

# Towards an Insight Into Customer Behavior in Virtual Brand Communities: An Investigation of Personal and Community Characteristic Factors

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims at exploring the effects of customer personal factors and characteristics of brand community on customer behaviors in virtual brand community. The data were collected from customers of virtual brand communities in the Vietnamese context via a survey. The data show that among the customer personal factors, customer ability has the largest impact on customer active behaviors in virtual brand community while customer motivation and opportunity have smaller significant influences on customer behaviors. Regarding the characteristics of virtual brand community, information quality posted in virtual community has the most dramatic effect on customer involvement in active behaviors. System quality is also relevant to customer behaviors, yet virtual interactivity and rewards are unrelated to customer activity involvement. With the findings, research shows useful suggestions for businesses in Vietnam in their efforts to understand the impact of customer behavior in the virtual community.

## KEYWORDS

Ability, Activity Involvement, Community Promotion Behavior, Information Quality, Member Interaction, Motivation, Opportunity, System Quality, Virtual Brand Community, Virtual Interactivity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A growing number of consumers use social networks to express and disseminate their knowledge, experiences, and opinions about products and services. The social network and sharing platform function as platforms to facilitate interaction among consumers and the formation of brand communities. (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muñiz & Schau, 2005, 2006). Consequently, many enterprises created their brand fan pages in the social network as their virtual brand communities. Those fan pages create a community of consumers who interact with the company through liking or commenting on

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brand posts or through sharing information (Bushelow, 2012). There has been evidence that brand fan page or many firms outperforms official websites in terms of consumer traffic (Neff, 2010; Zastrow, 2013). As such, building a community brand is essential to developing the company's brand while increasing the ability of interaction between the company and the customer.

The recent innovation of social network - based brand communities provide companies with benefits such as greater accessibility to customers, lower costs and higher communication efficiency (Laroche, 2012). Virtual brand communities are known as specialized, structured, and non – geographically bond, with no constraint, allowing continuous communications between many to many members. In addition, the willingness of customers to share or respond to products and services is an opportunity for marketers to grasp customers better by paying attention to discussing values from social networks. Thus, they can assess accurately customer's satisfaction level, discover new customer's needs and find important features to target in the media. Based on this practical information, the company can provide marketing strategies for potential products or develop and improve products based on customers' practical needs. Consumers can also form and manage many successful online or virtual brand communities in which they can influence other members to voluntarily perform various community behaviors like intention of membership, recommendation, active participation, and the like. Several studies show that virtual community is a crucial reference for the members. Prior to making a decision for purchases, participants can collect information, get consultancy or advice from an expert user on virtual communities. Even for post-purchase stage, customers may share their experiences of consumption to the community (De Valck et al., 2009). In this way, customer virtual communities clearly have a vast influence on consumers and become more dependable than commercial communities (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Brodie et al., 2013), but customer communities may also be disadvantageous to a company as negative messages from unsatisfied consumers could threaten brand image (Maclaran & Catterall, 2002).

Previous studies about virtual brand communities have addressed factors affecting a member's intention to share and customer's loyalty in a social media community of brand. For example, Gruen et al. (2006) revealed that customer characteristics like motivation, ability, and opportunities to engage in customer-to-customer exchanges are linked to customers' loyalty intentions (i.e. repurchase intention and words-of-mouth). Munnukka et al. (2015) disclosed that community commitment is associated to community members' attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. Ha (1998) studied the effects of customer attitudes and beliefs (i.e. perceived usefulness, ease of use, trust, responsiveness, and social norms) on social media-based community members' continuance intention. In a similar vein, Potgieter & Naidoo (2017) confirmed the influences of trust, perceived usefulness, and social norms on members' continuance intention. However, there is little research dedicated to specific behaviors of customers in virtual brand communities. Most of the existing studies have shown interest in the influential factors for community members' loyalty towards the brand or company (Ha; 1998; Gruen et al., 2005; Munnukka et al., 2015, Potgieter & Naidoo, 2017). Meanwhile, customers' behaviors directed at communities that have been partially recognized by former research like community participation (Tsai et al., 2012) and community promotion behavior (Munnukka et al., 2015) received limited attention of researchers. A rigorous review suggests that to date no research has examined the factors affecting these community-directed behaviors in a single study. Understanding about dynamics of these community behaviors will be valuable for companies to effectively manage virtual communities of brands – a recent prominent trend adopted by enterprises.

Moreover, prior research has, in part, identified the connections between personal factors (Gruen et al., 2005) as well as community-related factors (Islam & Rahma, 2017) and customers' behaviors in virtual exchanges. To exemplify, Gruen et al. (2005) proposed community members' motivation, ability, and opportunity to engage in interaction as crucial catalysts for customers' involvement in exchanges with others. Meanwhile, with a focus on community-related factors, Islam & Rahma (2017) accentuated information quality, system quality, virtual interactivity, and rewards as prominent drivers to customer engagement and participation in communities. These results entail the relevance

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