

**“Augmenting brand community identification for inactive users:
a uses and gratification perspective”**

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STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Purpose: In an era where companies shift a part of their marketing budget to support their social media presence, very little is known about the antecedents and effects of participant identification in a social media community. This research aims to examine the antecedents of community identification in a Facebook company-managed brand community, for inactive members, using the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT). Brand community identification is also expected to lead to higher levels of brand loyalty for these members.

Design: This research reports the results of a quantitative with survey data from 389 members of a variety of different official Facebook pages.

Findings: The results reveal that inactive members of Facebook pages can be influenced to act in a way that is beneficial for a company. Perceived human and information value of the brand Facebook page lead members to identify with a brand community and identification is a strong predictor of loyalty to the brand.

Practical implications: This paper provides suggestions to managers on the development of brand community value that can increase brand community identification and loyalty of apparently inactive brand community members.

Originality/value: By showing that brand community identification and loyalty exists for users with low activity levels, this research challenges the widely accepted idea that only highly active members are valuable in online brand communities. Specifically, it reveals the most important motivations for these members to identify with the community and be loyal to the brand.

KEYWORDS

social media, online brand community, identification, uses and gratification theory, brand loyalty

ARTICLE TYPE: Research paper

INTRODUCTION

Consumers today spend a lot of time interacting with brands on social media (Dessart et al., 2015; 2016; Tuškej and Podnar, 2018), which are defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the generation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p 61). Technology offers numerous opportunities to engage with brands online (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020) and therefore it is not surprising that the research of online brand-centered relationships, and in particular research on online brand communities, is attracting increasing interest from the academic community (Veloutsou and Ruiz-Mafe, 2020). Specifically, Facebook is one of the preferred social media platforms for consumers to engage with brands (Headstream, 2015) and with each other (Phua et al., 2017) and a popular platform to form brand communities (Hook et al., 2018; Clark et al., 2017).

Managers are concerned with the performance of their social media actions. They seek to generate brand acquisition and loyalty (Gensler et al., 2013; Valos et al., 2015) and try to understand how consumer interactions and participation on social media benefit (Kim et al., 2011). Firms typically try to share vivid, interactive, informative, and entertaining content to influence participation (de Vries et al., 2012) and the strategy and content choices made by the brand community managers have a relationship with the members' activity in the brand community (Shahbaznezhad and Rashidirad, 2020). In addition to participation, brand community research evidences that community identification plays a core role in generating brand loyalty both in offline (Algesheimer et al., 2005; 2010) and online contexts (Dholakia and Bagozzi, 2004). Brand loyalty appears as an important component of brand community success, and community identification as a factor leading to it.

However, a gap in the online brand community research seems to exist. Indeed, most of the research on brand community identification and loyalty in online brand communities and social media are bases in contexts of high participatory levels. In most studies, respondents have high engagement and participatory intentions (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Dessart and Duclou, 2019), participation levels (Algesheimer et al., 2010; Dholakia et al., 2004), or are

simply said to be active followers (Beukeboom et al., 2015). Active participation is even considered an antecedent of online brand community engagement (Vohra and Bhardwaj, 2019). These studies therefore overlook the growing challenge associated with social media, which is inactivity: up to 82 percent of the members of social media groups never engage actively (Heinonen, 2011; Nonnecke and Preece, 2000), shaking the widely accepted conception that social media are places for active and engaged behaviors (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). As users become overwhelmed with too much online information, they tend to back away from active interactions with companies (Bright et al., 2015). Companies are even questioning the validity of measuring consumer participation in social media communities as a cue for loyalty (Forrester, 2014). However, even when research focuses on not visibly active members, the concern still is the levels of participation (Kumar and Nayak, 2019, Kumar, 2019) or activity (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019) in online communities.

Inactive social media members have little visible participation and are defined as “those who post infrequently, who do not make a contribution in the first 12 months after subscribing to a list, who have not posted in recent months, or who never or only occasionally post a message” (Edelman 2013, p. 645) and have been also been characterized as non-active members (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019), passive members (Kumar and Nayak, 2019) or lurkers (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; 2003, Kumar, 2019). Not having active participation does not mean that they are totally not involved with the brand community, since they can be very engaged with the brand (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019) and engaged with the community without exhibiting it (Edelman, 2013) and live vicarious experience, via reading posts more actively than other users (Morrison et al., 2013) since they are seeking for information (Fernandes and Castro, 2020) and they are learning from the community (Dessart et al., 2015; Aljukhadar, Bériault Poirier and Senecal, 2020). These in principle inactive members are consuming the content of brand communities and the like or join brand pages, the view photos and videos and read brand posts, user comments and reviews in these pages (Triantafillidou and Siomkos, 2018), but all these actions are seen as rather passive behavior. This study focuses on members with low levels of behavioral engagement, considering that they can engage

socially, emotionally and cognitively nonetheless. Specifically, following the types of behavioral engagement defined by Dessart et al. (2015), these people follow the brand and they might learn from the community and endorse it outside the community, but they very rarely exhibit active behaviors such as “commenting”, “liking” or “sharing”.

This study posits that inactive members might experience brand community identification to the same extent as visibly active members (Carlson et al., 2008; Marzocchi et al., 2013; Mousavi et al., 2017) and develop brand loyalty (Koh and Kim, 2004; Kim et al., 2008; Marzocchi et al., 2013; Mousavi et al., 2017). Yet, there is very limited research on less active social media members (Edelman, 2013), their motivations and needs (Nonnecke and Preece, 2003; Nonnecke et al., 2006; Sun et al., 2014; Mousavi et al., 2017) and on factors that contribute to engagement with less active features of an online brand community (Triantafillidou and Siomkos, 2018). To help brand community managers make choices that could lead to brand-related results and to fill the gap in knowledge, this work aims to provide empirical evidence that helps our understanding of the process of developing identification to the brand community and loyalty to the brand for inactive brand community members.

The paper adopts as a theoretical lens the uses and gratification theory (UGT), which helps understanding why and how people actively seek out, choose, and use specific media to satisfy specific social and psychological needs (McQuail, 2010), such as community identification. This theory is valid in online contexts, including online games (Wu et al., 2010), social media (Phau et al., 2017; Bae, 2018), Facebook groups (Park et al., 2009) and online brand communities (de Vries and Carlson, 2014).

