The Impact of Online Brand Community Markers on Consumer Brand Engagement: Studying the moderating role of gender

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Abstract

Nowadays, online brand communities are considered an important tool for building strong successful brands. This study aims to uncover the influence of brand community based on social media markers; shared consciousness, rituals and traditions and moral responsibility on consumer brand engagement, that consequently affects brand trust and brand loyalty. Using an online questionnaire of 178 responses collected from consumers who are members of online brand communities on different social media channels. Partial Least Square - Structural Equation Modeling was used to analyse the data, the results revealed the significant positive impact of brand community on the three markers. The findings also suggest the positive effects of rituals and traditions and moral responsibility on consumer brand engagement. The moderation of gender was supported on examined relationships. Consumer brand engagement exert positive significant impact on brand trust and enhance long-term relationships. Important theoretical and managerial implications on building brand communities and consumer brand engagement can be drawn from the study findings.

Keywords: Brand community, brand community markers, gender, consumer brand engagement, brand trust, brand loyalty

1. Introduction

Online brand communities based on social media are double-edged sword for companies. These communities constitute a new marketing research tool used to collect reliable data about consumers, their needs, preferences, intentions, lifestyle, and post-purchase behaviour. It represents a new mean of relationship marketing for building connections with the customers and enhancing brand performance (Kumar & Nayak, 2018; Pedeliento et al., 2020; Veloutsou & Black, 2020). These communities provide its members with valuable sources of information about the brand, constitute a network of relationships with like-minded members to share their experiences and express themselves. The relevance

of social media in building communities transcends the geographical boundaries, cultural differences and variations in knowledge and background between consumers, so they can relay their set of beliefs through their interactions and engagement (Kizgin et al., 2020).

Concurrently, brand managers are challenged by designing strategies to build, maintain and manage its brand communities to gain consumers' attention and enhance their participation and interactive experience. Hence, brand communities, as a communication channel, contribute in consumers empowerment and emphasise their role in brand value co-creation process. This process depends heavily on the engagement of consumers with the focal brand and fellow members (Bowden et al., 2017; Dessart et al., 2015). Highly engaged consumers cherish the various community benefits including social, hedonic, and functional benefits (Laroche et al., 2012), and are involved in wide range of activities to build brand meaning and represent the brand within and outside the group boundaries (Veloutsou & Black, 2020). Accordingly, consumers engagement is the means of companies to get benefits from their participative membership in brand communities (Bowden et al., 2017), either initiated by consumer or by the company, including long-term relationships, loyalty, purchase intentions, higher sales, and insights to improve product innovation (Pedeliento et al., 2020).

Not all members are brand users, as reported by Muniz & O'Guinn, (2001), brand communities despite its context have a status hierarchy, but participants are part of the brand's large imaginary social construction. This supports the view that members of a brand community are different and stands against approaching brand communities as homogenous groups (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). The heterogeneity of members has been addressed in prior work to identify the existence of sub-groups in a brand community relative to their motivations of participation and the role played within the community (Özbölük & Dursun, 2017).

The understanding of brand community population and how it affects the brand-community relationship and brand-based consequences have recently gained extensive attention from scholars and practitioners (Hoang et al., 2019; Islam & Rahman, 2017; Kumar & Nayak, 2018; Pedeliento et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2015). For instance, the recent work of Pedeliento et al., (2020) highlights the significance of members' demographic in brand community participation and brand community relationships in different types of brand communities.

Extensive research has been conducted to better understand consumer engagement in online brand communities; however, this domain is still nascent. Specifically, there is call to uncover the antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement relative to different perceptions or associations of community members (Hoang et al., 2019; Islam & Rahman, 2017; Islam et al., 2018). This study examines the potentiality of brand communities in enhancing consumer-brand engagement and creating brand-based consequences relative to variations of members perceptions to community markers. Therefore, it provides answers to the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent do brand communities based on social media have the potential to engage consumers with the focal brand and enhance brand relationships?

RQ2: How members′ perceptions of brand community markers influence consumer brand engagement, and highlighting the relative importance of each component of brand community?

RQ3: Does gender influence the relationship between consumers perceptions of community markers and consumer brand engagement.

Dr. Reham Shawky Ebrahim

To answer these questions, this paper depends on brand community markers and its role to derive consumer brand engagement (CBE) and transfer consumer relationships from the community to the brand. In the extant literature, the three markers are introduced differently including brand community characteristics or the core components of building the community (McAlexander et al., 2002), the consequences of community participation (Madupu & Cooley, 2010), influences of social factors; the connection between members that motivate online community commitment (Zhou & Amin, 2014), members' psychological attachment to the group essential to sustain the community (Park & Cho, 2012). Depending on the prior work of (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), shared consciousness, rituals and traditions and moral of responsibility are adopted as the characteristics evident the existence of brand community; however, community members perceptions of these markers are relatively different. Thus, they are not equally existing in the brand community to affect consumer brand engagement and its consequent effect on brand trust and brand loyalty.

The paper is structured as follows. First, an extensive literature review is conducted, followed by the development of the conceptual model. Next, an overview of the conducted empirical study is provided, followed by a summary of the results. The paper finally provides discussion of the findings, an overview of key theoretical and practical implications, limitations arising from the study, and an agenda for future research.

2. Literature background

2.1 Online brand communities

The classical debate among early sociologist is to answer the question of "whether it is society or community". Reflections of this controversy extend across contemporary social sciences and govern the attempts of defining social relations effects on human response and acts. Sociologists consider both as different forms of social integration; society refers to the broad rules and processes that form contractual, mechanical and rational social order of large groups people without personification. While, community is formed of smaller groups of like-minded people with special informal emotional bonds (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Storper, 2005) sharing identity, expectation and interests and bridging any differences.

The growing importance of community in social science was also applied to modern economics to imply its potential positive effects on social integration and functionality improvements of labour markets (Storper, 2005). Branding pertains essentially in the discourse of modernity, society and community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), notably with the emergence of consumption communities (McAlexander et al., 2002) and brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001); thus, providing new avenue in understanding loyalty. In relationship marketing, brand community is a better fit than consumption community that insinuate tenuous bond of brand use and relationships among members (McAlexander et al., 2002). Marketers are depending on brand communities to act on behalf of the brand to familiarise and socialise consumers with the brand elements, provide assistance. On the other hand, within the community consumers are acting as brands' agents (Habibi et al., 2014).

