Studying the Effect of Brand Community on Making a Commitment to a Brand

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ABSTRACT — Customer loyalty is one of the most important assets of an organization and the brand community can play an important role in this context. The purpose of this study was to investigate antecedents of commitment to a brand community and its consequences. Thus, the two factors of trust and willingness to brand community have been considered as antecedents of brand community commitment. Accordingly, intention to repurchase, word of mouth advice to others in the field of brand and offering constructive suggestions and complaints as a result of consequences of brand community commitment. These relations were tested in a form of five hypotheses. This study is applied in terms of objectives and is descriptive survey in terms of data collection method. Statistical population of study consists of consumers of Apple products and 100 were selected by random sampling as statistical sample. A standard questionnaire was used as a tool to collect data and in order to analyze data, correlation statistical analysis was used. The results of data analysis confirmed every five assumed relationship between these variables. In this regard, brand community commitment can have positive effect on customer loyalty. There have been presented recommendations.
KEYWORDS: Brand community, Brand community commitment, Customer loyalty, Brand community trust

Introduction

Today, identification and prediction of customer needs are necessary for a firm in order to obtain competitive advantage and market segmentation. Customer is a key factor in boosting agility of organization and orientation of all objectives, strategies and resources are based on attracting and maintaining customers. Maintaining and strengthening customer loyalty are considered strategic challenges for companies that their main concerns are remaining in their position and developing their competitive position in the market. On the other hand, customer loyalty play an important role in creating long-term benefits for the company, because loyal customers do not need to have extensive promotional efforts, they are gladly willing to pay more for benefits and the quality of their favorite brand. The loyalty to a brand is the central theme of practical and theoretical marketing in order to create a sustainable competitive advantage. Given the importance of customer loyalty and gaining more profit of most commercial firms, paying attention to this concept and the factors that can affect it is of great importance. One of the factors affecting customer loyalty is "brand community". Brand community is a group of customers who are like-minded and are known with a common brand. "Information, customs and common moral responsibility" lead to the exchange of experiences of customers about a brand. Minimum requirements of having a brand community includes: The brand that fully distinguishes its customers and mechanisms that involve customers in a common experience of brand (Muniz, 2001). Qualitative characteristics of a brand appear on customers and what customers want, will be reflected in the quality of the brand. For example, the Harley-Davidson brand is known with concepts such as freedom, individuality, and rebelliousness, so it does not seem very strange that these concepts can be emerged in behaviors of Harley Davidson leather jacketed bikers (2006 O'Guinn,). Based on research conducted, the willingness of customers to approach the special characteristics of a brand is particularly important and taking this into account in the conversion of current and future members of a brand community, from a non-committed customer to a true and loyal fan, is really crucial (Barbara 2008). One of the models of brand communities in marketing includes four groups: The first group is called observers and includes those who are familiar with the brand only, the other group is non-committed ones who have no particular preference for one brand of product that have purchased but are not committed to that brand for repeating purchases. Next group is admirers who prefer a brand above others and last group is fans who prefer the brand and remain loyal to it. So part of the task of marketer is to lead consumer from the periphery to the center of brand community (in order to increase loyalty and revenue per customer) as well as attracting new customers. This requires a broad definition of brand community so that all fans of a brand consist of admirers and fans who really prefer brand (that have randomly chosen brand) and observers (who have not yet decided to purchase) (Muniz, 2001). The ultimate goal of a company is brand loyalty that has a product with a specific trademark. Priority and preference to buy a particular brand of product on a shelf by the customer is called brand loyalty. Customers have found that their favorable brand offers them a design and combination of healthy product having levels of quality with reasonable price. The customer's perception is the basis

for repeating new purchases. Customers at the beginning would have a test purchase of a product with special trademark and after being satisfied with it, they would continue to purchase the same trademark or brand because they trust that product and they are familiar with it.   In this regard, the research question can be stated as follows: does willingness and trust of a customer to brand community influence their commitment to that brand or not and on one hand, to what extent does brand community commitment relate to customer loyalty? Can we increase customer loyalty by boosting brand community commitment created by the trust and willingness of the brand community?

