Research on the Continuous Participation of Virtual Brand Community in Decision-Making Based on Social Influence Theory

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Abstract: Based on the social influence theory, the influence of virtual brand community members' perceived value on social influencing factors is discussed, and the influence of social influencing factors on virtual brand community members' continuous participation in decision-making is analyzed. Through an empirical analysis of the survey data of Xiaomi users in the Xiaomi Community, the results showed that the perceived value of virtual brand community members significantly and positively affects social influencing factors, which also significantly and positively affect the members' continuous participation in virtual brand communities. Therefore, only by sharing valuable information resources and improving the efficiency of information flow, thereby enhancing the perceived value of the community and increasing the stickiness of members to the virtual community, will we have an opportunity to enhance the interaction among members and effectively promote continuous participation in community activities through the strong bonds formed among members.

Keywords: Social influencing factors; Perceived value; Continuous participation; Xiaomi Community; Virtual brand community

1. Research background

The concept of community has existed since ancient times. From the hunting era, when human beings were connected by family blood for survival, to the transformation of modern society into an interpersonal network that is closely linked by common values and hobbies, the concept of community has undergone tremendous changes. With the advent of the digital economy, the form and connotation of community have also changed. People's lives are intertwined with two social networks: one is the social network in real life, while the other is the virtual community on the internet.

Virtual communities enable people to exchange, communicate, and interact conveniently on the internet anytime and anywhere. Virtual brand community refers to the relationship network formed among consumers gathered in cyberspace based on common interests or hobbies for a certain product or brand. In recent years, with the rapid development of social network services, virtual brand communities have attracted the attention of business circles and academic circles with their commercial value, such as information dissemination, two-way interaction, consumer experience, and mutual assistance among consumers. At the same time, consumers' purchasing decisions have also shifted from individual levels to

those that rely on virtual communities. Considering the importance and value of virtual brand communities, academic circles have extensively studied the formation mechanism, participation motivation, social satisfaction, and community loyalty.

Consumers gather in the virtual community to communicate and interact with relevant information, such as a brand, product preferences, purchase channels, prices, experiences, *etc*. This process acquires information value and social value as well as enhances the perceived community value of group members. Only the continuous participation of members and the high degree of involvement of the community can ensure the vitality of the community and the efficient flow of information. Existing research mainly focuses on the pre-factors and community value perception of consumers participating in the community. From extensive reading of existing literature, it can be seen that the pre-motives of consumers to participate in communities include information needs, social needs, entertainment and leisure needs, *etc*., while community perception is mainly based on community satisfaction and community belonging. The research theories involved in this field are mainly social interaction theory, social influence theory, hierarchical demand theory, and so on. For example, Yan *et al*. [1] believe that the pre-motives of consumers to participate in online communities include obtaining functional information, expressing themselves, interacting with others, and getting approval from others. This series of processes enables consumers to perceive community value and increase brand favorability, thereby generating brand stickiness and even brand loyalty [1]. According to He *et al*. [2], the continuous participation of individuals in the community is driven by the real environment they live in, coupled with the gradual satisfaction of individual-level needs. Initially, they are motivated by obvious external motivations, such as information exchange, which later develop into groups and key events triggering internalized motivation regulation [2]. Wang *et al*. [3] established a five-factor model of consumers' motivation to participate in brand communities, which includes social motivation, leisure and entertainment motivation, information motivation, ability achievement motivation, and economic interest motivation [3]. Rational behavior theory, technology acceptance model, and planned behavior theory are often applied in user acceptance research. For example, Wang *et al*. [4] believe that the functional value perception and social value perception of the community have a positive and significant impact on the continuous participation of community members in community decision-making.

Individual goals are influenced and constrained by the common goals and norms of surrounding organizations. This is the core of social influence theory. These common goals and constraints come from the subjective norm, social acknowledgement, team norm, and other levels of social groups, large and small, and they gradually form important elements of the community value structure in the virtual community. Subjective norm, social acknowledgement, and team norm are typical social factors, and they are also the basis for the interaction of virtual community members. Group members are influenced by subjective norm, combined with internet innovation and tolerance, to build a new type of interpersonal relationship in the virtual community, escape the constraints of real life, and form their own desires and intentions by evaluating the opinions and suggestions from community members. This is the characteristic of the interaction of community members under the influence of social factors [5,6]. We were inspired to conduct a study from the perspective of social factors and explore the motivation of community members to continue participating in the community through the interaction of community members. This paper establishes a research framework from the perspectives of demand hierarchy theory, consumer psychology, and value perception, explains the formation mechanism of consumers' motivation to participate in virtual communities, and provides brand marketing decision makers with methods and strategies for establishing consumer brand co-creation value.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

