How online brand community participation strengthens brand trust and commitment: A relationship marketing perspective

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ABSTRACT
Advancements in information technology have shaped the way customers and organizations interact with one another. Online brand communities (OBCs), especially have found their way into 21st century relationship marketing. While research embraces these OBCs for their cost-efficiency and ability for faster interactions, it has not thoroughly examined the procedure through which participation in such OBCs affects the major constructs of relationship marketing. Drawing from the trust-commitment theory and its central concepts of brand trust, brand commitment and brand loyalty, this thesis discusses the applicability of this theory in a brand community and in an online context. It also introduces the concept of OBC commitment as a very important outcome of participation in an OBC. Using probability sampling and a self-administered questionnaire, this study employs a deductive logic to investigate if higher levels of participation in an OBC translate to higher levels of member commitment toward that OBC and higher levels of trust, commitment and loyalty toward the brand that the OBC supports. This study underlines the importance of understanding the process through which an OBC member gradually develops strong emotional ties with that OBC, as a result of continuous interaction with other OBC members. Additionally, how participation in an OBC evolves to attachment towards the brand that the OBC supports.

CCS Concepts
• CCS → Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI) → Empirical studies in HCI

Keywords

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1. INTRODUCTION
Advances in technology do not only alter the way firms and organizations do business and market their products but also the way that consumers can communicate with one another. These recent advances have facilitated the creation of the online community, a new type of social network in which there is an observable increased interaction between consumers. The creation of such brand communities has enabled customers to alter their relationships with companies. While earlier managerial and marketing efforts were focused toward just attracting more and more people to join these communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), the latest trend is to view online brand communities as means of creating and maintaining strong and lasting relationships between firms and customers (Lee et al., 2011). It is evident that strong, healthy and focused online brand communities are linked to greater brand trust, commitment and loyalty. The vast majority of existing studies on OBCs and their dynamics (such as OBC participation) examine the effects of these dynamics on brand equity constructs (such as brand trust, brand commitment and brand loyalty) directly without prior examination of their effects on OBC-related outcomes. This implies that OBC members who participate more than others will demonstrate more positive attitudes towards the brand that the OBC supports, but without attaching themselves to the OBC itself first. This study shows that equity-related positive attitudes are a result of greater commitment towards the OBC, created through greater participation, rather than direct outcomes of OBC participation. Marketers are then urged to not only use methods to enhance participation in their OBC but also to keep improving the OBC both in technical and in relationship terms in order to retain commitment towards it. The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) is widely recognized as a concept linked to higher profits for the company. Although this theory has been widely tested in the offline and, more frequently, in the B2B context, very few attempts have been made to apply it in the online and OBC context. By identifying a link between OBC participation and the commitment-trust theory’s concepts, this paper proves that greater OBC participation is directly linked to increased profits.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
The social identification theory implies that OBCs are social organizations in which members can voluntarily enter, leave, participate and criticize. The upmost rationale of participation in an OBC is the derivation of benefits by doing so. Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) and Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) hold that commitment is an absolutely crucial precondition for an OBC in
order to exist and to certify future community relationships. Besides, when people feel committed toward an organization (much like an OBC), then they consider themselves as stakeholders in its success or failure (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Accordingly, Dutton and Dukerich (1991) imply that committed individuals will also ‘commit themselves to actions that support the organization’.

Lawler and Yoon (1996) suggest that cohesive and friendly networks give incentives to their members to continue being members and even taking a more active role. In other words, community commitment is enhanced. What is more, increased commitment towards a community proposes a positive attitude (hence greater commitment) towards the brand that this community is dedicated to (Lee et al., 2011; Kim et al. 2008).

