An Analysis and Empirical Study on the Generation Mechanism of Consumer Flow Experience in Brand Community

Ji’an Han

1JiangXi Normal University, College of Fine Art, 99 Ziyang Avenue, Nan Chang, JiangXi Province, China

Abstract. Brand community is a new type of community in the era of brand consumption formed by consumers with brand as the link, experience as the core, identity, sense of identity, belonging and self-transcendence as the goal. This paper mainly analyzes the phenomenon of flow experience produced by consumers in the brand community systematically, mainly from the basic connotation and generating mechanism of flow experience, discusses the factors and mechanisms that stimulate consumers to produce flow experience in brand community, and proves the phenomenon that consumers produce flow experience in brand community by combining with actual case analysis.

1 Introduction

Brand community is a new type of community formed by consumers around the consumption behavior of a certain brand. For consumers, the core of their joining the brand community is to gain identity and find a sense of psychological belonging, which are usually built on their personal participation in some specific activities of the brand community and acquired through experience. Muniz and O’Quinn (2001) pointed out that consumers can gain self-identity in brand communities and find a way of life that they yearn for; Muniz et al. (2005) found that community members can produce a sense of religious attachment from the study of Apple Newton brand community; Schouten et al. (2007) found that consumers will produce transcendental experience in brand communities and achieve self-transcendence through empirical research. In essence, the consumer’s consumption experience in the brand community will not only stay in the general daily experience, but also enter a higher level of experience, flow experience is the typical way. This paper systematically analyzes the generation mechanism of consumer flow experience in brand community.

2 Analysis on the basic mechanism of flow experience generation

Flow experience is a concept put forward by American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his doctoral thesis after interviewing hundreds of athletes, artists,
international chess players and rock climbers. It refers to "the psychological state of forgetting the surroundings, losing self-awareness and even forgetting the existence of time is generated when people are engaged in something fully they are interested in." It can be seen from this that flow experience is a kind of emotional experience produced by people when they are absorbed in doing one thing. In general, flow experience arises directly from the activity an individual is engaged in, and has nothing to do with memory or imagination. This reflects a psychological phenomenon that flow experience can be produced through careful planning.

The possibility of flow experience planning means that its generation mechanism has rules to follow, and it is a psychological state when one's mind and thought are synchronized. "When flow occurs, one must be immersed in it, so that one’s thoughts can be fully coordinated and united, and there is no room for irrelevant thoughts or emotions. At this moment, one’s self-awareness has disappeared, but the feeling is stronger than usual. The sense of time is also distorted, one just feels that time flies, the moment has passed for several hours. Once the whole human body and mind are fully developed, whatever you do will be worth one hundred times, and life itself will become an end. Under the condition of unity of mind and body and concentration, life will be given the ultimate development. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi pointed out that flow experience generation must be three conditions. First, the subject should be clear about the goal of the activity they are engaged in. Only in this way can they form the rules of action, know what to do and how to do it, and construct flow activities. Because this type of activity creates a sense of flow, it allows people to focus on clear, compatible goals, as opposed to daily life. Second, the subject should be able to get feedback on the living results in time, so that the subject knows whether they have done well or not. They can judge whether they have improved immediately after completing each step. So that the subject can adjust their behaviors in time, so as not to interrupt the activity. Third, the ability of the subject should keep balance with the challenge difficulty set. When the subject's ability is unable to complete the goal, people will have negative emotions, and only when they are able to achieve the goal with their best efforts, can they generate flow experience. Novak and Hoffman (2000) further summarized the process of generating human flow experience into three stages: antecedent, characteristic and result. The antecedents include three factors: clear goals, timely feedback, and skills to deal with challenges. A clear goal is an important prerequisite for the flow experience. Only when people realize that the clear goal is worth achieving, will they be fully devoted to it; Timely feedback focuses people’s attention on the relationship between self and goal, and makes them clearly aware of what they are doing, which is quite different from the muddled routine of daily activities; The skills to cope with the challenges determine whether the flow experience can be generated. The flow experience is the optimal experience in the experience process. It is the best match between the difficult targets and the high-level skills. Other forms of matching are difficult to generate flow experience. The characteristics include three factors: the integration of behavior and consciousness, concentration and the feeling of control. The integration of behavior and consciousness means that people completely integrate the goal and the behavior to reach the goal in the process of experience; Concentration reflects that people have no time to pay attention to other things irrelevant to what they are doing in the process of experience, excluding all possible external interference. The feeling of control reflects the fact that everything is under control and the desired goal can be achieved smoothly. The results include three factors: the loss of self-consciousness, the distortion of the sense of time, and the purpose of the experience itself. The loss of self-consciousness is a typical characteristic when people are in the flow experience. Individuals no longer doubt and worry, and are liberated from the constraints of self-consciousness to gain freedom. The distortion of the sense of time is reflected in the sense that time flies when people are in the flow experience.
The purpose of the experience itself refers to the feeling that the experience process in the flow experience stage is a reward to the self, which produces a great sense of pleasure. Thus, it can be seen that flow experience is a sense of self-transcendence generated in the process of focusing on the realization of goals when one's ultimate ability is balanced with challenges with a clear intention.

