

A Study on the Factors Influencing Purchase Intention of Generation Z Users in Virtual Brand Community

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Abstract: As the first digital-native generation, Generation Z is the most diverse of all generations. Their lives are immersed in technology. This study proposes a model for investigating the formation of purchase intentions among Generation Z in virtual brand communities in China through the application of the S-O-R framework. The study employed a quantitative research method and collected data through the random distribution of surveys. The results confirm the validity of the S-O-R framework to better understand how purchase intentions can be fostered through interaction and information quality. The study finds that both content and interpersonal interactions, as well as information quality in virtual brand communities, have an impact on consumers' purchase intentions. The study also highlights the importance of community brand identification and flow in affecting consumers' purchase intentions and forming community brand identification. This study provides a model for understanding the application of the S-O-R framework in virtual brand communities and offers more brands a way to enhance user experience, increase purchase intentions, and appeal to Generation Z, who are set to become the most active market segment.

Keywords: virtual brand community, Generation Z, S-O-R framework, purchase intention, information quality

1. Introduction

The Generation Z cohort, born after 1995 [1], is experiencing a world that is vastly different from what previous generations have encountered [2]. In the Industry 4.0 era, digital technologies and global accessibility have shifted consumer buying patterns to online channels, particularly among Generation Z, who grew up with early exposure to internet technology and social networks. PhD. Mustafa Özkan predicts that Generation Z will become the most active participants in the business industry in the next five to ten years [3]. With a massive Gen Z population of 149 million individuals in China, it is crucial to understand their purchase behaviors. Generation Z has a good understanding of brands and consistently shares information about trends and brands on social media [4]. Studying their consumption habits in virtual brand communities is crucial for businesses to enhance their relationship with this significant consumer group and create more efficient marketing strategies, as traditional sales and marketing strategies do not easily influence them. Virtual brand communities are essential marketing tools for companies, with many allocating significant resources to establish and enhance them to improve customer engagement [5-6]. By establishing a virtual community for

Generation Z, companies gain valuable insights into their target market, tailor their products and services to meet their specific needs and preferences, and foster brand identification among Generation Z consumers, staying ahead in a competitive market. This study uses the S-O-R framework to investigate the relationships among information quality, interaction, brand community identification, and flow experience and their impact on purchase intention in virtual brand communities, providing a model to understand the factors influencing Generation Z's purchase intention.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Literature Background

IT advancements have transformed the role of customers in business operations, as seen in virtual brand communities (VBCs), where customers can voice opinions and influence product innovation, value creation, and delivery processes [7-10]. VBCs are online communities not restricted by geographic boundaries, based on social communication and relationships among a brand's consumers [11]. Virtual brand communities involve interpersonal interaction among customers [12,13], but there has been limited research on this topic, with exceptions [14-18]. Most studies focused on website interaction [19-20]. This study fills a research gap by examining the impact of content and interpersonal interactions on community identification and analyzing factors that influence prospective consumer participation in virtual brand communities, including interaction and information quality, and flow experience.

2.2. The S-O-R Framework

The SOR (Stimulus-Organism-Response) model, originating from psychology, explains how external environmental stimuli influence an individual's cognition and emotional state, thereby affecting behavioral responses [21]. The model represents a stimulus-organism-response framework, with the "S" representing external stimuli, the "O" representing the cognitive organism, and the "R" representing the response, such as acceptance or rejection. The SOR model is widely used in consumer behavior research, such as Bitner M J using the SOR model to study the impact of physical environment on customer and employee behavior [22]. Jia Mingxia, Xiong Huixiang [23] combined the S-O-R model with the MOA theory and ultimately found that knowledge exchange and sharing in virtual communities involve not only a simple stimulus-response process but also collective perception changes caused by external stimuli. Therefore, this study applies this framework to investigate the impact of information quality and interaction on consumer purchase intention in virtual brand communities, while also verifying the mediating effects of two intrinsic reactions of consumers: brand community identification and flow experience.

