VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITY INFLUENCE ON BRAND LOYALTY: CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST MEDIATORS

Joshua Doe
Central University, Ghana
PO Box DS 2310, Dansoman, Accra

ABSTRACT
This study examines whether online brand community affects brand loyalty through mediators such as customer-product relationship, customer-brand relationship, customer-company relationship, and trust. Data was randomly collected from 720 members of an online brand community page using an online questionnaire and analysed with Structural Equations Modelling (SEM). The study found that online brand community activities influenced customer-product relationships, and not customer-brand nor customer-company relationships. None of the customer relationships mediate the link between online brand community and trust. Trust, however partially mediates between customer-product relationships and brand loyalty, as well as between customer-company relationships and brand loyalty. Trust of the online community was confirmed to lead to loyalty. For industry practitioners, these findings support the need to ensure favourable customer/product related activities, experience and word of mouth within the online community. It also demonstrates the possibility of brand extension and brand trust at lower costs. The paper contributes to industrial and academic knowledge of virtual brand community and its effects.

KEYWORDS
Virtual Brand Community, Customer Relationships, Brand Loyalty, Brand Trust

1. INTRODUCTION
Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn, have become popular online attraction sites for consumer interactions (Alharthey, 2020). These social media create online communities that allow more dynamic roles in consumer to firm interaction and virtual presence. Individuals, professional groups, governments, and businesses alike are currently experimenting with social media marketing strategies, in what appears to be an exceptionally viral way to get messages (Saji, Chauhan, & Pillai, 2013; Sohail, Hasan, & Sohail, 2020). In this regard, researchers on social media have found that brand loyalty is enhanced through brand experiences and emotional connections, particularly through the use of social media brand community activities (Iglesias, Singh, & Batista-Foguet, 2011). These virtual brand community activities such as entertainment, interaction, and customization (Sohail et al., 2020) invariably build upon trust (Alharthey, 2020) that can yield loyalty. The horizon of marketing therefore has been broadened.

Within the context of a sub-Saharan developing country such as Ghana, a few companies seem to have engaged customers on facebook sites over the last couple of years. As part of their marketing drive to maintain brand communities, these firms developed social media campaigns as a strategic tool to engage customers.

Given this increasing use and popularity of these social media as brand communities in Ghana, studies that seek to examine brand loyalty (Barnet & Ferris, 2016), trust on social media (Alharthey, 2020), social media marketing (Sohail, Hasan, & Sohail, 2020) are worth doing. However, there is a paucity of research on how social media brand communities affect the brand within the context of sub-Saharan Africa. There is also limited research on the contribution of the social media brand community in the achievement of brands in Ghana. In this regard, this study is positioned to fill the research gap of examining a) whether brand community (Facebook) affects its relationship with customers, and b) the extent to which the online community affects brand loyalty.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as a group of internet based applications propelled by Web 2.0, allowing the creation and exchange of user generated content, in a sharing and collaborative way. In this way, users now create and consume content, thereby adding value to the site (Campbell et al., 2011). This has progressed from simple information recovery to interactivity, interoperability, and collaboration (Campbell et al., 2011), enabling brands to listen to consumers and respond (Fournier & Avery, 2011). This has resulted in a fundamental marketing strategy shift in how organizations and customers relate to each other (Angel & Sexsmith, 2009). Social media marketing therefore is the connection between brands and consumers, that offer personal channels and currency for user-centred networking and social interaction (Chi, 2011). The phrases, social networking and social media are often used interchangeably. Social media is the online interactive environment in which social networking takes place and has altered the way in which consumers gather information and make buying decisions. Popular social media sites that are accessible in Ghana include social networks (Facebook, Myspace, and LinkedIn), micro-blogs (Twitter, Plurk, and Friend Feed), reviews and ratings (Yelp, Amazon, and Trip Advisor), video (YouTube and Vimeo), messengers (WhatsApp, imo, Snapchat, Telegram, Wechat, Viber etc.), photo sharing (Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest etc.), and more.

2.2 Virtual Brand Community

Virtual Brand Communities (VBCs) can be described as aggregations of consumers that occur on a virtual space due to their interest in a brand or product (Georgi & Mink, 2012), or the site[s] of complex brand meaning creation and consumption efforts (Muñiz & Schau, 2007). The essence of VBC therefore is to generate loyalty to the brand through the creation of brand experiences, based on common interest.

