



Understanding consumer engagement in online brand communities: An application of self-expansion theory

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Abstract

Despite a growing importance of consumer engagement on online brand communities (OBCs), empirically derived insights into its antecedents, dynamics and outcomes remain limited. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to apply the self-expansion theory and study the influence of emotional attachment, brand love, and cultural values on consumer engagement in OBCs. Second, the study also examines the effect of consumer engagement on brand loyalty. Using an online questionnaire, data were collected from 453 respondents. The respondents were members of at least one OBC. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results revealed that all three constructs, emotional attachment, brand love, and cultural values significantly affect consumer engagement, while only emotional attachment and brand love had a positive effect on brand loyalty. Finally, customer engagement had a significant positive effect on brand loyalty. This research integrates the self-expansion theory and offers explanations of the different effects on consumer engagement and also contributes to the development of brand loyalty. Marketing managers will find the study useful in building effective OBC strategies and enhancing brand loyalty. By establishing this innovative theoretical link, this study provides additional insights in the domain of consumer engagement.

Keywords Consumer engagement · Online brand community · Self-expansion theory · Brand loyalty · Emotional attachment · Brand love · Cultural values

Introduction

Social networking sites and media sharing networks have pervaded into every aspect of one's daily life. The increasing importance of effect on communication with products, brands, and firms has been well documented in the literature (Beck et al. 2020; Cambier and Poncin 2020). Most of these social media applications, for example, social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and micro-blogs and social media sharing networks such as Instagram and Snapchat-enabled users to engage in online communications. Business organizations have been increasing using these platforms to aid online communications between users and brands (Pansari and Kumar 2017; Xu et al. 2021). Organizations are investing in online brand communities (OBCs) to develop stronger relationships between brands and customers.

Research on consumer engagement and OBCs has gained pace in recent years and is emerging as an influential concept in marketing (Hook et al. 2018). A topic of recent interest is clustered around social media, online community, engagement, and branding (Golob et al. 2020). The growing literature has included an examination of the consumer engagement process (Pan 2020; Brodie et al. 2011); empirical work on developing scales to measure consumer engagement on social media (Dessart et al. 2016; Hollebeek et al. 2014); identifying the antecedents and consequences of CE on social media (Soltani-Nejad et al. 2020; Islam and Rahman 2016); and consumer engagement behaviors (Dhaoui and Webster 2021; Oh et al. 2007). Yet, despite a growing need to have a better understanding of CE on OBCs, empirical research has lagged behind (Kaur et al. 2020). That is, while companies are investing in engaging consumers in OBCs, little is known about the influencing factors that motivate them to engage in OBCs. Specially, there is a need to identify and examine the directionality and strength of significant constructs' theoretical linkages to CE and brand loyalty

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and empirically validate these relationships. This study aims to fill this gap.

Second, past research has looked from different perspectives such as relationship-marketing service-dominant (S-D) logic (Vargo et al. 2020; Brodie et al. 2011; Hollebeek et al. 2016), the social exchange theory (Verleye et al. 2014) or congruity theory (Islam et al. 2018) to investigate consumer engagement. Drawing upon the gaps in the theoretical underpinnings, this study solicits the self-expansion theory within the consumer behavior domain.

Finally, past research has also emphasized the need to study consumer engagement in the context of different countries (Hwang et al. 2015; Hollebeek et al. 2016). Further, most consumer engagement and OBC research have been conducted in developed country settings (Kaur et al. 2020), and there is paucity of research in Arabian Gulf emerging countries. Therefore, the present research develops scholarship in the CE research domain. The choice of Saudi Arabia is justified because social media users have been growing exponentially; particularly after the so-called Arab spring (Bruns et al. 2013). Yet, there is paucity of research, despite the explosion of social media usage, particularly in Saudi Arabia. The number of social applications and programs has reached 18.3 million users, which is about 58% of the total population in Saudi Arabia (MCIT 2020). The interest of the Saudi people in social media has grown at a very rapid pace and has been making significant impact in the lives of the people.

As a result of addressing these gaps, the contribution of this study is as follows: Our first contribution is development of a theoretical framework. Initial and existing conceptualizations on motivations for community engagement in OBC context obviously do not take into consideration the new possibilities of interaction due to the continuous and rapid technological innovations in social and multimedia communication environment. New possibilities of interaction emerge with innovations and changing community behavior. There is a need to have an enhanced understanding of antecedents and relationships given the dynamic nature of social networks.