The article starts with a review of the relevant literature on brand community identification, UGT, and relational benefits of this identification. A research model and hypotheses are then presented. A large-scale consumer survey is then conducted to test the research hypotheses. The article ends with a discussion and presents implications of the findings.

BRAND COMMUNITY IDENTIFICATION, BRAND COMMUNITY VALUE AND USES AND GRATIFICATION THEORY

Based on social identity theory, Algesheimer et al. (2005) define *brand community identification* as the conscious knowledge of the individual's belonging to the brand community together with the emotional and evaluative significance attached to that membership. Brand community identification is a cognitive, evaluative, and emotional concept (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Dholakia and Bagozzi, 2004) central to brand community literature (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and does not represent active behavior. Brand community identification being a psychological, non-behavioral concept (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006) is applicable to both active and inactive members (Mousavi et al., 2017), while both more and less active behaviors in brand communities are triggered from the feeling of harmony with other members and the satisfaction of being a brand community member (Triantafillidou and Siomkos, 2018).

The recognition that a common identity is essential to the formation of a brand community however is matched by the paucity of studies on its formation, especially in online contexts. Interestingly, the few studies that have paid attention to the drivers of brand community identification, with a focus on brand-related or consumer-specific variables. Brand-related variables have been identified, including brand relationship quality (Algesheimer et al., 2005), brand trust and brand satisfaction (Paia and Tsai, 2011), and brand equity and brand-building activities (Samu et al., 2012). A certain focus on brand identification is also placed, highlighting the importance of the brand in sustaining the identification process (Hinson et al., 2019). Other researchers examined the personal characteristics of the members focusing on variables such as agreeableness, extraversion, openness, or authentic self-expression (Füller et al., 2008) or perceived community brand similarity (Hsu et al. 2015) and community participation (Matzler et al., 2011). Recent research examining brand community participation shows that most studies report self-related, social-related and information-related antecedents, while less studies focus on entertainment-related and technology-related antecedents (Hook et al., 2018). Despite these advances, this surprising lack of interest in the creation of identification might be because it is considered a "taken-for-granted" characteristic of brand community formation (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and motivations for active engagement are generally more appealing, and easier to investigate and observe.

An emerging stream of research now suggests the leading role of perceived community value in creating identification. Taking Chang and Dibb's (2012) view that customer-perceived value is the customer's overall assessment of what is received and given by a particular supplier (of good or services alike) and defines consumer perceived value of a brand community as a community member's overall assessment of the utility of the online brand community he is a part of, based on perceptions of benefits received from community membership, which are cognitive evaluations made by consumers (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006).

Consumers derive value from brand communities, including value coming from social benefits and community prestige or cultural benefits (Hung and Lin, 2015; Boomer et al., 2018; Dessart et al., 2019), symbolic and self-identity benefits (Boomer et al., 2018; Dessart et al., 2019) cognition in the form of informativeness (Hung and Lin, 2015; Dessart et al., 2019) economic benefits (Boomer et al., 2018), emotional benefits in the form of entertainment and escapism (Hung and Lin, 2015; Dessart et al., 2019) or an overall value perception (Hung, 2014). Social, utilitarian and hedonic value derived from the community have recently been used as a predictors of brand community identification (Hung, 2014).

The most prominent theory to approach and explain the value people get from social network sites and online brand communities in the literature is through the UGT as a theoretical lens (Dessart et al., 2019), a theory that has a driving question why people use social media. Studies examining value based on the UGT perspective (Table 1) have some characteristics that allow room for further research on the topic.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Specifically, most of these studies focus social network sites, rather than brand communities. The few studies focused on online brand communities often do not specify if the communities under investigation are the official brand pages or if they are managed by fans (de Vries and Carlson, 2014; Jahn and Kunz, 2012), except Claffey and Brady (2017) who

focus on firm-hosted communities. Some studies even use student samples recruited offline (de Vries and Carlson, 2014). Lastly, few studies use Facebook as a context of investigation, despite the fact that Facebook can give specific gratifications (Leiner et al., 2018) and that its users develop stronger ties than users of other social networks (Phua et al., 2017). This burgeoning literature suggests that further research is needed on the formation of brand community identification in social media contexts and that UGT provides a promising frame for this purpose. More research is thus needed on how perceived value translates into company-related outcomes through community identification on social media (Dolan et al., 2016).

Another shortcoming of the literature is that there is limited agreement on the types of perceived value or gratifications that consumers get when they interact online. Very limited research examines value when an individual engages in an online brand community (see table 2). Most studies suggest that the perceived value comes from connecting with people and brands from giving and receiving information, from the developed emotions or the satisfaction of personal needs, from self-related factors and from the content of the sites or the technology. There also seems to be a difference between the desired and obtained value (Dunne et al. 2010).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Table 2 evidences that qualitative studies identifying dimensions of perceived value that lead consumers to engage in online communities refer to social values, play, efficiency, excellence, aesthetic values, and altruistic values (Marbach et al., 2016; Claffey and Brady, 2017). Some quantitative studies examine a small number of motivations to participate in brand communities, such as knowledge and entertainment seeking (Tseng et al., 2017). Although members of Facebook brand communities may have different reasons to engage with brands, most of the studies agree that the top reasons are seeking information on product news, promotions and products, engaging with the brand, and entertainment (Azar et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2016; Fernandes and Castro, 2020), but other studies suggest that social interaction and entertainment are not predicting the satisfaction of the visitors and the intention

to use the offer (Choi et al., 2016). Given the clear fragmentation of the above-mentioned studies, the need to better understand the types of value perceived by members of an online brand community and how value contributes to community identification is evident.

There is a lack of understanding of the dimensionality of the types of perceived value that consumers get when engaging in brand communities and a lack of agreement in the dimensionality when engaging with others on the Internet or in social network sites (see table 2). This is particularly true when considering that different gratifications might lead to the use of different features of a social network site, and that inactive members might be more or less sensitive to certain uses and gratification than active members (Preece et al., 2004) and they function differently than active members in terms of their identification processes (Mousavi et al., 2017).