Dr. Reham Shawky Ebrahim

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Brand community is a form of consumption community (Canniford, 2011), it can be described as "*a specialised non-geographical, bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among brand users and fans*" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), p.412). The focal interest in such communities is the brand itself that identify the group identity. The rise of the internet in parallel with the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) served as platforms for new interactions and facilitate the formation of virtual communities (Brodie et al., 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Online brand community (OBC) or virtual community (VC) can be described as affiliative groups whose online interactions are based on social communications and relationships between consumers and the brand, product, fellow consumers, and the firm/marketer (Baldus et al., 2015; de Valck et al., 2009).

Brand communities established on the platforms of social networking sites are called social-media based brand communities. It is argued that the social-media setting demolishes hierarchical structure of brand communities; no discrimination between old fans and followers and newly participants (Habibi et al., 2014). Indeed, the extensive use of social media sites boosts the participation of members on online communities (Zaglia, 2013). Also, initially brand communities are depending on solitary type of relationships among consumers at one level; however, (McAlexander et al., 2002) propose the customer-centric model of brand community. The four types of relationships; consumer-product, consumer-consumer, consumer-brand, and consumer-company are acting as the building blocks of a brand community. Applying the consumer-experiential perspective in defining key relationships of a brand community enhances its dynamic nature and enriches its social context.

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Social media is an ideal environment for building brand communities with high tendency of enabling users to gain social capital which refers to the levels of integration among group members and their engagement with the community (Storper, 2005) and related values and benefits of social relations. Interactions among members on social media create three different forms of social capital: bonding (strong ties among likeminded persons), bridging (societal differences or distant acquaintances) and maintaining (keep valuable social connections) (Hsu & Lin, 2017). The strong sense of a community and it's influences on members can shape the community's culture, which can be characterised by three markers (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). There is a consensus in sociology that there are three markers of brand community despite its setting, they are: shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions and sense of moral responsibility (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Shared consciousness (consciousness of kind), psychologically consciousness itself is the constitutive dimension that create the medium of appearance for the surroundings. It is, rather, "*a meaningful and dynamic network of intertwining acts, themes, motivations, and so on, largely connected by relations of mutual implication, and grounded in inter-subjective frameworks and bodily propensities and expectations that are gradually built up over time*" (Sass & Parnas, 2003)p.429). Consciousness is not a biological substrate only but it should be reckoned to culture, thoughts and experiences of social activities (Yevarouski, 2020).

The shared consciousness of a community refers to the intrinsic emotional connections among group members. These feelings strengthen the sense of belonging among the group members and separate them from non-members (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Habibi et al., (2016) argued that shared consciousness represents the cognitive dimension of brand community identification; members' awareness of associated value derived from their membership. The identification defined in the community consciousness of kind implies two

social processes: legitimacy and oppositional loyalty. The former process differentiates between true members of the community and those who are not; true members of brand community are those appreciate its culture, history, rituals and traditions. While, the second social process which perpetuate consciousness of kind delineates member's opposition to competing brands. Through this dimension, the triangular (consumer, brand, fellow member) social constellation of brand community is asserted (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Rituals and traditions, the second indicator or consequence of a community, commonly they describe the practices, beliefs and customs transmitted across and beyond generations (Scully & Howell, 2008). Traditions refer to the cultural continuity in social practices and attitudes that inculcate certain behavioural norms and values (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). While rituals are symbolic form of communication experienced through repetition and expressed systemically in overt behaviour (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). When members of a community are sharing their perceptions of the positive aspects of rituals such as communication, enjoyment, memories and experiences, the relationships among them are strengthened (Meske et al., 1994).

The culture of a brand community is maintained by rituals and traditions, which symbolically build the community's identity and identify the ways of communications between members (Laroche et al., 2012). In virtual communities, members are enacting rituals by sharing consumption experiences with the brands and enjoying exclusive common language (traditions, jargons, emoticons) used within the community boundaries (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). These rituals and traditions perpetuate the sense of collectiveness among the community members (Habibi et al., 2016), and show their commitments to social role and communal goals (Hoang et al., 2019).

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Moral responsibility, the third and the last marker of brand community, this norm refers to the person's beliefs of being responsible for his acts and its consequences (Thi Xuan Mai & Ottar Olsen, 2016). This attribute arises from an individual's code of ethics; however, it can be assigned to a collective perceived as single entity (Miller & Makela, 2005). It is argued that collective moral responsibility is the summation of individual's responsibility, the irresponsibility of some members is thus reflected on the group as a whole.

The moral responsibility of a group requires the presence of moral individuals with shared ties and common goals contribute to collective moral acts and practices (Pfeiffer, 1988). Genuinely, collective moral responsibility may exist even in the absence of personal moral responsibility, the shared feel of guilt and motivations of being held responsive to the consequences of certain acts are shared among members but not with equal shares (Miller & Makela, 2005). Members are sharing responsiveness but with different degrees depending on their capacity to recognition of moral reasons and being motivated to act upon these reasons (Glannon, 1988). There is a general agreement that moral responsibility requires the integration of causality or the utility function over outcomes, blameworthiness and intentions, these components are diffused in a group (Halpern & Kleiman-Weiner, 2018).

In a community, moral obligations are derived from external social forces defining the basic social norms and internal moral norms; reflections of member's own convictions of the right or wrong behaviours (Thi Xuan Mai & Ottar Olsen, 2016). Muniz & O'Guinn, (2001) mark brand communities by shared moral responsibilities; a sense of duty to the community and its members. In the presence of social moral consciousness; the community formal or informal bounds of social norms, members are committed to the community, the brand and other members. Moral responsibility therefore supports the survival of the community and includes assistance of members in brand usage and consumption. This role

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is highly manifested and demonstrated on online brand communities (Laroche et al., 2012).

Thus, the first two markers identify the community differentiating identity; while, this indicator contributes to the group cohesion and produces collective action (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Brand communities built on the platform of social media connect consumers and facilitate sharing of information and experiences between them. Along with the ethnographic evidence, the collective communalities were empirically supported to be positively affected by social media-based brand communities (Habibi et al., 2016; Laroche et al., 2012).

