



# Factors affecting online community commitment in China: a conceptual framework

Yuan Zhou

*Beifang University of Nationalities, Yinchuan City, China, and*

Muslim Amin

*Management Department, College of Business Administration,  
King Saud University, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to introduce a conceptual framework for identifying the antecedents that affect members' online community commitment in the context of China. Understanding members' online community behaviour is important for e-marketers as it has been predicted that the online communities bring new opportunities and challenges to the business.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The framework is derived from the resource-based perspective. It addresses the main variables and explains the key stages of conducting the study.

**Findings** – This study conducted a suitable process to develop the framework which identifies the antecedents of members' online community commitment. In recent years, the social media has captured a major part of people's daily communication and internet users actively participate in the online community activities; therefore, understanding the factors influence members' online community engagement and commitment is perceived to positively capture the online market.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study proposes a conceptual framework of the antecedents of individual's online community commitment in the context of China on the basis of the previous research in this domain. An empirical study will be beneficial in supporting this framework and suggesting needed modifications.

**Originality/value** – The study provides a more holistic understanding of the factors that influence members' online community commitment. It identifies antecedents from two perspectives: individual psychological attachment and online community characteristics influence.

**Keywords** Commitment, Online community, Psychological, System characteristics

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

The widespread use of the internet has diversified its usage in the past two decades. People communicate online, build relations and enjoy themselves through various platforms on the internet such as social media, messengers, and blogs (Jang *et al.*, 2008). This has provided an opportunity for people to discuss and share information and their experiences through online communities. According to a report issued by the China Internet Information Centre (CNNIC, 2013), up to the end of December 2012, China has had 564 million internet users and among them, 48.8 per cent have registered in different online communities. The report further revealed that 93 per cent of the "Millennial Generation" (those born after 1982, who have come of age in a time of dependence upon technology) are communicating online, and nearly half of the internet users use online communities to communicate with others (CNNIC, 2013). Tencent and Renren, two major social networking site (SNS) service companies in China, have established numerous



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different types of online communities through their SNS (Fong and Wong, 2012); therefore, this study proposes to conduct its research on these two SNS.

Capturing a large number of technology-dependent people, online communities are considered a powerful socio-economic phenomenon (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) as they always develop electronic word of mouth (eWOM) effect which influences retail sales and customer loyalty (Park and Cho, 2012; Flavian and Guinaliu, 2005). The Chinese market has emerged as a dominant market for international companies in the process of globalization (Wang and Hong, 2012). Chinese customers engage in online communities to discuss and share information and their experiences with other customers, which provides an opportunity to interact with other customers as well as the companies. On the other hand, marketers show great interest in online communities because it helps companies in building newer and deeper relationships with their customers (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996) and provide them more opportunities and business (Li and Xie, 2012). This feature of online community related to two-way interaction has gained great attention in recent marketing research (Wu and Wang, 2011; Fuller *et al.*, 2008).

Previous studies have revealed a strong influence of community commitment on customer loyalty (Erdogmus and Cicek, 2012; Jang *et al.*, 2008; Kang, 2004; Oliver, 1999; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Aaker, 1991; Kotler *et al.*, 1989; Wiener, 1982; Staw, 1980). Other researchers have focused on the importance of a sustainable online community (Davison *et al.*, 2007; Koh and Kim, 2004), whereas Jang *et al.* (2008) and Flavian and Guinaliu (2005) primarily investigated the dimensions of web site characteristics that enhance the commitment of an online community. Moreover, numerous studies have discussed the impact of social influence on members' community commitment (Zhou, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2011; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Besides, Park and Cho (2012) have brought psychological attachment factors from social influence factors as the main determinants of the members' community commitment.

Researchers view the online community as one of the most influential platforms to generate online communication and recommendation effects (Kusumasondjaja, 2012). However, due to online communities' virtual features and low switching cost, it is obvious that the members are free to join or leave these online communities. Thus, to understand the reason why individuals choose to stay in an online community and invest their time and energy to engage in the community is very essential. Though prior researches have discussed the different factors that affect members' online community commitment, there is still limited research that has been done in terms of integrating different factors from various perspectives affecting online community commitment by presenting a holistic framework.

