

Three essays on social media-based brand communities

Mohammad Reza Habibi

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By: Mohammad Reza Habibi

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Dr. K. Argheyd _____ Chair

Dr. F. Pons _____ External Examiner

Dr. F. Muller _____ External to Program

Dr. M. Paulin _____ Examiner

Dr. R. Toffoli _____ Examiner

Dr. M. Laroche _____ Thesis Supervisor

Approved By: _____ Dr. H. Bhabra, Graduate Program Director

June 29, 2015

Dr. S. Harvey, Dean
John Molson School of Business

Abstract

Three essays on social media-based brand communities

Mohammad Reza Habibi, Ph.D.

Concordia University, 2015

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the notion of brand communities that are established on social media platforms. Social media has changed marketing practices from information acquisition to post purchase behavior; therefore, it is necessary for marketing scholars and practitioners to update our marketing knowledge according to this new changes. This thesis suggests the brand community lens as a proper and legitimate perspective to study marketing and branding activities on social media platforms because the essence of social media is associated with collective and community building. The first paper of this manuscript not only supports the existential possibilities of brand communities on social media but also more importantly it explores the unique aspects of social media that could interact with brand community practices and argue why we should examine brand community in this new context of social media.

The first paper conducts an in-depth qualitative study in two rich brand-generated communities on social media and analyzes their brand community elements and practices. The study shows the qualities of brand community elements, structural relationships (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig 2002) and value creation practices (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould 2009) within these communities and extract some unique characteristics of the social media based brand communities that differ from their traditional counterparts. The study concludes five unique

dimensions that make social media based brand communities (SMBBCs) distinguished from other offline/online counterparts and argues that this is why brand community researchers should treat brand communities on social media differently and study this phenomena separately. We need to update our understanding of brand community to suit the unique aspects of social media.

The second and third papers employ a quantitative approach to show how these communities can influence important marketing variables such as brand trust, brand relationship quality, and brand loyalty. These are marketing fundamental goals that are considered as a way to measure social media success in terms of increasing return on investment. These papers depict how different elements and building blocks of these communities on social media interact and influence trust and loyalty. The second paper shows the role of community engagement as a moderator while the third paper provides a big picture of consumer behavior in the context of brand communities that are established on social media. Several important measures such as value creation practices are developed in this paper.

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Before I begin my Ph.D., far from home, I knew it would be a difficult journey. What I did not know was that there will be individuals waiting for me at each stage of this journey who will generously take steps with me during the road so that I do not lose my way. I am sure without them this journey was impossible or much harder to pass. Hereby, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to them.

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DEDICATION

To

Memory of my mother ... nothing in the universe can fill her void

She would have been proud

My father whose sincere commitment to our family has been the source of inspiration for me

CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

This section discusses the author contributions for each of the papers contained in this thesis, as required by thesis regulations. While I have done my best to describe the contributions as accurately as I remember, I apologize to my coauthors if I have made any errors or omissions.

Dr. Laroche, Dr. Richard, and I contributed extensively on these papers. The whole project started with a vague idea of how can we study marketing activities on social media. The idea of the first and the second paper was developed by me with the help of Dr. Laroche and Dr. Richard. Then during more than 15 months of extensive work and data collection and analyses that was mainly done by me the papers were developed. Dr. Laroche and Dr. Richard spent a lot of time correcting and commenting on the papers. Especially Dr. Laroche and Dr. Richard helped in developing the scales that was used in the second and third paper through an iterative process.

The first and second papers were submitted to the *Journal of Advertising Research* where it was rejected after 3 rounds of revise and resubmit. I incorporated the reviewers' feedback and comments along with Dr. Laroche's feedbacks and comments in the papers. This process helped a lot to improve both papers in terms of contribution, clarity, and rigorous methodology. Then, the first paper was sent to the *International Journal of Information Management* and the second paper was submitted to *Computers in Human Behavior*. Both papers were accepted after one round of revision and have been heavily downloaded and cited.

For the third paper both Dr. Laroche and I contributed extensively. We both agreed that we need to provide a comprehensive model of consumer behavior in the context of brand communities on social media. The initial model was developed by me and was presented by Dr. Laroche in a

conference in Japan. Dr. Laroche received extensive feedback and comments from the conference and with the assistance of Dr. Richard we incorporated them in the paper. Then the data was collected by me and analyses were done under supervision of Dr. Laroche and Dr. Richard. Extensive financial support was provided by Dr. Laroche for this project.

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Introduction

“Social media has transitioned into an obsession and almost a way of life for online culture, changing the way we communicate with our colleagues, loved ones, and our favorite brands. As social media continues to grow in almost every market, the idea that social media is “just a fad” is no longer worth consideration as more and more demographics move toward utilizing social media on an everyday basis.” (Jones 2013)

Social media has brought about immense changes in the way people live. However, as marketing researchers we are more interested in investigating changes in consumer behavior, branding, communication, and other related marketing areas. As it is later described in this manuscript, technical cores of social media have enabled all individuals to be active creators of content on the web (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Mangold & Faulds 2009). An estimate in 2013 showed that almost 90% of the whole world’s data was created over the past two years (SINTEF 2013). This capability, along with dense networked interconnectedness among members (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching 2013) and technologies such as Ajax programming which enables automatic updates of selected areas of a webpage instead of manual full page reload (Garrett 2005) have created a turbulent environment of content in which consumers, brands, and other marketing entities interact.

Fast and pervasive growth of social media has raised numerous questions for marketers. Social media’s unique aspects and its high degree of popularity among consumers have made real changes in actual marketing practices (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden 2011) and in consumer behavior from information acquisition to post purchase behaviors (Mangold & Faulds 2009; Powers et al. 2012). However, due to this rapid and extensive growth and complexity of social media, researchers have not come to a general agreement and understanding of how social media influence brands and how managers should practice on social media remains elusive.

To provide some guidance and analytical tool to understand branding in social media environment, I believe we can look through the lens of “brand community theory” (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). Social media has a networked and social nature that allows people who have common interests easily and efficiently gather together and form subgroups of interest (Mangold & Faulds 2009). Henceforth, there are thousands of groups on social media outlets that are built around interest to a certain brand. In this regard, this research deals with several key questions: Are these groups related to the brand community concept introduced by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001)? That is, can these groups manifest brand community markers, characteristics and benefits, as introduced by scholars of brand community literature (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002; Schau et al. 2009)? If so, how do these brand communities differ from previously-studied brand communities such as online and offline ones? And more importantly, what/how are the impacts of such communities on fundamental marketing variables such as brand trust, and loyalty?

This research takes a multiple-method approach to address these questions. In the first paper, we answer this fundamental question of whether brand communities exist on social media (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard 2014a). That is do brand related groups manifest the sharply defined markers of a brand community (e.g., Muniz & O’Guinn 2001)? And consequently, how unique these communities are and how they embed unique aspects of social media is investigated in this study. By investigating two exemplary brand communities on Facebook (as the major and most comprehensive social media platform) the paper supports the manifestation of brand communities and comes up with five unique dimensions that distinguish these brand communities from previous brand communities. This provides the first building block for us and future researchers so that they can legitimately build on the rich literature of brand community

theory.

In the second paper, we turn our attention to elements of the brand communities that are established on social media and investigate how these elements can influence important marketing variables such as brand trust (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard 2014b). Specifically, in the second paper we investigate how building blocks of a brand community influence brand trust. We also investigate the role of engagement, which is a highly relevant and important variable in social media context, in the developed model. And finally, in paper three, we develop and estimate a comprehensive model of consumer behavior in the context of social media-based brand communities and test it across a large sample of brand community members in social media. In addition to providing a big picture of how such communities can influence brand relationship quality and brand loyalty, the paper develops some new measures that can be used for future research in the marketing field.

Together these three papers provide a deep conceptual overview of the research on social media and brand community research as well as other variables under study. They conceptualize the notion of social media-based brand community and their unique aspects that can be used to interpret counterintuitive findings in the field. The papers also target main variables in marketing that are among metrics for measuring success of marketing programs. They show how these variables can be influenced in social media. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Paper 1: Brand communities based in social media: How unique are they? Evidence from two exemplary brand communities

Understanding how brands should operate on social media is most important for contemporary marketing researchers and managers. This paper argues that due to the social and networked nature of social media it is an ideal environment for brand communities. Taking a deep qualitative approach and analysis of a vast set of data, the article articulates the existence of brand communities on social media. More importantly, it delineates five unique and relevant dimensions of brand communities based in social media. The authors advise researchers to consider these dimensions while conducting research on brand communities and social media. Further implications for practitioners and researchers are discussed.

Key Words: Brand community; Social media; Unique dimensions; Value creation practices; Netnography

Introduction

“We lived on farms, then we lived in cities, and now we're going to live on the Internet! “

Sean Parker in “The Social Network”, (2010), Film by David Fincher

Believe it or not, this is going to be our new reality. In the age of social media or, as renamed by some scholars, “people’s media” (Fournier & Avery 2011), people spend more than one third of their waking day consuming content on social media (Lang 2010). Facebook alone, the hallmark of social media, has over one billion active users. The unique aspects of social media and its immense popularity revolutionized marketing practices (Hanna et al. 2011) and consumer behavior from information acquisition to post purchase behavior (Mangold & Faulds 2009; Powers et al. 2012). Despite this growing popularity and general agreement on the influences of social media, a systematic understanding by brand managers of how to behave on social media remains elusive.

The networked and social nature of social media allows like-minded people to gather in groups and subgroups with a specific common interest (Mangold & Faulds 2009). There are many groups in social media that are centered on a certain brand. These groups could be either initiated by brand managers or by consumers. Our research deals with several key questions: Are these groups related to the brand community concept introduced by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001)? Do they manifest brand community characteristics and benefits, as introduced by McAlexander et al. (2002) and Schau et al. (2009)? If so, how do these brand communities differ from previously-studied brand communities such as online and offline ones?

To address these questions, we review and build on the literature related to social media and brand communities. Especially, we explore the unique aspects of social media that could build unique aspects of brand communities on social media. Then, we conduct an in-depth

qualitative study in two rich brand-generated communities on social media and analyze their brand community elements and practices. We show the qualities of brand community elements, structural relationships (McAlexander et al. 2002), and value creation practices (Schau et al. 2009) within these communities. More importantly, we extract five unique characteristics of the social media based brand communities that have not been studied in previous research.

This research makes several contributions. While there is anecdotal evidence of brand communities on social media (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Kietzman et al. 2011), we study such phenomenon and elaborate empirically on its quality and unique characteristics. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate how social media based brand communities differ from other online and offline brand communities. Although highly understudied, these unique characteristics are of highest relevance to the brand community literature. This research also has important implications for marketers as they have a historical opportunity to reach their consumers through such brand communities. Thanks to Facebook, there are brand fan pages that reach several millions users. For example, the Harley Davidson page has more than 3 million and Coca Cola has more than 30 million members. This research sheds new light on how marketers can better exploit this historical opportunity.

Theoretical framework

Brand community

Despite the fact that the concepts of consumption community and brand community were established long ago, the concept of brand community has become important in the marketing field only recently (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, p412) and is defined as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" This definition covers a broad community gamut from virtual (Adjei, Noble, & Noble

2010) to temporary small brand communities (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig 2007).

The brand community is very important to both consumers and managers. Brand communities provide many benefits for the brand and marketers such as sharing information and keeping in touch with highly devoted consumers (Anderson 2005), integrating consumers into the brand identity and enhancing their loyalty (Anderson 2005; McAlexander et al. 2002), obtaining valuable market research from consumers for innovation and new product development purposes (Von Hippel 2005), and co-creating value with consumers (Schau et al. 2009). Brand communities allow sharing essential resources such as information and experiences; strengthening the cultural norms and values of the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001); and are conducive to sharing the most essential element in brand community that is "creation and negotiation of meaning" (McAlexander et al. 2002).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1985) explains partly why consumers would join a given brand community: they establish a social identity as part of their self-concept by classifying themselves into specific social groups such as brand communities, allowing brands to fulfill their needs to identify with symbols and groups (Grayson & Martinec 2004). According to social capital theory (Bourdieu 1983; Coleman 1988) brand communities are a potential form of social network through which consumers realize social capital. For instance, it is stated that sharing information and resources is the essence of brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001) and consumers derive hedonic and utilitarian values through participating in brand community events (McAlexander et al. 2002). Basically, consumers derive intangible social capital from their network of admirers or consumers of the same brand.

Brand communities encompass all three markers of traditional community, i.e., shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and obligations to society (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001).

Shared consciousness refers to intrinsic feelings of connectedness among group members and manifests itself through such processes as oppositional brand loyalty (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001), and in-group/out-group differentiation (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann 2005). *Shared rituals and traditions* are symbolic ways of communication that perpetuate meanings and cultural norms of the community and transfer them to members of as well as outside the community. Rituals and traditions also help building and preserving community identity (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001) and manifest themselves in a celebration of brand history, sharing interesting brand related stories, and using a specific jargon within the community (Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu 2008). *Obligations to society* are a felt sense of duty and obligations to the community and its members. It assures survival of the community and motivates members to contribute to community practices such as brand use (Schau et al. 2009) in the sense that when they realize a fellow member is asking for help they see themselves obligated to help.

The schema of brand community portrayed by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) basically comprises a triad of customer-customer-brand relationships. We agree with McAlexander and his colleagues (2002, p39) that a mere emphasis on social relationships among consumers is “correct but not entirely complete” to recognize a brand community. Thereby, to uphold a brand community one should “weave through the fabric of community” and not only recognize the consumer- consumer relationships but also delve into consumer relationships with the brand, the product, and marketers to provide a more complete picture of dynamic brand community relationships.

Also, all activities that consumers and marketers accomplish within the context of brand communities, either online or offline, were categorized by Schau and his colleagues (2009) in an extensive, qualitative study. They identified 12 common practices, which in turn were organized

into four thematic groups: social networking, impressions management, brand use, and community engagement (Schau et al. 2009). Since they examined nine brand communities and conducted a meta-analysis of 52 related articles, it appears that this typology covers almost all outcomes as a result of such activities. We believe that to study a brand community, one should scrutinize the realization of these practices within the community.

Social networking practices “focus on creating, enhancing, and sustaining ties among brand community members.” (p34). This group of practices includes welcoming, empathizing, and governing, which are all conducive to greeting new members, socializing them, articulating the norms of the community, and lending emotional or physical support. *Impressions management* practices intend to create and maintain favorable impressions of the brand and the community in the external world; they include justifying and evangelizing. Examples of such practices include sharing good news or favorable information, encouraging others to use the brand or preach it, and rationalizing the amount of effort and time devoted to brand activities. *Community engagement* practices include staking, milestoneing, badging, and documenting (Schau et al. 2009, p34). These activities enhance member engagement in the community and provide them with social capital. For instance, consumers symbolize and record their most outstanding experiences with the brand. Finally, *brand use* practices relate to optimal use of the brand. They include grooming, customizing, and commoditizing. Through these practices consumers and marketers interact to enhance better use of the brand.

In sum, these studies have enhanced our knowledge of brand communities, their dynamic mechanisms, and potential benefits. However, similar to all aspects of human life, communities are evolving rapidly due to technological revolutions. This mandates researchers to scrutinize new forms of brand communities, the most recent of which are those established on social media

platforms, in order to provide deeper and more practical understanding for academics and practitioners.

Brand communities based on social media

Social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, p61). The technological core enables consumers to have access to social media in many formats from blogs and microblogs to video sharing and networking sites (Harris 2009). The concept of user generated content implies that people are not mere consumers of content, but they actively participate in creating, sharing and consuming the contents.

“Groups” is stated as one of the main functional blocks of social media and is described as “the extent to which users can form communities and sub-communities” (Kietzman et al. 2011, p247). Social media is a platform that enables likeminded people to gather in groups, discuss, share information, photos, videos, flirt, or fall in love (Fournier & Avery 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Lenhart & Madden 2007; Mangold & Faulds 2011; Rheingold 1991). Just like brand communities, people join social networks to fill some needs such as self-presentation, self-expression, and increasing self-esteem (Back et al. 2010; Wilcox & Stephen 2013; Yeo 2012). As a result, the intersection of brands and social media formed groups or communities of brand admirers that we call social media based brand communities (Laroche et al. 2012; Laroche, Habibi, & Richard 2013).

In our view, there are fundamental overlaps between the concepts of brand community and social media. The word “community” in the former and the word “social” in the latter both imply that they are “instrumental to human well-being” (McAlexander et al. 2002, p38). Creation

and sharing of meaning is the most important aspect of brand community (McAlexander et al. 2002) and creation and sharing of content is the most important aspect of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Thus, the intersection of the two would be an ideal environment for creation, negotiation, and sharing of contents, meaning and values for like-minded consumers, i.e., brand enthusiasts.

Social media based brand community might be considered as a special case of online brand communities. From the beginning of studying brand communities, researchers considered online brand communities as well because the Internet context is well-suited for building relationships between consumers and brands (Schultz & Bailey 2000). For example Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) found evidence of the underlying markers of community (e.g. shared consciousness) and Schau et al. (2009) identified some of the value creation practices in online communities. Others examined the positive influence of online brand communities on loyalty (Jang et al. 2008). However, there are some unique characteristics associated with social media based brand communities. For example, the cost of initiating these communities is lower and the reward is greater than the online ones (Lapointe 2012) because the platforms are usually free for both brands and consumers and the reach is also higher. Today having communities with millions of members is possible. Also, those who do not own the product of a brand could also join the brand community on social media while usually they may only join and participate in clubs and brandfests once they buy the product (Algesheimer et al. 2005; McAlexander & Schouten 1998).

There is also another underlying difference between social media based brand communities and other virtual brand communities. Members in social media usually provide their real identities instead of using pseudonyms that are common in online virtual communities.

This results in a change in the pattern of personality of community and social media users (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga 2010). These unique aspects call for brand communities on social media to be studied separately from their online virtual counterparts. In this article, we further elaborate on such differences.

Brand communities and events can set the stage for members and other brand-related elements to involve a high context communication through which meaningful consumption experiences, brand stories, their symbolic interpretations, and other valuable resources are shared among members. This eventually leads to strengthening the bonds among members, co-creating value, providing higher participation and engagement, and enhancing brand loyalty (Algesheimer et al. 2005; McAlexander et al. 2002; Monga & John 2010; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Schau et al. 2009; Thompson & Sinha 2008; Zhou et al. 2012). We believe that social media is capable of providing such high context communication among admirers of a brand and other brand elements such as marketers and other consumers. When someone logs into a social media platform, likes or follows a favored brand community, explores the content and news of the community, shares stories, consumption experiences, pictures and videos related to the brand, and asks a question and answers other community fellow members, the invisible community becomes visible. In these dynamic rich communications, valuable resources as well as information are being shared and value is exchanged among members in different forms. Therefore, we expect to observe brand community markers, elements, and practices on social media.

