BRAND COMMUNITY FORMATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT: Brand communities have the potential to increase the loyalty of those consumers who are members, to generate oppositional loyalty towards the brands of competitors and also to influence new product adoption behaviour. Moreover, this concept contributes to a better understanding of the relationships between consumers and a specific brand and thus presents an interest not only for marketing researchers, but also for brand managers. Starting with the 21st century, brand communities have been conceptualized and studied many times in the marketing literature, which has explored both the positive and negative consequences of these consumption communities. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the most important findings related to this marketing topic. Therefore, the article begins with the review of the most relevant definitions given to brand communities which are then analysed. Secondly, there is a section dedicated to the characteristics and particularities associated with these consumer communities, which were identified by previous research. Subsequently, another section focuses upon the emergence process of such communities, the way they are constructed by customers and also upon the factors and steps that allow the formation and organization of brand communities. Finally, some implications for brand management are offered, as well as some directions for future research.

Keywords: brand community, collective consumption, community behaviour, brand loyalty.

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Introduction

From the beginning of the 21st century until now, brand communities have been "a heavily researched topic" in the marketing literature (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010), which has documented not only the positive consequences of these consumption communities, but also the negative ones. Referring to the positive aspects of such communities, there have been mentioned: the enhancement of members' loyalty because brand communities are considered to be "a possible path" to "the Holy Grail of brand loyalty" (Thompson & Sinha, 2008; McAlexande et al, 2002), the engenderment of "oppositional loyalty" towards the brands of competitors (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), the influence on members' behaviour regarding new product adoption (Thompson & Sinha, 2008), the fact that the practices within these communities create value (Schau et al, 2009), the influence on purchase intention (Liaw, 2011) etc. On the other hand, some studies have discovered the negative behaviours encountered in brand communities, such as "inter-group stereotyping", denigrating rival brand communities, and "feeling pleasure at the misfortune of rival brands and their users" (Hickman & Ward, 2007).

Nonetheless, since this concept contributes to a better understanding of the relationships between consumers and a specific brand, offers "new ways for studying the word-of-mouth by

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defining a specific group that diffuses information" and has "implications for marketing strategies", it thus presents an interest not only for marketing researchers, but also for brand managers (Amine & Sitz, 2004).

The article begins with the review of the most relevant definitions given to brand communities which are then analysed. Secondly, there is a section dedicated to the characteristics and particularities associated with these consumer communities, which were identified by previous research. Subsequently, another section focuses upon the emergence process of such communities, the way they are constructed by customers and also upon the factors and steps that allow the formation and organization of brand communities. Finally, some implications for brand management are offered, as well as some directions for future research.

Theoretical considerations
The concept of brand community

Brand communities represent an instrument that contributes to "strengthening consumer - brand relationships" (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). The notion of brand community has been presented in marketing science by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), authors who have described it as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand". It is specified that they consider such a consumption community to be specialized because "at its centre is a branded good or service" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Moreover, the community under discussion is not delimited geographically which means that its members are "not compelled to be located in the same physical area", and is composed of consumers who have developed an attachment towards a brand (Amine & Sitz, 2004).

Another definition given to this term, which in the authors' opinion it clarifies better "the content of the very concept of community" is the following: "a self-selected, hierarchical and non-geographically bound group of consumers that share values, norms and social representations and recognize a strong feeling of membership with other members and with the group as a whole on the basis of a common attachment to a particular brand" (Amine & Sitz, 2004). Therefore, the researchers highlight "the membership feeling" on both inter-individual and collective levels (Amine & Sitz, 2004). Additionally, the authors Amine and Sits (2004) emphasize the "hierarchy and duration of the community" which differentiates brand community from "postmodern tribe" (Maffesoli, 1988; Cova, 1997).

Another point of view regarding brand communities is that of specialists Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) who explain this concept as follows: "a [...] group of consumers with a shared enthusiasm for the brand and a well-developed social identity, whose members engage jointly in group actions to accomplish collective goals and/or express mutual sentiments and commitments". In this definition, "social identity" refers to "the cognitive self-awareness of membership in the brand community" (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). Consequently, brand communities bring together people who might have nothing else in common but a particular brand (Dubois & Westerhausen, 2011).

