

Analyzing the Role of Brand Relationship Dimensions in the Development of Brand Community

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Abstract

The development of society proficiently acts as a sign of value creation for the formation of new communities and yields fruitful social arrangements. Usually, these communities are constructed through common concerns and shared values. This paper aimed to explore the role of brand relationship dimensions in the development and enrichment of brand community. The present study also analyzed what a brand community is and examined its importance in brand management. The significance of this research extended with providing a base for the understanding of the consumer - brand relationship, which acts as a crucial tool for the development and enhancement of a brand community. The approach involved the findings of the brand community construct roots and building an association between consumer brand relationship dimensions and brand community. The research focused on the modern concept of marketing domain that is brand community and providing an in-depth theoretical base to comprehend the brand community construct with consumer brand relationship dimensions. Methodologically, this research tested the reliability and validity of all latent constructs of the study. The study performed multiple regression analysis to understand the role of brand relationship dimensions in the development and empowerment of a brand community. The results of the study confirmed that the brand relationship dimensions, including brand loyalty, brand attachment, and brand engagement positively affected the development and enhancement of brand community; however, the role of each dimension was found to be variable. The findings of this study provided significant implications to academicians and managers.

Keywords : Brand community, brand loyalty, brand attachment, brand engagement, brand relationship

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In general, it is noted that people form a community by their common interests and views based on what is significant for each other. It also noted that restriction is not constrained to the benefit of community members; hence, people tend to select the community in which they can act in a synchronized manner (Tonnies, 2017). In recent studies, the approach of academicians in the management domain has shifted from individualism to communalism (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Various researchers label the communities in marketing perspective in assorted ways such as consumption communities (Thompson & Coskuner - Balli, 2007), subcultures of consumption (Burg - Woodman & Brace - Govan, 2007), brand communities (Ouwersloot & Odekerker - Schröder, 2008), and brand cults (Acosta & Devasagayam, 2010 ; Pandey, 2009). In the case of a brand community, it is fascinating to recognize that community bonding is based on the linkage values which are provided by the brand to its community members, which in turn creates the attraction among the consumers to build attachment towards the new community (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2015). The concept of brand community in

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the marketing area has achieved enormous attention, and modern consumer society considers a brand as a source of social interaction (Zaglia, 2013).

In today's world, saving face is likely to be both an individual and a standard practice undertaken in a brand's communities (Avery, 2012). Also, the consumer's relationship and knowledge of the product itself will change once engaged in the community. The exchange of brand stories and the celebration of the brand's heritage should strengthen the connection between the brand and the consumer. Due to increase in knowledge regarding the brand and the development of social ties with other consumers, brand communities may lead to the formation of favourable strong brand associations (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). A brand community is a twentieth-century phenomenon, which reflects the power of a social relationship to confirm the value of a brand (Giep & Moriarty, 2009), for example, Harley - Davidson and it is grassroots HOG (Harley Owners Groups), which is one of the most well-known examples of brand community. Muniz and Guinn (2001) found three characteristics of brand communities: consciousness of being connected to other members of a community while being related to the brand ; legitimacy achieved through rituals and traditions that distinguish real members from marginal members ; and oppositional brand loyalties.

The connection between brand community and brand relationship is not well researched in the literature and needs to focus on brand relationship dimensions as a tool for the development of brand community (Raut & Brito, 2014 ; Tsai & Men, 2013). In the light of this, the present research aims to enlighten the brand community construct through the lens of different aspects of brand communities and mainly portrays the role of brand relationship in the establishment of brand community. For understanding the importance of the consumer - brand relationship and brand community, this paper acts as a referring literature and discusses how a brand relationship would play a crucial tool for development and enhancement of a brand community.