Our second contribution is to marketing practice. Firms have been making substantial investments in the brand communities to generate newer content and ensure brand loyalty. The relationships between the motivation for community engagement and ensuing effect on brand loyalty identified in this study will give better insights to marketing managers and increase returns on the substantial investments made on OBCs. Third, this study incorporates sample from Saudi Arabia to examine consumer engagement from OBC perspective, which is a first of its kind.

Literature review

Theoretical underpinnings

Previous studies have applied different theories to explore consumer engagement, all of which exhibit a theoretical fit given the collaborative nature of consumer engagement. Some of these include the relationship-marketing paradigm (e.g., Rooney et al. 2021; Bowden 2009; Cambra-Fierro et al. 2015), SD logic (e.g., Brodie et al. 2013; Chathoth et al. 2014; Hollebeek et al. 2016), self-determination theory (Kelley and Alden 2016), social identification theory (e.g., Algesheimer et al. 2005), and congruity theory (Islam et al. 2018). This study is also in response to a call for future research to sharpen theoretical tools and introduce new approaches and introduce more dynamic frameworks in order to introduce more generalizations (Vrontis et al. 2021).

The underpinnings of this study are the self-expansion theory, which proposes that individuals have an intrinsic desire to include others in their self-concept (Aron et al. 2013). When a person includes other people in his/her self-concept, he/she will treat the other person in the same way as he/she does to himself/herself. Applying the self-expansion theory to the context of emotional attachment and community engagement implies that emotional attachment is a reflection of an individual's feelings and cognitive representation of the relationships between the self and others including the community. Some studies in the context of emotional attachment with brands have found that customers are not only receivers of the brand value but also actively participate to maintain a relationship with the brand (Park et al. 2010). This self-brand connection stimulates customers to engage with other members in the community and help them in product usage (Hsieh and Chang 2016). Another recent study also demonstrated that customers, who have a heightened emotional attachment with the community, actively engage with the community to maintain valuable relationship (Loureiro and Sarmento 2019).

Through the inclusion of self in the self-concept, self-expansion theory describes a process by which people tend to maintain their individual identity, but this depends on culture (Ketay et al. 2020). Given that self-concept is rooted in cultural differences, this study aims to understand the influence of cultural values on consumer engagement in the context of OBC. The self-expansion theory also provides theoretical support to explain the integration of brand into consumers' identity to facilitate brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). This study considers brand love as an influencer of consumer engagement in OBC context leading to brand loyalty.



Consumer engagement

The concept of consumer engagement has been addressed in a number of studies in marketing literature. Yet, this remains unexplored in extant OBC research (Pan 2020). A widely accepted definition considers consumer engagement as, “a psychological state that occurs through interactive, co-creative consumer experiences with a focal agent/object” (Brodie et al. 2011, p. 2). This has been subjected to various interpretations and review of literature reveals a lack of agreement over the conceptual domain with some authors using the term “consumer engagement” (Brodie et al. 2011), some others as “brand engagement” (Sprott et al. 2009), and a majority “customer engagement” (Gummerus et al. 2012). Nevertheless, there is unanimity in the focus of engagement, which has predominantly been brand (either goods or services).

Extant literature has documented the need to have a better understanding of consumer engagement in the context of OBCs (Khan et al. 2020; Bitter and Grabner-Kräuter 2016). Research in the area of consumer engagement has accelerated in recent years and has focused on identifying the antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement. Researchers have called for the identification of the factors influencing consumer engagement and exploring its relationship with brands (Dessart et al. 2016). Research on identifying the relevant constructs having an influence on consumer engagement has been driven broadly by two factors: the changing business environment and the consumers. First, the changing business environment requires marketers to implement the consumer engagement concept, which are more customer-driven strategies (Bentley et al. 2021; Groeger et al. 2016). It is also apt to point that the conceptualization of engagement itself has been subjected to much debate with some researchers relating it to identity, civism, and rigor absorption (Calder et al. 2013). Some authors have taken a uni-dimensional view of the concept (van Doorn et al. 2010), while others have taken a multi-dimensional perspective (Brodie et al. 2013; Dwivedi 2015; Hollebeek 2011).