In line with previous literature, this study attempts to propose a conceptual framework that presents the effect of members' psychological attachment dimensions and community characteristics on community commitment. This study aims to identify the influence of members' psychological attachment dimensions and online community characteristics on community commitment. In line with these two main purposes, this paper attempts to elucidate the following four aspects:

- (1) key characteristics of an online community;
- (2) the influence of online community characteristics on community commitment;

- (3) key dimensions of members' psychological attachment; and
- (4) the influence of members' psychological attachment dimensions on online community commitment.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Traditional community and online community

2.1.1 *Background of community.* The concept of community has existed since the nineteenth-century, where early sociologists defined it as largely in opposition to society (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Tonnies (1955) classified social groups into communities (*gemeinschaft*) and associations or societies (*gesellschaft*), and stated that community is customary, familial, and an emotional rural based relation, whereas the society is a mechanical, contractual, individualistic, and rational based relation (Jang *et al.*, 2008).

The concept of community changed along with the research scope. Budiman (2008) considered communities as the building blocks of society, and explained that communities can be categorized into communities of kinship, communities of locality, and communities of the mind (developed from Tonnies, 1955). Since this study focuses on the issues of online community, emphasis will be on the "communities of the mind". Tonnies (1955) explicated that a community of the mind involves individuals who cooperate and coordinate based on a common goal or similar interests, and they are more emotionally involved but not bound by geography or kinship (Budiman, 2008).

Karp *et al.* (1991) stated that community is a sustained social interaction in which members share similar attributes and values, and normally has a delineated geographical space. However, Lawrence (1995) argued the "delineated geographical space" is no longer a necessary component, and should be revised to "membership rules". Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) believe that there are two key features of community: affect-laden relationships of the members and commitment to a set of shared "values, meanings, and a shared historical identity". They argued that people seek pleasure and respond to moral norms that are enforced by authority and community (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999).

On the basis of previous studies, researchers defined community as an organization that is formed when individuals or small groups get together and share a mutual responsibility (Rheingold, 2000; Rothaermel and Sugiyama, 2001; Jang *et al.*, 2008). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) have identified three core community components:

- (1) an intrinsic connection such that members feel different from others not in the community;
- (2) the presence of shared rituals and traditions that perpetuate the community's history, culture, and consciousness; and (3) a sense of moral responsibility, duty, or obligation to the community as a whole and its individual members (Jang *et al.*, 2008).

2.1.2 *Online community.* The development of the internet and human's desire to connect has stimulated the emergence of online communities (Jang *et al.*, 2008). These online communities have now taken a form of new social platforms for people to interact and communicate with each other about what they are interested in. However, online communities are very different from the traditional communities. Members of traditional communities meet each other face-to-face, interact with one another in the physical world, and these activities are mainly bound by geographical locations; while in online communities, people interact with each other in cyberspace, and do not necessarily meet each other in real life, therefore they are no longer bounded by geographic limits. Most importantly, individual members' involvement in online communities is driven by

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“volitional choice” (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Jang *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, an online community is the relational community concerned with human relationship, and is different from the traditional geographical community.

Definition of online communities varies in the existing literature. For example, Rheingold (1993, p. 10) defined the online community as the “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace”. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) viewed online communities as computer-mediated social spaces with intentional actions, in which the content is created by members through on-going communication processes. Similarly, Kim *et al.* (2008) stated that the online community is:

[...] a set of socially gathered people who share common interests or purposes and actively interact, create and share value and exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks.

However, Rothaermel and Sugiyama (2001) stated that online communities may not be a complete substitute for personal, simultaneous, one-to-one interaction, either vocally or face-to-face. Their study found that around 30 per cent of the respondents interact with each other off-line or in person besides in the online communities. Jang *et al.* (2008, p. 60) termed online community as “a group of individuals engaging in predominantly online interaction in virtual spaces created through the integration of communication with content developed by community members”.

