How to gain consumers' trust? The significant role of positioning in large-scale online promotion activities

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How to gain consumers' trust? The significant role of positioning

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Abstract: In large-scale online promotion activities (OPAs), how to stimulate, obtain and monopolize consumers' platform trust has been a key prerequisite for e-commerce platforms to stand out in the increasingly fierce and homogeneous market competition. We selected the Alibaba Double eleven shopping Carnival and Jingdong 6.18 shopping Carnival as the empirical cases and conduct fsQCA analysis on 613 valid questionnaires. The research shows that there are four configurations that affect consumer platform trust. Three of these configurations are composed of self-efficacy, expected relationship benefits, perceived festival atmosphere and perceived snap-up atmosphere. Activity satisfaction plays a significant role in triggering consumer platform trust. In addition, the results confirm the critical role of positioning intensity. The finding of the research has practical significance for network marketing planners and online shopping platform operators.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to a set of data released by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the proportion of online retail sales in total retail sales rose from 16% in 2019 to 19% in 2020 [1]. To cope with the competitive business environment, various platforms have launched large-scale online promotion activity (OPAs). Platforms hope to attract consumers and get their feedback by holding OPAs. However, it is worth noting that the major promotional activities become homogeneous after years of development. We found an interesting phenomenon that consumers still have a preferred platform when they choose the same product at the same price simultaneously. This means that consumers have formed a strong trust in the platform. To explore the reasons behind this phenomenon, this research will start from the perspective of consumer platform trust to explore the internal logical mechanism of the formation of such consumption behavior.

The existing literature on consumer platform trust have identified three categories according to the research contents. The first part is about the influencing factors of platform trust. Kim and Peterson[2] used meta-analysis method to verify the impact of perceived privacy, perceived quality of service, and other factors on trust. The second part is about the relationship between consumer trust and consumer behavior. It found that trust in the platform will significantly affect online purchase intention [3,4]. The third part is about the establishment strategy of platform trust. Although consumer platform trust has been widely studied [5,6], these studies only focus on the impact of consumer personal characteristics and platform characteristics on trust[2,7]. In the research on consumers' mind, positioning theory is one of the classic theories. Few articles turn the research perspective to OPA situation to explore the applicability of positioning theory and no concept is used to express the effect of positioning.Thus, we frame our first research question (RQ) as follows:

RQ1: Does the positioning theory apply to the promotion of OPA? How does positioning work?

Consumer platform trust is affected by many factors. Most of the existing studies use SEM (structural

equation model) to test the influencing factors of consumer platform trust[7]. Although SEM can better analyze the linear relationship between variables, it is unable to explore the "joint effect" between conditional variables. It is of high research value to examine the formation of consumer platform trust from an overall perspective. Specifically, we propose the second research question (RQ) based on the above problems:

RQ2: What are the driver combinations of consumer platform trust in the context of OPA?

Based on the above research background, firstly, we will propose a new concept called "positioning intensity" to solve RQ1 in combination with theoretical review and practical situation. Then this paper introduces fsQCA method to solve RQ2. FsQCA is a suitable method to accommodate complex complementary and nonlinear relationships between structures and then identify relationships between different combinations of antecedents and results. Combined with positioning theory, social existence theory and expectation confirmation model, fsQCA results explain how positioning works. Results can provide some reference for the decision-making of e-commerce platform.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Activity satisfaction and consumer platform trust

Trust is generally considered as the basic elements of a successful relationship[8-10]. Morgan and Hunt[10] define trust as the perception of "confidence in the exchange partner's reliability and integrity". In this study, platform trust refers to customers' confidence in the quality and reliability of services and products provided by the platform in promotional activities. Existing literature has verified that consumer platform trust is affected by satisfaction. In this study, consumers' activity satisfaction with large-scale OPAs is defined as the perception of the gap between prior expectations and actual experiences after participation. Harris and Goode[11] suggested that trust is positively and directly link with satisfaction and this relationship strongly supported. Singh and Sirdeshmukh[12] found that consumer satisfaction will affect their post-purchase trust in the traditional trading market. Shao Yeh and Li[13] combined the technical acceptance model and service quality model to explore the factors influencing online trust, and found that users satisfaction directly positively affects their trust. The more satisfied consumers are with promotional activities, the more they trust the platform. In addition, when consumers are satisfied with a promotional activity, they will have a certain sense of trust in the promotional activity. Trust in promotional activities can enhance users' trust in the hosting platform.

