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# The impact of brand communities on public and private brand loyalty: A field study in professional sports

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines the role that brand community plays in the relationship between brand identification and brand loyalty. A theoretical framework was developed and tested using an online survey in the brand community of a UK professional basketball team. Study results reveal that consumers' brand community identification has a significant direct relationship on both public and private brand loyalty. It also shows that brand community identification fully mediates the relationship between brand identification and consumer behavior towards the brand, which is enacted both publicly and privately. The study adds to academic understanding of brand identification, brand community theory, and the importance of the differentiation of public and private brand loyalty, whilst providing guidance for branding practitioners.

## 1. Introduction

Brand community research has enabled academics and practitioners to understand the complex networks that exist among admirers of specific brands (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). However, the downstream effect of brand communities, such as their potential to build consumer loyalty, remains unknown (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Kuenzel & Vaux Halliday, 2008; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Tuskej et al., 2013). This has meant that practitioners are left with little understanding regarding the role of brand communities and the vast effect that they have upon the consumers' overall relationship with the brand.

The lack of understanding of the power of brand communities has been further exacerbated during the global pandemic with the importance of community becoming even more prevalent in society (Stansfield et al., 2020). Throughout the pandemic, brands have looked to harness the power of community in their marketing communications (Sobande, 2020). Therefore, understandably, the extant research has called for a more nuanced understanding of brand community to be developed (Habibi et al., 2016). Our research aims to shed light on the mechanism under which (a) brand communities are developed, and (b) brand loyalty is strengthened. To achieve this, a theoretical framework

is developed explaining how brand identification is the key driver of brand community development and that brand community identification, in turn, affects both private and public brand loyalty. The model is empirically tested in the brand community of a professional basketball team.

Our study makes a twofold contribution. First, the research provides greater insight into the separate focuses of consumer identification with the brand and the brand community. This duality of identification has been recently exhibited during the failed launch of the European Super League in association football, with brand communities organizing large-scale demonstrations against their own clubs (The Guardian, 2021) and clearly displaying a separation between fans identifying with the brand community against the brand. This study specifically investigates the mediating role of brand community identification within the established relationship between brand identification and brand loyalty, thus providing new insights into the mechanisms through which brand communities generate positive brand outcomes (Woisetschlager et al., 2008; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Kumar, 2019; Won et al., 2020).

Second, the study contributes to loyalty research by separating the concept of loyalty into the public and private spheres, thus providing a greater understanding of the differences in mechanisms based on whether an individual's behavior is displayed in public forums or

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privately (Ratner & Kahn, 2002). Consequently, the study of potentially differing impacts that brand community identification has on the relationship between brand identification and different facets of brand loyalty is enabled. The findings will enable marketing managers to more effectively leverage brand communities to assist with the production of pro-brand consumer behaviors (European Commission, 2012; Grant et al., 2011; Kilduff et al., 2010; Madrigal, 2000; Ngan et al., 2011; Wetzal, 2018).

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Brand communities

Community has been the focal point of much philosophical and social thought in the past century (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Much of the debate has focused on the demise of community in the wake of the modernist world. This negative perception has been challenged recently as the use of the internet has grown in both scope and breadth, thus enabling the development of both online and offline communities, with exchanges taking place both digitally and in person (Islam & Rahman, 2017).

The influence that communities have on their members has attracted the interest of business scholars over many years (Dholakia et al., 2004), initially in combination with the understanding of consumption communities (Boorstin, 1974). Consumption communities establish and operate as a group of consumers whose common ground is based on the use of a particular product. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) later advanced the concept of consumption communities from the singular facet of product use to a community structure that is interested in the overall brand and all its constituent elements. They posit that brand communities are established by a group of individuals who have a shared admiration for, or identification with, a specific brand. Brand communities display many of the mainstream community's mores, such as a shared consciousness of kind, rituals, traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Shared consciousness of kind is the conscious appreciation of consumers that they are part of a larger group that is founded on the admiration of a specific brand. Thus, they feel connected to their fellow community members. The connections are often more aptly described as a relationship that stems from shared attitudes and values that are clearly contrasted with those of non-members and can be publicly displayed in the form of rituals and traditions (McAlexander et al., 2002). The rituals and traditions are, in turn, designed to reaffirm the community and embody its values and norms. Members will continually strive to maintain the traditions as part of their sense of moral responsibility for the community. Members might also take it upon themselves to defend the community and its members, as well as proactively promote their community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Through such actions, the individuals aim to promote the perception of commitment to the community and its objectives to other community members (Marzocchi et al., 2013).

The original conception of brand communities as a triadic relationship has later been repositioned to a more complex consumer-centric model, which was termed as integration into brand community (IBC) (McAlexander et al., 2002). McAlexander et al. (2002) explain that the consumer has a much higher integration into the brand community than originally suggested. Indeed, the consumer has more than one "touch point" with a brand and experiences the brand through the products, marketer, interaction with other consumers, and the brand itself.

Needless to say, continued participation in the brand community by its members is critical for its long-term survival and success. Participation in a brand community can take numerous forms including emphasizing, assisting, mingling, appreciating, celebrating, and ranking (Hollebeek et al., 2017). These practices provide the social lubrication needed for the brand community to operate effectively including the sharing of meaning and the creation of value (Holt, 1995).

