



# The roles of brand community and community engagement in building brand trust on social media



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## ABSTRACT

Brand communities and social media often overlap. Social media is an ideal environment for building brand communities. However, there is limited research about the benefits and consequences of brand communities established on social media platforms. This study addresses this issue by developing a model depicting how consumers' relationship with the elements of a brand community based on social media (i.e. brand, product, company, and other consumers) influence brand trust. The findings include that three of the four relationships positively influence brand trust. However, customer-other customers' relationships negatively influence brand trust, which is counter intuitive and interesting. The prominent role of engagement in a brand community is also investigated in the model. Community engagement amplifies the strength of the relationships consumers make with the elements of brand community and it has a moderating effect in translating the effects of such relationships on brand trust. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The emergence of social media has dramatically influenced marketing practices. The conventional well-established marketing practices are not highly influential anymore and in many cases can backfire on the firm (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013). Therefore, there is an ever increasing need for updating the understanding of social media and further develop knowledge which suits the imperatives of marketing in social media environments (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013). One main challenge for marketers has been to see how their efforts can pay off and how their social media activities can influence important brand related variables (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

This article takes the brand community literature as the main theoretical lens to address this issue. The concepts of brand community and social media meet at a critical juncture: community or socialness. Brand communities are essentially a place (physical or virtual) for people who admire a certain brand to socialize in the context provided, at least partly, by that brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Brand community practices gradually gained more attention from marketing researchers and practitioners. At the same time the Internet

technologies evolved to their current highly social forms. Today, the brand communities and their online platforms are a match more than ever before; the social aspects of brand communities are strongly backed by the social and networked nature of social media. Not only is social media a natural place for brand communities, but there are recent empirical studies showing the existence (Zaglia, 2013), quality and unique aspects of brand communities embedded in social media platforms (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014).

This article develops a conceptual framework that shows how building blocks of a brand community established on social media can influence brand trust. Indeed one main marketing objective is to gain consumers' trust in the brand. Trust is important during the shopping process (Powers, Advincula, Austin, Graiko, & Snyder, 2012) and is a main antecedent of patronage (Pentina, Zhang, & Basmanova, 2013; See-To & Ho, 2014). Therefore, knowing if/how social media based brand communities (SMBBCs) influence brand trust is essential for marketers. In addition, this might be helpful to managers in social media contexts because measuring social media ROI is a challenge for them and one way of measuring ROI is to examine what kind of "marketing objectives" the social media activities would satisfy (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010, p. 42). Thus, this article focuses on brand trust and examines how SMBBCs influence customers' trust in a brand.

The article also looks at the role of engagement in brand communities as it is a very relevant variable in social media. Perhaps

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one of the main goals of being present in social media is to gain a higher share of consumers' attention and engagement (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). The article investigates the moderating role of brand community engagement in the conceptual framework and also examines the direct role this variable has on the building blocks of a brand community (i.e., consumer relationships with product, brand, company and other consumers; McAlexander et al., 2002).

Despite its importance, limited research was done in the area of SMBBC. The current knowledge of online brand communities does not fit with the new aspects of SMBBCs in which the structure of the communities, the social context within which members communicate, the size, and the way stories are being told are different from previous types of brand communities (Habibi et al., 2014). This research makes important contributions by filling this void. Unlike research that treat brand community as a whole (Moran & Gossieaux, 2001; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012), this article looks at the brand community through its building blocks (McAlexander et al., 2002) and it examines how each element influences brand trust. More importantly, it measures and includes community engagement and examines how it influences the brand community elements and how it moderates these effects on brand trust. The findings provide detailed insights for marketers and identify which elements of a brand community can be detrimental and which can be beneficial in building a trustworthy brand through brand community building practices on social media.

The paper is organized as follows. First, an extensive literature review of brand communities is conducted. We describe different research streams related to brand communities and situate this article within the brand community literature. Then we argue why brand communities on social media are unique and must be studied separately. Next, we develop our hypotheses which relate to our conceptual model of how SMBBC can influence brand trust. Finally, we report the results of our study. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, limitations of our research and avenues for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Brand community

The brand community concept developed in response to two increasing challenges that faced by marketers. The first one was the difficulty of keeping up with one-on-one relationships with customers, which was one main idea behind relationship marketing (Berry, 1995). Although keeping long term personalized one-on-one relationships with customers would bring many benefits to firms (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000), it would increase its costs and the time spent on developing relationships, which makes relationship marketing less efficient in practice (Iacobucci, 1994; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Thus, brand communities that can perform many important functions on behalf of the brand, such as providing assistance or socializing the customer with brand elements, can play an important role in realizing the values of relationship marketing with higher efficiency. In a brand community consumers play the role of the brands' agents within the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The second challenge brand communities address is a lack of having a powerful analytic category to study consumer behavior. Consumers' interpersonal activities and life styles have more explanatory power in understanding how consumers spend their time and money than conventional categories marketers used to segment consumers such as age and gender (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Therefore, brand communities provide a reliable analytical category to marketers which

facilitate understanding consumer behavior (McAlexander et al., 2002).

