

The role of brand community identification and reward on consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty in virtual brand communities



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ABSTRACT

With the advent of interactive Web 2.0 (and beyond) technologies, the role of consumer brand engagement (CBE), which focuses on the consumer's investment in their brand interactions, is of rapidly growing importance. Despite growing recognition of CBE's importance in virtual brand communities, empirically-derived insight into its drivers, dynamics, and outcomes remains limited, as investigated in this study. Responding to this gap, we explore the effect of consumers' brand community identification and reward on CBE, which we posit to subsequently affect brand loyalty. To investigate our hypotheses, we conducted a survey with 602 Facebook users. Our structural equation modeling results reveal brand community identification's and reward's positive effect on CBE, and a positive effect of CBE on brand loyalty. In addition, our findings reveal CBE's partial mediating effect in the association of brand community identification and reward with brand loyalty. Theoretically, our findings further insight into CBE's virtual community-based dynamics, with a focus on the role of community identification and reward. Practically, our results identify the key role of nurturing virtual community identification and the offering of reward to engage consumers.

1. Introduction

According to the [Global Web Index Report \(2018\)](#), today's increasingly tech-savvy consumers spend in excess of two hours daily on social media, which comprises around 33% of their online time. Given the considerable amount of time people spend online nowadays, marketers are making substantial investments in this area ([Lee et al., 2018](#); [Mirbagheri and Najmi, 2019](#)). The Web 2.0 (and beyond) environment is characterized by two-way interactions between consumers and brands, thereby exhibiting a stark contrast with more one-way, traditional media ([Hollebeek et al., 2014](#); [Brodie et al., 2013](#)). In this interactive environment, consumers are not only able to respond to brand-related communications, but also create these themselves (e.g. user-generated content; [Hollebeek and Macky, 2019](#)), revealing its high degree of interactivity. In this changing environment, *consumer brand engagement*, which reveals the consumer's investment in their brand-related interactions ([Islam et al., 2017](#); [Hollebeek et al., 2019b](#)), is of rapidly growing importance ([Wirtz et al., 2013](#); [Islam and Rahman, 2017](#)). Specifically, engaged customers have been viewed to contribute to

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sales increases, enhanced positive word-of-mouth, and improved organizational performance (Bijmolt et al., 2010), thus warranting its strategic significance.

Given its high inherent interactivity, virtual brand communities (VBCs) have been identified as an important setting to facilitate or study consumer brand engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2019a; Hollebeek et al., 2017). VBCs are defined as “specialized, non-geographically bound online communities based on social communications and relationships among a brand’s consumers” (De Valck et al., 2009, p. 185). As platforms for like-minded users to meet and share their brand-related experiences (Baldus et al., 2015; Trusov et al., 2009), the strategic role of VBCs is increasingly recognized (Kumar et al., 2013; Naidoo and Hollebeek, 2016), which is often linked to CBE (Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015).

However, despite a growing need to better understand CBE in VBCs, empirical research in this area has lagged behind. That is, even though companies are making extensive investments in their VBCs, little remains known about their driving consumer-based motivations or success factors, thus warranting further research (Baldus et al., 2015). In response to this gap, we identify consumers’ uses-and-gratifications/social identity theory-informed brand community identification and reward as key CBE drivers in this study (Hollebeek et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2017). We also explore CBE’s subsequent effect on brand loyalty, thus rendering CBE a mediating variable in the association of community identification and reward on the one hand, and brand loyalty on the other.

Given CBE’s motivational nature (Hollebeek et al., 2019b), brand community identification and reward were selected as key uses-and-gratifications-informed and social identity driven CBE antecedents (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). The uses-and-gratifications and the social identity perspectives outline consumer motivations for selecting particular media, including functional or social/identity motives (Dholakia et al., 2004; Dolan et al., 2016; Lam et al., 2010). In line with these perspectives, we explore the effect of consumers’ intrinsic brand community identification (i.e. social/identity) and extrinsic reward (i.e. functional) motivations for their brand community-related investments (Leclercq and Poncin, 2019). Moreover, we explore the effect of CBE on their ensuing brand loyalty, thereby furthering insight into CBE’s dynamics in virtual brand communities.