Member participation in the brand community is impacted by their

sense of both individual and collective ownership of the brand community (Kumar, 2019). Pedeliento et al. (2020) explain that brand communities that are run by the members rather than the brand result in higher levels of participation and commitment, whilst Burgess and Christian (2020) provide further insight into brand communities' importance to their members through their study of a forced brand community closure. Specifically, reactions from members of the closed community included disbelief, pleading, distress, and ultimately acceptance. These are reactions closely resembling the traditional stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

Although the primary focus of much extant brand community research is based on physical face-to-face communities, the recent rise in both the prevalence and power of brand communities must be attributed to the non-geographic (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and non-time-constrained (Szmigin & Alexander, 2004) nature of them. Brand-focused virtual communities are often termed online brand communities (OBC).

OBCs were ultimately spawned from the specific individual needs that were either functional –with members searching for information – or hedonic, where members aimed to entertain themselves (De Vries et al., 2012). Kamboj and Rahman's (2017) literature review introduced antecedents to OBC membership among consumers including, psychological, hedonic, and functional attributes. Hook et al. (2017) generally concurred with the prior research by presenting social-related, self-related, entertainment-related, information-related, and technology-related as the five antecedent categories of brand community participation.

Although membership of an OBC is voluntary, it still acts as a reference group with regard to the OBC members' behavior. In fact, it is the voluntary nature of the membership that may be the reason that OBC membership has greater influence over individuals' behaviors than membership of traditional geographically bound communities (de Valck et al., 2009). An OBC's reference-group influence is founded on members communicating expected norms and reporting their own actual behavior (de Valck et al., 2009), providing the community members with the expectation of receiving rewards or punitive action depending on whether their behaviors align with community expectations or not. This influence would logically impact many of the expected outcomes of OBC membership including purchase intention (Hur et al., 2011; Kumar, 2019), WOM (Kumar, 2019; Woisetschlager et al., 2008), brand commitment (Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Won et al., 2020), brand trust (Laroche et al., 2012), and brand loyalty (Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Laroche et al., 2012).

### 2.2. Brand identification

Brand identification has been cited as an antecedent of numerous pro-brand behaviors including loyalty (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), word of mouth (WOM) (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Kuenzel & Vaux Halliday, 2008; Tuskej et al., 2013), feedback (Ahearne et al., 2005), commitment (Tuskej et al., 2013), and repurchase (Kuenzel & Vaux Halliday, 2008).

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) posit that customers develop an identification with a company when the identity of the company: i) is similar to their own; ii) is distinctive from others; and iii) provides a level of prestige. With these factors in place, consumers will utilize their identification with the company to develop and display their self-concept. However, most extant research examines consumers' brand identification in a vacuum and has not accounted for the social impact on consumers. Research exploring potential relationships between brand identification and group-focused constructs is therefore scarce.

Building on Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) introduced "social brand benefits" alongside "brand warmth" and "memorable brand experiences" as an antecedent to brand identification. Their work demonstrated the power that social factors have on

brand identification since the antecedent of “brand social benefits” was presented as the strongest tested. [Tuškej et al. \(2013\)](#) are among the few scholars that have introduced social factors as a mediating force into the relationship between brand identification and pro-brand outcomes. They posit that the pressure a consumer feels to conform to social pressures partially mediates the effect brand identification has on a consumer’s propensity to partake in WOM activity. Although this demonstrates the potential mediating power of social factors in the conceptualization of brand identification and pro-brand outcomes, there is very little empirical research that explores it further.

### 2.3. Private vs public loyalty

Inspired by [Ratner and Kahn’s \(2002\)](#) work on private versus public consumption, we define public brand loyalty as a person’s tendency to enact behaviors towards a brand that are clearly observable by others whilst private brand loyalty is seen as a consumer’s tendency to enact behaviors towards a brand that are not clearly observable by others.

[Ratner and Kahn \(2002\)](#) posit that individual behavior is altered when it is observed by others compared to when it constitutes a private act. [Cheng et al. \(2015\)](#) explain that impression management is the antecedent to this behavioral change. Impression management can manifest itself in behavior through either reactive defensive strategies, such as minimizing or removing behaviors that negatively affect social image, or proactive assertive strategies that are designed to enhance social image ([Cheng et al., 2015](#)). The individual is motivated by both the positive and the negative implications that different behavioral options will have for their social identity ([Tetlock & Manstead, 1985](#)).

Social identity theory posits that individuals’ conscious membership of groups that they value and are committed to is integral to their self-concept ([Tajfel, 1982](#)). This definition has subsequently enabled academics to conceptualize social identity as a second-order construct with cognitive, affective, and evaluative first-order factors ([Ellemers et al., 1999](#)). The cognitive dimension captures the individual’s conscious awareness of membership of a group. The affective element is the commitment that the individual feels towards the group. The evaluative dimension is the value that the individual places on membership of the group. In order to facilitate interpreting the social world, individuals utilize categorization to place others and themselves within groups ([Ellemers et al., 1999](#)). This understanding enables individuals to utilize groups, such as brand communities, to display their self-concept externally and are integral to the development and maintenance of self-esteem by individuals. Therefore, social identity theory provides theoretical support for the conceptualization that impression management in groups such as brand communities is critical to the self-concept and self-esteem of consumers. As a brand community becomes more important to individuals, and integral to their self-concept, the more pressure individuals feel to maintain their membership. [Algesheimer et al. \(2005\)](#) claim that, when consumers become more engaged with a brand community, they feel an increase in normative pressure to comply with the group’s behavioral expectations. Ultimately, this impacts their intentions to not only remain loyal to the brand and the community but

also to be seen to remain loyal.