Theoretical background
Brand community and brand community commitment
With the importance of brand community having been emphasized recently, marketers are increasingly focusing on building, managing, and maintaining brand communities (e.g. Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The concept of community has been defined in various ways. Rheingold (1993) defines it as a group of people who have longtime interactions with rich individual affection, which is mediated by computers online. The major goals of brand community participation are functional and hedonic. Functional goals refer to information exchange among community members, whereas hedonic goals lead people to have a rich and positive experience through the interactions among them (Holland and Baker, 2001). Companies have begun to use brand communities for the strategic purpose of getting closer to a particular target market segment. Members of a brand community determine the agenda and specific community activities by the interrelationships among members who possess the same brand, and as they exchange information and/or meanings about the brand (Muniz and Schau, 2005). Therefore, the interaction between companies and brand communities is helpful for companies to identify customers' characteristics and needs more accurately, so that companies are able to manage long-term customer relationships at a lower cost. Commitment refers to the state of developing stable relationships with partners, accepting short-term sacrifices in order to maintain relationships and assuring the stability of the relationships (Anderson and Weitz, 1992). Commitment is mentioned as a core feature of relationship marketing management (Doney and Cannon, 1997 Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997), and as a requirement for achieving a company's goals (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). When a customer is committed to a brand or a company, it is highly likely that the customer will cooperate actively and will not easily be attracted to competitors, which in turn will increase profits. In addition, commitment is regarded as the source of a company's sustainable competitiveness because it has causal relations with a company's cost reduction and profit increase, the word-of-mouth effect through recommendations, and a premium pricing effect (Reichheld, 1996). In the context of consumer-brand relationship, community commitment refers to each member's attitude toward the community. In this regard, the concept of commitment is used as a predictor of members' actual behaviors in an online community, such as participating in community activities, offering help to the community, and solving problems for others. Considering the role of commitment in the relationship with actual behaviors in the community, commitment should be treated as an attitudinal factor that is emphasized when members acknowledge the value of continuing relationships between their community and themselves (Hur, et.al, 2011). On the other hand, studies focusing on the mediating role of community commitment have identified that this construct positively affects brand performance, such as brand loyalty (Jang et al. , 2008; Fu ller et al. , 2007). Other studies report that community members who commit more to their online communities perceive brand identification more positively and clearly, showing stronger attachment to brand relationship quality (Algesheimer et al., 2005).
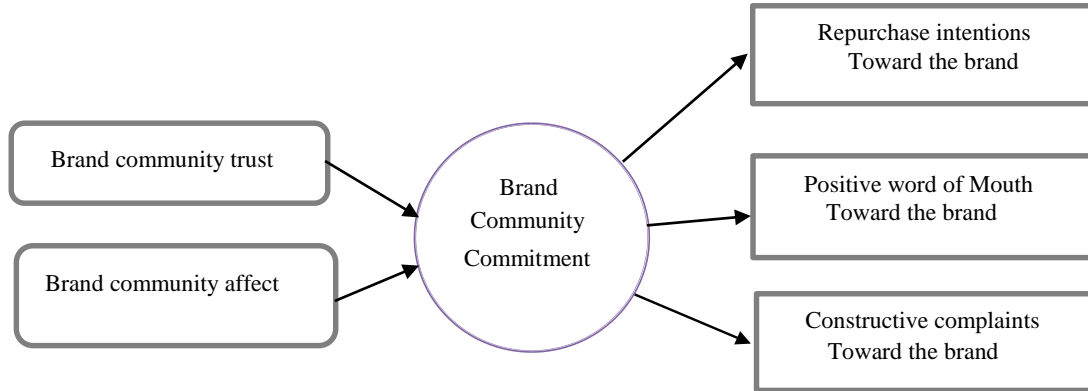**Antecedents of brand community commitment**
Trust is highlighted in relationship marketing as a precursor of commitment (Morganand Hunt, 1994). Anderson and Narus (1990) define trust as a generalized expectancy concerning partners' future behavior. Trust is also thought of as involving a "calculative process" (Doney and Cannon, 1997), determining whether to stay in a relationship based on a cost-benefit evaluation. In this regard, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) present the notion of brand trust, resulting in a well thought out and carefully considered process. Brand trust can be seen as the tendency of the customer to believe that a brand keeps its promise regarding performance (Fuller et al., 2008). Whereas trust reduces uncertainty and reinforces relationships with customers at a cognitive level, affect is often related to a positive emotional response, one that is more spontaneous, more immediate, and less deliberately reasoned in nature (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001, p. 82). The positive affect generated by brand community activities will enhance committed responses, such as consciousness of a kind (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and integration in the brand community (Mc Alexander et al., 2002).
Consequences of brand community commitment
Dick and Basu (1994) define customer loyalty as the relationship between relative attitude and repeat patronage. They suggest three research streams: behavioral, attitudinal, and integrative viewpoints (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). The recent integrative approach has opened a more detailed research perspective on loyalty, which is divided further by the degree, level, or strength of the loyalty. Dick and Basu (1994) categorize four kinds of loyalty: true, latent, spurious, and low loyalty. Van Dyne and Ang, 1998), which represent the positive relationship between brand community commitment and constructive complaints from brand community users. Following previous studies of varied loyalty behaviors based on the strength of loyalty between the company and customers (Dick and Basu, 1994; Ganesh et al., 2000; Hirschman, 1970), this study includes repurchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth, and constructive complaints as consequences of brand community commitment.