H1: Brand communities based on social media positively affect the three markers of a community (a: Shared consciousness, b: Rituals and traditions and c: Moral responsibility).

2.2 Consumer brand engagement

Theoretical background

The term of engagement has received great attention from academics in the past ten years, it is rooted in the social exchange theory (SET) which provides a paradigm for understanding interactions and interdependent relationships between persons. The central essence of social exchange is the mutual benefits between parties in an ongoing relationship based on their perceptions of costs and benefits (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This exchange process can be initiated and involve different parties, engagement can be therefore generated by the firm or the consumer; constituting two different perspectives (Obilo et al., 2020).

In this study the focus is on the type of engagement generated by consumers as a response to their experience with a brand community hosted by any social media channel.

Up till then, inconsistencies exist between several research when defining consumer engagement and its dimensions. However, several identifying aspects can be drawn, *first*, engagement reinforce the centricity of customers in relationship management (Verhoef et al., 2010), it explicitly accounts for the dynamics of interactions between customers and the focal object; the brand and its related elements including other fellow customers, its community (virtual or offline), content on social media, the firm and its products (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Obilo et al., 2020). Consumers engagement with different foci, engagement objects, has been evidenced by Dessart et al., (2015; 2016) in social media context. *Second,* consumer involvement and participation can be demonstrated at different levels and encompassed many activities that include both transactional (purchase) and non-transactional; behavioural manifestation going beyond the act of purchase (van Doorn et al., 2010) such as providing customer feedback, or contributing and/or creating brand-related content on social media (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). *Third*, engagement is a multifaceted, context-dependent variable; it depends on the aspects of the setting surrounding the firm and/or the customers and affecting the iterative relationship between the engaged subject and the focal object (van Doorn et al., 2010). In figure 1, the key aspects identifying consumer engagement are depicted.

How brand community promote consumer engagement?

Online brand communities facilitate interactions between members, which provide them with a great deal of social, functional, symbolic and affective benefits at different levels (Wirtz et al., 2013). A considerable number of studies expand the engagement literature and provide a better understanding of the precedence of consumer engagement in online communities, these drivers can be categorised in three sets.

First, community characteristics, these extrinsic motivations encourage consumers to interact with other community members; thus, enhancing community-based *relationships* at both consumer and brand level. Within the framework of social identity theory, a community that enhances the sense of identification and permits the formation of strong bonds between community members has high social and affective values that supports consumers engagement (Molinillo et al., 2020).

Second, consumer community-based brand relationships, this category chart the transition of brand community relationship to consumer-brand relationships; the effects of brand communities in building long brand relationships. It is proposed that at any online platform, consumers are sharing their experiences and values drawn from the brand with community members. Intimate brand community relationships (e.g. brand community identification, brand community commitment, brand community experience, or brand community trust) reinforce consumer-brand relationships including engagement, attachment, and loyalty.
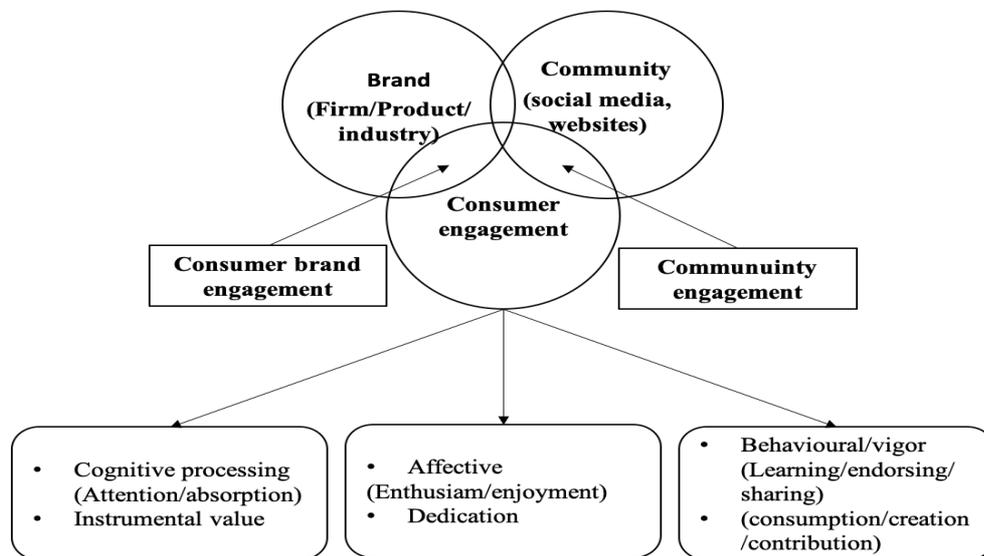
Figure 1: Consumer engagement levels and aspects

Third, consumer traits and values, personal forces such as self-image and self-enhancement, may promote consumers engagement in online brand communities. Accordingly, brand communities are considered powerful brand engagement tool (Habibi et al., 2014).

Community markers and gender influences on consumer engagement

Brand community markers create a sense of meaning and identity for members to get involved in the community. According to brand community theory, community characteristics support social interactions, sharing of experiences and information between members. According to McAlexander et al., (2002) community characteristics exist in each community but not equally exhibited, consumers are willing to fit in the community and feel the sense of belonging. Through participation in events, experienced participants are taking forward steps toward moral responsibility; by guiding other members and sharing with them ritual stories about the brand. moral obligations are perceived as norms equivalent to cognitive constructs and responsible for the acts of participation, deep involvement and subsequent behaviour (Thi Xuan Mai & Ottar Olsen, 2016). Consumers are participating in different activities and are interacting with community members; while, maintaining and supporting the community markers (Habibi et al., 2016; McAlexander et al., 2002). Which then contribute in the creation of community sense of identification that affects community engagement (Habibi et al., 2016).

Perceptions of being part of a community cultivate the feelings of responsibility and remove individual differences; experienced and inexperienced members are having shared aspirations and establish a subculture (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Shared consciousness is related to the believes that community members are closely related to each other and are sharing the same basic concepts about the brand. Strong feelings of belonging and identification enhances members to participate in the community prospects and activities; therefore, they are more likely to engage with brand value creation practices (Habibi et al., 2016; Hoang et al., 2019).