By addressing these gaps, this study makes the following contributions. First, despite growing understanding of CBE in VBCs, little remains known regarding the effect of consumers’ intrinsic community identification and extrinsic reward on their VBC-related CBE, as explored empirically in this paper (MSI, 2018). Second, while existing research has addressed the direct effect of reward and brand identification on brand loyalty (Rather et al., 2019; Huang and Chen, 2010; Rather and Hollebeek, 2019), there is a dearth of insight regarding the mediating role of CBE on these relationships in the VBC context. We therefore study CBE’s mediating effect of CBE in the association between brand community identification and reward in shaping brand loyalty in VBCs, thereby adding empirically-derived insight in this area. Third, from our results, we infer a set of practical implications that are designed to facilitate managerial decision-making with respect to CBE management in VBCs, thus adding value to organizational online customer relationship management strategies.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We next review key literature in our chosen topic area and develop the research framework and hypotheses. We then outline the research method, followed by our data-analytical procedures and a discussion of our findings. The paper concludes by presenting an overview of key theoretical and managerial implications that arise from this work, limitations, and issues for further research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social identity theory and brand community identification

The concept of brand community identification (BCI) is built on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), where consumers are viewed to be motivated to enhance their self-identity by identifying with specific social groups, including virtual brand communities (Lam et al., 2010). Reflecting the extent to which consumers identify with the community, BCI forms a “primary psychological substrate for the kind of deep, committed, and meaningful relationships that marketers are increasingly seeking to build with their customers” (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, p. 76). Social identity theory offers a suitable theoretical lens for investigating consumer-brand relationships in virtual brand communities, as community affiliation represents an important source of consumer-perceived value, thereby aligning with virtual brand communities’ key purpose (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Consequently, social networking and related research has adopted this theory to explain or predict consumer behavior, which we apply in the virtual brand community context (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

2.2. The uses-and-gratifications/reward interface

The roots of the uses-and-gratifications (U&G) perspective lie in the communication and media literature (Whiting and Williams, 2013). In online contexts, the role of content, the communications process, and their associated (e.g. social) gratifications are reported as key drivers of consumers’ Internet use (Stafford et al., 2004). The U&G perspective’s key propositions are that media users actively interact, are goal-oriented, and driven by particular motivations that are typically functional (informational), or hedonic (e.g. entertainment-based) in nature (Alnawas and Aburub, 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2016; Rubin, 2009). The latter motive, in particular, exhibits theoretical alignment with social identity theory, as discussed above. Consequently, we adopt an integrative social identity/U&G-informed perspective in this paper.

Companies are encouraged to design their brand-related content to satisfy one or more of these consumer motives. The more

strongly consumer needs are met by specific media content, the higher their perceived value that emanates from the media (e.g. community)-based interactions (Brodie et al., 2013; Malthouse et al., 2013). In addition to the outlined motivations, the U&G perspective recognizes the importance of remuneration or reward in fostering consumers' media interactions (Dolan et al., 2016; Ko et al., 2005). However, despite its importance, little remains known in the literature regarding the role of reward in driving CBE in virtual brand communities (Islam and Rahman, 2017; Muntinga et al., 2011). Therefore, we explore the effect of U&G-informed reward on consumer motivation to engage in virtual brand communities, thereby exhibiting conceptual correspondence with prior research (Alnawas and Aburub, 2016; Hashim et al., 2015; Lee, 2013; Lim and Kumar, 2017; Shim et al., 2015).

2.3. Consumer brand engagement in virtual brand communities

The concept of consumer brand engagement (CBE) has attracted considerable attention in the academic marketing literature from around 2005 (Islam and Rahman, 2016a,b; Brodie et al., 2011). Reflecting its rising importance, the Marketing Science Institute has consistently listed the undertaking of further research on customer/consumer engagement, particularly in technological (e.g. VBC-based) contexts, as a key research priority since 2010 (e.g. MSI, 2018). In response to this need, a plethora of definitions and sub-variants of customer/consumer engagement has emerged, including consumer brand engagement (CBE). Here, we adopt CBE given our virtual brand community context, where VBC users are not paying customers per se; hence, the relevance of using the term *consumer* (vs. customer) engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014). In addition, as the predominant object around which VBC members engage is the brand, we adopt the CBE concept (Hollebeek, 2011a,b).

The construct's meta-theoretical foundations lie in what Vivek et al. (2012) refer to as an extended realm of relationship marketing, and broadly reflect consumers' interactive brand experiences (Islam et al., 2019b; Brodie et al., 2011). Despite debate surrounding engagement's conceptualization, most researchers agree regarding its two-way, *interactive* nature (Groeger et al., 2016; Hollebeek, 2013). For instance, Hollebeek et al. (2019, p. 166) define CBE as a customer's motivationally driven investment of operant/d resources in their brand interactions (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Hollebeek et al., 2014), thereby fitting with the U&G perspective's *proactive* view of consumers. To illustrate, in today's increasingly online environment, consumers are not just able to receive brand-related content, but are also able to actively contribute to its creation (e.g. via user-generated content), thereby revealing CBE's two-way nature (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014).

