THE INFLUENCE OF BRAND COMMUNITY IDENTIFICATION AND REWARD ON BRAND LOYALTY: EXAMINING THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF CONSUMERS BRAND ENGAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary era of digital technology, brands apply novel strategies to convey concepts proficiently and interact with customers while also endeavoring to acquire valuable insights into their experiences. The current study assists brand managers in formulating unique strategies and methodologies to sustain their customer base and business operations, differentiate themselves from rivals, and improve their performance. Online platforms enable innovative approaches to consumer engagement. To achieve this objective, a theoretical framework has been established that leverages online media to investigate brand community identification and reward, aiming to foster brand loyalty. The present study aimed to examine the mediating role of brand engagement in the association between brand community identification, reward, and brand loyalty. The statistical software packages SPSS and Smart PLS were employed to analyze the data. This evaluation utilized a sample size of 180 participants. The study's results indicate a noteworthy correlation between consumer brand engagement and loyalty. Moreover, it has been observed that brand community identification exerts a divergent impact on brand loyalty, albeit fostering a positive association with consumer brand engagement. Furthermore, the reward additionally exerts a significant effect on brand engagement, and increased involvement helps to attain brand loyalty. Finally, this study is helpful for the brand managers to enhance their scope by integrating brand-related components to gain a deeper comprehension of customer behavior.

Keywords: Brand community identification (BCI), Brand engagement (BE), Brand loyalty (BL), Reward, Virtual brand communities (VBC), Social Networking Sites (SNS)

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, informal communication platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp have emerged as essential and indispensable tools for businesses operating in many sectors. These platforms are crucial in promoting products and services and establishing meaningful connections with customers. According to Ameri and Honka (2019), brands utilize various media channels to provide offers, data, customer service, exclusive promotions, and entertainment. Furthermore, these brands can directly and promptly engage with their clientele. This phenomenon yields several significant advantages, including increased sales growth and brand equity, reduced expenses,

innovative expertise and collaborative processes with customers, enhanced consumer-brand relationships, brand loyalty, purchasing behavior, and brand affection (Algesheimer & Dholakia, 2005; Calder & Malthouse, 2016).

Informal communication is a prevalent online behavior observed among individuals in Pakistan and, consequently, in other parts of the world (Beckers & Van Doorn, 2018). The collective observations on interpersonal communication platforms indicate that the average time spent on social networking sites (SNSs) is around 1.59 minutes daily. Furthermore, it has been observed that individuals aged 18-32 dedicate approximately 2.46 minutes of their daily schedule to SNSs.

According to Horbinski and Cybulski (2019), individuals aged 33 to 51 spent an average of roughly 1.47 minutes. Facebook is the dominant social networking site globally, boasting a substantial user base of over 2.32 billion monthly active users. Based on a prior investigation, the global population of Facebook users is 219 million, with Pakistan accounting for 3.146 million (Calderón-Monge & Ramírez-Hurtado, 2021). In March 2019, Pakistan had a total of 3.146 million Facebook users, constituting around 15.1% of its population. The majority of individuals involved were male. The core demographic of clientele consisted of individuals between the ages of 18 and 24, totaling 12.3 million. Only a limited number of studies have explicitly examined client interactions with significant exceptional circumstances. Several researchers have demonstrated that accountability should be conceptualized from a multi-foci viewpoint, namely with a focus on both the brand and brand network (Calder & Malthouse, 2016; Hollebeek & Solem, 2017; Islam, Rahman & Hollebeek, 2018).

Moreover, based on the findings of Calder and Malthouse (2016) and Ameri and Honka (2019), it has been estimated that over 60 million organizations worldwide maintain active Facebook pages. Facebook awards brands the opportunity to create a public profile page to disseminate company information or content about their products or services. This webpage will encourage clients to communicate with the firm and stay informed about current updates. According to Ameri and Honka (2019), clients exhibit enthusiasm in transitioning from passive recipients of communication material to active participants within the brand organization. Social networking sites utilize applications that allow users to track customer feedback, generate and manage data, and analyze and interpret insights related to specific brands within a corporate context (Beckers & Van Doorn, 2018).

