
Brand Communities for Fast Moving Consumer Goods

Sandra Meister

Brand Communities for Fast Moving Consumer Goods

An Empirical Study of Members'
Behavior and the Economic Relevance
for the Marketer

Foreword by Prof. Dr. Claudia Fantapié Altobelli



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RESEARCH

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Foreword

It is no longer possible to imagine the world of communication without social media. The triumph of Web 2.0 in all economic and social areas has meant that more and more companies are turning to social media for their corporate communications. The success of virtual platforms such as YouTube and Flickr shows that many users no longer see the internet as just a passive information medium, but are actively involved in content creation.

This book addresses an active area of social media research: brand communities for fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs). A brand community usually refers to a group of internet users who support a particular product or brand online, exchange experiences or compile test reports. Although several studies have already been published on the effectiveness of brand communities for high-involvement goods, there is no corresponding research for FMCGs. It is therefore not very clear whether the use of brand communities by branded goods manufacturers leads to success for the brands and, if so, under what conditions. The focus of this book is therefore both contemporary and innovative in every respect.

Operators of online communities usually only collect sociodemographic, product-related and category-related data from their members, while basic purchasing characteristics, particularly aspects of customer retention, remain unknown. By conducting a quantitative research with representative data from four German FMCG communities, this research takes up this lack of knowledge. First the author investigates whether brand-community members have a particular behavioral profile that differs from that of non-members. She then goes on to assess whether these behavioral characteristics have any effect on the success of the brands and whether customer retention is greater among members than among non-members. The behavioral variables she investigates are emotional attachment to brands (brand involvement and brand loyalty), social identity (self-presentation through brand-community membership and innovativeness) and social interactions

(sociability, opinion leadership, market maven, opinion seeker). Customer retention is assessed as a dependent variable in terms of purchase intention, tolerance of price increase and intention to recommend.

This research is important because it is the first to provide comprehensive results on the success of FMCG brand communities. Studying the behavioral profiles of members and non-members also generates important information for branded goods manufacturers. The research results may initially frustrate businesses: The success of brand communities for FMCG may in many cases be lower than assumed. Brand communities have not succeeded in attracting multipliers (mavens and opinion leaders). Another important finding is that membership in a community is not connected with higher levels of brand bond or customer retention. Rather, membership of a brand community seems to be connected with a distinct thematic interest—such as cooking—and not with the brand as such.

The results are worth noting in any case and are highly practical for brand manufacturers. The wide-ranging theoretical insights and practical data make this a report worth reading as well as the starting-point for further discussion. I hope the book will be widely distributed among scholars and practitioners.

Prof. Dr. Claudia Fantapié Altobelli

Preface

Social Media is one of the buzz-words in modern marketing. Brand communities, as part of this phenomenon, play a more and more important role in this context as communication tool, not only for high-involvement, but also for fast moving consumer good (FMCG) brands. But so far, there is only little knowledge about the effect as well as the consumers involved in FMCG brand communities. One of the key questions, what kind of consumers take part in these brand-managed communities, cannot be answered. Can they be characterized by specific behavioral attributes? Are these attributes drivers of their willingness to buy or recommend the respective brand? Do community members behave differently compared with non-members?

Objective of this work was to examine these questions and deliver implications for the use of brand communities in FMCG marketing.

This document was accepted as doctoral thesis by the Department of Economics- and Social Science of Helmut-Schmidt-University, University of the Federal Armed Forces Hamburg, Germany in November 2011.

The successful completion of this work was only possible thanks to the great support of many people. First of all, I am very grateful for the generous help of my doctoral adviser, Professor Dr. Claudia Fantapié Altobelli, who accepted me as an external doctoral candidate. She always had an open ear and provides me with support and useful food for thoughts.

I further want to thank Professor Dr. Mark Heitmann of the Hamburg University, who spontaneously took over the role of the second corrector.

I am very grateful for the participation of Dr. Oetker and STABILO International, as well as of the Sozioland Online Panel in the empirical part of this thesis. This support made it possible to investigate the brand-community phenomenon on such a broad basis.

Many thanks also to all my friends, especially to my former colleague Torsten Danker, providing me with helpful suggestions, as well as technical and mental support.

Without the support of my family, this study would never be possible. Thanks to my husband Michael, who encouraged me to start this project and allowed me to concentrate on this work. A very deep thank to Karin Reinholz and Ingrid Rudolph for their mental support and tireless work as babysitters.

This book is dedicated to Merle and Millie.

Sandra Meister

Brief Contents

1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
2	LITERATURE REVIEW AND DEFINITION OF THE MAIN TERMS.....	8
3	FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY.....	112
4	EMPIRICAL STUDY.....	172
5	CONCLUSION.....	258
	APPENDIX B.....	269
	REFERENCES.....	271

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Contents

LIST OF FIGURES	XVII
LIST OF TABLES	XIX
ABBREVIATIONS	XXIII
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Scope and Problem Description	1
1.2 Objective of the Study and Delimitation of the Research Object	2
1.3 Structure of the Paper	5
2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND LITERATURE REVIEW	8
2.1 Brand Communities	8
2.1.1 The Brand	8
2.1.1.1 Definition of the Term <i>Brand</i>	8
2.1.1.2 A Brand Owner and Consumer Perspective on the Brand	11
2.1.1.3 Classification of Brands	17
2.1.2 The Community	21
2.1.2.1 Definition of the Term <i>Community</i>	21
2.1.2.2 Classification of Communities	23
2.1.3 Brand Communities	27
2.1.3.1 Brand Communities—Definitions	27
2.1.3.2 Brand Communities as Part of Social Media	36
2.1.3.3 Categorization of Brand Communities	39
2.1.3.3.1 Initiator	40
2.1.3.3.2 Driver / Leader	41
2.1.3.3.3 Access	43
2.1.3.3.4 Online vs. Offline	44
2.1.3.3.5 Host	45