A brand community is a "specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Similar to other communities, a brand community has three indicators that make a community recognizable. These indicators are shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions, and obligations to society. *Shared consciousness* is a felt sense of connection among members within a brand community. These feelings lead members to feel that an invisible hand connects them to each other and separates them from outsiders (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). *Rituals and traditions* are symbolic acts or gestures that are developed throughout the history of the brand and aim to perpetuate and communicate the symbolic meanings and culture of the brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). For example, consumers use a specific jargon inside the community which is a cultural element of the community that solidifies members' bonds. The third marker is *obligations to society* which is the sense of commitment members have toward the welfare of their fellow members and the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This commitment is the main driver in participating in brand use practices through which members help each other optimize their brand use (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009).

In addition to these three markers, a brand community is essentially constructed on a set of relationships that community members develop with the brand, the product, marketers, and other customers. As opposed to initial models of brand communities which assumed only relationships between consumers, the *customer centric model of brand community* considers the relationships among all involved elements in a brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002). Therefore, the building blocks of a brand community are four relationships: customer-product, customer-brand, customer-company, and customer-other customers. This provides a useful framework for analyzing brand communities as well as brand community building practices. Later we build on this model to develop our hypotheses depicting how these relationships can enhance brand trust.

### 2.2. Main research streams about brand community

In brand community research, three main research streams are gaining attention from researchers. The first stream relates to the conceptual aspects of brand communities which together conceptualize a brand community and identify its defining characteristics and limits (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Muñiz & Schau, 2007). Articles in this research stream do not address the outcomes and consequences of brand communities directly but they mainly focus on brand community elements and activities (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), but they also indirectly mention the outcomes brand community practices would bring about for firms and consumers (Brown et al., 2003; Schau et al., 2009; Muñiz & Schau, 2007). The other streams specifically deal with the outcomes (and their antecedents) of brand communities for consumers and brands. Also many articles examined how brand communities are established.

### 2.3. Where and how to identify brand communities

Researchers wondered if brand communities exist on different platforms, in different sizes, and around different products. This question is important because several brand community success stories tempted marketing managers to establish brand communities in different settings and contexts. One cannot call any collective a community unless the collective presents the markers of a

community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Fortunately, this stream of research stressed that brand communities can exist in different forms such as offline/physical (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002), online/virtual (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010; Muñiz & Schau, 2007; Thompson & Sinha, 2008), small or large (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a; McAlexander & Koenig, 2010), temporary (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007), and even can develop around such mundane products as convenience goods (Cova & Pace, 2006). Recently, the existence of brand communities in social media contexts was supported by two studies (Habibi et al., 2014; Zaglia, 2013). Habibi et al. (2014) also identified five dimensions which make such communities unique. We further elaborate on these dimensions later.

The commonality among all these studies is that they show a manifestation of brand community indicators to different degrees. However, brand communities can be vastly different depending on their social contexts and forms (McAlexander et al., 2002). Therefore, the outcomes and the mechanisms through which these outcomes can be actualized are different. The second and third research streams deal with the outcomes of brand communities for the consumer and the brand.

#### 2.4. Why consumers join brand communities?

The outcomes for consumers are the reasons why they would join a brand community and keep their membership continuing (Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008; Zaglia, 2013). Generally consumers gain utilitarian and hedonic values from their participation in brand communities (McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009). These two values can be explained by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) and social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1988). According to social identity theory consumers join a brand community to fulfill the need for identification with symbols and groups. This gives them the ability to augment their self-concept. Muñiz and Schau (2007) show how members integrate the community into their identities in cyberspace by using the brand community symbols and meanings. They clearly show how the need for identification is manifested through participation in brand communities. Consumers also share their passion and receive pleasure from participating in brand communities (Zaglia, 2013).

Social capital theory predicts that consumers pursue some sort of economic value through networking with their fellow members in the brand community. McAlexander et al. (2002) emphasize the utilitarian values consumers gain by participating in brandfests. Also, Schau et al. (2009) shed light on brand use practices that aim directly at enhancing the use of the brand by consumers. Zaglia (2013) shows that one of the main motivations of consumers is to obtain the necessary information or skills to better use the product of their favorite brand. Apparently obtaining such skills and information from peers who share the same values and passions is more convenient than obtaining them from other sources. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) show that members can be categorized within brand communities according to their initial motivations. They conclude that consumers make stronger relationships with different aspects of brand communities based on their primary consumption motivations. Thus, motivations can be an indicator of the future behavior of consumers in a brand community.

#### 2.5. Brand community outcomes for firms

Firms have more reasons and motivations to facilitate brand communities. Brand communities perform many important tasks on behalf of the brand. For instance, brand community members

can play the role of the support service department of their companies, essentially by helping each other and fixing each other's problems with the brand (Schau et al., 2009). They can also be the brand's advocates in defending the borders of the brand (Habibi et al., 2014) as well as evangelists trying to make desirable impression on outsiders (Schau et al., 2009). Members of a brand community can be an excellent source for innovation and product improvement because they are highly attached to the community and the future prospects of the brand matters to them (Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008; Von Hippel, 2005).