2.3. Research Hypotheses

2.3.1. Interactive Effects

Massey and Levy's 1999 study [14] on news websites showed that interactivity includes communication between individuals and between individuals and content. Interactivity on news websites can occur through commenting on articles, engaging with other readers, or sharing news content on social media. In this study, Massey & Levy's research is used as a reference, with interactivity categorized into two dimensions: content and interpersonal. Although content and interpersonal interactions can overlap, this paper focuses on them as separate research factors. Interpersonal interaction in virtual brand communities can create a "sense of mutual interdependence

and connection,” as supported by Burgoon et al. , and Rafaeli & Sudweeks [24-25]. Furthermore, Nuan Luo et al. [26] found that customers can easily form identities and relationships through interactive activities, and interpersonal interaction serves as a lubricant for attitudes and emotions, increasing customers’ willingness to share product information and furthering the interaction process in virtual brand communities.

Therefore, Based on this, this article proposes the following hypotheses:

H1a: The interpersonal interaction has a significantly positive impact on community identification

H1b: The interpersonal interaction has a significantly positive impact on the state of flow experienced by consumers

Fournier’s research on virtual communities [27] showed that consumers perceive brand marketing activities on social media as brand behavior, which influences their overall brand perception. Customers in a brand community seek product-related knowledge to facilitate decision-making. Useful content interaction enhances customers’ identification, assists them in problem-solving and decision-making, and strengthens the bond among community members [28].

Therefore, Based on these, this article proposes the following hypotheses:

H2a: The content interaction has a significantly positive impact on community identification

H2b: The content interaction has a significantly positive impact on the state of flow experienced by consumers

2.3.2. Information Quality, Community Identification and Flow Experience

Previous studies have examined information quality as a unidimensional or multidimensional factor that influences behavioral intention [29-30]. Higher quality information in a community better meets users’ information needs. Empirical research has mainly studied information quality as an independent variable and explored its relationship with information adoption, user participation, and consumer willingness. Zhou Tao, Lu Yaobin et al. [31] found that website information quality positively impacts the website’s value of use, consumer participation, purchase intention, and consumer group identification.

Based on this, this article proposes the following hypothesis:

H3a: The information quality has a significantly positive impact on community identification

Liang Wenling’s empirical research [32] revealed that virtual brand community users evaluate information quality more comprehensively than general community users. They demand authentic, accurate, easily understandable, secure, and efficient information systems that provide high value. These dimensions form a complete information quality system for virtual brand communities. Shim et al. and Lee et al. [33-34] found that consumers’ opinions on usefulness and informativeness directly affect their emotional state and repurchase intention.

Therefore, Based on these, this article proposes the following hypothesis:

H3b: The information quality has a significantly positive impact on the state of flow experienced by consumers

2.3.3. Flow Experience, Community Identification and Purchase Intention

Flow is a psychological state where individuals are fully immersed and highly focused on the current task or environment, experiencing pleasure and losing track of time [35]. This state can be intrinsically rewarding and increase learning and association with the brand. Zhang and Yin [36] found that when customers experience flow, their immersive participation enhances purchase intention. Flow is a comprehensive experience that consumers feel when fully engaged and deeply immersed in an activity [37].

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Flow experience has a significantly positive impact on brand community identification

H5: Flow experience has a significantly positive impact on consumers' purchase intention

2.3.4. Brand Community Identification and Purchase Intention

Brand community identification (BCI) refers to consumers aligning with virtual brand communities (VBCs) to improve their sense of self [38], which serves as a measure of relationship strength within VBCs [39]. Frequent community participation fosters shared values and preferences, strengthening the group's identity [40-42]. Du and Yu [43] suggest that consumers' strongest relationships with companies are built on identifying with brands that fulfill their self-defining requirements, leading to beneficial behaviors for the company.

Therefore, based on the previous research, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Brand community identification has a positive impact on consumers' purchase intention.

