# Online brand community engagement: Scale development and validation

Brian J. Baldus [a,*], Clay Voorhees [b], Roger Calantone [b]

[a] *California State University, Sacramento, Tahoe Hall 2015, 6000 J Street, Sacramento, CA 95819-6088, United States*
[b] *The Eli Broad College of Business, North Business Complex, 632 Bogue Street, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824-1122, United States*

## ABSTRACT

In a quest for connecting with customers, the world's largest brands have gone online to develop communities to interact with consumers. Despite widespread adoption less is known about what motivates consumers to continually interact in these communities. Across six studies, we develop and test a typology of online brand community engagement (i.e., the compelling intrinsic motivations to continue interacting with an online brand community). We identify 11 independent motivations and test the scale's predictive power for participation in an online brand community. This study provides a much needed refinement to the disparate conceptualizations and operationalizations of engagement in the literature. As a result, academic researchers can now rely on a diverse set of motivational measures that best fit the context of their research, adding to the versatility of future research studies. The results provide managers with new insight in the motivations for and impact of interacting in online brand communities.

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## 1. Introduction

Brands as disparate as the Boston Red Sox, Salesforce.com, Starbuck's Coffee, Dell, General Motors, and Procter & Gamble are making significant investments in online brand communities in an effort to cultivate stronger relationships with their consumers. Often, these communities began as simple text forums where consumers share thoughts and questions about a brand, but over the past 15 years these communities have evolved and some have even blossomed into strategic marketing investments designed to offer unique brand experiences in rich interactive multimedia environments. This increased sophistication not only offers consumers a new array of opportunities within these communities, but also carries a substantial cost for the brands. For example, General Motors recently announced that they invest $30 million annually to simply generate content for their community on Facebook and are planning to continue this investment, despite cutting their $10 million Facebook advertising budget (Barkholz & Rechtin, 2012).

While each brand community has a unique purpose, the one universal is that they represent an explicit marketing investment on behalf of the firm to develop long term connections with their current and potential consumers (Zaglia, 2013). In order to increase returns on these substantial investments, marketing managers require better consumer insights into the motivations to participate in brand communities and the resulting attitudinal and financial benefits to the brand. Improved measurement of these motivations can also assist in the development of operational standards of excellence for this maturing medium of

brand communication. Despite this practical need, academic research on the consumer motivations to participate in online brand communities has struggled to keep pace with the changing landscape of the industry (e.g., Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). While early investigations in brand communities provide us with operational definitions of these investments: "Online brand communities represent a network of relationships between consumers and the brand, product, fellow consumers, and the marketer" (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002, p. 39) and insight into early motivations for community engagement (e.g., Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004) they fail to capture the complexity of motivations driving consumer engagement in communities for three reasons (e.g., Cova & Pace, 2006). First, these initial investigations are now a decade old and these initial conceptualizations don't account for the new possibilities of interaction due to recent technological innovations and substantial investments in these communities by their brands.

Second, early investigations were necessarily limited to extreme lead users. Brand communities now have moved into the mainstream and it is common to find as many early and late majority consumers interacting in these communities as lead users. The increased diversity in online brand communities challenges community managers to increase participation rates and necessitate a broader set of marketing tools to reach the diverse types of community members.

Third, no prior study has undertaken a dedicated effort to understand the unique dimensions of engagement for online brand communities. Several studies have examined channels, in general Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel (2009), brand channels (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014) and C2C communication (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004), but very few have examined communities centered on brands in the online domain. As a result, our paper is the first to truly

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 916 278 6978.
*E-mail addresses:* baldus@csus.edu (B.J. Baldus), voorhees@broad.msu.edu (C. Voorhees), rogercal@broad.msu.edu (R. Calantone).

