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A moderated mediation model of consumers' role behaviors in brand communities

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the manner in which individuals identify with a voluntary organization by developing a moderated mediation model of members' role behaviors in brand community (BC) settings. The influence of BC characteristics, including the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of these characteristics, on members' identification with a BC was investigated. The empirical results indicated that social and emotional characteristics exert a more significant influence on members' community identification than cognitive characteristics do. Moreover, the length of the relationship exerts a u-shaped curvilinear effect on the positive relationship between identification and extra-role behaviors, implying that senior members experience three phases, namely honeymoon, inertia, and rejuvenation periods, when participating in BCs. We conclude by presenting a discussion of the research and the managerial implications of this study's findings.

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1. Introduction

Effective brands must be identifiable to customers. Establishing a loyal customer base is crucial to the sustainability of a brand. In practice, establishing an ongoing membership in a brand community (BC) is a considerably effective approach for gaining customer loyalty (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005). A BC is a specialized organization centered on a brand and characterized by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001). A BC is based on a structured set of social relationships among brand admirers whose shared enthusiasm for the target brand manifests a well-developed social identity that expresses shared sentiments and encourages members' participation in achieving collective goals (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). Therefore, BCs are highly valuable for marketing practitioners in brand–consumer relationship management.

Numerous scholars have invested considerable efforts in understanding members' participation according to both the factors that precede participation and those that mediate it (e.g.,

Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004; Pai & Tsai, 2011; Tsai & Pai, 2013). One of the most consistent findings is that social identification with a community plays a crucial role. Identification refers to the degree to which members perceive similarities between their defining attributes and those of the focal organization (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Scott & Lane, 2000). A member's identification with a community acts as an essential mediating mechanism that shapes his or her proactive participation (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Tsai & Pai, 2013). Companies and BC practitioners thus favor these behaviors. Despite their importance, the antecedents of member participation and conditions under which identification influences members' participation and decision making have not been addressed thoroughly in the literature. The objective of this study was to remedy this oversight and address the following related research gaps.

The first gap concerns the antecedents of BC identification from the perspective of the characteristics of a BC. Although Tsai and Pai (2013) introduced the relevance of community characteristics as antecedents of proactive participation in virtual community contexts, the factors that precede a member's identification with a BC are not clearly understood. However, their investigation of participation antecedents included only a limited number of constructs, thus necessitating further research into other factors that influence

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members' participation to understand clearly the factors that influence members to identify with a BC.

Another research gap relates to the consequences of BC identification from the perspective of members' in-role and extra-role behaviors. The existing literature has not yet addressed this topic adequately. Although researchers have examined proactive (extra-role) (Tsai & Pai, 2013) and reactive (in-role) participation behaviors independently (Cheung & Lee, 2009; Koh, Kim, Butler, & Bock, 2007; Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007), the literature lacks an empirical exploration of situations in which both participation behaviors are present. The current study addressed this research gap by incorporating in-role and extra-role behaviors into one conceptual model.

The third gap relates to the u-shaped curvilinear effect of relationship length on identification behavior. Mael and Ashforth (1992) argued that identification increases rapidly in the early stages of a relationship (the honeymoon period), followed by a period of inertia, indicating that tenure with an organization weakens the positive relationship between identification and role behaviors. Furthermore, Tsai and Bagozzi (2014) argued that as members participate in social groups over time, the possibility that their positive attitudes transform into positive behaviors increases, implying that the length of the relationship strengthens the positive relationship between identification and role behaviors. To the best of our knowledge, BC studies lack consistent evidence detailing the role of members' tenure in members' participation processes. To address this gap, we adopted the perspectives of Mael and Ashforth (1992) as well as Tsai and Bagozzi (2014) and propose that individuals' participation experience comprised three phases: *honeymoon*, *inertia*, and *rejuvenation* periods. This proposition represents a considerable first attempt to examine the u-shaped nonlinear effect of *relationship length* on members' identification and role behaviors in BC settings.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

The proposed research framework (Fig. 1) elaborates on the nature of BC identification. We propose that social, emotional, and

cognitive characteristics of a BC affect members' identification with a community. In accordance with previous research, this framework positions identification as having positive consequences, causing members to become active supporters of the BC with which they identify. The proposed model also recognizes that, although identification may guide in-role and extra-role behaviors, relationship length can moderate this relationship.

2.1. Brand community identification

Identification is defined as the degree to which members of an organization perceive themselves and an organization as having the same defining attributes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). The central assertion in this field is that some of the strongest member–community relationships are those that are anchored on the consumers' identification with a community that helps them satisfy one or more self-defined needs (Ahearne et al., 2005; Algesheimer et al., 2005). Such identification is active, selective, and volitional on the part of the members and causes them to engage in favorable community-related behaviors (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). This assertion is supported by research that identifies organizations as forming key components of people's social identities. An individual engages in self-categorization by comparing his or her personal defining characteristics with those that define a BC (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006).

2.2. Antecedents of brand community identification

An individual's identification with an organization depends on his or her perceptions of the identity of the organization as represented in its core or defining characteristics (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). The identity of an organization, like the identity of an individual, represents constellations of characteristics or traits that are central to the organization (Scott & Lane, 2000). On basis of the findings of Dholakia et al. (2004), McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002), and Tsai and Pai (2013), this study proposed three dimensions of BC characteristics that shape members' identification with a BC: social, cognitive, and emotional dimensions.

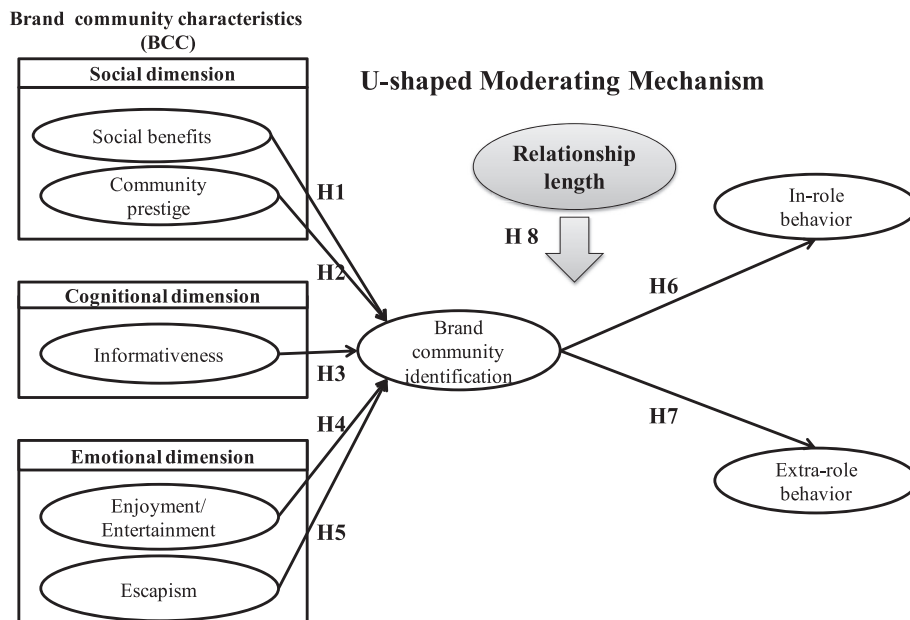


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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