Literature Review

Community and society are the two concepts which have been central terms in research theory debates, beneath which social scientists have tried to demonstrate its present form and its comparison with the past as well its effects in the future (Tonnie, 2017). The community concept is based on the assumption that the people in one community enjoy many similarities, including types and styles of their goods as compared to non - community members (Hegmon, 2002). One of the simplest definitions presented by James (2006) for community constructs is a network or group of people who are connected objectively with each other. This connectivity is based on social relations and is not restricted by geological ties, and it can be recognized by their social identity and social practices.

The brand community construct has intrigued the eyes and ears of academicians, who initiated an augmentation in the acceptance of this construct. However, ethnographic and quantitative researchers state that the bonding of brand community and individuals is constituted with how the consumers perceive themselves to be with a brand, a company, its products, and with other consumers (Schau et al., 2009). Every member of each brand community is related to each other and interacts on the platform of tradition, sense of responsibility, patterns of consumption, and perceived similarity (Muniz & Guinn, 2001). Acceleration in brand communication on social media is evidence that consumers use an array of tools and resources on social media to engage with brands (Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016). In branding literature, brand engagement is positioned as an element of brand relationship, which defines the strength of the relationship between consumers and their preferred brands (Keller, 2001 ; Trehan & Gupta, 2015).

Current approaches in information technology have led to the development of media for self-expression and intelligence sharing. These advances enable users to get valuable information from the Internet rather than offline sources, thereby resulting in the establishment of a variety of online brand communities. An online brand

community is a particular, non - geographically bound community based upon social relationships among admirers of a brand in cyberspace. Due to the online community, marketers can observe and record the consumers' group behaviour in a naturalistic environment (Kandpal & Patra, 2013). With respect to the brand community, both online and offline brand communities possess equal importance in brand community management (Wirtz, Ambtman, Bloemer, Horváth, Ramaseshan, Klundert, Canli, & Kandampully, 2013). As the findings of research confirmed the importance, uniqueness, and rapid growth of social media, marketers and researchers should pay particular attention to this phenomenon and examine well-established notions and theories in the social media contexts (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). Utilizing this unique feature of brand communities, bounteous marketers can perform enthusiastically to build a healthy brand community.

(1) Brand Community : In the branding literature, the brand community is presented as a structured set of relationships, consumption activities (Stokburger - Sauer, 2010), and affiliation with others (Keller, 2003). The concept of brand community was initially defined by Muniz and Guinn (2001) as a specialized, non - geographically connected community, and based on a structured set of relationships among admirers of a brand. Keller (2001) elaborated the meaning of brand community and quoted that a brand community exists when consumers feel a kinship or affiliation with other people connected with the brand. On the website of American Marketing Association, brand community is defined as a community formed by attachment to a brand, product, or service. The research attraction towards brand communities initiated from the research of Muniz and Guinn (2001). In their research, they found that brand communities are mostly imagined communities, and represent a form of human association situated within the consumption context.

Furthermore, it has been noted that the brand community is a concept that can strengthen brand engagement (Wirtz et al., 2013). Brand communities carry out essential functions on behalf of the brand, such as sharing information, perpetuating the history and culture of the brand, and providing assistance for decision making (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). A brand community, from a customer brand experience perspective, is a foundation of brand relationships (Felix, 2012 ; Rawat, 2014 ; Sreejith & Suresh, 2017 ; Sumbly & Siraj, 2019). McAlexander et al. (2002) extended the brand community model explained by Muniz and Guinn (2001) from customer - customer - brand to a customer - centric model of brand community, where the focal customer will be at the centre surrounded by brands, products, customers, and marketers. This model explains the existence and meaningfulness of the community in the customer experience. Schau and Muniz Jr. (2002) studied the self-presentation in computer - mediated environments and consumer participation in brand communities. This investigation provided insights into some of how consumers negotiate membership and involvement in brand communities. Research by Schau and Muniz Jr. (2002) found evidence that there was a significant variability in the extent to which consumers embraced as well as adopted a brand and community and consumers' commitment towards the brands was also found to vary.