2.2 Consumer attributes and consumer platform trust

Ajzen[14] pointed out that the rule of perceptual behavior in TPB includes self-efficacy and perception controllable. In this study, self-efficacy is defined as the belief that consumers can participate in large-scale online promotion activities and achieve the expected goals. Self-efficacy can be divided into three aspects: participate in self-efficacy, rules understand self-efficacy and payment self-efficacy. If consumers have no confidence to participate in the activity, they may be attributed to the online shopping platform managers who fail to explain the rules of the activity well or have no reasonable arrangement. Consumers will doubt the platform management ability and operation ability. This doubt ultimately affect consumers' trust in online shopping platform.

Expected return refers to an individual's expectation of a particular result that a certain behavior may cause. The expected relationship benefits in this study refer to the expected return of harmonious interpersonal relationships after consumers participate in promotional activities. Based on the expectation confirmation theory and technology acceptance model, Bhattacherjee[15] proposed an expectation confirmation model and point out that consumers' expectation confirmation is an important factor of trust. In social psychology, the expected relationship benefits capture people's desire to keep a relationship with others [16]. In other words, when an activity can bring more expected relationship benefits to consumers, consumers will be more likely to trust the platform.

Perceived atmosphere refers to the feeling created by the e-commerce platform through marketing promotion activities, building platform environment, creating sensory impact and triggering emotional resonance of consumers. Aiming at the characteristics of promotional activities, this article divides the atmosphere felt by consumers into the festival atmosphere and snap-up atmosphere. Festival atmosphere refers to the scene that the promotion activities that give people a specific feeling, such as the marketing atmosphere and the active participation of friends around. Snap-up atmosphere refers to the tense atmosphere created by the platform through holding rush buying activities such as limited time and limited sales. E-commerce platform extends the influence of promotional activities to real scenes by setting off the atmosphere to improve the platform's social presence. Short et al.[17] proposed the concept of social presence. It refers to the degree to which a person is regarded as a "real person" and the perception of contact with others in the process of communication through the media. Short et al.[17] thought that media with high social presence is considered to be social and humanized, and people will prefer it. Verhagen et al.[18] defined ocial presence as the personal and social feelings conveyed and existing in the media. Through the research, Verhagen found that social presence has a substantial impact on platform trust.

2.3 Positioning and consumer platform trust

Positioning is to determine the position and image of the brand in the customers' mind. In 1969, Jack Trout first proposed the concept of "positioning" [19]. Trout and Rivkin proposed to create "the first position", because only the concept of "the first" can make consumers remember deeply. After entering the 21st century, positioning theory has entered the stage of repositioning theory research [20]. Consumers' cognition of a brand is often based on their needs and experiences. On the one hand, brands occupying particular positions are most likely to be concerned; On the other hand, familiar brands are easy to accept.

Based on the positioning theory and reality analysis, we propose a new concept called "positioning intensity" and put forward three dimensions as the measurement standard. Positioning intensity refers to the value of OPA brand and clarity of brand image in consumers' mind. The three dimensions are as follows. First, the time when the platform initially organized the promotion. The first promotion can always get the most attention and leave a deep impression on users. In addition, users subconsciously associate the activities with the hosting platform, and the exercises have gradually become the platform's brand. Second, the marketing efforts made by the platform. Through the constant diversity of publicity and marketing, the brand image is more and more profound. Third, consumer familiarity with the activity. The more frequently users participate, the more familiar they will be with the whole movement. The re-participation of consumers means that they trust the platform, which proves that the activity brand occupies a specific position in the consumer's mind.