**Table 1**
Operationalizations of engagement in the marketing literature.

| Citation | Construct definition | Dimensions/ items | Data collections | Online context | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Unbranded outlets (forums and media sites) | General social media outlets | Dedicated brand communities | MROCs |
| Current research | *Online brand community engagement* is the compelling, intrinsic motivations to continue interacting with an online brand community | 11 dimensions/ 42 items | 2 qualitative/4 quantitative | ✗ | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ |
| Hollebeek et al. (2014) | *Consumer brand engagement* is "a consumer's positively valenced cognitive, emotional and behavioral brand-related activity during, or related to, specific consumer/brand interactions." p. 6 | 3 dimensions/ 10 items | 1 qualitative/3 quantitative | ✗ | ✔ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Sprott et al. (2009) | *Brand engagement in self-concept* is the "individual difference representing consumers' propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves." p. 92 | 1 dimension/8 items | 5 quantitative | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Calder et al. (2009) | *Consumer engagement with a website* is defined as "a collection of experiences" (consumer's beliefs about how a site fits into his/her life) "with the site." p. 322 | 8 dimensions/ 32 items | 1 quantitative | ✔ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Algesheimer et al. (2005) | *Community engagement* is "the consumer's intrinsic motivation to interact and cooperate with community members" (p. 21) | 1 dimension/4 items | 1 quantitative | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) | *eWOM communication* is defined as "as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" p. 39 | 8 dimensions/ 27 items | 1 quantitative | ✔ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |

*Note:* MROCS = Marketing Research Online Communities.

capture the unique engagement dimensions for these communities that must capture motivations tied to the channel, other consumers, and the brand simultaneously. Without considering all these elements, our understanding is incomplete and overly generic. While these broader conceptualizations certainly have a lot of value to the literature, they must be complemented with context-specific investigations that provide actionable insights at a very granular level. This is particularly important from an area of marketing investment as important as online brand communities.

We attempt to close this gap by conducting a comprehensive examination of consumer motivations to participate in a broad variety of brand communities and developing a measure of online brand community engagement following a grounded theory approach. In doing so, this research contributes to the marketing literature by providing a platform for future investigations into how these motivations influence consumer behavior in online brand communities and in the marketplace following interactions in the community. Accordingly, our primary research question is what motivations do consumers have for interacting with an online brand community?

Results of the scale development process and subsequent nomological net testing suggest that online brand community engagement is not unidimensional, but multidimensional. Therefore, extant measures of engagement are too narrow to capture online brand community members' diverse motivations. Ultimately this research enables both researchers and managers to better understand consumer motivations for participating in brand communities and provides a widely-applicable platform for future research on brand communities. In the following section, we briefly review the evolution of brand communities, current research on brand communities, review the scale development process, and discuss the implications of this research.

## 2. Scale development and validation procedure

To develop measures for online brand community engagement, we began with a review of the engagement literature (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Calder et al., 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al.,

2004; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009) followed by a grounded theory approach to establish baseline dimensions of engagement in online brand communities and then proceeded with a modified scale development processes. Table 2 provides an overview of the entire process, which entailed two qualitative data collections, item generation, expert review, an exploratory data collection, and two validation studies. In the following sections, we provide details on the entire process and criteria used at each stage of the development. (See Table 1.)

### 2.1. Identification of engagement dimensions

Because there has been limited research into online brand community engagement, we follow a grounded theory approach (Spiggle, 1994) to explore the domain of engagement to develop the scale for online brand community engagement. Specifically, we began the process using a series of qualitative research efforts (focus groups and qualitative surveys) to identify consumer motivations for interacting with brand communities. Consistent with our earlier definition, these motivations served as our primary engagement dimensions. When these dimensions aligned with prior literature, we labeled them accordingly and for dimensions that were unique, we created new labels and operational definitions that captured the essence of the motivation. Details on the focus groups and the open ended survey are provided next.

#### 2.1.1. Study 1 — focus groups

Focus group participants were recruited from a large Midwestern university's undergraduate marketing courses. Thirty students volunteered to participate in the focus groups for extra credit. 11 students (6 male and 5 female, median age 21 years old) were identified as active members of online brand communities and included in this phase of the research process. Focus group sessions were conducted based on a questioning route developed specifically for this study (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Following the focus group sessions, the researchers and assistant moderators (two research assistants not aware of the theoretical background) met to discuss the transcripts.