The online community, as a platform, meets four types of consumers’ needs: transaction, interest, fantasy, and relationship (Lee, 2009; Armstrong and Hagel, 1996); it facilitates people’s needs to interact with others easily since they are no longer bound by geographic distances (Shang *et al.*, 2006). Online communities play an important role for both marketers and customers as they serve as interactive platforms for the generation of eWOM (Shi, 2011). From the marketers’ perspective, online communities can be an effective marketing tool serving as a good market arm to develop customer loyalty towards the brand (Shi, 2011) and developing newer and deeper relationships between customers and organizations (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996). From the customers’ perspective, it is important for them as an interactive platform where they can interact with other customers and the companies themselves.

Online communities are developed to serve different purposes, such as support, information/knowledge exchange, entertainment, collaboration and production (Cheung and Lee, 2009). Researchers have classified online communities from different perspectives based on different research aims (Porter, 2004; Henri and Pudelko, 2003; Leimeister *et al.*, 2006), such as based on the criterion of community initiators (Shi, 2011), specifically customer-created communities and firm-created communities (Jang *et al.*, 2008); from an economic perspective, namely commercial communities and non-commercial communities (Leimeister *et al.*, 2006; Shang *et al.*, 2006); according to content elements, such as user-generated communities/consumer-generated communities (Kusumasondjaja, 2012; Yoo and Gretzel, 2011; Akehurst, 2009; Van Dijck, 2009; Jeong and Jeon, 2008; Gretzel *et al.*, 2006; Muniz and Schau, 2007); and corporate-generated communities (Smith *et al.*, 2005; Allsop *et al.*, 2007). This study intends to classify online communities from the economic perspective which categorizes online communities into commercial communities and non-commercial communities since this classification has not been well studied (Laroche *et al.*, 2013; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Commercial communities are the

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platforms where consumers share their personal experiences and feelings about the brands and products. Non-commercial communities, on the other hand, are platforms operated or founded by customers and consumers with the purpose of exchanging and sharing information (Shang *et al.*, 2006).

### 2.2 Community commitment

Commitment is an important buyer-seller partnership (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987) in relationship marketing theory (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995), emphasizing on on-going dialogue between customer and the supplier (Ellonen *et al.*, 2010; Grönroos, 2004). Researchers have found that consumers like to reduce choices by engaging in an on-going loyalty relationship with marketers, so that they repeatedly transact with the same marketer or purchase the same brand of products or services in order to simplify their extensive and limited problem solving situations, reduce their choices, and avoid risks (Howard and Sheth, 1969; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

Commitment is defined as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Moorman *et al.*, 1992), which is based on positive emotional bonds and is characterized as affective social identity (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). It has been widely studied from various aspects as it plays a key mediating role in the formation of consumer loyalty and behavioural intention (Cheung and Lee, 2009; Jang *et al.*, 2008; Pritchard *et al.*, 1999). Therefore, community commitment can be seen as the sustainable relationship factor between members and communities, and their active engagement in the communities.

In light of the preceding definitions, online community commitment can be seen as the active engagement that members hold in an online community, which leads to a sustainable relationship between members and the community. However, due to online communities’ virtual features and low switching cost, it is obvious that the members are free to join or leave such a community. Thus, to understand why individuals choose to stay in an online community, and to invest their time and energy to engage in the community, is an important point to ponder. What forms the sustainable relationship between members and an online community and how to attract members to stay in an online community is a motivation for this study to present the conceptual framework.

## 3. Conceptual framework

To develop an effective relationship between members and the online community, it is necessary to understand what motivates members to commit to this community and engage in a relational behaviour by continuing to enter in an online community and participate in the interactions and communication.

The existing studies have suggested that different factors may affect online community commitment. Grönroos (2004) considered service quality, perceived value and satisfaction as the antecedents of consumer commitment. Jang *et al.* (2008) found that online community characteristics are the important antecedents of community commitment. According to Koh and Kim (2004), leader’s enthusiasm, off-line interaction, and enjoyability lead to a sense of online community that has a significant influence on its members’ commitment. Furthermore, studies suggest that trust directly affects members’ commitment (Cheng *et al.*, 2013; Laroche *et al.*, 2013; Casaló *et al.*, 2008). In addition, Koh *et al.* (2007) explicate that rules and reward greatly influence members’ commitment. In prior literature, a number of researchers have emphasized

social influences on community commitment (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Park and Cho, 2012). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) identified the three most important elements of community; namely consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. In a recent study, Park and Cho (2012) view these elements from a psychological perspective, and named them as we-ness, moral responsibility and shared culture.

