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# 중국 온라인 브랜드 커뮤니티의 상호작용, 동일시, 충성도간의 구조적 관계에 관한 연구

이지나\*

## A Study On The Structural Relationship Of Interaction, Identification, And Loyalty of Online Brand Community in China

Ji-Na Lee\*

**요약** 본 연구는 온라인 브랜드 커뮤니티 내의 상호작용성이 브랜드 충성도에 미치는 영향을 밝히면서 중국 온라인 환경에서 전략적 브랜드 관리 활용방안에 관한 시사점을 제공하고자 하는 목적에서 이루어졌다. 이를 위해, 중국 자동차 브랜드 커뮤니티를 대상으로 총 300부를, 구조방정식 모델을 기반으로 한 AMOS 20을 이용하여 실증 분석하였다. 연구결과, 커뮤니티 내 소비자-소비자 상호작용(상호연대감, 연결성, 영향력)과 소비자-브랜드 상호작용(친밀감, 즐거움)은 커뮤니티 동일시와 브랜드 동일시를 통해 행동적·태도적 충성도(e.g. 재구매, 브랜드호감, 추천의지등)와 경쟁 브랜드에 대한 대항적 충성도(반감, 공격적 의지)를 증대시키는 메커니즘을 규명하였다. 중국 소비자들은 브랜드 충성도가 낮고 지인회적 성향을 가지고 있어 고객관리 차원에서 브랜드 커뮤니티의 관리는 충성도 제고에 새로운 지평을 제공해 줄 것이다.

**주제어** : 온라인 브랜드 커뮤니티, 상호작용, 동일시, 브랜드 충성도, 중국 소비자

**Abstract** This paper takes the online automobile brand community in china as an example, importing 'interactivity', the concept of sociology, into online brand community study. It follows the logical way as 'How does interactivity embody among the online communities —How about its deepening process? —What the results of interactivity will be?', that is, 'formation of the relationship (Interaction) - deepening of the relationship (identification)-result of the relationship(brand loyalty)', makes systematic study through the method of combining theory and case analysis together, and puts forward the marketing strategic direction for online brand communities.

**Key Words** : Online Brand Community, Interaction, Identification, Brand Loyalty, chinese consumer

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern marketing network that can dominate the marketing concept, being a member of a brand community shows positive attitude and intention towards the brand which a person is interested in. Thus one of the important methods used to achieve

better marketing performance is the development and construction of a powerful brand community[8][23]. The basis for establishing the relationship between enterprises and consumers is interaction; without interaction it is impossible to build the relationship. In a community, the participation of members is the core factor to guarantee the success of the community as

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\* This paper is the modified version of Lee's Ph.D. dissertaion, "A Study on the Impact of online brand community interaction model on Brand Loyalty"(2012). An earlier version of this paper was presented in 2011 International Conference on Journal E -Business and E -Government (ICEE).

\*Associate Professor, Department of Business Administration, Soongui Women's College  
논문접수: 2012년 10월 30일, 1차 수정을 거쳐, 심사완료: 2012년 11월 30일

well as being the decisive factor to guarantee the existence of communities[18]. That is the degree of participation is the most important factor in guaranteeing the continued existence of a brand community[3], which is finally achieved through interaction.

With the development of the Internet, interaction also has changed; it has become a very important research subject. In fact, interaction is the most-watched concept in the Internet environment. In an online environment, interaction will keep customers interactive through multiple ways. Customers can search for the brand products they like through search engines and communicate and exchange information directly with sellers. Also, customers can share their experience about sellers and financial services with other customers[20].

By combining an online community and with brand community research as the research object, this study aims to import an 'online interaction' mechanism to explore how to deepen the relationship 'Consumer - Brand - Consumer' so as to enhance the performance of online brand communities. We will focus on the perceptions upon which customer base their identification with an online community and their identification with a brand during the online interactive process of 'Customer and Customer' and 'Customer and Brand'. In addition we will assess whether the production of the both identifications could influence brand loyalty (behaviour loyalty, attitude loyalty and oppositional loyalty). Taking an online automobile brand community as the example, this paper will research and analyse the influence that interaction can produce in an online brand community.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

### 2.1 Online brand community interaction model

Nowadays, the brand community formed by

customers who care about and like the same brand has surpassed the one to one relationship between customers and brands. It has formed the relationship network of customers and brands, as well as the relationship among similar customers, which is attracting more and more customers to join in [21]. Therefore, the relationship of Customer-Brand in this article refers to the relation between customers and brands as well as the social network based on equal partnership and interaction. The place that such relationship has produced is defined as "brand community".