Unique aspects of social media

Although social media platforms are based on the Internet, there is an underlying metamorphosis between social media platforms and other online/offline ones, which results in

changes in almost every aspect of marketing practices and consumer behavior (Mangold & Faulds 2009). Most of this metamorphosis comes from two underlying aspects of social media: the technological aspect of Web 2.0 and the ideological aspect of User Generated Content (UGC). The Web 2.0 technological core refers to a mixed technological and media core that allows instantaneous, real-time communication with relatively low cost and utilizes various formats (e.g., text, video, audio, or photos), global reach and different delivery platforms (Harris 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Mangold & Faulds 2009). Now it is easier than ever before to have multimedia, one-on-one communication throughout the world 24/7 thanks to the development of Web 2.0.

This technological advancement has augmented the ideology of social media, which refers to the fact that content is not consumed by consumers passively, but they actively participate in creating, sharing and consuming the content. The content created by users (or UGC) contains a certain level of creativity, is created unprofessionally and is publicly available on the Internet (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery 2007). UGC created new opportunities for developing and exchanging knowledge and culture (Benkler 2006) in the forms of groups and communities.

These two characteristics caused a chain of effects. For example, consumers are no more under control of mainstream media and brands. The voice of consumers is strong to the extent that gurus warn brands to focus on brand protection rather than brand building (Fournier & Avery 2011). The control of brands involving timing, frequency, contents, and medium of communication has decreased dramatically, which indicates a paradigm shift in marketing communications (Mangold & Faulds 2009). Now one consumer may post brand dissatisfaction to 10 million rather than the traditional offline close network of 10 persons (Gillin 2007). The

other unique result stemming from social media is the high transparency of brand activities. Brands can no longer keep anything secret; everything should be clear; the age of social media is one of transparency (Fournier & Avery 2011). Consequently, consumers evaluate information obtained from social media to be more trustworthy than information obtained from traditional sources (Foux 2006).

As research on social media advances different findings from previous online research emerge. For example, extraverted persons use social media more than introverted ones (Ross et al. 2009). This is contrary to findings about other online social interaction tools such as chat rooms, which were used more often by introverted persons (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi 2000). This might be due to the ideological foundation of social media, user generated content, and transparency, where anonymity is not as possible as it was on former Internet based social interaction tools. So, introverted persons are less inclined to interact in social media environments. To sum up, social media has its own unique imperatives that should be reflected in brand communities, which we study next.

Methodology

A netnography (Kozinets 2002; 2010) research approach is implemented to address the main questions of this research. The objective is not only to identify the existence of brand communities on social media but also to scrutinize the quality of such existence and most importantly how such brand communities differ from other brand communities. To do so we try to pay attention to the most relevant dimensions that can have important implications for researchers and practitioners.

“Netnography, or ethnography on the Internet, is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are

emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets 2002, p62). This method has advantages such as providing less obtrusion, time, and costs than traditional qualitative methods. Netnography was developed specifically to study cultures and communities online (Kozinets 2010; Pettit 2010) and it was successfully used in past studies (Jayanti 2010; Nelson & Otnes 2005). Kozinets (2006) mentions how this method is ideal for studying phenomena on Web 2.0.

The advantage of netnography over traditional content analyses or ethnographic technics is that netnography is a holistic approach specifically developed to study communities and cultures online. Netnography is more than just analyses of contents yet it is a highly flexible approach to study online communities; it allows researchers to be mere observers or active participants in a given online group under study (Kozinets 2002; 2010). The data collected with this method can be analyzed with various methods and tools such as spreadsheets or programs such as Atlas.ti or NVivo (Kozinets 2002; Jayanti 2010).

The procedure of netnography can be summarized in three steps. The first step is to identify the proper online group/community to study. This step is called *entrée* and involves choosing a group that is related to the main query of researchers and also provide useful, deep, and voluminous data for analyses. The other steps are observation, data collection, and analyses of the data. During observation, the researchers can naturally observe the online discussion or even participate in them and archive the data for further analyses. A key point is that the researchers should become familiar with the culture and jargon of the groups under study. Then iterative qualitative technics such as thematic analyses (e.g., Boyatzis 1998) or intra-textual analyses (e.g., Thompson 1997) can be used to reveal related themes or pattern from the obtained data (Kozinets 2002; 2010). We will describe these steps in more details in the next part.

Sample

We chose Facebook as the platform on which to study brand communities. Facebook is the most popular social media application that offers many capabilities associated with social media such as sharing texts, pictures, videos, blogging, and networking with other people (Kietzman et al. 2011). In a discussion about why they use Facebook, professionals gave reasons such as getting daily news and information, sharing views and videos, communicating with friends, finding subscribers, playing games and using other apps, engaging with communities and sharing knowledge (Linkedin 2011). These reasons explain why Facebook has over one billion users and is the biggest social media outlet in the world.

To choose the brand communities for this study, we looked at communities that are “relevant,” “active,” “interactive,” “substantial,” “heterogeneous,” and “data-rich” (Kozinets 2010, p89). We selected the Jeep and Harley Davidson official fan pages on Facebook. These fan pages are organized and run by marketers from the respective companies so they are comparable to brandfests and official brand community events. Also they match all these six criteria. They are relevant because these brands have strong brand communities and culture; also vehicle related brand communities have been targeted in many cases such as Jeep, Harley Davidson (McAlexander et al. 2002), Saab (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001), European cars (Algesheimer et al. 2005), Mini Cooper (Schau et al. 2009) and Volkswagen (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry 2003). Therefore, these two groups on social media are highly relevant to the main questions of this study of whether and how brand communities exist on social media.

The Jeep and Harley communities on Facebook meet the other five criteria because Jeep had more than 1.5 million (Facebook 2012a) and Harley had more than 2.5 million (Facebook 2012b) members at the time of this study. Therefore, these two groups are highly substantial.

Previous online groups rarely reach this level in terms of size. These members communicate and interact on a daily basis, which yields hundreds of discussion threads, shared videos and pictures that are rich for a netnography study which manifests the richness of data in these communities. The crowd on Facebook is highly heterogeneous. We already mentioned that billions of users from different ages, gender, and from different areas are users of social media. This heterogeneity is also reflected in these two groups. In total, these two groups meet all the criteria to be chosen for this study.

Moreover, one author is personally interested in cars and motorcycles. Riding and driving is one of his personal hobbies. He also owns a Jeep vehicle and is very interested in Harley motorcycles. The team of authors have product and brand culture familiarity, which are crucial for conducting netnographic studies.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection started after the communities were selected (Kozinets 2002). According to netnography, data collection and analysis require joining and actively participating in the communities under study to become familiar with the context and cultural aspects of the communities (Kozinets 2010). Therefore, one author joined the two communities by pressing the “like” button on the brands’ pages and interacting with the members long before conducting this study. Then we followed and read the two brand pages for more than two years; however, the data archived refers back to four months from September 2011 to January 2012. This resulted in more than 1000 posts and their corresponding comments from the Jeep users and more than 75 discussion threads initiated by Jeep. These discussion threads received up to 2000 comments in some cases. The content is comprised of text (most of the comments), pictures and videos accompanying explanatory texts (most of the members’ posts on the wall). For Harley Davidson

on the other hand, we gathered posts on the page created by Harley marketers and the members' comments on them. We analyzed more than 100 posts and their corresponding comments. These posts reached up to 800 comments in some cases; therefore, we analyzed more than 6000 comments. These data proved sufficient for our purposes.

The purpose of analyses in a netnography study is to build trustworthy observations and interpretations from the textual discourse enacted in the online community under study (Kozinets 2002). Therefore, the analyses are mainly based on observation of textual conversations that are considered as social acts of participants in the online environment. Therefore, careful scrutiny in the online group under study, long enough immersion, and triangulation are among techniques that help boost trustworthiness of the interpretations. In this thesis the authors spent long enough time in each community to become familiar with each one and also through papers 2 and 3 and referring to the brand community and social media literature, the observations are triangulated.

Moreover, for our initial questions, the data analysis goal is to reveal the existence and quality of brand community markers (i.e. shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and obligations to society), to show how consumers' relationships with brand elements (McAlexander et al. 2002) form as a result of participating in the communities, and also how value creation practices (Schau et al. 2009) operate in such communities. Thus, the goal is to find evidence for predefined categories in brand communities. Also in an iterative process we updated our interpretations and extracted new dimensions that are unique to brand communities on social media that we discuss in the ensuing section.

Findings

Social media based brand communities: The main brand community markers soon manifested themselves in both brand communities. Shared consciousness is usually manifested by a feeling

of being in a family or a close network of friends. In both communities members call each other as “Jeep family” or “H-D folks.” They talk about their experiences as being in a family and sometimes they want to do some collective collaboration: “...we can change the reputation about what people think about Harley riders” or they consult about private matters with the community members in the same way they do within their families:

“The family is getting a 2012 Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Sports S (manual) but we can’t choose a color, Green, bright red, or yellow.”

On this post, four other members commented and gave their opinion about what color this person should choose for their new car. Marketers also take an active role in the process of building shared consciousness. They create and share contents that are interesting for members and actively trigger discussions and always treat members as if they were part of the community by using “we” and “us”:

“Most flings are measured in days, and sometimes hours. We measure our flings in miles, like the Highland Fling offered through H-D Authorized Tours. Like Hogmanay and haggis, a Harley gliding down the road goes hand in hand with Scotland’s breathtaking countryside.”

In addition to activities that pertain directly to shared consciousness, there are many activities on these brand fan pages that establish shared rituals and traditions in the communities. These rituals and traditions foster feelings of consciousness of kind among members as well (McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). In these communities, rituals and traditions emerge in different ways. Members share rituals in posts or discuss them under brand or consumer posts. In the following, Peter (pseudonym) ironically promulgates an old tradition among Jeep owners that receives Mary’s response:

Peter: “Am I the only one that gets out of the Jeep jumps into another vehicle and keeps waving at Jeeps passing?”

Mary: “hahahahahaahaaaaa.....I thought I was the only one!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!:) I’m waiving to ya right now, Peter!”

Peter: “Tnx, I’m not alone!!!!!”

In this discussion thread Peter and Mary not only emphasize that they practice the rituals, but they also form a kind of friendly relationship, which strengthens the feelings of community among them. In the Harley community members remind each other to “just enjoy the ride and keep it safe” or “...try not to ride when you have to watch the clock,” all referring to rituals of “safety first” among Harley riders.

Perhaps the most often repeated element of rituals and traditions in communities is storytelling. Social media seem a suitable milieu for consumers to share their interesting stories. Storytelling is one of the most focal facets in brand community building, retaining, and legitimating and perpetuating its cultural norms and values (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). In the Harley community many consumers passionately share their personal stories that are usually about their relationship with the vehicle that they own or used to own, their passion to ride, or adventures they experienced with their Harley:

Jessica: “In 2001 I told my (now ex) husband I wanted to ride my own bike. He said “good you need a new hobby other than having babies!” we had three kids at that time. So we went out and bought me a 2000 883XL and I learned to ride and love it! And then... I had my 4th baby the next spring! [My husband] moved out 8 months later. So as a single mom of 4, I never ride as much as I would like- but who does?! The kids are half grown now, my days will come!”

In this inspiring story, Jessica describes her story and her passion and love to ride her Harley vehicle. In spite of the hardships she had in life, she never gives up the idea of riding her Harley. This story and other similar ones got “Likes” and comments from other members, which is a sign of emotional support in the social media context. In the Jeep community sharing brand related stories is common too. Many of these stories are more visual in the sense that consumers take pictures or videos capturing themselves and their Jeep vehicle in different sometimes unique

and impassable locations to show their vehicles' abilities. They provide explanations to the picture to put others in context. Alexandra shared this story along with a photo of her red Jeep Cherokee, which was severely crumpled in an accident:

“This 2005 Jeep Grand Cherokee saved me. I know that if I had been in other car, I would not have survived. Thanks for making such an awesome car. I’m a Jeep for life!”

Alexandra’s interesting story perpetuates her love of Jeep and impresses other members who read it and see the picture of the crumpled, red Grand Cherokee.

Another indicator of rituals and traditions is the jargon developed in each community to facilitate transferring specific meanings among members (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). “Ride safe” is a favorite and prevalent word in Harley. Jeep members frequently bubble “it’s a Jeep thing” to allude to points that only “Jeep people” understand:

“My husband asked me today if I would keep my Jeep for another two years!?! Seriously, does he not understand the Jeep thing? You keep it till it dies and then you buy another one. :)”

Members in both communities have strong feelings in support of each other and their communities. These represent feelings of moral responsibility. Members either share their experiences of how to find better deals or answer each other’s questions of how to better use their vehicle. In some cases, when members feel their community is threatened, they react collectively to defend the borders of their community. Since the communities are established on social media, everyone has access to and can share content in these communities. However, members try to stop those who share irrelevant content on the page. In one case, for example, a person inserts a picture of another brand’s vehicle on the Jeep’s page. Three other members remind the person that he is in the wrong place: “Wrong page...this is a JEEP page.” This shows a sense of obligation to the community as a whole.

After examining community indicators, we examine whether and how community

building relationships identified by McAlexander et al. (2002) exist in these two communities. Our analyses confirm the findings of McAlexander et al. (2002) that consumers' relationships with brand elements are enhanced as a result of participating in brand communities. In the Facebook communities, marketers actively share videos or reports that demonstrate high capabilities of the vehicles customers own. This leads customers to be aware of the precious vehicle they own and what they can do with it, and then they admire their brand, and product: "Jeeps can go anywhere. Even up a pole." "All Jeeps Go To Heaven." "My Jeep is designed to keep my family safe in any situation. Love my Jeep." "Love to ride my Harley." "These past 2 weeks I was able to put 2000+ miles on my bike... feel really really good!!!!!!! Nothing beats handling of Harleys... :)."

Members often appreciate the efforts of the company and its marketers in their day-to-day interactions. Especially when the marketers emphasize how much they care about their customers and how much they pay attention to their needs and voices. Consumers also interact with each other on many occasions. Some devotee members know each other very well; they know what vehicle they have and how they like to ride or drive it. In our participations in the Jeep community, we made some friends and maintained online relationships. Together we deduct that the communities on Facebook set the platform for marketers and brand members to co-build and improve their relationships. This shows the dynamic nature of community building activities that result in enhanced relationships among consumers and focal brand's elements.

Some important aspects of each brand community are the practices that yield value for both consumers and brands. These practices were elicited by Schau et al. (2009) and we believe that existence of these practices is essential to show the existence and quality of a community. Value creation practices illustrate themselves in many ways in the Facebook brand communities.

When it comes to social networking practices such as welcoming, the moment members notice someone is new or just bought a new vehicle, they welcome and support that person. Thanks to social media this level of being welcomed and getting emotional support is now available 24/7 for everyone who is a member of a brand community:

Brad: “Hello Jeep folks! I just bought a Cherokee! It still rocks... and my first Jeep vehicle :)”

John: “Welcome to the Jeep family”

Britney: “Welcome”

Brad: “Tnx everybody... I’m proud of this family”

The Jeepgirl: “Congrats”

Bernard: “if it has a 4.0 you’ll be rocking for a while more!”

Gary: “Great”

Jeep: “Great choice. Welcome to the family”

This thread is a good example of how consumers and marketers socialize with a new member, and co-create social networking practices (Schau et al. 2009). In Harley community members also welcome each other: “Hey and welcome girl! Come ride with us, The Fat Bottom Girlz in lovely ATL! ...” Also members try to govern each other’s behavior by engaging in discussions and reminding of the norms; for example when a member tries to impose his opinion about a picture of a customized motorcycle, another one tells him that: “[...]just because you don’t like it doesn’t mean they shouldn’t make it. I think it looks cool and so do other people. [...]” Examples of empathizing practices are numerous; members lend emotional support to each other in sad or happy moments by sharing comments of “condolences,” “congrats,” “happy birthday,” or “happy marriage.”

Impressions management is the second set of practices that are devoted to sharing good news about the brand and justifying the consumption of the brand. Due to the reach of Facebook and the richness it provides in terms of sharing contents, it seems to be a good environment for these practices. Marketers share links, videos, news and pictures of new developments,

championships in great contests, new creativity initiated by consumers and whatever can impress other members. Usually the number of likes and comments under such posts are higher than other posts. Also members engage in these practices; Matt explains why he loves Harley under a comment that begins with “WHY HARLEY-DAVIDSON?” then he elaborates that “[...] When you straddle the leather seat, there is a feeling not unlike when a cowboy mounts a bucking bronco at a rodeo. [...] Nothing on the planet sounds like a Harley. At an idle, it has a low chugging beat, slow and strong like a rhinoceros just before the charge.” In addition, in the Jeep community members try to impress each other by, for example, sharing pictures that depict them with their car in impassable places to show the power and strength of their vehicle.

The third set is community engagement practices, which includes staking, milestoneing, badging, and documenting. *Staking* refers to delineating domains of participation by members (Schau et al. 2009). This manifests itself in Facebook by creating new subgroups in the community. For example, “Jeep Grand Cherokee Owners” is a sub-community of the Jeep community on Facebook and it has over 1000 members (Facebook 2012c). They describe the community as “The FIRST & ORIGINAL page only for Grand Cherokee owners. All Years. All versions. Like it! Invite your friends!” There are sub-communities for Harley as well that are more based on geographic location. *Milestoneing* refers to consumers’ experiences on specific occasions with their brand. Erick tells what he is experiencing with his original engine car: “My 1997 Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo is 95 miles from hitting 400,000 miles!!!! Original Engine!” and his post receives four “likes” and some comments positively reinforcing his experience. “*Badging* occurs when a semiotic signifier of a milestone is created” (Schau et al. 2009, p 35). Consumers share pictures of their customized vehicle and their personally significant symbols on it. Since the communities are computer mediated environments, the documenting practices are

occurring whenever consumers share their experiences and stories with the brand. Linda posts a picture of herself on the Jeep's Facebook wall. In the photo she is standing with a big smile on her face on a black Jeep vehicle wrapped in white ribbons:

“I love my 50 year birthday present. This is my 3rd Jeep and by far the best.”

Twelve other members like this memorable moment shared with them and 8 other members comment on it. This way, an outstanding moment in Linda's life is well documented and shared with her community mates.