Shared rituals and traditions, the rituals, history, storytelling, and experiences systematically shared between members in their communications reinforce the community culture and enhance its identity. The common practices and language spoken in a community using jargons are part of its traditions, through interactions members are getting familiar with the brand. Engagement increases awareness of shared rituals and traditions strengthen the bond between the consumer and the brand (Madupu & Cooley, 2010). It is believed that this identity is prerequisite to consumers brand engagement (Habibi et al., 2016).

Moral responsibility, this concept is related to the willingness of consumers to help and give assistance to fellow-consumers; community members, and being responsible for them. It thus plays an important role in entailing the code of conduct in a community, the high sense of obligation toward the community and its members increase consumer involvement (Habibi et al., 2016; Laroche et al., 2012).

H2: Brand communities based on social media positively affect consumer brand engagement

H3: The markers of a brand community (a: Shared consciousness, b: Rituals and traditions and c: Moral responsibility) positively affect consumer brand engagement.

Generally, there are biological variations between male and female which frame their cognitive, behavioural and social responses. At the cognitive level, men are more rational and logic they pay attention to

independent-impacts of different attributes and follow the selective; while women are more emotional and intuitive, they focus on similarities and interrelationships between different attributes. At behavioural and social level, gender difference in social orientation is reflected by the different communication patterns of women and men. Men held great concern for self and are socially oriented toward independency and assertiveness, in a society they seek the establishment of domination and control. Unlike women are motivated by the need for self-affiliation they communicate in a society showing less dominancy to create affinity and enjoy interpersonal harmony (Sun et al., 2010).

With reference to the theoretical perspectives of gender difference at the behavioural and social level. In an online brand community, gender variations should be reflected on the domination of community characteristics and its impact on engagement. The social role theory posits that, women are dependent, cooperative, concerned with others and expressive while men are independent, competitive, concerned with self and instrumental (Eagly & Wood, 1991). In consistent with social-role theory of gender differences, this study posits that the effects of community markers on consumer brand engagement depends on the individual characteristics presented in gender. In an online community, women are motivated by social interactions, vulnerable to peer influence and put great emphasis on self-transcendence value than men (Hoang et al., 2019).

H4: The effects of community markers (a: Shared consciousness, b: Rituals and traditions and c: Moral responsibility) on consumer brand engagement will be stronger for female consumers than male.

Consequences of consumer brand engagement

The term engagement is associated with consumer relationships, it has been broadly examined as a strategic tool for creating and sustaining a competitive advantage and as a performance indicator of business successfulness. Trust is a critical factor in shaping relationships developed in an online network or community (Ebrahim, 2019). Brand trust denotes for consumer willingness to rely on the brand in delivering its promises (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In an online brand community, the flow of trust is along the engagement process. For new consumers, trust at the community level creates the potential of consumers to engage with other community members (Hollebeek, 2011) and encourage the development of sense of belonging and getting involved in brand activities (Martínez-López et al., 2017). Through their engagement in the brand community they learn more about the brand and its uses, be more familiarised and increase their brand knowledge; thus, reducing uncertainty levels. As a result, consumers levels of trust in the brand increases (Casaló et al., 2007). Trust contributes in the understanding of long-term relationship built in the venue of online communities. It is the reason behind consumers engagement and simultaneously is an outcome that reflects consumer positive experiences and attitudes toward the brand (Jung et al., 2014). The present study proposes that brand trust is a consequence of consumer brand engagement.

H5: Consumer brand engagement positively affects brand trust.

Brand loyalty refers to consumer commitment towards the future purchase of preferred brand despite situational factors and other marketing efforts (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). The relationship between engagement and loyalty is well developed now in the literature. The positive influence of consumer engagement based on social media on brand loyalty has been demonstrated in several studies, for example (Solem, 2016; Kaur & Paruthi, 2019; Kaur et al., 2020). Engaged consumers may have strong emotional bonds with the brand that ensure long-term relationship.

H6: Consumer brand engagement positively affects brand loyalty.
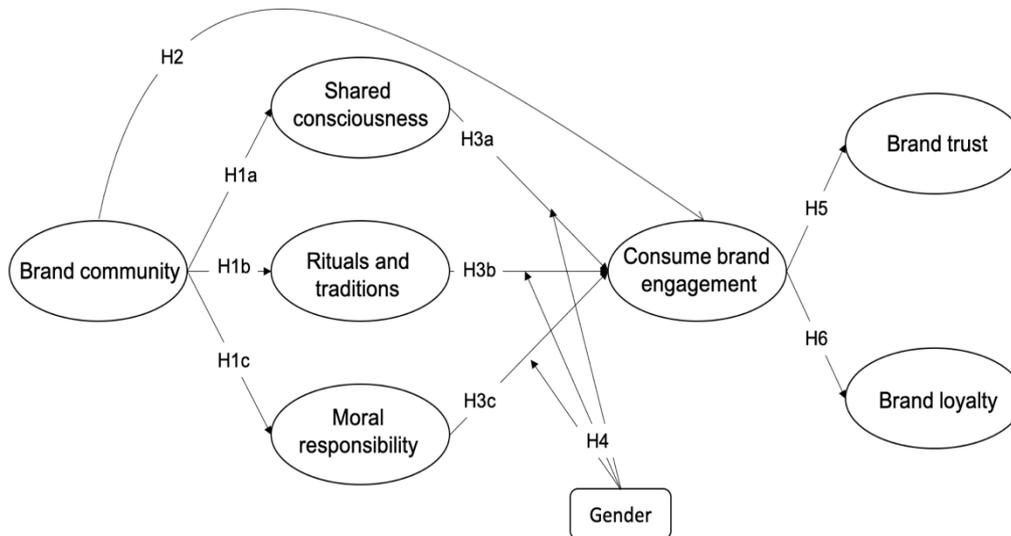
The research framework is shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Research model

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and procedure

Data was collected from Egypt through the administration of online questionnaire, available in English and Arabic, during October 2019. The instrument was translated into Arabic language and then back into English, the back-translation procedure to ensure vocabulary equivalence (Sekaran, 1983). The participants were recruited on a referral basis of being members of an online brand community based on any social media platform using non-random convenience sampling technique. Respondents were advised first to name the social media site they prefer and frequently use. Then, they were asked to name the most preferred brand-related group they are member of and refer to their community experiences while answering the questions.

