



Brand community relationships transitioning into brand relationships: Mediating and moderating mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

We aim at identifying and examining the different patterns of mechanisms through which the community-based relationships result in brand-based relationships. Hence, we address the gaps of identifying and engaging in a community for the generation of loyal customers of a specific brand, which is mediated by the customers' brand engagement. We have collected data from 240 brand community members in India and conducted the empirical analysis through a partial least square-structural equation modeling technique.

The results have indicated that customers brand engagement (CBE) fully mediates the relationship between brand community engagement and loyalty intentions, and partially mediates the relationship between customer brand identification and loyalty intentions. A sense of community-brand congruity has a moderating effect in the transition of community-based relationships into brand-based relationships. This study provides new evidence to the academicians and practitioners for guiding their understanding of brand management through brand communities.

1. Introduction

Brand communities have evolved as a powerful marketing tool for building connections with the customers which provides an explanation about the quest of world's smallest firms for establishing community networks (Baldus et al., 2015). The brand community is described as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). The brand community offers its members a sense of identity (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006) and provides a self-categorization platform (Ellemers et al., 1999). Customers' engagement in the community enhances their participation levels and their membership duration (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Initial understanding of a customer's relationship with a brand community was limited to the presence of a pre-existing brand loyalty (McAlexander et al., 2002), i.e., a prior bonding with the brand led to the development of a kinship with the community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Tsai et al., 2012). Lately, the precedence of community-based relationships in generating brand relationships attracted scholarly attention (e.g., Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Jang et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2012; Raies et al., 2015). After establishing brand community as the modern marketing program, the preference for community-based relationships was focused upon, and it changed the landscape of brand

community research by highlighting the part played by the community in creating brand-relationships (McWilliam, 2000; Fournier and Lee, 2009).

The role of brand communities in facilitating brand relationships is not new as on date (e.g., Algesheimer et al., 2005; Schau et al., 2009; Zhou et al., 2012). For example, customer-community relationships have noticeably enhanced brand performance by augmenting brand loyalty (Kim et al., 2008; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010; Zhou et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014; Raies et al., 2015). Although ‘brand community relationships’ essentially means the relationship with the community and the focal brand (Kozinets, 1999; Bagozzi et al., 2012; O'Guinn and Muniz, 2009), the patterns of mechanisms through which the community-based relationships generate brand-based relationships remain underexplored (Zhou et al., 2012). The brand community relationships does not always give rise to brand-based consequences such as loyalty (Shang et al., 2006; Casalo et al., 2007; Jang et al., 2008; Raies et al., 2015) because this transition and transformation is mediated by an affective brand state such as brand commitment and brand attachment (Raies and Gavard-Perret, 2011; Zhou et al., 2012). This relational transformation from the community to the brand highlights the marketing function of a brand community in building brands, but more attention is required to understand the mediating role of brand relationship variables (Zhou et al., 2012).

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¹ Members, customers, and consumers have been used interchangeably to represent customers who are brand community members.

