Research on Mechanism of Impact of Situational Factors on Brand Community Integration

F. REN

School of Management, Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin, China

ABSTRACT: Existing research mainly analyzed the causes of brand community from the perspective of consumers, and lacked enough attention to the external situational factors influencing the formation of brand community. Therefore this paper analyzes the impact of situational factors on brand community integration and the mediating effect of brand community consumption experience, builds the model of mechanism of impact of situational factors on brand community integration in theory, and reveals the forming process of brand community. Finally, the significance and limitations of the research are discussed.

KEYWORD: Brand community; Brand community integration; Situational factors; Consumption experience

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the concept of brand community was put forward, it has been receives extensive attention of researchers. The researchers made a lot of achievements on brand community and the present studies mainly concentrate in two aspects: one is the study of connotation and characteristics of brand community, and the other is the study of mechanism of impact of brand community. However, the research about forming mechanism of brand community is relatively weak, and the main embodiment is: the analysis of forming mechanism of brand community is mainly focused on the consumers' subjective point of view, ignores the influence of external situational factors, and the research on the forming process of brand community is incomplete. A comprehensive understanding of the forming process of brand community is the key to guide enterprises to establish brand community, but the existing research is hard to provide strong theoretical support for the brand community practice, therefore the influence factors of brand community formation and the forming process of brand community still need further research.

Brand community integration means that in the process of participating in brand community, consumers are deeply attracted by the community, and form a strong interest or a state of emotiona attachment to the community. Consumers driven by the motivation to participate in the brand community is only a link in the process of brand community formation, consumer participating in brand community and consumer integrating brand community are two different concepts, only when the consumers establish a close relationship with community and form brand community integration, the brand community is truly created. Brand community provides a new way for us to build customer loyalty, however, if enterprises want the brand community to play a positive role, the members must integrate into the community, and for the low participation of community members, brand community will be difficult to have a positive impact. So the study will focus on discussing the influence factors of brand community integration, and analyze the impact of situational factors on brand community integration in theory, so as to reveal the formation process of brand community more comprehensively.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 *Consumption experience*

The consumption experience did not get enough attention until the nineteen-eighties, because the content of the experience is too broad, the researchers did not reach an agreement on the concept of consumption experience, and gave different definition from different point of view. For example, Schmitt pointed out that the consumption experience was the consumers' internal reflection of external stimuli such as enterprise marketing measures (Schmitt 1999). Campared with Schmitt's point of view, the definition of consumption

experience of Hairong et al. emphasized the important influence of consumer itself on consumption experience, their research suggested that consumption experience was the positive psychological or emotional responses which came into being in the process of the interaction of consumer and product (Hairong et al. 2001). Although scholars have different opinion on the definition of consumption experience, there still exists in common between these concepts. They all think consumption experience is consumers' inner emotions or feelings associated with consumption, but the scholars have different interpretations of the process and influence factors of the feelings. At the same time, because of the differences of research background and perspective, the researchers also have different dimensions of consumption experience. Schmitt divided the consumption experience into sense experience, emotion experience, thinking experience, action experience, relevance experience (Schmitt 1999). Holbrook summarized the past achievements and divided the consumption experience into five dimensions, including experience, entertainment, exhibitionism and evangelizing (Holbrook 2000). Consumption experience could affect consumers' behavioral intention, and positive consumption experience has a significant impact on brand loyalty, customer satisfaction and purchase intention.

2.2 *Brand community integration*

Brand community integration could measure quality of the relationship between members and community. McAlexander et al. first put forward a clear concept of brand community, they pointed out that brand community was the network which took the consumers as the center, and there were four groups of main relations in the brand community, including consumer and brand, consumer and enterprise, consumer and product, consumer and consumer (McAlexander et al. 2002). Brand community integration is a comprehensive concept reflecting the overall quality of the four groups of relations, and represents the degree of integrating into community of participants. Brand community strengthens the connection between the members, through the communication and participation in community activities, the members receive positive community experience, so as to generate commitment or loyalty and affect the brand attitude or behavior of members. However, regardless of the mechanism of impact of brand community on consumer attitudes and behaviors , integrating into the brand community is the premise and foundation, and what brand community integration focus is the relationship between the members and the community. So Brand community integration means that in the process of participating in brand community, consumers are deeply attracted by the community, and form a strong interest or a state of emotional attachment to the community. There are many factors that can influence brand community integration, such as information spread in the community, members' psychlological satisfaction of participating in community, community relations, and so on. In addition, the members' individual characteristics will impact brand community integration also. Recently the scholar discussed the effects of network centrality on community integration (Xue 2011). Community experience also will be in effect for the community integration, but there are few scholars to do research in this field.