A total number of 178 completed questionnaire were used, the sample demographic and characteristics are presented in table 2. As shown in this table, 97 respondents were males and 81 were females. The majority of the respondents were under 30 constituting a percentage of 35.4% followed by those who aged between 18 and 20 with a percentage of 28.7%. and 64.6% of the respondents are holding a bachelor degree. There is heterogeneity between respondents in terms of membership duration and number of visits, 55.1% of the respondents are members of a brand community for more than a year and 47.8% are visiting the brand group on daily basis.

Table 2: Sample demographics and characteristics

Characteristics	Value	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	97	54.5%
	Female	81	45.5%
Age	18 – 20	51	28.7%
	21 – 30	63	35.4%
	31 - 40	27	15.2%
	41 - 50	22	12.4%
	51 - 60	10	5.6%
	60$^+$	5	2.8%
Level of Education	High school	37	20.8%
	Bachelor	115	64.6%
	Diploma/Master	9	5.1%
	Doctoral degree	8	4.5%
	Other	9	5.1%
Job status	Employed	71	39.8%
	Unemployed	17	9.5%
	Student	75	42.2%
	Other	15	8.5%
Experience on social media	Less than a year	13	7.3%
	1 – 5 yrs	26	14.6%
	6 -10 yrs	77	43.3%
	More than 10 yrs	62	34.8%
No. of visits to BC	Daily	85	47.8%
	Weekly	33	18.5%
	Monthly	5	2.8%
	Every 3 months	4	2.2%
	Whenever I need	50	28.1%
BC tenure	Less than a month	18	10.1%
	1 – 6 months	39	21.9%
	6 -12 months	23	12.9%
	More than a year	98	55.1%

Measures development

We depend on developed measurement scale from the prior literature on online communities, engagement and branding. The items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Brand community was measured using a set of five items developed by Laroche et al. (2012, 2013). To assess the community markers, we depend on the scale developed and validated by Habibi et al. (2014, 2016). This scale has been used in other studies to measure the brand community markers for example (Hoang et al., 2019; Rayat et al., 2017; Yongsoo Ha, 2018). The scale consists of 11 items; shared consciousness was measured by three items while rituals and traditions and moral of responsibility each was assessed by four items. CBE on social media was captured as a second-order developed by Hollebeek et al., (2014) with three indicators; cognitive processing (three items), affection (four items) and activation (three items). Finally, to measure brand trust we used the four-item scale developed by Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001), and four-items adopted from the work of Yoo & Donthu (2001) were used to assess brand loyalty.

3.2 Assessment of Reflective Measurement model

To analyse the date, we employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), this method is of great potential to researcher in the area of marketing and works efficiently with small sample sizes (Hair et al., 2011). The minimum sample size required by PLS equals to the maximum number of either ten times the largest number of formative indicators used to measure one construct or ten times the largest number of paths to an endogenous reflective construct (Hair et al., 2011). Although, the 10-times rule method is most widely used to determine the minimum sample size, Hair et al., (2014) proposed the R-squared method

as an alternative method. This method calculates the sample size relative to the maximum number of arrows pointing at a construct, significance level, and R^2 value. Based upon, the sample size of 178 exceeds the threshold of the minimum sample size assuming that statistical power is set at 0.8 and at the commonly used significance level of 0.05; therefore, the study sample size is considered sufficient.

Given the relatively small size, the inclusion of moderation effect relationships, and the use of latent variables scores for predictive purposes, the PLS is considered a suitable technique to use in this study. The PLS software v.3.3.1 was used in the assessment of the measurement model and structural model.

As suggested by Hair et al., (2019), the assessment of the measurement model starts by examining the factor loadings of indicators. Out of the 33 indicators only 32 were perfectly loading with values greater than 0.7 at significant t-value ($p < 0.001$); thus, support the association of indicators with the respective constructs. The item with low loading was subject to elimination. To test internal consistency, both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were used to provide the lower and upper boundary for the reliability respectively (Hair et al., 2014). Both measures had satisfactory values above 0.7; thus, meet the requirements of construct reliability. Convergent validity was assessed by the average variance extracted (AVE) using a cut-off point of 0.5, the reported values of all variables suggest good convergence.

Dr. Reham Shawky Ebrahim

Table 3: Reliability and validity assessment of the measurement model

Items	Loading	α	CR	AVE
Brand community (BC)		0.905	0.934	0.779
BC1: The members share experiences about the brand online with other members of the community.	0.865			
BC3: The members of this community benefit from the community.	0.870			
BC4: The members share a common bond with other members of the community.	0.927			
BC5: The members strongly affiliated with other members.	0.867			
Shared consciousness (SC)		0.858	0.913	0.778
SC1: An intrinsic connection is felt among the members.	0.926			
SC2: I think these traditions contribute towards a specific culture of the community	0.837			
SC3: I am familiar with other members of this brand community	0.880			
Rituals and traditions (RT)		0.843	0.905	0.761
RT1: I recollect vital social traditions or rituals specific to the brand community.	0.892			
RT2: I think these traditions contribute towards a specific culture of the community.	0.937			
RT3: Members of this brand community use jargons that are unfamiliar to new members.	0.780			
Moral responsibility (MR)		0.913	0.938	0.792
MR1: The members of the community assist or advice members of the same community in the proper use of the brand.	0.865			
MR2: The community engages in integrating and retaining members.	0.880			
MR3: The members of the community share their experiences and knowledge with each other.	0.928			
MR4: Members of this community are helpful and willing to share their experiences.	0.886			