Second, the majority of existing conceptualizations view engagement as a multi-dimensional concept that is typically viewed to comprise cognitive, emotional, and affective dimensions (Brodie et al., 2011; Mollen and Wilson, 2010). Some researchers also add a social dimension (Hollebeek et al., 2019b; Brodie et al., 2013), which we posit is important in the VBC context, particularly given our dual U&G/social identity-based perspective.

Based on this literature synthesis, we refer to CBE as "consumers' psychological state of mind and intensity of their awareness, affection, participation, and connection with the brand" (Paruthi and Kaur, 2017, p. 133). In accordance with these authors, we conceive of CBE as a reflective second-order construct comprising conscious attention, affection, enthused participation and social connection as distinct dimensions that correspond to engagement's multidimensional nature (Hollebeek, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2019b). This view of CBE fits well within the VBC context that is characterized by consumer exchange, participation, and connection with the brand (e.g. through consumer contributions to new product development through online brand communities; De Valck et al., 2009; Baldus et al., 2015). Given that consumers devote extensive time interacting on VBCs; it is worthy to investigate the underlying forces characterizing their engagement with these communities (Baldus et al., 2015; Islam and Rahman, 2017). We next develop our research hypotheses and an associated model.

3. Research model and hypotheses

3.1. Brand community identification's effect on consumer brand engagement

Brand community identification (BCI) offers an important indicator of relationship strength or quality in VBCs (Chang et al., 2013). For example, consumers who identify with the community develop an emotional sense of belonging both to the brand and the community (Carlson et al., 2008). BCI thus represents users' sense of being part of the VBC (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Zhou et al., 2012), exhibiting similarity to Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) *consciousness of kind*. In addition, Muniz and Schau (2005) report that highly-identifying members tend to more actively participate in community-based discussions. In the car club context, Algesheimer et al. (2005) find community identification to exert a positive effect on community engagement (Wirtz et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015). We posit:

H1: *VBC-based brand community identification positively affects consumer brand engagement.*

3.2. Effect of reward on CBE

Reward refers to the benefits that community members desire through their VBC participation. While utilitarian benefits reflect the consumer's desire for functional reward (e.g. brand-related learning, deals and incentives), hedonic benefits are more experiential in nature (e.g. enjoyment, entertainment; Baldus et al., 2015). Reward is a key motivating driver of engagement in VBCs. For example, Cvjickj and Michahelles (2013) propose that entertaining (i.e. hedonic) Facebook content significantly affects users' engagement level (Chan et al., 2014). Moreover, Islam et al. (2018) advise marketers to offer personalized reward to their community members to induce engagement. Overall, prior research establishes the importance of both hedonic and utilitarian reward, which are

viewed to positively affect CBE in VBCs (Wirtz et al., 2013). Therefore, we propose:

H2: *VBC-based reward positively affects consumer brand engagement.*

3.3. Consumer brand engagement's effect on brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is defined as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, despite other situational and marketing factors that have the potential to induce switching behavior” (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). A key way to trigger, build, or foster brand loyalty is by engaging customers in VBCs (Islam and Rahman, 2017). Though prior research demonstrates brand loyalty as an important consequence of CBE (Hollebeek, 2011a), empirical investigation into this association is lacking (Bolton, 2011; Brodie et al., 2011, 2013; Bowden, 2009). In VBCs, the experience offered by consumer engagement helps in developing an emotional connection with consumers that makes them brand loyal (De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Gummerus et al., 2012). We posit that customers' brand loyalty can be strengthened by engaging consumers in brand-related virtual communities (De Valck et al., 2009). For example, consumer engagement can help develop emotional ties with buyers, thereby fostering their loyalty (De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Gummerus et al., 2012; Hollebeek et al., 2014; So et al., 2014, 2016).