Dholakia *et al*. [7] proposed a virtual community engagement framework to explore the impact of social factors and individual motivations on community members' participation in decision-making. This framework emphasizes the importance of social influence and individual motivation in virtual communities. Social factors have an influence on the participatory decision-making of community members. Social factors may include opinions of other members, social norm, and social acknowledgement. However, social influence is in turn influenced by an individual's perceived value of a particular behavior. This means that individual motivation plays a key role in determining participation behavior. Okazaki [8] extended the research on the perceived value of participation, proposing three aspects of perceived value. The first is purpose value, which refers to the perceived value of participating in a virtual community to achieve a set goal. Community members believe that certain goals can be achieved through participation, so participation has purpose value. The second is social promotion, which refers to improving one's status in the community and gaining acceptance and recognition from other members by participating in the virtual community and making contributions to the community. Social promotion is important for individuals because it helps build social relationships and gain social approval. Lastly, there is entertainment value, *i.e.*, the sense of fun or relaxation that can be gained from participating in virtual communities and playing or interacting with others. Entertainment value is an important factor for psychological satisfaction and enjoyment. Taken together, we highlight the importance of social factors, personal motivations, and perceived value in understanding and explaining consumer engagement in virtual communities. Social factors and individual motivations jointly shape community members' participation decisions, while perceived value affects individuals' motivation and satisfaction with participation.

Virtual communities have grown in popularity in recent years, providing individuals with a platform to connect with like-minded people and share interests. However, participation in these communities is not solely based on personal preferences or interests. Social factors, such as team norm, social acknowledgement, and subjective norm, play an important role in influencing an individual's decision to participate in a virtual community. Subjective norm refers to an individual's perception of the impact of other people's opinions on his/her participation. This means that an individual's decision to participate in a virtual community may be influenced by the opinions of others within the community. For example, if a person believes that their participation in a virtual community is highly valued by other members, he/she may be more likely to participate. Social acknowledgement includes cognitive identity, affective identity, and evaluative identity. It involves self-knowledge in relation to community. Cognitive identity involves an individual's awareness of one's similarities and differences to community members and non-community members, respectively. Emotional identity reflects an individual's emotional attachment or sense of belonging to a community. Assessing identity involves the individual's perception of his/her worth and importance within a community. These factors influence an individual's decision to participate in a virtual community, as the individual may feel a stronger sense of connection and belonging to the community. Team norm represents the shared goals and expectations agreed upon by group members. These norms influence an individual's decision to participate in a virtual community, as he/she may feel pressured to conform to group expectations. For example, if a virtual community has a strong focus on environmentalism, individuals may be more willing to participate if they share similar values. The perceived value of virtual community participation positively affects social factors. This means that individuals may be more likely to participate if they believe that participating in a virtual community will provide them with benefits, such as social connections, knowledge, or entertainment. The concept of perceived value explains the factors that influence members' decisions to participate in virtual brand communities. A virtual brand community is an online community centered on a specific brand or product. Individuals may be more likely to participate if they believe that participating in a virtual brand community will provide them with exclusive

information or discounts. Dholakia *et al.* [7] and Okazaki [8] pointed out that the perceived value of virtual community participation has a positive impact on social factors. Therefore, this concept may be used to explain the factors that influence members' decisions to participate in virtual brand communities. Hence, we put forward the following assumptions:

H1a: The purpose value of virtual brand community positively affects team norm.
H1b: The purpose value of virtual brand community positively affects social acknowledgement.
H1c: The purpose value of virtual brand community positively affects subjective norm.
H2a: The social promotion of virtual brand community positively affects team norm.
H2b: The social promotion of virtual brand community positively affects social acknowledgement.
H2c: The social promotion of virtual brand community positively affects subjective norm.
H3a: The entertainment value of virtual brand community positively affects team norm.
H3b: The entertainment value of virtual brand community positively affects social acknowledgement.
H3c: The entertainment value of virtual brand community positively affects subjective norm.