### 3. Theoretical framework and hypothesis development

The extant literature has enabled the development of our theoretical framework as presented in [Fig. 1](#) where we attempt to develop a greater understanding of the influence that brand community identification has upon both public and private brand loyalty, and, in particular, the mediating role that brand community identification has in the relationship between brand identification and both public and private brand loyalty.

As mentioned, our research separates the concept of brand loyalty into two distinct dimensions of public and private brand loyalty. The importance of this is enhanced because existing research has somewhat neglected the impact that social influences have on the public consumption behavior of consumers ([Ratner & Kahn, 2002](#)). The division of brand loyalty into public and private facets is also supported by the extant literature ([Cheng et al., 2015](#); [Froming et al., 1982](#); [Lin et al., 2013](#)) with the separation of public and private behavior having been explored in numerous contexts including variety seeking behavior ([Ratner & Kahn, 2002](#)), public face and private thrift ([Lin et al., 2013](#)), conspicuous consumption ([Veblen, 2007](#)), and public indulgence ([Cheng et al., 2015](#)).

[Froming et al. \(1982\)](#) suggest that the different impact that public or private consumption has on an individual’s behavior could be related to whether the individual is focused on the private or public self. If individuals are paying attention to the private self, their behavior will be more closely guided by their personal attitudes. This contrasts with circumstances where individuals focus on their public self in which societal expectations play a greater role in their behavior. [Ariely and Levav \(2000\)](#) explain that individuals are constantly having to balance their pursuit of individual goals and goals favored by the group, which generates variance in behavior depending on the dominant focus. [Ratner and Kahn \(2002\)](#) state that it is the level of observability of the individual’s consumption that motivates differing behavioral acts; when their consumption is being observed by others, individuals are more focused on their public self and, therefore, their behavior will adjust accordingly.

The current study specifically examines brand communities as a group structure and the impact that this has upon members’ individual brand loyalty, both private and public. Brand communities have been selected as the focus of this study because they are considered to be important reference groups for individual members of the community ([de Valck et al., 2009](#)). Brand community identification as supported by social identity theory ([Tajfel, 1982](#)) is used to present the relationship that members have with the brand community. Brand community identification has been selected based on precedence in the extant research ([Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006](#); [Popp & Woratschek, 2017](#); [Zhou et al., 2012](#)) as a predictor to behavior ([Dholakia et al., 2004](#)). [Tuomela \(1995\)](#) introduced the concept of we-intentions as the commitment from an individual to participate in a joint action, agreed either implicitly or explicitly, within a group. [Bagozzi and Dholakia \(2006\)](#) use this

Figure 1. Proposed Theoretical Framework

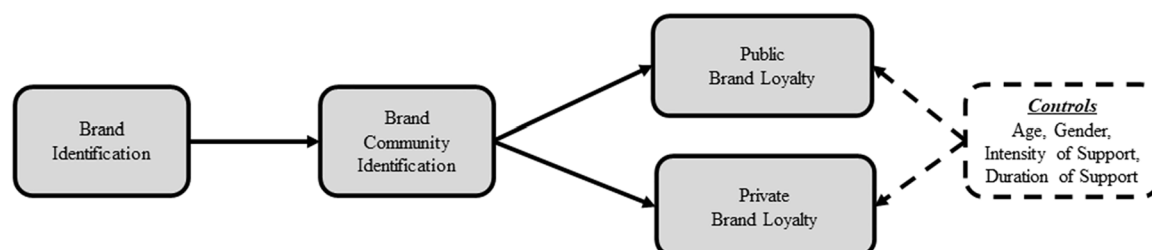


Fig. 1. Proposed conceptual model.

conceptualization to posit that brand community identification is an indirect antecedent to “social intention”. Ariely and Levav (2000) suggest that groups, such as brand communities, exert an impact on individual members’ behavior through a collective intention to undertake joint action. Therefore:

- H1a. Brand community identification is positively related to public brand loyalty.  
 H1b. Brand community identification is positively related to private brand loyalty.

To date, most of the research on both brand identification (BI) and brand community identification (BCI) has aimed to disclose the brand-related outcomes of the respective constructs. In fact, both BI and BCI have been cited as antecedents to WOM (BI – Kuenzel & Vaux Halliday, 2008; Popp & Woratschek, 2017; Woratschek et al., 2014) (BCI – Demiray & Burnaz, 2019; Popp & Woratschek, 2017; Woisetschlager et al., 2008), purchase (BI – Kuenzel & Vaux Halliday, 2008) (BCI – Demiray & Burnaz, 2019), brand commitment (BI – Tuškej et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2012) (BCI – Zhou et al., 2012), and brand loyalty (BI – Coelho et al., 2018; Popp & Woratschek, 2017; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) (BCI – Habibi et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding the above contributions, very few articles have examined these constructs within the same model. Marzocchi et al. (2013) looked to explore whether brand community members were loyal to the brand or the community. They presented both brand identification and brand community identification as direct antecedents to brand affect, brand trust, and attitudinal loyalty, with the latter mediating the relationships with behavioral loyalty, social promotion, and physical promotion. Zhou et al. (2012) hypothesized brand identification as a direct driver of brand commitment and brand attachment, whilst brand community identification’s relationship with brand attachment and brand commitment was conceptualized as mediated by brand community commitment. The results of these studies support the premise that both the brand and the brand community provide distinct foci for consumers to identify with, and that both forms of identification have significant effects on brand loyalty.