We hypothesize:

H3: *VBC-based consumer brand engagement positively affects with brand loyalty.*

3.4. Effect of brand community identification on brand loyalty

Prior research advocates that brand community identification's positive effect on brand loyalty (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Chou, 2013). Given BCI's nature as a group-based phenomenon, the establishment of favorable BCI in VBCs is likely to draw user connectivity, support, and proactive community and brand contributions. Therefore, companies are establishing VBCs to build, maintain, and strengthen customer loyalty. We hypothesize:

H4: *Brand community identification positively affects brand loyalty.*

3.5. Effect of reward on brand loyalty

Reward are designed to motivate consumers to participate in VBC-based activity and enhance their brand connection, brand, thereby contributing to their brand loyalty and community sustenance (Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Jang et al., 2008; Meyer-Waarden, 2013). A creative, highly interactive, and enjoyable VBC can offer utilitarian, hedonic, and social benefits, thereby fostering users' brand and community-related interactivity and participation and in turn promoting brand loyalty (Chan et al., 2014). We posit:

H5: *Reward positively affects brand loyalty in VBCs.*

3.6. CBE's mediating effect in the proposed relationships

Our research model proffers that the relationship of BCI/reward and brand loyalty is mediated by CBE. Brand community identification indicates the extent to which a user identifies with the VBC (Chang et al., 2013), and is one of the main determinants of community engagement behavior (Füller et al., 2008; Tsai and Men, 2013). Moreover, Algesheimer et al. (2005) reveal that community engagement mediates the relationship between brand community identification and brand loyalty (Habibi et al., 2014). Accordingly, we propose:

H6: *Consumer brand engagement mediates the relationship between brand community identification and brand loyalty.*

Our research model also highlights the indirect effects of reward on brand loyalty through CBE. Previous research suggests that community characteristics positively affect CBE and loyalty (Chan et al., 2014). Community characteristics include system support, freedom of expression, community value, reward and recognition. In this study, when individuals get rewarded for their VBC participation, they become engaged and in turn exhibit an enhanced propensity for brand loyalty (Chan et al., 2014; Islam and Rahman, 2017). Therefore, we view CBE to mediate the effects of reward on brand loyalty. Thus, we propose:

H7: *Consumer brand engagement mediates the effect of reward on brand loyalty.*

Consistent with these hypotheses, our research model is presented in Fig. 1.

4. Research method

4.1. Sample and data collection

A survey of 750 students of an Indian university was conducted by using convenience sampling. After obtaining the required permission, the authors visited the various Departments of the university. Before the start of the lecture, students were briefed about the survey and were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation. Those willing to participate were given 15 min to complete the survey. Before distributing the questionnaire, students were provided with a definition of, and introduction to, VBCs by means of a 15-minute presentation. Definitions and examples of VBCs were also shared with the students, and student queries were answered by the main researcher.

To ensure respondent eligibility to complete the survey, relevant screening questions were first employed to rule out those students who did not use Facebook or were not members of at least one Facebook-based VBC. Respondents were then asked to name

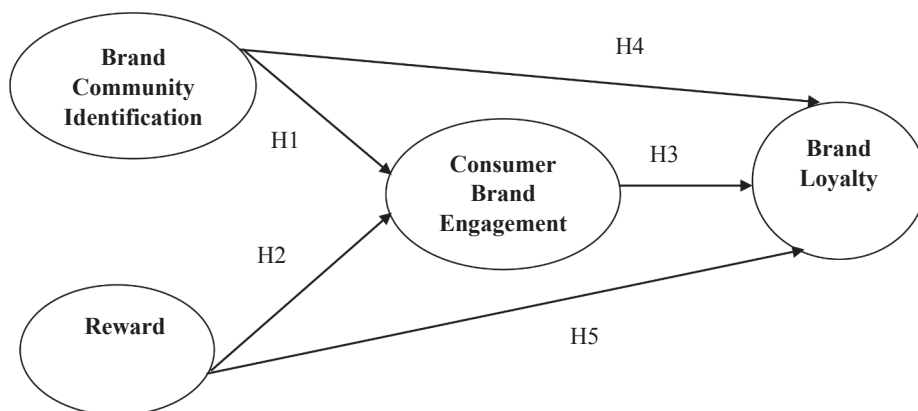


Fig. 1. Proposed Research Model.

at least one of their favorite Facebook-based VBCs that they followed and which' updates regularly appear in their newsfeed, after which they answered the survey questions with reference to their preferred VBC. A total of 680 completed questionnaires were received, 78 of which were incomplete, which were thus excluded from further analysis. Thus, 602 usable questionnaires were retained for further analysis. Those students who did not respond to the questionnaire cited a lack of interest/time as the main reasons for declining their survey participation.

Students of various Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. courses were chosen as the sampling frame in this study, as they tend to be among the more engaged Facebook users (Ahuja and Bharadwaj, 2016). They use Facebook not only to create a public profile, update their status, meet or make friends, but also to share their own user-generated content (Nadeem et al., 2015). We chose Facebook as the main research setting for this study given its high popularity and leading global position as a social networking site (Islam and Rahman, 2017).