Conceptual model

According to the research objectives and questions, and reviewed theoretical background the conceptual model of research has been drawn as figure 1. It is important to mention that the conceptual model had been developed and tested by Hur, et al., (2011) and has been re-tested in this research in another field.

Figure 1) the conceptual model of the research
The Source: adopted from Hur, et al., (2011)

Hypotheses

According to above discussion and the conceptual model about the antecedents and consequences of band community commitment, following hypotheses have been proposed:

1. There is a positive and meaningful relationship between "brand community trust" and "Brand community commitment."
2. There is a positive and meaningful relationship between "brand community affect" and "Brand community commitment".
3. There is a positive and meaningful relationship between "brand community commitment" and "repurchase intentions toward the brand".
4. There is a positive and meaningful relationship between "brand community commitment" and "positive word-of-mouth toward the brand".
5. There is a positive and meaningful relationship between "brand community commitment" and "constructive complaints toward the brand".

Research method

From purpose point of view present research is applicable; because its findings are used to resolve the special problems inside the organization. Based on data collection, the research is descriptive survey; because it tries to gain required information of statistical sample by using questionnaire. From time aspect, it is cross-sectional and based on type of data it is quantitative.

The statistical population of the study was consumers of Apple products. Given to the lack of available list of people of population, using formula of indefinite population, 100 users were selected as samples. For sampling also due to the unavailability of the list of individuals of population, one-step cluster random sampling method was used. A tool to collect data was a questionnaire used in research by Hur et al (2011). To analyze the data in relation to assumptions, correlation analysis technique using SPSS19 has been used.