Dholakiaa *et al.* [7] explained that the participation motivation and needs of community members are closely related to the value provided by the community. The motivation of consumers to enter the community deeply reflects Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, and the functional value and emotional value provided by the community must not only satisfy the hierarchy of needs theory, but also be reflected in a certain social norm framework. In this way, the higher the community norms, the stronger the participation intention. Related studies have shown that the participation intention of virtual community members is positively affected by team norm [9-11]. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

H4a: The team norm of virtual brand community positively affects the participation desire of virtual community members.
H4b: The team norm of virtual brand community positively affects the participation intention of virtual community members.

According to Hogg *et al.* [12], social acknowledgement allows individuals to maintain a self-defining relationship in their interaction with community members. Ellemers *et al.* [13] pointed out that individuals' preferences in groups are affected by social acknowledgement. Studies have also found that social acknowledgement has a positive impact on the participation desire and intention of virtual community members [14]. Accordingly, we put forward the following hypotheses:

H5a: The social acknowledgement of virtual brand community significantly and positively affects the continuous participation desire of the virtual community members.
H5b: The social acknowledgement of virtual brand community significantly and positively affects the continuous participation intention of the virtual community members.

According to the rational behavior theory and planned behavior theory, individual behavioral intentions are positively influenced by subjective norm. Li *et al.* [15] proposed that subjective norm has a positive impact on trust intentions in innovative technologies. Studies have shown that subjective norm positively affects community members' desire to participate in virtual communities [16]. Accordingly, we put forward the following hypotheses:

H6a: The subjective norm of virtual brand community significantly and positively affects the continuous participation desire of the virtual community members.

H6b: The subjective norm of virtual brand community significantly and positively affects the continuous participation intention of the virtual community members.

According to Dvais, decision-makers must understand and accept the degree of desire of users for their products or services, because desire is the cause of behavior and a key factor in decision-making. According to Bratman's BDI (belief-desire-intention) model, Shen *et al*. [17] pointed out that desire plays an important role in the formation of behavioral intentions. In addition, studies on virtual communities have shown that community members' desire to participate in virtual communities has a positive impact on their participation intentions [18]. Therefore, we put forward the following assumption (**Figure 1**):

H7:   The community members' desire to continue to participate in virtual brand community has a significant positive impact on their continued participation intention.
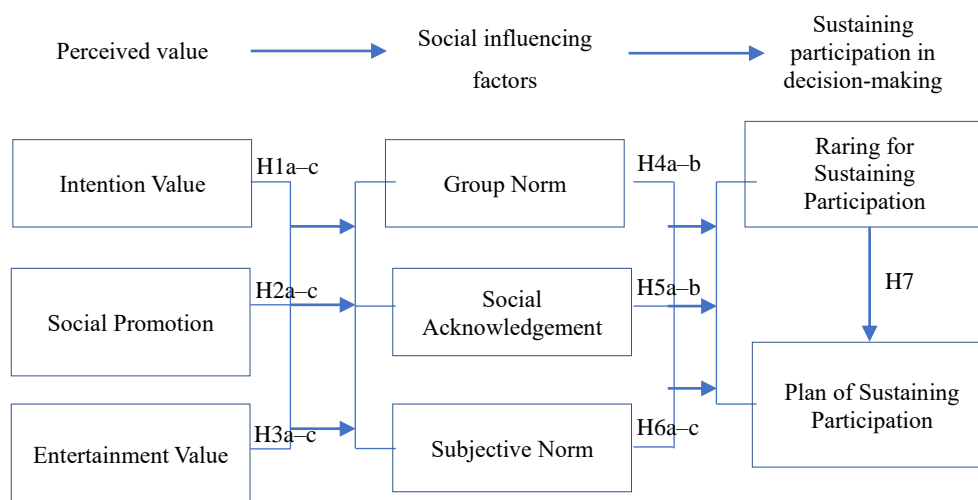
Figure 1. Research framework of this paper

3. Study design

The Xiaomi Community, which is a relatively mature virtual brand community, is taken as the research subject. Xiaomi Corporation launched Mi Community in August 2011, aiming to help Xiaomi users discover valuable resources, products, services, and even contacts. The Xiaomi Community includes Xiaomi Forum, Coldplay Gang, Suishoupai, Xiaomi Academy and City Club, *etc*., providing various services for Xiaomi users.