This divergent conceptualization provides a ground for further investigation. Changing consumer habits, in the sense of increasing participatory stance and increasing engagement in community groups offers significant opportunity to firms in their marketing efforts. Consumers actively contribute to numerous marketing activities like, product/service innovation, firm-induced communications, etc. (Malthouse et al. 2013). As consequences of all these, there is an increasing interest in identifying the factors that leads to consumer engagement. This study builds on the literature by proposing a model that identifies the influencing factors of brand community and its effects on brand loyalty in the context of OBCs. This study puts together

extant literature to develop the constructs and build measurement items.

Emotional attachment

Bowlby’s (1979) pioneering study in psychology described emotional attachment as a specific, emotion-laden tie connecting a determined object with a person, generally a custodian. The ground-breaking work in the field of psychology uncovered that the desire to make an emotional attachment with another person/object serves as a basic human need, beginning from a child’s attachment with her mother (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Bowlby 1979). The stronger one has an attachment with an object, the more likely he/she will maintain proximity with the object, and when the person experiences stress in the environment, they seek a psychological protection form the attached object.

In the realm of consumer behavior, researchers have suggested that the notion of attachment reflects an emotional bond (Shimp and Madden 1988). Since then marketing scholars proposed the emotional attachment construct into research in branding (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). A recent study has assessed and confirmed the influence of emotional attachment on CE behavior (Li and Han 2021).

As for the relationships between emotional attachment and brand loyalty, a study found that consumers form emotionally long-lasting associations with limited number of brands and engage in an emotional relationship (Thomson et al. 2005). In line with suggestion from previous literature that attachments are purely emotional in nature (Thomson et al. 2005), we investigate the impact of emotional engagement on consumer engagement and brand loyalty. We hypothesize

H1a An individual’s emotional attachment positively influences consumer engagement.

H1b An individual’s emotional attachment positively influences brand loyalty.

Brand love

The concept of brand love is derived from the notion of interpersonal love in psychology (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Shimp and Madden 1988). In the context of interpersonal relationships, the triangular theory of love developed by Sternberg (1986) identifies three components of love – intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment components. The concept of brand love has been gaining scholarly attention in the field of marketing (Islam and Rahman 2016; Batra et al. 2012). In an earlier study, it was found that the concept of love was central for all consumer–brand relationships (Fournier 1998). Brand love is defined as the “the degree



of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name” (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006, p. 81). It can be characterized as an intimate and exciting, having a high level of engagement between the brand and consumer (Coelho et al. 2019). As a consequence of brand love, persons having association with a brand community interact with each other on a regular basis, making the value associated with the brand even greater within the community (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Park et al. 2010).

Brand love influences several marketing constructs (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Romantic love is defined as “an attitude held by a person toward a particular other person, involving predispositions to think, feel, and behave in certain ways toward that other person” (Rubin 1973, p. 256). Another study has defined brand love as “degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied customer has for a particular trade name” (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006, p. 81). A study examining consumer–brand relationships concluded that the concept of love was central in all relationships (Fournier 1998). Further, research has also outlined a positive relationship between brand love and word-of-mouth, which is an expression of customer’s engagement in a community (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Specifically, research has also explained brand love as a driver of engagement (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2009). The above literature leads us to hypothesize that an increased level of brand love leads to consumer engagement.

When there is a ‘fanaticism’ or love for a brand, consumers are so much affected by this love, that they stop preferring other brands, which in turn reinforces brand loyalty (Coelho et al. 2019). Other studies have also confirmed the direct influence of brand love on consumer engagement (Lee and Hsieh 2021) and on brand loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Joshi and Garg 2020).

In the light of these findings, it is thought that there is positive and significant relationships between brand love and consumer engagement as well as brand loyalty.

H2a An individual’s brand love positively influences consumer engagement.

H2b An individual’s brand love positively influences brand loyalty.

Cultural values

In the present times globalized environment, culture is an important construct and different concepts have been used to compare cultural differences across countries. Researchers on information technology diffusion have frequently referenced the cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede (1991), the most influential researcher on cultural values (Erumban and de Jong 2006). De Mooij (2013) put forth

that individuals learn their values in an absolute way that defines what the world is and what it ought to be. These values unconsciously guide the individuals’ beliefs, attitudes, and actions. De Mooij (2013) study on cultural value paradox identified that contradictory cultural values play a role in consumers’ perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, which affect attitudes, choices, and actions (De Mooij 2013).