The concept of online media evolution is somewhat novel, embarking on a journey to discover and explore newfound opportunities for personal liberation. One crucial aspect of brand management on social media is the perceived necessity of accountability among experts with varied backgrounds (Hollebeek & Solem, 2017). Over the past decade, there has been a growing interest in studying online consumer engagement (Islam, Rahman & Hollebeek, 2018). However, further research is still required to conduct a comprehensive evaluation, as the existing studies have limitations that restrict their generalizability (Hollebeek & Solem, 2017). Previous studies have emphasized the importance of incorporating the social aspects of consumer brand engagement (CBE), such as the expression of interest, exchange, co-creation, and sharing of brand-related qualities and content (Calder & Malthouse, 2016; Islam, Rahman & Hollebeek, 2018; Ameri & Honka, 2019). The importance of social factors, such as communication, brand attributes, value co-creation, investment, and discourse, in consumer brand engagement has been emphasized by previous researchers (Calder & Malthouse, 2016; Ameri & Honka, 2019). Social networking websites have garnered significant attention from scholars and marketers alike as they have built diverse online communities to enhance consumer interactions. The current research on online communities, particularly in relation to spontaneous purchase behavior, remains limited, mainly focusing on brand collaboration and its impact on brand engagement and loyalty (Calder & Malthouse, 2016). The theorization of the brand community and brand should incorporate the concept of engagement experience facilitated by online social platforms (Bandara, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW
Brand Community Identification
Algesheimer & Dholakia (2005) stated that brand community identification (BCI) plays a significant role in the association among virtual brand communities or brand loyalty; thus, brands and communities create instinct feelings by local area through buyers. Brand community identification also reports the instinctive characteristics of virtual brand communities and compares awareness (Ameri & Honka, 2017). Furthermore, scant research explained the communication of local areas and identified the individual's interest in online media. So, the new concept of value co-creation has been concentrated by marketers to create the value of products in which consumers are not only the purchaser but also value creators.

Customers share their brand experiences that influence the brand, and these communities play an essential role in this value-creation procedure (Becker & Ringle, 2015). The consumers benefit

from collaborating with these online communities to uncover the elements of co-creation practices, such as brand engagement and social and brand networking practices. Consequently, the current study reveals that the participation of consumers is influenced by community identification. In contrast, brand community identification is connected with one's title to impact social media platform actions. Therefore, this study hypothesized that.

H1: BCI over VBC significantly affects the brand loyalty

Rewards

Reward relied upon to ask purchasers to participate in VBC-based development and cultivate their picture affiliation brand, contribute to their image devotion and local area food (Casaló & Flavián, 2007; Bandara, 2020). An imaginative, natural illustration in VBC can offer practical, liberal, and social benefits to encourage customers' image. Baumgartner & Sujan (1992) depict that when strategists see a client's relationship to its image, the purchasers' commitment to the brand improves significantly.

Purchasers assume a more grounded relationship with brands when they are presented with a positive response. Monetary awards began via carrier organizations and financial awards, similar to prizes or rebates. Social awards, like correspondence among local area individuals, local area administrators, and promoters, foster strong associations among purchasers and associations. Such compensations offer worth to clients. There are two kinds of remunerations in the internet-based brand local area: financial prizes and express regulating rewards. Money-related prizes resemble fortunate draws, value advancement, and fortunate focuses, which the organizations generally present. Monetary awards are successful for all kinds of individuals in local areas; however, it has a transient impact on individuals (Bandara, 2020).

The utilization and gratifications hypothesis (UGT) is the theoretical point of convergence through which this examination sees this significant broad assessment of related brands. Starting now and into the foreseeable future, a couple of studies have accepted the UGT, disregarding the way that contrasting their early phases and constructions, they have been established with the agreement that people are dynamic, know about their prerequisites, and pick various media to satisfy them. Explains

customers' points of view on using media, factors that impact these goals, and the aftereffects of media use (Calderón-Monge & Ramírez-Hurtado, 2021).

Online brand networks urge the buyers to get the most significant relationship benefits from the local area by compensating the shopper for exercises (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). The brand's local area does not pay for these exercises; local area individuals have fewer struggles to collaborate in networks. Individuals become fulfilled when they feel a sense of trade, and so is the situation with the brand. Clients feel fulfilled when they get compensation from a brand (Ameri & Honka, 2017). So, the hypothesis is:

H2: Reward through VBC significantly influences brand loyalty

Consumer Brand Engagement

Baldus & Voorhees (2015) stated that cognitive and behavioral elements of customers impact the brand. The current study assumes that the emotional and behavioral factors involved by customers with brands create strong brand engagement. Furthermore, these activities determine the instinctive nature of consumers related to the brands. However, cognitive elements are illustrated by different scholars and prove that they reflect the motivation of customers (Baumgartner & Sujan, 1992). It activates consumers' passion for the brands on social media, whereas the emotional element enhances the interest of consumers.