These Facebook communities contain millions of fans and owners and marketers of the brands. Together these communities are a precious repository of knowledge about how to best use the brands. This makes the practices of brand use, the fourth set of practices that aim to enhance the use of the focal brand, to happen frequently. Novice members usually have many questions about the focal brand that they can ask from knowing members. In the following thread Robert asks about how to solve an issue with his car:

Robert: “I got a question. I have water coming into my jeep from bolts in the sunvisor what is causing this and how do I fix it or do I have to take it to the dealer?”

Fredric: “id take the bolts out wrap em in plumbers tape then put em back”

Robert: “I'll try that”

This is an example of *grooming* that aims to enhance caring for the brand. In Harley Davidson as well, especially under posts that are specific to customizing the Harley motorcycles, members seek to get some advice on how to customize their vehicles.

In conclusion, our findings support the existence of brand communities on Facebook for Jeep and Harley-Davidson. We showed that all the indicators of brand community, consumers' relationship with brand elements, and value creation practices are commonly observable in these communities. Social media capabilities also accelerate these practices and enhance the indicators in many cases. In spite of the findings that brand communities on social media manifest main

characteristics of brand communities, we found some underlying unique aspects that have many implications for brand community researchers and practitioners.

Unique characteristics of brand communities based on social media

In previous part we retained support for the notion of brand communities that are based on social media and their qualities. However, an important question remains that if and how these communities differ from other types of brand communities, e.g., their offline and online counterparts. If we believe that social media has some unique characteristics that distinguishes it from more traditional media and online platforms, then how these unique aspects are manifested in subsequent phenomena happening based on social media including brand communities?

Our approach to answer this question was that by drawing on relevant literature we directed our attention to main dimensions of brand communities that can distinguish brand communities from each other. These dimension range from social context to structure (e.g., McAlexander et al. 2002). Brand communities differ to the extent to which these dimensions differ. Then by immersing in brand communities under our studies we tried to figure out what these dimensions have in common that is different from those of previous brand communities.

Social context: Social context is a little understood dimension in brand community studies. Brand communities on social media can be uniquely situated in the social context continuum described by McAlexander and his colleagues (2002). Communication is not as rich as the face-to-face communications in offline brand communities and is not as poor as solely text based communications in online communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2002). Also, since social media members, unlike in previous online platforms, use their real identities in their profiles along with pictures and personal history, members can easily gain information about one another such as age, sex, attractiveness, location, and marital status by clicking on their profile link. Also, there

are chances for people to meet each other through events, which are facilitated by features of the social networks.

Through our netnography analysis we observed many occasions in which members appreciate this unique context. For example, some members check each other's profiles before answering their questions or they might add each other if they find similarities between themselves. Social context might be important from brands perspectives too because the fact that members can visit each other's profiles can influence their brand evaluation (Naylor, Lamberton, West 2012).

Structure: Structure is an important aspect of brand communities (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). In former brand communities, members were divided based on their commitment, experiences, and membership duration into groups such as hard core, soft core, pretenders, or outlaws (Fox 1987; Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Wolff 1991). Similarly, there is often a system in virtual brand communities ranking members based on the number of comments they make or appreciations they receive from other members. These members are called "highly engaged consumers" who would earn certain "rights" in the community; for example to consider some brands "ethical" or eligible to be reviewed by other members of the community (Brodie et al. 2013, p5). The ranking system in the Coca Cola virtual community in Spain ranks members based on criteria such as the sexiest, the hardest, or the most original (Sicilia & Palazon 2008). However, in our netnographic study we did not find evidence pertaining to any sort of structure or ranking system. Brand communities based on social media have flat structures. Although the page admins and some devotee members are there and are usually distinguished from other members, there is not an explicit hierarchy or ranking system in these communities.

Scale: Related to, but not dependent on, social context is the scale of social media based brand communities. While most online virtual communities do not exceed more than tens of thousands, what is called the most successful brand community building, extensively supported by Coca Cola, gained about 1.5 million members after 3 years (Sicilia & Palazon 2008). This is while the Coca Cola brand community on Facebook has over 50 million members without such efforts. Although there is research that pays attention to the moderating role of the size of brand communities (e.g., Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo 2004), little is known about such recent mega brand communities on social media. Additionally, despite large virtual brand communities in which members do not usually have any personal knowledge about one another (Dholakia et al. 2004), the social context in social media is a way for members to easily find a lot of information about each other, which is a new aspect of these mega communities.

Content and storytelling: Storytelling has been pervasive in the consumption context. Much information is transferred via stories and brands have often a central role in the consumption related stories; in fact, “consumers often use products and services as props or anthropomorphic identities to enact story productions that reflect archetypal myths” (Woodside, Sood, & Miller 2008, p98). Wherever there is a human collective, it is highly likely that people involve in some sort of storytelling. This, in the context of brand communities, is about sharing brand related stories, with the brand having some sort of primary or peripheral role. In social media based brand communities, still members do the same thing but differently as our study reveals.

Text was the primary medium in virtual communities to transfer narratives, cultural and traditional elements, meanings, and stories to other members of the community (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2002). However, visual narratives such as videos or photos accompanied by small descriptions or tags were dominant in the communities we studied. Our study shows that

although text is still there, most content being shared is visual in the form of photos and videos. There are numerous instances that members, instead of narrating a story, share a picture of what happened to them and their vehicle with a description. This is the new trend of storytelling in brand communities. Equipped with digital cameras embedded in cell phones, everyone has a higher power of transferring thousands of words with a simple picture. This has a lot of implications for brand managers since the format of storytelling is being changed in the social media era.

Myriads of affiliated brand communities: Another related and important observation is the existence of myriads of sub-brand communities, usually initiated by enthusiastic brand devotees or branches of the company. Social networks provide the ability for anyone to initiate groups and communities instantaneously. For both communities, we found more than a thousand related brand communities that are devoted to some more specific aspects of the brands. For example, there are communities such as Harley Davidson Photography (Facebook 2013a) or Jeep for the Cure, which is a community of “fellow Jeepers to put on something PINK and rally behind a great cause!” (Facebook 2013b). Such variety and access to brand communities is perhaps a new aspect in marketing and also raises issues of multiple community membership, which has often been neglected by scholars of brand community (McAlexander et al. 2002).

Discussion and theoretical implications

“Social media introduces substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities, and individuals. This presents an enormous challenge for firms, as many established management methods are ill-suited to deal with customers who no longer want to be talked at; instead, customers want firms to listen, appropriately engage, and respond.” (Kietzmann et al. 2010, p250)

The purpose of this article was to delve into a new phenomenon in which brand gurus, admirers, and marketers collectively participate on a platform that allows them to share their

ideas, feelings, and consumption experiences of a common brand in any format (from text to multimedia) and in an efficient manner. We called these collectives *brand communities based in social media*. We also showed that these collectives manifest all characteristics and elements of brand communities that were stated by brand community research initiatives (e.g., Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002). This is in line with previous research in online brand communities that distinguish online brand communities (e.g., Muniz & Schau 2007; Thompson & Sinha 2008) and also supports research in the social media context that takes the brand community approach to study the influences of branding activities in social media on brand related variables such as trust and loyalty (Laroche et al. 2012; 2013).

However, unlike previous research this article comes up with five new dimensions of brand communities established on social media that could have immense implications for research. The purpose here was to focus researchers' attention on these dimensions and emphasize the impacts that they could have on other aspects of marketing in social media. Take the dimension number 1 (social context) for example. We argued that the social context in social media is different from previous platforms. For example, in online brand communities based on chat rooms or discussion forums, users usually use aliases in order to participate in the community. However, this is not the case with social media; people not only usually use their own real names but also it is possible for them to gather a significant bunch of information about others just by a click on their profile. This transparency in brand supporters' identities impact brand evaluation and purchase intentions; similarity in supporters' identities enhances evaluation (Naylor et al. 2012).

Now consider the dimension number three (scale). As we argued that the size of these brand communities is very large hence their population is highly heterogeneous. Therefore it

might negatively influence consumers' brand evaluations. This is counter intuitive because brand managers simply like a larger brand community because of having a more extensive communication (or advertisement) channel. What are the negative and positive consequences of such large scale brand communities? How can practitioners avoid the negative consequences, if any?

It seems to us that one of the ways brand community members (or marketers) commit to initiatives to attract and consequently interact with more similar brand supporters is by initiating new groups (sub-communities). As we mentioned in the discussion of dimension number 5, there are numerous brand sub-communities in social media. These sub-communities are initiated around commonalities among their members; for instance, the *Jeep for Cure* community, which consists of members (mainly women) who are interested in raising awareness for curing certain diseases. However, we call for research to delve into this dimension more: What are the motivations of starting up new sub-communities by members? How similar (different) are these communities from their parent community?

Lack of structure is another characteristic of such brand communities. Previously, brand communities used to have a certain structure from hard cores to outsiders. Perhaps one of the motivations of devotee members was to go up the ladder (Schouten & McAlexander 1995) to gain some credit and appreciation in the community. How do these devotee members feel in these mega-sized flat communities in social media? Will they still try to find a position in the community or do they find it useless? What would be the effect on their community participation intention (Algesheimer et al. 2005)?

Research showed that scale matters in brand communities in some contexts such as higher education; there are significant differences between small and large institutions with

respect to their members' relationships with brand elements as well as their integration in the brand community (McAlexander & Koenig 2010). Researchers need to pay more attention to the effects of mega sized brand communities that are formed on social media. Social context, content and other aspects are also important dimensions of brand communities that must be considered while studying or being involved with brand communities.

Managerial Implications

In addition to above discussion, which has useful hints for managers, this article has practical implications for brand managers. It shows that brand managers have a historical opportunity to reach and foster their bonds with the brand fans in social media through brand community practices. For very small cost (Lapointe 2012), brand managers can now set up brand communities on social media and access millions of brand supporters around the world that are either current or future consumers of their products. However, managers must pay attention to the differences that exist between the new form of brand communities and the more traditional ones.

Research shows that a feeling of community positively influences consumers' involvement in UGC, which in turn enhances consumer-based brand equity (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme 2012). Our research complements previous research and shows how managers can build relationships with consumers in the form of social media-based brand communities. According to our findings, fans of a brand on social media have a strong feeling of being in a community so that they feel obligated to contribute to its welfare. Therefore, managers should facilitate conversations among members and marketers to foster such feelings (Powers 2012).

More importantly, as dimension four (content and storytelling) demonstrates, marketers

have to better facilitate the sharing of new forms of communication, such as videos and photos by, for instance, creative photo or video clip contests. We also suggest that managers use more visual messages to communicate with the audiences. Considering the flat structure of these communities, marketers should not try to impose any unnatural hierarchy to preserve a position for themselves because it might receive negative reactions the crowd. To take full advantage of the large scale of these communities, marketers should participate in the community as if they are a member of the community not the managers. Marketers also should respect the heterogeneity of sub-communities and try to foster it. Merely trying to expand the community as much as possible might not be the best idea because the large variety in identity of supports might oppress the evaluations of the brand. We generally agree with Moran and Gossieaux (2010) that marketers should deeply understand the human characteristics and also unique aspects behind these communities in order to be successful in social media-based community deployment.

Limitations and future research

In addition to the research questions we mentioned in the Discussion, here we open some new research avenues that will address the limitations of current article. We only investigated two famous brand communities in our study that are related to vehicle categories. Consumers are highly involved in this product category (Zhou et al. 2012). It would be interesting to include more product categories and examine whether brand community characteristics will reveal themselves across communities involving various products. For instance, it would be very interesting to examine if members feel that they are part of a community for lower involvement product categories.

Researchers can also look at the problem from the perspective of the richness of the

interactions among brand community members on social media. Richness of interactions could be one dimension to categorize communities based on social media (Fischer, Bristor, & Gainer 1996). For example, researchers can compare Jeep, Harley, and other communities based on the richness of their interactions with their fans.

Due to the nature of social media, it is easy for consumers to have multiple community memberships. “Scholars of brand community often neglect the effect of multiple community membership” (McAlexander et al. 2002, p40). Therefore social media create an interesting platform where researchers can examine the effects of multiple memberships. Multiple memberships are theoretically possible on social media due to recent findings, which explain that consumers can experience multiple identities and connections with their network of friends, brand, or company (Bagozzi et al. 2012). Due to the nature of our research, it was not possible to include multiple memberships in our investigation. Future research can address this issue and examine its effects on consumption experience and behavior.

Transition between papers 1 and 2

Paper 1 is necessary not only for paper 2 but also for all other future research that will build on theoretical grounds of social media and brand community. The first paper of this thesis prepares the ground for future research by first supporting how brand communities are formed in social media. The paper discovers five unique dimensions of social media-based brand communities that justify future research on this topic and also can be used to analyze future findings. It also provides evidence of the interwoven relationships of brand communities as their building blocks (McAlexander et al. 2002) on the new platforms of social media. In paper 2 titled “The roles of brand community and community engagement in building brand trust on social media” published in *Computers in Human Behavior*, we build a nomological network that shows how the building blocks of social media-based brand communities influence brand trust.

Paper 2: The roles of brand community and community engagement in building brand trust on social media

Brand communities and social media often overlap. Social media is an ideal environment for building brand communities. However, there is limited research about the benefits and consequences of brand communities established on social media platforms. This study addresses this issue by developing a model depicting how consumers' relationship with the elements of a brand community based on social media (i.e. brand, product, company, and other consumers) influence brand trust. The findings include that three of the four relationships positively influence brand trust. However, customer-other customers' relationships negatively influence brand trust, which is counter intuitive and interesting. The prominent role of engagement in a brand community is also investigated in the model. Community engagement amplifies the strength of the relationships consumers make with the elements of brand community and it has a moderating effect in translating the effects of such relationships on brand trust. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

Key words: Brand community; Social media; Community engagement; Brand trust; Consumer centric model; Facebook.

Introduction

The emergence of social media has dramatically influenced marketing practices. The conventional well-established marketing practices are not highly influential anymore and in many cases can backfire on the firm (Fournier & Avery 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013). Therefore, there is an ever increasing need for updating the understanding of social media and further develop knowledge which suits the imperatives of marketing in social media environments (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013). One main challenge for marketers has been to see how their efforts can pay off and how their social media activities can influence important brand related variables (Hoffman & Fodor 2010).

This article takes the brand community literature as the main theoretical lens to address this issue. The concepts of brand community and social media meet at a critical juncture: community or socialness. Brand communities are essentially a place (physical or virtual) for people who admire a certain brand to socialize in the context provided, at least partly, by that brand (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002). Brand community practices gradually gained more attention from marketing researchers and practitioners. At the same time the Internet technologies evolved to their current highly social forms. Today, the brand communities and their online platforms are a match more than ever before; the social aspects of brand communities are strongly backed by the social and networked nature of social media. Not only is social media a natural place for brand communities, but there are recent empirical studies showing the existence (Zaglia 2013), quality and unique aspects of brand communities embedded in social media platforms (Habibi et al. 2014a).

This article develops a conceptual framework that shows how building blocks of a brand community established on social media can influence brand trust. Indeed one main marketing

objective is to gain consumers' trust in the brand. Trust is important during the shopping process (Powers et al. 2010) and is a main antecedent of patronage (See-To & Ho 2014; Pentina, Zhang, & Basmanova 2013). Therefore, knowing if/how social media based brand communities (SMBBCs) influence brand trust is essential for marketers. In addition, this might be helpful to managers in social media contexts because measuring social media ROI is a challenge for them and one way of measuring ROI is to examine what kind of "marketing objectives" the social media activities would satisfy (Hoffman & Fodor 2010, p42). Thus, this article focuses on brand trust and examines how SMBBCs influence customers' trust in a brand.

The article also looks at the role of engagement in brand communities as it is a very relevant variable in social media. Perhaps one of the main goals of being present in social media is to gain a higher share of consumers' attention and engagement (Hanna et al. 2011). The article investigates the moderating role of brand community engagement in the conceptual framework and also examines the direct role this variable has on the building blocks of a brand community (i.e., consumer relationships with product, brand, company and other consumers; McAlexander et al. 2002).

Despite its importance, limited research was done in the area of SMBBC. The current knowledge of online brand communities does not fit with the new aspects of SMBBCs in which the structure of the communities, the social context within which members communicate, the size, and the way stories are being told are different from previous types of brand communities (Habibi et al. 2014a). This research makes important contributions by filling this void. Unlike research that treat brand community as a whole (Moran & Gossieaux 2012; Laroche et al. 2012), this article looks at the brand community through its building blocks (McAlexander et al. 2002) and it examines how each element influences brand trust. More importantly, it measures and

includes community engagement and examines how it influences the brand community elements and how it moderates these effects on brand trust. The findings provide detailed insights for marketers and identify which elements of a brand community can be detrimental and which can be beneficial in building a trustworthy brand through brand community building practices on social media.

The paper is organized as follows. First, an extensive literature review of brand communities is conducted. We describe different research streams related to brand communities and situate this article within the brand community literature. Then we argue why brand communities on social media are unique and must be studied separately. Next, we develop our hypotheses which relate to our conceptual model of how SMBBC can influence brand trust. Finally, we report the results of our study. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, limitations of our research and avenues for future research.

Literature Review

Brand community

The brand community concept developed in response to two increasing challenges that faced by marketers. The first one was the difficulty of keeping up with one-on-one relationships with customers, which was one main idea behind relationship marketing (Berry 1995). Although keeping long term personalized one-on-one relationships with customers would bring many benefits to firms (Sheth & Parvativar 2000), it would increase its costs and the time spent on developing relationships, which makes relationship marketing less efficient in practice (Iacobucci 1994; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Thus, brand communities that can perform many important functions on behalf of the brand, such as providing assistance or socializing the customer with brand elements, can play an important role in realizing the values of relationship

marketing with higher efficiency. In a brand community consumers play the role of the brands' agents within the community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). The second challenge brand communities address is a lack of having a powerful analytic category to study consumer behavior. Consumers' interpersonal activities and life styles have more explanatory power in understanding how consumers spend their time and money than conventional categories marketers used to segment consumers such as age and gender (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). Therefore, brand communities provide a reliable analytical category to marketers which facilitate understanding consumer behavior (McAlexander et al. 2002).

A brand community is a "specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001, p412). Similar to other communities, a brand community has three indicators that make a community recognizable. These indicators are shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions, and obligations to society. *Shared consciousness* is a felt sense of connection among members within a brand community. These feelings lead members to feel that an invisible hand connects them to each other and separates them from outsiders (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006b). *Rituals and traditions* are symbolic acts or gestures that are developed throughout the history of the brand and aim to perpetuate and communicate the symbolic meanings and culture of the brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). For example, consumers use a specific jargon inside the community which is a cultural element of the community that solidifies members' bonds. The third marker is *obligations to society* which is the sense of commitment members have toward the welfare of their fellow members and the community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). This commitment is the main driver in participating in brand use practices through which members help each other optimize their brand use (Schau et al. 2009).