In addition to these benefits, brand communities can influence consumer behavior in favor of brands. Loyalty is perhaps the most studied marketing variable in the brand community literature. At the beginning researchers qualitatively supported the idea that a brand community is a place for loyal consumers and that it increases the loyalty of their members through different mechanisms such as oppositional loyalty and integration in the community (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Then, researchers tried to understand different ways by which loyalty and other important marketing variables are influenced in brand communities.

McAlexander, Kim, and Roberts (2003) using a large sample of offline community members supported that integration in a brand community influences satisfaction which eventually increases brand loyalty. They also argued that brand loyalty is a more dynamic and comprehensive variable than the notion of satisfaction. Algesheimer et al. (2005) examine the social effects of brand communities on variables such as purchase intentions, brand loyalty, and community identification. They developed a nomological network and estimated it using a large sample of various European car clubs. They showed that brand relationship quality has a positive impact on brand loyalty and purchase intentions. Also brand community identification has a positive effect on brand loyalty through the mediation of community engagement, which is an essential but under-studied variable in the brand community literature.

Zhou, Zhang, Su, and Zhou (2012) studied the role of brand community identification on enhancing brand community commitment and brand identification. Similar to Algesheimer et al. (2005), through a nomological network they found positive effects of brand community identification on brand community commitment, which is a concept close to brand loyalty. Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu (2007) examine the effects of participation in brand community on brand trust and loyalty. They found, in the context of online brand communities, that participation in brand community enhances brand trust and brand loyalty. Tsai, Huang, and Chiu (2012) examined the antecedents of participation in brand community. They ran a study in a non-western context and found that in addition to consumers' personal factors, the perceived level of trust in the relationships enhances participation in brand communities.

Stokburger-Sauer (2010) examines the effects of the four building blocks of brand community (i.e., consumer's relationship with brand, product, company, and other consumers) on brand loyalty and brand community identification. He found that these elements can positively influence brand loyalty, satisfaction and community identification. More interestingly, he did not find a difference between online and offline brand communities regarding these effects. Thompson and Sinha (2008) looked at the problem from an oppositional loyalty perspective. They investigate the positive effects of brand communities on adopting new products from preferred brands and avoiding the adoption of new products from rival brands, as long as comparable products from the preferred brand are available in the market. The role of brand community contextual factors is somehow studied in the literature too. For instance, Sung, Kim, Kwon, and Moon (2010) investigate the differences between

consumer- and marketer-generated brand communities. Also Jang, Olfman, Islang, Joon, and Kyungtae (2008) found that who initiates the brand community can moderate the effect the brand community has on brand loyalty and commitment.

Although most researchers paid attention to the positive sides, brand communities can also have some dark sides. Hickman and Ward (2007) found that identification with a brand community can lead members to trash talk outsiders and also have feelings of schadenfreude, which refers to feeling joyful from someone else's misery. Algesheimer et al. (2005) also indicate that brand communities can exert normative pressure on members which results in reactance, decreased intention to recommend the community, decreased community participation, and less loyalty.

All in all, due to the complexity of brand communities from an academic perspective, many researchers tried to investigate their effects from different perspectives which led to different models. Brand communities can be very different based on their social contexts, platforms, size, and others (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010; McAlexander et al., 2002). As described next, social media is a completely different context from previous contexts of brand communities. There is little research about brand communities on social media platforms. Additionally we focus on brand trust as well as the role of community engagement which are under-studied in the literature, but is highly pertinent to social media contexts.

## 2.6. Social media and its unique aspects

Social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). User generated content (UGC) is content created by consumers and publicly available and distributable, has some degree of creativity and is not made through professional content creation practices. This definition implies that consumers have a 24/7 access to different sorts of media such as blogs, microblogs, video/photo sharing sites, and social networks (Harris, 2009).

Web 2.0 and UGC revolutionized marketing. There is no doubt that companies that intensively exploit the capabilities of social media to connect with their customers, employees and other stakeholders outperform other companies (Corstjens & Umblijs, 2012). Also social media changed shopping behavior (Powers et al., 2012). Perhaps the most influential upshot of social media is consumer empowerment; now consumers have a strong voice and firms are not in control of the conversations among consumers (Fournier & Avery, 2011). This implies that every customer and his/her conversations should matter for marketers.

Social media dramatically changed the patterns of internet usage and the personality of internet users. For example, a few years ago most users of online collectives such as forums and chat rooms were introverts, but today this is no more the case (Ross et al., 2009). This might be caused by a new trend of internet usage in which people use their real identities online as opposed to using the pseudonyms that were common in previous online platforms. This implies that online behavior changed due to the change in online users. All in all, these new developments and trends show that current knowledge might not match with the new aspects and implications of social media. Therefore, researchers need to conduct research in areas in which marketing intersects with social media in order to help managers move ahead. One such area is brand communities established on social media.