There is therefore a need to better capture the sources of value for inactive online brand community members (Sun et al., 2014) before examining specific relationships between variables. Because brand community identification usually has been treated in brand community and social media studies as interacting with other behavioral manifestations of brand community participation (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Algesheimer et al., 2010), research presenting identification in the context of inactive members is to date quite innovative and exploratory.

RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

This study focuses on how perceived value fosters identification of a large portion of online brand community members: the inactive members. Most online brand community members are lurkers who do not take action (Sun et al. 2014) and thus fail to increase the engagement metrics of the communities. Previous research on internet support groups suggests that the top 1% of the members contribute to the sizable majority of the group posts, the next 9% a small minority and 90% of the members very few or no posts (Carron-Arthur et al., 2014).

The limited research on passive behavior in online communities does not provide a lot of insight into the formation of the inactive brand community members' support to brands. Most research on inactive members engages with online communities broadly, and not clearly with online brand communities, with some conceptual work (Madupu and Cooley, 2010; Edelman, 2013; Sun et al., 2014), and other empirical profiling active and inactive users in relation to user generated content (Morrison et al., 2013), examining community commitment in online consumption communities (Yang et al., 2017) or predicting the intention to share knowledge in online interest communities (Lai and Chen, 2014). Research exploring passive behaviour in online brand communities is emerging still very limited, and includes outputs using scales to capture active and passive behaviour of respondents who self-selected liked brand pages examining the effect of active and passive behaviour of the same individuals on brand loyalty, but without identifying active or inactive brand community members (Fernandes & Castro, 2020). Very few outputs identify inactive online brand community members (Table 3), but primarily recruit respondents who self-identified as online brand communities' members from the general population (Kumar, 2019; Kumar and Nayak, 2019; Mousavi et al., 2017) and often relying on a very small sample of inactive online brand community members (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019; Kumar and Nayak, 2019). In terms of topics, research on inactive brand community members mostly tries to predict WoM behavior (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019; Kumar, 2019; Kumar and Nayak, 2019; Mousavi et al., 2017; Yuan et al., 2021), with some limited work identifying purchase intentions drivers (Kumar, 2019; Kumar and Nayak, 2019), but with no attention on both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty. To better understand inactive brand community members, some studies exclusively recruited inactive online brand community members (Kumar and Nayak, 2019; Yuan et al., 2021).

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

This paper follows the UGT logic whereby perceived value simply motivates media usage without a need of active and visible behavior (McQuail, 2010). The causal relationships of interest therefore assume precedence of value to identification.

Different kinds of value have been found to be good predictors of consumer engagement with online brand communities in various contexts (Dholakia et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2008), including communities embedded on Facebook (de Vries and Carlson, 2014). However, some of these studies conceptualize value as one overall variable (Kim et al., 2008), and in others there is very little explanation about the selection process of the examined sources of value (de Vries and Carlson, 2014; Dholakia et al., 2004). This study distinguishes between “information” and “human” value, which seems to be an appropriate distinction for value types in the case of inactive users. Indeed, UGT theorists show that information seeking is a very prominent aspect of online media usage, which is core to the effort one has to engage to use an online medium, whereas other psychological, social and hedonic motives are secondary. This conceptualisation of the values has similarities to the “information” and “social” values suggested by Mathwick et al. (2008).

Information value can be related to Dholakia et al. (2004) purposive value, which is obtained when members receive content that is posted on the community. Information value is defined as the usefulness and quality of the knowledge exchanged on the page (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007). In other instances, it refers to the mere fact of providing information about the community (Park et al. 2009) and is considered a rather practical aspect of a Facebook community (Gummerus et al., 2012).

Human value on the other hand is composed of **interpersonal interconnectivity, entertainment, self-discovery, and social enhancement**. It refers to the socio-psychological aspects of community participation (Dholakia and Bagozzi, 2003), in contrast to the more utilitarian aspect of information value (Dholakia et al., 2004). **Interpersonal Interconnectivity** refers to the creation and maintenance over time of social contact with members of the community, such as support, friendship, and intimacy (Dholakia et al., 2004). Social engagement is known to be a key determinant of brand evaluation on social media online communities (Vernuccio et al., 2015) and interactions with other contribute to people remaining in the community. Indeed, having the ability to socialise with others is often considered to be a core element of a brand community. Feeling connected to others through the community is

a key aspect of interconnectivity and network membership, which members value (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008) and which can be perceived without active engagement (Edelmann, 2013). **Entertainment** refers to the relaxing and fun aspect of communities, and it is an important contributor of member engagement on Facebook fan pages (Gummerus et al., 2012). Members use communities to unwind and have fun thanks to the activities or content posted online. The fun and exciting aspect of community engagement is often recognised as a key aspect of Facebook pages (Park et al., 2009). Another dimension of perceived human value on social media is **self-discovery**. Being part of a community is often part of an effort of self-definition and self-understanding. Self-discovery is the ability provided by the community for one to elaborate on his or her own values and identity. Gaining insight into one's identity through the community is a key motivation of community membership (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). The last dimension of human value is **social enhancement**, which is the value that a member derives from gaining acceptance and approval of other members, resulting in the enhancement of one's social status within the community (Dholakia et al., 2004). Recognition by peers is an important motivator for community membership and might also act as a driver for community identification (Gummerus et al., 2012).

This study takes the perspective that inactive users are expected to be more triggered in their community usage by their passive consumption of the information provided on the page (Qin, 2020), whereas social or human aspects would be secondary. Indeed, qualitative information can lead to entertainment value, leading to stress-relief and personal enjoyment, as well as self-discovery by the confrontation of external information with internal experiences. Access to group information leads to individual enhancement and opportunities to compare and position oneself with others (Dholakia and Bagozzi, 2003) as members may feel special for having access to exclusive information. Since inactive user's main activity lies in observing and gaining information (Edelman, 2013), it appears that information value could be the main mechanism whereby they develop other socio-psychological benefits in the group, highlighting the complementary aspects of user's motivations (Dholakia and Bagozzi 2004). Elements of information value and human value have been examined together in studies on online brand

communities (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Sicilia and Palazón, 2008), Facebook (i.e. Hunt *et al.*, 2012; Malik *et al.*, 2016) and Facebook groups (i.e. Park *et al.*, 2009, Qin, 2020), but their relationship has not been considered and this can be an oversight of the existing research, particularly for inactive users. Information value is thus hypothesized to have a preceding or constitutive role to the other ways to enjoy page membership, leading to:

H1: Information value positively influences human value in social media online brand communities.