In consumer behavior context, several studies have shown the importance of cultural congruence. For example, a study undertaken in Saudi Arabia shows that role cultural congruency plays in improving the advertisement effectiveness (Sohail and Al-Gwaiz 2013). This study examined the cultural factors shaping attitude towards advertising and concluded that when brand identities are inconsistent with local values in Saudi Arabia, consumers tend to form a negative attitude towards the product or brand. Another study undertaken in Saudi Arabia found that self-image congruence and brand symbolic features are cherished concepts for effective marketing strategies (Klabi 2020). A basic proposition on OBCs is that while they may be global in nature, they are bound by the culture and language in which they are set up. Individuals join an OBC because of their shared values and interest in a brand. An important driver of community engagement is members shared set of common values (Algesheimer et al. 2005). A key concern in the OBC research is that of a paucity of cross-cultural studies (Dessart et al. 2015). While literature has pointed out that understanding the national culture is of paramount importance to understand the usage of networking sites, few studies have investigated this in the context of Arab culture. Further studies on the influence of cultural values in the Arab world on brand loyalty are also limited. An exploratory study with respondents from two public universities in Australia suggested that individual’s proneness to brand loyalty may be influenced by their cultural values (Lam 2007). All of these explanations suggest to the fact that cultural values significantly affect community engagement and brand loyalty.

H3a An individual’s cultural value positively influences consumer engagement.

H3b An individual’s cultural value positively influences brand loyalty.

Consumer engagement and brand loyalty

Studies on consumer engagement focus on the concept of brand loyalty to capture the relational benefits a firm can get by individual’s participation in brand communities. The end goal of most studies on brand communities is to see the influence on brand loyalty (Kaur et al. 2020; Bowden and Mirzaei 2021; Gruner et al. 2014). Brand loyalty represents



consumer's favorable disposition of attitude towards a brand as well as an intention to repurchase (Liu et al. 2012).

During the interactive process of engagement, consumer's understanding of the brand increases, leading to brand loyalty (Dwivedi 2015). While several theoretical models have suggested that consumer engagements have a positive effect on brand loyalty (van Doorn et al. 2010; Verhoef et al. 2010), a few studies have also empirically validated this relationship (Islam et al. 2018). Therefore, we hypothesize

H4 Consumer engagement will positively influence brand loyalty.

Based on the above hypotheses, the research model is shown in Fig. 1.

Research methodology

Measures

All the items of the questionnaire were adopted from previous studies. Some minor alterations were made to the scales where they were deemed necessary and appropriate to the context. The scales were anchored in a five-point Likert scales, which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was divided into five parts with questions representing the constructs. Six items from Hollebeek et al. (2014) assessed respondents brand community engagement. Brand loyalty was assessed through three measures adopted from the works of Yoo et al. (2002). Three items to measure emotional attachment were adopted from Thomson et al. (2005); five items to measure brand love from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006); and another five items to measure cultural values from Abuljadail (2017). Finally, a

few questions were added to seek respondent's demographic information.