In addition to these three markers, a brand community is essentially constructed on a set of relationships that community members develop with the brand, the product, marketers, and other customers. As opposed to initial models of brand communities which assumed only relationships between consumers, the *customer centric model of brand community* considers the relationships among all involved elements in a brand community (McAlexander et al. 2002). Therefore, the building blocks of a brand community are four relationships: customer-product, customer-brand, customer-company, and customer-other customers. This provides a useful framework for analyzing brand communities as well as brand community building practices. Later we build on this model to develop our hypotheses depicting how these relationships can enhance brand trust.

Main research streams about brand community

In brand community research, three main research streams are gaining attention from researchers. The first stream relates to the conceptual aspects of brand communities which together conceptualize a brand community and identify its defining characteristics and limits (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander et al. 2002; Schau et al. 2009; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry 2003; Muniz & Schau 2007). Articles in this research stream do not address the outcomes and consequences of brand communities directly but they mainly focus on brand community elements and activities (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002), but they also indirectly mention the outcomes brand community practices would bring about for firms and consumers (Brown et al. 2003; Schau et al. 2009; Muniz & Schau 2007). The other streams specifically deal with the outcomes (and their antecedents) of brand communities for consumers and brands. Also many articles examined how brand communities are established.

Where and how to identify brand communities

Researchers wondered if brand communities exist on different platforms, in different sizes, and around different products. This question is important because several brand community success stories tempted marketing managers to establish brand communities in different settings and contexts. One cannot call any collective a community unless the collective presents the markers of a community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Fortunately, this stream of research stressed that brand communities can exist in different forms such as offline/physical (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Alegesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann 2005; McAlexander et al. 2002), online/virtual (Adjei, Noble, & Noble 2010; Muniz & Schau 2007; Thompson & Sinha 2008), small or large (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006a; McAlexander & Koenig 2010), temporary (Schouten et al. 2007), and even can develop around such mundane products as convenience goods (Cova & Pace 2006). Recently, the existence of brand communities in social media contexts was supported by two studies (Zaglia 2013; Habibi et al. 2014a). Habibi and his colleagues (2014a) also identified five dimensions which make such communities unique. We further elaborate on these dimensions later.

The commonality among all these studies is that they show a manifestation of brand community indicators to different degrees. However, brand communities can be vastly different depending on their social contexts and forms (McAlexander et al. 2002). Therefore, the outcomes and the mechanisms through which these outcomes can be actualized are different. The second and third research streams deal with the outcomes of brand communities for the consumer and the brand.

Why consumers join brand communities?

The outcomes for consumers are the reasons why they would join a brand community and

keep their membership continuing (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Zaglia 2013; McAlexander et al. 2002; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder 2008). Generally consumers gain utilitarian and hedonic values from their participation in brand communities (McAlexander et al. 2002; Schau et al. 2009). These two values can be explained by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1985) and social capital theory (Bourdieu 1983; Coleman 1988). According to social identity theory consumers join a brand community to fulfill the need for identification with symbols and groups. This gives them the ability to augment their self-concept. Muniz and Schau (2002) show how members integrate the community into their identities in cyberspace by using the brand community symbols and meanings. They clearly show how the need for identification is manifested through participation in brand communities. Consumers also share their passion and receive pleasure from participating in brand communities (Zaglia 2013)

Social capital theory predicts that consumers pursue some sort of economic value through networking with their fellow members in the brand community. McAlexander and his colleagues (2002) emphasize the utilitarian values consumers gain by participating in brandfests. Also, Schau and his colleagues (2009) shed light on brand use practices that aim directly at enhancing the use of the brand by consumers. Zaglia (2013) shows that one of the main motivations of consumers is to obtain the necessary information or skills to better use the product of their favorite brand. Apparently obtaining such skills and information from peers who share the same values and passions is more convenient than obtaining them from other sources. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) show that members can be categorized within brand communities according to their initial motivations. They conclude that consumers make stronger relationships with different aspects of brand communities based on their primary consumption motivations. Thus, motivations can be an indicator of the future behavior of consumers in a brand community.

Brand Community outcomes for firms

Firms have more reasons and motivations to facilitate brand communities. Brand communities perform many important tasks on behalf of the brand. For instance, brand community members can play the role of the support service department of their companies, essentially by helping each other and fixing each other's problems with the brand (Schau et al. 2009). They can also be the brand's advocates in defending the borders of the brand (Habibi et al. 2014a) as well as evangelists trying to make desirable impression on outsiders (Schau et al. 2009). Members of a brand community can be an excellent source for innovation and product improvement because they are highly attached to the community and the future prospects of the brand matters to them (Fuller, Matzler, & Hoppe 2008; Von Hippel 2005).

In addition to these benefits, brand communities can influence consumer behavior in favor of brands. Loyalty is perhaps the most studied marketing variable in the brand community literature. At the beginning researchers qualitatively supported the idea that a brand community is a place for loyal consumers and that it increases the loyalty of their members through different mechanisms such as oppositional loyalty and integration in the community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002). Then, researchers tried to understand different ways by which loyalty and other important marketing variables are influenced in brand communities.

McAlexander, Kim and Roberts (2003) using a large sample of offline community members supported that integration in a brand community influences satisfaction which eventually increases brand loyalty. They also argued that brand loyalty is a more dynamic and comprehensive variable than the notion of satisfaction. Algesheimer and his colleagues (2005) examine the social effects of brand communities on variables such as purchase intentions, brand loyalty, and community identification. They developed a nomological network and estimated it

using a large sample of various European car clubs. They showed that brand relationship quality has a positive impact on brand loyalty and purchase intentions. Also brand community identification has a positive effect on brand loyalty through the mediation of community engagement, which is an essential but under-studied variable in the brand community literature.

Zhou, Zhang, Su and Zhou (2012) studied the role of brand community identification on enhancing brand community commitment and brand identification. Similar to Algesheimer and colleagues (2005), through a nomological network they found positive effects of brand community identification on brand community commitment, which is a concept close to brand loyalty. Casalo, Flavián, and Guinalú (2007) examine the effects of participation in brand community on brand trust and loyalty. They found, in the context of online brand communities, that participation in brand community enhances brand trust and brand loyalty. Tsai, Huang, and Chiu (2012) examined the antecedents of participation in brand community. They ran a study in a non-western context and found that in addition to consumers' personal factors, the perceived level of trust in the relationships enhances participation in brand communities.

Stokburger-Sauer (2010) examines the effects of the four building blocks of brand community (i.e., consumer's relationship with brand, product, company, and other consumers) on brand loyalty and brand community identification. He found that these elements can positively influence brand loyalty, satisfaction and community identification. More interestingly, he did not find a difference between online and offline brand communities regarding these effects. Thompson and Sinha (2008) looked at the problem from an oppositional loyalty perspective. They investigate the positive effects of brand communities on adopting new products from preferred brands and avoiding the adoption of new products from rival brands, as long as comparable products from the preferred brand are available in the market. The role of

brand community contextual factors is somehow studied in the literature too. For instance, Sung and his colleagues (2010) investigate the differences between consumer- and marketer-generated brand communities. Also Jang and colleagues (2008) found that who initiates the brand community can moderate the effect the brand community has on brand loyalty and commitment.

Although most researchers paid attention to the positive sides, brand communities can also have some dark sides. Hickman and Ward (2007) found that identification with a brand community can lead members to trash talk outsiders and also have feelings of *schadenfreude*, which refers to feeling joyful from someone else's misery. Algesheimer and his colleagues (2005) also indicate that brand communities can exert normative pressure on members which results in reactance, decreased intention to recommend the community, decreased community participation, and less loyalty.

All in all, due to the complexity of brand communities from an academic perspective, many researchers tried to investigate their effects from different perspectives which led to different models. Brand communities can be very different based on their social contexts, platforms, size, and others (McAlexander et al. 2002; McAlexander & Koenig 2010). As described next, social media is a completely different context from previous contexts of brand communities. There is little research about brand communities on social media platforms. Additionally we focus on brand trust as well as the role of community engagement which are under-studied in the literature, but is highly pertinent to social media contexts.

Social media and its unique aspects

Social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, p61). User generated content (UGC) is content created by

consumers and publicly available and distributable, has some degree of creativity and is not made through professional content creation practices. This definition implies that consumers have a 24/7 access to different sorts of media such as blogs, microblogs, video/photo sharing sites, and social networks (Harris 2009).

Web 2.0 and UGC revolutionized marketing. There is no doubt that companies that intensively exploit the capabilities of social media to connect with their customers, employees and other stakeholders outperform other companies (Corstjens & Umblijs 2012). Also social media changed shopping behavior (Powers et al. 2010). Perhaps the most influential upshot of social media is consumer empowerment; now consumers have a strong voice and firms are not in control of the conversations among consumers (Fournier & Avery 2011). This implies that every customer and his/her conversations should matter for marketers.

Social media dramatically changed the patterns of internet usage and the personality of internet users. For example, a few years ago most users of online collectives such as forums and chat rooms were introverts, but today this is no more the case (Ross et al. 2009). This might be caused by a new trend of internet usage in which people use their real identities online as opposed to using the pseudonyms that were common in previous online platforms. This implies that online behavior changed due to the change in online users. All in all, these new developments and trends show that current knowledge might not match with the new aspects and implications of social media. Therefore, researchers need to conduct research in areas in which marketing intersects with social media in order to help managers move ahead. One such area is brand communities established on social media.

Unique aspects of brand communities established on social media

As mentioned, one research stream shows the presence of social media in different

contexts and another stream examined the outcomes and consequences of brand communities. However, the outcomes of brand communities depend on the types of brand community as well as their unique characteristics. In addition, the crowds on social media are different and perhaps more heterogeneous than the previous “somewhat homogenous” (Pitta & Fowler, 2005) crowds in more conventional brand communities. Habibi et al. (2014a) delineate five dimensions that make SMBBCs unique. The first one is the *social context* of SMBBCs. The social context provided by social media is unique. The web 2.0 technologies put the social context of SMBBCs somewhere between offline/physical communities and solely text based communities. For example, members can obtain a great deal of information (e.g., profiles, pictures, location, gender, and family status) about their fellow members; this was perhaps not possible in other conventional communities. The second differentiating dimension is *structure*. Basically, there is no explicit or implicit structure in SMBBCs (Habibi et al. 2014a), unlike previous communities in which a mechanism was implemented to distinguish devotees from newbies (Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Sicilia & Palazon 2008). The third distinguishing dimension is the *scale* of SMBBCs. While brand communities do not go beyond thousands of brand aficionados, SMBBCs may have millions of members (Habibi et al. 2014b). The implications of brand community size were investigated before, but never such mega sized brand communities. The fourth factor is *storytelling*, which is an important aspect of brand communities. In SMBBCs storytelling is completely different by using videos and photos accompanied by texts. Storytelling also is more interactive due to the ability of readers to instantly comment or “Like” the story. The fifth dimension is numerous *affiliated brand communities*. In social media the cost of initiating a community is nearly zero; thus there are many subgroups and related groups in a given brand community. This can bring up important issues such as multiple memberships (McAlexander et

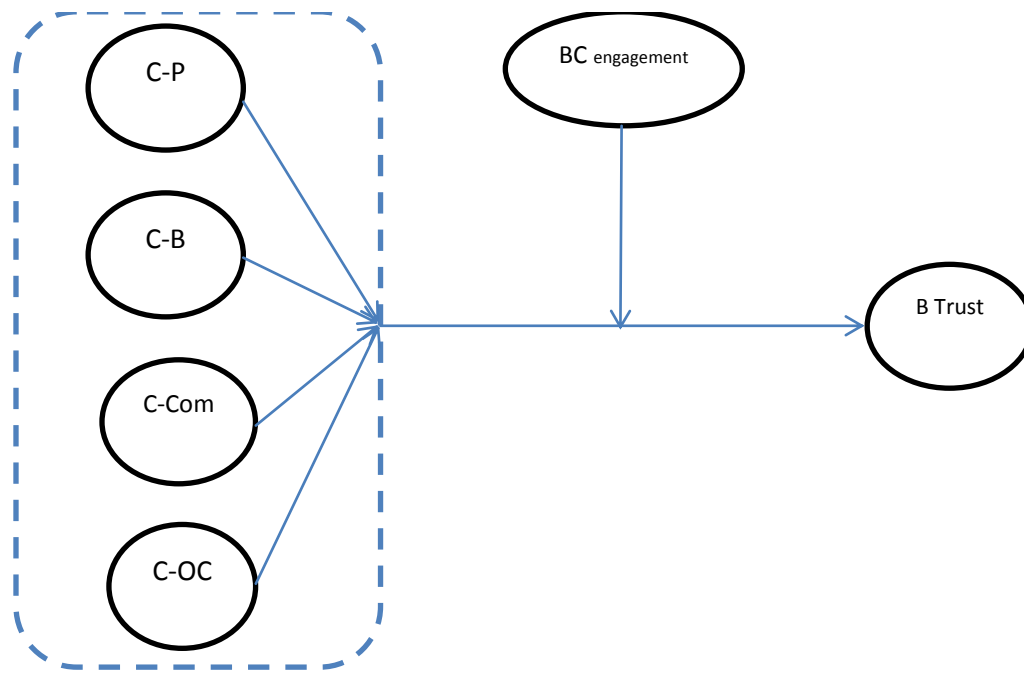
al. 2002)

These five dimensions obviously put SMBBCs in a unique situation compared to previous brand communities; hence studying their outcomes is inevitable for managers. In this article we develop a conceptual framework that investigates the role of the four building blocks of brand community as well as the brand community engagement in building brand trust, which is one marketing goal of investing in social media (Hoffman & Fodor 2010).

Brand community based on social media and brand trust

When it comes to trust, some claim that “perhaps there is no other single variable which so thoroughly influences interpersonal and intergroup behavior” (Golembiewsky & McConkie 1975, p131). Trust is critical for attitudes and behavior toward a brand or seller (Dwyer et al. 1987) and is important during shopping (Powers et al. 2010). We hypothesize that the relationships customers make with brand community elements in SMBBCs increase brand trust (Figure 1). Trust is chosen in this study because of its importance as a crucial variable successful marketing. Social media is ideal for building trust, awareness, and loyalty. In the next paper we focus on several other important variables such as loyalty and relationship quality. Together, these papers provide a proper picture of how crucial marketing variables can be enhanced by brand communities that are established on social media.

Figure 2.1: The effects of brand community relationships on brand trust



Legend: C=Customer, P=Product, B=Brand, Com=Company, OC=Other Customers, BC=Brand Community

Brand trust is “the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook 2001, p82). Trust usually is more of an issue when there is information asymmetry and chances of opportunism. Decreasing information asymmetry results in increased trust. Thus, one way brands can make their customers trust them is to give them the necessary information about the product and the brand (Chiu, Huang, & Yen 2010; Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub 2003). We argue that there are at least two different

mechanisms through which consumers' relationships with brand community elements (brand, product, company, and other consumers) in the social media context enhance brand trust. The first mechanism is through dissemination of information. Social media provides a rich communication context for admirers of a brand and allows building and maintaining their relationships with the different elements of the brand. They can easily communicate and share their thoughts about the product and brand with other customers and marketers. This essentially requires brand related information dissemination among these parties. Therefore, these relationships would positively influence brand trust.

Theoretically, repeated interactions and long term relationships increase trust between parties (Holmes 1991). The second mechanism is related to the level of exposure to the brand and increased interaction the consumer will have through developing relationships with the brand community elements. When customers join a brand community based on social media they become constantly exposed to the brand contents as well as the meaningful experiences that other customers had with the brand and its products. They begin to communicate with other brand members as well as with marketers. Sharing meaningful experiences with the brand on social media and receiving feedback from fellow members strengthen the ties among consumers and brand entities such as the product, the company, and other consumers. These enhanced relationships that result from the rich interactions in social media would make consumers consider the brand as more trustworthy. In social media contexts, consumers are frequently exposed to and interact with brands' posts, pictures, videos and fans. Therefore based on these two mechanisms we hypothesize that:

H1: Consumers' relationships with the: *a)* brand, *b)* product, *c)* company, and *d)* other-consumers, on social media, positively influence brand trust.

Does community engagement matter?

Community engagement is highly pertinent to social media. Engagement is perhaps the Holy Grail of social media; all brands, fan pages, and organizations' pages strive to get a bigger share of customers' attention and engagement in their pages (Hanna et al. 2011). Similarly, people vary in terms of their engagement in social media outlets; they can spend as little as a few minutes or as much as several hours a day consuming social media content. Regarding H1, it would be an oversimplification to think that whoever likes a page or becomes a member of a brand community in anyway would be heavily influenced by the brand community.

Not all members are equal; they vary a great deal according to their engagement with the brand community and have varying attitudes toward the brand according to their motivations to become a member on social media. Some members might even be negative although they are still members and continue shopping (Lapointe 2012). Some people join to seek help and receive information, others to learn and improve their skills and knowledge about the products they use, some for entertainment, some to reflect their concerns (Zaglia 2013), and others might join just out of curiosity or because the group was suggested by other friends or the social network platform. Obviously the level of engagement is not the same for all of these people and the community does not mean the same thing to all of them.

Community engagement is "the consumer's intrinsic motivations to interact and cooperate with community members" (Algesheimer et al. 2005, p21). Interaction in social media contexts refers to activities such as sharing stories, photos, videos, liking and commenting on related materials in the community page. Community engagement also relates to the desirable effects that identifying with the brand community has on its members. Therefore, higher engagement means higher cooperation and interactions, which in turn would result in higher

positive effects gained through such interactions. Additionally, higher engagement means higher attention and effort is pent toward the community. That is, consumers would spend more of their time and resources reading the contents in the community and/or interact with other members and brand community elements. Therefore, highly engaged consumers are expected to form stronger relationships with brand elements, so we hypothesize that:

H2: Consumers' relationships with the *a)* brand, *b)* product, *c)* company, and *d)* other consumers are stronger for customers with high engagement in the brand community compared to customers with low engagement.

Moreover the effects of these relationships on brand trust should be stronger for customers who are highly engaged in the brand community compared to those with low engagement. Considering the two mechanisms of trust enhancement discussed before, higher engaged members would gain more information about the brand, and therefore they would have less information asymmetry. Additionally, higher engaged members would be more frequently exposed to brand elements, which according to trust theories (Holmes 1991) results in higher levels of trust. Therefore we believe that brand engagement has a moderating role in translating the effect of brand community elements to brand trust (Figure 1):

H3: Brand community engagement amplifies the impacts of customers' relationships with the *a)* brand, *b)* product, *c)* company, and *d)* other consumers on brand trust.