Furthermore, a fairly recent attitudinal study conducted by Hur, Ahn and Kim (2011), examined brand commitment conceptualized as ‘repurchase intention’. More specifically, as Morgan and Hunt (1994) posit, this commitment is best described as relational commitment, hence as an intention to maintain a valued relationship. According to Hur, Ahn and Kim (2011) ‘brand community users’ commitment toward a brand community will have a positive effect on repurchase intentions toward the brand’. This is because both calculative –or attitudinal–commitment (the inclination to preserve a relationship) and affective commitment (psychological attachment) toward a brand community incentivize customers to preserve a positive attitude toward the Brand to which the community is dedicated to and prevents them from using competitors’ products or services.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) speculate that commitment is an essential prerequisite for loyalty. Since commitment can be regarded as one of the foundations of loyalty, commitment to an OBC should lead to greater brand commitment and consequently brand loyalty (Jang et al., 2008)

1.1 The Conceptual Model and Research Questions (Hypotheses)

Figure 1. The Conceptual Model

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) argue that people participate in a virtual community when they have a common interest with the rest of the community members. From a social psychology point of view, participation in an OBC is a behavioral determinant (Andersen, 2005; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) in the sense that the emotional ties that are being developed to the focal brand as a consequence of the interactions between the virtual community members (through discussions related to the brand and its products or services), may lead to commitment and loyalty toward that particular brand (Andersen, 2005). Similarly, it is important to state that participation is particularly significant in the relationship marketing literature since it is found that it favors group cohesion (Casaló, Flavián and Guinalíu, 2007) as the group’s (OBC) members can exchange experiences associated to the common interest and information about the product or the service that the OBC favors. The participation behavior of the members of a virtual community can either be interactive or non-interactive (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). Non-interactive behavior, also known as ‘lurking’ or ‘free riding’, is usually referred as passive participation (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). These lurkers usually observe the OBC as they try to acquire information or advice for a product or service but they tend to not actively interact with other OBC members. As the distinction between active and passive participation is to a certain extent unclear, most studies in the field do not distinguish between the two but treat them as one. In other words, they regard both lurkers and active participants, simply as OBC members. This paper on the other hand employs the concept of OBC commitment as a consequence of active OBC participation. This means that active participants only were surveyed. Therefore, the present paper uses Madupu and Cooley’s (2006) definition of OBC participation; ‘consumers’ active participation in brand related events and their interactions with other members of the online brand community’.

The majority of OBC participation studies link it directly to brand commitment or brand loyalty. It is only the last few years that OBC commitment is being studied as a separate identity and is considered to be a consequence of participation in an online brand community. There are only a handful of empirical researches that attempt to measure this relationship (Jang et al., 2008; Casaló et al., 2007; Wirtz et al., 2013). However, research has shown that, in online communities in general, people tend to develop a sense of commitment to their community when they participate more. As mentioned, OBC participation has been found to have a positive effect on OBC commitment in studies which regard it as a concept of customer engagement in an OBC (Jang et al., 2008; Casaló et al., 2007, 2013). One of the most recognizable outcomes of an OBC is the ‘commitment and intention to continue participation in an OBC’ (Wirtz et al., 2013). The long-term survival of an OBC depends greatly on its members’ commitment and continued participation in the community relationships. Such commitment and participation are particularly important in the online context, as members can switch to an alternative OBC with just a few easy clicks. To ensure vitality and longevity, members need to be cohesive and have a strong sense of belonging (Wellman and Gulia, 1999).