Information value has been conceptualized as one of the values derived from Facebook group participation (Park *et al.*, 2009), particularly for content-consuming members (Qin, 2020). It can increase participation in online communities (Sun *et al.*, 2014; Tseng *et al.*, 2017) and plays an important role in the assessment of the quality and relevance of a community by its members (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007). Although information sharing is a key virtual community activity (Koh and Kim, 2004), it is a reported type of perceived value for Facebook use (Hun *et al.*, 2012) and Facebook groups (Park *et al.*, 2009), but it is not a dimension considered in previous research using UGT in online brand communities (de Vries and Carlson, 2014; Dholakia *et al.*, 2004), except in Claffey and Brady (2017) where it is pooled under “utilitarian motives” with other dimensions. Information can make or break online brand community engagement if it is irrelevant, offensive, or even boring. Studies however show that people who are more willing to consume informative content in social media are more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward the brand (Qin, 2020). Enriching and stimulating content can affect the identification of the members who feel that the content they see reflects their interests, values they stand for, and also elevates their social status (Madupu and Cooley, 2010, Haverila *et al.*, 2020). Fernandes and Castro also reported that information need is the strongest predictor of lurking behavior on Facebook (2020). Based on previous studies, it is proposed:

H2: Information value positively influences brand community identification.

There is extensive support from the literature that all four aspects of perceived human value can sustain participation in a community (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004) and identification to it (Dholakia

and Bagozzi, 2003). In studies investigating active community participation, interpersonal interconnectivity (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008), entertainment (Park et al., 2009; Tseng et al., 2017), self-discovery (Madupu and Cooley, 2010) as well as social enhancement (Dholakia et al. 2004; Claffey and Brady, 2017) are factors contributing to members embedding themselves in a community through participation. The value derived from creating interpersonal value in the branded online environment are also proven to have positive consequences in terms of consumer behavior (Claffey and Brady, 2017). Given that these relational factors also theoretically contribute to community identification for active members (Dholakia and Bagozzi, 2003), it can be expected that they contribute to identification for inactive members in this study. The following hypothesis is formulated based on the impact of human value on brand community identification.

H3: Human value positively influences brand community identification.

Research supports a link between liking a Facebook brand page and brand attitude, brand equity, and purchase intention (Beukeboom et al., 2015), even when the members are only browsing the brand page (Dijkmans et al., 2015). Consumer interaction and communication through social media have a direct effect on product attitude and an indirect effect on purchase intention (Wang et al., 2012), and participation in the community and willingness to promote the community have been tested as antecedents of the loyalty to the community brand (Koh and Kim, 2004) even for passive members (Kumar and Nayak, 2019; Kumar, 2019). Commitment to the community is a good predictor of brand commitment (Kim et al., 2008). Considering social identification with the community, Mousavi et al. (2017) also show that identification is a strong predictor of affective brand commitment, which is akin to attitudinal loyalty, and that this relationship might even be stronger for inactive than active members. Recent research also supports that brand community identification leads to overall brand loyalty (Kaur et al., 2020) and behavioral brand loyalty (Yoshida et al., 2018). Therefore, the engagement with the brand community could be one of the factors that predicts brand loyalty for inactive users. Recent meta-analysis of the dimensions of loyalty also confirmed that attitudinal loyalty is a strong predictor of behavioral loyalty (Watson et al., 2015). As a result,

the two following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Brand community identification positively influences (1) attitudinal and (2) behavioral brand loyalty.

H5: Attitudinal brand loyalty positively influences behavioral brand loyalty.

The research hypotheses are summarized in the research model shown in figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

METHODOLOGY

Measures

All measures were adapted from existing studies, modifying the wording when needed to fit the context of Facebook pages. The scales were adapted from previous research (see table 4). Seven-point Likert scales were used in the instrument, with anchors of 1: Completely disagree and 7: Completely agree.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

Data collection

An online questionnaire was created and disseminated using two-step (or two-stage) sampling, because of they offer advantages when there are secondary sampling units that have similarities, (in this case, brand communities), but also varying components (in this case, communities of different brands that could have some diversity amongst them) (Adachi & Yamamura, 2000). The population of a Facebook page cannot be contacted by e-mail (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007), it is by nature hard to reach (Preece et al., 2004). Moreover, brand communities operate differently in terms of their privacy and access settings. Online brand communities on Facebook (i.e., official branded Facebook pages) were selected purposively (Kozinets, 1999) in order to represent a wide range of product categories. This approach was

chosen because a reliable listing of Facebook pages that would constitute a robust sampling frame could not be obtained (Wright, 2005). Practically, researchers sought to have a good balance between global pages (using listing of the biggest and most performing Facebook pages from Social Bakers and Facebook's own statistics), as well as local brands. 326 administrators of pages were contacted and prompted to post the link to the survey on their page to ensure that the population of interest, that is, the individual consumer members of an OBC, could be reached. A total of 39 brands posted the link and gathered answers. Just over half of them were multinationals (e.g. Star Alliance, Porsche or Santander) and the other half national or local brands (including a university, a sports club, a restaurant, etc.). The sample of communities comprised multinationals and local retailers, and the page memberships ranged from a few hundred members to several hundred thousand.

Once the Facebook pages were selected, the second level of sampling could be performed. Once the questionnaire was posted on the page, it would be visible to its members. Because post visibility is dependent on Facebook algorithms, individual privacy settings, and page visits, it is impossible to evaluate how many people saw the link to the post, and therefore know the response rate. It is however expected that this rate was very low as less than 1 percent of viewers click through links on Facebook (Salesforce 2015). In total, 989 individuals started the questionnaire. Global brands were fewer to post the study but gathered more responses. After the data cleaning and a listwise deletion of cases with more than 10% missing data, only 448 cases were retained. Missing data were addressed with the Expectation Maximization method on SPSS. Out of these 448 cases, a final sample of 389 inactive users was selected. Following the conceptual positioning of the paper, respondents' visibly active engagement was measured using the engagement scale of Dessart et al. (2016). Specifically, the level of sharing behavior on the brand community was measured using items such as items "I share my experiences on the community", "I share my opinion with the community", "I reply to questions on the community". Only respondents exhibiting a below average level of sharing behavior were kept, with an average level of 1.98 out of 7 on the items of the scale. This method ensured that our sample was composed entirely of people considered to be inactive on the community.