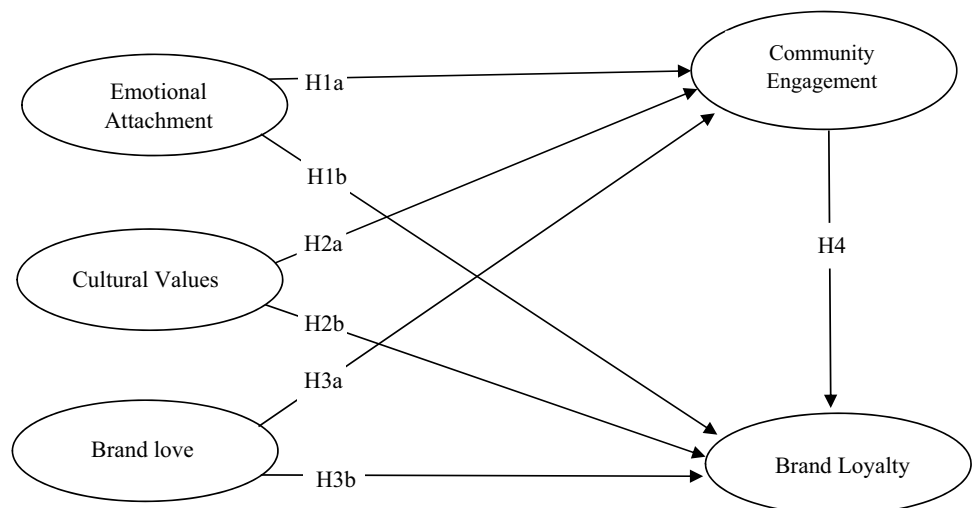
Sample and data collection

The target population was those individuals who belonged to at least one OBC and residing in Saudi Arabia. An online survey was used to collect the data. An online survey was the natural choice due the topic of research. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed due to time and resource constraints. Participants were invited online to take part in the research study. The link to the survey was distributed using the authors' social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. The online survey questionnaire was first created in English and then translated in Arabic language. The Arabic questions were verified to match the English version using the back-translation method. This was done to allow respondents to choose their preferred language. Prior to conducting the survey, the bilingual questionnaire was checked and refined by an expert review process. This was then followed by a pre-test with 25 people as an initial validity check. Data were collected during a 4-week period in June 2020. A total of 498 responses were received, of which 45 were found to be incomplete and excluded from further analysis. Thus, 453 valid responses were used for further analysis.

Self-selection bias and non-response bias

Non-probability sampling is prone to the risks of biases. First is the bias of self-selection. To tackle the bias of self-selection, a few precautionary measures were taken. To ensure that the respondents were residents of Saudi Arabia, the introductory statement clarified that the survey was only intended for people residing in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, some questions in the demographic section sought

Fig. 1 Research model



information on the region in which the respondents resided. Only those respondents, who belonged to at least one OBC were requested to respond. The potential respondents were then requested to state their favorite OBC. They were asked to respond to the survey questions keeping in mind this favorite OBC.

Next, the non-response bias was checked using the extrapolation method suggested by Armstrong and Overton (1977), which involves a comparison of early and late respondents. Two groups of respondents were created, the first group comprised those respondents who voluntarily responded to the survey and the second group contained those respondents who initially refused but later agreed. These two groups were compared for the variability in their responses. No significant differences were observed between the mean scores of the variables ruling out non-response bias.

Sample characteristics

Of the 453 respondents, 64.2% were males and 35.8 were females. A majority of 55.6% were in the age group of 18 to 25 years, 26% were between 26 to 35 years, and 16% were between 36 to 50 years of age.

As for respondent's education, 52.6% had acquired bachelor's degree, 19.7 master's degree, and another 17.2% went up to high school. A further 7.7% had doctoral degrees and the remaining 12 respondents had diplomas from vocational colleges, thus representing a range of qualifications. As for the place of living in Saudi Arabia, 45% reported they were living in Dammam – a major administrative center for the Saudi oil industry, the remainder were fairly distributed across the major cities of Saudi Arabia. The majority of the reported OBC was in the areas of electronics, retail, and apparels. The results revealed that 52.1% of the respondents spent between 1 to 3 h week on their preferred OBC and another 24.3% spent 4–7 h per week on the same. The details are provided in Table 1.

Data analysis and results

To test the proposed conceptual framework, we used a two-step approach involving confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling. Initially, CFA was undertaken to undertake validity and reliability checks (Hair et al. 2010). IBM® SPSS® Amos 24 software was used to test the proposed model using structural equation modeling (SEM) and the regression results.

Table 2 presents the factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, the average variance extracted, as well as the means and standard deviations of the constructs. The criteria of convergent validity were met as all the loadings were above 0.5 (Bagozzi 1994). The Cronbach's alpha values ranged

Table 1 Profile of respondents

	Frequency (n = 453)	%
Gender		
Male	291	64.2
Female	162	35.8
Age		
18–25	252	55.6
26–35	118	26.0
36–50	73	16.1
> 51	10	2.2
Education		
High school	78	17.2
Bachelor's	239	52.8
Master's	89	19.7
PhD	35	7.7
Other	12	2.6
City living		
Jeddah	80	17.6
Riyadh	87	19.2
Dammam	204	45.0
Other	82	18.1
Hours spent per week on OBC		
1–3 h per week	236	52.1
3–5 h per week	110	24.3
5–10 h per week	89	19.6
> 10 h per week	18	4.0

from 0.845 to 0.903 indicating inter-item reliability. Further the CR values ranged from 0.693 to 0.876, and AVE's ranged from 0.4310 to 0.595 demonstrating acceptable levels (Fornell and Larcker 1981). To test for the normality of distribution, skewness and kurtosis were examined. These values were less than 1, indicating the data were normally distributed (Hair et al. 2010). The values of skewness and kurtosis were close to zero, indicating the assumptions of normality are not violated.