3 MECHANISM OF IMPACT

Existing research did not pay enough attention to the external situational factors influencing the formation of brand community. Although consumer participation is the key link in the process of brand community formation, it is not all, the formation of brand community needs certain external conditions, and especially the brand community integration will be influenced by external situational factors. In brand community, the members could get consumption experience which is difficult to obtain for external members, consumption experience helps the members generate strong interest and attackment to the community and form brand community integration, and the obtaining consumption experience of members in brand community is the key reason for the consumers to stay in the community and strengthen the relationship with the community. The existing research has proved that consumption experience has positive effect on brand community integration (Ren 2013). The situational factors, such as community activities, hosting type of community, brand personality and so on, will influence the formation of consumption experience in brand community. From what has been discussed above, this paper builds the model of mechanism of impact of situational factors on brand community integration, which is presented in Figure 1.
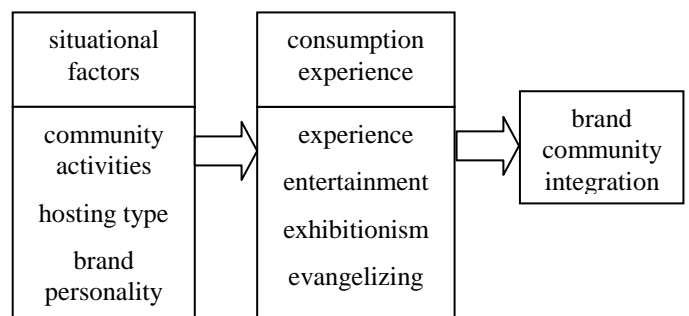

Figure 1. The model of mechanism of impact

3.1 Influences of community activities

Community activities can be divided into four main types, including "member-member", "member-brand", "member-enterprise" and "member-society" (Li 2011). No matter what type of community activities, the member is one of the involved major factors, and community members will get brand community consumption experience (community experience) by participating in various community activities and communicating with other community members. Community experience contains four dimensions, including experience, entertainment, exhibitionism and evangelizing (Holbrook 2000). On the other hand, community experience will affect community attitudes, such as community integration. First of all, experience widely exists in the brand community members. Brand community sets up a platform for communication between members, the members can get rid of the bondage of social identity in the community, speak freely together with other people, even establish friendship with other members, and get a sense of belonging in the community. The sense of belonging of members leads to the changing of community attitudes, even the formation of attackment to the community. Secondly, entertainment value is one of the important antecedents of integrating into brand community for the members, from the perspective of consumption experience, looking for entertainment experience is human nature, the greater the life and work stress, the more entertainment demand. Most of the brand community members can obtain entertainment experience through community activities, so as to strengthen the interest in the community itself, promote the consumers to integrate into brand community, and form close relationship with community. Thirdly, community activities provide opportunity for the community members to show good skills in product use of other aspects, through these activities members can also get the respect of others, the different activity held by brand community meets psychological needs of self-expression, also increases the popularity of members in the community, and promotes the members to integrate into the brand community. Finally, community activities strengthen the communication between members, through community activities the members can help others solve the problem of product in the process of using, obtain praise and respect of the other members of the community in the process of missions, and this kind of psychological satisfaction will encourage member to generate positive emotion to the community, furthermore promote brand community integration. Therefore, community activities can help brand community members to gain more consumption experience, community experience will promote brand community integration, and community activities can affect the relationship strength between members and the community through community experience.

3.2 Influences of community hosting type

According to difference of the initiator, brand community can be divided into three main types, the initiators are company, consumer and the third party respectively, in fact the brand community which is set up by consumer and the third party is unofficial brand community, and the brand community which is set up by company is official brand community. The existing research shows that different community hosting type will form different community environment, influence participants' subjective feeling of brand community, and lead to the differences in community attitudes and consumer behavior (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Community hosting type could influence leader enthusiasm, enjoyment, quality of the information, and comunity commitment. In unofficial brand community, the consumers are given priority to voluntary participation, however, in official brand community, the purpose of consumers to participate is to get useful information and the technical support of the enterprise mainly, which will lead consumers to log in the brand community much more in unofficial brand community than official brand community, and the communication between members in unofficial brand community is more warmly. Therefore, in the unofficial brand community, participants will gain more rich community experience. On the other hand, the manangers of official brand community tend to delete the negative information about the brand in community, this behavior will lead to decline of the information quality in brand community, and affect the members' community experience, at the same time, the managers' behavior of covering up the negative information will not only lead to negative feeling for the community members, but also hinder the memebers from forming positive community attitudes. Therefore, compared with the official brand community, consumers in the unofficial brand community will get more rich community consumption experience and are easier to form brand community integration. Community hosting type can affect brand community integration of members through community experience.