Algesheimer et al. (2005) postulate that it is the quality of the brand–customer relationship that directly contributes to the customer’s identification with the brand community. This relationship was tested empirically by Martínez-López et al. (2017) who conceptualized brand identification as a direct antecedent to brand community identification. Marzocchi et al. (2013) did not hypothesize any relationship between brand identification and brand community identification. However, they did include them in the same model, and they presented findings indicating community identification’s stronger effect on attitudinal brand loyalty. Although this does not support the claim of mediation, it certainly provides impetus for further investigation. Therefore:

- H2. Brand community identification mediates the effect of brand identification on (a) public brand loyalty and (b) private brand loyalty.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Research context

To empirically investigate the hypotheses, the context of professional sports was selected. Professional sports have become the focus of an increasing amount of academic research (Wetzel, 2018), prompted by the continuing growth in the economic impact that professional sports have globally. The European Commission commissioned a report in 2012 to gain a greater understanding of the impact of sport on economic growth and employment within the 27 EU member states (European Commission, 2012). The report concluded that sports contributed €294bn annually to the total GDP of the European Union (EU) and

provided employment for over 5 million people (2.42% of total EU employment). This illustrates the importance of professional sports economically and provides justification for an increased focus on professional sports in academic research.

Conceptually, professional team sports have clear and defined “contemporary communities” (Grant et al., 2011), and they provide suitable data to test the proposed theoretical framework. The sports context has been extensively employed in previous research on related subjects (Kilduff et al., 2010; Madrigal, 2000; Ngan et al., 2011). It provides access to the highly public nature of brand communities within the sporting world, as sports fans proactively gravitate toward their favorite teams. This study relies on a survey conducted in the setting of the UK professional basketball domain. In particular, the current research focuses on the fans of the UK’s most successful professional basketball team, the Newcastle Eagles. The Newcastle Eagles were a founding member of the UK’s elite basketball competition, the British Basketball League (BBL), and have won 18 trophies in the league’s thirty-year history. Their extensive history and success have created a strong following with match attendances often exceeding 3,000, thus placing them in the top 25% of the league for attendances. Its status as one of the most followed clubs in the league is reaffirmed with Newcastle having the third highest social media following in the BBL. Such levels of online engagement justify this study’s focus because they provide a wider breadth of respondents. Although the fan base and revenues in the chosen context are dwarfed in comparison to the behemoths of professional European and US sports (Ozanian, 2021), the context is still an interesting one since it enables the study of brand communities among small and mid-level brands vis-a-vis large brands, such as Harley Davidson (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), Apple (Muniz & Schau, 2005), Jeep (McAlexander et al., 2002) and Swatch (Ouwensloot & Oederkerken-Schroder, 2008), which have been the primary focus of most of the extant research.

### 4.2. Data collection approach

The survey was promoted on the club’s social media channels during the 2018/2019 season and emailed as part of a club newsletter to 7,093 subscribed email addresses. The lead researcher administered the data collection email. It outlined the purpose of the survey, how the data collected was to be used, and by whom, and it provided a link to complete the survey. Through this distribution, 298 usable completed surveys were obtained for a 4.2% effective response rate. This relatively low response rate is to be expected given that the average open rate for marketing communication emails from professional basketball clubs in the UK is below 10% – a figure was obtained through pre-study interviews with club management. On this basis, we can assume that only 710 were opened which equates to an actual response rate of approximately 42%. Comparisons between early and late respondents on key study variables and demographic characteristics revealed no significant differences, thus indicating an absence of non-response bias (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). The sample comprised 182 male (61.1%) and 116 female (38.9%) respondents. The mean age was 25 years old with a standard deviation of 13.9. Of the sample, 98 (32.9%) were season ticket holders whilst 128 (43%) intended to purchase a season ticket the following season.

The introduction to the survey outlined the purpose and structure of the research and also made clear that information provided by participants would be anonymized, which assisted in the reduction of social desirability bias (Oppenheim, 1992). Details of entry to a prize draw for a chance to win a signed club kit were included for all participants who completed the survey. The survey addressed the theoretical framework in reverse order to overcome respondent fatigue by presenting the questions in a logical manner (Dillman, 2007). Therefore, the loyalty constructs were measured first, followed by brand identification and brand community identification. In each section, the items were randomized to reduce the systematic impact the order of questions could

have upon the respondents' answers (Dillman, 2007).