2.3.5. The Mediating Effects of Community Identification and Flow Experience

The conceptual model introduced earlier includes two constructs, brand community identification and flow, that make up the organism component. Multiple studies conducted both domestically and internationally have verified the mediating effect of these variables in establishing consumers' purchase intentions from virtual brand communities [44,45]. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H7a: Brand community identification mediates the significant positive indirect effect of interaction on consumers' purchase intentions.

H7b: Flow experience mediates the significant positive indirect effect of interaction on consumers' purchase intentions.

H7c: Brand community identification mediates the significant positive indirect effect of information quality on consumers' purchase intentions.

H7d: Flow experience mediates the significant positive indirect effect of information quality on consumers' purchase intentions.

2.3.6. Control Variables

Two control variables – gender and visit frequency are considered. Previous research has suggested that an individual's gender can have an impact on their affect and physiology, as demonstrated by Levenson et al [46]. As noted by Nuan Luo et al. [26], being a member of a community can influence the relationships within that community as well as one's sense of community identification. Therefore, this study takes into account the frequency of customer visits to the community and gender, as control variables.

The hypotheses outlined above have been developed to form the theoretical model based on the S-O-R framework, as depicted in Figure 1.

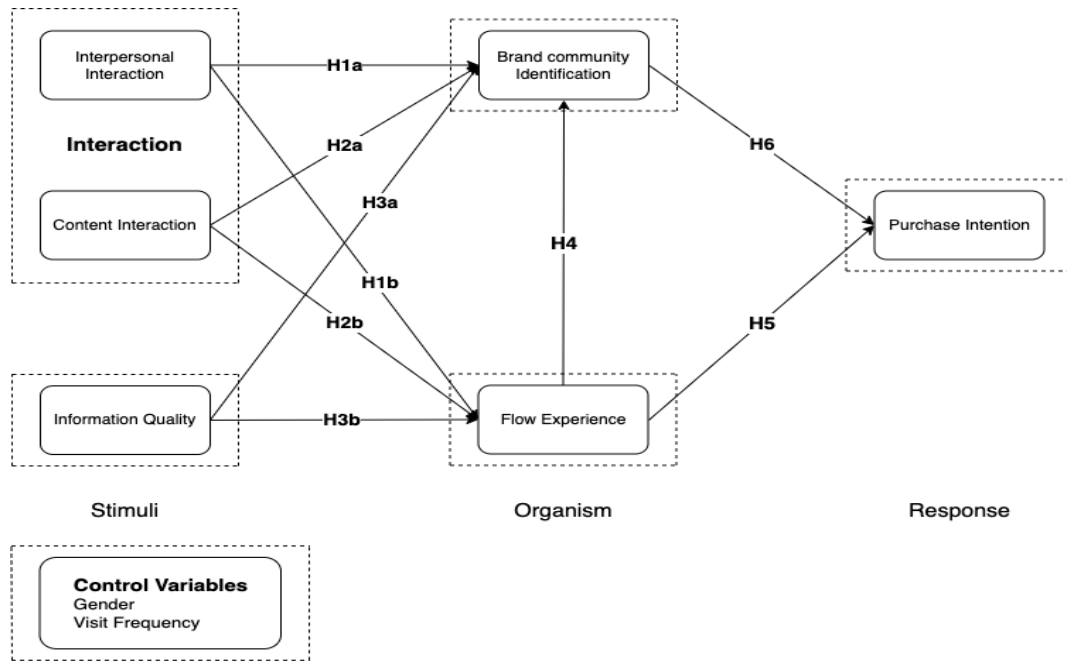


Figure 1: Research model.