Methodology

Subjects and Procedure

Data were collected through a credited US consumer online panel. Participants were offered a small monetary incentive in return for their participation. The survey was administered online so we were able to program the survey in order to control the sequence of questions; we

made sure that everyone was exposed and responded to all questions. Also the program enabled us to measure the time everyone spent on each question. The program did not allow participants to fill out the questionnaire more than once.

The target population consisted of people who are members of a brand community in social networking sites; thus, participants were asked to first name the social networking site of which they are a member. Then the concept of brand community was introduced and they were asked to name the most important brand community of which they are a member and follow on the social networking site they just mentioned. Participants were requested to keep that brand community in mind while answering the questions.

With this procedure, which is consistent with previous studies in online contexts (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006; Casalo et al. 2008), 665 completed questionnaires were obtained. After deleting those who responded too fast (less than 1.5 minute to complete the whole questionnaire) or those who mentioned non-commercial communities such as news groups or celebrities as their most important brand communities, we had 569 usable questionnaires. The sample covers 284 brand communities with well-known brands such as Apple, Microsoft, Nike, Coca Cola, Samsung, Nokia, and Starbucks representing more than 30% of the sample; 45% are female, 54.8% are male, and 0.2% did not disclose their gender. The largest age range in the sample is 21-30 (51%), followed by 31-40 (27%), 2% were under 20 and 20% were over 40. About 80% of respondents said that they logged into their social networking sites once or multiple times a day. About 95% of respondents chose Facebook as their social networking site; the rest chose sites such as Twitter, Pinterest, or Google+. About 49% of the respondents mentioned that they checked their brand community page once or multiple times a day, 33% once or multiple times a week, and the rest at least once a month.

Measures

The measures were borrowed from the related literature and modified to suit the study. Measures of consumers' relationship with brand entities came from McAlexander et al. (2002) and brand trust from Chadhuri and Holbrook (2001). For consumer/company relationships we added two items from Chaudhry and Krishnan (2007). The measure for community engagement came from Algesheimer et al. (2005). All items were 5 point Likert-type scales, anchored by (1) "strongly disagree" and (2) "strongly agree". See the items in the appendix.

Analyses and Findings

Analysis procedure

To test the conceptual model we conducted structural equation modeling with the whole sample by using EQS 6.1 (Byrne 1994; 1998). To assess model fit we report indices such as chi-square, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and the comparative fit index (CFI) which are among important fit indices (Bentler 1990; Marsh & Hocevar 1985; Browne & Cudeck 1993).

Discriminant and convergent validity

To assess construct validity we conducted a five-factor confirmatory model with all the latent constructs in the model (i.e. four customer centered relationships and brand trust). An acceptable fit (Byrne 1998) was achieved after two items were eliminated ($\chi^2=428.8$, $df=125$, $CFI=.935$, $RMSEA=.065$, $GFI=.923$); this change had a negligible impact on the content of the measures and improved the reliability and validity parameters. All items loaded significantly on their intended construct and all loadings were higher than .5 (Table 1), which supports the convergent validity of the constructs (Steenkamp & Van Trijp 1991). All AVEs are above .5,

providing additional evidence of convergent validity (Anderson & Gerbing 1988; Dillon & Goldstein 1984). For discriminant validity we calculated 95% confidence intervals of the correlations among constructs. None of them includes 1, which supports discriminant validity (Bagozzi 1994).

Table 2.1: Item loadings

Construct	Item	Factor loading	R-Square
Consumer/product relationships	1-	.792	.628
	2-	.828	.685
	3-	.668	.446
Consumer/brand relationships	1-	.722	.521
	2-	.639	.408
	3-	.782	.612
	4-	.773	.597
Consumer/company relationships	1-	.699	.489
	2-	.746	.557
	3-	.784	.615
	4-	.755	.570
	5-	.554	.307
Consumer/other consumer relationships	1-	.799	.638
	2-	.798	.623
	3-	.631	.398
Brand trust	1-	.714	.509
	2-	.800	.640
	3-	.592	.351

Internal consistency

To assess the internal consistency of the constructs, we calculated Cronbach alphas (Cronbach 1971), composite reliabilities, and average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs. Cronbach alphas and composite reliabilities are above .7, which supports measures' reliability (Hair et al. 1995). All AVEs are above 0.5 which supports internal consistency as well (Bagozzi & Yi 1988). For more details refer to Table 2.

Table 2.2: Measurement properties

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Consumer-product	3	.797	.81	.58
Consumer-brand	4	.816	.82	.53
Consumer-company	5	.832	.84	.51
Consumer-other consumers	3	.780	.78	.55
Brand trust	3	.750	.75	.50
Community engagement	4	.852	.85	.61

Testing Hypotheses 1

To test H1 we ran a structural equation modeling procedure using EQS 6.1. We constructed a model with four variables (i.e. customer relationships with brand elements) directly influencing brand trust (Figure 1). The fit indices indicate a satisfactory fit for the model: $\chi^2=428.8$, (df=120, $p<.05$), RMSEA=.067, GFI=.923, CFI=.934 (Byrne 1998). The results show that all path coefficients are significant and positive except for the coefficient from customer/other customer relationship to brand trust, which is negative (Table 3). Therefore, the findings support H1a, H1b, and H1c at the .05 level. H1d is not supported. The result gained for H1d is counter intuitive, which we interpret in the Discussion section.

Table 2.3: Test of Structural Relationship

Relationship	Coefficient (S.E)
H1a: Consumer/brand→Brand trust	.345 (.037)*
H1b: Consumer/product→Brand trust	.300(.059)*
H1c: Consumer/company→Brand trust	.313 (.052)*
H1d: Consumer/other consumers→Brand trust	-.162 (.039)*

* Significant at $p<.05$

MANOVA analysis to test H2

In H2, we construed that the strengths of the relationship between the customer and the four elements of brand community are higher for those with higher levels of community engagement. To test this hypothesis we split the sample into two groups based on the median of

community engagement. The median point is 3.5 and details of the two groups are provided in Table 4. The mean of the high engagement group is 4.23 and the mean for low engagement group is 2.77. According to statistical tests, these two groups are significantly different ($p < 0.01$).

Table 2.4: High vs. low engagement groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Low engagement	291	2.77	.590
High engagement	286	4.24	.401

Next, we used MANOVA to test H2 because four individual ANOVAs would inflate the overall type I error. Moreover, the four relationships of brand community are correlated. MANOVA addresses these issues by conducting one test on all dependents variables combined into one variable (Hair et al. 1995; McAlexander & Koenig 2010). After confirming that the means of the relationships are not equal for the two groups ($p < .01$), we conducted single ANOVAs to further analyze the results. The Levene test (1960) for homogeneity of variances indicates that for three of the four outcome variables the variances are different in the two groups (Table 5). Therefore, we report the appropriate statistics depending on whether the variables passed the Levene test.

Table 2.5: Levene's test of equality of error variances^a

	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Customer-Brand	13.769	1	575	.000
Customer-Product	20.865	1	575	.000
Customer-Company	2.114	1	575	.146
Customer-Other Customers	32.630	1	575	.000

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

a. Design: Intercept + HghLwEng

The findings are reported in Table 6. Hypotheses 2 (*a* to *d*) suggest that consumers that

are more engaged with the brand community have stronger relationships with the brand community elements. These hypothesis are fully supported which highlights why engagement is strongly applauded by social media gurus.

Table 2.6: MANOVA results

H2		Low Engagement Mean	High Engagement Mean	Significance of MANOVA results
<i>a</i>	Customer-Brand	3.74	4.16	$p < 0.05$
<i>b</i>	Customer-Product	3.53	4.37	$p < 0.05$
<i>c</i>	Customer-Company	3.58	4.26	$p < 0.05$
<i>d</i>	Customer-Other Customers	2.99	4.12	$p < 0.05$

Moderating effects of engagement

We used multisample SEM to test for the moderating effects described in H3. This method is consistent with similar research (Algesheimer et al. 2005). We built separate structural models for the high/low engagement groups and we conducted a test of moderation to determine whether the respective path coefficients are different. That is, we unconstrained all the paths first. This is the baseline model. Then, we constrained relevant paths one by one to be equal for both groups and ran the model. This is called the “equal path” model. We use the difference in chi-square values between the two models to judge the equality of paths for the two groups (Table 7).

Table 2.7: Results of the analyses for H3

Hypothesis	Path coefficient in unconstrained model	Chi-square test result
Baseline model		χ^2 (240)=620.60
H3a (C-B→trust)	$g_{(HE)} = 0.97^*$ $g_{(LE)} = 0.52$	χ^2 (241)=626.04 Test of H3a χ^2 (1)=5.44, $p < .05$ supported
H3b (C-P →trust)	$g_{(HE)} = 0.523$ $g_{(LE)} = 0.01$	χ^2 (241)=651.80 Test of H3b χ^2 (1)=31.2, $p < .01$ supported
H3c (C-Com→trust)	$g_{(HE)} = 0.230$ $g_{(LE)} = 0.229$	χ^2 (241)=620.60 Test of H3c χ^2 (1)=0, $p > .05$ Not supported
H3d (C-OC→trust)	$g_{(HE)} = -0.147$ $g_{(LE)} = 0.0$	χ^2 (241)=693.75 Test of H3d χ^2 (1)=73.15, $p < .01$ supported

*Standardized coefficient

Note: C=Customer, Com=Company, OC=Other Customers, P=Product

H3 hypothesized that the effects of customer relationships with the four brand community elements on brand trust are stronger for those consumers highly engaged with the brand community. The results support H3a and H3b and for H3d, the results are significant but in the opposite direction. H3c is not supported. We elaborate on these results in the Discussion section.

Discussion and theoretical implications

In the age of social media everything is about community building and gaining customers' engagement with the community and the brand. Our findings provide detailed insights on how brand community and engagement interact in building brand trust. As predicted three out of four brand community relationships (i.e. customer-brand, customer-product, and customer-company) positively influence brand trust. However, contrary to our prediction the customer-other customers relationship negatively influences brand trust. This seems

counterintuitive at first glance. However, considering the unique aspects of social media, there are some possible explanations for this finding.

First, consider the unique aspects of SMBBCs described earlier. One aspect is the lack of structure or hierarchy in such communities. This perhaps would confuse some members about the rank and experience of their fellow members with the brand. This way they might doubt the credibility of the information they receive, therefore negating their trust in the brand. A second explanation refers back to consumer empowerment through social media (Fournier & Avery 2011; Powers et al. 2012). Consumers' connectivity and interactions make them stronger so that they demand more and expect more from brands. Social media and all consumers being connected together all the time raised consumers' expectations about brands. Several researchers warned marketers that in order to avoid the negative trust effects of such empowerment, brands should encourage and facilitate conversations and not disrupt them (Fournier & Avery 2011). Remember that in social media negative posts or comments have five times the effect of positive ones (Corstjens & Umblijs 2012; Powers et al. 2012). Since consumer-consumers relationships would eventually contain some negative talks about the brand, this can negate the effect of such relationships on trust. This also might explain why customer-customers relationships have a larger negative effect on brand trust for highly engaged customers (Table 7, H3d). Consumer-consumer relationship is the point that brands have no control over in social media contexts (Fournier & Avery 2011); therefore it is not unusual to get counterintuitive findings at this point. However, researchers should further investigate this issue before making generalizations from our findings.

Our results empirically support why community engagement matters in social media contexts. First, consumers with higher levels of engagement in brand community form stronger

relationships with the brand community elements (Table 6). Making strong relationships with the brand elements might be one of the main points of branding and community building. Therefore, the first benefit of engaging consumers in brand communities lies in the stronger relationships they form with the brand, the product, other consumers and the company. More importantly, brand community engagement acts as a moderator and enhances the effect of consumer-brand and consumer-product relationships on brand trust, and decreases the negative effect of consumer-other consumers relationships on brand trust.

With respect to the theoretical model (Figure 1), one might argue that the direction should be the reverse; that is, because consumers trust the brand, they participate in the brand community and build the relationships. Although this might be generally true, it is not necessarily the case in social media contexts, where there is no limit for anyone to become a member of a brand community. One can join a brand community by simply pressing the “Like” button. In this regard, brand communities based on social media are different from traditional brand communities for which only brand owners and those who already trust the brand could become members. Nonetheless, even owners of the brand might not fully trust or know the full functional capabilities of the brand’s products. On top of that, the literature supports the directions in our model: for example Chen et al. (2009) show that emotional and informational interactions, which are natural consequences of one’s participation in online interactions, positively influence trust.

One might be cautious in generalizing these findings. We asked respondents to name and keep in mind their most important brand page on social media while answering the survey. This is to make sure that the brand group represents a community to them, as was our assumption. However, not all the members of a community have the same emotions about it. Readers should

be aware that they should interpret the results in its aggregated form not from individuals' points of view. That is, if our findings show that customer-brand relationships add to the brand trust, it perhaps does not mean that this is the case for all members of a brand page. Obviously some people are just there for several reasons and they do not feel the group is a community. That is why engagement is so crucial in the age of social media and all brand managers should be concerned with consumers' engagement with their brands.

Practical implications

This research emphasizes the role of community building and engaging customers with the community in social media contexts. Our results clearly show that three out of four brand community relationships enhance brand trust. Moreover, more engaged customers make stronger relationships within the brand community. Community engagement also moderates the effects that such relationships have on trust; it increases the positive effects of customer-brand and customer-product relationships on brand trust; and decreases the negative effects of customer-other customers relationship on brand trust.

However, we caution marketers about the relationships that customers make with other customers. In social media, this is exactly the point that brands have no control over (Fournier & Avery 2011) and mixed results are found in the literature. There are many anecdotal advices to guide marketers in managing the effects of customers' conversations (Fournier & Avery 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Our findings show that brands either are not following this advice or other sorts of advice and practices are required. To identify how brands can minimize such negative effects should be the subject of future studies, but our findings show that increasing consumers' engagement can lessen the negative effects of consumers' relationships on brand trust.

This article also draws the practitioners' attention to outcomes such as trust when they measure the outcomes of their social media activities. When it comes to measurement of community success in social media, there is a large gap between what the goals of the community are and what is actually being measured. For example, the main goal of establishing such communities are enhanced loyalty, trust, idea generation, and market insights but in practice managers usually measure the number of active users, posts, or visitors (Moran & Gossieaux 2012). This shows that managers should be more sensitive to other measures such as trust. Our model provides some insights for marketers on how to add to brand trust by community building practices.

All in all, social media based brand communities are crucial phenomena for marketers to make sense of and understand their mechanisms and consequences. Such communities are collectives of millions of people interacting on a daily basis. They are ideal environments for seeding viral contents since their members are more likely to share the community's messages (Brown et al. 2007); customers form strong relationships with brand elements which in turn add to their trust in the brand. Thanks to social media, having brand communities with millions of members is today possible. However, not only the number of members but also their level of engagement is important.

Limitations and future research

Although we used a heterogeneous sample of real social media users, readers should be cautious in generalizing these findings. More replications are necessary since we used an online survey method. Also, we used a general sample of brand community members. There might be several groups in social media that people are members of just to get some benefits such as promotions. Obviously these groups do not represent a community to many of its members and

hence do not show the characteristics of brand communities. Since the goal was to measure the effects of social media based brand communities, we asked respondents to name and think about the most important community in social media of which they are a member. This way we can safely assume that what respondents named has the meaning and characteristics of a brand community to them. However, to be more precise, future research should focus on a few specific brand communities and demonstrate the existence of community markers.

Our sample includes brand communities for a wide range of products. Although brand communities can exist even for convenience goods, the type and intensity of their consequences and benefits might be different. Therefore, we suggest conducting more specific studies across various product categories to provide deeper insights for brand managers.

Due to the nature of social media, it is easy for consumers to have multiple community memberships. “Scholars of brand community often neglect the effect of multiple community membership” (McAlexander et al. 2002, p40). Therefore social media create an interesting platform where researchers can examine the effects of multiple memberships. Multiple memberships are theoretically possible on social media due to recent findings that explain that consumers can experience multiple identities and connections with their network of friends, brands, or companies (Bagozzi et al. 2012).

Transitions between papers 2 and 3

Paper 3 is related to and in continuance of both papers 1 and 2. Paper 1 provides the ground for paper 3. As we argued, in brand community research the first step is related to manifestation of the brand community on the platforms that are under investigation. In addition to discover how brand communities are manifested in social media and what are their unique dimensions, paper 1 find evidence of value creation practices and the consumer's relationship with brand community elements, all of which are used in the conceptual model that is developed and tested in study 3. The goal in paper 2 was to investigate how such communities can influence important marketing variables specially brand trust. Showing how fundamental marketing goals can be attained in social media is an important way to measure social media ROI (Hoffman & Fodor 2010).

Similarly, in paper 3 we target other ultimate marketing variables such as brand loyalty and brand relationship quality. This paper builds and extensive model of consumer behavior in the context of social media based brand communities and argues that various elements in such communities interactively influence brand relationship quality and brand loyalty. Together, these articles provide a body of knowledge on brand communities that are embedded in social media from their existence and unique dimensions to their outcomes.

Paper 3: A comprehensive model of consumer behavior in the context of social media-based brand communities

This article argues that an important lens through which researchers can investigate the mutual effects of social media on brands and consumer behavior is the brand community. Due to several benefits of brand community initiatives and the potential advantages of social media, many marketing managers made significant investments in trying to build brand communities based on social media (e.g., Zaglia 2013). A noticeable issue here is how to measure the success of such investments in the way that is understandable and comparable to other marketing initiatives (Romaniuk 2012; Hoffman & Fodor 2010). To address this issue, it is essential to understand how social media-based brand communities influence customers' perceptions and behaviors. The purpose of this article is to develop and estimate a comprehensive model of how different aspects of customers' relationship with such communities influence their perceptions and behaviors. We describe how the customer's identification with a brand influences perceptions of relationship with brand community elements, brand community markers, and ultimately how they influence brand relationship quality and brand loyalty. Then using a large sample of brand community members in social media and using structural equation modeling, we show how social media-based brand communities will positively influence brand relationship quality and brand loyalty. Managerial implications are discussed.

Key words: Brand community; Social media; Brand community markers; Customer centric model; Value creation practices; Brand loyalty.