In the marketing literature, brand communities are distinguished from "cultures of consumption" (Kozinets, 1999) and from "subcultures of consumption" (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The criteria taken into consideration in the distinction made between brand communities and the latter are "the cause of members gathering" and "the level of analysis" (Amine & Sitz, 2004). While a subculture of consumption is "formed around a product [...] or a consumption category (involvement cause, aggregate level)", a brand community has at its centre "a particular brand (attachment cause, disaggregate level)" (Amine & Sitz, 2004). It is specified that these communities also differ from "consumer tribes" and from "brand cults" due to their characteristics (Arnhold, 2010; Cova & Pace, 2006).

Although it is possible for such consumer communities to appear for any brand, it is more likely that they appear for 'brands with a large degree of threatening competition or "underdog"

brands' (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001 *apud* O'Sullivan et al, 2011). Recently, it was demonstrated that a brand community "can form around dominating brands such as Coca-Cola and Red Bull" (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Cova & Pace, 2006 *apud* O'Sullivan et al, 2011).

Previously, based on Tonnies' (1912 *apud* Andersen, 2004) pioneer work in community research, traditional communities were considered to be geographically restrained. The development of the Internet has later allowed brand communities to permeate the online environment. In his paper, Andersen (2004) states that "the Internet provides the infrastructure for enhancing the development of brand community activities, by expanding the reach of communities (reducing barriers for interaction), by increasing communication effectiveness, and by providing additional possibilities for interaction among community members". In the author's opinion, brand communities are distinguished from virtual (brand) communities. The latter concept was defined by Wiertz (2005) as "company-endorsed online aggregations of customers who collectively co-produce and consume content about a commercial activity that is central to their interest by exchanging informational and social resources".

According to Brodie et al. (2011, p. 105), the key-concept for understanding the nature and the operating mode of brand communities is the term "*engagement*". The consumers engage within a brand community with a certain scope and usually their involvement is based on a multidimensional set of reasons. Hollebeek (2011 *apud* Brodie et al., 2011, p. 106) defines the customer brand engagement as "the level of a customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in brand interactions". Therefore, the consumer's engagement within a brand community can occur at different levels of intensity and can be triggered by particular motives, reflecting distinct engagement states.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004 *apud* Brodie et al., 2011, p. 107) consider that there are eight factors that motivate consumers to engage within communities, among which the most important are the social benefits. The other factors include: venting negative feelings, concern for other consumers, self-enhancement, advice-seeking, economic benefits, platform assistance and helping the company.

Starting from these findings, Brodie et al. (2011, p. 110) identify five specific factors that can represent consumer engagement reasons, applicable especially in the case of virtual brand communities, namely:

- *learning*: is the first element because the engagement process is generally initiated by consumers' need for information and it is usually implied in the purchase decision proccess and consumption decision-making;
- *sharing*: can contribute to the co-creation of knowledge within the community through personal relevant information and experiences partaking;
- *advocating*: is manifested through recommendations and advice shared within the community regarding specific brands, products or services;
- *socializing*: is represented by the interactions between the community members;
- *co-developing*: is possible when consumers contribute to organizational performance.

Therefore a consumer can be stimulated to join a brand community due to specific advantages and benefits. Moreover, the engagement gives rise to specific experiences and interactions between the community members. A deeper level of engagement helps create, build and enhance consumer relationships within the community.

A more general classification of the motivations that determine consumers to participate in a brand community is the one conceived by Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008), which is based on "various notions" related to consumer behaviour: (1) "reassurance of quality" in the case of products with "significant credence attributes" (Nelson, 1970); (2) "high involvement" with the

product category in which the brand is included (Quester and Lim, 2003); (3) "opportunity for joint consumption"; (4) "the brand's symbolic function" (Aaker, 2005).

