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# Relationship formation within online brand communities: Bridging the virtual and the real

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## ABSTRACT

To increase competitiveness, companies are increasingly using online brand communities (OBCs) to cocreate value for themselves and their consumers; however, evidence of the effectiveness of OBCs as a marketing tool remains mostly anecdotal. This study developed a framework for examining how the cocreation of value in OBCs can extend and improve brand relationships between corporations and consumers through combination with the integration of online and offline relationships. Sample 1, comprising 450 respondents, was used to investigate second-order OBC value cocreation and total measurement models. Sample 2, comprising 418 respondents, demonstrated that OBC value cocreation directly benefits consumer OBC commitment, thereby directly enhancing offline brand relationship quality (BRQ) and brand commitment as well as indirectly enhancing brand loyalty, and that BRQ directly benefits brand commitment and brand loyalty. This paper presents the research and managerial implications of these findings, as well as limitations and future research directions.

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## 1. Introduction

When an online community (OC) adopts a para-social approach to the understanding, connection, interaction, sensing, and cocreation of value in person–network, person–person, and person–organization relationships (Shen, Huang, Chu, & Liao, 2010), online brand communities (OBCs) can incorporate brands as the core of value cocreation, thus catalyzing the cocreation process through which consumers experience the brand and the brand owner improves the experience (Rageh Ismail, Melewar, Lim, & Woodside, 2011). This creates, maintains, and encourages brand relationships (Piyathananan, Mathies, Wetzels, Patterson, & de Ruyter, 2014–15). Therefore, OBCs have attracted considerable attention from both academics and marketers (Hamzah, Syed Alwi, & Othman, 2014; Saariluoma & Jokinen, 2014).

Relationship marketing involves establishing, developing, and maintaining a network of relationships among suppliers, service

personnel, customers, and other stakeholders, which includes problems with partnerships, alliances, intergrowth, and internal marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This concept has provided a breakthrough for studies on economics and marketing. In relationship marketing, the economic and marketing behaviors of supply-and-demand organizations and stakeholders no longer involve only absolute competition but also effective and diverse “coopetition.” The relationship-marketing model is ideal for describing the complex, continual, and diverse market relationship structures (e.g., Yang, Chao, Liu, & Chen, 2014). Therefore, such a model has been frequently applied in discussions regarding OBCs. However, empirical studies on OBCs have typically adopted a firm-based viewpoint, with a primary focus on firm activities, ceremonies, traditions, systems, communication quality, sponsorships, rewards, and bonuses (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010; Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008; Kim, Choi, Qualls, & Han, 2008; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). The stimulation–reaction structures in these studies have rarely been discussed from the viewpoint of market participant interactions (e.g., customer–firm and customer–customer). Furthermore, the development of OBCs overcomes the limitations of traditional individual transactions involving suppliers and customers and holistically gathers content cocreated by participants (Laing, Keeling, & Newholm,

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2011). Value-cocreation information relating to marketing personnel is limited, which increases the difficulty of conducting relevant research (Ahn, Kwon, & Sung, 2010; Galvagno & Dalli, 2014).

Additionally, scholars have indicated the importance of thoroughly investigating mutual expansion and collective creation in online and offline settings (Jin & Zou, 2013; Pentina, Gammoh, Zhang, & Mallin, 2013). Relevant empirical studies have demonstrated brand relationship quality (BRQ) to be critical in generating continuity and spillover effects in subsequent associations between the consumer and brand and in stabilizing and sustaining the consumer–brand relationship (e.g., Huber, Vollhardt, Matthes, & Vogles, 2010). Accordingly, this investigation was intended to clarify the roles of OBC value cocreation and BRQ in the ensuing brand relationships. Therefore, this study reviewed the literature on brand relationship marketing models, OBC value cocreation, and BRQ in a conceptual framework and proposed various hypotheses. The following sections summarize the research methodology and results, and the final section discusses the primary results, presents the study implications and limitations, and suggests future research directions.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Previous studies have suggested that a website can be considered as representative of a business and, therefore, that the relationship between a website and its users resembles the business-to-consumer (B2C) relationship (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). Scholars have used the Morgan and Hunt (1994) business-to-business (B2B) relationship marketing model to devise online B2C models (e.g., Li, Browne, & Wetherbe, 2006). Moreover, the literature on social psychology and communication assumes that a consumer can be considered an agent that fulfills individual needs (McQuail, 1983), and thus that consumer–platform interactions resemble member-to-member and consumer-to-consumer (C2C) relationship interactions (Kim et al., 2008). In other words, the units that constitute a community, regardless of whether they are grouped or individual, must be considered “participants” to understand their interactions.