Just as Muniz & O'Guinn (2001)[23]described, the relationship between customers and brands, that is Customer-Brand relationship, is expanded gradually to a social complex of brand customers in brand communities. Finally it becomes the Customer-Brand -Customer relationship and the Brand Community Triad model. Bagozzi & Dholakia (2006) [5] divided the member behaviours, that is, interactions in the brand community into community-related behaviour and brand-related behaviour; They also deeply researched the social and psychological factors that attract the above mentioned behaviours. The community-related behaviour shows as the interaction of Customer- Customer, while brand-related behaviour shows as the interaction of Customer-Brand.

(TABLE 1) Online brand community interaction model

Nature of interaction	Type of interaction	Component
Sociality	Customer- Customer (C-C)Interaction	Mutuality
		Connectedness
		Influence
Individuality	Customer- Brand (C-B) Interaction	Familiarity
		Enjoyment

### 2.2 Customer- Customer Interaction and Community Identification

During the study with brand community as the research object, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001)[23] pointed out that the active social interaction among community

members is the factor for community success, which can promote close contact between community members, that is, identification. This study has explored the components of Customer-Customer interaction, which include mutuality, connectedness and influence, and this kind of interaction will effect the community identification.

Burgoon et al. (1999-2000)[8] proposed and explained that one characteristic by which to evaluate the interaction is mutuality. This is the trust and directivity to other people generated on a shared background. It has multi-level concepts including psychology, perception, emotion and behaviour. The result of DX f. mutuality is the establishment of links and homogeneity among members.

Hagel (1999)[15]proposed that the most important factor in the development of a social community is interaction, and interaction is the mutual connection through various communication ways and systems. Through interconnection, the members of communities can share culture and value, which will help to enhance the links among community members [17]. McMillan and Chavis (1986) [22]put forward the idea that when a person experiences four levels of benefits such as the qualification, influence, integration and satisfaction of demand, as well as shared feelings of membership by participating in a specific community, he will produce community awareness. The community awareness, that forms the tight connection between individuals and community, is one of the main components of identification in this study.

### 2.3 Customer- Brand Interaction and Brand Identification

Normally, brand identification means the degree of harmonization of self-image and brand image [4]. This individual identification begins at the time when consumers produce similar feelings to a certain brand. This study suggests that the Consumer - Brand interaction generated through positive feelings, such as brand familiarity and enjoyment, will create brand

identification.

A recent study emphasizes that during the process to establish relationship with customers, familiarity is the factor that can strengthen the relationship. Gremle r, Gwinner& Brown (2001) [13] advocated familiarity as the positive factor to strengthen customers' confidence in enterprises, and it also brings active influence to the word-of-mouth of customers' behaviours.

It is mentioned in many experts' research that hedonistic value is the important driving factor to promote customers to join and integrate into brand communities[12][19][20].

### 2.4 Identification and Brand Loyalty

Community members will produce deeper affection for a community through sharing cognitive and emotional identification with others, which will influence their favourable impressions, as well as their purchasing intentions towards certain brand. This attitude will become the main reason for higher brand loyalty. Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn (1995) [6] asserted that the level of identification with the community is closely related to the continuous purchasing of the products or service that the community shares.

As to the competitive advantage, the necessity of managing brand loyalty through strengthening the Customer- Brand relationship becomes more and more important as the importance of customers' brand loyalty increases[2]. Keller(2001)[16]thought that the final stage to construct brand asset value should lay emphasis on the resonance of Customer-Brand, which stands for the deeper relationship between customers and brands and brand identification. When we reach this stage, customers will show their strong affection for the brand, and they will show their loyalty through their brand product-purchasing behaviour and through their active participation behaviours.

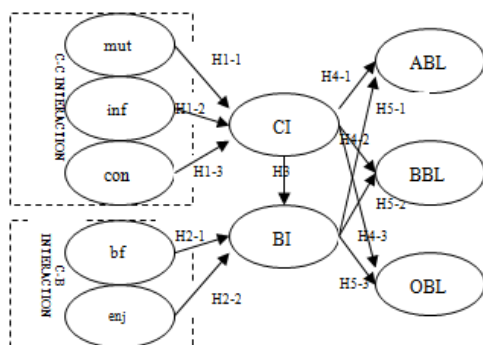
As shown in Table 2 and Figure 1, this paper follows the logical way as 'How does interactivity

embody among the online communities →How about its deepening process? →What the results of interactivity will be?', that is, 'formation of the relationship (Interaction) - deepening of the relationship (identification) - result of the relationship(brand loyalty)', makes systematic study by combining theory and case analysis together, and puts forward the marketing strategic direction for online brand communities.