3.1. Questionnaire design
3.1.1. Definition of variables and sources of scales

Based on relevant literature and the actual situation of Xiaomi Community, we designed specific questionnaire questions for Xiaomi users. The following is the definition of each latent variable: purpose value refers to the perceived value of an individual obtaining a given purpose by participating in a virtual brand community; social promotion refers to the perceived value of improving social status and gaining acceptance and recognition by others by participating in and contributing to the virtual brand community; entertainment value refers to the perceived value of gaining pleasure or relaxation by participating in games or interactions with others in the virtual brand community; team norm refers to the shared goals and expectations of the community members (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Sources of variables and scales

Latent variable	Code	Observed variable	Source
Intention Value (IV)	IV1	Joining the Xiaomi Community helps me get information.	[7,8]
	IV2	Joining the Xiaomi Community helps me provide information to others.	
	IV3	Joining the Xiaomi Community helps me solve product problems.	
Social Promotion (SP)	SP1	Joining the Xiaomi Community helps me make a good impression on others.	
	SP2	Joining the Xiaomi Community lets people know my importance.	
	SP3	Joining the Xiaomi Community helps me gain the respect of others.	
Entertainment value (EV)	EV1	It is a pleasure to join the Xiaomi Community.	
	EV2	Joining the Xiaomi Community helps me relax.	
	EV3	Joining the Xiaomi Community is a way to pass time.	
Team Norm (TN)	TN1	I follow the social norm with other members of the community.	[11,17]
	TN2	I have a high degree of alignment of goals and vision with other group members.	
Social Acknowledgement (SA)	SA1	My personal image is similar to that of members in the Xiaomi Community.	
	SA2	I have a strong sense of belonging to the Xiaomi Community.	
	SA3	I have demonstrated my self-worth in the Xiaomi Community.	
Subjective Norm (SN)	SN1	Xiaomi consumers around me join the Xiaomi Community and thus I should too.	
	SN2	Some people who are important to me think I should join the Xiaomi Community.	
	SN3	Some influential people think that I should join the Xiaomi Community.	
Raring for Sustaining Participation (RSP)	RSP1	I look forward to socializing with Xiaomi Community members in the next two weeks.	[7,11]
	RSP2	I have a strong desire to interact and socialize with Xiaomi Community members.	
	RSP3	I hope to continue socializing with Xiaomi Community members in the next two weeks.	
Plan of Sustaining Participation (PSP)	PSP1	I will continue to browse Xiaomi Community information in the next two weeks.	
	PSP2	I continued to interact with members of the Xiaomi Community over the next two weeks.	
	PSP3	I will continue to participate in activities initiated by the Xiaomi Community in the next two weeks.	

3.1.2. Questionnaire structure

The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part of the questionnaire is mainly about whether the interviewee is a Xiaomi user or a member of the Xiaomi Community. If the respondent answered "Yes" and filled in the e-mail address, the respondent would have to complete the second part of the questionnaire, which includes the demographic profile of the respondent and the measurement items of the observed variables. The 7-point Likert scale was used for scoring, and choices were made from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" for the proposed items, "1" being strongly disagree and "7" strongly agree.

3.2. Research samples and their characteristics

Among the Xiaomi mobile phone user base, there are many college students who participate in the online community every day. These students are suitable as research subjects of the virtual brand community. We conducted the survey on college students, as college students generally use smartphones. Since the consumption expenditure of students mainly comes from their parents, many of them have mid-priced Xiaomi phones. First, we investigated whether the college students are Xiaomi users and have joined the Xiaomi Community; then, the respondents who joined the Xiaomi Community were requested to fill in the

observation items. After preliminary investigation, 506 valid samples were obtained, in which all of them are members of the Xiaomi Community. Questionnaires were distributed to these 506 Xiaomi Community members via email, and 487 questionnaires were recovered. After excluding the questionnaires with incorrect information or obvious contradictions, 464 valid questionnaires were finally obtained. The characteristic information of the respondents is presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Characteristic information of the respondents in the valid questionnaire

Statistics		Number of samples	%
Gender	Male	270	58.19
	Female	194	41.81
Participation time	1 year	165	35.56
	1–3 years	220	47.42
	Over 3 years	79	17.02

3.3. Data analysis and hypothesis testing

3.3.1. Reliability and validity test

Reliability refers to the internal consistency and stability of the questionnaire. The higher the reliability, the more believable the findings. Cronbach's α coefficient is a commonly used indicator for evaluating reliability in social science research. It is generally believed that a coefficient greater than 0.7 indicates that the internal consistency of the scale is better. **Table 3** lists the Cronbach's α coefficient of each variable scale. It can be seen from **Table 3** that the Cronbach's α coefficient of each variable scale is greater than 0.7, indicating that each variable scale is highly reliable.