Of the 602 completed responses, 324 (53.8%) were male and 278 (46.1%) female respondents. Out of 602 participants, 285 (47.34%) were enrolled in bachelor's, 222 (36.87%) in Master's, and 95 (15.7%) in Ph.D. courses. Most of the students' preferred VBCs were in the fashion, retail, or electronic goods sectors. The most commonly-liked brand pages were those of Maybelline, Sony, Adidas, Zara, Nike, and Apple. Respondents' main activities included sharing their brand-related experiences with other VBC members, participating in VBC discussions, accessing gamified brand-related content, and participating in (brand-related) surveys.

4.2. Measures

All of the constructs included in our model were measured by using well-established scales. Minor alterations were made to relevant scales as required, so as to ensure appropriate fit with our study context. A panel of three marketing academicians was contacted to validate the questionnaire, followed by a survey pre-test with 50 post-graduate students. The questionnaire comprised two sections. In the opening section, respondents were asked whether they had "liked" any brand's Facebook page in last six months, followed by general questions to capture their demographic profile. The second section measured the latent variables used in our study. Brand community identification was measured by using Bhattacharya et al. (1995) instrument. A sample item includes "when someone criticizes (my favourite brand community), it feels like personal insult to me." Reward was gauged through Baldus et al. (2015), with a sample item as "I enjoy being immersed on (my favourite brand community)." Brand loyalty was measured through Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) scale, with a sample item reading "I will use (my favourite brand community) next time I get online on Facebook." Finally, second-order CBE was gauged by using Paruthi and Kaur's (2017) measure, with a sample item reading "Engaging with (my favorite brand community) makes me feel happy." Table 1 shows the constructs and their corresponding measures. Seven-point Likert scales were employed to collect the responses, ranging from "1" (strongly agree) to "7" (strongly disagree)

5. Data analysis

We employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) by using AMOS 18.0 software to empirically test the proposed model and hypothesized relationships.

5.1. Measurement model assessment

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to test the reliability and validity of the constructs. The CFA results for the measurement model are presented in Table 2. To test the reliability of the constructs, Cronbach α was calculated. All Cronbach α values were found to exceed the recommended level of 0.70, thus demonstrating acceptable reliability. Items with weak (< 0.5) factor loadings were dropped, thus providing preliminary support for convergent validity. Further, "average variance extracted" (AVE)

Table 1
Construct Items.

Construct	Item
Consumer Brand Engagement: Conscious Attention (Paruthi and Kaur, 2017)	CA1: I like to know more about X. CA2: I like events that are related to X. CA3: I like to learn more about X. CA4: I pay a lot of attention to anything about X. CA5: I keep up with things related to X. CA6: Anything related to X grabs my attention
Consumer Brand Engagement: Affection (Paruthi and Kaur, 2017)	A1: Engaging with X makes me feel happy. A2: I feel the experience on X to be pleasurable. A3: Browsing X satisfies me.
Consumer Brand Engagement: Enthused participation (Paruthi and Kaur, 2017)	EP1: I spend a lot of my free time on X. EP2: I am heavily into X. EP3: I am passionate about X. EP4: I try to fit accessing X into my schedule.
Consumer Brand Engagement: Social connection (Paruthi and Kaur, 2017)	SC1: I love accessing X with my friends. SC2: I enjoy using X more when I am with others. SC3: X is more fun when other people around me also access it.
Brand Community Identification (Bhattacharya et al., 1995)	BCI1: X successes are my successes. BCI2: When someone praises X, it feels like a personal complement to me BCI3: When someone criticizes X, it feels like personal insult to me. BCI4: When I talk about X, I usually say “we” rather than “they”. BCI5: I am very interested in what others think about X. BCI6: I have strong feelings for X.
Reward (Baldus et al., 2015)	RW1: I like X because it is entertaining. RW2: I enjoy being immersed on X. RW3: My main aim of liking “X” is to access to deals, offers, coupons available. RW4: X provokes me to participate by offering lucrative deals. RW5: Without the special deals provided by X, I would stop being a member of it.
Brand Loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001)	Bloyalty1: I intend to keep on following X. Bloyalty2: I will go to X next time I go visit an online brand community. Bloyalty3: I would readily spend more time on X. Bloyalty4: I intend to reduce the usage of X in near future. Bloyalty5: I have strong preference for X. Bloyalty6: I will try new variants of X.

