

# Study of Brand Love as Consequence of Virtual Brand Community Engagement

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**Abstract** - Brands today face a new challenge as consumers take the communications into their hands using social media to connect more among themselves. The traditional view that consumers are the passive recipients of communications created by marketers is quickly becoming obsolete as consumers form virtual brand communities. As a consequence it is important to develop a new model for understanding consumer behavior in the context of these brand communities, which is an important aspect in the development of e-business. This research explores the role of identification, psychological sense of community, and engagement on brand love, which is a new construct that is better suited for explaining consumers' commitment to the relationship with the brand.

The study interviewed respondents via an online survey posted in the fan pages because it is the place of interaction among the fans. A total of 576 usable questionnaires were collected. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the relationships between the latent constructs in the study. The effects of identification factors on brand love are mediated by engagement. It is found that to enhance brand love it is important to consider engagement, which is the recruitment of like-minded consumers to help in the creation of value-added

activities. Future research can explore the temporal effect of engagement because it is found that a majority of the respondents are aged over 30 years.

**Keywords** - Brand Love, Brand Community, Engagement, Identification, Premier League, Psychological Sense of Community

## I. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Marketers today are aware that they no longer hold the exclusive power over branding. Previous research (He, Li, & Harris, 2012; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) have posited that participation in virtual brand communities consumers will strengthen consumer identification with the brand thus creating a stronger relationship with the brand and its other users. Consequently social media based virtual communities such as Facebook, which allows connecting to customers to be done effectively at a low cost are of interest to researchers (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). Laroche et al. (2012) studied these communities and found that the virtual brand community characteristics had an impact on engagement, trust and consequently brand loyalty.

Fournier (1998) suggested that a brand should have a strong relationship with the consumer that may be defined as love. McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002), and He, Li, and Harris (2012) recognize that

participation in virtual brand communities would enhance brand centered identity and customer brand relationships. Brand identification involves emotional attachment with the brand therefore they would evaluate the relationship more favorably (He, Li, and Harris, 2012). The authors suggest that future research should identify the outcomes of brand identification. This includes brand championship, resistance to negative information, and support for marketing activities, which are conceptually part of brand love as posited by Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi (2012).

Participants in virtual brand communities experience different levels of knowledge and participation (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Fournier (1998) and Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) state it is still not clear when and why consumers respond to certain relationship building efforts. Thus, the second research problem is identifying the impact of identification.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Holbrook (1997) explained that romanticism makes the experiences of brand consumption more enriched. Ahuvia (2005) focused brand love as a reflection of self-identity thus emphasizing the congruence to true and ideal self of the individual by exploring "object love" in creating identity narratives. Simply put the brands people love shapes the sense of self of the individual (Ahuvia, 2005). Later Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) defined brand love as an emotional and passionate relationship between a satisfied customer and a brand.

As brands become loaded with meaning, consumption becomes an issue to of serving identification goals (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Fournier, 2009). Escalas and Bettman (2003, 2005) recognized that the importance of the self-brand connection stems from organization identification. The authors described these self-brand connection as the extent to which an individual incorporates the brand into their personal definition of self-concept. A bond is

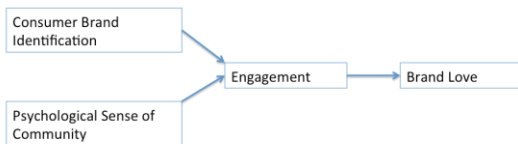
formed by consumers, who engage with the brand, because they identify with it (He, Li & Harris 2012). Virtual brand communities have been recognized as having the ability to contribute to the formation of attitudes towards the brand (Muniz and Schau, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). They also support the engagement with other supporters of the brand. Friendship is one of the benefits sought in joining virtual brand communities. This feeling of camaraderie or psychological sense of community is an important characteristic identified as a collective sense of identity that is felt by members of a virtual brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; O'Guinn & Muniz, 2005).

Hollebeek (2011) defined engagement as the level of a customers' motivational, brand-related, and context-dependent state with specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in brand interactions. This captures the value of the experience derived as a consequence of these interactions. The impact of different engagement levels on loyalty outcomes thus should be studied through statistical modeling.