On the basis of literature review, this study developed a conceptual model, which is presented in Fig.1.
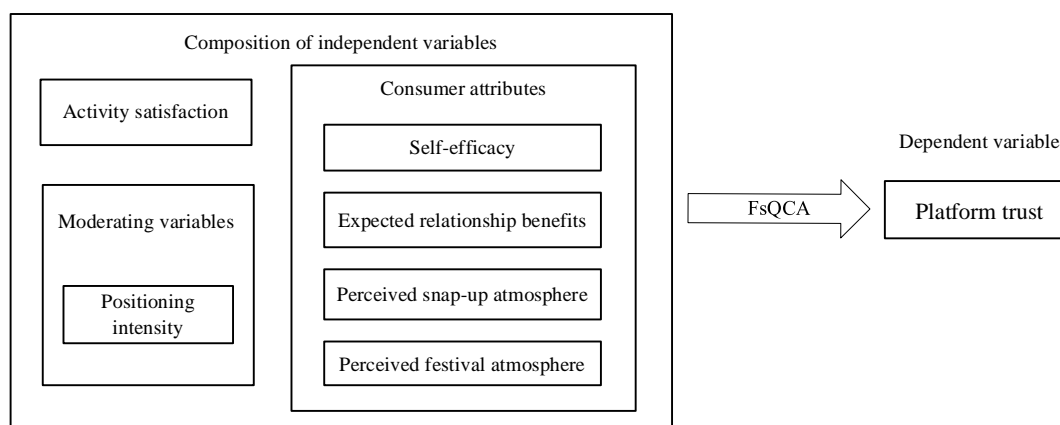

Figure 1.   FsQCA model

3.   RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Measurement

All measurement items and references are shown in Table 1. Most of the items are adapted from the existing literature, but some minor changes have been made in the wording to adapt to the background of large-scale online promotion activities. They are measured by seven-point Likert scales. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted prior to the release of a prominent official questionnaire. Above 30 consumers were recruited to participate in the pilot and finished the questionnaire.

What's more, three experts whose research interests are e-commerce or network marketing were invited to modify the questionnaire according to the feedback of the pilot. Through this way, the integrity and feasibility can be guaranteed before we conduct our formal large-scale survey.

Table1.   Measurement item

Factors	Number of items	Reference
Self-efficacy (SE)	3	Taylor and Todd[21]
Expected relationship benefits (ERB)	3	Bock et al.[22]
Perceived festival atmosphere (FA)	3	Gefen and Straub[23]; Deng and Poole[24]
Perceived snap-up atmosphere (SUA)	3	Gefen and Straub[23]; Deng and Poole[24]
Activity satisfaction (SAT)	3	Wallin Andreassen and Lindestad[25]; Berraies et al.[26]
Activity trust (AT)	3	Morgan and Hunt[10]
Platform trust (PT)	3	Cyr et al.[27]
Positioning intensity (PI)	3	Trout[19]; Trout and Rivkin[28]; Ries and Trout[20]

3.2   Case selection

The double eleven shopping carnival held by Alibaba and the big promotion on June 18 held by JD were selected as the empirical cases in this study. The above two promotions are selected mainly for the following considerations: (1) Reputation of the platform. By the end of 2020, both Alibaba and JD are among the top ten Internet companies globally in terms of market value. (2) Maturity of the large-scale OPAs. These two activities have been carried out in China for many years. (3) Time of the large-scale OPAs. These two events are held at the middle of the year and the end of the year respectively.

3.3   Data collection

The research team used interviews and questionnaires to obtain research data. In the interview section, the team randomly interviewed 25 consumers, including consumers engaged in promotional activities and consumers who had not participated. For respondents who were not involved in the activity, we mainly asked them why they were not involved and whether they regretted not taking part. The participants who participated in the activities primarily investigated the experience of the activities and the dissatisfaction or suggestion of the activities. In the survey section, the sample was selected from the consumers who participated in the promotion.

A total of 641 questionnaires were collected. Therefore, in addition to eliminating questionnaires that were incomplete and over-focused, the research group also eliminated the completed questionnaires for less than 11 minutes and finally got 613 valid questionnaires. There were 286 males and 327 females. The respondents were mainly aged from 18 to 25, accounting for 81.7%.

4.   FSQCA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1   Reliability and validity test

The specific results are shown in Table 2. First, the reliability of the questionnaire was examined. Table 2 shows that Cronbach's alpha and CR (composite reliability) of all factors are more than 0.7. These results

indicating that the questionnaire has good reliability . Then, the convergent validity of the questionnaire was measured. As shown in table 2, the average variance extraction values (AVE) of all variables are above 0.5, indicating that the questionnaire has good convergence validity. Finally, the discriminant validity of the scale was tested.