## 2.7. Unique aspects of brand communities established on social media

As mentioned, one research stream shows the presence of social media in different contexts and another stream examined the

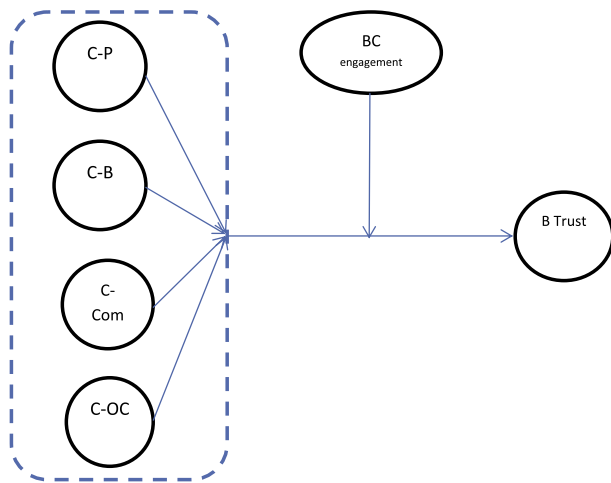
outcomes and consequences of brand communities. However, the outcomes of brand communities depend on the types of brand community as well as their unique characteristics. In addition, the crowds on social media are different and perhaps more heterogeneous than the previous “somewhat homogenous” (Pitta & Fowler, 2005) crowds in more conventional brand communities. Habibi et al. (2014) delineate five dimensions that make SMBBCs unique. The first one is the *social context* of SMBBCs. The social context provided by social media is unique. The Web 2.0 technologies put the social context of SMBBCs somewhere between offline/physical communities and solely text based communities. For example, members can obtain a great deal of information (e.g., profiles, pictures, location, gender, and family status) about their fellow members; this was perhaps not possible in other conventional communities. The second differentiating dimension is *structure*. Basically, there is no explicit or implicit structure in SMBBCs (Habibi et al., 2014), unlike previous communities in which a mechanism was implemented to distinguish devotees from newbies (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). The third distinguishing dimension is the *scale* of SMBBCs. While brand communities do not go beyond thousands of brand aficionados, SMBBCs may have millions of members (Habibi et al., 2014). The implications of brand community size were investigated before, but never such mega sized brand communities. The fourth factor is *storytelling*, which is an important aspect of brand communities. In SMBBCs storytelling is completely different by using videos and photos accompanied by texts. Storytelling also is more interactive due to the ability of readers to instantly comment or “Like” the story. The fifth dimension is numerous *affiliated brand communities*. In social media the cost of initiating a community is nearly zero; thus there are many subgroups and related groups in a given brand community. This can bring up important issues such as multiple memberships (McAlexander et al., 2002).

These five dimensions obviously put SMBBCs in a unique situation compared to previous brand communities; hence studying their outcomes is inevitable for managers. In this article we develop a conceptual framework that investigates the role of the four building blocks of brand community as well as the brand community engagement in building brand trust, which is one marketing goal of investing in social media (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

## 2.8. Brand community based on social media and brand trust

When it comes to trust, some claim that “perhaps there is no other single variable which so thoroughly influences interpersonal and intergroup behavior” (Golembiewski & McConkie, 1975, p. 131). Trust is critical for attitudes and behavior toward a brand or seller (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987) and is important during shopping (Powers et al., 2012). We hypothesize that the relationships customers make with brand community elements in SMBBCs increase brand trust (Fig. 1).

Brand trust is “the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function” (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82). Trust usually is more of an issue when there is information asymmetry and chances of opportunism. Decreasing information asymmetry results in increased trust. Thus, one way brands can make their customers trust them is to give them the necessary information about the product and the brand (Chiu, Huang, & Yen, 2010; Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). We argue that there are at least two different mechanisms through which consumers' relationships with brand community elements (brand, product, company, and other consumers) in the social media context enhance brand trust. The first mechanism is through dissemination of information. Social media provides a rich communication context for admirers of a brand and allows to build and maintain their relationships with



**Fig. 1.** The effects of brand community relationships on brand trust. Legend: C = Customer, P = Product, B = Brand, Com = Company, OC = Other Customers, BC = Brand Community.

the different elements of the brand. They can easily communicate and share their thoughts about the product and brand with other customers and marketers. This essentially requires brand related information dissemination among these parties. Therefore, these relationships would positively influence brand trust.

Theoretically, repeated interactions and long term relationships increase trust between parties (Holmes, 1991). The second mechanism is related to the level of exposure to the brand and increased interaction the consumer will have through developing relationships with the brand community elements. When customers join a brand community based on social media they become constantly exposed to the brand contents as well as the meaningful experiences that other customers had with the brand and its products. They begin to communicate with other brand members as well as with marketers. Sharing meaningful experiences with the brand on social media and receiving feedback from fellow members strengthen the ties among consumers and brand entities such as the product, the company, and other consumers. These enhanced relationships that result from the rich interactions in social media would make consumers consider the brand as more trustworthy. In social media contexts, consumers are frequently exposed to and interact with brands' posts, pictures, videos and fans. Therefore based on these two mechanisms we hypothesize that:

**H1.** Consumers' relationships with the: (a) brand, (b) product, (c) company, and (d) other-consumers, on social media, positively influence brand trust.