Introduction

“Social media has transitioned into an obsession and almost a way of life for online culture, changing the way we communicate with our colleagues, loved ones, and our favorite brands.” (Jones 2013)

Marketing in the social media environment is much more complicated than marketing before the advent of social media. Perhaps the best metaphor to describe marketing in the turbulent environment of social media is what Hennig-Thurau et al. (2013) use as the “pinball” game as opposed to “bowling”. Marketing in social media environment is just as interactive and chaotic as the game of pinball. In this game, gaining success is difficult but keeping the success is even more difficult. The same is true for branding when it comes to social media (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor 2015). An important element in this environment is the consumer who has gained power of a strong voice due to the dense networked nature of social media and user generated content capability (Kohli, et al. 2015; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013).

When social media was at its explosion phase, some scholars were skeptical and considered brands as crashers of social media (Fournier & Avery, 2011) rather than entities that consumers will embrace (Habibi et al. 2014a). Bringing up many intimidating instances in which the brand’s reputation was damaged by masses of social media-empowered customers, many scholars advised managers to protect rather than build brands on social media (e.g., Fournier & Avery 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Gradually more and more researchers engaged in pushing the edges of social media research by conducting empirical studies. According to recent developments, there is no doubt that social media usage by brands and consumers enhance sales, brand performance, brand loyalty, brand trust, awareness and other marketing measures (Sonnier, McAlister, & Rutz 2011; Rapp et al. 2013; Laroche et al. 2012; Laroche, Habibi, & Richard 2013). However, these studies are fragmented as they investigate the effects of social

media on various outcomes and from different perspectives. The need for an integrated model of consumer behavior in the context of social media is high.

Building on the research stream that takes brand community literature to investigate consumer behavior on social media (e.g., Habibi et al. 2014a; 2014b; Zaglia 2013; Laroche et al. 2013) this article develops and estimates a comprehensive model of how customers' identification with a brand community will influence their perception and behaviors within the context of social media. This article argues and through estimation of a comprehensive model supports that an important lens through which researchers can investigate the mutual effects of social media on brands and consumers is the "brand community" theory (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Due to success stories of brand communities (Brown et al. 2003; Belk & Tumbat 2002) as well as the potential advantages of social media, many marketing managers made significant investments trying to build brand communities on social media (Zaglia 2013). A noticeable issue here is how to measure success of such investments in the way that is understandable and comparable to other marketing initiatives (Romaniuk 2012; Hoffman & Fodor 2010). We address this issue by linking consumer behavior to brand loyalty, as an ultimate measure of brand success. We describe how brand community identification influence perceptions of relationship with brand community elements, brand community markers, and ultimately how they influence brand relationship quality and loyalty.

This research contributes to the literature on brand community and social media in different ways. It provides a big picture of customer behavior in the context of brand communities that are established on social media. It argues the establishment of brand community and the extent to which consumers feel identified by that community on social media will enhance community markers and customer relationships with brand community elements,

which in turn positively influence value creation practices and consequently brand loyalty. Additionally, the article develops measures value creation practices (Schau et al. 2009) and brand community markers (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001) that can be used by future researchers. As we mentioned, one way to measure brand success is through achieving ultimate goals of branding such as loyalty and relationship quality. This article provides a big picture of how this can be done within brand community context. The research has considerable implications for marketing managers as it provides a framework to understand how to create value for their firms.

The paper is organized as follows. First we briefly present our conceptual framework and argue why using the brand community lens is appropriate for studying branding activities on social media. Then we develop our hypotheses, which together provide a comprehensive model of consumer behavior in the context of social media-based brand communities. Next we report the findings on testing the model. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, limitations of our research and avenues for future studies.

Conceptual Framework

Social media

If we aim to review the history of marketing evolution in recent years, we can certainly divide it into two different parts; marketing before social media and marketing after social media. Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching (2013, p237) use the “pinball” metaphor for marketing in social media as opposed to the “bowling” metaphor for marketing before social media. Contrary to bowling, which is a linear and plain game, pinball is a multi-directional, highly interactive, and turbulent game. Many elements are playing a role in this game and the ball can change direction at any point. Similarly marketing in social media environment is a

different game which marketers and researchers are gradually learning how to master and play. Considering this metaphor the question is: what is unique about social media that makes marketing in social media similar to the pinball game?

Apart from its technological aspects which is known as web 2.0 technologies (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010), the most prominent aspect of social media is the increased power and proactive role of consumers in creating content and getting involved in conversations as opposed to their previous passive roles as mere recipients of the content in web 1.0 (Labrecque 2013). Brands no longer have any significant control over the content, timing, and frequency of conversations (Mangold & Faulds 2009) and this authority is delegated to consumers through the virtues of web 2.0. Another unique characteristic of social media is the dense networked interconnectedness among consumers which leads to an extremely high transparency in the marketing environment, that is, all consumers' and brands' activities are immediately visible to a huge group of others on social media (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013) and content can be passed through the network very rapidly and efficiently (Kohli et al. 2015)

These unique aspects caused dramatic changes to online consumer behavior and consequently to marketing practices. Take high visibility and transparency for example. Transparency is evident in all aspects of social media usage. For instance, consumers do not use pseudo user names as their identification anymore. In social media, most users use their real identities online. This is perhaps the main reason why the population of internet users has changed from more introverted personalities to more extroverted ones (Ross et al. 2009).

New technological cores, highly empowered consumers, transparent environments with users using their real identities, online population with different personality from before, and other important factors, all add to the complexity of the pinball game of marketing on social

media and mandate us to revise our understanding of online consumer behavior in order to tailor it to the unique aspects of social media. Among all possible approaches, we believe that looking through the brand community lens is appropriate since building groups and communities comes natural to social media (Kietzman et al. 2011). Social media is a place for socialization, networking and forming communities with like-minded people, so is brand community. We elaborate on this in the next section.

Brand community lens to study consumer behavior on social media

Related to our context, researchers have tried to empirically address two issues; what are the outcomes of brand related activities in social media and how these outcomes are realized? The former deals with the concern that whether spending time and budget on developing social media activities pays off and the latter deals with how it pays off. To do so researchers took different approaches. Some focused on the content, valence and volume of conversations among consumers about a brand or a topic. The assumption is that what consumers talk about can be a good proxy of their preference and hence predictor of important performance variables such as sales (Sonnier, McAlister, & Rutz 2011; Asur & Huberman 2010; Kumar et al. 2013). These articles, that usually use mathematical modeling approaches, have shown that spreading word of mouth (Kumar et al. 2013), positive and neutral comments (Sonnier et al. 2011), and the volume of content about a brand (Asur & Huberman 2010) enhance sales and performance of a brand.

Other researchers focused on consumer behavior and tried to examine how consumer behavior influences fundamental marketing variables. The reason is that these fundamental variables are a proxy for measuring ROI on social media investments (Hoffman & Fodor 2010). This research stream shows that social media usage by brands and their customers enhance brand performance and brand loyalty (Rapp et al. 2013); consumer involvement with brand-related

user generated content enhances brand equity (Christodoulides et al. 2012), and involvement in co-creation of value enhance transfer of WOM and purchase intentions (See-To & Ho 2014).

The other possible approach which is getting more attention from researchers is to examine consumer behavior in social media through the lens of brand community perspective. As mentioned, for early social media scholars, social media seemed like a natural environment for consumers to form groups and consumption collectives around brands and/or topics of interest. Social media give various options to users and brands to form and manage groups (Kietzman et al. 2011). However, some researchers ruled out the possibility of existence of groups or communities around brands since they thought social media is not the place for brands—in fact they are “uninvited crashers” of social media (Fournier & Avery 2011).

In contrast, the presence of brand pages on every social media outlet with millions of followers and members shows that not only brands are not crashers of social media but also people embraced them warmly (Habibi et al. 2014a). Moreover, the success of brand communities on other platforms incited marketing managers to establish their brand communities on social media. Later, researchers asked important questions as whether brand related collectives on social media manifest the strictly defined markers of brand communities (Zaglia 2013; Habibi et al. 2014a) and if yes, how these communities differ from their previous counterparts (Habibi et al. 2014a).

Zaglia (2013) focused on revealing common brand community markers in two different brand communities on Facebook as well as the consumer motivations to join those communities. She discovered that markers of brand community manifested themselves soon in these communities and that consumers have feelings of love and connectedness with other members and define part of their identity by that brand and its community (Bagozzi et al. 2012). Also,

members' motivation included utilitarian factors such as getting help or improving skills for better use of the branded products as well as hedonic reasons such as entertainment and forming social relationships.

Habibi, Laroche, and Richard (2014a) further investigated this topic. They not only observed the markers of brand community in two leading brand communities on Facebook but also assessed the presence of value creation practices (Schau et al. 2009) and the building blocks of brand communities (McAlexander et al. 2002). More importantly, they identified at least five unique dimensions which make the brand communities on social media different from previous brand communities. These dimensions are “social context”, “structure of brand communities”, “scale”, “content and storytelling”, and “myriads of affiliating brand communities” (Habibi et al. 2014; p128-29). The presence of brand communities on social media gives a strong theoretical tool to researchers to analyze consumer behavior online and unique aspects of these communities provide a strong reason to study them separately.

These five dimensions are highly relevant to brand communities and must be considered while conducting research on social media-based brand communities. For instance, unlike traditional online or offline brand communities which have hierarchical structure (Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Wolf 1991; Sicilia & Palazon 2008), the “structure” of brand communities on social media is flat and there is usually no explicit or implicit ranking system. The lack of structure might confuse members about with whom they are talking. In previous communities, members usually know the experience or the rank of fellow members while interacting with each other (Schouten & McAlexander 1995). However, within social media it might be difficult to identify the level of dedication and expertise one has for the brand due to the lack of a ranking structure.

In another example, unlike traditional communities which are normally very small in “scale” (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo 2004), social media based brand communities are very large and in many cases involve millions of members. The same story applies to other dimensions; storytelling, social context and membership; they are different in brand communities based on social media as opposed to previous brand communities. Going into the details of each dimension is beyond the scope of this article (see Habibi et al. 2014a for further details) but each of these dimensions can be the root of different outcomes of brand communities (McAlexander et al. 2002).

One important question regarding social media based brand communities is to how they can influence customers’ perceptions, behavior, as well as important marketing variables? In spite of the evidence of existence and quality of brand communities on social media, there is little empirical research about their outcomes (Laroche et al. 2012; 2013; Habibi et al. 2014b). This article presents a comprehensive model of the consumer behavior within the context of brand communities and then estimates the model across a wide range of members of brand communities on social media. Next, we develop our hypotheses.

Social media-based brand community

Social media-based brand communities are brand communities established on the platforms of social media (Habibi et al. 2014a; Zaglia 2013). According to theory, a brand community is a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001, p412). Although brand communities used to have a structure or somehow a hierarchy separating devotees from newbies, Habibi, Laroche, and Richard (2014a) argue that these structures have become less and less prominent in such communities. There is not any explicit and clear way that one can realize who

has what rank in these communities. Therefore, the definition of brand community should be modified to “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, which is based on a set of unstructured social relationships among admirers of a brand in social media platforms” in order to be applicable to the social media context.

Although the definition of brand community might differ based on the platform it is established on, there is a consensus on the three markers of brand community; shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions, and the felt sense of obligation to the community among its members (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). Shared consciousness is the felt connection among members of a brand community. It reflects a collective agreement on what the community is and how its members are different from outsiders (Gusfield 1978). Shared rituals and traditions are practices through which members of a community strengthen their ties. For example, certain traditions and jargons might be common among members of a community. These traditions are developed along with the history of the community and perpetuate the identity of the community as well as the sense of collectiveness among members (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). The third marker is the obligation members feel toward the welfare of the community and its members. This is why members of a community do not hesitate to help each other or accept service roles in their community (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001).

For one to say that a brand community exists, these three markers must be found. But before these markers emerge consumers need to feel related to the brand community. The strength of the relationship between consumer and brand community is defined as “brand community identification” (Algesheimer et al. 2005). Brand community identification refers to the degree to which a consumer considers him/herself an integral part of a community. This kind of identification helps consumer to belong to a group or a collective identity (Tajfel & Turner

1985).

Identification is the feelings attached to the community as the whole and shared consciousness is shared feelings of connectedness among the members of the community. Research shows that collective identity captures two dimensions; cognitive and affective (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Algesheimer et al. 2005). These dimensions have overlaps with brand community markers and in fact can be considered as antecedents of these markers. The cognitive aspect of brand community identification relates to the cognitive awareness of a member regarding his/her membership and belongingness to a greater whole or collective. This component supports the shared consciousness among brand community members through which they emphasize on the similarities with community members and differences with outsiders. The affective component of identification implies that consumers are emotionally involved and committed to the group as a whole, its rituals and traditions as well as its well-being (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk 1999; Algesheimer et al. 2005). We know that evidence of markers of brand community have been found on different platform and different situations, (Adjei, Noble, & Noble 2010; Schouten et al. 2007) and recently on social media (Habibi et al. 2014a; Zaglia 2013). Therefore, according to the argument above we hypothesize:

H1: Brand community identification positively influences the three markers of brand community (i.e., shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, obligations to society).

Figure 1 illustrates this hypothesis and the conceptual model. In addition to the markers of a community which reflect members' feelings and commitments toward the brand community, according to the "customer centric model" a brand community consists of four crucial relationships that consumers make with elements of the brand community (McAlexander et al. 2002; Fournier 1998). These four elements are brand, product, marketers, and consumers. As

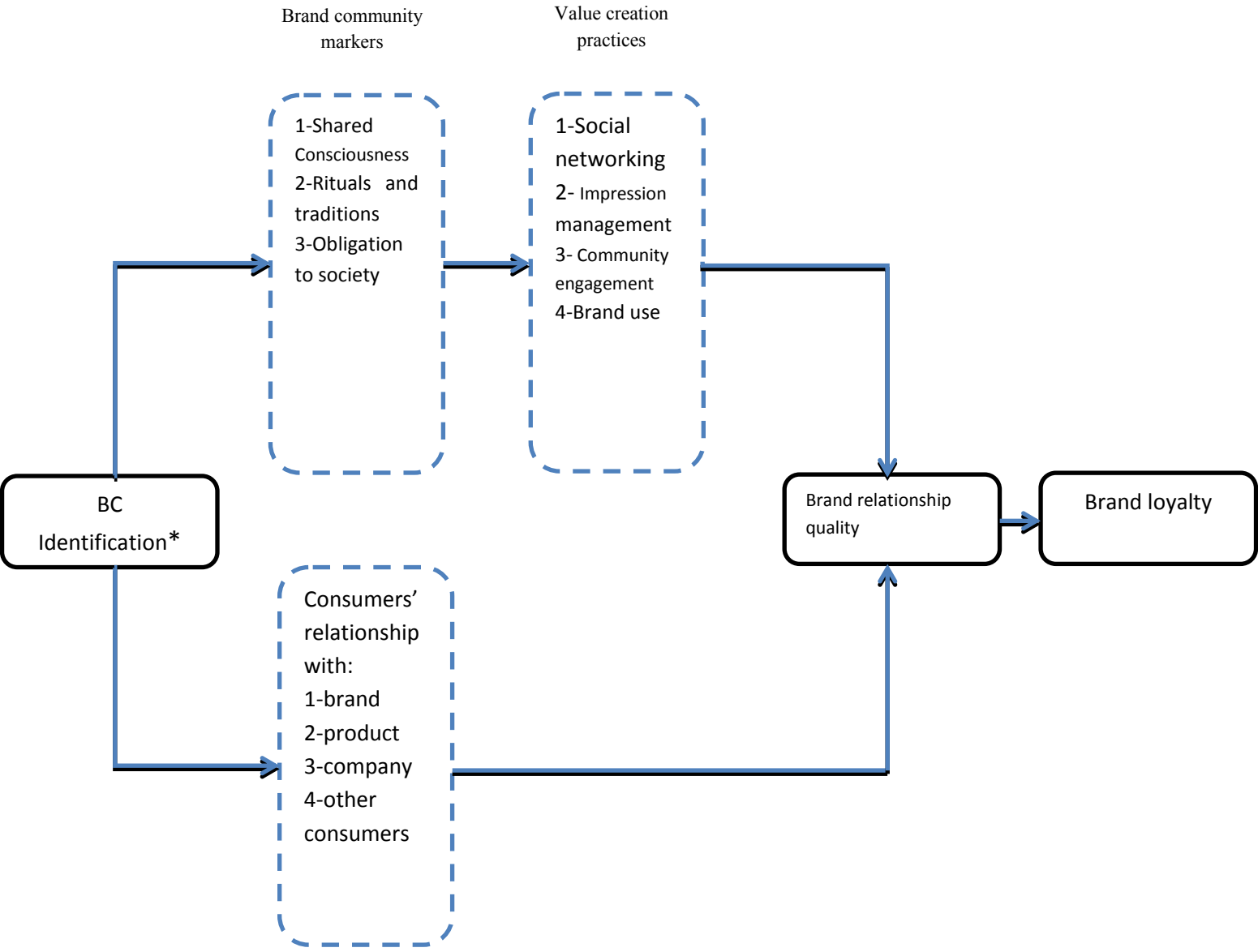
McAlexander and his colleagues (2002) put it, a community is made up of these entities and the relationships among them. These relationships are called “the building blocks” of a brand community. We believe that for these blocks to get together and build the brand community, consumers have to feel identified with the community initially. That is, cognitively and affectively consumers should categorize themselves as being part of a greater whole and also feel committed to its welfare and totality. This identification is referred as “Kinship between members” (McAlexander et al. 2002) or “we-ness” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) which is an antecedent of building a community. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2: Brand community identification positively influences the strength of relationships consumers make with brand community elements (i.e., product, brand, company, and other consumers).

Value creation practices

Consumers within a brand community –online or offline– participate in different activities that pertain to the welfare of members and prospect of the community. These activities are called value creation practices since each one of them directly or indirectly create some sort of value for the firm or members of the community (Schau et al. 2009). These practices are clustered into four categories: social networking, community engagement, impression management, and brand use practices.

Figure 3.1: A comprehensive model of consumer behavior on social media based brand communities



Social networking practices pertain to creating, maintaining, and cementing ties among brand community members (Schau et al. 2009). They include such practices as welcoming and empathizing. Habibi, Laroche, and Richard (2014a) illustrate many cases in which consumers welcomed a new member in the Jeep community on Facebook or “like” and “comment” on each other’s passionate brand-related stories. Social media platforms facilitate these practices. Consumers can easily read, like, follow, and comment on each other’s posts in social media. They can click on their fellow profiles and start direct conversations or even develop friendly relationship on social media. The degree to which a member is involved in these activities depends on how strongly the member feels about the community—how salient their feelings are about brand community markers. The brand community theory (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001; Schau et al. 2009) implies that stronger feelings of shared consciousness and obligations to society means members would participate more in social networking practices. The more committed the member is about the rituals of the community, it is more likely that he/she involves in value creation practices. Therefore we hypothesize that:

H3-1: The markers of brand community positively influence social networking practices.