3 Analysis of motivating factors and process of consumer flow experience in brand community

Judging from the conditions and the production process that the flow experience should have, it can be generated in any activities carried out by people, which naturally includes consumption activities of consumers. Pine and Gilmore (1998), when differentiating the range of consumers' consumption experience, pointed out that when consumers actively participate and fully immerse themselves in the experience activities, they will have flow experience. They believe that consumers are the absolute subject and control the process and results of the experience in the flow experience. Whether in the real environment or in the virtual network space, they focus on the experience activity itself and forget all other things that are not related to the current experience activity. Thus, they can experience infinite happiness from it. What are the factors that motivate consumers to generate flow experience in the consumption field Schouten et al. (2007) believe that the source of inspiration for generating transcendental experience in the consumer field can come from sensory experience, such as what is seen, heard, and smelled, as well as from the unexpected satisfaction that occurs when people meet, including interaction with other consumers and salespeople, or it can also come from a sense of success that exceeds one’s own expectations. To be specific, there are three main factors that stimulate consumers to produce aesthetic experience in the brand community: first, the brand inherent sensible factors, such as products, services, brand symbols and so on; second, the brand consensus realized in the interaction, such as the common consciousness, ritual and tradition and moral responsibility of the brand community; third, self-transcendence generation in the process of consumption experience, such as enhancing skills and winning competitions and so on.

Brand community, without a doubt, is an important field that motivates consumers to generate flow experience. First of all, the brand community regularly organizes various forms of activities, such as outings, competitions, or games. Secondly, the brand community provides a relaxed and pleasant environment for the communication between consumers. In the interaction with each other, because of the common topic with a high degree of identity, such as the recognition of brand history and story, and the sharing of user experience and so on, which can stimulate consumers to be deeply immersed in the conversation, experience happiness from it and generate flow experience. Thirdly, the virtual brand community provides consumers with a platform for network interaction. Consumers can form a sense of deep involvement and generate flow experience in the process of online interaction, information query and Posting. For example, Webster and Ryan believe that the flow experience should have the nature of a game, which is a subjective experience of people in human-computer interaction. During the interaction, people can get involved and have a sense of pleasure. If the higher the nature of a game the human-computer interaction has, the more positive emotions and satisfaction people will get, and they will be further devoted.
In the brand community, many activities that consumers participate in are carefully planned, such as outings, competitions, performances and so on. These activities usually have specific goals (individual or collective), and select participants according to their difficulty, which ensures that they can successfully complete them. For example, the Jeep Conference, as the Jeep brand, has been regularly organizing car club activities every year since 1995. From the beginning of the United States, to Europe, to China, it has a long historical tradition and huge social influence, and it has become a festival for Jeep owners to gather and communicate. Each Jeep Conference will set up different areas such as the Owner Center, Jeep Grand Cherokee and Jeep Commander Camp, Jeep Guide Camp, Performance Area, Campground and so on. In order to allow riders to fully experience Jeep's off-road performance, communicate with each other and learn about off-road experience, the Jeep Conference will carefully plan track racing, rock climbing, mountain bike cross-country and other activities. Riders can experience the extraordinary experience of driving Jeep in the activities with specific goals, matching challenges and abilities, which not only can deepen the understanding of the Jeep brand, but also enhance its sense of identity and belonging. The reason why the Jeep Conference becomes the carnival festival that Jeep owners look forward to every year is that the activities organized by the Jeep Conference constitute flow activities for the riders. In other words, the goals set by the competitions or games make the riders focus on the process of the activities, forget about all other factors momentarily, and generate flow experience. The Harley Owners Group promotes communication and interaction among its members and deepens understanding and recognition of the brand through regular self-drive activities. Each activity is carefully planned through route planning, member recruitment, activity rule making and so on, so that the rider will generate flow experience in each activity. In the virtual brand community, through the design of the website interface, consumers are guided to actively interact, and in the exchange of experience and usage skills, they are encouraged to generate flow experience. Muniz et al. (2005) found in a study of Apple’s obsolete products—Newton's virtual brand community, that members of the brand community were deeply attracted by some challenging tasks, immersed in them. Thus, they can generate flow experience and never give up the product.

In the investigation of Nanjing Pioneer Car Club, it is also found that many members generated flow experience in the activities organized by the car club. The main reason is that the Car Club will regularly organize different activities according to different riders, so that participants can get good experience from it. For example, “Head Lifting Practice” is not for all members, but for some car enthusiasts who like to challenge themselves and have good physical and psychological qualities. For another example, every “motorcycle tour” activity should be carefully planned. There must be route planning and actual inspections in advance, and a plan for handling unexpected situations on the road, such as carrying some maintenance tools. During the activities, there will be special pilots, voyagers, escorts and closed staff. Considering the differences in driving abilities and experience of riders, the distance of more than 100 kilometers usually controls the number of people within 20. The participating members must be old players with certain experience in activities, while the distance within 100 kilometers requires no more than 100 participants, and some junior members can be allowed to participate. “Competitions” are divided into internal competitions and outdoor competitions, the internal competitions participants must be competitive members, outdoor participants must be the most skilled drivers. It is fully considering the different needs of different riders that they can fully immerse themselves in the activities they participate in and generate flow experience.
5 Conclusion

In the process of generating the flow experience of consumers in the brand community, people can generate self-transcendence and forget everything, but it is generated in carefully planned flow activities. A clear goal and a balance of capabilities and challenges are important foundations for the consumer flow experience in the brand communities. In the brand community, most of the activities are organized, and a host of participants participate for many times. The reason is that they can show themselves, conquer themselves and gain self-transcendence in this activity. It is typical flow experience to clarify the direction of the goal and achieve surpassing in the process of achieving the goal. Although the process of the flow experience is well-planned, it is essentially an aesthetic experience. Facts have proved that the flow experience in the brand community is a common phenomenon, and it plays a central role in attracting consumers to participate in the brand community continuously.

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