Table2.　Reliability and convergent validity of the samples

Item	Factor Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's alphas
Self-efficacy		0.752	0.901	0.835
SE_1: I can clearly understand the rules of the online promotion activity.	0.890			
SE_2: I can get most of the products I want in online promotion activity.	0.837			
SE_3: I can complete the payment smoothly in online promotion activity.	0.873			
Expected relationship benefits		0.852	0.945	0.913
ERB_1: My friends and I discuss online promotion to strengthen communication and contact with my friends in online promotion activity.	0.931			
ERB_2: My friends and I recommend products to strengthen communication and communication with my friends in online promotion activity.	0.937			
ERB_3: My friends and I shopping together can strengthen communication and communication with my friends in online promotion activity.	0.901			
Perceived festival atmosphere		0.915	0.970	0.954
FA_1: In online promotion activity, many marketing activities let me perceive the festival atmosphere.	0.954			
FA_2: In the online promotion activity, the warm social atmosphere let me perceive the festival atmosphere.	0.964			
FA_3: In online promotion activity, the positive shopping mood of friends around me lets me perceive the festival atmosphere.	0.952			
Perceived snap-up atmosphere		0.840	0.940	0.905
SUA_1: In online promotion activity, the purchase time limit of many products (such as spikes) made me perceive the snap-up atmosphere.	0.924			
SUA_2: In online promotion activity, the quantity limit of many products (such as a limit of 1,000 pieces) made me perceive the snap-up atmosphere.	0.926			
SUA_3: In online promotion activity, the price limit of many commodities (for example, the original price will be restored at 0:00 on November 12) made me perceive the snap-up atmosphere.	0.900			
Activity satisfaction		0.868	0.952	0.924
SAT_1: I am satisfied with the whole process of the promotion.	0.918			
SAT_2: I think participating in online promotional activity is a wise choice.	0.932			
SAT_3: I am satisfied with my experience in online promotion activity.	0.945			
Activity trust		0.918	0.971	0.955
AT_1: I think the online promotion activity is reliable.	0.956			
AT_2: I think the online promotion activity is trustworthy.	0.964			
AT_3: In general, I trust online promotion activity.	0.954			
Positioning intensity		0.692	0.871	0.778
PI_1: I tend to participate in the double eleven shopping carnival (the earliest online promotion activities).	0.832			
PI_2: The online promotion activity I participated in made great efforts in marketing.	0.784			
PI_3: I am familiar with the online promotion activity..	0.878			
Platform trust		0.835	0.938	0.901
PT_1: I think the transaction process of the e-commerce platform used for online promotion is safe.	0.905			
PT_2: I think the information on the e-commerce platform used for online promotion is reliable.	0.921			
PT_3: I think the e-commerce platform used for online promotion is trustworthy.	0.916			

4.2 Calibration

Before fsQCA analysis, the continuous variables involved in the study need to be calibrated [29]. First, Excel software was used to average the antecedent condition variables. Then, according to the 5% (fully out), 50% (crossover point) and 95% (entirely in) standards proposed by Ragin[29], we use the "PERCENTILE" function in Excel software to calculate the quartile point. Finally, we applied the "calibration" function in the fsQCA3.0 to calibrate (see table 3).

Table3. Calibration value of continuous variables

	SE	ERB	FA	SUA	SAT	PI	PT
5% (Fully Out)	2.333	1.900	1.000	1.000	2.000	3.444	3.000
50% (Crossover Point)	4.500	4.333	5.000	4.667	4.667	5.083	5.000
95% (Fully In)	6.333	7.000	7.000	7.000	7.000	6.675	7.000

Note: SAT=activity satisfaction; PT=platform trust; SE=self-efficacy; ERB=expected relationship benefit; FA=perceived festival atmosphere; SUA=perceived snap-up atmosphere.

4.3 Necessity analysis

Necessity analysis is used to test whether a variable's existence can be considered a necessary condition for the result [30]. To determine whether the six antecedents are essential for consumer platform trust, we conducted a necessary condition analysis (see Table 4). It is found that when the result variable is platform trust, the consistency level of single factor antecedents of each variable does not exceed 0.9, so there is no necessary condition [29].