### 4.3. Measures

The study constructs were measured utilizing reliable scales that were previously evidenced. They were refined for the purposes of this research based on interviews with two experts in branding and a small pretest (n = 20) with potential respondents. The construct selection and the pretesting procedure were in line with precedence and recommendations in the related literature (Donbesuur et al., 2020; Hultman et al., 2021; Strandberg et al., 2020) and ordered systematically to ensure maximum content and psychometric validity and reliability. The pretest participants represented sports fans across a wide variety of teams and sport categories to ensure the question wording would be generalizable, transferrable, and not limited to the club and sport under investigation. The pre-test resulted in minor changes in the wording and ordering of some of the questions but was generally well received by the panel. The full list of items and their basic measurement properties are presented in Table 1.

The scale used to assess brand community identification was based on items developed by Algesheimer et al. (2005). The brand identification scale utilized by Gwinner and Swanson (2003) was the basis for this study's contextually relevant set of brand identification items. Public brand loyalty comprised items previously employed by Gau et al. (2009) and Jahn and Kunz (2012). Three items were deployed to measure private brand loyalty that were previously validated through their use by Gau et al. (2009) and Jahn and Kunz (2012). In addition to the focal constructs, the study incorporated several control variables including gender, the respondent's age, team support duration (a 6-point scale measuring how many years they had been a fan ranging

**Table 1**  
Study constructs and measurement properties.

Constructs and items	Loadings	t-values <sup>b</sup>
<b>Brand Identification (α = 0.807, CR = 0.806, AVE = 0.632)</b>		
When someone criticizes Newcastle Eagles (NE) it feels like a personal insult	0.731	11.483
I am very interested in what others think about NE	0.618	9.297
NE successes are my successes	0.879	14.798
When someone praises NE, it feels like a personal complement	0.898	15.267
If a story in the media criticized NE, I would feel embarrassed <sup>a</sup>	–	–
<b>Brand Community Identification (α = 0.890, CR = 837, AVE = 0.626)</b>		
Other NE fans and I share the same objectives	0.750	11.877
I see myself as a part of the NE fan community	0.840	13.908
The friendships I have with other NE fans mean a lot to me	0.710	11.049
I am very attached to the community of NE fans.	0.818	13.400
If NE fans planned something, I'd think of it as something 'we' would do rather than something 'they' would do	0.830	13.677
<b>Public Brand Loyalty (α = 0.884, CR = 0.814, AVE = 0.594)</b>		
I will recommend NE to other people	0.912	15.754
I will introduce NE to other people	0.810	13.273
I will wear NE apparel on a regular basis	0.854	14.300
I will wear NE clothing when I attend a game <sup>a</sup>	–	–
<b>Private Brand Loyalty (α = 0.724, CR = 0.753, AVE = 0.616)</b>		
I intend to remain loyal to NE in the Future	0.886	14.810
I will continue to think of myself as a loyal supporter of NE	0.834	13.682
I will watch sports broadcasts on the local TV news for information about NE	0.607	8.332
I will not stop supporting NE <sup>a</sup>	–	–

Fit indexes:  $\chi^2_{(84d.f.)} = 144.157$ ; NFI = 0.965; NNFI = 0.981; CFI = 0.985; SRMR = 0.070; RMSEA = 0.049.

<sup>a</sup> Item omitted during scale purification.

<sup>b</sup> All loadings are statistically significant (p > .001).

from “less than a year” to “more than 5 years”), and team support intensity (an 8-point scale measuring the number of games they attended last season ranging from 0 to 18+). The team support duration and intensity control variables were added as proxies for brand familiarity based on the pre-study interview results.

Potential common method bias (CMB) concerns were obviated by adopting procedural remedies at the questionnaire development stage, such as using physical separation between measurement items in the questionnaire in order to make prior responses less salient and available. Some predictor and criterion variables were also counterbalanced to make the expected construct interconnections less predictable to respondents (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In addition, statistical tests to control the presence of CMB were conducted by performing a single-factor test in which a superordinate construct was estimated, reflected in all the study's manifest variables, using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The CFA fit statistics show poor fit with the data ( $\chi^2_{(90)} = 1416.531$ , p < .001; NFI = 0.654; NNFI = 0.612; CFI = 0.667; SRMR = 0.230; RMSEA = 0.223). In order to further mitigate the CMB risk, a marker variable test (Lindell & Whitney, 2001) was performed, where the second smallest correlation (i.e., 0.27) among the study's manifest variables was identified and used as a proxy for CMB (Hultman et al., 2021). This proxy's average correlation with the remaining study variables was subsequently used as a basis for calculating a new CMB-adjusted correlation matrix using Lindell and Whitney's (2001) equations. The procedure resulted in negligible differences between the original and the CMB-adjusted inter-construct correlations ( $\Delta r \leq 0.036$ ) and no change in the pattern of significant and non-significant correlations overall. Based on these tests, it was concluded that CMB is unlikely to impact the study results.

## 5. Analysis and results

To evaluate the reliability and validity of the constructs, an additional CFA using EQS was employed based on the elliptical reweighted least squares (ERLS) estimation method, which has been evidenced to yield unbiased parameter estimates for both multivariate normal and non-normal data (Sharma et al., 1989). Following Anderson and Gerbing (1988), each item in the model was restricted to load on its preassigned factor, while the latent factors were set to correlate freely. The CFA resulted in an initial omission of three poorly performing items (see Table 1) that displayed a loading below 0.5 (Hair et al., 2010). The final CFA results in Table 1 reveal a model that fits the data well within the acceptable ranges ( $\chi^2_{(84)} = 144.157$ ; NFI = 0.965; NNFI = 0.981; CFI = 0.985; SRMR = 0.070; RMSEA = 0.049).