H1: Greater OBC participation leads to greater OBC commitment

The relationship between OBC participation and brand trust is one that has not been extensively studied as there is limited evidence of the former’s effects on the latter. While participation in a virtual brand community is usually related to brand commitment and brand loyalty, contemporary literature offers very little insights on participation’s impact on brand trust. Most of the evidence concerning this relationship is either speculative or anecdotal. The only empirical confirmation of the positive relationship between these two constructs was given by Flavián and Guinalíu (2006). The greater the participation of an individual in an OBC is, the greater his or her familiarization and acquaintance with the brand and its products or services will be. Due to the moral responsibility existing among members of an OBC (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), the individual is able to solve problems and find full support related to the correct use the product or the service. Hence increased OBC participation boosts members’ certainty and confidence about the product or the service, increasing their trust in the brand. Prior research has revealed that the derived certainty and confidence toward a brand
the OBC member enjoys, has a profound and positive effect not only on brand trust directly but also on brand satisfaction which is considered to be the single most significant antecedent of brand trust (Chinomora, 2013). The relationship between OBC participation and satisfaction was further examined by Royo-Vela and Casamassima (2011) who suggest that customers who belong to a virtual brand community develop higher levels of satisfaction (and hence trust) than the customers who are not members of an OBC. Moreover, there is evidence that OBC participation can help the brand develop new products or services taking into consideration the members’ suggestions and comments (Andersen, 2005). Thus, since the brand cares about members’ needs and desires, the relationship between the brand and the member is improved and making the member trust the brand more (Flavián and Guinaliu, 2006). Summing up, it is here suggested that

H2: OBC participation is positively related to brand trust

The positive relationship between brand Community commitment and brand commitment is supported by Kim et al. (2008) who indicate that when consumers are exposed to an environment which is favourable toward a specific brand and when they feel emotionally attached and committed to this environment, then they will be more inclined to show a favourable attitude toward the brand itself. Indeed, research has shown that brand community members share their experiences, create shared meanings with other members and with the brand and they produce norms and customs of what is acceptable or appropriate and what is not (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Brown and Reingen (1987), further imply that “when online community members receive favourable information about products from reliable sources and are connected with others who share a common interest in a network relationship (also referred as ‘homophily’ in the network theory literature), then they are more prone to view the product favourably’. Brauer, Judd and Gliner (1995) also suggest that group discussion has a significant impact on attitude polarization. As such, online community commitment is not limited to the members but also positively affects brand commitment.

Zhou et al. (2012) support that for online brand communities, brand commitment is not a straightforward process. OBC owners shall first encourage the cultivation of consumer emotion and attachment toward the community itself. Likewise, Algesheimer et al. (2005) identified a positive relationship between brand community commitment and repurchase intention of the products that the community supports. Based on the above, this study suggests that

H3: Brand community commitment positively affects brand commitment

Trust plays an important role in the establishment of long-term relationships and partnerships in business as it stimulates a propensity to rely on an exchange partner. Many researchers argue that beliefs such as benevolence, integrity and ability can reflect one’s trustworthiness (Doney and Cannon, 1997). In their work in 1994, Morgan and Hunt point out that trust is an important factor that determines relationship and commitment. The link between trust and commitment is based on theories of long-term exchange (Perlman and Duck, 1987).

Marketing literature recognizes trust as an indispensable predecessor of commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Trust is also essential as a determinative factor in predicting future behaviours of the customer and the brand as well as mutual trust is a central precondition for lasting and committed relationships and for transactions (McDonald, 1981). Doney and Cannon (1997) further describe trust as a ‘calculative process’ that determines whether to stay in or leave a relationship based on the cost-benefit theory. Trust is consequently a ‘very well-thought and carefully considered process’ (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001) and ‘can be seen as the tendency of the customer to believe that a brand keeps its promise regarding performance’ (Füller et al., 2008).

Commitment binds consumers to brands. In this regard, Kuppelwieser, Grefrath and Dziuk (2011) propose that when an individual trusts his or her business partner, then he or she develops a tie and a sense of commitment for that particular partner. Kuppelwieser et al. (2011) further posit that committed relationships are based on trust as they are based on past behaviours and allow for future development of commitment. In trusted relationships the short-term advantages are being sacrificed for long-term relationship preservation. Evidence found in the literature does not only support the proposition that trust affects the behavioural dimension of commitment only but also its continuity. As the partners have the minimum doubt concerning the other party’s intentions and actions, they enjoy their collaboration and strive to preserve it. In marketing, commitment, or the preservation of a valued business relationship, is translated into repeated purchasing which is not based on price-costs characteristics but on mutual trust between partners (Cater and Zabkar, 2008). Hess and story (2005) suggest that commitment which is based on trust, generate and uphold robust brand-customer relationships and connections that stress far beyond sales promotion and competitive pricing, allowing brands to charge premium prices for their products.