Table 3. Cronbach's α coefficient of each variable scale

Latent variable	Number of items	Cronbach's α coefficient
IV	3	0.823
SP	3	0.792
EV	3	0.722
TN	2	0.942
SA	3	0.815
SN	2	0.767
RSP	3	0.836
PSP	2	0.740

Validity refers to the validity of the scale, including content validity, criterion validity, and construct validity. The first two kinds of validity usually require expert qualitative research or accepted criterion measurement, so it is difficult to achieve; meanwhile, construct validity can be measured using a variety of methods. After establishing the theoretical model, the construct validity of the scale is usually assessed according to the model fit of confirmatory factor analysis. We also used this method in our study. The model fitting results of confirmatory factor analysis are shown in **Table 4**. It can be seen from **Table 4** that the fitting index value of each latent variable has reached the ideal standard. The results showed that the entire scale has good validity.

Table 4. Model fitting results of confirmatory factor analysis

Fitted index	Ideal index value	Latent variable							
		IV	SP	EV	TN	SA	SN	RSP	PSP
χ^2 (df)	N/A	5.36 (3)	6.08 (3)	5.08 (3)	5.33 (2)	5.89 (3)	6.36 (2)	4.27 (3)	5.38 (2)
χ^2/df	≤ 2.00	1.731	1.590	1.875	1.213	1.531	1.765	1.236	1.405
GFI	≥ 0.90	0.947	0.962	0.965	0.937	0.953	0.977	0.934	0.913
AGFI	≥ 0.80	0.932	0.921	0.925	0.862	0.933	0.901	0.942	0.856
RMR	≤ 0.05	0.022	0.022	0.009	0.031	0.011	0.041	0.013	0.022
RMSEA	≤ 0.05	0.016	0.016	0.024	0.016	0.017	0.013	0.048	0.039
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.948	0.948	0.922	0.918	0.946	0.927	0.972	0.952

Abbreviations: AGFI, adjusted goodness of fit index; CFI, comparative fit index; df, degree of freedom; EV, Entertainment Value; GFI, goodness of fit index; IV, Intention Value; PSP, Plan of Sustaining Participation; RMR, root mean square residual; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; RSP, Raring for Sustaining Participation; SA, Social Acknowledgement; SN, Subjective Norm; SP, Social Promotion; TN, Team Norm.

3.3.2. Hypothesis testing

AMOS 18.0 was used for structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis to study complex multivariate data and simultaneously assess the causal relationship between multiple latent variables. Through SEM analysis, the model significance of the influencing factors of continuous participation in decision-making in the virtual brand community was tested. **Figure 2** shows the detection results of the structural equation model. The path analysis results showed that purpose value has a significant positive effect on team norm, social acknowledgement, and subjective norm, supporting H1a, H1b, and H1c; social promotion has a significant positive effect on team norm, social acknowledgement, and subjective norm, supporting H2a, H2b, and H2c; entertainment value has a significant positive effect on team norm, social acknowledgement, and subjective norm, supporting H3a, H3b, and H3c; team norm has a significant positive effect on continuous participation desire and continuous participation intention, supporting H4a and H4b; social acknowledgement has a significant positive impact on the desire and intention to continue to participate, supporting H5a and H5b; subjective norm has a significant positive impact on the desire and intention to continue to participate, supporting H6a and H6b; continuous participation desire has a significant positive impact on continuous participation intention, supporting H7.
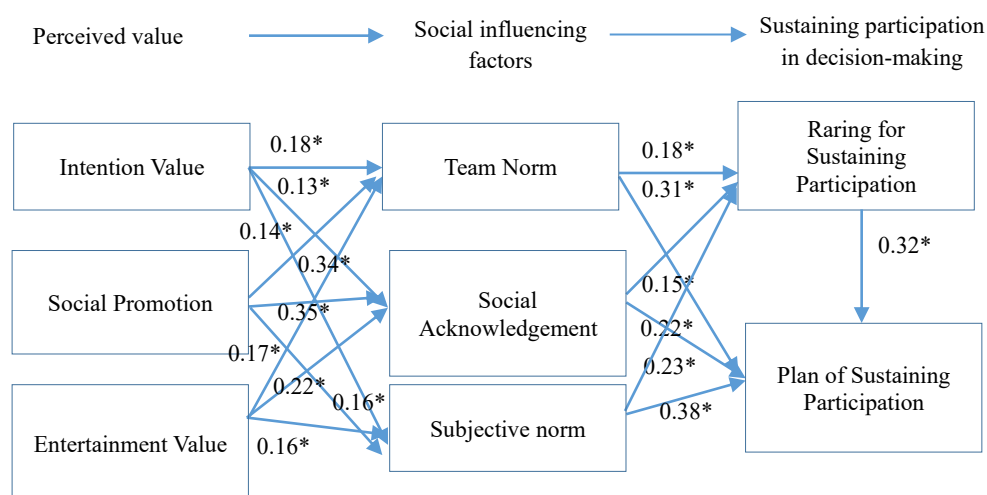
Note: ** indicates $P < 0.01$; * indicates $P < 0.015$