CBE **Dimension 1: Cognitive processing (COG)**		0.918	0.931	0.577
COG1: Using this brand gets me to think about it.	0.700			
COG2: I think about this brand a lot when I am using it.	0.700			
COG3: Using this brand stimulates my interest to learn more about it.	0.696			
Dimension 2: Affection (AFF)				
AFF1: I feel positive when I use this brand.	0.821			
AFF2: Using this brand makes me happy	0.829			
AFF3: I feel good when I use this brand	0.802			
AFF4: I am proud to use this brand	0.750			
Dimension 3: Activation (ACT)				
ACT1: Whenever I am using this product, I usually use this brand.	0.783			
ACT2: This brand is one of all the brands I usually use when I use this product	0.723			
ACT3: Using this brand gets me to think about it.	0.783			
Brand trust (BT)		0.950	0.944	0.870
BT1: I trust this brand	0.948			
BT2: This brand is safe	0.919			
BT3: I rely on this brand	0.926			
BT4: This is an honest brand	0.938			
Brand loyalty (BL)		0.943	0.949	0.854
BL1: In the future, I will be loyal to this brand.	0.936			
BL2: I will buy this brand again.	0.954			
BL3: This brand will be my first choice in the future.	0.931			
BL4: I will not buy other brands if this brand is available for sale.	0.874			

Finally, the discriminant validity is also tested via traditional metric (Fornell-Larcker criterion) by comparing the square root AVE to the inter-construct correlation for each construct. As indicated in table 5, the bold values on the diagonal ($\sqrt{AVE}$) is higher than the off-diagonal correlation values, suggesting a satisfactory discriminant validity.

Table 5: Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion)

Construct	BC	SC	RT	MR	ENG	BT	BL
BC	**0.883**						
SC	0.57	**0.882**					
RT	0.509	0.536	**0.872**				
MR	0.629	0.509	0.474	**0.89**			
ENG	0.475	0.44	0.463	0.463	**0.76**		
BT	0.54	0.499	0.455	0.512	0.566	**0.933**	
BL	0.376	0.349	0.342	0.385	0.627	0.646	**0.924**

3.3 Structural model

The assessment of the measurement model was satisfactory; thereafter, we examined the structural model using standard assessment criteria; R^2, Q^2, and path coefficient, to verify the developed hypotheses. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to evaluate the predictive power of the model. The R^2 of brand loyalty is 0.513 indicating high predictive validity. In addition, Q^2 is used to determine the predicative accuracy of the model, after running the blindfolding procedure, we obtained the value of 0.489 which indicate the predictive relevance of the PLS path model. results are summarised in figure 3.
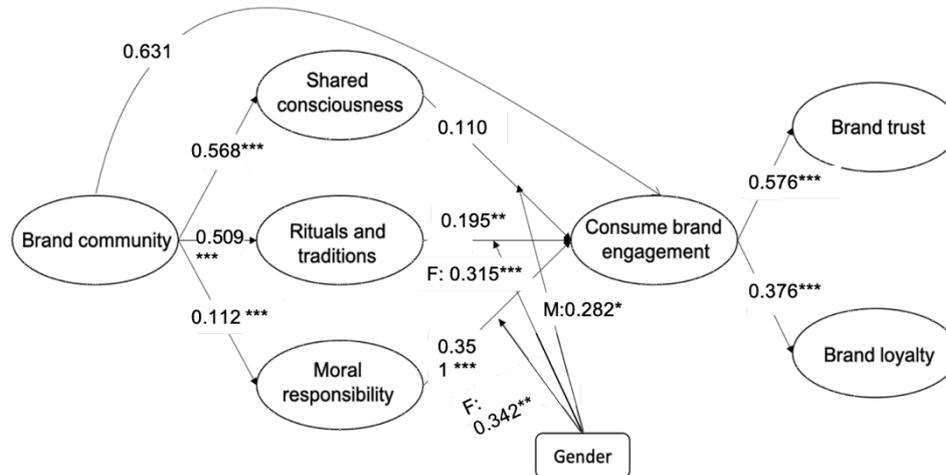
Figure 3: Results of Research model

The test of the significance of paths revealed that brand community has significant direct positive impacts on its markers; shared consciousness ($\beta = 0.568$, t = 9.581, p < 0.001), rituals and traditions ($\beta = 0.509$, t = 6.888, p < 0.001), moral responsibility ($\beta = 0.112$, t = 9.677, p < 0.001), supporting H1a, H1b and H1c. However, brand community has insignificant impact on CBE ($\beta = 0.631$, t = 0.936, n. s.), rejecting H2. Moreover, only two community markers have significant direct positive impact on CBE; rituals and traditions ($\beta = 0.195$, t = 2.335, p < 0.05) and moral responsibility ($\beta = 0.351$, t = 3.451, p < 0.001); therefore, H3b and H3c are supported. Shared consciousness exerts no impact on CBE ($\beta = 0.110$, t = 1.242, n. s.), rejecting H3a. The positive direct effect of CBE on brand trust ($\beta = 0.576$, t = 10.369, p < 0.001) and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.376$, t = 5.072, p < 0.001) is significant, supporting H5 and H6.

Mediation effects of community markers

To provide a deep understanding of the role of community markers in consumers engagement, a mediation test was used to evaluate if the significant community markers; rituals and traditions and moral responsibility mediate the relationship between brand community and CBE. The results provided in table 6 support the indirect effect of brand community on CBE through rituals and traditions ($\beta = 0.049$, t = 1.998, p < 0.05) and moral responsibility ($\beta = 0.074$, t = 2.964, p < 0.05). Therefore, a full mediating relationship between brand community and CBE through community markers; rituals and traditions and moral responsibility is supported.

Table 6: Mediation results of community markers

Path	Path coefficient	t-value	significance
BC→ RT → CBE	0.049	1.998	0.046
BC → MR → CBE	0.074	2.964	0.003

3.5.1 Moderation effect of gender

To verify hypothesis four and test the moderation effect of gender on the relationship between community markers and CBE, the sample was divided into two groups: male and female. Following group comparison method, we compare the corresponding path coefficients in the two structural model. Results showed that the path coefficient from shared consciousness to CBE was significant for male group ($\beta = 0.282$, t = 2.447, p < 0.01) and insignificant for female group ($\beta = 0.058$, t = 0.417, n.s.); thus, rejecting H4a. As hypothesised, the female group yielded a significant stronger relationship between rituals and traditions and CBE ($\beta = 0.315$ t = 2.588, p < 0.01) than male group having insignificant relationship, Therefore, H4b was supported. The influence of moral responsibility on CBE of the female group was significant ($\beta = 0.342$, t = 2.115, p < 0.01), unlike the male group having insignificant relationship, H4c is supported.