Trust is not only an antecedent of commitment but also its determinant (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Summing up, consumers’ commitment toward a brand can be regarded as a consequence of their trust in it (Lacey, 2007). Based on this discussion, brand commitment seems to be influenced by brand trust. Hence,

H4: There is a fundamental association between customers’ trust to a brand and their underlying commitment to this brand

‘Brand trust is very important for increasing customers’ loyalty toward brands’ (Ha, 2004). A great deal of research supports the positive effect of trust on loyalty in online or offline contexts (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001, Chiu et al., 2010, Harris and Goode, 2004, Kim et al., 2011 and Zhou et al., 2012). Among the first to explore the role of trust in relationship marketing and in shaping brand loyalty are Morgan and Hunt (1994), according to whom trust is an essential psychological precondition that induces consumers to preserve relationships with brands. Without trusting a brand, a customer can never be loyal to it since his or her emotional bond will be weak. For a relationship to be sustained, both parties should feel that their counterpart will not undertake opportunistic behaviour and that it will provide all the necessary information about its future actions and intentions. Indeed, the work of Reicheld and Schefter (2000) attests that the development of brand loyalty is actually based on trust. Both parties revaluate a relationship throughout its duration and reassuring that trust is not dilapidated leads to stronger bonds and loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

Morgan and Hunt (1994) consider trust as a key decisive factor of any long-term relationship. When a person trusts another person or party, it is likely that he or she will develop some forms of positive behavioural intention towards that other person or party. Despite the fact that there is no typical method to conceptualize
brand loyalty (Laroche, Habibi and Richard, 2013) as it can be regarded both as a behaviour towards a certain brand and/or as an ‘actual pattern of purchase behaviour’ (Matzler, et al., 2006), it is widely held in the marketing and social psychology literatures that trust is one of the main antecedents of loyalty (Chiu et al., 2010; Harris and Goode, 2004; Kim et al., 2011 and Zhou et al., 2011a).

Trust can be defined as the ‘willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the other party to perform its stated function’ (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). In the case of marketing, trust constraints the negative effects of information asymmetry. Hence customers are more comfortable with the brand community and consequently with the brand itself when trust ensues (Chiu et al., 2010, Doney and Cannon, 1997).

Can there really be a definition of trust that directly attaches it to loyalty though? The answer is it probably cannot, the contemporary marketing literature (Chiu et al., 2010) however signifies the term as equivalent to the sum of a) reduction of exchange ambiguity, b) easy flow of information (top-down and bottom-up) and c) the feeling of being comfortable with a specific brand.

It is not then a coincidence that building brand trust is thought to be creation of value. According to Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002), trust will ineludibly increase perceived value and therefore loyalty. Brand trust is then regarded as an indispensable factor of loyalty (Lin and Lee, 2012). They also offer a subtler explanation of this value creation based, which they base on the elimination of brand reliability doubt, which is also applicable to an online brand community (Lin and Lee, 2012). More specifically, trust enhances brand loyalty through increasing the perceived value of a brand (or a brand community). When the customer or the community member visits the community, he or she will develop a sense of community experience and hence a perception of the brand’s fairness, honesty and capability of performing tasks that benefit the consumer. This study suggests that

H5: Brand trust positively affects brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is often described as the ‘holy grail’ of marketing. It occurs when an individual purchases products or services from the same manufacturer repeatedly rather than from other suppliers (Farris et al., 2010). There are two viewpoints in examining brand loyalty. One is derived from the behavioural and social psychology area which implies that loyalty is translated to repeated actions (purchases in this case), whereas the attitudinal viewpoint attempts to recognize the reasons and the rationale of this behaviour, while examining brand loyalty on the grounds of preferences, commitment and purchase intentions. It can then be conceived both as behaviour towards a certain brand and/or as ‘actual pattern of purchase behaviour’ (Matzler et al., 2006).