2.2 State of Research on Brand Communities	45
2.2.1 Empirical Research on Brand Communities	45
2.2.1.1 Motivation to Participate and Community Bond	46
2.2.1.2 Impact on Brand Preference and Economic Determinants	51
2.2.1.3 Value Creation: Innovation and Consumer Insight	55
2.2.2 Overview of the Existing Brand-community Research	57
2.3 Consumer Behavior from a Brand-Community Perspective	69
2.3.1 Key Aspects of Consumer Behavior from a Brand-Community Perspective	69
2.3.2 Determinants of Consumer Behavior Relevant for Brand Communities	73
2.3.2.1 Psychological and Emotional Determinants	73
2.3.2.2 Social Determinants	79
2.3.3 Main Theories on Consumer Behavior Relevant for Brand Communities	83
2.3.3.1 Social Learning Theory	84
2.3.3.2 Social Identity Theory	89
2.3.3.3 Theory of Cognitive Dissonance	93
2.3.3.4 Self-perception Theory	96
2.4 Customer Retention as Marketing Objective for Brand Communities	100
2.4.1 Definition of Customer Retention	101
2.4.2 Determinants of Customer Retention	104
2.5 Delimitation of the Research Object and Additional Need for Research	108
3 FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY	112
3.1 Conceptualization of the Research Framework	112
3.1.1 Emotional Relationship to Brand and Company	113
3.1.2 Social Identity through Brand-community Membership	115
3.1.3 Social Interaction and Moral Responsibility	117

3.1.4 Performance Measures	119
3.1.5 Posting as Moderator	123
3.1.6 Summary of the Conceptualized Research Model	124
3.2 Derivation of the Hypotheses	125
3.2.1 Hypotheses Concerning the Emotional Relationship to the Brand	126
3.2.1.1 Brand Involvement as Specific Behavioral Attribute	126
3.2.1.2 Brand Loyalty as Specific Behavioral Attribute	128
3.2.1.3 Impact of Emotional Relationship to the Brand on the Performance Measures	131
3.2.2 Hypotheses Concerning Social Identity	133
3.2.2.1 Self-presentation as Specific Behavioral Attribute	133
3.2.2.2 Innovativeness as Specific Behavioral Attribute	135
3.2.2.3 Impact of Social Identity on the Performance Measures	137
3.2.3 Hypotheses on Social Interaction	139
3.2.3.1 Sociability as Specific Behavioral Attribute	139
3.2.3.2 Market Maven, Opinion Leader, and Opinion Seeker as Specific Behavioral Attributes	141
3.2.3.3 Impact of Social Interaction on the Performance Measures	144
3.2.4 Hypotheses on the Performance Measures	148
3.2.5 Hypotheses on the Moderator Posting	151
3.2.6 Summary of Hypotheses	152
3.3 Operationalization of the Constructs	156
3.3.1 Measuring the Behavioral Attributes	156
3.3.1.1 Measuring Brand Involvement	156
3.3.1.2 Measuring Brand Loyalty	157
3.3.1.3 Measuring Self-presentation	159
3.3.1.4 Measuring Innovativeness	160

3.3.1.5 Measuring Market Maven	162
3.3.1.6 Measuring Opinion Leader and Opinion Seeker	163
3.3.1.7 Measuring Sociability	164
3.3.2 Measuring Customer Retention	165
3.3.3 Measuring Posting as Moderator	168
3.4 Development of the Questionnaire and Implementation of the Survey	169
4 EMPIRICAL STUDY	172
4.1 Data Collection and Dataset Selection for the Empirical Study	172
4.1.1 Selecting Brands and Brand Communities	172
4.1.2 Collecting Data and Data Editing	176
4.1.3 Characteristics of the Samples	180
4.2 Methodology and Approach for the Analysis	182
4.2.1 The PLS Method	182
4.2.1.1 Description of the PLS Method	182
4.2.1.2 Comparison between Variance- and Covariance-based Methods	186
4.2.1.3 Reasoning for the Use of PLS in this Study	190
4.2.2 Analysis Flow and Quality Criteria	191
4.2.2.1 Estimation of the Behavioral Attributes (Step 1)	192
4.2.2.2 Estimation of the Outer Model (Step 2)	194
4.2.2.3 Estimation of the Inner Model (Step 3)	198
4.3 Results	200
4.3.1 Results of the Analysis of the Behavioral Attributes (Step 1)	200
4.3.1.1 Screening of the Attributes	200
4.3.1.2 Test for Significance	207
4.3.1.3 Further Important Findings of the Data Assessment	213
4.3.1.4 Intermediate Findings of Analysis (Step 1)	216

4.3.2 Results for the Outer Model (Step 2)	218
4.3.2.1 Results of the EFA	218
4.3.2.2 Results of the Factor Structure	226
4.3.2.3 Intermediate Findings of Analysis (Step 2)	234
4.3.3 Results for the Inner Model (Step 3)	235
4.3.3.1 Results of the Inner Model of Brand-community Members	235
4.3.3.2 Results of the Inner Model of Brand-community Non-Members	242
4.3.3.3 Intermediate Findings of Analysis (Step 3)	248
4.3.4 Results of the Moderating Effects	249
4.4 Summary of the Results and Interpretation	251
5. CONCLUSION	261
5.1 Contribution to Brand-community Research	261
5.2 Implications for Marketing Management	263
5.3 Limitations of the Study and Further Research Directions	266
APPENDIX B	269
REFERENCES	271

APPENDIX A and B can be accessed as additional material (OnlinePlus) on www.springer-gabler.de, author's name: Meister, ISBN 978-3-8349-4054-4.