In the discussion of what makes a virtual brand community (VBC) cohesive and loyal to a brand, Casaló, Favián, and Guinalíu (2008) found that trust for a VBC leads to increased participation, and positive VBC participation experience leads to more loyalty of the brand. Trust itself is influenced by security (Cha, 2009), individual users’ participation, group unity and awareness (Casaló, Favián, & Guinalíu, 2008). Habibi, Laroche, and Richard (2014) emphasised four types of customer relationships open to virtual brand community participants: customer-product, customer-brand, customer-company and customer-other customer relationships.

Group norms represent the set of shared goals, beliefs, and values that group members follow. The nature and culture of social media group norms affect the way its members interpret and attach meaning to brands and products (Muñiz & Schau, 2007). Thus community members within a strong social group are more likely to have group intentions to accept the organization’s offer in online communities or not (Zeng, Huang, & Dou, 2009).

2.3 Brand

“A ‘brand’ is a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (Keller, 1998). Brands may be represented by a personality and a signature tune to capture the hearts of consumers and keep them loyal (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). Strong brands therefore enable the consumer to identify products, evaluate their quality, and make it easier for the customers to develop attitudes and expectations. Brands also make shopping more efficient as it tends to reduce perceived risks of purchase (Keller, 1998). Well-known brands are capable of developing favourable attitudes and perceptions more easily, leading to loyalty (Kapferer, 2008).
2.4 Brand Trust

Gaining the trust of a brand audience is essential to building brand loyalty (Lau & Lee, 1999). While Lau and Lee (1999) viewed brand trust as the willingness to rely on the brand, Moorman et al. (1992) described trust as the willingness to rely on an exchange partner confidently. Thus brand trust is the willingness and keenness to depend on another party in the face of risk. In relationship-marketing literature, trust has been viewed as a determinant of the loyalty (Berry, 1983), and has been recognised in recent studies as a key variable in long-term relationships with customers, which in turn positively affects brand loyalty (Ming et al., 2011; Bowen and Bowen, 2020). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) summarises this phenomenon that brand trust strongly influences the customer’s attitude and repurchase loyalty.

2.5 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty has been widely discussed within the offline brand loyalty literature, giving prominence to two dimensions of the concept. These are behavioural and attitudinal loyalty (Balginger and Rubinson, 1996). Oliver (1997) defines loyalty as capturing its multi dimensionality as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or patronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchase, despite the situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour”. Aaker’s (1991) description of brands as the measure of attachment that a customer has towards a brand conceptualises brand loyalty as a pyramid with five tiers: the switchers; satisfied, but habitual buyers; satisfied buyers with switching cost; brand likers; and committed buyers.

2.6 Hypothesis Development

Consumer engagement on social media can be measured by consumers’ propensity to invest the resources of themselves in activities in the social media group activity such as value co-creation, social interaction, knowledge sharing/storing, and word of mouth (WOM) (Liu, Lee, Liu and Chen, 2018). While this has been found to moderate between the various customer-virtual brand relationships (product, brand, company) and trust (Habibi et al., 2014), Stokburger-Sauer (2010), however, suggests a significant relationship between online brand community engagement and consumer personal relationships with product, brand, and company. This study examines whether the social media brand community engagement leads to enhanced consumer-product relationship, consumer-brand relationship, and consumer-company relationship. It is therefore hypothesised that:

*H1: Online brand community engagement influences customer/product relationship.*

*H2: Online brand community engagement influences customer/brand relationship.*

*H3: Online brand community engagement influences customer/company relationship.*

Habibi et al. (2014) developed and tested a model on how consumers’ relationships with the elements of a brand community based on social media (brand, product, company, and other consumers) influences brand trust. Apart from customer relationship with other customers, Habibi et al. (2014) reported a significant relationship between the other three constructs and brand trust among the online brand community participants. This study tests these hypotheses under the current contexts, and therefore hypothesise the following:

*H4: Customer/product relationship influences trust among customers.*

*H5: Customer/company relationship influences trust among customers.*

*H6: Customer/brand relationship influences trust among customers.*

Brand trust resulting from online community engagement has been reported to lead to brand loyalty (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). This study therefore hypothesise that:

*H7: Brand trust leads to brand brand loyalty.*
3. METHODOLOGY

Items for the measurement of customer-product relation, customer-brand relation, and customer-company relation were all adapted from Habibi, Laroche, and Richard (2014) and Casalo, Flavian, and Guinali (2010). Question items for trust were adapted from Habibi et al. (2014), brand loyalty were adapted from Casalo, Flavian, and Guinali (2010) and the social media engagement construct was adapted from Liu, Lee, Liu, and Chen (2018). Data was conveniently collected with questionnaires conducted in a central shopping mall in Ghana. A sample size of 740 useable responses were received from users of various brand communities. The data was analysed with Structural Equations Modelling (SEM) in SmartPLS software (Ringle, Wende, & Smith, 2005).