Note : During the above chart, the writer uses different monogram to stand for various hidden variables. Mut stands for Mutuality, inf stands for influence, con stands for Connectedness, bf stands for familiarity and enj stands for enjoyment. CI stands for Community Identification, BI stands for Brand Identification, BBL stands for Behaviour Brand Loyalty, ABL stands for Attitude Brand Loyalty, and OBL stands for Oppositional Brand Loyalty.

(TABLE 2) HYPOTHESIS

	Content
H1-1	Mutuality has a positive impact on community identification.
H1-2	Influence has a positive impact on community identification.
H1-3	Connectedness has a positive impact on community identification.
H2-1	Familiarity has a positive impact on brand identification.
H2-2	Enjoyment has a positive impact on brand identification.
H3	Community identification has a positive impact on brand identification.
H4-1	Community identification has a positive impact onbehaviour brand loyalty.
H4-2	Community identification has a positive impact on attitude brand loyalty.
H4-3	Community identification has a positive impact on oppositional Brand Loyalty.
H5-1	Brand identification has a positive impact onbehaviour brand loyalty.
H5-2	Brand identification has a positive impact on attitude brand loyalty.
H5-3	Brand identification has a positive impact on oppositional Brand Loyalty.



[Figure 1] Research Model

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1 Sources of Data

Considering community scale, degree of activity, influences and various other factors, we have adopted the virtual community of a relevant professional auto website as the objects of this research, having auto brands as the subject. The formal survey for this research collected data through online questionnaires. Notices and information were published on relevant auto brands virtual forums. Email invitations were sent to community members to ask for their assistance. During the two-plus months, 455 community members in all of different auto brands participated in the survey, including 125 members who eventually failed to pass our questionnaire scrutiny or quitted part way. Finally, we got 300 effective questionnaires for data analysis. An analysis of population statistic variables of the samples shows that males account for a large proportion of all members (73.6%) and the members are primarily aged between 26 and 35 and mostly have college education, registering a proportion of 63.3% and 74% respectively. 53.3% of the members have been a member for over one year.

#### 3.1 Measures

A questionnaire survey was used as a measurement tool in this research. The research refers to scholars who have already used questionnaires[1][8][7][21][11][3][13][4]. All items were measured on 7-point Likert-type rating scales, in which 1 represents strongly disagree and 7 represents strongly agree, except for the demographics portion.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Reliability and Validity

In the reliability test, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) of various latent variables were calculated and the results show that the  $\alpha$  coefficient of all latent variables is near or higher than 0.70 and that the various variables of this research had a high degree of reliability. As shown in Table 3, all latent variables of this research have a CR value ( $\rho_c$ ) higher than 0.70 and an AVE value ( $\rho_v$ ) higher than 0.50. It shows that latent variables render uniform support to the semantic scales. It is noteworthy that variable 'behaviour loyalty' is measured through a single question. This variable has a fixed load factor of 0.85 and a restricted error variance of 1 minus variance reliability number[6]. The estimated reliability is 0.85. Restriction of error variance allows the researcher to show the variance arising from measurement errors.

In addition, the relationship matrix in Table 4 shows that various personal constructs have an AVE value that is higher than the square of the correlation coefficient between all personal constructs, i.e. the lowest responsive AVE value (0.53) is higher than the square of the highest correlation coefficient between familiarity and community loyalty (0.396). Therefore, the questionnaires for various variants all have a high degree of differentiation validity.

〈TABLE 3〉 Results of Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach $\alpha$	CR	AVE
Mutuality	0.838	0.79	0.56
Influence	0.757	0.70	0.53
Connectedness	0.837	0.76	0.62
familiarity	0.814	0.81	0.68
Enjoyment	0.865	0.86	0.67
Community Identification	0.869	0.82	0.60
Brand Identification	0.883	0.83	0.71
Oppositional Brand Loyalty	0.825	0.78	0.55
Attitude Brand Loyalty	0.835	0.81	0.68

Note: behaviour Brand Loyalty is a unidirectional variable

〈TABLE 4〉 Correlation Matrix of Latent Variables

	mut	inf	con	bf	enj	CI	BI	ABL	OBL
mut	1	.232	.148	.131	.080	.277	.166	.362	.019
inf	.482	1	.241	.123	.105	.396	.266	.271	.068
con	.385	.491	1	.171	.077	.377	.235	.209	.036
bf	.362	.351	.414	1	.085	.133	.061	.286	.047
enj	.283	.324	.277	.291	1	.106	.119	.195	.024
CI	.526	.629	.614	.365	.326	1	.269	.284	.016
BI	.408	.516	.485	.246	.345	.519	1	.232	.074
ABL	.602	.521	.457	.535	.442	.533	.482	1	.119
OBL	.138	.261	.191	.217	.154	.126	.272	.345	1

Note: below the diagonal is the correlation coefficient between concepts and above the diagonal is the correlation square between concepts.