On the issue of common method bias, although recent research has suggested that common method bias does not carry a serious threat for survey research (Fuller et al. 2016), priori procedures were used to check for any potential common method bias. Podsakoff et al. (2003) stated that when constructs in a study are from multi-item self-reported scales, there might be a likelihood of common method bias and recommends measures to control them. These procedural remedies were followed in the present study. First, during the data collection phase, the respondents' were informed that the questions do not have a correct or incorrect answer, and the survey only sought their responses to each of the question. The explanatory statement also assured the confidentiality of responses and anonymity of respondents. Following this, Harman's one-factor test was performed, as



Table 2 Reliability and validity of constructs

Construct items	Factor loadings	Cronbach	AVE	CR	Mean	SD
Emotional attachment						
EMOT1	0.781	0.903	0.595	0.815	3.675	0.924
EMOT2	0.771					
EMOT3	0.763					
Cultural value						
CULVAL1	0.670	0.845	0.463	0.774	3.582	1.169
CULVAL2	0.758					
CULVAL3	0.592					
CULVAL4	0.692					
Brand love						
BRLOV1	0.613	0.862	0.436	0.794	3.872	0.976
BRLOV2	0.640					
BRLOV3	0.690					
BRLOV4	0.663					
BRLOV5	0.691					
Customer engagement						
CUSENG1	0.708	0.898	0.543	0.877	3.552	1.091
CUSENG2	0.664					
CUSENG3	0.747					
CUSENG4	0.734					
CUSENG5	0.782					
CUSENG6	0.781					
Brand loyalty						
BRLOYAL1	0.687	0.866	0.432	0.693	3.631	1.179
BRLOYAL2	0.634					
BRLOYAL3	0.645					

suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003). According to this test, when a single factor accounts for greater than 50% of the covariance, there is a likelihood of common method bias. The results from the present study showed that the variance explained by the first factor was 22.34% (< 50%). This confirmed that common method bias is not an issue in this study. Furthermore, we conducted the marker variable test (Podsakoff et al. 2003). The results of the marker variable test indicated that all the adjusted variables and item correlations were below the threshold of 0.30, indicating that common method bias is unlikely to be present in this study (Lages and Piercy 2012).

Discriminant validity was then assessed. The square root of the AVE of each construct was compared with their corresponding correlations (Fornell and Larcker 1981). The squared root of the AVE for each of the construct exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlation, suggesting an acceptable level of discriminant validity.

Results

The model fit of the constructs was assessed using criteria given by Hair et al. (2010). The χ^2 and the key fit indices,

GFI, AGFI, CFI, IFI, NFI, and RMSEA which are some of the subset indices of model fit suggested by SEM researchers were used to see if the model exhibits an adequate fit. Table 3 shows the recommended values and the values from the model in the present study. All the values meet or exceed recommended values.

The results of the regression analysis are summarized in Table 4. Overall, the model explained for 59.5% of the variance in consumer engagement and 62.4% of variance in brand loyalty.

Emotional attachment significantly predicted customer engagement in OBC (H1a: $\beta=0.162$; $t=3.446$; $p<0.05$). There was an even more significant effect of emotional attachment on brand loyalty (H1b: $\beta=0.321$; $t=5.456$; $p<0.01$). Brand love also had a significant positive effect on both customer engagement (H2a: $\beta=0.274$; $t=6.662$; $p<0.01$) and brand loyalty (H2b: $\beta=0.303$; $t=5.843$; $p<0.01$). The third construct of the study cultural value had a significant positive effect on customer engagement (H3a: $\beta=0.456$; $t=11.282$; $p<0.01$) but did not have an effect on brand loyalty. Further investigation on the total effects showed that cultural value had a total effect through customer engagement to brand loyalty ($\beta=0.435$; $t=9.305$;