Figure 2. Structural equation modeling analysis

4. Conclusions and countermeasures

4.1. Conclusions

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons community members participate in virtual brand communities, we built a theoretical model of virtual brand community continuous participation in decision-making based on perceived value and social influence theories, taking the Xiaomi Community as the empirical research subject. The results showed that the perceived value (including purpose value, social promotion, and entertainment value) of community members to virtual brand community has a significant positive impact on social influencing factors (including team norm, social acknowledgement, and subjective norm). Therefore, it has a significant positive impact on community members' continuous participation in decision-making (including continuous participation desire and continuous participation intention) in virtual brand communities.

Understanding the perceived value of an individual's participation in a community helps us to understand an individual's motivation to continue to participate in a virtual brand community. From the results, it can be inferred that community members hope to obtain useful information by participating in a virtual brand community to achieve specific goals (such as obtaining information or methods to solve problems, *i.e.*, purpose value), improve one's status in the community by contributing to the community (*e.g.*, becoming a premium member, *i.e.*, social promotion), or have fun interacting with others (*e.g.*, playing online games to relax, *i.e.*, entertainment value).

Individuals' continuous participation motivation is the reason for them to accept the social influence of the community. During this process, community members begin to pay attention to whether the values of other members are consistent (for example, they hope to internalize community goals into their own personal beliefs, *i.e.*, team norm), hope to gain the approval of other members (for example, establishing their own influence and value in the community through frequent interactions, *i.e.*, social acknowledgement), or start working hard to meet the expectations of other members (such as maintaining smooth communication and immediate response and avoiding unanswered messages, *i.e.*, subjective norm). In short, an individual's motivation (perceived value) to generate desire and intention to sustain participation in a virtual brand community relies on social influence processes.

4.2. Countermeasures and suggestions

Since the introduction of the concept of virtual communities, many companies have begun to adopt this concept in their business operations. In recent years, enterprises have paid more attention to organizing and operating virtual communities in the online world. Through the operation of virtual communities, product (or brand) operators can not only influence consumers' decisions and quickly transmit new product knowledge and concepts to consumers, but also actively interact and communicate with consumers to establish good customer relations.

The perceived value acts as the motivation for the virtual brand community to continuously participate in decision-making. Therefore, product (or brand) operators or virtual brand community operators should (i) ensure the information quality of the community, so that community members (or consumers) will be more willing to search and accept information and opinions in the community, thereby increasing the purpose value, (ii) design an effective incentive and evaluation mechanism, so that community members (or consumers) are more willing to participate and share information, thereby achieving social promotion, (iii) increase interactive games, audio-visual pictures, applications, and other elements to enhance the entertainment value gained by community members.

In view of the influence of social influencing factors on community members' continuous participation in virtual brand communities, product (or brand) operators or virtual community operators should strengthen several aspects to enhance the role of social influencing factors.

First of all, they should clarify and strengthen the theme, purpose, and value vision of the virtual community, so as to encourage community members to internalize it as their own beliefs (*i.e.*, team norm). Secondly, a real-time recommendation and feedback mechanism should be designed, and relevant incentives (such as product discounts or point rewards, *etc*.) should be given to recommenders to increase their enthusiasm for participation. This mechanism also improves the social identification of the referee. Lastly, the roles of community managers, moderators, and opinion leaders should be established in the community, as they not only contribute to the establishment of common norms in the community, but also affect the enthusiasm of community members (consumers) to participate in the community and indirectly promote products and brands (*i.e.*, subjective norm).

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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