McAlexander et al. (2002) researched the impact of brand community integration, customer satisfaction, and customer experience on customer loyalty and found that brand community integration had a direct and indirect effect through customer satisfaction on customer loyalty in case of less experienced and experienced groups of customers. Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005) found that there are communities that have clear and established links with the brand involved. In other words, it is the relationship a brand community member explicitly developed with the brand. Researchers in brand literature have also classified communities according to the nature of their interaction with each other or their motives for joining the community (Fournier & Lee, 2009). Research done by numerous branding researchers (Laroche et al., 2012 ; Ouwersloot & Odekerken - Schröder, 2008) suggests that there are different objectives of consumers towards joining a brand community. Firstly, users may participate in a brand community because of their need for quality reassurance. Secondly, users may take part in a brand community to express their involvement with the branded product. Lastly, consumers may wish for joint

consumption and, therefore, join a brand community. Users may decide to participate in a brand community because they want to live up to the brand's symbolic functions. In general, interactions between brand community members takes place in two ways - either online or offline. Also, community members interact with an organization through a brand community. Wirtz et al. (2013) identified four dimensions of online brand community - namely brand orientation, Internet-use, funding, and governance. These online brand community drivers may be brand - related, social or functional, as well as potential moderators of the relationship between the products and customers or may play a role of situational factors. Nike found that online brand community interaction between its consumers strengthened the online brand community (Fournier & Lee, 2009).

(2) Brand Community and Brand Relationship Dimensions : In literature, research presents the association of various brand elements with the brand community such as brand engagement (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014), brand engagement as a self - concept (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009), and online brand community involvement (Baldus, Voorhees, & Calantone, 2015). A strong brand relationship exists when buyers are willing to invest personal resources in the brand such as time, energy, and money (Keller, 2001). The brand relationship construct has been demonstrated in numerous studies, which confirmed the characteristics of brand engagement in association with the brand community (Evans, 2008 ; Lee, Lee, Taylor, & Lee, 2011 ; Tsai & Men, 2013). Researchers also observed that brand community and brand relationship dimensions are positively influenced by the demographics of consumers (Raut, 2015 ; Raut & Pawar, 2015). According to Muniz and Guinn (2001), brand communities provide a social structure for the relationship between a marketer and a consumer. It is presumed that the brand community would strengthen the bonds with the customers in a much superior fashion (Brogi, Calabrese, Campisi, Capece, Costa, & Di Pillo, 2013). Recent studies have further succeeded in alerting marketers about positive aspects of brand community participation and engagement that ultimately influences the behaviour of a customer in the marketplace (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013).

Brand communities are a very efficient tool and support sharing information and culture of the brand and also perpetuating the history and assisting consumers. It also provides a social structure to customer - marketer relationships and significantly influences the customer loyalty (Muniz & Guinn, 2001 ; Marzocchi, Morandin, & Bergami, 2013) and brand engagement (Tsai & Men, 2013). Brand loyalty positively affects the consumer buying behaviour (Kanimozhi & Jayakumar, 2010 ; Kumar & Gogoi, 2011). Brand loyalty (Kumar & Menon, 2017 ; Kumar & Narayanan, 2017 ; Singh, 2018) and brand attachments (Hood & Berger, 2017) are considered as the vital elements of brand equity (Mukherjee & Shivani, 2013 ; Shashikala & Suresh, 2013) which help to strengthen the bond between consumers and their brands. It is also noted that brand loyalty (Kamalaveni, Rajalakshmi, & Kalaiselvi, 2008 ; Shetty, 2010) helps organizations to retain the customers more efficiently (George & Govindan, 2015 ; Jana & Chandra, 2016 ; Nandi & Pattanayak, 2015) and also helps to increase the market share (Agarwal, Kumar, & Gupta, 2011). More significantly, appreciation of the roles of brands in daily lives points towards a brand community perspective that recognizes the network of connections between a brand and consumers. McAlexander et al. (2002) and Sprott et al. (2009) believed that the role of brand engagement and brand community is to strengthen the consumer - brand relationship. The current study examines the literature that focused on brand community and brand relationship together.