Brand engagement can also be established by hash tag action on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. In this way, the brand managers create strategies to turn them into loyal customers. Moreover, previous studies did not consider the brand and customers' perspectives on brand loyalty (Beckers & Van Doorn, 2018). Prior studies also exposed that brand intention and brand loyalty is influenced by brand engagement (Casaló & Flavián, 2007; Bandara, 2020). On online media platforms, customers who are loyal to a particular brand become sensitive towards those brands (Calderón-Monge & Ramírez-Hurtado, 2021). So, they become more conscious of sustaining the relationship with the brands to purchase products and ignore the other brands. So, the current study hypothesized that:

H3: **CBE through VBC significantly mediates the relation between BCI and brand loyalty**
H4: CBE through VBC significantly mediates the relation between reward and brand loyalty
Brand Loyalty
Developing a solid and empowering brand generally demonstrated the preference for a particular brand with the purchasers, prompting brand loyalty. The loyalty included a significant level of association between buyers and a brand. Similarly, loyal purchasers hesitate to switch to a brand they feel loose and satisfied with (Ash, 2020).

Buyers who were steadfast towards a brand were less responsive and addressed prominent costs for a particular brand deviated from various decisions since customers might see a phenomenal worth in the brand. Proceeding advantages can be refined by minimizing casual trade with brand-loyal customers, making it more useful (Balakrishnan & Dahnil, 2014). Brand loyalty is depicted as *"a significantly held commitment to rebuy or re-put dow toward thing/organization dependably later on, regardless other situational and displaying factors that might conceivably activate trading conduct"* (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000).

Brand loyalty is the level of a buyer's energetic association with a brand and exhibits that purchasers will make repeated purchases and recommend the brand to others. Experts have shown that client brand associations (Horbinski and Cybulski, 2019), client responsibility, and social effects in brand networks influence brand loyalty. The social character works directly with the progression of an individual's citizenship to a get-together (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000). When people have a vital ID with a social event, they trust themselves to be fundamental for the get-together and will be a get-together partner (Casaló & Flavián, 2007). Thus we proposed that

H5: CBE through VBC significantly influences brand loyalty
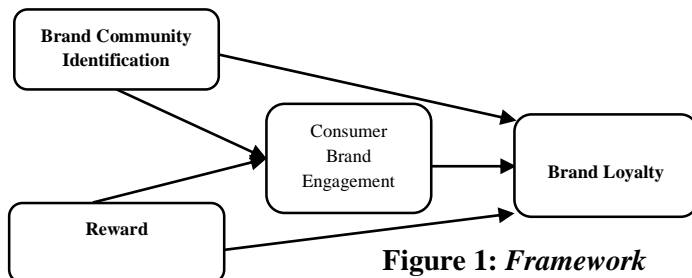
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Figure 1: *Framework*

METHODOLOGY
The present study employs a deductive approach, utilizing non-probability convenience sampling for data collection. The targeted population of this study consisted of students from diverse academic institutions in Lahore using social networking sites. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed among respondents from which 180 valid responses were utilized for data analysis. The data analysis was conducted using SPSS and Smart PLS. Structural equation modelling (SEM) has been employed to test hypothesis.

Measurements
Five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used to get information from respondents who took part in this study. To measure the factors, the study used scales from previous studies that had been changed as needed. The scale of brand community identification consisted 5 items adapted from (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). The scale of reward consisted 5 items adapted from the study by (Baldus, Voorhees, et al., 2015). Consumer brand engagement was measured with 12 items adapted from (Morgen's, 1991). Brand loyalty was measured with 5 items adapted from (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

Respondent Profile
This portion deals with demographic information together with this analysis. Table 1 shows that out of 180 respondents, 55.6 % (100) were male and 44.4 % (80) were female. The female respondents' rate is less than that of male respondents. The above table shows the division of respondents concerning age. The survey accounted for 15.6% (28) of respondents aged up to 20 years. Moreover, 37.8% (68) respondents were between the ages of 21 and 25, 40% (72) respondents were between the age group 26 and 30, and 6.7% (12) respondents were more than 31 and above years of age. Results show that the respondents are between the age group of 26 to 30. It is evident that 42.8% (77) of the respondents possessed a bachelor's degree, 45.6% (81) participants held a master's degree, whereas only 11.7% (21) of the respondents got their PhD degree. The analysis further implies that the majority of participants hold master's degrees.

