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# Consumers' Role Performance and Brand Identification: Evidence from a Survey and a Longitudinal Field Experiment

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**Abstract**

Why do some consumers evangelize brands and create value for them even without receiving any direct reward in return? How do their motivations influence their role behaviors and their identification with the company or brand? We draw on motivation theory and the in- and extra-role literature of leadership to propose a theoretical framework. We use this framework to analyze data from one cross-sectional survey conducted with members of two online brand communities and one longitudinal field experiment with consumers of one new online brand community. We first separate community members' motivations into three types of psychological needs (self-competency, self-belongingness, self-autonomy) that are fulfilled by membership in a brand community. We investigate how each of these needs influences consumers' in-role and extra-role behaviors, which in turn positively affect their brand identification and create value for the company. Our results show that self-competency motivates both in- and extra-role behaviors, self-belongingness only increases less involved in-role behaviors, and self-autonomy only affects more involved extra-role behaviors. Both role behaviors foster beneficial consumer brand identification. We discuss how these findings can inform marketers' brand community-building strategies.


*Keywords:* Online brand community; Brand identification; Self-determination theory; In-role behavior; Extra-role behavior

## Introduction

In the past two decades or so, marketing scholars have re-examined the fundamentals of the consumption experience and suggested that a different form of consumption, i.e., individual transactions being augmented by community-based experiences, has emerged (Mathwick, Wiertz, and De Ruyter 2008). Community-based consumption experiences are increasingly evident in brand communities. A brand community allows consumers to form a "non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muñiz and O'guinn 2001, p. 412). The rise of the Internet has made brand communities more accessible to different consumers across the globe. Consequently, the immense popularity of online brand communities and social media has revolutionized the consumption experience (Johnson and Lowe 2015; Singh and Sonnenburg 2012; Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012). Today, many consumers regularly spend more than one-third of their waking hours on social media (Adler 2014), and, thus, it is not surprising to see that participation in online brand communities has become more than common.

One interesting trend is that many members of a brand community are no longer just participants who simply share information with other members or post comments in threads, but they often actively advocate for the brand and engage in behaviors that benefit the brand and the brand-community. For example, in the well-known Harley Owners Group (HOG), sponsored by Harley-Davidson, evangelical consumers promote the brand and groom new community members (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Members belonging to a variety of brand communities, such as Sun Java (Cothrel and Williams 2000), Jeep (Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig 2007), Apple (Muñiz and Schau 2007), Coca-Cola,

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Nike, and Volkswagen (Muñiz and Schau 2007) engage in behaviors similar to those of HOG members and in doing so, adding value to the brand. These behaviors are intrinsically motivated as the community members usually do not expect some form of extrinsic reward provided directly by the brand or firm (Mathwick, Wiertz, and De Ruyter 2008).

Despite these well-documented phenomena and their increasing visibility on social media, many firms have yet to fully unlock some of the dormant marketing potential contained in their brand communities. How can firms foster consumers' intrinsic motivations to act in the interest of the brand? And, more importantly, how do such motivations influence consumers' role behaviors within the brand community and subsequently their identification with the brand? To answer these important theoretical questions, this research draws on the in- and extra-role theory in leadership (Hughes and Ahearne 2010; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009), self-determination theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan 1985; Gagné and Deci 2005; Ryan and Deci 2000), and social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael 1989). We attempt to significantly broaden our understanding of how customers participate in an online brand community.

Our research efforts make several important contributions to the existing literature. First, our research extends the theoretical dialog on consumers as value co-creators to the literature on brand community. We build a comprehensive theoretical framework with respect to brand community members' motivations to take on a variety of roles in the brand community to which they belong, as well as how these motivations eventually foster brand identification. Second, while prior research has examined brand identification as an antecedent or as a mediator leading to a variety of behavioral outcomes (e.g., Lam et al. 2010; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009; Scarpi 2010; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009), it remains unclear why and how brand identification forms. We address the practical concerns as to how identification among brand community members can be facilitated (Press and Arnould 2011; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009). Our research investigates the process that prompts consumers or brand community members to identify with a brand. Understanding this mechanism is important because brand identification is often associated with favorable brand advocacy. In other words, strong identification with the brand often elevates consumers to advocate and promote the brand to others. Unlike conventional branding research, in which brand identification is usually conceptualized as the gateway to intention and actual behavior, our research makes a unique contribution by proposing that consumers can interact and purchase a brand without necessarily having to identify with the brand. In fact, brand identification can very well occur afterwards. This appears to be particularly true when the brand is new to the consumer. Third, our research advances the brand community literature methodologically by using both a cross-sectional survey and a longitudinal field experiment to fully evaluate our proposed theoretical framework. We analyze self-reported and actual behavioral data to test the proposed causal relationships. This methodological pluralism lays the groundwork for future quantitative online brand community investigations. The overarching conceptual framework guiding this research is provided in Fig. 1.

## Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Muñiz and O'guinn (2001, p. 412) define brand community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand." Muñiz and O'guinn (2001) further identify three markers of brand communities: consciousness of kind, presence of shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Consciousness of kind is defined as "the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community" (Muñiz and O'guinn 2001, p. 413). This consciousness leads to a sense that users of the shared brand are different or special, compared to users of other brands. Rituals and traditions may include specific greeting practices, celebrating brand history, and sharing brand stories. Moral responsibility refers to a sense of duty and commitment to the community as a whole, as well as to its individual members. It often encompasses community-oriented activities, such as integrating and retaining members and assisting brand community members in the proper use of the brand.

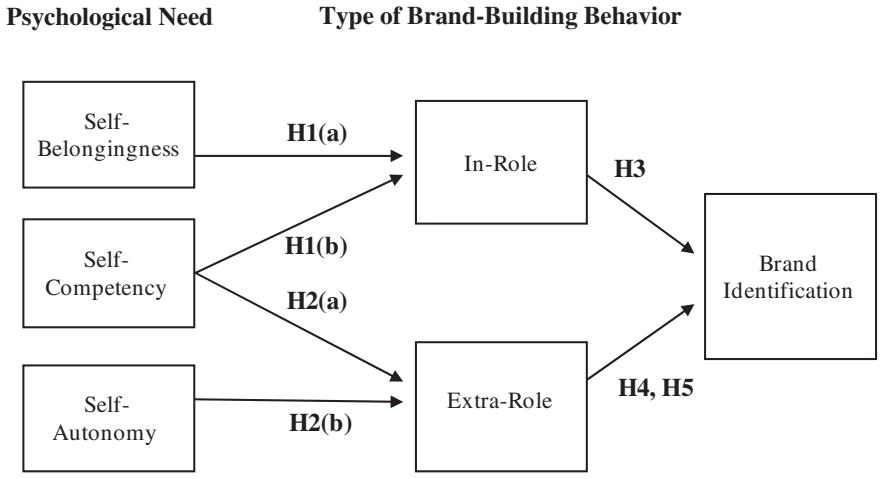


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.