Sample characteristics

The 389 respondents of this survey show a slightly higher percentage of male respondents (56%) and are relatively young (84% under 45 years), which is common in online-based studies (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007). Most of them are well educated, with 40% having an undergraduate degree and 48% a postgraduate degree. They live in 66 different countries but most of them are from the United Kingdom (27%), the United States (9%), and Ireland (8%). Most of them joined Facebook in 2007 (21%) or 2008 (22%), and they usually have been part of the community for about 1 to 5 years (63%). The respondents tend to log onto Facebook several times per day, with 31% of them receiving instant push notifications from Facebook on their mobile device, making them connected all the time. In terms of page activity level, most respondents admit to visiting the page less than once a month (33%), and some of them never visit the page after liking it (13%). If they ever visit the page, most of our respondents spend less than 2 minutes on it (49%). Data was collected from Facebook users participating in many page types, mainly from travel (33%), food and beverage (19%), and durable good (15%); but also from other categories of products and services, such as entertainment or fashion brands retail and technology brands. Full details regarding the sample characteristics can be found in table 5.

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

RESULTS

The hypotheses are tested using structural equation modelling. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Model (SEM) were run using the AMOS program (Byrne, 2010), testing their goodness-of-fit with a range of adequate statistics (Bagozzi and Yi, 2012), and reporting parameter estimates and standard errors.

Internal consistency

The measurement model run using the CFA procedure exhibited strong reliability figures, with Cronbach's Alphas above 0.83, as well as high inter-items correlations (above 0.50) for the items representing each variable of the model (this was presented in table 4). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was also computed as a measure of internal consistency because it measures the amount of variance captured by a construct's measure relative to random estimation errors (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All AVE values were above 0.50 (see diagonal of table 4), so they are supportive of the internal consistency of the variables (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988).

Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity of the model constructs was first evaluated by building a confirmatory factor analysis model with five latent constructs, one of which was a second-order construct composed of four first-order variables, with a total of 23 measures. Results showed that the model fit the data well with goodness-of-fit statistics as follows: chi-square = 672.72 (df: 213), CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07. As a first evidence of discriminant validity, the correlations between the latent constructs were measured. Additionally, the AVE of each construct is compared with all the squared correlations involving this construct, as suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Further evidence of discriminant validity is shown by the fact that all AVEs are greater than all the paired-squared correlations related to it. Table 6 exhibits the AVEs in the diagonal, the paired construct correlations below the diagonal, and their squared values above the diagonal.

INSERT TABLE 6 HERE

Structural model estimation

The structural model analysis was then run to test the hypotheses. The structural model exhibited similar fit values as the CFA model, with a chi-square = 771.23 (df: 216), CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.07. These values are within acceptable ranges for the model, indicating

a good fit of the data. Considering information value, it represents a very good predictor of human value ($\beta = .69$, S.E. = 0.06), in support of H₁. Human value has an R₂ equal to 0.31 and is well reflected by its first-order variables, interpersonal interconnectivity, entertainment, self-discovery, and social enhancement values (all of them exhibit significant standardised regression weights composed of between 0.86 and 0.92). The direct impact of information value on brand community identification, however, is not significant ($\beta = 0.07$, S.E. = 0.05), which fails to support H₂ and indicates that information value has an impact on brand community identification only through the mediation of human value. With an overall R₂ of 0.78, brand community identification is well predicted by human value alone ($\beta = 0.89$, S.E. = 0.05), showing strong support for H₃. A test of mediation indicates a complete mediation of human value on the effect of information value on brand community identification. It can be concluded that brand community identification is a direct function of human value, which is itself affected to a certain extent by information value, but information value fails to directly influence brand community identification.

Brand community identification has a positive impact on attitudinal and behavioural loyalties. Its influencing power over attitudinal loyalty is a bit higher ($\beta = 0.41$, S.E. = 0.04) in support of H_{4b}, but it remains significant over behavioural loyalty as well ($\beta = 0.22$, S.E. = 0.04), also supporting H_{4a}. Attitudinal loyalty exhibits a multiple squared correlation of 0.20; brand community identification thus explains 20% of its variance. Last, with an overall R₂ equal to 0.43, behavioural loyalty is also positively affected by attitudinal loyalty, as expected ($\beta = 0.49$, S.E. = 0.05), which is supportive of H₅. The structural model values are summarised in figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

DISCUSSION

Most of the research on online brand communities has thus far focused on the small portion of community members who take active part in the community (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013;

Gensler et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2011). Focussing on members who are apparently inactive and moving beyond the desire to make them more active (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019; Kumar and Nayak, 2019, Kumar, 2019; Yuan et al., 2021) and appreciating that they might stay passive, this study sought to understand how they form brand community identification and whether community identification has the ability to benefit brand managers in terms of relational and behavioral outcomes.

An important contribution of the study lies in evidencing the overall role of UGT in sustaining brand community identification for inactive members. It highlights the types of perceived value at play and their relative importance in this process. Extending the role of UGT to explain invisible social media engagement is in a way reconciling it with its original application to non-interactive communication media such as TV or radio (McQuail, 1984). Specifically, an interesting contribution of this study lies in showing that perceived human value is the strongest direct predictor for the identification of online brand community inactive members. This is a counterintuitive finding as previous research had highlighted that information search was one of the biggest draw for active members (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Fernandes and Castro, 2020). Our study shows that informational value is only effective through human value. It can be argued that human value plays such a crucial role in the identification process of inactive members precisely because they interact very little on the platforms. Because they engage so little with the community, a strong feeling, or understanding, of their underlying connection with the community (Edelmann, 2013) is necessary to nurture their identification to it. Additionally, the precedence of information value in the whole process is noteworthy, and shows its particular importance for inactive member, contrasting with previous studies on active members (Izogo, and Mpinganjira, 2020).