The information in Table 1 further demonstrates how the measures used meet key reliability and validity requirements. Specifically, all factor loadings exceed 0.6, the α scores exceed 0.7, and composite reliability (CR) values are 0.75 or above, which indicates acceptable convergent validity and reliability. Moreover, the lowest average variance extracted (AVE) value is 0.59, and the square roots of the AVE values are greater than the correlation between each pair of constructs, indicating good discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations of the study constructs and control variables.

### 5.1. Hypothesis testing

To analyze the hypothesized direct relationships between the constructs, a full information structural equation model (SEM) using the ERLS method was employed. Following established procedures (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), the single-item control variables were assumed to have a reliability of 0.90 for module estimation purposes. The results imply a model with acceptable fit with the data ( $\chi^2_{(115)} = 209.763$ ; NFI = 0.981; NNFI = 0.982; CFI = 0.985; SRMR = 0.080; RMSEA = 0.077). Table 3 shows the standardized parameter estimates and the directional significance levels for the investigated main effects

**Table 2**  
Descriptive statistics and correlations<sup>a,b</sup>

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Brand identification	0.795							
2. Brand community identification	0.588	0.791						
3. Public brand loyalty	0.257	0.324	0.771					
4. Private brand loyalty	0.318	0.436	0.724	0.785				
5. Team support duration	0.008	0.057	0.034	0.107	–			
6. Tem support intensity	0.171	0.358	0.130	0.249	0.370	–		
7. Gender	0.041	0.035	0.159	0.082	-0.125	0.049	–	
8. Age	0.089	0.105	0.075	0.099	0.193	0.257	0.027	–
Mean	4.478	4.996	6.548	6.418	4.460	5.410	1.390	25.390
Standard Deviations	1.472	1.489	0.798	0.909	1.698	2.433	0.488	13.927

<sup>a</sup> Correlations above and below 0.125 are significant at the 0.05 level and correlations above and below 0.171 are significant at the 0.01 level.

<sup>b</sup> Square root of AVE is reported on the diagonal.

**Table 3**  
Structural equation model results.

Independent variables	Dependent variables		
	Brand community identification β (t-value)	Public brand loyalty β (t-value)	Private brand loyalty β (t-value)
Age		0.097 (0.464)	0.020 (0.335)
Gender		0.150 (2.435)*	0.071 (1.190)
Tem support intensity		0.001 (0.008)	0.079 (1.223)
Team support duration		0.031 (0.473)	0.063 (0.987)
Brand identification	0.588 (11.180)***	0.097 (1.291)	0.099 (1.371)
Brand community identification		0.259 (3.446)***	0.348 (4.808)***
	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.346	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.130	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.192

( $\chi^2_{(115 \text{ d.f.})} = 209.763$ ; NFI = 0.981; NNFI = 0.982; CFI = 0.985; SRMR = 0.080; RMSEA = 0.077).

\*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001. Critical t-values are, respectively, 1.96, 2.58, and 3.29 (two-tailed test).

and control paths.

The SEM results reveal a positive significant relationship between brand community identification and both public brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.259$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and private brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.348$ ,  $p < .001$ ), in support of H1a and H1b, respectively. Considering the difference between the standardized estimates and the explained variance in the dependent variables (public loyalty  $r^2 = 13$ ; private loyalty  $r^2 = 19$ ), a difference of slopes test was conducted to establish whether the effect differences were indeed significant. The results of the test indicate no significant difference ( $t = 1.497$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The SEM results further reveal, as expected, a strong significant positive relationship between brand identification and brand community identification ( $\beta = 0.588$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r^2 = 0.346$ ) but mainly non-significant relationships between the control variables and the loyalty constructs. The only exception to this is the relationship between gender and public brand loyalty where men appear to engage in such behavior to a higher extent ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Although the overall pattern of significant and insignificant relationships revealed by the SEM suggests a mediating role by brand community identification, there is insufficient evidence to conclude mediation as per H2a and H2b. Instead, mediation was tested using the PROCESS macro for SPSS with 5000 bootstraps (model 4) (Hayes, 2018). Gender, age, intensity of support, and duration of support were included in the model as covariates. The PROCESS model showed a significant relationship between brand identification and brand community identification,  $t(292) = 11.882$  ( $p < .001$ ) and between brand community identification and public brand loyalty  $t(291) = 3.601$  ( $p < .001$ ). The results of the bootstrap showed the total effect of brand identification of

public loyalty to be significant,  $t(292) = 4.160$  ( $p < .001$ ). However, with the inclusion of the mediator into the model, the direct effect becomes insignificant,  $t(291) = 0.0531$  ( $p = .153$ ). The role of brand community identification as a mediator in the relationship between brand identification and public brand loyalty is further supported by the presence of a significant indirect effect (CI: 0.034, 0.133). These results support H2a, which posits that brand community identification fully mediates the relationship between brand identification and public brand loyalty.