The concept of brand loyalty is generally divided into two sub-categories by scholars. a) spurious brand loyalty: The biased behavioural response (repurchase) expressed over time by some decision-making unit, with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands, which is a function of inertia (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978) and b) true brand loyalty: The biased behavioural response (repurchase) expressed over time by some decision-making unit, with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands, which is a function of psychological (decision making, evaluative) process resulting in brand commitment (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978).

From the two types of commitment recognized in the marketing literature (affective and continuance), the one which is more closely related to true loyalty is the affective commitment since continuance commitment is a rather practical attachment to a brand and not an emotional one as it is based on the lack of affordable alternatives and on high switching costs. On the other hand, affective commitment is rooted in shared values, identification and attachment (Fullerton, 2003). In essence, consumers trust and enjoy doing business with a partner when they are affectively committed to that partner. It may well be that affective commitment lies at the heart of customer-brand relationships, although there have only been a few definitive studies of the role that customer commitment plays in the consumer-brand relationship (Coulter, Price and Feick, 2003). Intuitively, affective commitment would lie at the heart of a consumer-brand relationship because consumers come to identify with and be involved with many of the brands they consume. Affective commitment is usually used to describe the procedure through which a customer is loyal because he or she has a ‘favourable attitude towards the brand and is also a frequent buyer of that brand’ (Fullerton 2005).

A customer who is truly loyal comprises a sense of commitment while spurious loyal customers lack this attribute. Due to this sense of commitment, the consumer insists on buying the same brand over and over and needs to buy the product again. According to Bloemer and Kasper (1995), brand commitment is an absolutely necessary prerequisite for true brand loyalty to occur. A widely used definition for brand commitment is ‘the pledging or binding of an individual to his or her brand choice’ (Kiesler, 1971). In other words, commitment is the result of an explicit and extensive decision-making process, as well as evaluative process, that makes him or her pledged or bound to that particular brand choice. Alternatively, commitment refers to the psychological emotion of attachment toward a certain brand while loyalty also encompasses the actual act of repurchasing the same brand. The former is an undeniably essential precondition for the latter to occur. Commitment, in other words is seen as a major precursor of brand loyalty (Beatty and Kahle, 1988).

Marketing literature sometimes, arbitrarily, jumbles the notions of brand commitment and brand loyalty considering them as being the same. A careful inspection of the most prominent studies in the area reveals the full picture justifying why while these two concepts are connected, they are, by definition, separate and complementary (Pritchard et al., 1999). In social psychology, the concept of commitment has some intentional aspects and this is the reason why intentional commitment is sometimes referred as brand commitment (Lee and Lee, 2013). Li and Patrick (2010) also support that sometimes commitment (and almost always affective commitment) is disconcerting referred as loyalty due to the terms’ juxtaposition. Commitment is formed by psychological and economic attachments (Fullerton, 2003, 2005) and these attachments are predecessors of brand loyalty (Iglesias, Singh and Batista, 2011). These attachments are also the decisive factor of whether a customer engages in an emotional relationship with a brand or not. Affective commitment hence, has a focal role in brand loyalty and is a key factor for true brand loyalty (Mattila, 2001) but it is not the same. Loyalty is a rather multidimensional construct that apart from commitment, it also includes trust, perceived value, satisfaction and repeated purchase behaviour and results in positive Word-Of-Mouth and brand advocacy (Dick and Basu, 1994). Furthermore, Beatty and Kahle (1988), Dick and Bashu (1994) and Pritchard et al. (1999) suggest that a formative relationship, in essence, casts commitment as the emotional or psychological attachment to a brand that develops before a customer would be able to determine that their repeat purchase
behaviour was derived from a sense of loyalty, supporting that commitment is clearly a precursor of loyalty. Moving back to defining these two terms, lots of contemporary and early scholars describe loyalty as a compound attitudinal and behavioural blend and try to measure the degree to which a customer favours and buys a brand repeatedly (Pritchard and Howard, 1997). Commitment on the other hand, is typically measured in purely cognitive terms that measure consumers’ attitudes of attachment to a specific brand. For example, Morgan and Hunt (1994) define commitment as “an enduring desire to continue an attachment”.