Data analysis

In this study, to analyze data and to investigate the presence or absence of a significant relationship between the variables, Pearson correlation coefficient was used. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of the analysis of correlation between research variables

Hypothesizes	The positive and meaningful relationship between........	Corellation Rate	The Coefficient of determination	t-value	(Sig).	Results
1	"brand community trust" and "Brand community commitment"	.352	.124	9.055	.000	approved
2	"brand community affect" and "Brand community commitment"	.389	.151	8.476	.000	approved
3	"brand community commitment" and "repurchase intentions toward the brand"	.310	.096	12.269	.000	approved
4	"brand community commitment" and "positive word-of mouth toward the brand"	.310	.096	12.269	.000	approved
5	"brand community commitment" and "constructive complaints toward the brand"	0.515	0.301	6.743	.000	approved

The results of the study on a correlation between studied variables showed that there has been a positive and significant relationship between brand community commitment and community itself and brand community commitment and customer loyalty dimensions considered as consequences of brand community commitment. Because the obtained significance level related to all these hypotheses has been less than .05. The correlation between variables has been also positive. According to the results of two situations, the relationship of willingness tto brand community has been more than trust in brand community (.38). Of results obtained from brand community commitment, providing constructive suggestions and complaints had more positive relationship (.51).

Conclusion
The purpose of this study was to investigate antecedents of brand community commitment and its consequences. Thus, the two factors of trust and willingness to brand community have been considered as antecedents of brand community commitment. Accordingly, intention to repurchase, word of mouth advice to others in the field of brand and offering constructive suggestions and complaints as a result of consequences of brand community commitment. These relations were tested in a form of five hypotheses among consumers of Apple products in Tehran. Results of data analysis confirmed the relationship between studied variables using correlation test. Positive and significant relationship between trust and willingness to brand community and brand community commitments showed that consumers as rational decision makers seek to maximize the value and benefit per transaction. Hence they are trying to deal with companies with the highest value and benefit to offer. As a result, we can say that trust is an important moderating factor that makes commitment in seller-buyer relations. According to Schemwell (1994), trust creates more value and benefits in relationships that subsequently increases the quality of relationships. Consumers express their mind through choosing their favorite brand community and they are dependent on brand names that are more consistent with their personal visions and as a result they are more willing to repurchase products with such brand names. According to Graeff (1967), scenarios and positive attitude toward the brand form when personal visions of consumers and real image of brand community are consistent.. Similarly, Grathwolg & Grubb (1967) have insisted on the idea that consumers complete their main vision by studying physiological aspects of a product. A positive and significant relationship between brand community commitments and a variety of brand loyalty confirms that willingness to repurchase the products of a brand has been socially defined. Calculative commitments influence willingness of people to maintain relationships and play an important role in maintaining long-term relationships. Parvatiyar & Sheth, (1995) indicated that consumers, who show a sense of sensory commitment, will be less attracted by advertisements of competing companies. Commitments as a psychological dependence leads to innovative consumer behavior, such as positive word of mouth advertising. Especially when consumers emotionally are attached to a company, they believe themselves as same as measures and values of that company and instead they contribute to the growth and development of that company. In short, it can be said that the sense of unity and integrity of consumers with a brand community leads to active word of mouth advertising. When consumers are not satisfied with a product or service, they prefer to cut off their relationship with the company providing that product or service or will inform that company of their dis satisfaction. Therefore, consumers who inform their dissatisfaction in a constructive method, play an important role for improving   and modifying products and services of a company. Consumers, who do not feel necessary commitment to their relationship with a company, can easily cut this connection.

Research Limitations
There might be unwanted factors in any research that make limitations to the research; hence, some of the unwanted variables are not under researcher`s control. These factors must be determined and the researcher must show his knowledge about the influence of these factors on the research results. In the present study, there were some limitations such as:

✓ To study the variables the survey (questionnaire tools) has been used; while it was better to use observation and/or interview for some factors. The questionnaire is a tool by which the understandings and attitude of any person is investigated; whereas, the reality might be different with respondent`s answers.

✓ There are two issues must be considered regarding the nature and generalization of the research: firstly, there might be some practical behaviors like other survey researches that are mostly dependent on environmental conditions. Furthermore, intervening variables might affect the supposed relations among variables that are considered in this study.

✓ Some other important limitations to this research include: reluctancy of some of the respondents to answer the questionnaires, not enough carefulness of some of the respondents in answering the questions, the possibility of bias in answering the questions by some of the respondents.

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