Note: (X denotes “my favorite brand community”).

values ranged from 0.556 to 0.733 and all the values were > 0.50 (Nazir and Islam, 2019; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Composite reliability was also computed and all values were found to be above the minimum acceptable level of 0.70 (Chin, 1998). Common method bias (CMB) was also checked by using Harman’s one-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Our results revealed that the first factor accounted for only 44.036% (i.e. < 50%) of the variance, confirming that CMB is not an issue in our study (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

We also assessed discriminant validity by comparing the shared variance among the constructs to the AVEs of the individual items (Nazir and Islam, 2017; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As illustrated in Table 2, the results revealed that the shared variance between the items (i.e. MSV, ASV) was less than the AVEs of the individual items, therefore confirming discriminant validity of our modelled constructs. To further access discriminant validity, we compared the squared root of each construct’s AVE with its parallel correlations” (Hair et al., 2010). As illustrated in Table 3, the squared root of each construct’s AVE surpassed its respective inter-construct correlations, thereby suggesting the existence of discriminant validity between our constructs (Islam and Rahman, 2016b; Hair et al., 2010).

5.2. Structural model assessment

We used SEM to test our hypotheses. The fit indices for the hypothesized model were CMIN = 1026.779 and df = 363, χ^2/df = 2.829, CFI = 0.943, NFI = 0.915, RMSEA = 0.055, and SRMR = 0.0557, indicating the model’s good fit to the data. All fit indices fell within the recommended range as CFI > 0.9, RMSEA < 0.05 (Hu and Bentler, 1999), NFI > 0.90 (Bentler and Bonett, 1980; Hooper et al., 2008) and SRMR < 0.09 (Brown, 2014), thus indicating acceptable model fit.

With respect to hypothesis testing, BCI was found to exert a positive effect on CBE (γ = 0.445, p < .001) thereby, supporting H1. The effect of reward on CBE (γ = 0.280, p < .001) was also found to be positive and significant, thereby, supporting H2. Further, CBE was found to exert a strong and positive effect on brand loyalty too (γ = 0.366, p < .001), supporting H3. The results of the hypotheses testing are summarized in Fig. 2 and Table 4.

Table 2
The results of CFA for the measurement model.

Construct	Dimension	Dimension Factor Loading	Item Label	Item Factor Loading (≥ 0.5)	Cronbach α	Composite Reliability (≥ 0.7)	AVE (≥ 0.5)	MSV	ASV
Consumer Brand Engagement	Conscious Attention	0.871	–	–	0.912	0.916	0.733	0.464	0.409
			CA1	0.786					
			CA2	0.750					
			CA3	0.800					
			CA4	0.803					
			CA5	0.806					
	Affection	0.921	CA6	0.801	0.888				
			A1	0.879					
			A2	0.860					
	Enthused Participation	0.829	A3	0.824	0.871				
			EP1	0.799					
			EP2	0.855					
			EP3	0.805					
	Social Connection	0.799	EP4	0.722	0.829				
			SC1	0.861					
SC2			0.759						
Brand Community Identification	–	–	SC3	0.729	0.902	0.900	0.601	0.464	0.341
			BCI 1	0.752					
			BCI 2	0.814					
			BCI 3	0.801					
			BCI 4	0.764					
			BCI 5	0.742					
			BCI 6	0.776					
Reward	–	–	RW 2	0.833	0.860	0.862	0.758	0.377	0.307
			RW 3	0.907					
			–	–					
Brand Loyalty	–	–	BL 1	0.756	0.873	0.862	0.556	0.386	0.307
			BL 2	0.795					
			BL 3	0.745					
			BL 4	0.722					
			BL 5	0.708					
			–	–					

Note: AVE = Average variance extracted, MSV = Maximum shared squared variance, ASV = Average shared square variance.

Table 3
Descriptive statistic, Inter-construct correlations, and Square root of AVE.

Variable	Mean	S.D.	CBE	BCI	RW	BL
CBE	4.24	1.70	0.856			
BCI	3.75	1.68	0.52*	0.775		
RW	4.18	1.74	0.51*	0.53*	0.870	
Brand loyalty	4.52	1.54	0.62*	0.63*	0.61*	0.745

Note: CBE depicts “consumer brand engagement”, BCI depicts “brand community identification”, RW depicts “reward”, and BL depicts “brand loyalty”. The figures in bold depict the square root of AVE; *Correlation is significant at 0.05 level; N = 602.