3.3 Influences of brand personality

Vivid brand story, unique brand culture and recognizable brand elements are the basis of social classification and comparison in a sense, for example, if the values of a profound connotational brand can correspond to the consumer's own values, it will be more conducive to consumers to increase self-esteem, build self, promote social classification

and comparison, and affect the community experience and brand community integration. Brand personality can be defined as "a series of anthtopomorphic characteristics associated with the brand " (Aaker 1997). Brand personality is closely related to the brand image and brand is endowed with a series of human character. According to the existing research, in the consciousness of consumers, the brand is associated with different personality traits, and brand personality is a multi-dimensional concept (Aaker 1997). Brand personality can be divided into five measurable dimensions, including sincerity, excitement, sophistication, ruggedness, and cute (Yang & Cho 1997). The concept of brand personality is created by consumers, and exists in the subjective consciousness of consumer. For consumers, brand and brand community are two different categories, however, there is a closing relationship between them, the core of brand community is the brand itself. The consumers who use the same brand gather together, share the experience about the use of product, at the same time, they also will release their own views of the brand in the brand community, and discuss the brand and product with other members. The more prominent brand personality is, the more warmly communication and exchanges between members is, the brand community will contain more information related to the brand, and the consumers should get more community consumption experience and integrate into brand community. Brand personality can affect brand community integration of members through community experience.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This paper builds the model of influence mechanism from situational factors to brand community integration, and discusses the influences of situational factors on brand community integration theoretically and intermediary role of brand community consumption experience in the process. The model explains the influences of situational factors on brand community from the perspective of brand community integration, and laid a solid foundation for further exploring the forming mechanism of brand community. It is not a long time since brand community was brought up, the researchers have made some achievements, however many aspects are still to be deepened, especially the research achievements about the forming mechanism of brand community are less than that of other aspects of brand community research, and the existing research ignores the influence of some key factors. This article introduces the situational factor to brand community studies, takes situational factor as an important antecedent, and enrich the theory of brand community, at the same time we hope that

more researchers could pay attention to the role of situational factors on the brand community through this paper. For practitioners, to establish a successful brand community and promote members to integrate into brand community, situational factor is one of the key which the brand manager cannot ignore. Companies could create a good communication environment for community members, support various community activities, improve entertainment of community, and create conditions for getting community consumption experience for community members.

Of course, the model of influence mechanism from situational factors to brand community integration proposed in this paper is still in the theoretical analysis stage, the relationship between the variables involved in the model still lack of empirical test, the next job will be to measure the variables and verify the relationship between the variables, so as to test the validity of the model and promote the theoretical system.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

[1] Aaker, J.L. 1997. Dimension of brand personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*34 (3): 347-356.

[2] Hairong, L., Terry, D. & Frank, B. 2001. Chriaracteristics of virtual experience in electronic commerce: a protocol analysis. *Journal of Interactive Marketing* (3): 13-30.

[3] Holbrook, M.B. 2000. The millennial consumer in the texts of our times: experience and entertainment. *Journal of Macromarketing* (2): 178-192.

[4] Li, Z.N. 2011. Research on interaction and activities in online brand community——based on the perspective of web content analysis. *Lanzhou Academic Journal* (7): 61-64.

[5] McAlexander, J.H., Schouten, J.W. & Koenig, H.F. 2002. Building brand community. *Journal of Marketing* 66(1): 38-54.

[6] Muniz, A.M. & O'Guinn, T.C. 2001. Brand community. *Journal of Consumer Research*27 (4):412-432.

[7] Ren, F. 2013. A study on forming mechanism of brand community——based on the brand community integration perspective. *Journal of Hebei University of Economics and Business*34 (6):104-109.

[8] Schmitt, B.H. 1999. Experiential marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management* (1): 53-67.

[9] Xue, H.B. 2011. An empirical study of the effects of network centrality and brand community integration on the performance of brand community. *Contemporary Finance & Economics* (10):73-81.

[10] Yang, Y. & Cho, E.H. 2002. The study of korean brand personality scale development and validation. *Korean Journal of Consumer and Advertising Psychology*3(2): 25-53.