Social Network Site (SNS) Brand Page Participation and Commitment: A Comparison between China and Korea

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Abstract

The wide use of Social Network Site (SNS) brand pages by companies has renovated brand strategies in the new era. This study is to provide meaningful implications to companies' effective use of SNS brand pages, and help global companies with their development of brand strategies. Using survey, this study investigates the motivating factors (functional benefits, hedonic benefits, economic benefits, intrinsic benefits, and brand reputation) influencing individuals’ SNS brand page participation and commitment as well as the impact on purchase intention. Potential cultural differences between Chinese and Korean users are also studied. The results show that prior motivating factor in traditional online communities still hold for SNS brand pages in both countries, but there are differences in the significance and importance between the two countries. Implications and contributions are discussed.

Keywords

SNS brand page, brand community, information seeking, reward, participation, commitment, purchase intention.

Introduction

The prevalence of the Internet has enabled individuals from all over the world to form communities based on common interests without geographic restrictions. An online brand community, defined as “a specialized, non-geographically bound communities, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p.412), is typically formed based on attachment to a brand or to its product/service. Common interests, socio-economic similarities, and shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility can be the essential foundation of brand communities.

A special form of online brand communities is Social Network Site (SNS) brand page (also known as brand page or fan page). SNS brand pages, which are organized around a single brand, product, or company, represent an emerging form of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) that provides constant connectivity among users worldwide; SNS brand pages can help direct messages and posts to subscribed users, promote and lead discussions about a brand (or its product/service), arouse individual awareness, and contribute to tight social networks among subscribed users. The wide spread use of SNS brand pages by companies has renovated their brand management strategies in the new era. Companies can easily deliver a variety of contents related to their brands and timely communicate with potential or existing customers (Boyd and Ellison 2007).

SNS brand pages, however, differ from traditional online brand communities in two major aspects. First, unlike traditional online brand communities that are largely user-driven, SNS brand pages are mainly company-driven and are used as an explicit brand communication and interaction channel between users and the brand. Second, while a traditional online brand community is based on pure brand-likeness, an
SNS brand page may not be so (e.g., Boyd and Ellison 2007; Jahn and Kunz 2012). Members of traditional online brand communities typically have strong attachment or commitment to the brand (or its product/service), are willing to share their values, and bear a sense of moral responsibility (e.g., Boyd and Ellison 2007; Jahn and Kunz 2012). In contrast, users of SNS brand pages may not “like” the brand (or its product/service). Instead, they become users because they want to control SNS brand pages by producing and distributing online content related to the brand (or its product/service), to receive discounts or freebies, to be connected to SNS “friends” who might neither be “fans” of the brand (or its product/service), or to signal their self-identity (e.g., Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Extant research on has studied users’ participation and commitment in traditional online brand communities and related motivators (e.g., Fornell and Larcker 1981; Jackson and Wang 2013; Li et.al 2006) and consequences such as purchase intention (e.g., Borle et al.2012; Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Vasalou et al.2010). However, there is a lack of systematic investigation regarding users’ participation and commitment in the context of SNS brand pages (Tse et al.1989). Due to the differences between SNS brand pages and traditional online communities discussed before, we wonder whether the motivators-participation/commitment-purchase intention relationship examined in current online brand community literature still holds in the context of SNS brand pages. Based on the uses and gratifications theory, this study investigates motivating factors influencing users’ participation and commitment in SNS brand pages in China and Korea, two counties with very active users of SNS brand pages. The paper is organized as follows. We first review related literature, leading up to propositions. Then we discuss data collection and analysis, followed by findings, implications, limitations and future directions.

**Literature Review and Hypothesis Development**

**SNS Brand Page Participation, Commitment and Purchase Intention**

**Participation** in SNS brand pages refers to engaging in activities (e.g., creating messages, disseminating information) and providing emotional support to others (Borle et al.2012). Active participators of SNS brand pages typically show high levels of interest—though not necessarily likeness— in the brand (or its products/services), and constantly update their knowledge through interactions with the business and communications with other users. Frequent interactions with the brand communities can enhance individuals’ brand knowledge (Morgan and Hunt 1994) and strengthen individual–brand bond. **Commitment** in SNS brand pages reflects the strong and positive psychological attachment to a brand or its product/service (Beatty and Kahle 1988). This attachment may have originated from prior internal emotional involvement with the brand (Zaichkowsky 1985) or generated via active participation in maintaining long-term relationships with the brand (Butler and Cantrell 1994). Participation and commitment in SNS brand pages help build individual–brand relationships, which consequently influence other downstream behaviors (e.g., purchase) towards the brand or its product/service (e.g., Flavián and Guinalíu 2006; Kassim and Abdullah 2010). Research on traditional online brand communities found that participation has significant influence on online purchase behavior (e.g., Borle et al.2012; Kassim and Abdullah 2010), and commitment has a significant influence on individuals' continuous usage (Lee et al.2008) and brand attachment such as trust and loyalty (Zeithaml et al.1996).