The second set of practices is the brand community engagement (Schau et al. 2009). These practices pertain to intensifying members’ engagement in the community and include activities such as staking and documenting. Through these activities, members collaboratively build social capital by, for instance, focusing on a specific area of shared interest with some other members or documenting unique experiences they collectively had while using the brand (Schau et al. 2009). Although some researchers argued that being online detaches people from engaging in significant social relationships (Davis 2001; Gackenbach 1998; Turkle 1996), but research illustrates several cases in which brand community members document their experiences and key

points in their brand usage by sharing photos, videos, and text-based stories (Zaglia 2013; Habibi et al. 2014a). Also social media gives ability to members to explicitly engage in different sub-groups related to communities.

According to the brand community theory (McAlexander et al. 2005; Schau et al. 2009) engaging in value creation practices require members to have strong feeling of brand community indicators such as obligation to the community and shared consciousness. One of the functions of these markers is that it creates a sense of meaning and identity for members, which is a prerequisite for involving in the community. Since participating in these activities require some effort, we believe the degree to which members feel about markers of a brand community has direct effects on the degree to which these practices are realized in a brand community. Therefore:

H3-2: The markers of brand community positively influence brand community engagement practices.

The third set of value creation practices is impression management. The same way members of a family try to project a good image of their family to strangers, brand community members strive to make a desirable impression on outsiders and non-users of the brand through performing impression management practices (Schau et al. 2009). This happens mainly via sharing good news, spreading favorable word-of-mouth, and justifying devotion to this brand. Social media gives opportunities to members for practicing impression management through networked connections among users and sharing features. Research shows that impression management is practiced intensively in different ways in Facebook communities (Habibi et al. 2014a).

For members to get involved in impression management, to actively spread positive

WOM, and to share good news about the brand, they should feel a strong sense of connectedness, obligations to society as well as commitment to the rituals. Since members define the community as part of their self-identity (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen 2003) it is therefore their implied duty to maintain a favorable image of the community among others. Therefore, we believe that the degree to which members feel about community markers positively influence the manifestation of impression management practices. Thus:

H3-3: The markers of brand community positively influence impression management practices.

The last set of value creation practices refers to brand use practices, which includes all the activities that help members optimize the use of the brand (Schau et al. 2009). Better use of the brand may entail grooming, customizing or commoditizing. In the brand communities studied by Habibi and his colleagues (2014a) on Facebook, several cases were found in which members provided tips to each other for better using the brand. Usually hard core users with more experience help the newbies to enhance their experiences and use of the brand. Again according to brand community theory, committing to help other members to boost their brand use needs members to feel strongly connected, obligated to their communities, and united through following rituals and traditions of the community. Therefore:

H3-4: The markers of brand community positively influence brand use practices.

Brand relationship quality and loyalty

Brand loyalty is perhaps the ultimate marketing variable that all marketers seek to achieve. In the brand community literature loyalty not only is an ultimate outcome but it also plays a pivotal role. For Algesheimer and his colleagues (2005), “brand loyalty offers a useful way to examine the interplay between the consumer’s relationship with the brand and the brand

community.” (p23). This article provides a comprehensive model depicting how the building blocks of brand communities as well as the value creation practices, which maintain valuable activities within the brand community context, influence brand loyalty. Previous research mainly ignored these elements and their role on building brand loyalty.

A key construct in our conceptual model, which translates the effects of practices and relationships within the brand community to brand loyalty, is brand relationship quality. It is defined as “the degree to which the consumer views the brand as a satisfactory partner in an ongoing relationship.” (Algesheimer et al. 2005, p23). This view of brand relationship quality is consistent with McAlexander and his colleagues’ (2002) view of customer centric model. In the customer centric model, a brand community is deconstructed to a set of relationships with brand community elements. According to this model and the definition of relationship quality, it is implied that for customers to perceive a high quality relationship with a brand, they first should have strong relationships with its elements. Therefore, this model implies that the relationships built on the customer centric model of brand community positively influence brand relationship quality. When consumers build relationships with the brand, other customers, the company, and the products, they are enhancing the quality of their relationship with different elements of the brand, which they consider as a satisfactory partner. Consistent with previous research the operationalization of this construct in our research refers to the overall evaluation of how strong is the brand community member’s relationship with the brand (Algesheimer et al. 2005). Therefore:

H4: The strength of the consumer’s relationship with brand, company, other consumers, and the product positively influences the strength of brand relationship quality.

According to the definition of value creation practices, these practices produce some sort

of social or utilitarian value for community members (Schau et al. 2009). Consistent with the notion that consumers perceive brands as humans and associate humanistic characteristics to them (Aaker 1997), relationship quality implies that consumers have some sort of cognitive evaluation of how their relationship with a particular brand qualifies (Algesheimer et al. 2005). Thus, the more hedonic and utilitarian value is created in the communities the more consumers perceive the important role of the brand as a satisfactory partner in their life and the more they appreciate the brand relationship. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H5: Brand relationship quality is positively influenced by value creation practices.

Finally, as Algesheimer and his colleagues (2005) explain, brand relationship quality positively influences brand loyalty. Better relationship quality leads to consumers' intention to purchase more from the brand adding to their loyalty toward the brand. Consistent with Algesheimer and his colleagues (2005) we do not state a formal hypothesis for the path between brand relationship quality and brand loyalty since this path is well documented in the literature, but it is included in the model for the sake of completeness and testing it in a new social media context. Also we test the role of brand relationship quality as a full mediator in translating the influence of brand community on loyalty. Hence, it is necessary for us to keep the path between brand relationship quality and brand loyalty.

Methodology

Measure development

We derived measures for several constructs in the framework from the extant literature. These scales include brand community identification, brand quality relationship and brand loyalty intentions (Algesheimer et al. 2005), and the four constructs for consumers' relationship with brand entities (McAlexander et al. 2002; Chaudhry & Krishnan 2007). For the three

community markers, and the four value creation practices, we developed original scales according to Churchill's procedure (1979) as briefly explained in the following.

Fortunately, the brand community markers and value creation practices are studied in-depth in the literature with extensive qualitative and interview data (see Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schau et al. 2009). Therefore as we discussed about these constructs they are clear in the brand community domain however no measure is developed for them. Building on the literature, the research team members generated more than 70 items for these constructs. Then to enhance the face validity of the constructs we asked five doctoral students who were familiar with the domain of the study to evaluate the items with respect to wording, fit with the construct, and completeness. During this iterative process we modified several items and deleted those that did not fit the constructs. Then as Churchill suggests (1979) we conducted a series of exploratory analyses and EFA with a sample of 150 participants to calculate reliability and also check for the uni-dimensionality of each construct.

Then we used a new sample of 270 to run a series of confirmatory factor analyses in order to examine constructs' reliability, validity, and items loading on their intended constructs. The process of data gathering is similar to the procedure of the main study we describe in the next section. During this process we deleted items with poor loading, cross loading, and detriment to the reliability of the constructs (the final items for each construct in addition to their standardized loadings are provided in the appendix). The fit indices for the final CFA is as following: $\chi^2[2118]= 3561.79$, RMSEA=.050, 90% confidence interval of RMSEA (.047, .052), RMR=.07, SRMR=.068, CFI=.974, BIFI=.965. According to the cutoff points for these indices we can conclude the CFA model is strongly supported. We then used these constructs in our main study and repeated the CFA with the full sample for the main study and found similar

results regarding to item loadings, inter construct correlations, reliability, and validity, which further confirms the robustness of our measurement model, which are reported in the next sections.

Subjects and procedure

Data was collected using a credited online consumer panel, and participants were offered a monetary compensation in return for their participation. We announced that only those who are a member of a brand community on social media platforms are eligible to take the survey. First we asked participant to name the social media platform of which they are a member and use most frequently. Then, we asked them to name the most important brand related group or community of which they are a member on the platform they just named. Then, we asked them to consider their experiences with that community while responding to the questions. The order of questions was randomized.

670 completed responses were collected. However, after dropping off those who responded too quickly and those who mentioned non-commercial or unrelated names as their most important brand they follow on social media, we ended up with 608 completed questionnaires for the final analyses.

Sample characteristics. More than 95% of the respondents chose Facebook as their main social networking site. They belong to more than 300 brand communities with leading brands such as Apple, Coca Cola, Samsung, Starbucks, Nike, Sony, and Pepsi representing about 28% of the sample. The sample's demographics are as follows: 52% were male; the most frequent age range was 21-30 with 50%, followed by 31-40 with 24.5% of the sample; 90% mentioned that English is their primary language, the primary languages of the rest were Chinese, Spanish, and French; 39% mentioned that they log into their social media platform several times a day, 35%

mentioned they do so at least once a day, the majority of the rest log in once or multiple times a week. More than 90% of the respondents remarked that they check their brand's page multiple times a month. More than 50% of them check the page multiple times a week.

Analysis procedure. To test the conceptual model we conducted structural equation modeling using our full sample. We ran the models using EQS 6.1 (Byrne, 1994; 1998). To assess the fit of the model we report indices such as chi-square, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and the comparative fit index (CFI) which are among important fit indices (Bentler 1990; Marsh & Hocevar 1985; Browne & Cudeck 1993).

Results

Measurement model evaluation

To assess internal consistency and convergent validity we employ two gauges. First we calculate the composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha (Fornell & Larcker 1981; Cronbach 1970) of each construct. A composite reliability beyond its cut-off point of 0.60 provides support for internal consistency as well as convergent validity (Bagozzi & Yi 1998). As Table 1 shows all composite reliability are well above this cut-off point. As a support for convergent validity, all measures load significantly on their intended constructs with loading above .50 (see appendix; Steenkamp & Van Trijp 1991).

Table 3.1: Composite reliability and Alpha for constructs

	Number of items	Composite reliability	Alpha
Brand Community Identification	5	.818	.814
Social networking	5	.764	.75
Obligations to society	4	.710	.706
Shared Consciousness	4	.760	.752
Community engagement practices	7	.803	.742
Brand Use	7	.855	.819
Impression management	6	.811	.781
Consumer Product relationship	4	.817	.772
Consumer brand relationship	3	.722	.677
Consumer company relationship	5	.833	.826
Consumer – other consumer relationship	3	.777	.773
Culture and Tradition	6	.808	.796
Brand Relationship Quality	3	.825	.796
Brand Loyalty	3	.752	.703

Discriminant validity is also checked by CFA analyses and calculating 95% confidence interval for correlations among all constructs. None of the intervals ranged more than 1.0, deeming support to discriminant validity (Bagozzi 1994).

Structural Model Estimation

The fit parameters for the full SEM model are χ^2 [2169]=6315.4, RMSEA=.058, 90% confidence interval of RMSEA (.056, .059), RMR=.066, SRMR=.067, CFI=.957, BIFI=.965. Except for the chi square all other fit indices indicate a strong model fit (e.g., Bentler 1990). Chi-square is sensitive to sample size therefore it is acceptable if it violates the model fit with a large sample size. We found support for H1 indicating that brand community identification positively influence perception of community markers. Table 2 summarized these results. The table shows that the effect of brand community identification on shared consciousness, shared traditions, and obligations to society is strong and positive.

Table 3.2: Test of structural model

	Relationship	Coefficient (S.E)
H1:	BCI →	
	SC	.956 (.085)*
	RT	.903 (.172) *
	OS	.838 (.010) *
H2:	BCI →	
	C-P	.766 (.080)*
	C-B	.708 (.010) *
	C-COM	.644 (.076) *
	C-OC	.908 (.034)
H3:	1 –	
	SC → SN	.664 (.065)*
	RT → SN	.380 (.068) *
	OS → SN	-.241(.110) *
	2 –	
	SC → CE	-.486 (.010) *
	RT → CE	.946 (.104) *
	OS → CE	.499 (.129) *
	3 –	
	SC → IM	-.782 (.53) *
	RT → IM	1.31 (.107) *
	OS → IM	.368 (.096) *
	4 –	
	SC → BU	-.64 (.45) *
	RT → BU	.900 (.114) *
	OS → BU	.649 (.01) *
H4	C-P → BRQ	.442 (.056)*
	C-B → BRQ	.410 (.086)*
	C-COM → BRQ	.043 (.040)
	C-OC → BRQ	.240 (.069)*
H5	SN → BRQ	.060 (.067)
	CE → BRQ	.013 (.163)
	IM → BRQ	.340 (.168)*
	BU → BRQ	.260 (.148)*
	BRQ → BL	.951 (.01)*

*significant at .05

BCI: Brand Community Identification, SC: Shared consciousness, RT: Rituals and traditions, OS: Obligations to society, C-P: Consumer-product relationship, C-B: Consumer-brand relationship, C-Com: Consumer-company relationship, C-OC: Consumer- other consumers relationship, SN: Social networking practices, CE: Community engagement practices, IM: Impression management practices, BU: Brand use practices, BRQ: Brand relationship quality, BL: Brand loyalty

Furthermore, as predicted, brand community identification positively influences the relationships consumers make with brand community elements (i.e., product, brand, company, and other consumers), in support of H2. According to the results the degree to which members feel identified by the community has a strong and positive impact on the building blocks of brand community; consumer-product, consumer-brand, consumer-other consumer, and consumer-company relationships.

Additionally, H3 is partially supported. H3-1 to H3-4 included hypotheses regarding the effects of community markers on value creation practices. 8 out of 12 hypotheses are supported. As we predicted, the effects of shared consciousness and rituals and traditions are positive and significant on social networking practices but it is negative for that of obligations to society. For the remaining hypotheses of H3, except the effects of shared consciousness on brand community engagement, impression management, and brand use, which are negative, the rest of the effects are positive according to expectations. Therefore, H3-1 to H3-4 are partially supported.

Consistent with our expectation, H4 is supported. All the path coefficients from consumers' relationship with brand community elements to brand relationship quality are significant and positive except for the path from consumer-company relationship which is positive but not significant. Therefore, as we argued the degree to which consumers build relationships with brand community elements positively influence the relationship quality with the brand. Regarding H5, all the coefficients are in the same direction as expected but only two of them are significant as shown in Table 2. The relationship between brand relationship quality and brand loyalty is positive and significant as expected.

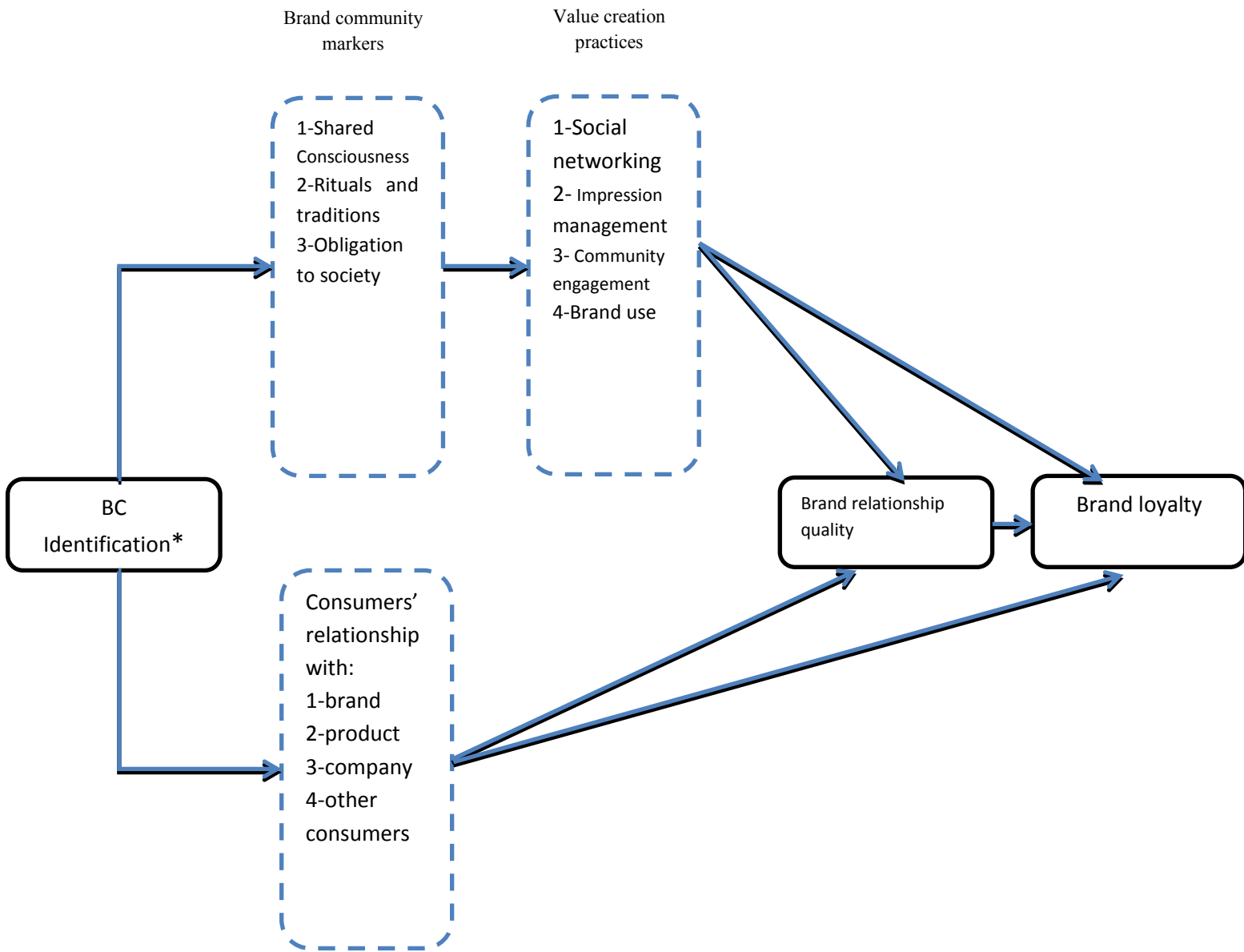
Full mediating role of brand relationship quality

To assess the success and credibility of a proposed conceptual model, it is customary to

compare it to rival models. Our model is based on several fundamental articles that together build the main part of the brand community body of knowledge. The model does not allow direct paths from value creation practices or consumers' relationships with brand community elements to brand loyalty. It assumes a full mediating role for brand relationship quality and contends that indeed brand communities based on social media are able to enhance brand loyalty but this happens through improving the quality of the relationship consumers have with the brand. However, a less parsimonious rival model would hypothesize direct paths from these elements to brand loyalty, which in total adds 8 more paths to the model. It is shown in Figure 2:

We estimated this rival model and compared it with the original model. The fit for this new model did not improve and is almost equal to the original model (RMSEA=.54, CFI=.96, RMR=.064, SRMR=.065) but at the same time the rival model has less parsimony. In the proposed model 85% (24 of 28) of the paths are significant, whereas in the rival model only 63% (23 of 36) of the paths are significant. Most of the new paths are not significant. Only two of the paths are significant but they do not make theoretical sense. For example, consumer-brand relationship gained a significant but negative effect on brand loyalty.