Characteristics, particularities and processes of brand communities

With respect to the key relationships involved by any brand community, there have been proposed three distinct chronological approaches, as presented by McAlexander, Schouten and Koening (2002). The first perspective is the "traditional model of customer–brand relationship" (McAlexander et al, 2002) which acknowledges only the connection between the customer/ community member and the brand. Another approach is that of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) who "envision a brand community as a customer–customer–brand triad" (McAlexander et al, 2002), consequently taking into consideration "the importance of community members interaction" (Dubois & Westerhausen, 2011). In this case, brand communities are presented as "social entities that reflect the situated embeddedness of brands in the day-to-day lives of consumers and the ways in which brands connect the consumer to the brand, and consumer to consumer" (Muniz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001). McAlexander, Schouten and Koening (2002) suggest the third approach which, compared to the previous one, implies "an extension of the model as well as a shift of perspective". The authors propose the "customer-centric model of brand community", according to which the analyzed communities are characterized though a four-relationship structure: the relationships between a customer and the product, the brand, the company, and other customers/owners (McAlexander et al, 2002). Therefore, they expand the notion of brand community to „entities and relationships neglected by previous research" (McAlexander et al, 2002).

Starting from McAlexander, Schouten and Koening's (2002) model, Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schrode (2008) tried to segment the community population "on the basis of the importance the members attach to the four relationships". They concluded that a large part of each of the investigated communities displayed some homogeneity and "found evidence of heterogeneity among community members" (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schrode, 2008).

Regarding the common characteristics, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) confirmed the presence of three components of a brand community – „consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility". The first refers to the „intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). As a consequence, consumers/ members are "conscious of a shared knowledge of belonging to the community" (Dubois & Westerhausen, 2011).

This "commonality" of brand communities generates "legitimacy" and "oppositional brand loyalty" among their members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) research, the former concept is defined as "a process whereby members of the community differentiate between true members of the community and those who are not, or who occupy a more marginal space". The latter is another process which refers to "opposition to competing brands" manifested by brand community members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

The second "marker of community" is the existance of "shared rituals and traditions" which imply "celebrating the history of the brand" or "sharing brand stories" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Rituals and traditions „represent vital social processes" which help so that "the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). As a result, "sharing brand stories and building upon the history of the brand" are extremely important for brand communities (Wiegandt, 2009). These "conventions" perpetuate the existence of the "community's culture and history" (Wiegandt, 2009). Finally, these conventions "favour social solidarity" (Durkheim, 1965 *apud* Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

In a brand community there is a "sense of duty" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) to the community as a whole and to its members, which is commonly known as "moral responsibility" (Dubois & Westerhausen, 2011). It is specified that this sense of obligation is what generates, when the community is threaten, "collective action" and therefore it contributes to "group cohesion" (Muniz

& O'Guinn, 2001). It contributes to "the consumers' integration in the community, their retention, and their assistance when using the brand" (Heding et al, 2009).

Building brand communities

According to O'Sullivan, Richardson and Collins (2011), "one of the more intriguing features" of brand communities is that their formation happens often without "company input or organisation". They usually originate "from consumers rather than companies" (O'Sullivan et al, 2011).

Amine and Sitz (2004) brought to light the idea that these communities can emerge from "a conscious intent" of some consumers "to create a space for interaction with fellow devotees of a brand".

Some studies have reached the conclusion that "company input and investment into a consumer formed brand community may accelerate community growth" (McAlexander et al, 2002). Such growth can be obtained by fostering interaction between community members and by offering them "an outlet for their needs" (O'Sullivan, Richardson & Collins, 2011).

Regarding the motivation that lies behind the formation of brand communities, Cova (1997) states that although individual consumers try "to liberate themselves from the perceived restrictions of traditional social links", after succeeding they still "crave social links of some sort". Thus, they make an effort "to recompose their social universe"; to achieve this goal, participating in brand communities can be taken into account (O'Sullivan et al, 2011).

Based on the study of Amine and Sitz (2004), the formation of online brand communities is constituted of "several steps" and is influenced by "the activation of some factors". The authors note that the building processes of the investigated communities "require that one or few people, strongly involved" in the respective product category and "highly committed to the brand" initiate the creation of a "place" for accommodating "the interactions between individuals around the brand" (Amine & Sitz, 2004).