Focusing on purchase intention, we suspect

**H1.** Participation in SNS brand page is positively associated with purchase intention.

**H2.** Commitment in SNS brand page is positively associated with purchase intention.

**Uses and Gratifications Theory and Motivators for SNS Brand Page Participation and Commitment**

To understand motivators for participation and commitment in SNS brand pages, we turn to uses and gratifications theory (UGT) (Severin et al.1997). According to UGT, individuals actively seek for media to satisfy their specific needs and gratifications. Although UGT was originally developed to examine traditional media (e.g., newspaper, television) (e.g., Katz et al.1973; Kippax and Murray 1980; Rubin 1983), recent studies have applied UGT to new media (e.g., social media) (e.g., Flanagin 2005; Leung 2001). Existing research on traditional online brand communities (e.g., Bock et al.2005; Borle et al.2012; Gupta and Kim 2007) suggests five major group of motivators, namely functional benefits, hedonic...
benefits, economic benefits, intrinsic benefits, and brand reputation. We suspect these five major motivators still apply to participation and commitment in SNS brand pages.

**Functional Benefits**

Functional benefits refer to the concrete outcomes that individuals can receive in using the media (e.g., SNS brand page). Functional benefits include two aspects, i.e., *information seeking* or *convenience seeking* benefits associated with the information (or system) quality provide by the media. *Information seeking* benefits individuals perceived may have significant influence on individuals’ participation and commitment (e.g., Fornell and Larcker 1981). For example, research found that the motivation of information seeking encourages individuals to actively and positively take part in online brand community activities (Lee 2005; Li et.al 2006). *Convenience seeking* (i.e., easy access of anytime-anywhere benefits) has been identified as a key gratification in using online brand communities (Nambisan and Baron 2009). The convenience function derives from the ease of use in either computer-based websites or applications on small devices.

When SNS brand page members immerse themselves into the “information warehouse”, they can find timely answers for their inquiries and spread useful information among fans without time or distance constraints. Besides, information dissemination via SNS brand pages is easy and convenient, which further facilitate smooth interactions among users (e.g., Ko et al.2005; Ul Haq 2012). Therefore, the gratification of two functional benefits is expected to exert a significant and positive effect on individuals’ participation and commitment in SNS brand pages. Hence, we propose

\[ H3a. \text{Information seeking is positively associated with SNS brand page participation.} \]
\[ H3b. \text{Information seeking is positively associated with SNS brand page commitment.} \]
\[ H4a. \text{Convenience seeking is positively associated with SNS brand page participation.} \]
\[ H4b. \text{Convenience seeking is positively associated with SNS brand page commitment.} \]

**Hedonic Benefits**

Hedonic benefits (i.e. *entertainment seeking*) refer to the various pleasures that members feel when using the media (e.g., Dholakia et al.2004; Li et.al 2006; Sheldon 2008) and the utility of such feelings or affective states (e.g., enjoyment) (Vasalou et al.2010). The intent to seek entertainment motivates individuals to spend their leisure time on the diverse activities (e.g. games, contests, polls) available in SNS brand pages, which may arouse or elicit positive emotions and passion (Armstrong and Hagel 1995) that consequently further motivate them to more extensively use SNS brand pages. Also, SNS brand pages can provide individuals with opportunities to gather and explore new things that they seldom experience offline. For instance, users can be entertained through Facebook in various ways like surfing on a friend’s page, or learning what their friends are doing by reading through newsfeed on Facebook, and etc (SINA 2013). The entertained users are likely to experience greater satisfaction, which will further motivate them to participate in or commit to SNS brand pages (Raju et al.2009). Thus, we argue

\[ H5a. \text{Entertainment Seeking is positively associated with SNS brand page participation.} \]
\[ H5b. \text{Entertainment Seeking is positively associated with SNS brand page commitment.} \]