Table4. Results of necessary conditions

Outcome: Platform Trust											
	SE	~SE	ERB	~ERB	SAT	~SAT	PI	~PI	FA	~FA	SUA	~SUA
Consistency	0.789	0.565	0.794	0.569	0.827	0.567	0.829	0.545	0.781	0.610	0.779	0.594
Coverage	0.754	0.553	0.729	0.582	0.788	0.557	0.790	0.535	0.775	0.575	0.734	0.589

4.4 Solution description

FsQCA3.0 was used to construct 2^K row truth table, where k is the number of antecedents. The proposed consistency measurement threshold in QCA literature is 0.8 [29]. Our study chose 0.85 as the cut-off point to ensure a high degree of consistency at this stage of analysis. At the same time, we set the acceptable number of cases as 1, and the final result is shown in Table 5. The overall coverage is 0.78, and the overall consistency is 0.87, indicating that the eight configurations capture a large proportion of the results. By classifying the configurations with the same core conditions, they can be summarized into the following four trigger configurations of consumer platform trust behavior.

The first configuration consists of four sub-models (C1a, C1b, C1C and C1d), in which the core element is positioning intensity. This configuration shows that when the activity brand has a high positioning intensity in the consumer's mind, users will trust the platform (C1a) when satisfied with the promotion activities. In addition, when users feel the cold festival atmosphere and snap-up atmosphere, high positioning intensity will trigger consumers' trust in the platform (C1b). C1c shows that in the intense festival atmosphere created by the promotion activities with high positioning intensity, consumers with low expected relationship benefits will trust the platform. C1d indicates that consumers with low self-efficacy will trust the platform in the solid snap-up atmosphere created by high positioning intensity promotional activities.

The second configuration takes high self-efficacy and activity satisfaction as the core conditions, including two sub-models (C2a and C2b). Sub-model C2a takes low perception of festival atmosphere as peripheral condition, and its configuration is "self-efficacy * activity satisfaction * ~ perceived festival atmosphere."

Sub-model C2b takes high perception of snap-up atmosphere as peripheral condition, and its configuration is "self-efficacy * activity satisfaction * perceived snap-up atmosphere". In the second configuration, two sub-models are used to analyze the consumers with high self-efficacy and satisfaction with promotion activities. Research shows that a low festival atmosphere and a high snap-up atmosphere will trigger consumers' trust in the platform.

The third configuration reflects a group of consumers with high expected relationship benefits and are satisfied with the promotion activities. When they feel the intense festival atmosphere and snap-up atmosphere, they will trust the platform. Therefore, the core conditions of configuration C3 are high perceived festival atmosphere and activity satisfaction, and the peripheral state is high expected relationship benefits and high perceived snap-up atmosphere. Therefore, its configuration is "perceived festival atmosphere * activity satisfaction * expected relationship benefit * perceived snap-up atmosphere".

The forth configuration shows that if platform wants to improve the trust of this kind of consumers, the platform should try to create a strong snap-up atmosphere when holding promotional activities. As shown in Table 9, the core conditions of C4 configuration are high self-efficacy, high expected relationship benefits and strong snap-up atmosphere. The forth configuration represents consumers that have high self-efficacy and expected relationship benefits. Hence, its configuration is "self-efficacy * expected relationship benefit * perceived snap-up atmosphere".

FsQCA software selects the maximum coverage by default, which will lead to the formation of similar but different configurations due to the slight gap being enlarged. Raw range is used to measure the interpretation degree of antecedent configuration for the results. The larger the basic coverage is, the stronger the interpretation degree of antecedent conditional configuration for the results is. After comparison, the coverage rate of the first configuration is higher than that of any other trigger configuration, indicating that the first configuration has strong explanatory power. In other words, when users perceive the high positioning intensity of online promotion activities, they are more likely to trust the platform.