5.3. Mediation analysis

To examine the mediating (full/partial) effect of CBE on the relationships between BCI and reward on brand loyalty, we employed Baron and Kenny’s (1986) approach. Subsequently, we used bootstrapping, as suggested by Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010). In full mediation, the predictors (BCI and Reward) affect the outcome variable (Brand Loyalty) only through their effect on the mediator (CBE). Conversely, in partial mediation, the predictors (BCI and Reward) affect the criterion variable (Brand Loyalty) directly, as well as indirectly through its effect on the mediator variable (CBE; Baron and Kenny, 1986; Ekinci et al., 2008; Khan et al., 2016). As depicted in Table 4, BCI and Reward have direct positive effect on Brand Loyalty ($\gamma = 0.123$, $p < .001$; $\gamma = 0.129$, $p < .001$) respectively, thereby supporting H4 and H5. These results show that the effects of BCI and Reward are partially mediated by CBE. A plausible explanation for this finding is that BCI and Reward aimed to satisfy intrinsic and extrinsic consumer motivations, thereby facilitating their VBC-based engagement. In addition, engaged consumers are likely to be more contented as their informational, hedonic, and social needs are met. Consequently, they are expected to develop a favorable attitude towards the brand, which in turn drives brand loyalty. These findings further suggest that consumers who identify with a VBC and perceive the attainment of benefits from their VBC participation will tend to develop a psychological contract with the VBC, and consequently, the brand, culminating in

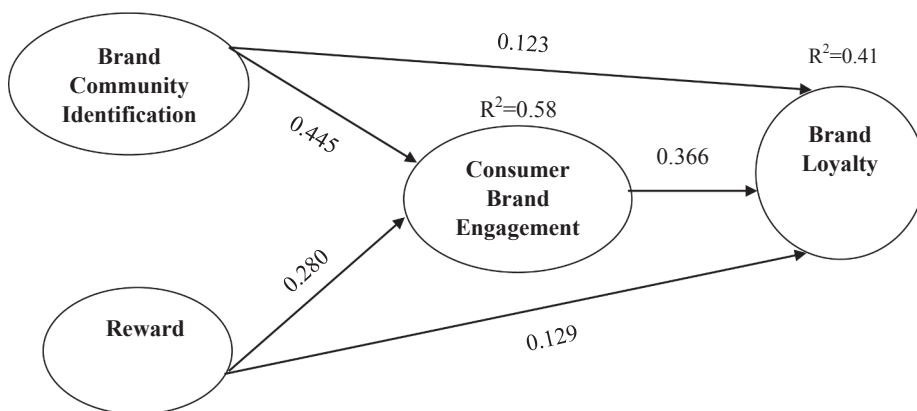


Fig. 2. Structural Model.

Table 4 Hypothesis testing.

Hypotheses	Path	Path Estimate	t-value	Test Results
H1	BCI → CBE	0.445	10.391	Supported
H2	Reward → CBE	0.280	7.641	Supported
H3	CBE → Brand Loyalty	0.366	5.996	Supported
H4	BCI → Brand Loyalty (via CBE)	0.123	2.583	Supported
H5	Reward → Brand Loyalty (via CBE)	0.129	3.301	Supported

Note: BCI = brand community identification; CBE = consumer brand engagement.

heightened brand loyalty.

6. Discussion

The emergent literature emphasizes the key role of CBE in consumer-brand relationships (e.g. Hollebeek and Solem, 2017; Islam et al., 2019a; Hollebeek et al., 2019b; Brodie et al., 2013). Building on the U&G and social identity perspectives, this study developed a model and empirically tested the role of brand community identification and reward in facilitating CBE’s development. In addition, we explored brand loyalty’s role as an outcome of CBE (Vivek et al., 2012; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Gummerus et al., 2012). Our results reveal that both brand community identification and reward significantly and positively affect CBE, thus aligning with prior findings (e.g. Algesheimer et al., 2005; Chan et al., 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2016; Tsai and Men, 2013, 2014). We also find CBE to mediate the association between brand community identification and brand loyalty, and between reward and brand loyalty, respectively. We next discuss important theoretical and practical implications that arise from this research.

6.1. Theoretical implications

The study adds to the CBE literature in the following ways. First, by uniting brand community identification, reward, CBE, and brand loyalty in a conceptual model, we offer a more granular understanding of specific intrinsic and extrinsic consumer motivations to engage within virtual brand communities. While prior research identifies a positive effect of brand identification and reward on customer loyalty (He and Li, 2011; Marin et al., 2009), little remains known about the effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors and CBE from a U&G/social identity theory perspective, as reported in this study. Therefore, our adoption of an integrative U&G/social identity theory perspective complements existing findings and further strengthens the conceptual claims of these theories in a social media context.