This study also shows the role that inactive members play in sustaining efficient and highly relational online brand communities through identification with the community. These results demonstrate the importance of having a variety of visibly active and inactive users in a community and further support the argument that visible behaviour in a brand community context (lurking vs posting) are not necessarily the most effective means to identify segments

of members (Haveila et al., 2020, Dessart et al., 2019). Rather than focusing on visible and active forms of community engagement, this study encourages a more nuanced view of the phenomenon and suggests that inactive members should be carefully monitored and nurtured (Edelmann, 2013). Less active members do experience identification to the community, see themselves as members who enjoy their belongingness to the online brand community (Mousavi et al., 2017; Triantafillidou and Siomkos, 2018), and receive satisfaction from their lasting brand community membership (Haveila et al., 2020).

Another contribution of the paper is to show the power of community identification in generating loyalty. Although the impact of social identification on loyalty behaviors has been evidenced, the relationship was almost always mediated by group participation in an online (brand) community or social media studies (e.g., Algesheimer et al., 2005; Dholakia et al., 2004). Building on the work of Mousavi et al. (2017), this study contributes to showing the direct relationship that exists between brand community identification and self-reported behavioral and attitudinal loyalty, without including in the model any form of visible behavioral engagement. Brand community identification positions itself here as a strong predictor of brand loyalty in the context of online brand communities on social media (He et al., 2012) for inactive members, discrediting the common assumption that active members of a community are the most valuable to it.

MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The realization that most brand community members are inactive (Carron-Arthur et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2014) can be worrying for community managers who seek to boast high online engagement figures. This study shows that if inactive community members could get more value from the community, their identification with the community could increase, which would lead to higher brand loyalty. A first recommendation for managers is thus to nurture and value invisible community users while trying to increase their identification to the community.

In order to do so, findings show that a good social media strategy needs to trigger other

forms of perceived value than just the information content. Our findings confirm the fact that information is not enough and needs to be combined with other forms of benefit of a more human nature to generate identification with the community. In other words, information content and campaigns also need to generate human value in order increase user identification. Community managers should therefore promote social interactions (Al-Jabr et al., 2015; Han et al., 2015) in their communication as well as sustain consumer efforts of self-discovery and social enhancement. Good ways to do so are to favor authenticity in content and to promote the company's ethos (Tuškej et al., 2013).

Specifically, managers should devise social media strategies that allow consumers to identify more easily to the brand community by signalling and fostering social and psychological in addition to informational value. A first step is to help members clearly understand brand positioning and ethos, through informative posts, which will ease the identification process. The brand should invite active members to share their own experience of brand usage. Indeed, many respondents learn vicariously from others' experience (Schau et al., 2009), as this can enhance both informational and human perceived value. A third step is to understand and monitor how brand community affiliation and content is used outside of the community. Inactive members often report using affiliation to the community as a signal to their wider network and to engage in e-word of mouth with community content, outside the community (Abrantes et al., 2013). By tracking outside-the-community behavior, managers can identify their most valuable members and understand what interests and motivates them, and adapt their content accordingly.

Overall, this research proves that all members are valuable, can feel strongly about the community and are impacted by the way the community is managed. Since their attachment to the brand community conditions their loyalty to the brand, it is essential to stay relevant to them with adequate content and vicariously through publicly active members.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite the theoretical and managerial contributions it affords, this study also presents certain shortcomings. First, it focused on only one social network. Because UGT is a media-specific theory, we expect different types of perceived value to be more prominent on other media, depending on their core function. Facebook is particularly rich for social presence (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) but more information-oriented media such as Twitter might generate different insight, as suggested by Pelletier et al. (2020). Complexity is even increased with the growing multi-functionality of individual social media and multi-channel characteristics of current consumer-brand relationships. Firstly, as users can engage in more and more diverse activities on a single social platform, they seek different types of gratifications depending on which action they undertake (Malik et al., 2016; Quinn, 2016). Uses and gratifications for online brand community identification thus need to be considered in the broader context of social media engagement and motivations. Interesting insight could also be derived from analyzing the identification response to specific types of content or campaigns launched on social media, classifying the content in terms of the value it taps into, or follow recent research findings that take into account the length, number, and intervals between Facebook sessions to approach gratification (Rokito et al., 2019) and try to apply them in the context of online social network sites brand communities.

Additionally, this paper does not investigate explicitly how community identification may contribute to consumer behavior outside of the online community. While we do measure brand loyalty, the operationalization is self-reported and largely intention-based. Recent advances on social commerce offer a way to understand the link between online brand community participation and actual purchases (Hajli et al., 2017).

This study shows how important it is to sustain high levels of community identification for apparently inactive members, despite the growing tendency to seek active media engagement at all expenses. The findings support recent research reporting that brand community membership of less behavioral active members can lead to brand loyalty (Haveila et al., 2020, Dessart et al., 2019) and future research needs to focus more on less active brand community members, aiming to further understand their thinking processes, their role in the community

and other potential brand-related benefits. Leading social media and consumer research should thus seek to deepen our understanding of community identification, its formation, effects, and applications, considering the whole spectrum of consumer profiles.

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Figure 1. The Research Model