Other researchers (O'Sullivan et al, 2011) consider that, in order to form and establish a brand community "as an ongoing entity", some conditions must be satisfied: "prior membership of a subculture or willingness to participate in a subcultural activity", "the initial experience" should be strong enough so that it "precipitates a mutual desire to maintain the transcendent experience" etc.

Not only do these consumers play a vital role in the formation and "the management of the community", but they also represent the "hard core members" of the future community (Amine & Sitz, 2004). These community members who are "the most involved ones" are considered to be "experts" in what concerns the products of the brand (Amine & Sitz, 2004). According to authors Amine and Sitz (2004), they encourage that the members get in contact and interact with each other, "have the legitimacy to referee potential conflicts" and "participate actively in defining the community rules and norms".

Additionally, in order to be viewed as an "active and a perennial online community", it is extremely important that the most of the community members "interact frequently enough online" to develop "a feeling of membership" with one another and with the entire community (Amine & Sitz, 2004). The same researchers (Amine & Sitz, 2004) specify that such "regular interactions" allow also "to develop common rules, norms and representations" that provide a "structure" to the community.

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A good understanding of the formation and the structuring processes of a brand community could permit that companies "forecast information about the brand" through evaluating the opportunities of interacting with the hard core members, "build relationships with the brand within the community" or include these members in the "new products conception process" (Amine & Sitz, 2004).

Discussion and managerial implications

Being a valuable, long-term asset for the company, the brand represents a fundamental element, an intermediate between company and consumers, which demands a constant strategic management.

Defining the brand, Keeble (1991 *apud* Maurya & Mishra, 2012, p. 125) mentioned that "a brand becomes a brand as soon as it comes in contact with consumers". Brands gain consistency and develop themselves through their relationship with the consumers. A brand needs to be maintained and managed taking into account that its true value and the future prospects depend on consumers. Therefore the influence of consumers on branding and brand management is an aspect of central importance.

As it was shown before, the brand communities present some specific features and opportunities for the marketing activity and especially for brand management. For marketers it is important to identify from the beginning the meanings of the brand-consumers relationships developed within specific brand communities. From a managerial perspective, it is important to understand why and how consumers engage in brand communities and what are the consequences and implications of this engagement.

For the brand community members, the connection with the brand can be perceived as a relationship with the company or as a simple interaction with other consumers with similar interests. In both cases, the marketers need to identify the best ways of interacting with the community without generating the feeling of intrusion. Brodie et al. (2013, p. 112) mention that "the communities welcome marketers only if they are contributing to the community". Becoming a part of the community and interacting with the consumers requires a deep preliminary analysis and planning and should use a non-commercially driven approach. Marketers need to learn about how to organize or sustain brand communities because "building and managing brand communities seems cost-effective as well as impactful" (Algesheimer et al., 2004, p. 3).

Brand communities can create value for its members and also for companies. In order to strategically manage the brands, the attention needs to be focused on the relevant variables linked to the consumers' engagement within brand communities.

Aaker (2005) pointed out that the strategic management of the brand can help create brand equity. The customer-based brand equity concept is an important aspect which can be related to brand communities. This concept, created by Keller in 1993, reflects a set of interconnected elements which, in relation with consumers, have the ability to bring value to the company, at both commercial and financial levels. Identifying and understanding the factors that lead to the creation of brand equity represents the starting point for brand management decisions. The brand value can be amplified on account of each of the factors involved.

Knowing that brand communities influence the brand, it is important to determine what kind of elements influence the brand equity and help create a strong brand.

The companies need „to make use of positive group effects in communities that lead to compliance, community engagement, dissemination of brand knowledge, or influence on brand loyalty" (Algesheimer et al., 2004, p. 34). As Brodie et al. (2013, p. 105) noticed, "engaged consumers exhibit enhanced consumer loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, connection, emotional bonding, trust and commitment". Most of these elements contribute to the creation of brand equity.