Based on the discussion in the preceding parts, this study develops a framework which proposes that online community members' psychological attachment and the online community's characteristics affect the level of community commitment (Figure 1).

### 3.1 Member's psychological attachment factors

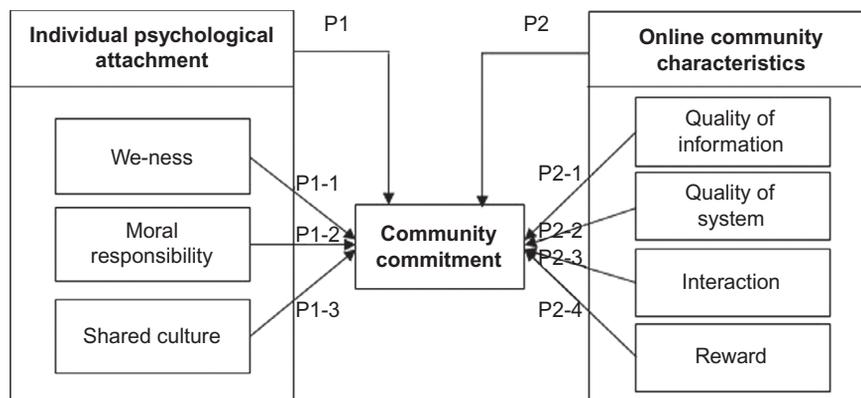
The existing research has identified the psychological attachment factors that influence online community commitment. Bender (1978) suggested we-ness as a key factor. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), McAlexander *et al.* (2002) and Flavian and Guinaliu (2005) claim that the consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, as well as moral responsibility are the main determinants for members to stay and commit to these online communities. Pentina *et al.* (2013) found that the information sharing culture of online communities may create long-term social interactions, which contributes to another important factor-the social context. Additionally, Laroche *et al.* (2013) in their research identified shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions, and obligation to society as the main antecedents to online community commitment.

Based on the above literature, Park and Cho (2012) identified three factors from the psychological attachment including we-ness, moral responsibility, and shared culture. This study adopts these three variables from Park and Cho's (2012) research.

### 3.2 Online community characteristics

This study adopts four major characteristics of online community from Jang *et al.*'s (2008) research:

- (1) quality of information;
- (2) quality of system;
- (3) interaction; and
- (4) rewards for activities.



**Figure 1.**  
A conceptual framework of factors affecting online community commitment

The first two characteristics are known to exert a strong influence on the satisfaction and loyalty of the members to the community (Jang *et al.*, 2008; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). The third characteristic, interaction, has been revealed to have a close relationship with commitment to the community. Furthermore, reward for valuable information to the community has been identified to have a positive relationship with the level of community commitment (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). On the basis of these arguments, Table I shows that the prepositions have been developed as described (Table II).

#### 4. Discussion

This study aims to investigate the motives of online community members behind their commitment to an online community. The proposed conceptual framework suggests that members' online community commitment is influenced by an individual's psychological attachment factors and online community characteristics. A number of prior researches have been conducted to examine the motives of members' commitment from different perspectives (Park and Cho, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2012; Laroche *et al.*, 2013; Jang *et al.*, 2008; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). However, lack of research has been found in terms of integrating different factors affecting the online community commitment and presenting a holistic framework.

Another issue this study stresses on is the inclusion of online community types. Though online communities have been classified differently based on different research objectives, researchers have suggested that more research needs to be conducted to consider online community types from the economic perspective (Laroche *et al.*, 2013; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Conducting this research suggestion, the present study proposes for a comparative study of the members' commitment to commercial communities and non-commercial communities.