Various brand community literature, directly and indirectly, exhibits the association of various branding elements (Baldus et al., 2015 ; Brodie et al., 2013 ; Hollebeek et al, 2014 ; Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008 ; Schouten et al., 2007) with the brand community construct. In the context of Indian consumers, no rigorous attempt has been made to explore the effect of brand - relationship dimensions on brand community. The gap in the brand community literature is that brand relationship has been considered as a singular construct. In contrast, the present study considers brand relationship as a multidimensional construct and analyzes the meaningful connections between brand relationship dimensions and brand community (Hur, Ahn, & Kim, 2011). The

consideration of Indian consumers to understand the association between brand relationship dimensions and brand community presents the uniqueness of the current research.

Methodology

This investigation aims to discover how the consumer - brand relationship dimensions affect the brand community. The research methodology for the study is divided into two phases, the first phase focuses on the pilot testing. The second phase contains the final data collection and data analysis. A pilot test was directed to identify defects in research design and instrumentation. First, we performed the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for all the latent variables in the study. The study considered the Keller (2013) scale to measure all latent variables, including brand community, brand loyalty, brand attachment, and brand engagement. For the pilot testing, the sample size was 120 respondents. Further, the questionnaire was restructured and changes were made to enhance the quality of the research instrument and to increase the response rate.

In the second phase, final data collection and data analysis were done. For accomplishing the objectives of the present study, the final data were collected from 400 respondents based on their perceptions towards brand community and brand relationship dimensions. For the survey, a well - structured questionnaire was prepared. From the sampling point of view, the present study used judgmental sampling to improve the sample representativeness. Before getting the responses from the respondents, we made sure that the respondents were members of at least one brand community. The final data collection was done from August - September 2017 with the help of a well-structured questionnaire.

Data Analysis and Results

The Table 1 demonstrates the results of exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and reliability (Cronbach's alpha) statistics. The present study conducts the analysis of measures of the present study's constructs and for this purpose, we run the EFA to test the factor loadings of the observed variables, which prove the consistency of the scale. All observed variables illustrate the goodness of fit with their relative latent variables as the factor loadings of all observed variables is greater than 0.5 (the four observed variables which show the factor loadings less than

Table 1. Exploratory Factor Analysis

| Construct | Generated Items | Communalities | Factor Loadings | Cronbach's Alpha |
|-----------------|---|---------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Brand Community | I truly identify with people who use this brand. | .749 | .643 | .888 |
| | I think as if I almost belong to a society with other users of this brand. | .726 | .844 | |
| | This is a brand used by people like me. | .418 | .334 | |
| | I feel a deep association with others who use this brand. | .813 | .854 | |
| Brand Loyalty | I consider myself loyal to this brand. | .710 | .853 | .873 |
| | I buy this brand whenever I can. | .617 | .841 | |
| | I buy as much of this brand as I can. | .410 | .424 | |
| | I only need goods manufactured by this brand. | .427 | .446 | |
| | This is the one brand I would wish to purchase. | .619 | .822 | |
| | If this brand is not available, it would make difference to me if I had to use another brand. | .641 | .728 | |
| | I would go out of my way to use this brand. | .434 | .583 | |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|------|------|------|
| Brand Attachment | I truly love this brand. | .726 | .835 | .944 |
| | I would really miss this brand if it went away. | .720 | .827 | |
| | This brand is extraordinary to me. | .754 | .847 | |
| | This brand is beyond a product to me. | .634 | .780 | |
| Brand Engagement | I really like to talk about this brand to others. | .643 | .670 | .837 |
| | I am always concerned in learning about this brand. | .658 | .772 | |
| | I would be interested in merchandise with this brand's name on it. | .323 | .438 | |
| | I am proud to have others know that I use this brand. | .583 | .715 | |
| | I like to visit the website for this brand. | .528 | .649 | |
| | Compared with other people, I follow news about this brand closely. | .543 | .692 | |

Sample Size (*N*) = 400

Kaiser - Meyer - Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy = .712

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

0.5 are excluded from further data analysis). The reliability of the measures tested through Cronbach's alpha indicates high reliability of measurement as the value of Cronbach's alpha is greater than 0.7. The exploratory factor analysis, reliability analysis, and multiple regression analysis were performed using SPSS 22.