Table5.   Configurations leading to consumer platform trust

Configuration	C1a	C1b	C1c	C1d	C2a	C2b	C3	C4
SE				⊗	●	●		●
ERB			⊗				•	●
FA		⊗	•		⊗		●	
SUA		⊗		•		•	•	●
SAT	•				●	●	●	
PI	●	●	●	●				
Consistency	0.865	0.842	0.878	0.861	0.850	0.862	0.874	0.843
Raw coverage	0.735	0.417	0.407	0.418	0.450	0.628	0.603	0.615
Unique coverage	0.038	0.017	0.005	0.013	0.007	0.001	0.011	0.017
Overall solution consistency	0.873							
Overall solution coverage	0.781							

(Outcome: Platform Trust)

Note：● represents that the condition variable exists, the large circle represents the core element and the small circle represents the peripheral element; ⊗ represents that the condition variable does not exist, the large circle represents the core element and the small circle represents the peripheral element; "Blank" indicates that the condition has two possibilities of existence and no existence at the same time.

5.　DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1　Discussion of the results

This study use fsQCA analysis to study the antecedent configuration of triggering consumer platform trust. Comprehensive conclusions are as follows:

Consumer activity satisfaction plays a key role in the process of forming platform trust. The results of fsQCA confirm the critical role of consumer satisfaction. In the second configuration (C2) and the third configuration (C3), activity satisfaction, as the core variable, plays a significant role in triggering consumer platform trust. In addition, in configuration C1a, activity satisfaction, as a peripheral variable, helps trigger consumer platform trust. This is consistent with the previous research results of Bendapudi[31] and Gulati[32].

Consumer platform trust is affected by many factors. Consumers' self-efficacy, expected relationship benefits, perceived festival atmosphere, and perceived snap-up atmosphere play core roles in configuration C2, C3 and C4, and play peripheral roles in configuration C1. Configuration C2 takes high self-efficacy as its core condition, and two sub-models take low festival atmosphere and high snap-up atmosphere as peripheral conditions. In configuration C3, high festival atmosphere is the core condition, and high snap-up atmosphere and high expected relationship benefits are the peripheral conditions. Configuration C4 consists of three core conditions: high self-efficacy, high expected relationship benefits, and high snap-up atmosphere.

Positioning theory plays an essential role in OPA. We can find that among the four configurations formed by fsQCA, the configuration with positioning intensity as the core condition (C1) has higher coverage than any other trigger configuration, which indicates that it has high explanatory power. The result of fsQCA means that the promotion activities with high positioning intensity are easier to trigger consumers' platform trust in the hosting platform.

5.2　Theoretical and practical implications

The greatest theoretical contribution of our research is that we puts forward three dimensions to quantify the positioning performance and names the results as "positioning intensity". The proposal of positioning intensity makes the positioning performance more concrete, simplifies the research on positioning. This concept not only helps our research verify the applicability of positioning theory in OPA, but also facilitates scholars to study the application of positioning theory in other fields.

Some practical implications of this study might be helpful for prominent network marketing planners and online shopping platform managers. First, platform should improve consumer feedback mechanism. Planners of large-scale OPAs should pay attention to the education of consumers. For example, complex activity rules can be explained through pictures or videos to facilitate consumers' understanding. Second, strengthening marketing professionalism is necessary. For event planners, they can consider user portraits to define target users' characteristics, according to which to determine the strength of marketing and to create the appropriate atmosphere. Finally, platform should establish project management mechanism. For platform managers, it is necessary to occasionally mention and promote activities during non-event periods to continuously deepen consumers' impression. In addition, the platform can create a clear brand image for the activity through promotional slogans, such as the announcement of "the lowest price of the whole year" on double eleven carnival.

6.　CONCLUSION

This study explores the formation mechanism of consumer platform trust under the background of large-scale OPA. At the same time, the paper provides empirical support for verifying the effectiveness of positioning theory by putting forward the concept of "positioning intensity". The results can provide suggestions

for e-commerce platform managers, help the platform to carry out promotional activities more effectively, and provide theoretical support for the establishment of OPA brand.

Although the two activities selected in this study are very representative, we must admit that consumer behavior shows different characteristics in different economic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, further cross-cultural comparative studies can be conducted to determine the applicability of the results of this study in other markets. In addition, there are many different promotional activities in the market. Therefore, future researchers can improve or verify the results of this study by studying other promotional activities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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