## III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

The conceptual framework was developed in order to explore brand love within the nomological network that includes the constructs of identification and engagement. As a consequence this study explores brand love within virtual brand communities. The identification antecedents are linked to one of the markers of community, consciousness of kind, which is the intrinsic connection to members separating them from other groups as defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). As a consequence this adoption of the values of the community, which in this case is derived through consumption of the brand results in engagement whereby increasing the member's self-esteem. This is supported by Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006), which found that identification had an impact on engagement. The psychological sense of community may

extend beyond the members of the community to other consumers as well. They reasoned that this is because the connection to the brand is more important than the identification with the characteristics of other members. This is especially true in the case of the virtual brand community wherein members can be very diverse since the community is no longer geographically bound.



**Fig. 1** Conceptual Framework Hypotheses Development

McAlexander et al. (2002) explained that the greater the engagement within the community results in greater integration in the brand community increases the customer loyalty and consequently the transcendental consumer experiences result in stronger relationships with the brand and the other customers. In a similar vein the ideal self-congruity implies that the brand fulfills the need of self-esteem, which results in the positive evaluation of the brand leading to higher engagement.

**H1:** The consumer brand identification and psychological sense of community have a positive influence on engagement.

Carlson, Suter, and Brown (2008) found that the relationship bond that formed between the users of the brand should be an antecedent to the development of commitment to the community group. Thus, the identification drove the level of engagement with activities in the community.

**H2:** Engagement mediates the effects of consumer brand identification and psychological sense of community on brand love.

#### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Previous brand love studies including Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi (2012); Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen (2010); Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) used the survey method. This study uses the structural equation modeling technique to test the hypotheses requiring 10 – 15 respondents to one parameter/item (Hair et al., 2010; Ho, 2006). There are 48 items tested in this research. As a result a total of 576 questionnaires were collected from virtual brand communities on Facebook. The majority of the respondents are male (84%) and aged over 30 years (61%). Most of them have income below 10,000 baht (41%).

The Chi-square goodness-of-fit test (3.016) shows that the measurement model has an adequate model fit demonstrating convergent validity of the constructs (Kline, 2011).

#### V. HYPOTHESES TESTING

In this hypothesized model, the variations in engagement are explained by the joint influence of the antecedents and mediator investigated in this study. The unexplained variance of .17 for the brand love construct shows that the two identification factors and engagement mediation explain 83% of the variation of this construct (Ho, 2014).

The Chi-square test of the structural model is 3.24 is adequate (Kline, 2011). The Goodness-of-Fit index (GFI) value is 0.78. The root mean square error of approximation RMSEA is acceptable 0.06 (Ho, 2006; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The baseline comparison indices of NFI (.880), RFI (.869), IFI (.914), TLI (.905), and CFI (.914). The model is thus adequate.

The significant Standardized Regression Weights are .31 for the path from consumer brand identification and .30 from psychological sense of community to engagement supporting Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 is supported with a significant Standardized Regression Weight of .77. As proposed by this research the antecedents of identification consumer brand identification

and psychological sense of community are significantly and positively related to engagement driving brand love. This means that for the model to be strong all of the three constructs must work together to predict brand love. As suggested by McAlexander et al. (2002) that the greater the engagement within the community results increases the customer loyalty through transcendental consumer experiences resulting in stronger relationships with the brand and the other customers. The findings reinforce the work of Rauschnabel, Ahuvia, and Ivens (2015), which posited that people connect with others using brands as connectors.

## **VI. THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTION**

The theoretical contribution is the confirmation of the nomological framework of brand love. The findings explain that identification with brands and other members that are further enhanced through engagement have a positive impact on brand love.

For managerial contribution it is found that members who exhibit community and social support would tend to have better relationship outcomes with the brand. Therefore, the connection between the brands must be made with the characteristics of the reference groups as suggested by Escalas and Bettmann (2005). Thus, the virtual brand community creation needs to consider the recruitment of members, who should have the positive desirable characteristics of the brand. For instance the member recruitment strategies have to include member-get-member because these form the strongest bond with the brand through the personal relationship of the members. Each member must have a role to play in the creation of meaning and survival of the community.

## **VII. LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The reiterative nature of the virtual brand community engagement may result in changes in the engagement levels and its outcomes.

The research findings appear to have evidence for the need to incorporate temporal effect. With 61% of the respondents aged over 30, it appears that it takes time for brand love to be formed through engagement. Consequently, the use of longitudinal studies to examine this temporal effect in future studies is suggested.

The structural model has adequate fit for the hypothesis testing. Further testing can be made to confirm the relationship within the nomological network for the construct of brand love defined in this study.

In addition the findings of this study suggest that consumer and brand characteristics may also be interesting factors that may be studied in terms of their impact on engagement and consequently brand love. This is because the characteristics of individuals and the brands may have an impact on the identification process and resulting engagement.

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