List of Figures

Fig. 1: Structure of the study	7
Fig. 2: Most highly valued global brands (2011)	12
Fig. 3: Interaction of brand identity and brand image.....	16
Fig. 4: Community classification scheme	26
Fig. 5: Harley-Davidson owner group (U.S. online site).....	28
Fig. 6: Muniz and O'Guinn's brand-community triad	29
Fig. 7: Customer-centric model of brand community	30
Fig. 8: Characteristics for brand-community categorization.....	39
Fig. 9: Example of a member-driven brand community (Rezeptwiese by Dr. Oetker)	42
Fig. 10: Example of a marketer-driven brand community (MeinMaggi by Nestlé).....	43
Fig. 11: Example of a members-only brand community (toonity.com by STABILO).....	44
Fig. 12: Stages of the purchase-decision process with impact of brand community.....	69
Fig. 13: The Word-of-mouth network coproduction model.....	72
Fig. 14: Social learning theory	85
Fig. 15: Process of social learning	87
Fig. 16: Social identity theory	90
Fig. 17: Concept of customer retention from a behavioral perspective	103
Fig. 18: Functional chain of customer retention	105
Fig. 19: Determinants of customer retention.....	108
Fig. 20: Overall structure of the research model.....	125
Fig. 21: Path model and research hypotheses	154

Fig. 22: Integration of the survey on Rezeptwiese.de.....	177
Fig. 23: Screening questions	178
Fig. 24: Example of a PLS path model	183
Fig. 25: Two-step process of PLS path model.....	184
Fig. 26: Flow of PLS algorithm.....	186
Fig. 27: Flowchart of the analysis	192
Fig. 28: Cooking communities: Awareness of topic-related brand communities	214
Fig. 29: Cooking communities: Use of thematically related internet sites or brand communities.....	215
Fig. 30: Likes about the respective brand communities.....	216
Fig. 31: Path model based on EFA results	222
Fig. 32: Path model of the Rezeptwiese members	240
Fig. 33: Path model of Knorr Family members	240

List of Tables

Tab. 1: Brand categorization	18
Tab. 2: Overview of brand-community definitions	36
Tab. 3: Overview of brand-community research	68
Tab. 4: Hypotheses on the strength of the behavioral attributes	153
Tab. 5: Hypotheses on the path model	155
Tab. 6: Statistical relevance of the modified PII by Mittal	156
Tab. 7: Brand involvement scale	157
Tab. 8: Brand loyalty scale	159
Tab. 9: Scale on self-presentation	160
Tab. 10: Scale on innovativeness	162
Tab. 11: Scale on market maven	163
Tab. 12: Scale on opinion leader	164
Tab. 13: Scale on opinion seeker	164
Tab. 14: Scale on sociability	165
Tab. 15: Customer retention scale	168
Tab. 16: Posting question	169
Tab. 17: Overview on the preselected brand communities	174
Tab. 18: Brand communities for the empirical study	175
Tab. 19: Sample structure of the empirical study	181
Tab. 20: Comparison of variance- vs. covariance-based methods	190
Tab. 21: Flowchart of the analysis of the behavioral attributes	192
Tab. 22: Flowchart of the analysis of the outer model	195

Tab. 23: Flowchart of the analysis of the inner model	199
Tab. 24: Presence of selected items (top-two box).....	203
Tab. 25: Comparison of behavioral attributes	207
Tab. 26: Results of the Mann-Whitney-U-test.....	212
Tab. 27: Membership in social networks.....	213
Tab. 28: Rotated component matrix of the exogenous variables	221
Tab. 29: Rotated component matrix of the endogenous variables	222
Tab. 30: Modified set of hypotheses on the behavioral attributes	224
Tab. 31: Modified set of hypotheses on the performance impact	226
Tab. 32: Indicators per sample after EFA and analysis of the factor structure	230
Tab. 33: Results of the outer model for the Rezeptwiese members.....	231
Tab. 34: Results of the outer model for the Knorr Family members.....	231
Tab. 35: Results of the outer model of the MeinMaggi members	232
Tab. 36: Results of the outer model of the toonity members	232
Tab. 37: Results of the outer model of the Rezeptwiese non-members.....	233
Tab. 38: Results of the outer model of the Knorr Family non-members.....	233
Tab. 39: Results of the outer model of the MeinMaggi non-members.....	234
Tab. 40: Results of the structure model of the Rezeptwiese member sample	237
Tab. 41: Results of the structure model of the Knorr Family member sample	237
Tab. 42: Results of the structure model of the MeinMaggi member sample	238
Tab. 43: Results of the structure model of the toonity member sample	238

Tab. 44: Results of the structure model of the Rezeptwiese non-members	243
Tab. 45: Results of the structure model of the Knorr Family non-members	244
Tab. 46: Results of the structure model of the MeinMaggi non-members ...	244
Tab. 47: Results of the hypotheses on the behavioral attributes.....	254
Tab. 48: Results of hypotheses on the path model.....	257
Tab. 49: Results of hypotheses on the moderator „posting“	258

Abbreviations

AGOF – Arbeitsgemeinschaft Online Forschung

ANOVA – analysis of variance

cf. – compare

B2B – business-to-business

B2C – business-to-consumer

EFA – explorative factor analysis

e.g. – exempli gratia

et al. – et aliae

etc. – etcetera

et seq. – et sequens

Fig. – figure

FMCG – Fast Moving Consumer Goods

KMO – Kaiser-Meer-Okin

LISREL - Linear Structural Relationships

LV – latent variable

M – Million

MSA – measure of sampling adequacy

MV – manifest variable

n.a. – not applicable

n.s. – not specified

p. – page

pp. – pages

PLS – Partial Least Squares

SEM – Structural Equation Model

SNS – Social Networking Sites

SPSS – Superior Performing Software System

Tab. – table

vs. – versus

WOM – word-of-mouth

1 Introduction

1.1 Scope and Problem Description

The dynamic development of information and communication technology, especially the rapid spread of the internet, presents marketing management with numerous challenges.¹ Today, consumers are confronted with more and more information sources. In addition to traditional mass media, such as television, newspapers, and radio, modern information technology, as smart phones or android-tablets and the internet allow to retrieve information and to connect and communicate with others whenever and wherever the need or desire arises. Marketers need to adapt to this new environment and develop new strategies and techniques to communicate successfully with their target groups and to promote their brands. Therefore, interactivity between brands and consumers becomes ever more common in marketing. The internet and internet-based communities play an important role in this context.