3. Methodology

A self-administered questionnaire was created based on an extensive review of the literature, and all variables utilized in this study were taken from the existing research, as shown in Table 1. The data was collected from a questionnaire randomly distributed through WeChat groups and conducted the study with the final exclusion of individuals outside of the research group, Generation Z. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Table 1: Measurement items of constructs.

| Construct | Question item | Origin |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Content interaction | CI1: Virtual brand communities provide brand, product, and service information I need. | He Huan (2013) [47] 66 |
| | CI2: I'm interested in information and activities on virtual brand communities. | |
| | CI3: I share positive experiences and feedback on virtual brand communities. | |
| | CI4: I express opinions on brands, products, and retailers on virtual brand communities. | |
| Interpersonal interaction | II1: Virtual brand communities offer diverse opinions and information from members. | He Huan (2013) [47] 67 |
| | II2: Communication with other members in virtual brand communities is direct and facilitates consensus. | |
| | II3: I offer information to help others in virtual brand communities. | |
| | II4: I tend to accept majority opinions and viewpoints in virtual brand communities. | |
| Information quality | IQ1: The information provided by the brand community is comprehensive. | Wang and Strong (1996) [48] and Cao Ruichang and Wu Jianming (2002) [49] |

Table 1: (continued).

| | | |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Flow experience | IQ2: The brand community updates its information in a timely manner. | Gao and Bai (2014) [37] 663 and Novak et al. (2000) [50] |
| | IQ3: The information provided by the brand community is accurate and reliable. | |
| | IQ4: The information provided by the brand community is clear and easy to understand. | |
| | FE1: When engaging in a virtual brand community, my attention was completely focused on the activity. | |
| | FE2: When engaging in a virtual brand community, I felt a lot of pleasure. | |
| | FE3: When engaging in a virtual brand community, my sense of time became distorted. | |
| Brand community identification | BCI1: I see myself as a part of the virtual brand community. | Algesheimer et al. (2005) [51] and Mael and Ashforth (1992) [52] |
| | BCI2: If community members planned something, I'd think of it as something "we" would do rather than something "they" would do. | |
| | BCI3: When someone praises this community, it feels like a personal compliment. | |
| Purchase intention | PI1: I am willing to search for products I need through virtual brand communities. | Davis (1993) [53] |
| | PI2: Information obtained from virtual brand communities has a significant impact on my shopping intention. | |
| | PI3: I am happy to recommend products from this brand to others. | |

3.1. Data Collection and Sampling

The survey targeted Z generation users who had participated in virtual brand communities. The formal survey was conducted using a professional online survey platform called "Wenjuanxing". A total of 300 questionnaires were collected, with 278 of them considered valid, resulting in a response rate of 92%. In Table 2, females comprised a majority of the sample subjects, accounting for 58.6%, reflecting the consumer market's reality. After excluding non-Generation Z samples, the research focused on the Generation Z, primarily born after 2000, highlighting their distinct characteristics. Moreover, 60.5% of the sample had a disposable income of 4000 yuan or less, while 91.7% were members of virtual brand communities for over six months, and 77.3% visited the community at least twice a week.

Table 2: Demographics of the survey respondents.

| Demographic profile | Categories | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------|
| Gender | Male | 115 | 41.40 |
| | Female | 163 | 58.60 |
| Year of birth | 1995-1999 | 70 | 25.18 |
| | 2000-2009 | 208 | 74.82 |
| Disposable income | Below 2000 yuan | 90 | 32.40 |

Table 2: (continued).

| | | | |
|--|------------------------|-----|-------|
| | 2000-4000 yuan | 78 | 28.10 |
| | 4001-6000 yuan | 49 | 17.60 |
| | 6001-8000 yuan | 35 | 12.60 |
| | Above 8000 yuan | 26 | 9.40 |
| Duration of membership | Within six months | 24 | 8.63 |
| | Six months to one year | 85 | 30.58 |
| | More than one year | 169 | 60.79 |
| Visiting frequency (times per week) | 1 time or less | 63 | 22.70 |
| | 2-5 times | 136 | 48.90 |
| | 6-9 times | 50 | 18.00 |
| | 10 times or more | 29 | 10.40 |

3.2. Data Analysis and Results

3.2.1. Construct Reliability and Validity

SPSS was used to analyze the reliability and validity of the sample data. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all variables were above 0.8, indicating good reliability of the measurement scales, with "Cronbach's alpha after item deletion" lower than the overall coefficient, suggesting reasonable item settings. Overall, the questionnaire in this study is reliable.