**Economic Benefits**

Economic benefits refer to bonuses or compensations that individuals receive. For SNS brand pages, the term *reward* is often used to describe the incentives individuals perceived through a variety of compensation activities (Mengze and Andrea 2014). Research on online brand communities found that bonus such as gift certificates (Ha and Perks 2005) and special promotions and coupons (Treadaway and Smith 2010) are likely to strengthen individual–brand relationship. The greater the economic benefits are, the greater customers’ satisfaction and loyalty will be (Sung et al.2010), and the more likely that individuals will continue participating (e.g., Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Sung et al.2010). Hence,

\[ H6a. \text{Reward is positively associated with SNS brand page participation.} \]
Intrinsic Benefits

Intrinsic benefits depict the internal psychological outcomes like self-esteem benefits and social benefits that one can perceive in using the new media. Interaction is essential to trigger individuals' intrinsic benefits and can consequently encourage participation and commitment (Armstrong and Hagel 1995). Brand page membership can be used by an individual to show a peer group his/her social presence and to signal one's self-identity; it can also be used to share with others interesting encounters and joy that may rapidly spread to all users of the communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). If individuals receive quick responses and can closely connect with others, the feeling of being recognized and paid attention to will lead to a sense of self-concept and self-esteem (Yen et al.2011), which may lead to active participation or commitment (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). For example, Ruiz-Mafe et al. (2004) found that interactions at Facebook brand page play an essential role in improving user attitude and loyalty. Thus, we suspect

H7a. Interaction is positively associated with SNS brand page participation.

H7b. Interaction is positively associated with SNS brand page commitment.

Brand Reputation

Brand reputation is another motivator for participation and commitment. SNS brand pages offer individuals a new way of knowing the brand, understanding its product/service, contacting the company, and communicating with peer customers. However, a lack of prior brand knowledge or poor brand image may deter individuals' interests to participate in the communities, since people make purchasing decisions partly based on their level of trust in the product, salesperson, and the company image (Heckhausen and Heckhausen 2008). Therefore, individuals tend to search for a reliable and responsible brand that may help reduce innate risks associated with the products and services (Delgado-Ballester et al.2003). If they perceive a brand and its products or services as trustworthy, they will actively develop a sense of commitment and affection towards the brand (Beatty and Kahle 1988). Therefore, we propose

H8a. Brand reputation is positively associated with SNS brand page participation.

H8b. Brand reputation is positively associated with SNS brand page commitment.

Cultural Differences in SNS Brand Page Participation and Commitment

It is well-recognized that culture influences individuals' behaviors and attitudes (Tse et al.1989), including participation and commitment in traditional online brand communities (e.g., Ahn et al. 2010; Van Doorn et al.2010). Focusing on two cultures (i.e., China and Korea) with a large number of active users of SNS brand pages, we suspect that cultural differences may exist for our hypotheses discussed above. Our suspicion is based on the literature on China-Korea differences in individuals' attitudes and behaviors. For example, research shows that when making purchase decisions, Korean and Chinese consumers have different emphases (e.g., Korean have higher emphasis on physical appearances) (e.g., Kim et al.2011). More closely related to SNS brand pages, a study about website characteristics affecting flow and satisfaction identified significant differences between the two countries (Fan et al.2013) Although not directly on SNS brand pages, the literature seems to suggest that Chinese and Korean may be different in their participation and commitment in SNS brand pages (e.g., Jackson and Wang 2013; Kim et al.2011). Thus, we propose

H9. The motivators-participation/commitment-purchase intention relationships are different between Chinese and Korean SNS brand page users.