The ongoing growth of the internet over the past quarter century has had an essential impact on consumers' communication patterns and how they receive and use new information. According to the AGOF internet facts, more than 51 million people in Germany—more than 73% of the population—are online. In 2011, the internet is accessed as both a source of information and a means of communicating. Herewith 83.7% of the internet users claim they use the web to search for information and 68.3% shop online. In the latter, preparing to shop by means of searching for specific information about a good plays an important role. All age groups are represented, with more than 90% of 14-39 year olds and 86.3% of 40-49 year olds claiming to be internet users; 73.1% of the 50-59 year olds and 36.1% of the above-60 year olds are online.²

¹ Cf. Meffert et al. (2008), p. 9.

² AGOF internet facts 2011-1; remark: AGOF refers to the German population above 14 years of age.

Perceptive vendors can use the internet to their advantage, capitalizing on its new modes of communication to connect with consumers directly, especially for the purposes of marketing and selling branded goods.

One new communication approach is seen with the rise of the brand community, a virtual, special interest venue that offers the potential for the company to connect with those consumers who either show high identification with a specific brand or exhibit at least a general interest in this brand.³

Starting in the automotive sector with the popular and successful community of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners and enthusiasts, brand communities have today reached a high level of popularity that spans almost all product categories. In addition, marketers of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) have discovered this tool for relationship building with their customers.

In contrast with conventional (online) advertising, brand communities target not only the relationship between the customer and the brand, but also the relationship shared between customers, which can have an impact on each individual customer's behavior.⁴ Successful and efficient brand management needs to manage both types of relationships. Marketers face new challenges in creating long-term relationships and increasing loyalty among customer networks, in addition to managing, as well as controlling, brand awareness.⁵

1.2 Objective of the Study and Delimitation of the Research Object

In order to successfully establish and operate brand communities as a method by which to market the product and to communicate with the consumer, we must seek to understand the consumers who will involve themselves with those brand communities. We must ask several key questions: which characteristics define the consumer who is attracted to the

³ von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 133.

⁴ Cf. Algesheimer (2004), p. 406.

⁵ Cf. Algesheimer (2004), p. 407.

product and its brand community; do brand communities really work to promote the product; and which consumers are using the communities?

Considerable work has been done on defining the brand-community phenomenon and on questioning the bonding within such communities, the impact of brand commitment, involvement, or loyalty, as well as on questions of value creation in terms of both developing innovative products and on generating of consumer insights.

As a standard practice, companies operating brand communities mainly ask their members only for general and socio-demographic data. From a marketing perspective, more revealing characteristics pertaining to consumer behavior very often remain unexplored and unanswered by empirical research.

To remedy this lack of knowledge, this study tries to answer the following four questions:

1. Can consumers involved in brand communities be characterized by specific behavioral attributes?
2. Do these behavioral attributes have an impact on the performance measures of customer retention: buying intention, intended recommendation, and tolerance of price increase?
3. Are there significant differences between brand-community members and those consumers who are simply visiting the brand-community site, the so called non-members?
4. Do brand-community members show a higher level of customer retention in the sense of purchase intention, intention to recommend, and tolerance of price increase, compared with those non-members?

Especially for high-involvement brands in the automotive sector as well as in information technology and consumer electronics, brand communities are a very popular and common marketing tool.

More and more companies from the FMCG sector are discovering that brand communities can be relevant for their purposes of marketing communication. FMCG are generally low-involvement products⁶, low-ticket items such as body care, home care or food products, bought by consumers frequently and with great routine. According to the Definitions Committee of the American Marketing Association, these convenience goods are purchased frequently, immediately, and with a minimum of effort.⁷ Because brand communities in this sector are a rather new development, the relevance of this marketing tool for FMCG manufacturers has been little investigated.

Therefore, the focus of this study is on brand communities in the FMCG market. Four official—meaning initiated and operated by the brand-owning company—brand communities from leading FMCG manufacturers are investigated empirically:

- Three brand communities run by food manufacturers: Rezeptwiese by Dr. Oetker, Knorr Family, MeinMaggi.
- One brand community for writing and drawing material: toonity by STABILO.

Herewith Dr. Oetker and STABILO supported the empirical research by promoting the survey on their community platforms.

The aim of this research is to identify an unambiguous profile of attributes, which will have significant impact on the buying decisions of brand-community members and their decisions whether to recommend the brand.

An empirical study of this nature allows for comparing brand-community members with non-members, i.e., consumers who may visit the community platform without having officially subscribed.

⁶ Cf. Laurent / Kapferer (1985), p. 45 et seq.

⁷ Cf. American Marketing Association—Dictionary (online).

A structural equation model is used to analyze the theoretically deduced hypotheses concerning the relevance of the behavioral attributes on the economic success of each brand.

Based on the results obtained, implications for marketing science and marketing management are deduced. These results offer indications for the efficient use, design, and management of brand communities.

1.3 Structure of the Paper

Figure 1 provides an overview of the structure of this paper, which is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 gives a general overview, addresses the need for the study, poses the research questions, and offers the methodology that will be used.

Chapter 2 focuses on the theoretical foundations of the brand-community approach as well as on the relevant aspects of customer behavior and customer retention. It provides definitions of the main terms and gives an overview of the current state of research.

Starting with the definition of the term *brand community* in Section 2.1, which derives from “brand” and “community,” an overview of the main perspectives of this marketing tool is presented, and the role of brand communities within FMCG is elucidated.

