

Community Members' Perception of Brand Community Character: Construction and Validation of a New Scale



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Abstract

Brand communities offer effective means to achieve favorable brand outcomes, such as enhanced consumer brand loyalty. But what drives brand community success, and how can managers evaluate their communities' performance? Based on Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) the existing literature suggests high levels of consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility among community members, which imply a notion of "brand community character". This study accordingly argues that community members' perceptions of the brand community character (PBCC) should lead to positive outcomes for both the community and the brand. Neither PBCC nor its three characteristics have been measured empirically previously, so this study develops an initial scale. Six consecutive studies to develop the PBCC scale demonstrate its reliability and validity, while a further study affirms that PBCC has a positive relationship with relevant brand outcomes.

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Introduction

In postmodern societies, consumers increasingly gather in groups organized around brands, or brand communities, defined 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, p. 412). The growth of online social networking sites has facilitated the establishment of even more company-managed brand communities, which attract tens of millions of members and (potential) customers (e.g., Coca-Cola's Facebook brand community featured more than 96 million members in January 2016; Facebook 2016). Traditional brand communities were run and owned by consumers, but brand communities on social networking sites increasingly result from

brand efforts, granting marketers more influence over their composition, as well as opportunities to shape the community content to achieve positive brand outcomes. Considering their increasing numbers and sizes, the effective management of such brand communities is of significant interest to both academia and practitioners.

Companies primarily initiate brand communities to achieve favorable brand outcomes. The existing literature has lauded brand communities as the "holy grail of brand loyalty" (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002, p. 38) and highlighted them as powerful tools for marketers to strengthen the relationship between consumers and their brands, as well as to increase brand equity. In particular, brand communities generally lead to increases in affective commitment to the brand (e.g., Casaló, Flavián, and Guinaliú 2008), loyalty to the community and the brand (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005; Dholakia and Durham 2010; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Thompson and Sinha 2008), oppositional loyalty to competing brands (e.g., Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Thompson and Sinha 2008), word-of-mouth

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communications, and brand image (e.g., Dholakia and Durham 2010; Woisetschlager, Hartleb, and Blut 2008). However, these positive outcomes likely depend on the traits of the specific brand community. In this sense, the existing literature suggests that a brand community requires high levels of consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility among members (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). These characteristics are frequently mentioned as the key characteristics a group of people gathering around a particular brand has to show in order to be classified as being a true brand community (e.g., Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter 2008; Thompson and Sinha 2008; Zaglia 2013). Yet no previous research has measured these three characteristics empirically. We propose that the three characteristics constitute “brand community character” and that community members’ perceptions of brand community character (PBCC) are what lead to the positive outcomes for the community and brand.

To test whether positive community and brand outcomes result when brand community members perceive high levels of consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (i.e., at high levels of PBCC), we develop a new scale that comprises all three characteristics and can empirically measure both community members’ PBCC and the effects on community and brand outcomes. The scale aims to apply to different kinds of brand communities, but we test it with social media brand communities, because of their great and increasing relevance and because marketers exert influence over their composition. With this new scale, we seek to help marketers measure the success of their brand communities and understand what they should display to obtain positive community and brand outcomes.

In line with standard scale development procedures (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009; DeVellis 2003; Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma 2003), we conduct a series of studies to develop our PBCC scale and demonstrate its reliability and validity. We confirm empirically that the PBCC scale consists of the three dimensions of brand community character, which we measure with 14 items. The PBCC scale achieves satisfactory levels of criterion validity and is sufficiently distinct from other community constructs, such as community commitment, identity, or integration and sense of community. Finally, we show that the scale attains satisfactory predictive validity and that PBCC is superior to other community constructs (i.e., sense of community) in predicting positive brand outcomes.

Conceptualizing the PBCC Construct

Before we empirically analyze the PBCC scale, we establish the domain of the PBCC construct theoretically (Churchill 1979; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Podsakoff 2011; Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma 2003), using a definition of the construct, its theoretical dimensions, and its distinction from other community constructs.

Definition

The existing literature implies largely positive effects of brand communities for brands, though marketers lack a quantitative

measure to evaluate the performance of their brand communities and identify the underlying characteristics that communities should exhibit to achieve positive effects. In their qualitative research, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) propose that brand communities have a certain character, reflected by their consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Psychology research into the link between perceptions and behavior suggests that perceptions of other people’s behavior increase the likelihood that the observer will engage in that behavior (Bargh, Chen, and Burrows 1996; Chartrand and Bargh 1999). Accordingly, we propose that community members’ PBCC leads to a sense of community among the individual community members and thereby results in positive outcomes for the community and the brand. In turn, we define PBCC as *individual brand community members' perceptions of the interactions within the brand community, according to whether they exhibit key brand community characteristics: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility*. Thus, PBCC should vary in strength and intensity, such that some brand communities induce higher levels of PBCC than others and in turn enjoy more positive outcomes.

Dimensions

Using Muñiz and O'Guinn’s (2001) three markers of brand community character, we derive three dimensions of the PBCC scale. Furthermore, on the basis of the perception–behavior link, we argue that if community members perceive high levels of the three dimensions within a community, they express higher PBCC and have a stronger sense of community themselves.

The first characteristic is *consciousness of kind* within the brand community (Gusfield 1975) defined as “an intrinsic connection 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 sense of we-ness (i.e., strong connection with others) and knowledge of belonging exists among brand communities’ members, even if they have never met or interacted (Bender 1978; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Weber 1978). Moreover, consciousness of kind recognizes differences between members of brand communities and people not in the brand community or users of other brands (Schau and Muñiz 2002). Brand community members perceive themselves as very similar to one another and special; they regard people outside the brand community as different and sometimes even inferior (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Consciousness of kind also may be manifested by brand community members who differentiate “true” members from others, such that the former really know the brand, whereas other members use the brand seemingly for the wrong reasons (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Similarly, brand community members oppose competing brands to highlight what differentiates them from members of other brand communities or users of other brands (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001).

The second characteristic of brand community entails the presence of both *shared rituals*, or “conventions that set up visible public definitions” (Douglas and Isherwood 1996, p. 43),

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