According to Kotler & Keller (2008, p. 413) brand equity can be obtained by creating the appropriate brand knowledge structures with the right consumers. Those consumers can be found

among the brand communities members. Füller et al. (2008, p. 616) stated that "consumer brand passion is positively related to brand knowledge", therefore the engagement within a brand community is driven by both passion and knowledge.

A brand community provides a medium where the consumers have the opportunity to share their opinions, thoughts, feelings and experiences and where they can exchange brand information based on their brand knowledge. Brands are constructed based on consumers' insights and experiences.

Feldwick (1996 *apud* Wood, 2000, p. 662) considers that brand image and brand loyalty are some of the most important elements that contribute to the creation of customer-based brand equity.

The improvement or the deterioration of the brand image is an essential aspect that marketers need to take into consideration within brand communities. The brand image reflects what consumers think, feel and expect from the brand and they tend to express those thoughts within a brand community. Since brand image is built based on a set of associations existing in the consumers' minds, marketers should aim to maintain a consistent and clear brand image within brand communities, as it has the ability to directly influence other consumers' perceptions.

Another important issue is related to loyalty. According to Aaker (1991 *apud* Lau & Lee, 1999, p. 341) brand loyalty is a measure of the consumer's attachment towards the brand. The consumers engage within brand communities due to a certain attachment towards a specific brand. A strong relationship with the brand, based on attachment or engagement is often leading to brand loyalty. Loyalty has two major components: behavioural loyalty and attitudinal loyalty, which reflect the consumer's internal, psychological involvement towards a brand.

As a result, brand communities can provide assistance to brand management in terms of predicting some of the consumers behaviour. Consumers demonstrate varying levels of commitment towards the brand and brand communities offer information about a certain kind of consumers, buyers or users of a specific product or service.

Building long term relationships based on trust, creating interactions between brands and customers and obtaining a high level of brand strength can contribute to the consolidation of brand equity using brand communities.

All of that is possible if the marketers mobilize the right resources in order to build strong brands. Vargo & Lusch (2008 *apud* Cherif & Miled, 2013, p. 16) consider that "consumers and brand communities have to be involved in the brand's value creation process". Therefore the concept of co-creation is proposed, claiming that "customers are active co-creators of the brand value" (Cherif & Miled, 2013, p. 16).

Brand communities can be a valuable source of innovation and inspiration for marketers. The consumers can participate in the marketing process and can be considered value creators through their collective actions and efforts. The brand community members share the same passion for a product or a brand and often bring in new ideas, share their opinions, discuss, comment and offer relevant feedback, useful to companies.

Algesheimer et al. (2004, p. 35) consider that "brand communities offer a fresh, effective and viral approach to building brands in the present-day marketing environment". In order to enhance the potential of these communities it would be recommended to identify the opinion leaders and the opinion formers within each brand community. The role of these influential community members is out of doubt of significant importance since their point of view can strongly influence the opinions of many people in a brand community. Also this process can be eased using the Internet and the virtual brand communities and can benefit from their unique advantages, such as instant communication and widespread visibility.

Besides the positive influences of brand community over the brand management, we also need to take into consideration the negative aspects. The brand communities can negatively influence the brand due to negative word-of-mouth, negative messages or false advertising. The communication in disfavor of the brand can inflict injury to it and the marketers need to avoid

negative group influences that may lead to such situations. Finally, marketers have to find ways to reduce the risk of altering the brand image among brand community members.

Conclusions, limitations and further research

This paper extends the theoretical knowledge regarding brand communities summarizing information about the essence of the concept, its characteristics and particularities and the factors that are contributing to the formation and organization of brand communities. The paper offers some recommendations for brand management, pointing out the main advantages of brand communities for companies.

The main limit of this paper is that it includes only a theoretical perspective. The article didn't focused on an illustrative example of a brand community and it didn't provided insights into the ways in which specific companies make use of brand communities.

Besides this, the paper provides a useful framework to guide future researches in this domain. The future directions of research could be oriented towards specific brands or companies or towards specific environments where communities are formed, both offline and online. Other researches could study the way brand communities are created or could identify the implications and the effects of brand communities on consumer behavior.

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