Regardless of the type of online or offline brand community (BC), loyalty is a critical outcome variable (Arora, 2009, pp. 7–21) and commitment is a crucial criterion in its development (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Therefore, this study included OBC commitment in the construction of OBC participant (C2C) relationships (e.g., Kim et al., 2008), and used brand commitment and brand loyalty to represent OBC brand and participant (B2C) relationships.

After examining the antecedent factors of the OBC brand relationship model, this investigation found that the most crucial value in OBCs is cocreation (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), which involves experiences, interactions, and relationships among participants and networks (Hsieh, 2015). Following an analysis of leading e-commerce journals from 2000 to 2015, Hsieh (2015) performed qualitative and quantitative analyses that involved scale replications across industries and consumer traits using various samples. Hsieh demonstrated the robust psychometric properties of the OBC value cocreation model, which includes the dimensions of experience, interpersonal interactions, and social relationships. According to our research, this study is currently the most complete investigation of OBC value cocreation. Consumers who share enjoyable and innovative experiences, engage in reciprocal and synchronous interpersonal interactions, and maintain ongoing and iterative social relationships experience high value (e.g., Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Kohler, Fueller, Matzler, & Stieger, 2011; Larivière et al., 2013; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; McColl-Kennedy, Vargo, Dagger, Sweeney, & van Kasteren, 2012; Moeller, Ciuchita,

Mahr, Odekerken-Schröder, & Fassnacht, 2013; Pongsakornrungrasit, Bradshaw, & Schroeder, 2008; Porter, Donthu, MacElroy, & Wydra, 2011) and develop increased willingness to commit to (or engage in) OBCs (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Jang et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2008; Laroche et al., 2012; Wirtz et al., 2013). This study proposed and tested Hypotheses 1-1 to 1-3 to assess the effects of the development of the three OBC values on OBC commitment (Fig. 1).

**H1-1.** Experience value is positively associated with OBC commitment.

**H1-2.** Interpersonal interaction value is positively associated with OBC commitment.

**H1-3.** Social relationship value is positively associated with OBC commitment.

Other scholars have asserted that consumers display different overall response levels toward OBCs and associated brands (Zhou, Zhang, Su, & Zhou, 2012). In other words, when consumers perceive the cocreation of value in OBCs, they develop commitment toward those OBCs. Subsequently, this commitment becomes linked with people and things (such as the brand) that are related to the community, linking OBC commitment (or engagement and attachment) with brand commitment (Brodie et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2008; Wirtz et al., 2013) and loyalty (or purchase intention) (Brodie et al., 2013; Gupta, Kim, & Shin, 2010; Jang et al., 2008; Pai & Tsai, 2011). This study thus proposed H2-1 and H2-2 regarding OBC commitment–brand commitment and OBC commitment–brand loyalty relationships.

**H2-1.** OBC commitment is positively associated with brand commitment.

**H2-2.** OBC commitment is positively associated with brand loyalty.

The link between brand commitment (or product attachment) and brand loyalty (or purchase intention, word of mouth, and cross-over buying) in both virtual and real-world contexts is widely recognized (e.g., Huang, Fang, Huang, Chang, & Fang, 2014; Kim et al., 2008; Wirtz et al., 2013). Therefore, this study proposed H3, which links brand commitment with brand loyalty.

**H3.** Brand commitment is positively associated with brand loyalty.

The prevalence of virtual communities does not suggest the

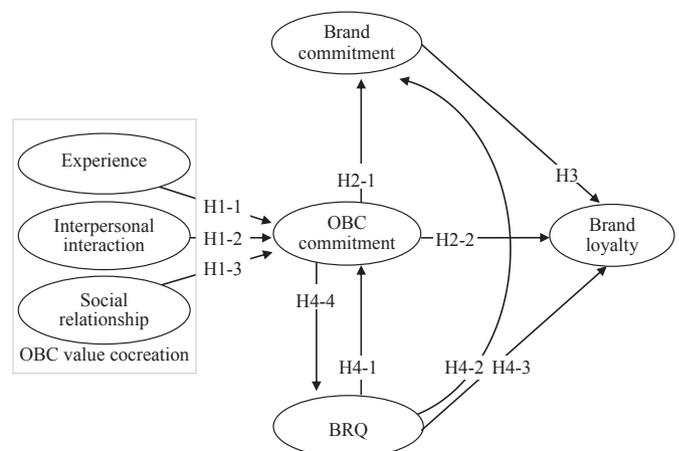


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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