Table 3: Reliability analysis results.

| Constructs | Question counts | Items | Coefficient after deletion | Cronbach α |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|-------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Content interaction | 4 | CI1 | 0.667 | 0.854 |
| | | CI2 | 0.719 | |
| | | CI3 | 0.713 | |
| | | CI4 | 0.788 | |
| Interpersonal interaction | 4 | II1 | 0.706 | 0.810 |
| | | II2 | 0.765 | |
| | | II3 | 0.726 | |
| | | II4 | 0.719 | |
| Information quality | 4 | IQ1 | 0.788 | 0.812 |
| | | IQ2 | 0.739 | |
| | | IQ3 | 0.806 | |
| | | IQ4 | 0.764 | |
| Flow experience | 3 | FE1 | 0.792 | 0.835 |
| | | FE2 | 0.771 | |
| | | FE3 | 0.784 | |
| Brand community identification | 3 | BCI1 | 0.759 | 0.837 |
| | | BCI2 | 0.771 | |
| | | BCI3 | 0.784 | |

Table 3: (continued).

| | | | | |
|--------------------|---|-----|-------|-------|
| | | PI1 | 0.794 | |
| Purchase intention | 3 | PI2 | 0.832 | 0.869 |
| | | PI3 | 0.775 | |

The KMO coefficient and the significance of the Bartlett sphericity test are the main references. A higher KMO coefficient, with a range between 0-1, indicates better structural validity of the questionnaire. A KMO coefficient less than 0.5 indicates poor structural validity. A Bartlett sphericity test significance less than 0.05 also signifies good structural validity. KMO and Bartlett tests are used to verify if the variables are suitable for factor analysis. Results indicate a KMO coefficient of 0.931 and a chi-square value of 2478.814 (Sig. = 0.000 <0.001), demonstrating excellent overall structural validity and suitability for factor analysis.

Table 4: Reliability analysis results.

| | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|----------|
| KMO Sampling Adequacy Measure | | 0.931 |
| | Approximate chi-square | 2478.814 |
| Bartlett's Test of Sphericity | DF | 210.000 |
| | Significance | 0.000 |

3.2.2. Verification of the Proposed Model and Hypotheses

In this section, linear regression analysis is used to examine the relationships between variables, with the aim of verifying hypotheses. The regression analysis results between each variable are shown below.

Table 5: Linear regression analysis results.

| Regression path | Standardized Coefficient | Std.Error | Standardized Coefficient | t | Significance | Test result |
|--|--------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|--------|--------------|------------------|
| Content interaction → Flow experience | 0.723 | 0.052 | 0.638 | 13.769 | 0.000 | H1a is supported |
| Content interaction → Community identification | 0.837 | 0.050 | 0.712 | 16.826 | 0.000 | H1b is supported |
| Interpersonal interaction → Flow experience | 0.661 | 0.055 | 0.586 | 12.028 | 0.000 | H2a is supported |
| Interpersonal interaction → Community identification | 0.714 | 0.056 | 0.609 | 12.769 | 0.000 | H2b is supported |
| Information quality → Flow experience | 0.687 | 0.046 | 0.665 | 14.776 | 0.000 | H3a is supported |
| Information quality → Community identification | 0.690 | 0.049 | 0.643 | 13.965 | 0.000 | H3b is supported |

Table 5: (continued).

| | | | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|--------------------|
| Flow experience → Community identification | 0.726 | 0.045 | 0.699 | 16.233 | 0.000 | H4 is supported |
| Flow experience → Purchase intention | 0.529 | 0.043 | 0.596 | 12.344 | 0.000 | H5 is supported |
| Community identification → Purchase intention | 0.539 | 0.040 | 0.631 | 13.502 | 0.000 | H6 is supported |

The results in Table 4, it can be seen that content interaction has a significant and positive effect on flow experience and community identification, with positive regression coefficients. Therefore, content interaction has a positive impact on both flow experience and community identification, supporting hypotheses H1a and H1b. Similarly, hypotheses H2a, H2b, H3a, H3b, H4, H5, and H6 are all supported.