The Table 2 and Figure 1 illustrate the correlation and influence of brand relationship dimensions on brand community, which is 0.690. The coefficient of determination ($r^2 = 0.625$) confirms that 62.5% variability in brand community is explained by the independent variables including brand loyalty, brand attachment, and brand engagement. Based on the values of the coefficients, it is found that there is a positive relationship between brand

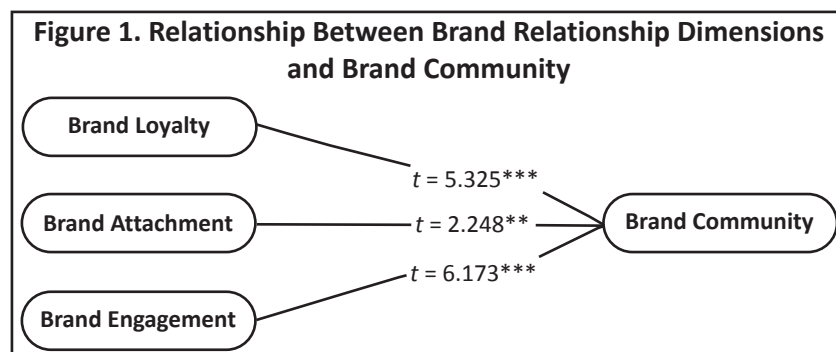
Table 2. Regression Analysis of Brand Relationship Dimensions and Brand Community

| Model - 1 | Construct | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | t - Sig. |
|-----------|------------------|------|------------|------|----------|----------|
| | (Constant) | .312 | .191 | | 2.553** | .007 |
| | Brand Loyalty | .344 | .034 | .043 | 5.325*** | .000 |
| | Brand Attachment | .202 | .042 | .093 | 2.248** | .016 |
| | Brand Engagement | .290 | .046 | .232 | 6.173*** | .000 |

$r = .690$, $r^2 = .625$, $F = 84.552$, and $FSig. = .000$

Dependent Variable: Brand Community

Predictors: (Constant), Brand Loyalty, Brand Attachment, Brand Engagement



relationship dimensions and brand community. From the regression analysis, it is clear that brand relationship dimensions are firmly and positively associated with the brand community development and enrichment. The value of F statistics of multiple regression model ($F = 84.552$) confirms the goodness of model fit. Regarding the values of tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF), all values of tolerance are greater than .2, and no values of VIF are greater than 10, so it is confirmed that multicollinearity does not exist in the present study model.

Findings and Discussion

Considering the dimensions of brand relationship, we run EFA for 21 observed variables. For the present study, brand relationship is operationalized with three dimensions, namely brand loyalty, brand attachment, and brand engagement. The EFA results reveal that a total four out of 21 observed variable loadings are less than the selection criteria of items in EFA, as the factor loadings of four items is less than 0.5, one from brand community, two from brand loyalty, and one from brand engagement. The present research also tests the reliability with Cronbach's alpha of the observed variables, and it is recorded greater than 0.7, which confirms the high reliability of the measures of the present research constructs. The regression analysis shows a statistically significant relationship between the brand community and brand relationship dimensions, including brand loyalty (0.344), brand attachment (0.202), and brand engagement (0.290). It is noted that all dimensions of brand relationship show a statistically significant relationship with brand community.