Commitment to an online community was suggested as one of the important predictors of using the community as an information seeking source (Park and Cho, 2012). Literature suggested that commitment could be built by psychological

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<i>P1</i>	Members' psychological attachment to a social network online community positively influences online community commitment
<i>P1-1</i>	We-ness (consciousness of a kind) to a social network online community positively influences online community commitment
<i>P1-2</i>	Moral responsibility (sense of morality) to a social network online community positively influences online community commitment
<i>P1-3</i>	Shared culture (ritual and tradition) to a social network online community positively influences online community commitment
<i>P2</i>	The characteristics of online community are positively associated with online community commitment
<i>P2-1</i>	Quality of information in an online community is positively associated with online community commitment
<i>P2-2</i>	Quality of system in an online community is positively associated with online community commitment
<i>P2-3</i>	Interaction among community members is positively associated with online community commitment
<i>P2-4</i>	Reward for activities in an online community is positively associated with online community commitment

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**Table I.**  
Preposition

Summary of operational definitions of the variables			
Name of variable	Operational definition	Sources	
Individual psychological attachment	We-ness	We-ness is a shared knowing of belonging and the collective sense that is formed among community members	Bender (1978), Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Park and Cho (2012)
	Moral responsibility	Moral responsibility refers to the sense that each member sustains the moral duty or obligation for the survival of the belonged community and the well-being of individual members	Shang <i>et al.</i> (2006), Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Park and Cho (2012)
	Shared culture	Shared culture refers to members share common values, history, and culture, such as special ways of dressing and handshakes, which enhance the members' emotional ties with a community	Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Park and Cho (2012)
Characteristics of online community	Quality of information	Quality of information provided through the community	Zeithaml <i>et al.</i> (1996), Lee and Kim (2005), Jang <i>et al.</i> (2008)
	Quality of system	Speedy and convenient search for information in the community, with help of menu hierarchy and layout	Zeithaml <i>et al.</i> (1996), Lee and Kim (2005), Jang <i>et al.</i> (2008), Zeithaml <i>et al.</i> (1996), Lee and Kim (2005), Jang <i>et al.</i> (2008)
	Interactivity	Degree of information exchange among community members and between community members and the host of the community	McWilliam (2000), Muniz and O'Guinn (2001)
	Reward for activities	Degree of monetary or psychological reward for proactive members in the community	Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995), Jang <i>et al.</i> (2008)
Online community commitment	Degree of strong and positive feelings among members towards the community	McWilliam (2000), Garbarino and Johnson (1999), Jang <i>et al.</i> (2008)	

**Table II.**  
Operational definitions of the variables

attachment to the community and community characteristics, which can be measured by a member's feelings about the communities and the influence of community stimulation. The findings of this research are expected to present the degree of different factors that effect online community commitment to the e-marketers in China. It will be helpful for them to put more effort on most dominant factors amongst the factors from various perspectives giving it a holistic view but not an isolated one in terms of drivers of online community commitment when applying online business in China. In addition, the level of members' community commitment on commercial communities and non-commercial communities will also be taken into account; therefore, the e-marketers could benefit from choosing the appropriate online communities and adopting suitable strategies in different types of online communities.

Although the conceptual framework provides factors from two perspectives, more factors remain to be explored. Cheung and Lee (2009) and Budiman (2008) suggest that past experience and enjoyment are important factors which influence people's online community commitment; further research is needed to integrate these factors and test them.

## 5. Conclusion

Developing a valid, reliable method to identify and measure the relationship among the target variables in the proposed model is vital. Considering the reliability and validity of this research, two milestones must be reached:

- (1) a model that encompasses the primary factors which determine the level of online community commitment; and
- (2) the model must be tested and validated to pinpoint the relationships among the dimensions embedded in it.

This article takes the initial step in reaching both these goals. An interactive and holistic model is developed based on two published articles (Jang *et al.*, 2008; Park and Cho, 2012). Two key antecedents which are proposed may positively associate with community commitment are offered:

- (1) member's psychological attachment; and
- (2) online community characteristics.

Each of these determinants contains a few dimensions which will be measured and tested separately.

To date, however, these antecedents have been studied separately, but none of the research has integrated and tested them together. Hence, this study intends to provide a more comprehensive view to understand the online community commitment. This proposed model is a conceptual framework which is developed after reviewing relevant articles. Therefore, it is believed that it will offer an ample agenda for further research.

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#### **Corresponding author**

Yuan Zhou can be contacted at: [yuan.850207@gmail.com](mailto:yuan.850207@gmail.com)