Furthermore, this chapter provides an overview of the relevant aspects of customer behavior (Section 2.2), and customer retention (Section 2.3). Finally, Section 2.4 will summarize the delimitation of the research object.

Chapter 3 describes the framework of the empirical study. Section 3.1 explains the conceptualization of the model. Based on the findings from Chapter 2, the hypotheses are deduced in Section 3.2.

Section 3.3 investigates the operationalization of the research model. It offers a detailed description of the marketing scales selected to measure

each construct which will be investigated in the empirical study. Section 3.4 provides information about the development and design of the questionnaire.

Chapter 4 presents the empirical study. In addition to the data selection and data editing described in 4.1, this section provides information about the brand communities involved in the study, as well as a summary of the socio-demographic structure of the samples.

Section 4.2 gives a description of the methodology and approach of the analysis, Section 4.3 presents the results. To answer the four key questions of this study, the approach and the presentation of the results are divided into three steps:

- First, an analysis of the behavioral attributes is conducted to investigate whether the defined attributes are relevant for brand-community members– especially in comparison with non-members.
- Second, an analysis of the measurement model of the selected constructs is offered, which provides information about their relevance within the model.
- Third, an analysis of the relationship between the selected constructs is explored, as well as the economic impact of the behavioral attributes on the brand success.

An interpretation and summary of the results can be found in Section 4.4.

Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the study's key findings as they pertain to marketing science and marketing management. It gives an overview on the limitations of the study as well as directions for future research.

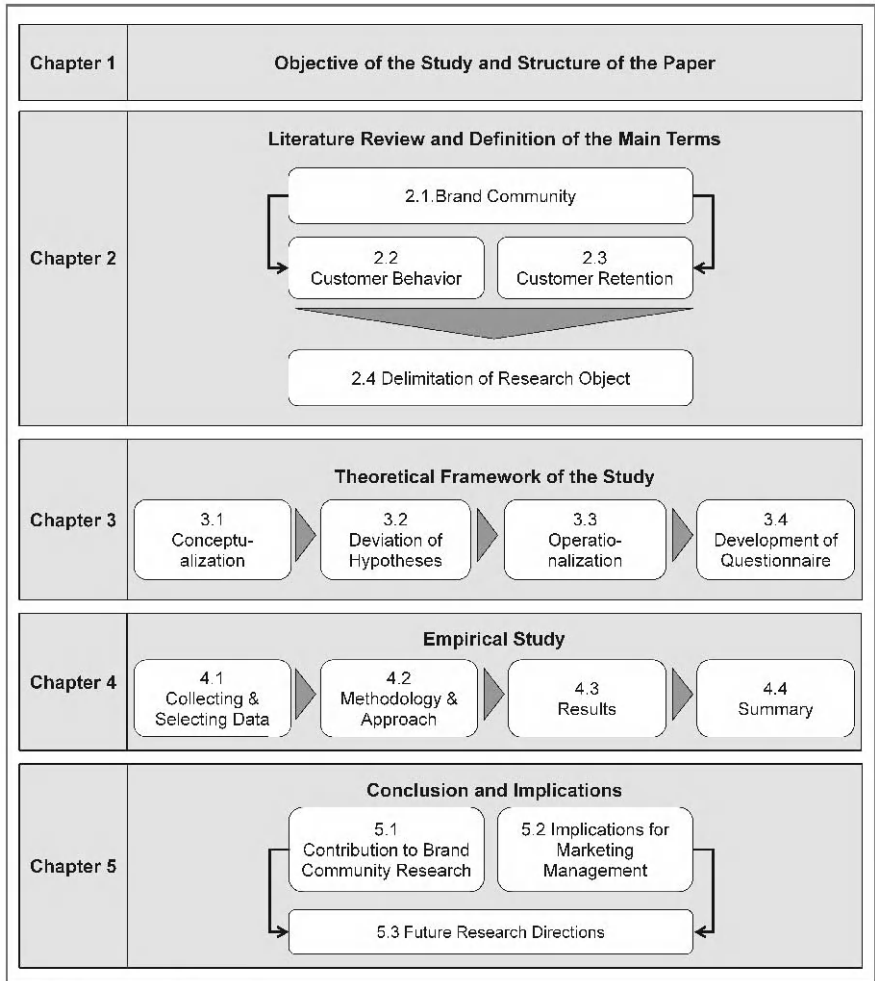


Fig. 1: Structure of the study

2 Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

2.1 Brand Communities

The term *brand community* consists of the two constitutive components: *brand* and *community*. Before providing an overview of the current research and definitions of the brand-community phenomenon, the two base terms—community and brand / branding—are described.

In the physical world, various forms of communities can be found. Thus, a classification will provide a better understanding.

The term brand community will be clarified, with a focus on existing research findings and a definition of the term offered, as understood within this study, to delimit the research object.

The relevance of brand community on the FMCG market and its application as a marketing tool concludes this section.

2.1.1 The Brand

2.1.1.1 Definition of the Term *Brand*

According to the American Marketing Association, “a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors.”⁸ This rather technical definition aims at the action of the seller or manufacturer of a good. The brand definition of Aaker is in line with this perspective. He argues that a brand is “a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or packaging design) intended to

⁸ American Marketing Association—Dictionary (online).

identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of seller, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors.”⁹

Bruhn defines a brand as goods and services that¹⁰:

- Allow differentiation because of a distinctive branding.
- Promise a certain quality level because of a systematical sales concept.
- Offer a long-term valuable benefit and satisfy consumers’ expectations.
- Reach an effective and long-lasting success in the market.

Brands can be physical goods, but also services, primary products, ideas, or human beings can achieve the status of a brand.¹¹

However, a brand can be understood in much broader terms, as “something that has actually created a certain amount of awareness, reputation, prominence, and so on in a marketplace.”¹² This second definition also integrates a consumer perspective.