4. DATA ANALYSIS

In order to run structural equation modelling analysis in SmartPLS, the data must first meet conditions of data validity and reliability as outlined by Chin (1998). Reliability refers to the extent to which the data collection instrument produces consistent results if replicated in another study (Saunders et al., 2006). Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s Alpha (α) tests were used to assess reliability of the research the instrument consistency. Chin (1998) recommended that an instrument indicated acceptable reliability if the Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s Alpha (α) were greater than 0.70.

Convergent validity tested the extent to which two or more indicators measure the same variable/construct. For example, customer/product relation was measured with four (4) indicators; hence it was important to test whether all these four indicators measure the concept of customer/product relation well or not. Chin (1998) recommended that a construct exhibited acceptable validity of the items if the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value was above 0.50.

Table 1 below shows the results for the test for reliability and validity of the constructs/variables used in the study. The CR values were between 0.75 and 1.00, well above the recommended threshold of 0.70. This implied that the items used to measure the variables/constructs showed high reliability and would produce consistent results if replicated on another sample. The AVE values were between 0.58 and 1.00, again showing acceptable convergent validity of measures since they were well above the recommended 0.50 value.

Table 1. Construct Reliability and Validity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Composite Reliability (CR)</th>
<th>Average Variance Extracted (AVE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand Loyalty</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Brand Relation</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Company Relation</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Product Relation</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Brand Community</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discriminant validity tested whether the items selected to measure a variable actually do so. This was tested in two ways: first, with the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the diagonal values were greater than the off-diagonal values (the pair-wise correlation between factors) as shown in Table 2 and cross loadings were higher on their respective construct (i.e. above 0.60) than on other constructs as shown in Table 3: both depicted acceptable discriminant validity.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity of Variables/Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand Loyalty</th>
<th>Customer/Brand Relation</th>
<th>Customer/Company Relation</th>
<th>Customer/Product Relation</th>
<th>Online Brand Community</th>
<th>Trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand Loyalty</td>
<td>0.782</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Brand Relation</td>
<td>-0.054</td>
<td>0.948</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Company Relation</td>
<td>0.339</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Product Relation</td>
<td>0.547</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>0.295</td>
<td>0.813</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Brand Community</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.201</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>0.227</td>
<td>0.857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>0.562</td>
<td>-0.125</td>
<td>0.335</td>
<td>0.496</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Three (3) items with a loading of below 0.60 on their respective constructs were removed to attain acceptable discriminant validity. These were one item each from Brand Loyalty (BLOYAL2), Customer/Brand Relation (BRND3) and Customer/Company Relation (COMP1).

Table 3. Cross Loadings of Items/Indicators on Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Brand Loyalty</th>
<th>Customer/Brand Relation</th>
<th>Customer/Company Relation</th>
<th>Customer/Product Relation</th>
<th>Online Brand Community</th>
<th>Trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BCOM1</td>
<td>0.111</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.845</td>
<td>0.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCOM2</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.211</td>
<td>0.848</td>
<td>0.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCOM3</td>
<td>-0.079</td>
<td>0.328</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
<td>0.178</td>
<td>0.877</td>
<td>-0.144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLOYAL1</td>
<td>0.906</td>
<td>-0.059</td>
<td>0.362</td>
<td>0.559</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>0.543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLOYAL3</td>
<td>0.634</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>0.231</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
<td>0.296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRND1</td>
<td>-0.044</td>
<td>0.932</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>0.160</td>
<td>-0.097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRND2</td>
<td>-0.057</td>
<td>0.963</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>0.213</td>
<td>-0.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTRUST1</td>
<td>0.386</td>
<td>-0.131</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.429</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTRUST2</td>
<td>0.371</td>
<td>-0.105</td>
<td>0.268</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>-0.169</td>
<td>0.670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTRUST3</td>
<td>0.514</td>
<td>-0.057</td>
<td>0.281</td>
<td>0.425</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>0.449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMP2</td>
<td>0.339</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.295</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>0.335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROD1</td>
<td>0.415</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>0.391</td>
<td>0.840</td>
<td>0.213</td>
<td>0.433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROD2</td>
<td>0.480</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.200</td>
<td>0.814</td>
<td>0.174</td>
<td>0.350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROD4</td>
<td>0.446</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>0.113</td>
<td>0.786</td>
<td>0.162</td>
<td>0.418</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PLS Structural Model Results