The same analysis procedure was also implemented to test H2b, which posited that brand community identification mediated the relationship between brand identification and private brand loyalty. Alongside the established significant relationship between brand identification and brand community identification, this analysis presented a significant relationship between brand community identification and private brand loyalty,  $t(291) = 5.031$  ( $p < .001$ ). The bootstraps also presented a significant total effect of brand identification on private brand loyalty,  $t(291) = 5.142$  ( $p < .001$ ). However, once again, the inclusion of brand community identification as a mediator in this model presented an insignificant direct effect of brand identification on private brand loyalty,  $t(291) = 1.522$  ( $p > .05$ ). This inclusion of brand community identification as a mediator also shows a significant indirect effect in the model (CI: 0.067, 0.182), suggesting that brand community identification fully mediates the relationship between brand identification and private brand loyalty, therefore supporting H2b.

### 5.2. Additional analysis

Additional analyses were conducted to ensure adequate sample power and to rule out potential reverse causality issues. First, although the non-response bias test does not indicate any serious concerns, the relatively low response rate may raise some concerns with regard to the statistical power of the obtained results. Therefore, a *post hoc* power analysis was conducted based on the highest variance explained in the main analysis (i.e., brand community identification:  $r^2 = 0.346$ ) and the obtained degrees of freedom. This analysis revealed that the study sample is appropriate for the tested model (power = 0.990;  $\alpha$  err prob = 0.001;  $df = 115$ ; critical  $F = 1.669$ ; noncentrally parameter  $\lambda = 157.657$ ), and that a sample of 227 respondents (at  $p < .05$ ) would have been sufficient for this study's achieved effect size.

Second, the contention that brand loyalty may cause increases in brand community identification levels, thus generating reverse causality problems, was ruled out. Results of a reversed modelling approach with both loyalty constructs as predictors instead of outcomes of brand community identification show that neither public brand loyalty ( $\beta = -0.018$ ,  $p > .10$ ) nor private brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.193$ ,  $p > .05$ ) significantly cause variation in brand community identification, whilst brand identification does ( $\beta = 0.647$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This shows that reverse causality is unlikely.

## 6. Discussion

This study empirically supports the hypothesized mediating role that brand community identification has in the relationship between brand identification and both private and public brand loyalty. The initial contribution of this paper is the separation of brand loyalty into distinct private and public sub-dimensions. Although this conceptualization is supported by the extant literature (Cheng et al., 2015; Froming et al., 1982; Lin et al., 2013), research exploring this in the brand community domain are lacking. The current literature primarily presents brand community's impact as rather homogenous across product categories and industries. Our study points to a more nuanced guidance for both future research and marketing practitioners. By separating brand loyalty into private and public dimensions, the work of Dholakia et al. (2004) and Marzocchi et al. (2013), who both posit that brand community identification is strongly related to brand loyalty, has been extended. The current findings support and extend this conceptualization by stating that brand community identification is associated with both private and public brand loyalty at potentially differing levels.

In the current study, brand community identification was measured utilizing both cognitive and affective elements of social identity. The cognitive element suggests that an individual member has a conscious awareness of community membership (Algesheimer et al., 2005), requiring the individual to undertake a categorization process by which individuals are classed as in-group (members of the brand community) or out-group (non-members of the brand community) (Ellemers et al., 1999). Therefore, for members to maintain their membership of the brand community, it is important to signal their in-group status. This provides the basis for the physical manifestation of rituals and traditions, which are considered a key marker of brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). By engaging in rituals and traditions, the individual is conforming to the expected norms and values of the community and, in return, will receive a positive reinforcing response from fellow members (Laroche et al., 2012). In the context of our study, this behavior can be manifested in sports fans wearing replica jerseys of players that are from the club's history and, in many cases, fans of sports teams wearing replica jerseys of players that retired long before they were even born. This public display of brand loyalty enables them to exhibit their membership of the brand community and, to some extent, demonstrate their seniority within the group. It is vital for practitioners to understand the brand communities that are associated with their brand in greater depth. Understanding the expected norms, values, and behaviors of the group will enable the marketer to proactively facilitate the development and display of rituals and traditions. These rituals and traditions will further enhance the consumers' brand community identification and generate higher levels of public brand loyalty.

The affective element of social identity captures brand community members' emotional attachment or commitment to the group (Algesheimer et al., 2005). This acts as a driver for in-group favoritism (Ellemers et al., 1999) and, therefore, provides the impetus to both promote and defend the brand community. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) conceptualized this sense of moral responsibility as one of their brand community markers, suggesting that brand community members feel responsible for the survival and success of the community and that motivates them to proactively recruit new members and to assist in maintaining the satisfaction of existing ones (Woisetschlager et al., 2008).

For practitioners, it is important to facilitate brand community members in their need to promote and defend the brand community. There are many tactics that would assist in this process, such as sending them products to test and review or even providing them with formal training on product usage. Marketers must also exploit the opportunities that social media has provided in this context. For example, in 2016, Facebook enabled individual users to customize their profile picture with the inclusion of a "frame" that enabled individuals to show their affiliation to a group through a branded border on their profile picture.

Consumer resistance to the use of such methods has been shown to be reduced for individuals who have a high level of identification with a brand community (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Therefore, marketers could work with brand communities to provide them with "frames" that enable brand community members to display their allegiance to the brand community rather than the brand. This public display of affective commitment to the brand community will increase brand community identification and, in turn, lead to further public displays of brand loyalty.