Brands are more than just products. Even though different brands can satisfy the same need, they are made to differentiate products from each other. They provide orientation for consumers. Sherry formulates a brand as “a contract, a relationship, a guarantee; an elastic covenant with loose rules of engagement”¹³ between the customer, the brand and the company. This implies the fact that the customer-brand relationship goes far beyond a purely economic transaction. “A brand is something that lives in your head.

⁹ Aaker (1991), p. 7

¹⁰ Cf. Bruhn (2004), p. 145.

¹¹ Cf. Esch (2010), p. 18.

¹² Keller (2008), p. 2.

¹³ Sherry (2005), p. 41

It's a promise that links a product or service to a consumer,"¹⁴ hereby "it implies trust, consistency [and] a defined set of expectations."¹⁵

As Ogilvy stated in 1951, brands are "the consumer's idea of a product."¹⁶ On the other hand, according to Kroeber-Riel, a brand lives based on the inner pictures created in consumers' minds, whereby the inner pictures express the consumers' product knowledge, which has an impact on attributes, as well as on the customer's behavior.¹⁷

The brand enjoys a special legal protection. From a legal point of view, a brand or brand mark can be understood as a combination of elements that allow for distinguishing a specific good from others.¹⁸ These can include signs, especially words including personal names, images, letters, numbers, or sounds, as well as the three-dimensional designs including shape of a good and its packaging, as well as further characteristics, such as colors or color-combinations.

As Desai and Waller state, "brands are complex strategic tools that perform a variety of functions including creating demand, circumventing middlemen so that a company can reach consumers directly, controlling prices, managing quality, providing a platform for trademark enforcement, defining national identities, and satisfying a consumer's emotional and psychological needs. These functions, separately or in combination, allow a company to differentiate products, avoid commoditization of its products or services, and distinguish the company and its goods or services from its competition."¹⁹

¹⁴ Adamson (2006), p. 3

¹⁵ Davis (2002), p. 3

¹⁶ Cf. Esch (2010), p. 23.

¹⁷ Cf. Kroeber-Riel (1986), p. 83.

¹⁸ Cf. §3 Abs. 1 MarkenG.

¹⁹ Desai / Waller (2010), p. 1449

2.1.1.2 A Brand Owner and Consumer Perspective on the Brand

According to the German Patent and Trademark Office, 69,069 requests for registration of new brand marks were made in Germany in 2009.²⁰ This is only one indicator of the importance and the value of a brand.

The value of a brand is reflected in its brand equity. According to Aaker, brand equity depends on brand loyalty, awareness of the brand and its name, its perceived quality, brand associations, and other characteristics, such as trademarks or patents.²¹ The higher the brand equity, the more valuable the brand is for the company. A strong brand has the ability to attain “real and sustainable competitive advantage ... [and creates] significant barriers to competitors.”²² Srinivasan, Hsu, and Fournier confirm this statement. They examined the effect of customer-based brand equity, market-based-, and financial-based brand equity on firm risk. According to their findings, a positive relationship between these three dimensions of brand equity and firm risk can be expected.²³

The monetary value of a brand represents an important asset for the brand owner. For companies such as Google, Amazon, or even Coca-Cola an important part of their assets are the intangible assets and goodwill, which includes trademarks. Accordingly, both protecting and attentively managing the brand are highly important activities—even when considered from a purely financial perspective. Herewith, “brands and brand management have become a central feature of the modern economy...brands...represent powerful, valuable tools for business.”²⁴

Each year, the statistics of the most highly valued brands show impressive figures. The 10 most valuable brands of the year 2011 are listed in Figure 2.

²⁰ Cf. Deutsches Patent- und Markenamt (2009), p. 21.

²¹ Cf. Kotler (1994), p. 445.

²² Joachimsthaler / Aaker (1997), p. 50

²³ Cf. Srinivasan et al. (2011), pp. 13, 14, and 16.

²⁴ Desai / Waller (2010), p. 1427



Fig. 2: Most highly valued global brands (2011)²⁵

Madden, Fehle, and Fournier support a value-based view on brands. Based on their findings, creating strong brands generates value also for the shareholders of the firm by limited risk.²⁶ For this reason, branding does not mean simply putting a name or logo on a product. To Aaker's point of view, a "brand is part of a coherent strategy, supported by actively managed and adequately funded-brand-building programs."²⁷

Brands (or branding) represent value not only for the manufacturer or seller but also for the consumer. From the manufacturer's point of view, a brand fulfills the following roles²⁸:

- Offers legal protection of unique product features (including color coding and packaging), and adds credibility and legitimacy to a claim,

²⁵ Millward Brown (2011): BrandZ™ Top 100 Ranking.

²⁶ Cf. Madden et al. (2006), pp. 232/233

²⁷ Cf. Aaker (2007), p. 9.

²⁸ Cf. Keller (2008), p. 7; Esch (2010), p. 24; Mullins et al. (2005), p. 249; Aaker (2007), pp. 10-12.

- Offers identification and differentiation against competition, and symbolizes ownership,
- Signals the quality level because of the attributes and values connected with the brand itself and the company behind it,
- Represents a competitive advantage by endowing it with unique associations that protect the brand against private labels or retailer brands,
- Increases trade acceptance, and protects pricing and trade margins,
- Can be used as a platform for new products (brand or line extensions) or for licensing,
- Benefits from marketing activities' halo-effects that strengthen the brand as a whole, and can therefore enhance visibility,
- Helps communication more efficient and feasible,
- Is a financial asset.

On the other hand, a brand helps consumers and gives guidance in terms of²⁹:

- Delivering identification and orientation,
- Signaling quality and its use as a symbolic device,
- Reduction of risk,
- Promise, bonding, or connection with the manufacturer.