First, the bootstrap method in SmartPLS 3 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015) was run to determine the significance of the hypothesized relations in the research model. It was evident that three (3) path relationships were statistically non-significant, namely: Customer/Brand Relation -> Trust; Online Brand Community -> Customer/Brand Relation and Online Brand Community -> Customer/Company Relation. Overall, four (4) path relationships showed statistical significance: Customer/Company Relation -> Trust and Online Brand Community -> Customer/Product Relation was at 95% significance level whilst Customer/Product Relation -> Trust and Trust -> Brand Loyalty was at 99% significance level. The results and further details are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Path Significance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Original Sample (O)</th>
<th>T Statistics ([O/STDEV])</th>
<th>P Values</th>
<th>Remark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Brand Relation -&gt; Trust</td>
<td>-0.176</td>
<td>0.883</td>
<td>0.378</td>
<td>n.s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Company Relation -&gt; Trust</td>
<td>0.219</td>
<td>2.198</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>p ≤ 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Product Relation -&gt; Trust</td>
<td>0.444</td>
<td>4.022</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>p ≤ 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Brand Community -&gt; Customer/Brand Relation</td>
<td>0.201</td>
<td>0.922</td>
<td>0.357</td>
<td>n.s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Brand Community -&gt; Customer/Company Relation</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>0.897</td>
<td>n.s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Brand Community -&gt; Customer/Product Relation</td>
<td>0.227</td>
<td>2.291</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>p ≤ 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust -&gt; Brand Loyalty</td>
<td>0.562</td>
<td>9.601</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>p ≤ 0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Test for Mediation

The study assessed the following: (i) whether the type of relationships established mediates the relationship between online brand community and trust; and (ii) whether trust mediates the relations between the types of customer relationships and brand loyalty. To assess mediation, guidelines by Hair et al. (2013) were followed. First, the model was made with only the exogenous and the endogenous constructs. Then the model was run with the introduction of the mediating constructs. If the relationship is not statistically significant, then there is no mediation, however, if there exists a significant relationship, then there is mediation. This mediation is full if the mediator makes the original relationship between the independent and dependent variables non-significant. Otherwise, only partial mediation is established.
5. FINDINGS

Online Brand Community and Customer Relations- Overall, the results revealed that online brand community led positively and significantly to customer/product relation ($\beta=0.201$, n.s.). This showed that online brand community improved customers’ consumption of the product. In this case, customer purchase of product increased due to the organisations online community activities. Online brand community also led positively to customer/brand relation ($\beta=0.227$, sig. $p \leq 0.05$), however, the relationship was statistically non-significant. Online brand community was once more found to exhibit a non-significant negative relationship with customer/company relation ($\beta=-0.016$, n.s.). In effect, therefore, online community improved customers’ relations mainly with the product, but not the company nor brand. This implies that online brand community can cause the increased consumption of a product as a group activity and not necessarily as a preference for the brand, nor the company. Overall, online brand community explained only a small percentage of the variance for the three types of relations tested, customer/product relation ($R^2=0.051$%), customer/brand relation ($R^2=0.040$), and customer/company relation ($R^2=0.00$). This implies that the online brand community is not necessarily the main reason why customers relate well with the product, brand or company.

Customer Relations and Trust- The study tested the impact of customers’ relationships with the product, brand and company through online communities on their level of trust. Results showed that customer–product relation ($\beta=0.444$, $p \leq 0.01$), as well as customer–company relation ($\beta=0.219$, $p \leq 0.05$) significantly helped build trust among customers. However, customer/brand relations ($\beta=0.176$, n.s.), which negatively related to the level of trust among customers, was not statistically significant. This means that customer–product relationship could mediate between online brand community and brand trust. This mediation effect implies that an online brand community can lead to brand trust only through the experience with the product. Even though customer–company relationship leads to brand trust directly, it however does not mediate between online community and brand trust. Customer-brand relationship neither led to brand trust, nor mediated between online community and brand trust. Overall, the three types of customers’ relation with the product, brand and company on online brand communities (in this case the online brand community of firms studied) explained about 30% of the variance for customers’ trust ($R^2=0.303$).