Method

Data Collection and Construct Measurement

We collected data using online survey with the assistance of two leading commercial market research institutions, one in China and one in Korea. Two versions of the survey (one in Chinese and one in
Korean) were prepared and translated by two separate bilingual graduate students to ensure that no discrepancies existed. Approximately 500 copies of surveys were distributed in each country. 384 valid responses were collected from South Korea and 407 were collected from China. To be included in this study, participants must be active users of certain SNS brand pages (e.g., Coke-Cola, BMW, Starbucks, McDonald, Samsung, and Lenovo)—we asked respondents whether they are active users of SNS brand pages at the beginning of the survey. If the answer is negative, then the survey will not start. Demographic details (collected at the end of the survey) of the sample are provided in Table 1. Constructs were measured using existing scales (5-point Likert) adopted from the literature (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (in years)</th>
<th>Average Frequency of SNS Brand Page Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Measurement Scales</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information seeking</td>
<td>The information of the SNS brand page is valuable for me.</td>
<td>Ducoffe 1996; Yang et al. 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The information of the SNS brand page is up-to-date for me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The information of the SNS brand page is exact for me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think this SNS brand page is a valuable information resource.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>I can get any information very easy from this SNS brand page.</td>
<td>Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004; Mckinney 2004; To et al. 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can use this SNS brand page without any limitation in time and place.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The SNS brand page is very convenient to use.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment seeking</td>
<td>The content of the SNS brand page is fun.</td>
<td>Moon and Kim, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The content of the SNS brand page is pleasant.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The content of the SNS brand page is entertaining.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>I can get answers from the brand on this SNS brand page.</td>
<td>Nambisan and Baron, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can interact with others on this SNS brand page.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can communicate with others on this SNS brand page.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can give feedback to others on this brand page.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand reputation</td>
<td>In my opinion this brand is respected by people.</td>
<td>Coulter, 1998; Day and Stafford, 1997; Escalas and Stern, 2003; Stafford 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In my opinion this brand is positive.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think favorably about this brand.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td>I can get bonuses following this SNS brand page.</td>
<td>Mengze Shi and Andrea, 2014; Sung et al. 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can get reward following this SNS brand page.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can get more points following this brand page.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>I frequently provide useful information to other members in general.</td>
<td>Bowen. 1990; Cermak et al. 1994; Goodwin, 1988; Kelley et al. 1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I do my best to participate in activities offered on the brand’s SNS brand page.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I post messages and responses on the SNS brand page with great enthusiasm and high frequency.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Commitment
I feel I am part of a community around this SNS brand page.
I feel the good relationship with others in this SNS brand page.
I think is important for me to connect with others in this SNS brand page.
I am an active supporter of this SNS brand page.
Moorman et al. 1992

Purchase Intention
I intend to remain loyal to this brand in the future.
I will not stop buying this brand.
I will have the intention of continuing to buy this brand.
Zeithaml et al. 1996

Table 2. Construct Measurement

Common Method Bias
As data is self-reported and collected from a single source, a potential problem is common method bias (CMB). We addressed this issue following suggestions of Podsakoff et al. (2003). First, participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their responses to minimize concerns about social desirability. Second, measurement items of the same construct were put in different places on the survey to reduce participants’ perception of direct connections among these items. Finally, Harman’s one-factor test was used, and results revealed more than one factor with eigenvalue value above 1, with the first factor accounting for 37.83% of the total variance. Hence, CMB is unlikely to be a serious concern.

Reliability and Validity Test
A confirmative factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 21.0 was conducted to assess construct reliability and validity of the measurement model. The reliability was tested by checking the internal consistency (i.e. Cronbach’s alpha). Cronbach’s alpha values for all constructs are greater than 0.7. In addition, composite reliabilities are found to be above 0.8 for all. Both signal satisfactory construct reliability. Construct validity consists of convergent validity and discriminant validity. In general, convergent validity can be claimed when t-values are 2.0 or above, standardized factor loadings are 0.5 or above, or averaged variances expected (AVEs) are 0.5 or above (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). Discriminant validity is confirmed when all the AVEs exceed the minimum level of 0.5 (e.g., Dodds 1991; Jin et al. 2010). All factors demonstrate adequate construct validity. Details of test results can be requested from authors.

Hypothesis Testing
The effects and statistical significance of the parameters in the SEM were tested using the bootstrapping procedure in AMOS 21.0. The test results (Table 3) show good fitness for the structural model using both samples. Results for China and Korea are presented in Figure 1 and 2. Most of the proposed hypotheses are supported with a few exceptions. H3a and H3b are supported for Korean sample, but not for Chinese sample, which indicates that information seeking is not positively associated with either participation or commitment of Chinese respondents. H4a and H4b are supported for Chinese sample but not for Korean sample, which means that the proposed relationship between convenience seeking and Korean respondents’ SNS brand participation/commitment does not hold. In addition, no positive association is found between commitment and purchase intention (H2) of Korean respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>χ²/df</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>AGFI</th>
<th>PGFI</th>
<th>RMR</th>
<th>NFI</th>
<th>IFI</th>
<th>TLI</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>958.66</td>
<td>2.556</td>
<td>.859</td>
<td>.825</td>
<td>.693</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.903</td>
<td>.939</td>
<td>.928</td>
<td>.938</td>
<td>.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>877.905</td>
<td>2.341</td>
<td>.869</td>
<td>.838</td>
<td>.701</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>.843</td>
<td>.903</td>
<td>.887</td>
<td>.902</td>
<td>.059</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Structural Model Fitness
Results and Discussions