Brands offer identification and orientation to their consumers. This aspect has two implications: The first aspect is rational and depicts the physical sense of knowing what to buy and where to find it, as well as having created one's own experiences with the brand. The second aspect is emotional or psychological. It can be depicted in, e.g., the riding of a Harley-Davidson motorbike symbolizes a specific attitude and set of values. Thus, buying and using certain brands can also mean identifying with the brand's values and its brand personality.

²⁹ Cf. Keller (2008), p. 7.

The brand personality represents a “set of human characteristics associated with the brand³⁰”. Aaker confirmed in her research five key attributes of brand personality³¹:

1. Sincerity: down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, cheerful,
2. Excitement: daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date,
3. Competence: reliable, intelligent, successful,
4. Sophistication: upper-class,
5. Ruggedness: outdoorsy, tough.

As mentioned by Keller, the attributes and characteristics of the brand help consumers to distinguish between brands. Therefore consumers can perceive brands “as being modern, old, fashioned, lively or exotic.”³²

Brands enable consumers’ self-expression. Furthermore, they can reach a religious status for the consumer. Shacher, Erdem, Cutright, and Fitzimons confirmed in their research a negative relationship between religiosity and brand reliance for those brands which enable self-expression—not for functional brands. They found out that for those consumers with low or no religiosity, brands can reach a similar function.³³

Finally, the brand always stands for the brand-owning company. As stated by Fioroni and Titterton, it describes the relationship “which is established between the consumer and the company.”³⁴ This can be very valuable if brands are well-perceived and can lead to cross-selling opportunities for other brands of the same company. However, there are also risks. One example was the call for a boycott of Shell Oil Company in 1995 because of its plan to dump the offshore drilling platform Brent Spar close to the Shetland Islands. As a result, in Germany Shell suffered a 20%-to-30%

³⁰ Cf. Aaker (1997), p. 347

³¹ Cf. Aaker (1997), p. 352.

³² Cf. Keller (2008), p. 86

³³ Cf. Shachar et al. (2010), p. 14

³⁴ Fioroni / Titterton (2009), p. 48

decline in sales.³⁵ As mentioned by Kay, strong brands affect consumer experience in a powerful way and can therefore become targets of attack, such as criticism or—as in the case of Shell—consumer boycotts.³⁶ This indicates that brands also have the potential to empower consumers in the sense of being either objects of desire or conversely, targets of rebellion.

Buying well-known brands helps consumers reduce the risks of being dissatisfied with a product; thus, the reduction of risk in the buying decision represents a very important feature, from a consumer's perspective. Several types of risks can be distinguished³⁷:

- Functional risk concerning the product performance and quality,
- Physical risk concerning the physical well-being or health of the consumer,
- Financial risk concerning its value for the money,
- Social risk in terms of acceptance and appreciation within the social peer group of the buyer,
- Psychological risk by affecting the mental well-being of the buyer,
- Time risk in case of failure, which results in opportunity costs of finding satisfying alternatives.

Consumers do not care whether they are dealing with a traditional branded product or with private labels, or retailer brands, which have already reached brand status. No longer does the product's origin, or its manufacturer or seller, represent the decision criteria for consumers. Today, brands live in the consumer mind and its imagination. Consumers buy brand name goods because they hold a particular image and perception of the product that is

³⁵ Cf. Kintzinger (1995).

³⁶ Cf. Kay (2006), p. 756

³⁷ Cf. Keller (2008), p. 8.

meaningful to them in some way. This is especially the case for well-established, strong brands with a clear brand image.³⁸

Finally, brand owners and consumers cannot be understood separately from each other. The exchange between them concerning the brand is very important. The brand owner represents the internal target group of the brand, which is responsible for the definition of the brand identity or the self-perception of the brand. The brand identity is the theoretical framework of the brand management. On the other hand, consumers as the external target group develop the brand image in their minds. Herewith the brand associations play an essential role, or as expressed by Aaker, they are the “heart and soul of the brand”³⁹ constituting the foundation of customer based brand equity⁴⁰. The brand identity can be called strong if consumers apprehend and internalize the communicated self-perception of the brand.⁴¹ Figure 3 illustrates this exchange process.

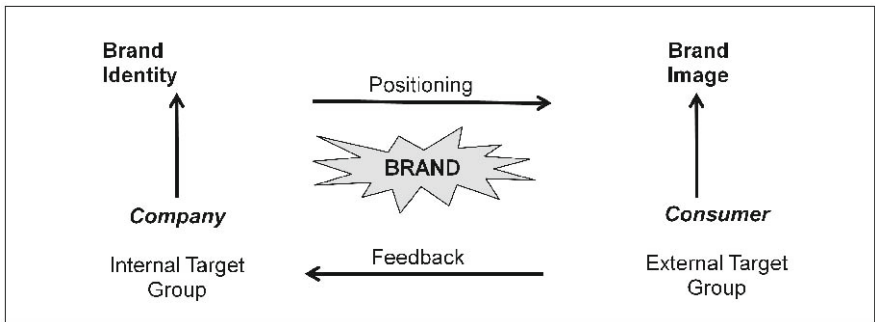


Fig. 3: Interaction of brand identity and brand image⁴²

³⁸ Cf. Esch (2010), pp. 20-21.

³⁹ Aaker (1996), p. 8

⁴⁰ Cf. Hsieh (2004), p. 33

⁴¹ Cf. Sattler / Voelckner (2007), p. 55 et seq.

⁴² Sattler / Voelckner (2007), p. 56 referring to Burmann / Blinda / Nitschke (2003), p. 5.