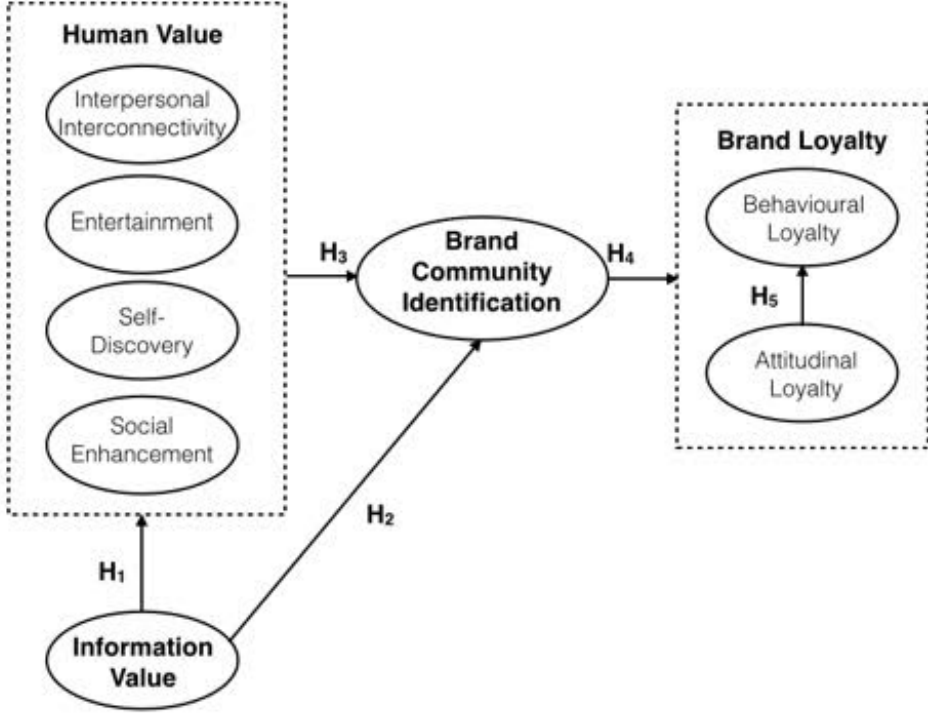


Figure 2. The Structural Model

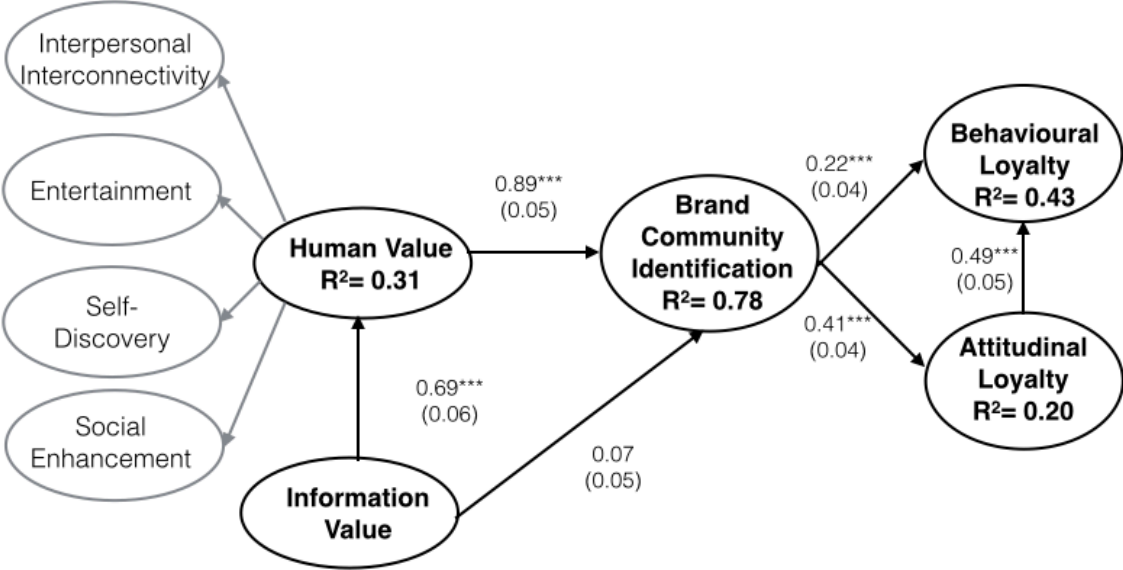


Table 1. Context and Sample of Studies Using UGT in Online Social Networks and Online Brand Communities

Authors	Year	Context	Sample
Dholakia et al	2004	Online brand communities	Regular brand community participants
Raacke and Bonds-Raacke	2008	Social network sites	Students
Sicilia and Palazón	2008	Website community	Regular brand community participants
Park et al	2009	Facebook groups	Students
Bonds-Raacke and Raacke	2010	Social network sites	Students
Dunne et al*	2010	Social network sites	Girls 12–14
Wu et al	2010	Online games	Online gamers
Zhang et al	2011	Facebook	Snowball sampling
Abrantes et al	2012	Internet as a medium to build groups	Students
Alhabash et al	2012	Facebook	General population
Hunt et al	2012	Facebook	Students
Jahn and Kunz	2012	Brand fan pages	Facebook fan page visitors
Alhabash et al	2014	Facebook	Facebook users
De Vries and Carlson	2014	Facebook brand pages	Students
Al-Jabri et al	2015	Twitter	Twitter users
Han et al	2015	Twitter	Twitter users
Shao and Ross	2015	Facebook brand pages	Facebook users
Choi et al	2016	Facebook hotel brand communities	Facebook users
Malik et al	2016	Social Network Sites photo sharing	Facebook users
Claffey and Brady	2017	Firm-hosted virtual communities	Firm-hosted virtual community members
Wallace et al.	2017	Facebook situational envy	Subscription software for data collection
Bae	2018	Social Network Sites	Students and snowball sampling
Heravi et al	2018	Online Social Networks	Students
Lim & Kumar	2019	Facebook pages	Facebook fan page members
Wang et al	2019	Online brand communities	Buyers of mobile phone, mouse, cosmetics, and jeans reporting they participate in brand communities

* Qualitative research

Table 2. Gratifications Suggested by Papers Using UGT in Online Social Networks and Online Brand Communities (*Represents qualitative research)

Authors	Year	Connecting with People and Brands									Information		Emotions and Personal Needs						Self-related factors								Content- and Technology-related factors																														
		Brand interaction value	Socializing/Companionship	Social Support	Friendship (existing)	Connection (new people)	Interpersonal connectivity	Social Presence	Social network surfing	Status updates	Affection	Shared identities	Information Seeking	Information giving	Information	Purposive/utilitarian value	Entertainment/Enjoyment	Relaxation	Escape/Social escapism	Emotional support	Passing time	Habit	Irritation	Self-discovery	Self-status	Attention	Social/self enhancement	Self-expression	Self-Presentation/disclosure	Self-documentation	Online identity	Fashion	Achievement	Professional advancement	Freedom of expression	Rewards	Medium appeal	Content functional value	Content hedonic value	Content	Photographs	Errors	Co-creation value	Cool and new trend	Facebook intensity	Facebook content generation	Convenience										
Dholakia et al	2004					X								X									X	X		X																															
Raacke and Bonds-Raacke	2008		X									X	X																																												
Sicilia and Palazón	2008		X											X																																											
Park et al	2009		X									X												X																																	
Bonds-Raacke and Raacke	2010				X	X							X																																												
Dunne et al*	2010	X	X	X	X							X				X	X							X					X																			X									
Wu et al	2010	X														X																X																									
Zhang et al	2011			X	X			X								X			X			X																																			
Abrantes et al	2012	X															X																																								
Alhabash et al	2012	X			X			X	X		X							X																													X	X									
Hunt et al	2012	X									X									X							X																														
Jahn and Kunz	2012	X	X																									X																													
Alhabash et al	2014	X											X			X		X										X																													
de Vries and Carlson	2014	X																																																							
Al-Jabri et al	2015	X														X																		X																							
Han et al	2015	X																																																							
Shao and Ross	2015	X									X													X																																	
Choi et al	2016	X											X														X																														
Malik et al	2016	X							X		X	X			X							X						X																													
Claffey and Brady	2017				X							X	X		X											X																															
Wallace et al.	2017				X							X								X																																					
Bae	2018	X	X										X	X		X		X																																							X
Heravi et al	2018				X	X						X			X														X																	X											
Lim & Kumar	2019					X						X			X																																										
Wang et al	2019	X										X																																													