Table 3 Fit indices and model measures

Fit indices	Suggested value	Recommended by author	Measurement model (present study)
χ^2/df	≤ 3	Fox and Hayduk (1989)	1.915
Goodness of fit index	≥ 0.9	Scott (1995)	0.923
Adjusted for degrees of freedom (AGFI)	≥ 0.8	Scott (1995)	0.810
Normal fit index (NFI)	≥ 0.9	Bentler and Bonett (1980)	0.941
Comparative fit INDEX (CFI)	≥ 0.9	Bagozzi and Yi (1988)	0.913
Root mean square error Estimation (RMSEA)	≤ 0.08	Bagozzi and Yi (1988)	0.061

Table 4 Results of regression analysis

	Direct effects				Total effects (direct effect + mediated effect via Cus.eng)	
	Cust Eng		Br Loyalty		Br Loyalty	
	Beta	<i>t</i> val	Beta	<i>t</i> val	Beta	<i>t</i> val
Cust Eng			0.637***	17.532		
Emot Att	0.162**	3.446	0.321***	5.456	0.681***	13.848
Brand love	0.274***	6.662	0.303***	5.843	0.719***	13.422
Cul.val	0.456***	11.282	0.331	.651	0.435***	9.3054

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

$p < 0.01$). Finally, customer engagement had a significant positive effect on brand loyalty (H4: $\beta = 0.637$; $t = 17.532$; $p < 0.01$).

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to apply the self-expansion theory and understand the influencing factors of CE in OBCs. The study also looks into the ensuing impact of CE on brand loyalty. The development of a loyal customer base is a challenge for organizations given highly networked era of present times (Khan et al. 2020). Past studies have suggested the adoption of a CE orientation to build and maintain brand loyalty (Pansari and Kumar 2017). By propounding brand loyalty as a consequence of CE, this study empirically validates previous conceptual findings (Kaur et al. 2020; Kumar and Kumar 2020). This study identifies the predictors of CE in OBCs which are conducive to building a loyal customer base.

The results of our study show that the dimensions of brand love, emotional attachment, and cultural values have an important effect on customer engagement, but only the dimensions of emotional attachment and brand love have an effect on customer engagement. Customer engagement has a strong positive effect on brand loyalty. These results demonstrate some valuable findings. Past research has established

that consumers can become emotionally attached to brands (Thomson et al. 2005), the present study findings are consistent with this as it has established that emotional attachment can lead to brand loyalty. The findings of the present study also find support from another study which concluded that emotional attachment is an important antecedent of CE in online communities (Li and Han 2021).

The mediation effect of consumer engagement also finds support from another study that concluded that OBC participation could trigger brand loyalty (Adjei et al. 2010). Therefore, consumer engagement is an important mediator predicting brand loyalty (Barger et al. 2016), as it drives consumers' emotional attachment to the brand (Fullerton 2005). The findings of the study also show how the local Saudi culture plays an influencing role in consumer engagement in OBCs. As marketers promote their brands in a globalized world, marketers tend to design content, which has a universal appeal, but these tend to be influenced by western culture (De Mooij 2013), and the concepts of cultural paradox and cultural congruity necessitate the importance of local Arab cultural values on consumer engagement in OBCs.

The results of this study also revealed that brand love has a significant positive effect on customer engagement, confirming previous research (Islam and Rahman 2016; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2009; van Doorn et al. 2010) as well as on brand loyalty, again confirming previous studies (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). This finding is also consistent



with another study which found that at the core of all brand relationship is the concept of love (Fournier 1998).

Managerial implications

The study provides some meaningful insight to practitioners as well. By introducing emotional attachment, cultural values, and brand love as drivers of brand loyalty, this study has encountered several fields of opportunities to develop relationship marketing and give brand loyalty a new supremacy in the OBC context. Further, the relationships between the three antecedents of brand loyalty had not been established in previous OBC literature, though they appeared in social and psychological studies. Because emotional attachment and brand love have an influence on consumer engagement, which in turn significantly effects brand loyalty, organizations should establish OBCs and help in its growth as there is a relationship between other consumer members of the same brand and brand loyalty. Brand community managers should also be aware of the importance to reinforce the direct links between the three antecedents and brand loyalty.