Trust and Brand Loyalty- The results showed that the trust-loyalty relationship is strong ($\beta=0.562$, $p \leq 0.01$) and trust accounts for about 30% of why customers are loyal to the brand. This means that it is important for brands to work towards winning the trust of customers of the online community, as this greatly led to brand loyalty, which is found to spur repurchase and generate increased performance.

Result of Mediating Relationships- Results reveal that the types of relations do not mediate the link between online brand community and trust. For example, the direct relationship between online brand communication and trust ($\beta=-0.232$, n.s.) was not statistically significant. Hence, there could not be a mediating effect by customer/product, customer/brand and customer/company relations. On the other hand, trust seems to have some mediating effect on some of the relationships and brand loyalty. For instance, the strength of the direct relationship between customer/product relations and brand loyalty ($\beta=0.562$, $p \leq 0.01$) reduced, but maintained statistical significance with the introduction of the mediating construct, trust ($\beta=0.494$, $p \leq 0.0$). This shows that trust only partially mediates the relationship. Similarly, trust only partially mediates the relationship between customer/company relations and brand loyalty as the strength of the direct relationship reduced but was still statistically significant with the inclusion of trust (i.e. from $\beta=0.355$, $p \leq 0.0$ to $\beta=0.335$, $p \leq 0.0$). Nonetheless, trust does not mediate the relationship between customer/brand relations and brand loyalty ($\beta=-0.058$, n.s) due to the non-significant nature of the direct relationship.

6. DISCUSSION

The data revealed that online brand community activities caused the increased consumption of the product as a group activity and not necessarily as a preference for the brand, nor the company. Customer–product relationship was the only significant consumer relationship resulting from virtual brand community engagement. The result confirms some findings from earlier studies (Muñiz & Schau, 2007; Mangold
& Faulds, 2009; Barnet & Ferris, 2016) as well as current studies (Alharthey, 2020) that online brand community interaction between consumers results in opinion leadership and group consumption decisions. Even though customer-product relationship did not mediate between virtual brand community and trust, it led to brand trust. This implies that online brand community can only lead to brand trust through experience with the product, and not the brand image nor company relationship. This result partly confirms Habibi, Laroche, and Richard’s (2014) report that customer-product and customer-company relationships influenced trust, while customer-brand relationship did not influence brand trust.

Even though the customer-company relationship leads to brand trust directly, it is not significantly affected by online brand community engagement and therefore does not mediate between online community and brand trust. This partly supports Habibi, Laroche, and Richard’s (2014) contention that customer-company relationship influences brand trust. Customer-brand relationship neither led to brand trust, nor mediated between online community and brand trust. This result supports Habibi, Laroche, and Richard (2014), but differs from that of Casaló, Flavián and Miguel (2008) who reported that virtual community has a positive influence on consumer commitment to customer-brand relationship.

Trust of the online community was confirmed to lead to loyalty. The finding supports the report of Casaló, Favián, and Guinalíu (2008) as well as Bowen and Bowen (2020) that brand trust influences loyalty to the brand.

7. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Managerial implications of the findings above include the following:

Organizations using online community as a marketing communications tool need to ensure favourable customer/product related activities, experience and word of mouth within the community. This can influence more purchase of the brand through opinion leadership.

Awareness creation of brand extensions can be done at very reduced marketing cost, as the brand community increased its purchases as a community activity even if they dislike the company or other elements of the brand.

Offline programs pertaining to brands need to be promoted as part of the online brand community activities to enhance the personal interaction with customers. This personal interaction can improve the customer/company relationship, thereby enhancing trust.

It is important for organisations to work towards winning the trust of customers of the online community, as this greatly leads to brand loyalty, which is found to spur repurchase behaviour and generate increased performance.

8. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was a cross sectional survey, which does not examine the effect the online brand community on individual consumers before and after the engagement with a online virtual brand community. Therefore a longitudinal survey of individual virtual brand engagement is recommended with qualitative explanations of the various constructs like trust and loyalty are developed over time within the community. This can unravel or decompose the composition of online trust and online loyalty. Further studies could introduce customer-other customer relationships. A comparative study could also be done between product related virtual brand communities and service related virtual brand communities. This can throw more light on which sector (product or service) performs better with the use of virtual community.

REFERENCES