

Consumers in an Online Brand Community:
Uses and Gratifications, Social Capital, and Brand Loyalty

Jihyeong Son, Washington State University, USA
Mary Lynn Damhorst, Iowa State University, USA

Keywords: Brand, community, social capital, loyalty

The increasing popularity of social network websites (i.e., Facebook, YouTube, Instagram) which connect individuals and groups through online networks, has enabled apparel retailers to establish their Online Brand Community (OBC). OBCs create new ways that consumers communicate and share assets such as knowledge, information, and experience about what they consume. However, many brands have difficulties facilitating conversations creating brand knowledge sharing and positive effects of consumers' social interaction on their brand consumption.

Recent studies have explored motivations (e.g., knowledge seeking, social status) among those who participate in OBCs and social network influence on knowledge sharing and behavioral intentions such as intention to participate in and recommend the OBC. However, the research has been limited to understanding how social motivation and impact (consumer to consumer communication) of community commitment influence knowledge sharing in OBC or to explaining the relationship between brand community commitment and brand loyalty in OBC members. Critical questions still remain in understanding the causal linkages among consumer need to participate in an OBC, social interaction patterns (i.e., knowledge sharing), social cohesion within the community, and brand loyalty. The purposes of this study were: to investigate (1) needs consumers bring to participation in and social resources generated in OBCs, (2) the process of how needs to use an OBC are gratified through achieving social resources available through the OBC, and (3) how outcomes of social interaction in the OBC influence loyalty toward the brand which the community endorses. A conceptual model explaining hypotheses (see Figure 1) was developed, combining two theories: uses and gratification theory (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974) and social capital and network theory (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Causal linkages were tested among consumer needs to participate in OBCs, social capital accumulations, knowledge sharing, community commitment, and brand loyalty.

Data were collected using a web-based survey through Amazon Mechanical Turk. A total of 499 surveys ($M=30.33$ years; female=44.3%, male=54.3%) completed by U.S. consumers who are members or visitors of an apparel, shoe, and/or accessory OBC were analyzed. Previously validated 7-point Likert-type scale measures were used. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) also determined measure structures, with all Cronbach's *alphas* above .70.

Findings from CFA confirmed five needs to participate in an OBC: (1) Socialization, (2) Entertainment seeking, (3) Self-status seeking, (4) Information seeking, and (5) Convenience seeking, and three social capital accumulations in the OBC context: (1) structural, (2) cognitive, and (3) relational capital. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using Mplus 7.0 indicated good model fit [χ^2 ($df=1758$) = 3916.06, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .50, SRMR = .73]. Consumers'

socialization need in OBC positively influenced all dimensions of social capital (structural, cognitive and relational capital). Self-status seeking positively influenced structural capital. Information seeking positively influenced cognitive and relational capital. Convenience seeking positively influenced relational capital. Structural capital positively influenced knowledge sharing, and cognitive capital positively influenced community commitment. Relational capital positively influences both knowledge sharing, community commitment, and brand loyalty. In addition, community commitment positively influences brand loyalty. Consumers' needs to use an OBC did not directly influence the outputs of social capital accumulations such as knowledge sharing and community commitment. However, needs influence social capital accumulation, and these accumulations influence social capital outcomes (i.e., knowledge sharing, community commitment) and brand loyalty.

The findings provide an understanding that consumers' needs to use an OBC are gratified by interacting with other consumers through social resources generated within an OBC. In addition, to attain more social capital, consumers engage in social interaction (i.e., knowledge sharing) and generate cohesion toward the community. In addition, relational capital and community commitment positively influenced brand loyalty. Thus, this study provides an understanding that emotions and feelings toward relationships within an OBC community are important factors related to attitudinal and behavioral loyalty toward the brand endorsed by the community. The findings have managerial implications for apparel marketers and retailers operating an OBC, enhancing understanding of what needs consumers have in regard to their participation in an OBC. Finally, the findings show how interaction and participation in an OBC satisfies and reinforces consumers' brand loyalty.

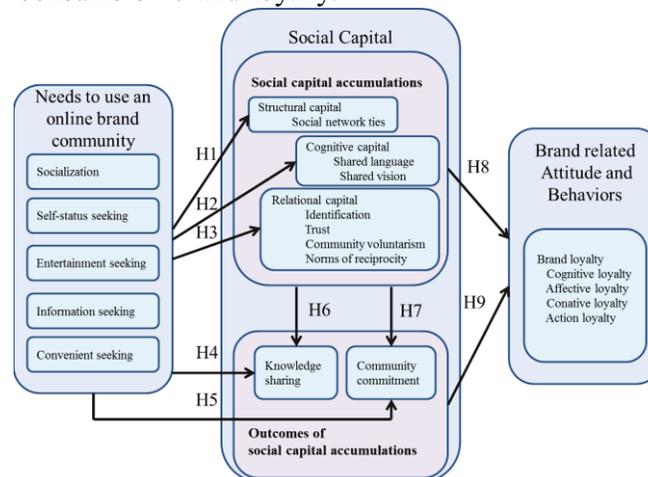


Figure 1 Conceptual model of relationships among needs to use OBC, social capital accumulations and outcomes, and brand related attitude and behaviors

References

- Katz, E. Blumer, J. G., & Gurevitch M (1974). Utilization of mass communication by the individual. In J. G. Blumler & E. Katz, (Eds.), *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research* (pp.19-32). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Nahapiet, J., & Ghoshal, S. (1998). Social capital, intellectual capital, and the organizational advantage. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(2), 242-266.