### 2.9. Does community engagement matter?

Community engagement is highly pertinent to social media. Engagement is perhaps the Holy Grail of social media; all brands, fan pages, and organizations' pages strive to get a bigger share of customers' attention and engagement in their pages (Hanna et al., 2011). Similarly, people vary in terms of their engagement in social media outlets; they can spend as little as a few minutes or as much as several hours a day consuming social media content. Regarding H1, it would be an oversimplification to think that whoever likes a page or becomes a member of a brand community in anyway would be heavily influenced by the brand community.

Not all members are equal; they vary a great deal according to their engagement with the brand community and have varying attitudes toward the brand according to their motivations to become a member on social media. Some members might even

be negative although they are still members and continue shopping (Lapointe, 2012). Some people join to seek help and receive information, others to learn and improve their skills and knowledge about the products they use, some for entertainment, some to reflect their concerns (Zaglia, 2013), and others might join just out of curiosity or because the group was suggested by other friends or the social network platform. Obviously the level of engagement is not the same for all of these people and the community does not mean the same thing to all of them.

Community engagement is "the consumer's intrinsic motivations to interact and cooperate with community members" (Algesheimer et al., 2005, p. 21). Interaction in social media contexts refers to activities such as sharing stories, photos, videos, liking and commenting on related materials in the community page. Community engagement also relates to the desirable effects that identifying with the brand community has on its members. Therefore, higher engagement means higher cooperation and interactions, which in turn would result in higher positive effects gained through such interactions. Therefore, highly engaged consumers are expected to form stronger relationships with brand elements, so we hypothesize that:

**H2.** Consumers' relationships with the (a) brand, (b) product, (c) company, and (d) other consumers are stronger for customers with high engagement in the brand community compared to customers with low engagement.

Moreover the effects of these relationships on brand trust should be stronger for customers who are highly engaged in the brand community compared to those with low engagement. Considering the two mechanisms of trust enhancement discussed before, higher engaged members would gain more information about the brand, and therefore they would have less information asymmetry. Additionally, higher engaged members would be more frequently exposed to brand elements, which according to trust theories (Holmes, 1991) results in higher levels of trust. Therefore we believe that brand engagement has a moderating role in translating the effect of brand community elements to brand trust (Fig. 1):

**H3.** Brand community engagement amplifies the impacts of consumers' relationships with the (a) brand, (b) product, (c) company, and (d) other consumers on brand trust.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Subjects and procedure

Data were collected through a credited US consumer online panel. Participants were offered a small monetary incentive in return for their participation. The survey was administered online so we were able to program the survey in order to control the sequence of questions; we made sure that everyone was exposed and responded to all questions. Also the program enabled us to measure the time everyone spent on each question. The program did not allow participants to fill out the questionnaire more than once.

The target population consisted of people who are members of a brand community in social networking sites; thus, participants were asked to first name the social networking site of which they are a member. Then the concept of brand community was introduced and they were asked to name the most important brand community of which they are a member and follow on the social networking site they just mentioned. Participants were requested

to keep that brand community in mind while answering the questions.

With this procedure, which is consistent with previous studies in online contexts (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a,b; Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2008), 665 completed questionnaires were obtained. After deleting those who responded too fast or those who mentioned non-commercial communities such as news groups or celebrities as their most important brand communities, we had 569 usable questionnaires. The sample covers 284 brand communities with well-known brands such as Apple, Microsoft, Nike, Coca Cola, Samsung, Nokia, and Starbucks representing more than 30% of the sample; 45% are female, 54.8% are male, and 0.2% did not disclose their gender. The largest age range in the sample is 21–30 (51%), followed by 31–40 (27%), 2% were under 20 and 20% were over 40. About 80% of respondents said that they logged into their social networking sites once or multiple times a day. About 95% of respondents chose Facebook as their social networking site; the rest chose sites such as Twitter, Pinterest, or Google+. About 49% of the respondents mentioned that they checked their brand community page once or multiple times a day, 33% once or multiple times a week, and the rest at least once a month.

### 3.2. Measures

The measures were borrowed from the related literature and modified to suit the study. Measures of consumers' relationship with brand entities came from McAlexander et al. (2002) and brand trust from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). For consumer/company relationships we added two items from Chaudhry and Krishnan (2007). The measure for community engagement came from Algesheimer et al. (2005). All items were 5 point Likert-type scales, anchored by (1) "strongly disagree" and (2) "strongly agree". See the items in the appendix.

## 4. Analysis and findings

### 4.1. Analysis procedure

To test the conceptual model we conducted structural equation modeling with the whole sample by using EQS 6.1 (Byrne, 1994, 1998). To assess model fit we report indices such as chi-square, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and the comparative fit index (CFI) which are among important fit indices (Bentler, 1990; Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Marsh & Hocevar, 1985).