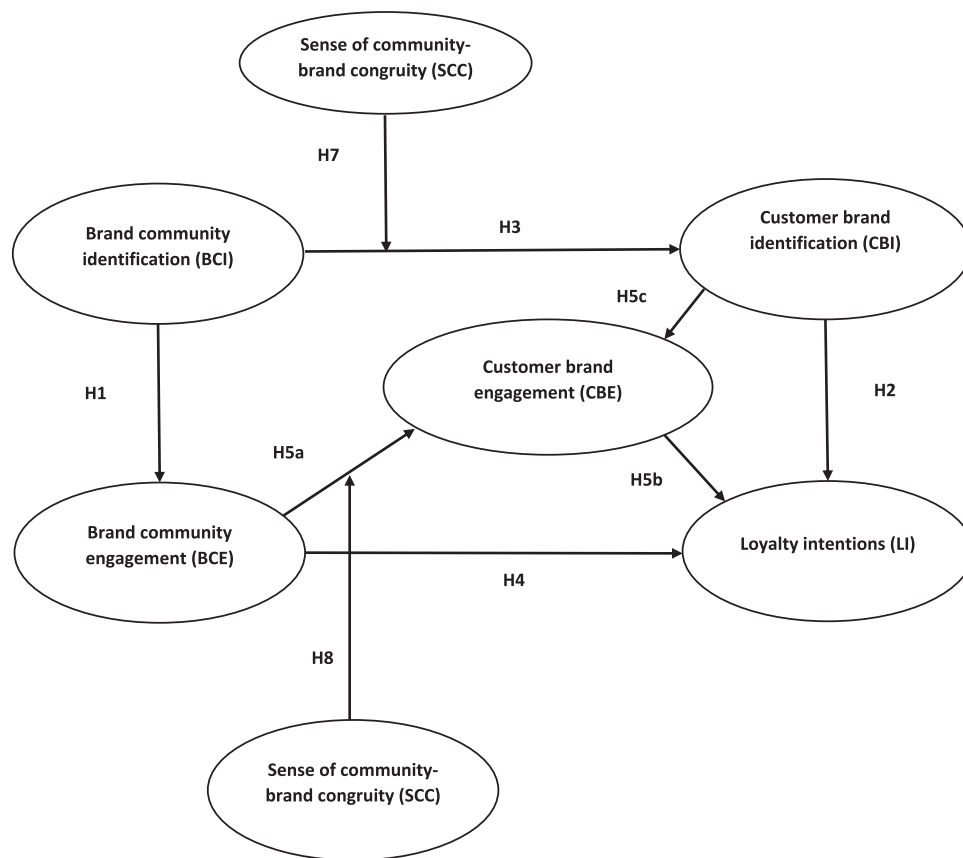


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework. Source: Own elaboration.

Brand engagement has evolved as the new brand relationship variable (Dwivedi, 2015), which acts as a stronger and better predictor of brand loyalty in the studies related to consumer behaviour (Brodie et al., 2011, 2013). The mediating role of brand-relationship variables such as brand trust can be seen in the transformation of community-based relationships into brand-based relationships (e.g., Marzocchi et al., 2013). Despite the contemporary importance of customers’ brand engagement, its role has not been considered in these relational transformations hitherto. The importance of engagement in the communities can be seen in the literary work of Schau et al. (2009), where ‘engagement’ and related terms were used record 75 times (Brodie et al., 2011). Engagement is vital in brand communities because engagement drives relationships beyond transactions (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010). Specifically, customer brand engagement (CBE) involves complete self-investment of customers (cognitive, affective, and behavioural) in brand-related interactions beyond financial transactions (L.D. Hollebeek, 2011; L. Hollebeek, 2011). Brand communities are formed by the assimilation of admirers of a particular brand; these admirers are associated with the brand community beyond traditional transaction motives (to pursue social relationships in a broader sense); hence, the role of brand engagement in brand communities becomes crucial. We address this gap by exploring the mediating role of CBE between community-based and brand-based relationships.

Along with the above-mentioned issues and concerns, there is a difference in the level of operations of the brand community relationships and brand relationships (McAlexander et al., 2002). The sense of sameness between the brand community and the brand may reduce the difference in these levels and influence the transitioning of community-based relationships into brand-based relationships. The different patterns of these stage-specific relationships remain uncharted till date and exploring these mechanisms could improve the success of a brand

community (Zhou et al., 2012).

Considering the highlighted gaps, this research explores the patterns of mechanisms involved in the conversion of customer-community relationships into customer-brand relationships. This study has three specific objectives:

- To conceptualize and empirically validate a model portraying the transitioning of customer-community relationships into customer-brand relationships.
- To explore the mediating role of CBE in the conversion process of community-based relationships into brand-based relationships.
- To explore the moderating role of perceived community-brand congruity in the transitioning patterns of brand community relationships into brand relationships.

The results of this study contribute to the academic and managerial understanding on brand management in certain ways. Researchers propose the mechanisms related to the conversion of brand community relationships into brand relationships, which are largely obscure of the mediating and moderating effects; hence, this research offers a new dimension to the supposedly linear ties between community-based and brand-based relationships. Specifically, the findings of this research indicate that to assure brand loyalty through brand communities, the members’ engagement with the focal brand requires due attention. This research also necessitates a congruity between the community and the focal brand for the conversion of community-based relationships into brand-based relationships and in maintaining the vibrancy of a brand community per se.

In the following section, the study framework is proposed along with research hypotheses. The rest of the sections in the paper include research method, results, and discussion in a progressive manner.

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