Table 3.
Existing Research on Inactive Online Brand Community Members

Paper	Targeted respondents	Main study Aim	Respondents profile
Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019	Active vs inactive members identified via real posting data	Individual (Facebook activity and brand engagement) and pro-social (brand community involvement) factors on fan page posting behaviour	250 Facebook users recruited from a brand page (not indicating how many active and inactive)
Mousavi et al., 2017	Active vs inactive identified via 2 screening questions on visiting and the name of the brand	Brand variables on social identity variables on affective brand commitment on positive WoM and Resistance to negative information	Self-identified as brand community members in a panel. Inactive (415), active (337) - based on self-reported posting of a comment in the last 3 months and the name of the brand
Kumar, 2019	Active vs inactive identified via 1 question on posting in the last 3 months	Individual and collective psychological ownership on brand community participation intention on WoM and brand purchase intention	Self-identified students. Inactive (452), active (311) - based on self-reported posting of a comment in the last 3 months and the name of the brand
Kumar and Nayak, 2019	Inactive members identified via 1 question on posting in the last 3 months	Individual and collective psychological ownership on brand community participation intention on WoM and brand purchase intention	221 self-identified students
Yuan et al., 2021	Inactive members based on real data of no interaction but browsing content in the last year	Perceived usefulness and ease-to-use on bonding and bridging capital on opinion passing and opinion seeking	439 inactive members from a specific online brand community

Table 4. Questionnaire Items

Variables and items
Information Value (adapted from Okleshen and Grossbart 1998) ($\alpha = 0.85$)
The information provided by the page is useful.
The information provided by the page is valuable.
The page is a great way to get answers to brand-related questions.
Human Value ($\alpha = 0.90$)
Interpersonal Interconnectivity (adapted from Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo 2004) ($\alpha = 0.90$)
The page allows me to meet like-minded people.
The page allows me to stay in touch with like-minded people.
Entertainment (adapted from Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo 2004) ($\alpha = 0.90$)
The page entertains me.
The page allows me to relax.
The page allows me to pass time when I am bored.
Self-Discovery (adapted from Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo 2004) ($\alpha = 0.89$)
The page allows me to learn about myself and others.
The page allows me to gain insight into myself.
Social Enhancement (adapted from Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo 2004) ($\alpha = 0.92$)
The page allows me to impress.
The page makes me feel valuable.
Brand Community Identification (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann 2005) ($\alpha = 0.83$)
I am very attached to this page.
The friendships I have with the other page members mean a lot to me.
If the page members planned something, I'd think of it as something "we" would do rather than something "they" would do.
I see myself as part of the page.
Behavioural Loyalty (Odin, Odin and Valette-Florence 2001) ($\alpha = 0.87$)
I am loyal to only one brand (the one I follow) when I buy this type of product.
For my next purchase, I will buy this brand again.
I always buy this brand.
I usually buy this brand.
Attitudinal Loyalty (adapted from El-Manstrly and Harrison, 2013) ($\alpha = 0.88$)
I have grown to like this brand more than others offering the same product/service.
I like the product/services offered by this brand.
To me, this brand is the one whose product/services I enjoy using most.

Table 5: Sample characteristics

Variables	Count	Percent	Variables	Count	Percent
Age			Year of joining Facebook		
18-24	84	22	2004	15	4
25-34	172	44	2005	16	4
35-44	71	18	2006	40	10
45-54	42	11	2007	81	21
55+	20	5	2008	87	22
Gender			2009	67	17
Male	218	56	2010	40	10
Female	171	44	2011	12	3
Education			2012	18	5
Primary school	1	0	2013	11	3
Secondary school	47	12	2014	2	1
Undergraduate degree	154	40	Daily time on Facebook		
Postgraduate degree	187	48	Less than 10 minutes	37	10
Nationality			10 to 30 min	107	28
UK	105	27	31 to 60 min	116	30
GR	24	6	60 min +	129	33
BE	66	17	Daily Facebook log-ons		
FR	34	9	All the time	120	31
US	35	9	1 to 3	98	25
IE	31	8	4 to 6	74	19
Others	94	24	6 +	74	19
Brand category			I don't log on every day	23	6
Travel	127	33	Page membership duration		
Food and Beverage	74	19	Less than a year	137	35
Durable Goods	60	15	1-5 years	247	63
Entertainment	32	8	5-10 years	5	1
Fashion and Beauty	56	14	Brand page visits		
Services	12	3	Never	52	13
Others	14	4	Less than once a month	130	33
Retail	8	2	About once a month	111	29
Technology	6	2	About once a week	66	17
			More than once a week	30	8

Table 6. Discriminant Validity

	INFOVAL	HUMVAL	BCID	BEHAVL	ATTL
INFOVAL	0.67	0.31	0.13	0.08	0.18
HUMVAL	0.39	0.63	0.58	0.04	0.03
BCID	0.36	0.76	0.60	0.07	0.05
BEHAVL	0.28	0.21	0.26	0.61	0.38
ATTL	0.43	0.18	0.23	0.62	0.73

INFOVAL = Information Value; HUMVAL = Human Value; BCID = Brand Community Identification; BEHAVL= Behavioural Loyalty; ATTL = Attitudinal Loyalty.