### 4.2. Discriminant and convergent validity

To assess construct validity we conducted a five-factor confirmatory model with all the latent constructs in the model (i.e. four customer centered relationships and brand trust). An acceptable fit (Byrne, 1998) was achieved after two items were eliminated ( $\chi^2 = 428.8$ ,  $df = 125$ ,  $CFI = .935$ ,  $RMSEA = .065$ ,  $GFI = .923$ ); this change had a negligible impact on the content of the measures and improved the reliability and validity parameters. All items loaded significantly on their intended construct and all loadings were higher than .5 (Table 1), which supports the convergent validity of the constructs (Steenkamp & Van Trijp, 1991). All AVEs are above .5, providing additional evidence of convergent validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Dillon & Goldstein, 1984). For discriminant validity we calculated 95% confidence intervals of the correlations among constructs. None of them includes 1, which supports discriminant validity (Bagozzi, 1994).

**Table 1**  
Item loadings.

Construct	Item	Factor loading	R-square
Consumer/product relationships	1-	.792	.628
	2-	.828	.685
	3-	.668	.446
Consumer/brand relationships	1-	.722	.521
	2-	.639	.408
	3-	.782	.612
	4-	.773	.597
Consumer/company relationships	1-	.699	.489
	2-	.746	.557
	3-	.784	.615
	4-	.755	.570
	5-	.554	.307
Consumer/other consumer relationships	1-	.799	.638
	2-	.798	.623
	3-	.631	.398
Brand trust	1-	.714	.509
	2-	.800	.640
	3-	.592	.351

### 4.3. Internal consistency

To assess the internal consistency of the constructs, we calculated Cronbach alphas (Cronbach, 1970), composite reliabilities, and average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs. Cronbach alphas and composite reliabilities are above .7, which supports measures' reliability (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995). All AVEs are above 0.5 which supports internal consistency as well (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). For more details refer to Table 2.

### 4.4. Testing Hypotheses 1

To test H1 we ran a structural equation modeling procedure using EQS 6.1. We constructed a model with four variables (i.e. customer relationships with brand elements) directly influencing brand trust (Fig. 1). The fit indices indicate a satisfactory fit for the model:  $\chi^2 = 428.8$ , ( $df = 120$ ,  $p < .05$ ),  $RMSEA = .067$ ,  $GFI = .923$ ,  $CFI = .934$  (Byrne, 1998). The results show that all path coefficients are significant and positive except for the coefficient from customer/other customer relationship to brand trust, which is negative (Table 3). Therefore, the findings support H1a, H1b, and H1c at the .05 level. H1d is not supported. The result gained for H1d is counter intuitive, which we interpret in the Discussion section.

### 4.5. MANOVA analysis to test H2

In H2, we construed that the strengths of the relationship between the customer and the four elements of brand community are higher for those with higher levels of community engagement.

**Table 2**  
Measurement properties.

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Consumer-product	3	.797	.81	.58
Consumer-brand	4	.816	.82	.53
Consumer-company	5	.832	.84	.51
Consumer-other consumers	3	.780	.78	.55
Brand trust	3	.750	.75	.50
Community engagement	4	.852	.85	.61

**Table 3**  
Test of structural relationships.

Relationship	Coefficient (S.E)
H1a: Consumer/brand → Brand trust	.345 (.037) <sup>*</sup>
H1b: Consumer/product → Brand trust	.300(.059) <sup>*</sup>
H1c: Consumer/company → Brand trust	.313 (.052) <sup>*</sup>
H1d: Consumer/other consumers → Brand trust	-.162 (.039) <sup>*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> Significant at  $p < .05$ .

**Table 4**  
High vs low engagement groups.

	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Low engagement	291	2.77	.590
High engagement	286	4.24	.401

To test this hypothesis we split the sample into two groups based on the median of community engagement. The median point is 3.5 and details of the two groups are provided in Table 4. The mean of the high engagement group is 4.23 and the mean for low engagement group is 2.77. According to statistical tests, these two groups are significantly different ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Next, we used MANOVA to test H2 because four individual ANOVAs would inflate the overall type I error. Moreover, the four relationships of brand community are correlated. MANOVA addresses these issues by conducting one test on all dependents variables combined into one variable (Hair et al., 1995; McAlexander & Koenig, 2010). After confirming that the means of the relationships are not equal for the two groups ( $p < .01$ ), we conducted single ANOVAs to further analyze the results. The Levene test (1960) for homogeneity of variances indicates that for three of the four outcome variables the variances are different in the two groups (Table 5). Therefore, we report the appropriate statistics depending on whether the variables passed the Levene test.

The findings are reported in Table 6. Hypotheses 2 (a to d) suggest that consumers that are more engaged with the brand community have stronger relationships with the brand community elements. These hypothesis are fully supported which highlights why engagement is strongly applauded by social media gurus.

**Table 5**  
Levene's test of equality of error variances.<sup>a</sup>

	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Customer–brand	13.769	1	575	.000
Customer–product	20.865	1	575	.000
Customer–company	2.114	1	575	.146
Customer–other customers	32.630	1	575	.000

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

<sup>a</sup> Design: Intercept + HghLwEng.