The above arguments based on the review of the relevant literature suggest that when studying the concept of online brand communities and their effects on brand loyalty, it is better to not only use brand community commitment or brand commitment as forerunners of brand loyalty but both.

**H6: Brand Commitment is positively associated to brand loyalty**

### 3. DATA ANALYSIS

Initially, 374 survey responses were collected. A first round data cleaning revealed that 51 responses were not usable since respondents left many questions unanswered. A standard deviation test was then conducted on Excel and another 23 responses were rejected (those with standard deviations below 0.4). A total of 300 were finally used. While no significant gender bias is observed, age distribution is heavily skewed towards younger to middle ages, something which was expected as 74% of Internet users are aged between 15 years and 44 years (Statista, 2014).

### Table 1. Correlations of the latent variables and evidence of discriminant validity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Means (S.D.)</th>
<th>OBCP</th>
<th>OBCC</th>
<th>BT</th>
<th>BC</th>
<th>BL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OBCP</td>
<td>4.325 (1.131)</td>
<td>.750</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBCC</td>
<td>5.024 (1.075)</td>
<td>.745</td>
<td>.762</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BT</td>
<td>4.804 (1.101)</td>
<td>.659</td>
<td>.729</td>
<td>.821</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>4.305 (1.322)</td>
<td>.719</td>
<td>.721</td>
<td>.791</td>
<td>.842</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>4.952 (1.219)</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td>.760</td>
<td>.817</td>
<td>.817</td>
<td>.819</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
* The bold numbers in the diagonal row are square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE)

### 3.1 Measurement model

#### 3.1.1 Construct, discriminant and convergent validity

To assess construct validity, a five factor confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with all the latent constructs in the model was performed using AMOS 21 to test the validity of the constructs. The statistics showed acceptable levels of fit through the model. A possible justification for this is that multicollinearity could be a potential drawback of the study. A possible justification for this could be the bidirectional nature of relationship marketing constructs. 95% confidence intervals of the correlations among constructs were also calculated. None of them included 1, which supports discriminant validity (Bagozzi, 1994).

#### 3.1.2 Internal consistency

The internal consistency was tested by examining composite reliability (CR), Cronbach alpha (Cronbach, 1970) and average variance extracted (AVE). Table 2 shows that the values of composite reliabilities were all higher than 0.7 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) and the stricter threshold of 0.8 (Koufteros et al., 2005), while all Cronbach alphas were also above 0.7, supporting measures’ reliability (Hair et al., 2005). All AVEs were above 0.5, also supporting internal consistency (Fornell and Larcker, 1981 and Hair et al., 1995).

### Table 2. Results of the confirmatory factor analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Standardised loading (a)</th>
<th>Composite reliability</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OBCP</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.836</td>
<td>.563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participation</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P3</td>
<td>.70</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P4</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBCC</td>
<td>OC1</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.873</td>
<td>.582</td>
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<tr>
<td>commitment</td>
<td>OC2</td>
<td>.80</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OC3</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>OC4</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>OC5</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brand trust</td>
<td>T1</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.911</td>
<td>.675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T2</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.912</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T3</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T4</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T5</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand commitment</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.923</td>
<td>.710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C3</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C4</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C5</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Brand loyalty</td>
<td>L1</td>
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<td>.671</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L2</td>
<td>.74</td>
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<td></td>
<td>L3</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L4</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L5</td>
<td>.87</td>
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</table>

### 3.2 Structural model

The structural model fit was tested using AMOS 20. Table 4 reveals that all the statistics indicate an adequate model fit. χ² is 465.178 (df = 164) and χ²/df = 2.836. CFI is 0.94, TLI is 0.931 and RMSEA is 0.078. NFI, SRMR, GFI and AGFI are 0.911, 0.33, 0.852 and 0.811 respectively.