Figure 3.2: Rival model



Discussion

In this research, we studied a comprehensive model through which a brand community influences consumer behavior and estimated the model in the context of brand communities that are established on social media. Our conceptual framework is unique and shows how brand communities that are established on social media can influence important marketing variables such as brand relationship quality and brand loyalty intentions. The model builds on the brand community literature and shows how brand community identification affects brand loyalty through a nomological network. This finding provides useful insights into current practices especially for social media marketing managers. In social media one of the goals of managers is to attract as many consumers as possible into brand related groups. However, if we look through brand community angle, according to our results we can argue that what matters more is the strength of identification with the community.

Our results posit that the extent to which members feel identified by the community positively influences the markers of brand community as well as the relationships that are building blocks of any brand community—consumer-brand, consumer-product, consumer-company, and consumer-consumer relationships. Therefore, managers of brand related groups have to facilitate identity building practices among members in order to lead their group toward becoming a strong community. This research adds to the qualitative evidence showing the presence of community markers and relationships within brand communities in social media (Zaglia 2013; Habibi et al. 2014a) by emphasizing on the antecedent of community building elements as well as indicators. The model shows that managers should facilitate brand community feelings and integration on social media. This will enhance the relationship consumers make with brand

community elements. Additionally, these relationships are shown to be beneficial in improving the quality of the relationship between brand and consumers, which eventually improves brand loyalty.

According to our findings, consumer-company relationships do not lead to a significant effect on brand community relationship quality. This makes sense in the context of social media. Given the large scale of brand communities in social media and its highly interactive environment, the company representatives are a very small fraction of these brand communities (Habibi et al. 2014a). Plus, in many cases the company prefers to stay away from conversations and do not interrupt consumer-consumer conversations (Fournier & Avery 2011). This is perhaps why the consumer-company relationships do not yield a large enough effect on brand relationship quality to be significant. Nevertheless, our findings show that facilitating brand communities on social media and therefore strengthening consumers' relationship with brand community elements is a considerable path for managers to follow in order to gain beneficial results from their social media activities and investments.

On the other hand, we found mixed results regarding the effects of brand community markers on value creation practices, and subsequently value creation practices on brand relationship quality. This deserves further scrutiny. We initially suggested that the paths from brand community markers to value creation practices would be positive and significant according to brand community theory. However, three paths from shared consciousness to community engagement practices, impression management practices, and brand use practices are negative. This shows that to create value for brand community through practices such as impression management or brand use, community facilitators should focus more on the senses of obligations to society or focus more on rituals and traditions of the community, and not shared

consciousness. A possible explanation for this finding relates to the nature of the feelings of shared consciousness. Shared consciousness perhaps gives a feeling of assurance or comfort to members so it will diminish the need to participate in practices such as impression management since these practices aim to share good news and impress others to build the consciousness and distinguish the community. Members might feel less need to do so while they feel very strongly connected with their fellow members and distinguished from other communities. At the same time, these feelings are neutralized by the positive effects that obligations to society and shared rituals have on value creation practices.

The effect of obligations to society on social networking practices is negative too. This shows that the more obligated the members are to the community, the less they will participate in networking practices and they will engage more in brand use, impression management, and community engagement practices. Perhaps for highly obligated members, these are the practices that create more and immediate value so they pay more attention to them. However, this can be a good avenue for future research. Other than that, our results generally support the idea that the strength of community markers has direct relationship with the degree to which members perceive value creation practices.

Furthermore, we found a positive impact of all value creation practices on brand quality relationship although two of these effects are not significant. This shows the importance of these practices in terms of more tangible marketing outcomes such as brand relationship quality and brand loyalty. According to Schau and his colleagues (2009) value creation practices evolve over time. They emphasize that “practices can be viewed as apprenticeships (Lave & Wenger 1991, p37); their effects evolve over time as consumer engagement deepens and practices are integrated”. Since social media is still in its infancy stages and so is brand community initiations,

we can assume that the effects of practices such as community engagement and social networking are not yet developed to a significant level. By nature, these practices aim for the more long term welfare of members whereas brand use and impression management practices have immediate and tangible effects. The findings show that managers should promote value creation practices such as brand use and impression management in the communities. Social media specially gives power to customers to share good news or share tips and tricks to better us the brand. Therefore, social media appears to be an ideal environment for practices that can enhance customers' relationship with the brand and ultimately their loyalty.

We also do not rule out the importance of conducting future research regarding our mixed results. One source of the mixed results in some of the paths might come from reasons that are still unknown to us due to the novelty of social media research. For example, we know that a primary purpose of users of Facebook and many other social media outlets is to have fun and entertainment (Schulz et al. 2014). Yet many of the relationships we examined above have more utilitarian functions for brands and consumers (e.g., consumer-brand relationship). The interactive effect between the primary goal of having fun and utilitarian functions of relationship developments are not examined in research. It can also relate to fact that we pooled all the communities and did not control for individual community differences. While there are similar research that supports this approach (e.g., Rapp et al. 2013; Algesheimer et al. 2005), there are others that found that product differences may affect the way people develop relationship or perceive social media marketing activities (Schulz et al. 2014). Our approach has its own merits and limitations that we elaborate on in the next section.

All in all, this research has useful insights for brand community practitioners. The conceptual model clearly shows the paths through which brand communities within social media

contexts can lead to positive, considerable values and benefits for consumers and the brand. This in line with other performance related research (e.g., Rapp et al. 2013) indicate the benefits of investment in social media marketing and casts doubt on claims that social media activities are detrimental to brands (Fournier & Avery 2011).

Limitations and future research

Similar to others, this work has its own limitations that can be avenues for future investigations. The first and most obvious limitation is the use of survey as the method of collecting data. Although we took precautions while collecting and analyzing the data, one should be cautious while interpreting the results. Also generalizing the findings to other brand communities such as offline brand communities must be done cautiously since the model is developed for and tested in the context of social media.

Due to practical limitations we did not consider differences among brand communities and treated all of them together. One might have two arguments against this; first this ignores individual differences among brand communities and second it is hard to believe that all brand community building activities will result in higher levels of brand loyalty for all brands. We admit that individual differences among brand communities can result in different outcomes and consequences and suggest future researchers should consider these differences, as moderators, if they are to dig deep into of this topic. Moreover, we believe that considering all brand communities in our research will increase our generalizability power. This is consistent with previous research in which 110 car clubs are pooled together to estimate a conceptual model about social effects of brand communities (Algesheimer et al. 2005). Additionally, the findings are supported by recent research showing that mere usage of social media by brands and consumers, regardless of their individual differences, enhance loyalty as well as firm

performance (Rapp et al. 2013).

One interesting research avenue is to investigate the effects of the intentions of users who join a brand community. Consumers can join a brand community for the purposes of actual or ideal self-presentations. That is, the members who actually use the products of the brand are in the community for actual self-presentation purposes while those who do not own the products of the brand, associate that brand in their social media profile for the purpose of ideal self-presentation (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012). It would be interesting to differentiate between these two groups and examine if and how brand communities can influence either of them.

Considering individual differences among brand communities is an important research avenue in this regard. These moderators can be brand community engagement or relationship capital possessed by brands (Rapp et al. 2013) and other related variables. Our prediction is that these variables can play moderating roles and increase or decrease the benefits of brand communities for their members and brands. Moreover, as we explained, social media-based brand communities are found to be unique at least in five dimensions (Habibi et al. 2014a). It would be interesting to control for these dimensions and investigate their implications for our model of consumer behavior.

General Discussion and Contribution

To symbolically illustrate the turbulent environment of social media marketing, Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching (2013) use the “pinball” metaphor as opposed to “bowling” metaphor they use for marketing before social media emergence. In contrast to bowling which is a linear and one-directional game, pinball is a highly interactive game in which the ball can change its path unpredictably at any moment depending on what element in the game hits the ball. It was due to this unpredictability of social media that many scholars argued that social

media is not a natural environment for brands and they warned them to stay out or very cautious while practicing on social media (Fournier and Avery 2011). Accordingly, scholars should investigate the dynamic environment of social media when it interacts with marketing to keep our understanding updated.

This thesis provides brand community as a legitimate lens to study marketing and branding activities on social media (paper 1) by providing evidence of how various elements of brand communities are manifested in social media. More importantly, the fact that these communities have at least five unique dimensions indicates that such communities embed unique aspects of social media within themselves (Zaglia 2013), which differentiate them from previous brand communities such as online and physical brand communities (e.g., car clubs or brand fests; Algesheimer et al. 2005). Each of these five dimensions (paper 1) can be conceptualized and operationalized in future research to investigate what kind of implications each can have for marketers and scholars.

Elements or building blocks (McAlexander et al. 2002) of brand communities that are established on social media positively influence brand trust (paper 2). This is because social media allows relationship building. Relationships facilitate dissemination of information among consumers and also increase exposure of brand elements. It is shown that brand community engagement has an important moderating role in this process. That is more engaged members are more likely to develop higher levels of trust toward the brand. This indicates why engagement is highly crucial in social media environment and why practitioners should strive to gain a higher portion of consumers' engagement.

Paper 3 depicts that the degree to which members feel identified by their brand community influence indicators of the community and the consumer's relationship with brand

community elements, which essentially bear the strength of brand communities. These elements and markers eventually influence value creation practices, brand relationship quality, and brand loyalty. The model implies that identification with the community or as Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) put it the sense of “we-ness” has a major role in providing benefits for marketers and integrating consumers in the brand community and maintaining their loyalty.

This thesis contributes to the marketing literature by developing a body of knowledge of brand community in the rapidly growing field of social media. The thesis covers questions from existence and quality of such communities in terms of their unique dimensions to their outcomes. This research makes several contributions. While there is anecdotal evidence of brand communities on social media (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Kietzman et al. 2011), it studies such phenomenon and elaborate empirically on its quality and unique characteristics. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate how social media based brand communities differ from other online and offline brand communities.

Also, as managers strive to improve their social media ROI (e.g., Romaniuk 2012) and considering that a valid way of thinking about social media ROI is “what marketing objectives” social media activities might satisfy (Hoffman & Fodor 2010, p42), we show how brands can influence brand trust, brand loyalty, and brand relationship quality which are among ultimate marketing objectives. This research also has important implications for marketers as they have a historical opportunity to reach their consumers through such brand communities. Thanks to Facebook, there are brand fan pages that reach several millions users. For example, the Harley Davidson page has more than 3 million and Coca Cola has more than 30 million members. This research sheds new light on how marketers can better exploit this historical opportunity. Our unique quantitative models provide detailed insights on what paths marketers should emphasize

more in order to gain better results and reach their goals in terms of increasing trust, loyalty, or involvement in value creative practices.

By paying attention to each path in our conceptual model, marketers can understand the relative importance of each element in increasing brand trust and loyalty among members of their communities. For instance, brand relationship quality is a key factor in translating the effects of brand community elements to brand loyalty. Marketers should keep that in mind that one of their goals of investing in brands on social media should be to enhance consumers' relationship quality with the brand. Brand community engagement also plays a key role as a moderator. As we mentioned, engagement is a key factor in social media as consumers have a limited attention span that they try to spend it on the most valuable content on the social media. The more they are engaged with a brand, the more valuable the brand is to them. Engagement not only is a moderator but also strengthen the relationship consumers make with brand community elements. That is, for example, consumers who are more engaged with the brand community on the social media platform will form a stronger relationship with each other.

All in all, the three papers in this thesis unwind a set of important problems in the contemporary marketing literature. The usefulness of brand community is supported in studying brands activities on social media platforms. Social media is ideal for building communities but the main differences of the platform which are consequently reflected in the structure and context of brand communities should be considered and included in branding practices. The two models in papers 2 and 3 suggest two potential ways through which such communities can contribute to achievement of final marketing goals such as winning consumers' loyalty and trust. In addition to future research avenues that were discussed in each paper, it would be customary to re-investigate the notions of this thesis in other cultures and countries. Perhaps, the paths in the

models would vary or the communities themselves would be different structurally. Future research can respond since social media has spread globally and people all over the world are actively using it.

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Appendices

Table 1: Construct items for paper 2

Consumer/Product relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1- I love my branded product. 2- I am proud of my branded product. 3- My branded product is one of my favorite possessions.
Consumer/Brand relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1- I value the heritage of the brand. 2- If I were to replace the product, I would replace it with the another product of the same brand. 3- My brand is of the highest quality. 4- I would recommend this brand to my friends.
Consumer/Company relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1- The COMPANY understands my needs. 2- The COMPANY cares about my opinions. 3- I feel this COMPANY cares a lot about its customers. 4- I feel the company takes my feedback seriously. 5- I feel the company shares information with me
Consumer/Other customers relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1-I have met wonderful people because of the community. 2- I have a feeling of kinship with the other owners. 3- I have an interest in the community because of the other owners of the brands.
Brand trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1- This is an honest brand. 2- I trust this brand. 3- This brand is safe.
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1- I benefit from following the brand community's rules. 2- I am motivated to participate in the brand community's activities because I feel better afterwards. 3- I am motivated to participate in the brand community's activities because I am able to support other members. 4- I am motivated to participate in the brand community's activities because I am able to reach personal goals.

Summary of measures for paper 3

	Brand community identification	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I see myself as an integral part of this brand community. 2. The friendship I have with other brand community members means a lot to me. 3. I am strongly attached to this brand community. 4. Other brand community members and I share the same objectives. 5. If I observe any plan on the brand community page, I think of it as something “we” would do rather than something “they” would do. 	<p>.746</p> <p>.802</p> <p>.692</p> <p>.477</p> <p>.701</p>
	Shared consciousness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A strong connection is felt among the members of this brand community, even if they don’t know each other personally. 2. All members in this brand community feel very distinct from those who are NOT members. 3. I feel much closer to friends and other users of social media when I notice that they are members of this brand community. 4. I think it is very bad if a person simultaneously is a member of this this brand community and competing brand communities. 5. I feel a sense of “group identity” or “we-ness” amongst members of this brand community. 	<p>.638</p> <p>.539</p> <p>.673</p> <p>.449</p> <p>.749</p>
	Rituals and traditions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In this brand community, there are specific traditions about how to consume this brand. 2. I think these specific traditions contribute to the culture of this brand community. 3. Members of this brand community celebrate the special events and history of the brand with ads, events, or posts. 4. It is important for this brand community how advertisements portray its brand. 5. Members of this brand community appreciate the history and culture of this brand. 6. If members of this brand community have interesting stories about and experiences with this brand they share them (through photos, videos, blogging) to enhance the traditions and culture of this community. 	<p>.527</p> <p>.722</p> <p>.703</p> <p>.530</p> <p>.733</p> <p>.620</p>
	Obligations to society	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All members of this brand community, including me, assist or give advice to each other, when asked, in the proper use of this brand. 	<p>.530</p>

		2. All members have a sense of duty to this brand community as a whole as well as to individual members.	.670
		3. This brand community engages in integrating and retaining its members.	.580
		4. If someone in this brand community posts a question on the brand's page, members willingly share their information to assist that person.	.507
	Social networking	1. This brand community keeps in touch with me with regular notifications.	.671
		2. This brand community emotionally supports its members when they need it.	.647
		3. I received special treatment after I became a member of this brand community.	.461
		4. This brand community recognizes special occasions for me and sends me personal greetings.	.693
		5. There are certain behavioral expectations in the brand community	.518
		6. This brand community imposes on its members specific norms of behavior.	.551
	Impression management	1. It is important for members to show why they love this brand.	.572
		2. Members of this brand community actively engage in discussions to justify their affinity towards this brand.	.663
		3. It is important for members of this brand community to create a favorable impression of this brand for other members.	.680
		4. Members of this brand community positively compare this brand with other competing brands.	.575
		5. Members of this brand community share good news about this brand through posts, photos, events, etc.	.699
		6. Members of this brand community actively encourage others to adopt this brand.	.683
	Community engagement	1. This brand community has several specific domains to which members can contribute.	.628
		2. There are many pages on social media that are devoted to a specific aspect of this brand	.633
		3. Members of this brand community remember and share their first personal experiences with this brand.	.572
		4. Seminal experiences with the brand are highly valued in the brand community.	.647
		5. There are many photos in the brand community page depicting consumers' experience with their brand.	.542
		6. Members of this brand community use symbols or badges to reflect important experiences with this brand	.592

		7. Members share narratives of their brand relationship journey on the brand's page.	.630
	Brand use	1. Members of this brand community share useful tips about better uses of this brand. 2. Members of this brand community share their experiences about their successful and UN-successful attempts at customizing its products. 3. Members of this brand community monitor and foster the activities to help better uses of this brand (e.g., advising to buy complementary products). 4. Members share their market knowledge to enhance the usage of the brand. 5. Caring for the brand is a value in the brand community. 6. Members share the ways how they care for their brand. 7. Members of this brand community are concerned with the optimal uses of this brand	.720 .560 .707 .720 .689 .717 .608
	Consumer product relationship	1. I love my branded product. 2. I am proud of my branded product. 3. My branded product is one of my favorite possessions. 4. My branded product is fun to use.	.767 .750 .736 .647
	Consumer brand relationship	1. If I were to replace the product, I would replace it with another product of the same brand. 2. My brand is of the highest quality. 3. I would recommend this brand to my friends	.659 .735 .647
	Consumer company relationship	1. This COMPANY understands my needs. 2. This COMPANY cares about my opinions. 3. I feel this COMPANY cares a lot about its customers 4. I feel the company takes my feedback seriously 5. I feel the company shares information with me	.654 .687 .768 .648 .588
	Consumer other consumers relationship	1. I have met wonderful people because of this brand. 2. I have a feeling of kinship with the other owners of products of this brand. 3. I have an interest in this brand community because of the other owners of this brand.	.718 .799 .618
	Brand relationship quality	1. This brand says a lot about the kind of person I am. 2. This brand's image and my self-image are similar in many respects. 3. This brand plays an important role in my life.	.752 .739 .731
	Brand loyalty intentions	1. I intend to buy this brand in the near future. 2. I would actively search for this brand in order to buy it. 3. I intend to buy other products of this brand.	.742 .611 .705

All item loadings are significant at .05 level.