**Table 6**  
MANOVA results.

H2	Low Engagement Mean	High Engagement Mean	Significance of MANOVA results
a Customer–brand	3.74	4.16	$p < 0.05$
b Customer–product	3.53	4.37	$p < 0.05$
c Customer–company	3.58	4.26	$p < 0.05$
d Customer–other customers	2.99	4.12	$p < 0.05$

#### 4.6. Moderating effects of engagement

We used multisample SEM to test for the moderating effects described in H3. This method is consistent with similar research (Algesheimer et al., 2005). We built separate structural models for the high/low engagement groups and we conducted a test of moderation to determine whether the respective path coefficients are different. That is, we unconstrained all the paths first. This is the baseline model. Then, we constrained relevant paths one by one to be equal for both groups and ran the model. This is called the “equal path” model. We use the difference in chi-square values between the two models to judge the equality of paths for the two groups (Table 7).

H3 hypothesized that the effects of customer relationships with the four brand community elements on brand trust are stronger for those consumers highly engaged with the brand community. The results support H3a and H3b and for H3d, the results are significant but in the opposite direction. H3c is not supported. We elaborate on these results in the Discussion section.

#### 4.7. Discussion and theoretical implications

In the age of social media everything is about community building and gaining customers' engagement with the community and the brand. Our findings provide detailed insights on how brand community and engagement interact in building brand trust. As predicted three out of four brand community relationships (i.e. customer-brand, customer-product, and customer-company) positively influence brand trust. However, contrary to our prediction the customer-other customers relationship negatively influences brand trust. This seems counterintuitive at first glance. However, considering the unique aspects of social media, there are some possible explanations for this finding.

First, consider the unique aspects of SMBBCs described earlier. One aspect is the lack of structure or hierarchy in such communities. This perhaps would confuse some members about the rank and experience of their fellow members with the brand. This way they might doubt the credibility of the information they receive, therefore negating their trust in the brand. A second explanation refers back to consumer empowerment through social media (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Powers et al., 2012). Consumers' connectivity and interactions make them stronger so that they demand more and expect more from brands. Social media and all consumers being connected together all the time raised consumers' expectations about brands. Several researchers warned marketers that in order to avoid the negative trust effects of such empowerment,

**Table 7**  
Results of the analysis for H3.

Hypothesis	Path coefficient in unconstrained model	Chi-square test result
Baseline model		$\chi^2$ (240) = 620.60
H3a (C-B → trust)	$g_{(HE)} = 0.97^*$ $g_{(LE)} = 0.52$	$\chi^2$ (241) = 626.04 Test of H3a $\chi^2$ (1) = 5.44, $p < .05$ supported
H3b (C-P → trust)	$g_{(HE)} = 0.523$ $g_{(LE)} = 0.01$	$\chi^2$ (241) = 651.80 Test of H3b $\chi^2$ (1) = 31.2, $p < .01$ supported
H3c (C-Com → trust)	$g_{(HE)} = 0.230$ $g_{(LE)} = 0.229$	$\chi^2$ (241) = 620.60 Test of H3c $\chi^2$ (1) = 0, $p > .05$ not supported
H3d (C-OC → trust)	$g_{(HE)} = -0.147$ $g_{(LE)} = 0.0$	$\chi^2$ (241) = 693.75 Test of H3d $\chi^2$ (1) = 73.15, $p < .01$ supported

Note: C = Customer, Com = Company, OC = Other customers, P = Product.

<sup>\*</sup> Standardized coefficient.

brands should encourage and facilitate conversations and not disrupt them (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Remember that in social media negative posts or comments have five times the effect of positive ones (Corstjens & Umblijs, 2012; Powers et al., 2012). Since consumer-consumers relationships would eventually contain some negative talks about the brand, this can negate the effect of such relationships on trust. This also might explain why customer-customers relationships have a larger negative effect on brand trust for highly engaged customers (Table 7, H3d). Consumer-consumer relationship is the point that brands have no control over in social media contexts (Fournier & Avery, 2011); therefore it is not unusual to get counterintuitive findings at this point; However, researchers should further investigate this issue before making generalizations from our findings.

Our results empirically support why community engagement matters in social media contexts. First, consumers with higher levels of engagement in brand community form stronger relationships with the brand community elements (Table 6). Making strong relationships with the brand elements might be one of the main points of branding and community building. Therefore, the first benefit of engaging consumers in brand communities lies in the stronger relationships they form with the brand, the product, other consumers and the company. More importantly, brand community engagement acts as a moderator and enhances the effect of consumer-brand and consumer-product relationships on brand trust, and decreases the negative effect of consumer-other consumers relationships on brand trust.

With respect to the theoretical model (Fig. 1), one might argue that the direction should be the reverse; that is, because consumers trust the brand, they participate in the brand community and build the relationships. Although this might be generally true, it is not necessarily the case in social media contexts, where there is no limit for anyone to become a member of a brand community. One can join a brand community by simply pressing the “Like” button. In this regard, brand communities based on social media are different from traditional brand communities for which only brand owners and those who already trust the brand could become members. Nonetheless, even owners of the brand might not fully trust or know the full functional capabilities of the brand’s products. On top of that, the literature supports the directions in our model: for example Chen, Zhang, and Xu (2009) show that emotional and informational interactions, which are natural consequences of one’s participation in online interactions, positively influence trust.