Online brand community participation has a strong positive effect on online brand community commitment (b=0.51, p<0.01), thus support is provided for H1. Online brand community participation also has a strong positive effect on brand trust (b=0.55, p<0.01), AGFI were also found to be greater than the recommended 0.8 threshold (Lee, Lee and Tan, 2012).

All items loaded significantly on their intended construct and all but two items exhibited loading values that are higher than the generally recommended level (0.7) supporting the convergent validity of the constructs (Steenkamp and Van Trijp, 1991). The two items exceeding the recommended values were removed.

Discriminant validity was tested by comparing the square roots of AVEs with the off-diagonal construct correlations (table 1). All of them exhibit a greater value satisfying the Fornell-Larker criterion of discriminant validity but the correlation between variables is relatively high, indicating that multicollinearity could be a potential drawback of the study. A possible justification for this could be the bidirectional nature of relationship marketing constructs. 95% confidence intervals of the correlations among constructs were also calculated. None of them included 1, which supports discriminant validity (Bagozzi, 1994).
thus providing support for H2. Online brand community commitment appears to have a strong influence on brand commitment (b=0.4, p<0.01), providing support to H3. H4 is also supported as expected, providing robust support to the trust-commitment theory. Brand trust has a significant positive effect to brand commitment (b=0.7, p<0.01). Brand trust also shows a significant effect on brand loyalty (b=0.53, p<0.01). The same is true for the effect of brand commitment to brand loyalty (b=0.3, p<0.01). Hence H5 and H6 are also supported. In total, the data collected support all six hypotheses as summarised in table 3.

Table 3: Hypotheses tests and results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1 OBC participation → OBC commitment</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2 OBC participation → Brand trust</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3 OBC commitment → Brand commitment</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4 Brand trust → Brand commitment</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5 Brand trust → Brand loyalty</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6 Brand commitment → Brand loyalty</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Summary of the results

The results of the analysed data demonstrate a positive relationship between online brand community participation and brand loyalty. Two types of antecedents of brand loyalty are recognised (brand trust and brand commitment) and two direct outcomes of OBC participation (OBC commitment and brand trust). Of the two antecedents of loyalty, trust seems to have a stronger impact to it than commitment. The relationship between OBC participation and brand commitment is mediated by the construct of OBC commitment. In other words, active OBC participants commit to the online brand community first and then to the brand that the community supports as suggested by Zhou et al. (2012). Building commitment towards the online brand community then seems to play a critical role in building commitment to the brand itself.

4.2 Theoretical contributions

The contributions of this study to the online relationship marketing theory are triple. First, it examines the application of the well-established trust-commitment theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) in an online context. Trust-commitment theory has been heavily tested in the offline and particularly in the B2B context. Here, its components are used as outcomes of active member participation in an online brand community. Second, the construct of online brand community commitment is recognised as a necessary precondition for true brand commitment and loyalty. Existing studies have, to a very large extent, disregarded OBC-specific interactions’ (here participation) outcomes before examining its relationship to brand-specific concepts. Attempts to relate participation in an online brand community to brand equity constructs (here brand trust, brand commitment and brand loyalty) through the mediation of OBC-specific outcomes of participation have mostly been theoretical and speculative (Wirtz et al., 2009).

The study investigates the behavioural mindset of OBC participants in terms of commitment and shows how this is developed through continuous interactions with other members and through building strong emotional ties with them, with the community itself and later with the brand.