3.2.3. Mediating Effects Analysis

This section uses SPSS 26.0's Process plugin with a Bootstrap test to analyze data, following Hayes' research [54]. The chain mediation model has a confidence level of 95%, a sample size of 5000, and Model 6. Purchase intention is the dependent variable, flow experience (M1) and community identification (M2) are mediators. The participants' gender and income are control variables, and content interaction, interpersonal interaction, and information quality are independent variables. Three Bootstrap tests are conducted for each independent variable, and the mediation effect results for flow experience and community identification are presented in table 5.

Table 6: Mediating effects analysis results.

| Path | Mediation effect | Effect proportion % | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|--|---------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| | | | Lower- bound | Upper- bound |
| Ind1: Interaction → Flow experience → Purchase intention | 0.1235 | 43.17 | 0.0374 | 0.2305 |
| Ind2: Interaction → Community identification → Purchase intention | 0.1039 | 36.32 | 0.0363 | 0.1782 |
| Ind3: Interaction → Flow experience → Community identification → Purchase intention | 0.0587 | 20.52 | 0.0192 | 0.1048 |
| Total mediation effect: Ind1 + Ind2 + Ind3 | 0.2861 | 100 | | |
| Ind1: Information quality → Flow experience → Purchase intention | 0.1168 | 37.00 | 0.0191 | 0.2194 |
| Ind2: Information quality → Community identification → Purchase intention | 0.0997 | 31.58 | 0.0471 | 0.1724 |
| Ind3: Information quality → Flow experience → Community identification → Purchase intention | 0.0992 | 31.42 | 0.0535 | 0.1510 |
| Total mediation effect: Ind1 + Ind2 + Ind3 | 0.3157 | 100 | | |

The results in Table 5, it can be seen that the six paths have significant mediation effects, as well as significant direct effects, indicating partial mediation. Brand community identification has a significant positive indirect effect on interaction and consumer purchase intention. Flow experience and community identification partially mediate the relationship between interaction and consumer purchase intention, and between information quality and consumer purchase intention. Therefore, hypotheses H7a, H7b, H7c, and H7d are supported. Flow experience has a greater mediation effect on purchase intention than brand community identification in the effects of interaction and information quality on purchase intention. Flow experience's mediation effect accounts for 43.17% of the total mediation effect between interaction and consumer purchase intention, and between information quality and consumer purchase intention. Perceived value partially mediates the relationship between closeness to life and consumer purchase intention, accounting for 37.00% of the total effect.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to test the impact of external stimuli and personal factors on purchase intentions in virtual brand communities using the S-O-R framework. The results confirm that information quality and customer interaction can foster purchase intention by creating a sense of community identification and enhancing user experience, with flow experience and community identification playing a mediating role. The study contributes to both theory and practice by uncovering intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that drive consumer engagement in virtual brand communities and provides new implications for addressing Generation Z customers' purchase intention. The conceptual model validates the S-O-R framework and emphasizes the significance of flow experience in promoting brand community identification and purchase intention. Knowledge on multiple factors behind customer identification with virtual brand communities could help companies design better strategies to maximize their marketing value.

5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations of this study should be noted, including the fact that data was collected from WeChat users within the Generation Z group in China, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cohorts and cultural contexts. Additionally, the study focused solely on virtual brand communities, and the findings may not apply to customers of other types of communities. Despite these limitations, the study highlights the importance of information quality, interaction, brand community identification, and flow experience in driving customer engagement in virtual brand communities. Moreover, within the S-O-R model, this study only selected information quality and interaction from a wide range of variables. Future research could explore the model's application in different cultural contexts and with a wider range of variables, as well as investigate the moderating effects of demographic variables on the relationships between the study's constructs, providing more comprehensive insights into customer engagement in virtual brand communities. Understanding these factors can help companies create more effective marketing strategies and foster long-term customer loyalty.

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