The second contribution of our research is the empirically supported conceptualization of brand community identification mediating the relationship between brand identification and both private and public brand loyalty. Building on Marzocchi et al. (2013) and Zhou et al. (2012), this study has sought to explore the relationship between individuals' identification with a brand and their identification with a brand community. As supported by Algesheimer et al. (2005) and Martínez-López et al. (2017), consumers need to develop a strong relationship, or to have developed identification directly with the brand, before they would identify with the associated brand community. However, our results indicate that, once developed, consumers' identification with the brand community becomes essential because brand community identification fully mediates the impact that direct identification with the brand has on both private and public brand loyalty.

It is important to remember that, as supported by social identity theory, brand identification is the process by which individuals utilize brands to facilitate the creation and public communication of their identity as individuals (Kuenzel & Vaux Halliday, 2008). Applying the work of Froming et al. (1982), it can be posited that individuals who utilize a brand to present their public self are more focused on societal expectations than on their own personal attitudes. This suggests that, in these circumstances, individuals' reference groups will have an increased effect on their behavior. Due to the strength of brand communities as reference groups (de Valck et al., 2009), members' feelings on societal expectations concerning their relationship with and behavior towards the focal brand will be greatly increased. The impact that this will have on both public and private brand loyalty can be explored further. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) and Dholakia et al. (2004) suggest that social identity within a group structure – in the current study's case, brand community identification – is a mediated antecedent to the creation of "we-intentions" (Tuomela, 1995). These "we-intentions" form the basis of motivation for increased participation within the brand community (Dholakia et al., 2004), which itself is an antecedent to brand loyalty and purchase intention (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Brand community participation can also be seen as a driver of primarily private brand loyalty constructs, such as brand commitment (Won et al., 2020), and primarily public brand loyalty constructs, such as WOM (Kumar, 2019).

This study's findings support the premise that, once consumers develop an identification with a brand community, those individuals are affected to a greater extent by the expectations of the community and their fellow members than they are by their direct relationship with the brand. This has considerable implications for practitioners, both positive and negative. Marketers should proactively embrace brand communities because, if they have been successful in helping a consumer identify with their brand, it is likely that individuals will look to affiliate with an associated brand community. On the positive side, their membership of the brand community will drive encouraging outcomes for the brand, such as WOM (Woisetschlager et al., 2008), brand trust (Laroche et al., 2012), brand commitment (Jahn & Kunz, 2012), and resilience to negative information (Marzocchi et al., 2013).

In essence, marketers who do not proactively embrace brand communities will be left with a reduced ability to influence consumers' loyalty to the brand. Therefore, marketers need to welcome the establishment of brand communities and the development of consumers' relationships with them. However, instead of conceptualizing brand communities as external entities, they should be incorporated into the

brand and included within its marketing activities. Marketers should see brand communities as a partner to collaborate with rather than an uncontrollable, unpredictable potential threat to the brand that must be contained.

### 6.1. Limitations and future research avenues

Although this research advances current knowledge, certain limitations to the application of these findings must be acknowledged. While the context selected could be positioned as representational for other applications, it must be accepted that the current study's findings would require additional research to fully justify their transferability into new domains. The extension of this research into contrasting industries or different geographical settings would, therefore, enable greater validation of the findings presented.

The cross-sectional nature of the data utilized must also be acknowledged. This is of particular concern with regard to the measurement of loyalty-based constructs because loyalty within professional sports is likely to fluctuate over time (Tsotsou, 2013). Therefore, it would be advisable to employ a longitudinal research design for future studies. This could also enable the study of the interrelationship between brand and brand community, particularly with regard to pertinent additional constructs, such as brand engagement.

The current research could also benefit from being explored in differing contexts with varying levels of competition, saturation, and strength of loyalty. This would provide strength to the generalizability of the current research and support the conditions presented in the theoretical framework.

Finally, this research has identified a clear relationship between brand community identification and brand identification and has justified it theoretically. However, in the literature, there is no clear consensus on a causal relationship, or the possible direction of that relationship. This gap in the knowledge would provide an interesting direction for future research as it would offer insights into the wider interaction effect between brand communities and their focal brands.

### 6.2. Conclusion

This research has made numerous important contributions that have extended understanding of the roles that brand communities play in consumers' formation of brand loyalty. It has shown that consumers' identification with a brand community can promote an increase in both public and private brand loyalty, which is novel in the extant research. This study has also presented brand community identification as a full mediator of brand identification's relationship with both public and private brand loyalty.

The study has provided support and encouragement for academics to explore the outcomes of brand community in a more nuanced manner. This will enable the domain to move past the current conceptualized impact of brand communities as being homogenous across contexts, and to provide greater insights that can be used by practitioners in differing industries. For example, this paper has enabled marketers of publicly consumed brands to differentiate their marketing practices from those of privately consumed brands.

Finally, the results have prompted a re-examination of the relationship between brand and brand community constructs. It is critical that a greater understanding is developed on the interplay between consumers' direct relationships with brands and their relationships with brand communities. For some practitioners, our study will direct their marketing endeavors to be far more collaborative and inclusive of brand communities. For other practitioners, who view brand communities as a potential threat, the study acts as a warning shot for them to appreciate the power and importance of the brand communities associated with their brands.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Mark Mills:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Pejvak Oghazi:** Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Magnus Hultman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Supervision. **Aristeidis Theotokis:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

### 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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