Table 7: Moderation effects of gender

Relationship	Male group		Female group		Hypothesis test
	β	t-test	β	t-test	
H4a: SC → CBE	0.282***	2.447	0.058	0.417	Not supported
H4b: RT → CBE	0.096	0.869	0.315***	2.588	Supported
H4c: MR → CBE	0.128	0.815	0.342**	2.115	Supported
***$p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$					

4. Discussion

The aim of this study is to examine the effects of community markers on CBE and the moderating role of gender. The proposed model suggests that the three community markers – shared consciousness, rituals and traditions and moral responsibility are antecedents to CBE in an online community. The gender acts as a moderator in this relationship. Brand trust and brand loyalty are postulated to be the consequences of consumer engagement.

A brand community on social media is a network of interactive relationships between its members around a specified brand, it is identified by their commonalities and shared resources. The existence of a brand community on social media is traced by the existence of its markers. Consumers perceptions of brand community memberships are distinguishable in terms of community markers; however, the strength of these peculiarities differ. The findings support that the community ethos is informed to members through shared commercial, mass-mediated communication and the competitive marketplace of the brand. The ethnographic study results of (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) emphasising the core components or characteristics of a brand community are empirically supported on social media context. These markers enhance the conglomeration of brand community insights and contribute to the value creation practices which ultimately build brand trust and loyalty (Habibi et al., 2016; Laroche et al., 2012).

Through these markers consumers motivations to join such communities are revealed and reflect emotional, utilitarian and hedonic stimuli. Consumers are participating in a brand community to feel the sense of belonging and collectiveness, love and connections with other members that denote an emotional stimulus. They also seek the help and support from others for better brand use as well as the fun and pleasure experienced (Zaglia, 2013).

Brand community based on social media foster CBE through its markers (Habibi et al., 2016; Laroche et al., 2012). However, the findings of the present study support only the influence of rituals and traditions and moral responsibility on CBE. While, Zaglia, (2013) emphasised that shared consciousness is the core component of a community and the key marker of perceived membership. The relative importance of the direct effect of shared consciousness on brand awareness and brand loyalty relative to rituals and traditions and moral responsibility is supported by (Hoang et al., 2019).

The insignificant impact of shared consciousness on CBE support the community openness to membership regardless to the type of consumer and support the status hierarchy in brand community. Members of a community transcend the dyadic relationship (consumer and brand) to a triangular relationship (consumer, brand and fellow members). The "we" notion describing the consciousness of kind indicate the feeling of connection with other members but the quality of this social process is subject to the demarcation effect. The discrimination is based on the relationship between the consumer and the brand expressed by ownership status; brand users, or brand believers; brand loyal (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Zaglia, 2013). Experiencing the brand directly and indirectly defies the ownership status argument; however, the fear of not fitting or the me-versus-them attitude may hinder CBE (McAlexander et al., 2002).

This raise the argument that shared consciousness; being connected to a group, does not influence consumer favourable expressions toward the brand such as sharing good news or advocate the brand (Laroche et al., 2012) or stimulate them to be psychological and behaviourally involved with a brand. However, these acts are justified by rituals and traditions and moral responsibility, the positive significant effects of these two last markers is in line with the results of (Habibi et al., 2016; Laroche et al., 2012).

CBE is motivated by rituals and traditions. Through this social process members create meaning of their interactive experiences with the focal brand or community and evangelise its ethos. Members are participating in brand events and other practices to establish shared rituals that define the set of common values and behaviours. These rituals and traditions maintain the culture of the community and reflect consumers commitment to the group. Consumers are reviving and sharing the brand history and brand stories based on their experiences to reinforce the consciousness of kind and outline their imaginary community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Shared stories and brand history aspire community members to socially construct around the brand meaning. It also underscores the sense of similarity, authenticity and exclusiveness among members to capture the pleasure and enjoyment aspects of engagement (McAlexander et al., 2002). Consumers are learning by sharing brand stories and feel secure to be with like-minded; thus, the status of hierarchy in a community is diminishing. True believers will show more appreciation to the brand history and ensure the brand legacy (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Morals obligations, the third community component, positively affect CBE. Habibi et al., (2016) support in their study that responsible members are likely to engage with a community. Experienced members are having the sense of responsibility by offering help to other newly inexperienced members and showing support to community. Consumers participating in an online brand community based on social media, exhibiting moral responsibility are engaging with the brand. The findings support the outcomes of CBE in building brand trust and brand loyalty.

Finally, the study supports the differential impact of community markers on CBE across the two gender groups. More specifically, we find that male consumers exhibit high levels of shared consciousness while female consumers show high levels of rituals and traditions and moral responsibility.

The domination of shared consciousness in a brand community significantly influences CBE for male consumers; while, for female consumers this relationship is insignificant. The prior theoretical perspectives on gender differences (Eagly & Wood, 1991; Sun et al., 2010) propose the independence of men enjoying high levels of self-esteem and self-concern. In an online brand community, male consumers highly perceive the sense of unity and belonging to the fellow members to enhance their self-concept. This expectation is derived from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), which posit that one's self-concept is derived from group membership; the strength of within-group identification and intragroup differentiation. Shared consciousness denotes the interaction between perceived membership of consumers and social identity theory (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). According to Zaglia, (2013), this community component is related to the cognitive component of social-identity. Similarly, Zhang et al., (2015) support the stereotype of male consumers; motivated toward demonstration of self-concept, uniqueness and competence. Therefore, those exhibiting high level of self-congruence are more likely to trust the brand and participate in brand activities.

Moreover, the relationship between rituals and traditions and CBE is significant for female consumers but insignificant for male consumers. Rituals and traditions conglomerate brand consumption experience to outline the community culture, emphasised celebrating the brand history and sharing brand stories. A probable explanation is that females follow the experiential system in information-processing, which depends on affections to encode reality in concrete images, metaphors and narratives (Epstein et al., 1996; Sun et al., 2010). Sociologically, Meske et al., (1994), support that females show higher perceptions of rituals and traditions than males

We also find that female consumers perceptions of moral responsibility significantly influence CBE, whereas for male consumer this relationship is insignificant. As females show more concern for the self and others to support harmonious relationship among group members (Sun et al., 2010).