### 4.2 Hypothesis Testing and Discussions

The foregoing analysis of reliability and validity shows that the measurement model as mentioned in this research can be further analysed. In order to confirm the fit index of the model, the 300 valid samples were subject to model test and cross validation through maximum likelihood (ML) and Structural Equation Model (SEM).

The results show that various fit indexes of the structural equation model are ( $\chi^2$ )=277.536 (df=188, P<0.001),  $\chi^2$  /df=1.786<3, GFI=0.905 ( $\geq$ 0.9), AGFI=0.898 ( $\approx$ 0.9), CFI=0.930 ( $\geq$ 0.9), NNFI= 0.915, ( $\geq$ 0.9), SRMR=0.067 ( $\leq$ 0.08) and RMSEA=0.051 ( $\approx$  0.05), which demonstrates that the model has good fitness. Therefore, we can use the results to analyse and test the hypothesis model of the research. Please see Table 4 for detailed data and results.

〈TABLE 5〉 Test Results of Hypothesis Verification

Hypotheses	Estimate	TS	Conclusion	
mut->CI	H1-1	0.204	3.871	Accept***
inf ->CI	H1-2	0.179	2.096	Accept *
con->CI	H1-3	0.334	4.860	Accept ***
bf->BI	H2-1	0.442	4.146	Accept ***
enj->BI	H2-2	0.132	2.607	Accept **
CI->BI	H3	0.291	3.124	Accept **
CI->BBL	H4-1	0.085	0.859	Reject
CI->ABL	H4-2	0.379	4.278	Accept ***
CI->OBL	H4-3	0.202	1.623	Reject
BI->BBL	H5-1	0.165	1.975	Accept *
BI->ABL	H5-2	0.237	3.397	Accept ***
BI->OBL	H5-3	0.205	1.980	Accept *

## 5. CONCLUSION

The conclusions and management tips are summarized as follows:

First, produce in-depth research on the interactions among consumers and between consumer and brand. Present researches on interactions are primarily carried out from a technical perspective based on media characteristics. However, such technical perspective is rejected in this research which focuses on the promotional and marketing effects of information exchanges and analyses interaction through establishment of consumer relationships. The research is expected to find the starting point for enhancement of brand and community relationships, i.e. the five constituents of interactions. As it is impossible to establish relationships without interactions, it is highly important both theoretically and practically to identify the constituents of the interactions within a brand community.

Second, prove and propose the effects of deepened relationships among the brand community, i.e. brand loyalty. It shows the necessity to regard brand as the differentiated competitive advantages of an enterprise and convey to enterprise that plan to establish brand management strategies that brand community is an important brand management tool. In particular, the further division of identification into community identification and brand identification shows that the identification-based brand strategy needs differentiation.

Third, two groundless hypotheses can be identified: community identification only affects brand intention loyalty but does not affect brand behaviour loyalty and competitor brand loyalty. This is possibly due to the existence of various other extrinsic variables that affect brand attitude in addition to the affinity strategy arising from brand community, e.g. product characteristics, advertisement characteristics, competitor brand strategies, community member characteristics and various other factors. In particular, provision of personal brand experience may be possible to directly

establish relationships with the brand when an enterprise is applying the brand community strategy. Meanwhile, other marketing variables that effective management controls have direct impacts on consumers' brand attitudes or brand loyalty. That is to say, brand community strategy can only guarantee the awareness or loyalty of the community but cannot guarantee the consumers' loyalty to the brand.

Generally speaking, this research can First deepen a company's understanding of the value of online brand community and hence encourage it to operate an online community. Second, it helps the community operator to have a deeper understanding of the different impacts that interactions may have on brand purchasing behaviours of members of an online brand community. This provides new approaches and a management basis for an enterprise to attract and maintain loyal customers; it offers business strategies and proposals to community operators or enterprises. It is expected to promote the interactions among community members and hence contribute to the improvement of brand images.

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## 이 지 나



· 2004년 6월: Fudan University (Shanghai, China) School of Business Administration(경제학석사)  
 · 2012년 1월: Fudan University (Shanghai, China) School of Business Administration(경영학박사)  
 · 2011년 3월~현재: 송의여자대학교 경영과 조교수

· 관심분야: 중국 E-biz, 중국시장 및 소비자연구  
 · E-Mail: fudanjiina@naver.com