One might be cautious in generalizing these findings. We asked respondents to name and keep in mind their most important brand page on social media while answering the survey. This is to make sure that the brand group represents a community to them, as was our assumption. However, not all the members of a community have the same emotions about it. Readers should be aware that they should interpret the results in its aggregated form not from individuals’ points of view. That is, if our findings show that customer-brand relationships add to the brand trust, it perhaps does not mean that this is the case for all members of a brand page. Obviously some people are just there for several reasons and they do not feel the group is a community. That is why engagement is so crucial in the age of social media and all brand managers should be concerned with consumers’ engagement with their brands.

#### 4.8. Practical implications

This research emphasizes the role of community building and engaging customers with the community in social media contexts. Our results clearly show that three out of four brand community relationships enhance brand trust. Moreover, more engaged customers make stronger relationships within the brand community. Community engagement also moderates the effects that such

relationships have on trust; it increases the positive effects of customer-brand and customer-product relationships on brand trust; and decrease the negative effects of customer-other customers relationship on brand trust.

However, we caution marketers about the relationships that customers make with other customers. In social media, this is exactly the point that brands have no control over (Fournier & Avery, 2011) and mixed results are found in the literature. There are many anecdotal advices to guide marketers in managing the effects of customers’ conversations (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Our findings show that brands either are not following this advice or other sorts of advice and practices are required. To identify how brands can minimize such negative effects should be the subject of future studies, but our findings show that increasing consumers’ engagement can lessen the negative effects of consumers’ relationships on brand trust.

This article also draws the practitioners’ attention to outcomes such as trust when they measure the outcomes of their social media activities. When it comes to measurement of community success in social media, there is a large gap between what the goals of the community are and what is actually being measured. For example, the main goal of establishing such communities are enhanced loyalty, trust, idea generation, and market insights but in practice managers usually measure the number of active users, posts, or visitors (Moran & Gossieaux, 2001). This shows that managers should be more sensitive to other measures such as trust. Our model provides some insights for marketers on how to add to brand trust by community building practices.

All in all, social media based brand communities are crucial phenomena for marketers to make sense of and understand their mechanisms and consequences. Such communities are collectives of millions of people interacting on a daily basis. They are ideal environments for seeding viral contents since their members are more likely to share the community’s messages (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007); customers form strong relationships with brand elements which in turn add to their trust in the brand. Thanks to social media, having brand communities with millions of members is today possible. However, not only the number of members but also their level of engagement is important.

#### 4.9. Limitations and future research

Although we used a heterogeneous sample of real social media users, readers should be cautious in generalizing these findings. More replications are necessary since we used an online survey method. Also, we used a general sample of brand community members. There might be several groups in social media that people are members of just to get some benefits such as promotions. Obviously these groups do not represent a community to many of its members and hence do not show the characteristics of brand communities. Since the goal was to measure the effects of social media based brand communities, we asked respondents to name and think about the most important community in social media of which they are a member. This way we can safely assume that what respondents named has the meaning and characteristics of a brand community to them. However, to be more precise, future research should focus on a few specific brand communities and demonstrate the existence of community markers.

Our sample includes brand communities for a wide range of products. Although brand communities can exist even for convenience goods, the type and intensity of their consequences and benefits might be different. Therefore, we suggest conducting more specific studies across various product categories to provide deeper insights for brand managers.

Due to the nature of social media, it is easy for consumers to have multiple community memberships. “Scholars of brand



community often neglect the effect of multiple community membership" (McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 40). Therefore social media create an interesting platform where researchers can examine the effects of multiple memberships. Multiple memberships are theoretically possible on social media due to recent findings that explain that consumers can experience multiple identities and connections with their network of friends, brands, or companies (Bagozzi, Bergami, Marzocchi, & Morandin, 2012).

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### Appendix A

#### A.1. Construct items

Consumer/product relationships	1-I love my branded product 2-I am proud of my branded product 3-My branded product is one of my favorite possessions
Consumer/Brand relationships	1-I value the heritage of the brand 2-If I were to replace the product, I would replace it with the another product of the same brand 3-My brand is of the highest quality 4-I would recommend this brand to my friends
Consumer/company relationships	1-The COMPANY understands my needs 2-The COMPANY cares about my opinions 3-I feel this COMPANY cares a lot about its customers 4-I feel the company takes my feedback seriously 5-I feel the company shares information with me
Consumer/other customers relationships	1-I have met wonderful people because of the community 2- I have a feeling of kinship with the other owners 3- I have an interest in the community because of the other owners of the brands
Brand trust	1- This is an honest brand 2- I trust this brand 3-This brand is safe
Community engagement	1-I benefit from following the brand community's rules 2-I am motivated to participate in the brand community's activities because I feel better afterwards 3-I am motivated to participate in the brand community's activities because I am able to support other members 4-I am motivated to participate in the brand community's activities because I am able to reach personal goals

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