5. Theoretical and Practical implications
5.1 Theoretical implications

This study sheds light on the rational of CBE in brand communities based on social media. It aids in the understanding of the importance of consumers' perceptions of brand community markers for building brand communities. specifically, this study aids understanding of role brand community markers.

Firstly, these markers are evidences of the significance of a brand community existence, aligned with (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Brand community characteristics manifested in shared consciousness, rituals and tradition, and moral responsibility, these peculiarities may not equally be perceived by consumers in a community; however, they are essential components in building a brand community.

Secondly, distinctive identity of a brand community is drawn from consumers' perceptions of these characteristics, as they describe the

strength of members relationships. Consumer's participation in a brand community is perceived differently reflecting their community experiences. These characteristics intersect with the cognitive and emotional aspects of social identify theory. The cognitive aspect is denoted psychologically by the we-ness factor formed among community members and the collective sense of difference from outsiders. While the emotional ties among members are enhanced by the shared culture.

Thirdly, the brand community characteristics contribute to the transition of consumer relationship from the community level to the brand level. CBE is influenced by consumers' perceptions of the community shared culture and moral responsibility.

The study contradicts approaching brand community assuming homogeneity of community members described by shared consciousness, rituals and traditions and moral responsibility. It supports the importance of connections and psychological attachments between members in building a sustainable brand community (Park & Cho, 2012); while, assuming the different roles of members in the community toward fellow members and the brand.

Consumers' brand engagement is affected by their involvement in community activities and high sense of responsibility. The influence of brand community characteristics on CBE differs with respect to male and female consumers. The findings on gender differences suggest that: (1) male consumers tend to value brand community distinctive social identity and subsequent sense of separation from members outside the group. (2) male consumers brand engagement is motivated by their competitive social orientation that enhance self-esteem. (3) female consumers highly perceive emotional ties between members in a brand community and moral responsibility. (4) Female consumers brand engagement is derived from their cooperative social-orientation and affective experience pursuing concern for self and others.

5.2 Managerial implications

The results of the current study provide marketers and brand managers with valuable insights to enhance brand existence on social media platform. In our view, powerful brand community have greater value to consumers. The results reveal the importance of strengthen the markers of brand community for CBE.

Members in true brand community are sharing their own brand stories. These distinguishable stories reflect their experiences with the brand commercials, logo, text and symbols, name and other brand-related factors, and contribute in learning shared values. Strong brand communities are collections of consumers with different status and responses toward the brand; however, they are connected to each other sharing the sense of duty. The shared culture and the fact that consumers are getting benefits from the community will reinforce the shared consciousness to develop a distinctive group identity. Therefore, rules and incentives are required to encourage members involvement and strengthen the brand community. Markers are evident of strong brand communities that stand as critical step in relationship marketing and loyalty. The existence of a brand community is not what brand managers should strive to achieve; but rather, a community with engaged consumers having the potential to volunteer and act as working consumers; contribute to the successfulness of the brand.

Companies are setting up the brand community to engage members as contributors to value co-creatin. Brand community managers should stimulate consumer engagement in the brand community and involve them with the brand management team. Highly engaged consumers represent the community outside the group, attract new members and contribute to the development of brand meaning.

Finally, brand manager should devote great attention to gender differences when designing consumer engagement strategies. Specially, the results show that gender affect consumer perceptions of brand community participations.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The findings of this study should be interpreted in the light of certain limitations. First, the research model did not differentiate between consumer-initiated communities and companies-initiated communities. it is highly recommended to test the model while considering the role of brand community type. Second, the study explored the effects of brand community and its markers on CBE, which was measured as second-order construct. Therefore, the spill-over effects of engagement dimensions; cognitive, affective and behavioural, were not considered. It is important to identify the how these dimensions are differently influenced and interacted in future research. Third, the sample used in this study meet the requirements of PLS-SEM software; however, it may be relatively small and collected from single culture. Therefore, it is suggested to use larger sample from different cultural context. Regardless to the limitations, this work still contributes to the extant literature by defining powerful brand communities relative to its characteristics and provides valuable insights into the utilisations these communities in enhancing CBE.

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تأثير خصائص مجتمع الماركة الرقمي على ارتباط المستهلك بالماركة:

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الملخص:

في الوقت الحاضر، تُعتبر مجتمعات الماركة الرقمية من الأدوات المهمة لبناء ونجاح الماركة. لذلك تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى اختبار أثر مجتمع الماركة المبني عبر مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي في تكوين خصائص هذا المجتمع وهي: الوعي المشترك، والتقاليد، والمسئولية الأخلاقية. وكذلك دراسة أثر هذه الخصائص على ارتباط المستهلك بالماركة والتي بدورها ستؤثر على درجة الثقة بالماركة والولاء لهذه الماركة. تم استهداف مستخدمي مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي المشتركين في أحد مجتمعات الماركة لتجميع البيانات باستخدام قوائم الاستقصاء، تم الحصول على عدد من ١٧٨ استبانة صحيحة. كما تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام نمذجة المعادلات الهيكلية بالمربعات الصغرى الجزئية، وأظهرت النتائج التأثير الإيجابي المعنوي لمجتمع الماركة الرقمي على الخصائص الثلاثة المميزة لتلك المجتمعات. كما كشفت النتائج عن الدور الإيجابي المعنوي لكل من التقاليد والمسئولية الأخلاقية فقط في زيادة ارتباط العميل بالماركة وكذلك معنوية الدور الوسيط للنوع في العلاقة بين خصائص مجتمع الماركة وارتباط العميل بالماركة. وأخيرا أوضحت النتائج معنوية التأثير الموجب لارتباط العميل بالماركة على زيادة ثقته بالماركة ودرجة ولائه لها. ويمكن استخلاص أهمية نظرية وعملية لهذه النتائج تساعد في بناء مجتمعات الماركة الرقمية المقامة على مواقع التوصل الاجتماعي ودعم ارتباط المستهلك بالماركة.

الكلمات الدالة: مجتمع الماركة؛ خصائص مجتمع الماركة؛ النوع؛ ارتباط العميل بالماركة؛

الثقة بالماركة؛ الولاء للماركة.