Relatedly, responding to the Marketing Science Institute’s call for further (empirical) investigation of social media-based CBE (MSI, 2016, 2018), we address the role of CBE in virtual brand communities with a focus on its reward- and identification based drivers and ensuing loyalty-based effects. As this particular combination of constructs, to the best of our knowledge, remains unexplored in prior research, our analyses offer new insight. Second, in light of these analyses, we find that brand community identification and reward are key in enhancing CBE. Therefore, given CBE’s nature as a proactive customer variable (Sasser, Kilgour, and Hollebeek, 2014; Brodie et al., 2013), the use of identification-fostering reward may be deployed as an integral firm strategy to build CBE and ensuing loyalty. Third, though the majority of CBE research has been conducted in developed countries, our exploration of the concept in a growth economy adds further insight to the body of CBE knowledge (Gupta et al., 2018; Hollebeek, 2018; Rather and Hollebeek, 2019; Sheth, 2011).

6.2. Managerial implications

This study also offers insight for marketing practitioners. First, as individuals' self- and group-identities tend to overlap, virtual brand communities represent important self/brand connection-fostering tools (Hollebeek et al., 2014). For example, in VBCs consumers can develop social bonds with other members and may perceive the community as a safe haven for their interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2017). Therefore, we recommend marketers to offer firm-hosted VBCs that allow consumers self-expression and the development of strengthened brand and organizational bonds. Correspondingly, virtual brand communities should provide a communal environment where users can share their brand-related experience and support one another. For example, companies can utilize the "peer linking" strategy conceptualized by Derville Gallicano (2009) to nurture or facilitate the development of community member relationships and to develop community identification. Such brand identification in turn is expected to boost CBE and loyalty. To cultivate community identification, marketers should focus their communication strategies on the commonalities, links, or fit between the brand, community and its users.

In addition, marketers may wish to devise tailored offers for particular VBC members, including by communicating with relevant VBC members via individual (e.g. private) messaging to raise particular topics of the individual's interest. The development of targeted content will be conducive to developing consumers' sense of VBC-related belonging and identification, stimulating their VBC loyalty. To develop community identification, hedonic and utilitarian reward may be used to satisfy users' affective, cognitive, or social needs, as per the U&G perspective (Hollebeek et al., 2016). Sample tactics include interactive quizzes, competitions, gamification, and teasers that encourage member participation and engagement.

Marketers may also wish to rank their community members based on their relative VBC contributions and offer relevant reward, particularly to those users who act as influencers or opinion leaders as these are also likely to attract new community users (Hollebeek et al., 2017). For example, brands may incentivize customer contributions through sales promotions (e.g. freebies or cents-off deals), elevated user (e.g. VIP) status, or monetary reward.

Moreover, our identified mediating role of CBE is significant for the development of firm-based engagement practices (Harmeling et al., 2017). Specifically, to create a loyal customer base, companies should focus on creating engaging social media experiences. We find that elevated CBE accrues through the satisfaction of users' brand community identification motive. Correspondingly, companies are advised to attract community users through utilitarian (i.e. informative), hedonic (e.g. entertainment) and social (e.g. social bonding) benefits, which in turn foster CBE and brand loyalty. When consumers feel their intrinsic needs are being met in virtual brand communities, they are likely to demonstrate citizenship behaviours such as helping other customers and disseminating positive brand-related word of mouth (Van Doorn et al., 2010). That is, by raising CBE, companies will build a more loyal customer base. In other words, customers who invest more in their brand relationship, are likely to be more loyal, thus highlighting CBE's strategic importance for firms.

7. Limitations and future research avenues

Despite its contributions, this study also has several limitations. First, a convenience (student) sample of students was deployed to collect our data, thereby yielding findings of potentially limited generalizability (e.g. reduced applicability to non-student customers). Therefore, further research may draw on probability sampling methods to ensure more generalizable results. Second, the proposed model was tested in the particular context of virtual brand communities. Consequently, it would be of interest to future scholars to examine the framework in offline contexts, or explore its dynamics in hybrid online/offline engagement platforms (Braidbach et al., 2014; Hollebeek, 2019). Third, our study examines brand loyalty as the sole consequence of CBE. However, further dependent variables may include the customer's willingness to pay a premium price for particular offerings, brand love, service innovation, and value co-creation. Finally, the proposed model is limited to the exploration of particular direct (e.g. mediated) associations. Therefore, the addition of relevant moderating variables (e.g. gender, culture) can yield further or refine existing insight.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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