Finally, the study highlights the process of brand loyalty formation through participation in an online brand community and the mediating roles for brand trust and brand commitment that have not been fully explained in prior studies in the context of OBCs. Although loyalty is an observable behaviour resulting in repeated purchasing, positive word-of-mouth and oppositional brand loyalty, it is a direct outcome of brand trust, which is a cognitive factor and of brand commitment, which is an affective factor. This study hence examines the parallel relationship of OBC-created brand trust and brand commitment (through OBC participation) with brand loyalty, enriching the literature of loyalty and showing that enhanced participation to an OBC alters the psychological status of members and impacts their purchase decisions.

4.3 Practical implications

Apart from the theoretical contributions, this study also delivers some hands-on insights to e-marketers or to OBC owners. The findings incentivise marketers to utilize their OBCs in order to build strong and lasting relationships with their customers or potential customers. More specifically, findings suggest that participation in an OBC is strongly, indirectly, related to enhanced brand loyalty which is the most effective and reliable strategy for profitability (Cyr, 2008). An online brand community is a powerful tool that can be used in shaping the strength and the endurance of the relationship between a brand and its followers or customers.

The findings of the data analysis suggest that practitioners should not only consider developing OBCs for their brands but also focus on producing relationship marketing strategies that encourage member participation to them. By actively and efficiently managing an OBC, marketers can create spaces where customers get involved, exchange information and broaden their understanding about brands (Hur, Ahn and Kim, 2011). Enhancing participation may also involve through providing benefits for doing so. Such benefits can be economic (discounts or gifts) or they can be intangible (freedom of expression, addressing complaints or taking part in the conversation).

Managers should also be aware that the community itself plays a crucial role in the formation of brand loyalty. Members that have developed emotional ties with other members through continuous interaction are more likely to become committed customers. The mere existence of a vibrant online brand community then cannot by itself guarantee enhanced profitability unless marketers retain their focus on it, keeping it relevant and replicating or even improving all the successful strategies that have created a harmonious environment where likeminded customers interact and exchange ideas and information about a brand.

4.4 Limitations and future research

Future researchers consulting this study should be aware of the several limitations that it is associated with. First, this study does not focus on a particular industry, hence generalization specification of its findings should be done with caution. Although the OBCs examined belong to brands within oligopolistic markets, highly concentrated markets or more competitive ones may exhibit OBC-member behaviour that deviate considerably. Second, future studies should be aware that the outcomes of participating in an online brand community do include more behavioural aspects than OBC commitment. Prior research has revealed that OBC trust, OBC co-creation, satisfaction and OBC loyalty are also cognitive and emotive states that derive from OBC participation. While this probably has trivial implications to practitioners who are predominantly concerned with the consequence of OBC participation (brand loyalty), it is of significant importance to researchers evaluating consumer psychology and the process of trust, commitment and
loyalty formation.

Table 4. Overall statistics of the CFA and structural model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fit index</th>
<th>Recommended level</th>
<th>CFA</th>
<th>Structural model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolute measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>χ²/df</td>
<td>445.513,169</td>
<td>465.178,164</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GFI</td>
<td>&gt; 8</td>
<td>.858</td>
<td>.852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>&lt;0.8</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incremental measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLI</td>
<td>&gt; 9</td>
<td>.933</td>
<td>.931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>&gt; 9</td>
<td>.943</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGFI</td>
<td>&gt; 8</td>
<td>.813</td>
<td>.811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFI</td>
<td>&gt; 9</td>
<td>.915</td>
<td>.911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parsimonious fit measure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normed chi-square</td>
<td>1 ≤ χ²/df ≤ 3</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. REFERENCES


[34] Iglesias, O., Singh, J. J. and Batista-Foguet, J. 2011. The role of brand experience and affective commitment in determining brand loyalty. *Journal of Brand Management*, 18(8), 570-582


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