Table 1
Respondent Profile (N=180)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	100	55.6
Female	80	44.4
Age		
Up to 20	28	15.6
21-25 Years	68	37.8
26-30 Years	72	40.0
31 or Above	12	6.7
Qualification		
Bachelor	77	42.8
Master	81	45.6
PhD	21	11.7

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS
Measurement Model Assessment
The composite reliability (CR) calculation was conducted to assess the construct's internal consistency reliability. The researchers analyzed the loadings of all items on reflecting structures to ensure they were above the threshold of 0.5, as specified by the recommendations outlined in the process (Hair Jr, Hult et al. 2021). The data presented in Table 2 shows that all constructions have been effectively loaded for all objects. All of the item loadings exceeded the threshold of 0.5. The constructs explain a significant portion of the variance in the observed variable, with loadings ranging from 0.735 to 0.945. To achieve a substantial level of internal consistency for the construct, components with loadings below 0.5 were methodically eliminated. The composite reliability (CR) values of ten latent reflective models varied between 0.971 and 0.942, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Ahmad, Widyastuti et al. 2020). Hence, all constructions exhibited a high degree of internal consistency reliability.

In order to evaluate convergent validity, the researchers calculated the average variance extracted (AVE). Convergent validity was assessed by estimating the average derived variance (AVE). Table 2 presents the findings of convergent validity, indicating that the average variance extracted (AVE) values for all latent constructs above the threshold of 0.5, ranging from 0.721 to 0.848. When the AVE value exceeds 0.5, the latent construct accounts for more than 50% of the variance observed in its indicators.

Table 2
Convergent Validity

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Brand Community Identification	BCI2	0.872	0.944	0.772
	BCI3	0.872		
	BCI4	0.880		
	BCI5	0.927		
	BCI6	0.840		
Brand Loyalty	BL1	0.909	0.971	0.848
	BL2	0.891		
	BL3	0.924		
	BL4	0.935		
	BL5	0.930		
	BL6	0.934		
Consumer Brand Engagement	CB310	0.837	0.969	0.721
	CBE1	0.852		
	CBE11	0.858		
	CBE12	0.849		
	CBE2	0.739		
	CBE3	0.897		
	CBE4	0.847		
	CBE5	0.844		
	CBE6	0.868		
	CBE7	0.900		
	CBE8	0.854		
	CBE9	0.836		
Reward	R1	0.872	0.942	0.765
	R2	0.882		
	R3	0.859		
	R4	0.884		
	R5	0.874		

Discriminant Validity
There are two ways to judge discriminant validity by victimization of the HTMT ratio; the primary one is as a criterion, and the second is applied math (Bandara, 2020). This study used the primary criterion approach to assess the discriminant validity using the HTMT ratio.

The table contains all values of the HTMT relationship for construct. The table shows that all HTMT ratio values for constructs were less than 0.90 and met the HTMT <0.90 criterion (Gold, Malhotra et al. 2001). Therefore, these findings indicated that discriminatory validity was established for all constructs.

Table 3
HTMT Ratio

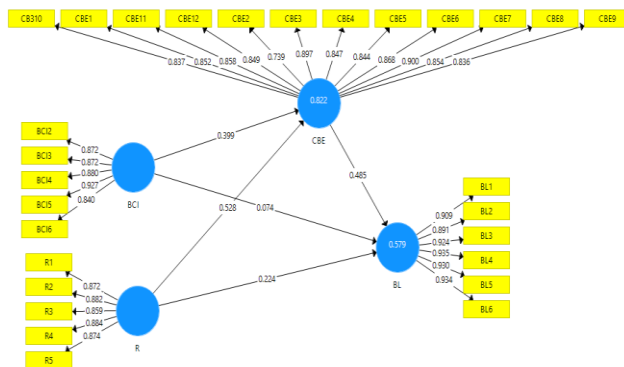| Items	BCI	BL	CBE	R
BCI				
BL	0.738			
CBE	0.924	0.771		
R	0.979	0.764	0.939	

Figure 2: *Measurement Model Assessment*

Structural Model Assessment (SEM)
Once the righteousness of the measurement model had been established, the next step was to test the hypotheses. The structural model was assessed by running the PLS-SEM algorithm and bootstrapping (Jayasingh 2019).

Direct Relationship-Path Analysis:
According to Bowden, (2009), the non-significant paths or showing signs in the opposite direction to the hypothesized do not support prior hypotheses, while significant paths empirically support the proposed causal relationship. Before the mediating effect was tested, bootstrapping with a resample of 180 was run to get the t-value to assess if the direct relationships were significant. Detailed results are as follows:

Table 4
Relationships Path Analysis

Hypothesis	Beta Value	SD	T Statistics	P Values	Decision
BCI -> BL	0.074	0.144	0.515	0.303	Not Supported
BCI -> CBE	0.399	0.081	4.953	0.000	Supported
CBE -> BL	0.485	0.114	4.25	0.000	Supported
R -> BL	0.224	0.153	1.47	0.071	Not Supported
R -> CBE	0.528	0.084	6.295	0.000	Supported

H1: Brand Community Identification does not influence Brand Loyalty.
Response from the output of the algorithm and bootstrapping PLS-SEM showed that brand community identification does not influence brand loyalty (β=0.074, t=0.515, and p=0.303). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

H2: Brand Community Identification positively influences Consumer brand engagement.
The response showed a positive and significant association between brand community identification and consumer brand engagement (β=0.399, t =4.953 and p=0.000). Therefore, Hypothesis H2 is supported.