By focusing on SNS brand pages, this study tested the motivator–participation/commitment–purchase intention relationships identified in the existing literature on traditional online brand communities. In addition, this study collected data from two countries with active SNS brand page users (i.e., China and Korea) to understand potential cultural differences. Findings of this study suggest that motivators identified in the current literature on traditional online brand communities (e.g., Bagozzi and Dholaki 2006; Bock et al. 2005; Borle et al. 2012; Gupta and Kim 2007) still hold for SNS brand pages. Most motivating factors (e.g., entertainment seeking, reward, brand reputation, and interaction) were found to have positive relationship with individuals’ SNS brand page participation and commitment in both China and Korea, consequently leading to purchase intentions. However, the significance and the strength of these motivating factors differ between Chinese and Korean SNS brand page users.

First, non-significant motivating factors were found to be different between China and Korea. For Chinese SNS brand page users, information seeking was not positively associated with SNS brand page participation/commitment; for Korean users, convenience was not positively associated with SNS brand page participation/commitment. These findings can be explained by the free Internet access in Korea and
the Internet census in China. In Korea, virtual identity in SNS brand pages must be officially verified and Korean may freely access information and brand news from Facebook, Twitter, Google, and etc. The safe and free Internet environment makes it easier for Korean to participate in or commit to SNS brand pages. In China, however, important and sensitive information about brands are owned and controlled by a few highly involved brand professionals and may not be easily accessible by most SNS brand page users. Therefore, information seeking benefits are non-significant for Chinese users’ participation/commitment.

Second, the most influential motivating factors for SNS brand page participation/commitment were also different between the two countries. The most influential factor was brand reputation in China and reward in Korea. The strong impact of brand reputation in China is still associated with its Internet environment. Due to a lack of free access to diverse and rich brand information in China, brand reputation appeared to be an importance reference to users of SNS brand pages. The strong influence of reward in Korea is consistent with prior studies (e.g., Sung et al. 2010, Treadaway and Smith 2010; Yen et al. 2011), which found that Korean took part in SNS brand pages mostly because of gift certificates, special promotions and coupons. This kind of participation by Korean users strengthened the connection between individuals and the brand names.

Third, this study found that interaction played an important role in affecting commitment in both countries. The influence of interaction is related to the unique features of SNS brand pages. Being a profile on a social networking website, SNS brand pages are embedded in an organically grown network of social ties, and have far more posts, feedbacks, and reviews than “product information sharing” communities. As a result, discussions among tightly connected fans may cover a wider range of topics, ranging from brands and products/services to product/service use experience and relevant personal stories. Therefore, SNS brand page users can gain more benefits through community interactions, which consequently makes them more committed.

Finally, SNS brand page participation and commitment were found to mediate the relationship between motivators and purchase intention in China, whereas only participation was positively associated with purchase intention in Korea. In addition, the strength of the effect was greater in China than in Korea. This suggests that users’ participation and commitment in SNS brand pages are better indicators for purchase intention in China than in Korea; in Korea, commitment is not a good indicator for purchase intention. Instead, Korean SNS brand page users are simply committed to (or driven by) potential benefits obtained from SNS brand pages (e.g., interaction, rewards), not to the related products/services.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study include the sample and the generalizability of findings. Data was collected in only two countries, and most respondents aged between 20 and 40 (i.e., 88.2% in China, and 86.7% in Korea). Hence, findings may not apply to SNS brand page users in other countries or in other age groups. Future research could try to verify the findings in other countries to increase generalizability of findings. Another potential future research direction could be testing the moderating effects of demographics (e.g., age, gender) to identify potential differences among segmented SNS brand page users.

Conclusion

This study investigated motivating factors influencing individuals’ participation and commitment in SNS brand pages as well as the potential impacts on purchase intentions in China and Korea. Results of the study provide empirical evidence regarding the motivators for and consequences of users’ participation and commitment in SNS brand pages, and the potential cultural differences.

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