The Figure 1 and regression analysis statistics explore the relationship between the brand community and brand relationship dimensions. It is revealed that there is a statistically significant relationship between brand community and brand relationship dimensions ; so, it is confirmed that all dimensions of brand relationship have an ability to predict the strength of the brand community. The present study findings are highly correlated with the findings of Stokburger - Sauer (2010) that brand relationship positively affects the strength of the brand community. The output of the present study clearly shows that brand loyalty is the most crucial element to build and enhance brand community, and this finding is very similar to the findings of Hur et al. (2011). The positive effect of brand attachment and brand engagement exhibited by the present research is similar to the findings of Brodie et al. (2013). A well - organized brand community is always fruitful for the development of a strong brand and brand loyalty & brand attachment help to enhance the consumer - brand relationship through the development of an effective brand community (Keller, 2001). These findings are quite similar to the present research findings.

Conclusion

In an online social community, loyalty, attachment, and engagement are certainly possible. The online community is measurable and, therefore, fosters participation through which engagement at the individual level occurs. A brand community can maintain and act as a curator for the corporate reputation of a brand, based on which a person may develop or attest to personal loyalty (Evans, 2008 ; Srivastava, 2016). There are few limitations endowed with analyzing the construct of a brand community. The management of a brand community can influence the strategies of the organization by affecting affirmative as well as dissenting results. A brand community is the crucial element of brand communication and also ensures the accomplishment of quality with regards to consumer expectations (Park & McMillan, 2015). The context of brand community bonding is a relationship ; all bonds are relational and developed between relationship parties in time. The strength of the brand community bonds is dependent on the perceptions of the individuals as well as influenced by all other bonds in the brand relationship. The present study proves that the brand relationship dimensions positively affect the brand community ; simultaneously, it also shows that if marketers want to develop an active brand community for their brand, they have to focus on consumer - brand relationship dimensions including brand loyalty, brand attachment, and brand engagement. The

multiple regression analysis shows the effect of each dimension on the brand community, and it is revealed that amongst the brand relationship dimensions, brand loyalty strongly affects brand community as compared to brand attachment and brand engagement.

Managerial Implications

The unique value of brand communities presents novel insights for customer relationship management and related promotion activities. Subsequent to the trend of organizations making the most of customers' constructive word-of-mouth in their marketing suggestions is one step to improve community participation, which may create valuable contributions to organisations' customer relationship marketing. First, the present study provides reliable and validated measures of the brand - relationship dimensions and brand community construct; with this, the managers can measure the level of brand relationship and strength of the brand community of their consumers towards a particular brand. Secondly, the managers can focus on crucial brand relationship elements, which can direct their consumers to join their brand community. Furthermore, the findings of the present study highlight the role of brand relationship dimensions, including brand loyalty, brand attachment, and brand engagement in the development and enrichment of the brand community. Using these key findings, brand managers can prioritize each brand relationship dimensions in the context of their brand. Based on the present research findings, brand managers can execute appropriate branding strategies with the focus on vital brand relationship elements with objective to strengthen their brand community. Hence, companies need to recognize the significant role of brand community and should formulate branding strategies to manage a brand community actively.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

The exploratory nature of the study demonstrates two meaningful limitations. First, at the theoretical level, the roots of the brand relationship construct are connected within the extended domain of relationship marketing. Due to this, the operationalization of the brand - relationship construct is not easy. Second is the sample size of the present research as the findings may not be uniform for different geographical regions. Another limitation is that the present study considers few brand relationship elements, particularly brand loyalty, brand attachment, and brand engagement and measures how these elements effect the brand community ; so, consideration of other branding elements such as brand trust and brand satisfaction might lead to a different direction.

For future research, researchers can test existing study models with the help of the measures taken in the present study, which can enhance the generalizability of the present study's findings. Also, it will be interesting to understand the mediating or moderating role of other brand related variables such as brand trust, brand satisfaction, and brand experience as these are also closely related to the brand relationship. It will be helpful to test the existing study model in different circumstances such how the brand relationship affects the brand community in the context of sale of a particular brand. It will also be fascinating to analyze what are the other extrinsic factors which directly affect a brand community.

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