Findings that emotional attachment has an influence on customer engagement and brand loyalty imply that managers need to activate the emotional appeal to foster consumer engagement in OBC and create brand loyalty. Often big data analytics techniques employed by managers tend to measure OBC participation by members employing metrics such as number of likes, comments, time spent online, or number of members (Dessart et al. 2015). Findings of this study imply that managers need to employ emotional branding appeals on OBC to engage consumers and build brand loyalty. Marketers can achieve this by creating content that appeals to the consumer's emotional state, ego, needs, and aspirations. This approach is likely to engage the consumers in OBCs and create an excitement about the brand, leading to brand loyalty.

That cultural values have an influence on customer engagement, and a total effect on brand loyalty has important managerial implications. It is apt to point that an earlier study observed that marketers are promoting their brands in countries where they lack a sufficient knowledge of the cultural values of the consumers (De Mooij 2013). Global brand marketers particularly, the Western marketers tend to develop a strategy of a universal content ignoring local values of the host markets (Abuljadail 2017). Findings of the present study in Saudi Arabia suggest that markets should develop strategies that encourage customer engagement like using the common Saudi cultural value cues like family values, local dialect, local scenes, traditional, and modest clothing, Islam, and gender roles.

Brand love also plays an important role in engaging consumers and developing brand loyalty. The importance of brand love in relationship building for psychological/

functional and affective reasons has been established (Albert and Merunka 2013). Managers should use message of love in communication and build long-term brand relationships. Managers should also be aware that passion with the brand also leads customers to engage positively in OBC, which enhances brand loyalty. Customers are more likely to re-buy the brand and choose the brand over others.

Limitations and future research

Despite the contributions of the study, we recognize that it has some limitations. First, the context of the study is limited to a single – Saudi Arabia – cultural context, it is suggested that future cross-cultural studies be conducted to empirically examine the effect of the constructs of this study on consumer engagement and brand loyalty for further generalizability. Second, this study used cross-sectional data conducted at a particular point of time. Further longitudinal studies are recommended to examine the causal relationships between the proposed constructs given the dynamic nature of consumer engagement. Third, besides studies to undertake cross-cultural comparisons, future research in different cultural settings including individualistic cultural settings. The conceptual model developed for this study, conducted in a collectivist culture, can be compared with other studies in different cultural settings. Finally, the conceptual model proposed in this study may also be extended to include subsequent outcomes of brand loyalty. It is recommended that consequences of brand loyalty with OBCs in terms of customer behavior outcomes like repurchase intention should be explored in future studies.

Appendix: Constructs and measurement items

Construct	Item	Measurement	References
Emotional attachment	EMOT1	I feel emotionally bonded with this brand	Thomson et al. (2005)
	EMOT2	I feel emotionally connected with this brand	
	EMOT3	I feel emotionally attached with this brand	



Construct	Item	Measurement	References
Cultural values	CULVAL1	I think a lot about the brand nationality when I am using the social media sites	Abuljadail (2017)
	CULVAL2	Using the local brand's social media pages stimulates my interest to learn more about the brand	
	CULVAL3	I like the portrayal (characteristics) of family values that the local brands' communicate in their pages	
	CULVAL4	I feel better when I see our traditions such as male dress and veiled lady in the local brands social media pages	
	CULVAL5	I feel I am sharing the same interest, language and values that the other local brands' social media users have	
Brand love	BRLOV1	This is a wonderful brand (BL1)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)
	BRLOV2	This brand makes me feel good (BL2)	
	BRLOV3	This brand is totally awesome (BL3)	
	BRLOV4	This brand makes me very happy (BL4)	
	BRLOV5	I love this brand!	

Construct	Item	Measurement	References
Customer engagement	CUSENG1	This OBC upgrades member privileges	Hollebeek et al. (2014)
	CUSENG2	Using this OBC gets me to think about the brand	
	CUSENG3	I think about this OBC a lot when I'm using it	
	CUSENG4	Using this OBC stimulates my interest to learn more about the brand	
	CUSENG5	I feel very positive when I use this OBC	
	CUSENG6	I am proud to use this OBC	
Brand loyalty	BRLOYAL1	I consider myself to be loyal to X	Yoo et al. (2002)
	BRLOYAL2	X would be my first choice	
	BRLOYAL3	I will not buy other brands if X is available at the store	

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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