H3: Consumer brand Engagement positively influences Brand Loyalty.
Response from the output of the algorithm and bootstrapping PLS-SEM shows a relation between consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty (β=.-0.005, t=4.25 and p=0.000)

H4: Reward does not positively influence Brand Loyalty.
Response from the output of the algorithm and bootstrapping PLS-SEM does not show a positive and significant association between reward and brand loyalty (β=0.224, t=1.47, and p=0.071)

H5: Reward positive influence Consumer Brand Engagement.
The above hypothesis support our study because all variable lies in the acceptable range (β=0.528, t=6.295, and p=0.000)
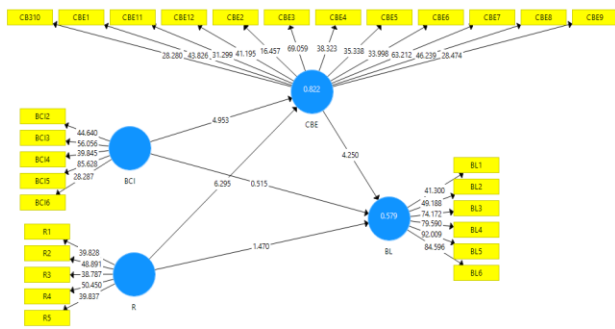
Figure 3: *Structural Model Assessment*

IMPLICATIONS

The present study has uncovered several determinants influencing customer brand engagement on the Facebook page and its subsequent impact on brand loyalty. Numerous studies have provided evidence indicating that several characteristics influence brand loyalty. The results also indicate a robust correlation between engagement and brand loyalty. This research significantly enhances the knowledge of consumer brand engagement (CBE) writing from multiple perspectives. Firstly, it facilitates the conceptualization of CBE. The primary theoretical underpinnings of this study involve the utilization of a comprehensive Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) framework to examine novel communication channels, such as social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram) and their impact on consumers' intention to adopt them for interpersonal purposes. Engage in communication and interaction with individuals who require connecting with the brand community. The triad systems have the potential to be implemented in several additional social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, to identify consumers who are interested in engaging in brand-related communications. There is limited availability of research studies that can aid organizations in comprehending consumer involvement and implementing effective strategies to foster enduring customer relationships (Jayasingh, 2019). Another significant contribution pertains to the brand relationship strategy. This technique is frequently advocated and holds significant value in managing consumer relationships from the social media perspective. Utilizing a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) program prevents clients from engaging in alternative modes of collaboration. Fournier and Avery (2011) argue that they provide limited assistance in elucidating the reasons for their commitment. This theoretical system offers the opportunity to recognize the consumer and explore various forms of brand engagement that might provide value for social networking sites (SNS).

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS TO FUTURE RESEARCH:

The present investigation was conducted with a sample consisting exclusively of customers who were younger than 40 and had a preference for branded products. Therefore, further research is necessary about the unique sample sizes. This study focuses on social networks, such as Facebook, as its primary subject of investigation. It is advantageous to extend the dissemination of this study to additional social media platforms, such as Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Baldus & Voorhees, 2015), as well as to a broader and more diverse audience. This study aimed to elucidate the impact of brand community identification and reward on brand loyalty, focusing on the mediating function of consumer brand engagement. Subsequent research endeavors should aim to elucidate the effect of brand-customer engagement on brand loyalty while also considering the potential role of brand love as a mediating variable. Additional elements of consumer involvement with branded social media platforms may encompass Para social interaction, predicated on social media as a catalyst for establishing social connections (Tsai & Men, 2013). Future studies should explore the customer loyalty ecosystem, encompassing various facets such as brand consumption, buying behaviour, customer brand experience, and dialogue behaviors and outcomes. Customer satisfaction and lifetime value have been discussed in previous research (Cabiddu & Dessì, 2020). This study exclusively focuses on consumer-related characteristics without considering factors associated with the brand. Hence, it is suggested that further studies may incorporate brand-centric prerequisites for fostering engaging behavior. This study solely assesses customer participation without differentiating between good and negative forms of engagement. Potential avenues for further investigation may encompass examining negative attention and its ramifications on brand loyalty. The purpose of this

poll is not to explore any specific brand, particularly within the product category.

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