To summarize these aspects on brands from a company and a consumer perspective, brands can be understood as rather complex constructs or even symbols, capable of conveying up to six levels of meaning⁴³:

- Attributes: Brands are connected with attributes, which often serve as the positioning platform (e.g.: Rolex = expensive).
- Benefits: Benefits represent consumers' reason to buy. Herewith consumers translate attributes into benefits (e.g.: expensive = good quality).
- Values: Brands represent the values of the brand owner. Consumers feel attracted to certain brands, whose values conform to those represented by the brand-owning company (e.g., Apple, Nike).
- Cultures: Brands might represent a specific culture and can stand for certain characteristics or values of a country (e.g., the American way of life).
- Personality: Brands can project a certain personality and stand for a special type of person or object, etc. The personality of a brand can be also strongly linked to spokespeople or celebrities (e.g., George Clooney for Nespresso).
- User: Brands are designed for special target groups composed of consumers whose beliefs correspond with the values, culture, and personality of the brand (e.g., organic food brands such as Yogi Tea).

The challenge for marketers is to provide meaning for the brand by defining the different levels of the brand strategy and by protecting it in the sense of aligning all activities.

2.1.1.3 Classification of Brands

Brands can be categorized either by particular brand attributes or by their brand architecture as shown in Table 1.

⁴³ Cf. Kotler (1994), p. 444.

Category Attribute	Brand Types	Examples
Brand seller (institutional position)	Manufacturer's brand Retail brand / private label	Kellogg's IKEA, Tandil (Aldi)
Type of good	Consumer goods brand Industrial goods brand Service brand Internet brand	Kellogg's, Adidas Siemens, Würth DHL, Allianz Google, Facebook
Vertical distribution	B2B-brand (pre-product) B2C-brand (final product)	Intel, GE, BASF Adidas, HP
Number of products / product categories	Individual brand Family brand Corporate or company brand	Red Bull Nivea, Tesa, Knorr Maggi, Dr. Oetker, STABLO
Geographic distribution	Regional brand National brand International brand Global brand	Vilsa, Hansano Schwartau Hershey's, Kellogg's Coca-Cola
Sensors	Word Logo Word-logo-mix Characters / figures Sound Taste Smell	Siemens Lacoste Crocodile, Shell Adidas (name and stripes) 4711 Jingles of German Telecom, Beck's Maggi Würze
Price differentiation	Premium-price brand Mid-price brand Discount brand	Persil Weißer Riese Spee
Brand Owner / manufacturer	Proprietary brand Nonproprietary brand Licensed brand	Bahlsen Leibnizkeks Palazzo Schoko-Keks Coca-Cola

Tab. 1: Brand categorization⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Own presentation referring to Hofbauer / Schmidt (2007), p. 17 referring to Linxweiler (2004), p. 79, Bruhn (1994), p. 32; Bruhn (2004), p. 146.

First, the brand attribute *institutional position of the brand seller* is one means of categorizing. Some brands still represent the traditional idea of a branded good: the brand owner is also the manufacturer, seller, and distributor responsible for complete brand management. On the other hand, retail brands or “private labels” are owned by retail companies, often manufactured by third party suppliers or even manufacturers of branded goods. Originally used as lower-priced alternative brands, many private labels nowadays have strongly increased their quality perception and have reached full brand status in consumers’ minds. They are no longer merely me-too products and some have even reach the position of innovative leader (e.g., BioBio, the first low-price organic food brand in German retail).

Another way of classifying brands by their brand attributes is according to the *type of good*, which differentiates among consumer good brands, industrial good brands, service brands, and internet brands, the last offering products or sells services only online.

A very similar approach is classification according to the *vertical distribution* of a brand. There are B2B (business-to-business) brands, which are mainly industrial goods brands sold to commercial or industrial customers and used in the production process, and B2C (business-to-consumer) or “consumer good brands,” which focus on the consumer market.

Another classification is based on the brand architecture focusing the *number of product categories* that are offered under the umbrella of one brand. Corporate brands represent the highest hierarchical level because it includes the most products under the roof of the brand. In Germany, for legal reasons, the company name must always be mentioned on the product package.⁴⁵ The second level is called family brands. This term applies to brands available in more than one product category. However, family brands

⁴⁵ Remark: For example, for the packaging of food products in Germany, to mention the company name is regulated in *Verordnung für die Kennzeichnung von Lebensmitteln* (LMKV) §3 (1.2).

do not necessarily include the name of the company or corporation.⁴⁶ The name of the family brand is usually mentioned on the packaging as product name. Individual brands represent the third level. They are restricted to a single product category. As an example Red Bull has to be mentioned, which is limited to energy drinks.

Geographical distribution can also be a classification criterion, starting with only locally distributed brands that can be found only in certain regions and extending to global brands that can be found worldwide, such as Coca-Cola.

Brands can also be differentiated by a *sensory type of branding*. Brands can be purely visible as a word mark (e.g., Mercedes-Benz), a logo (e.g., Nike swoosh), or a combination of word and logo. It is possible that some are unique enough that they can be distinguished by other senses, such as smell, sound, or taste, resulting in the brand being unambiguously recognizable.

The *price differentiation* between brands can also allow distinction. Sometimes manufacturers launch several brands within the same product category, e.g., Henkel KGaA produces three detergent brands Persil, Weißer Riese, and Spee in Germany. Apart from specific differences of the attributes (e.g., formulation, perfume, brand image), the pricing is the main differentiator. There are premium-price, mid-price, and entry-level price—or so called discount brands.

Finally, brands can be distinguished by their *brand owner or manufacturer*. Proprietary brand are made, sold, and distributed exclusively by the brand-owning manufacturer of the product, whereas for nonproprietary brands the manufacturer does not grant exclusive territory. Licensed brands can also be found in this category scheme. In this case, production and distribution are not managed by the brand owner but by the licensee under guidelines

⁴⁶ Cf. Keller (2008), p. 447.

clearly defined in the license contract. The licensee must pay a license fee to the brand owner.

The brands integrated in this study are characterized as manufacturer's brands with a clear distribution focus on consumers. They are distributed nationally or internationally, and are part of family or company brands.

2.1.2 The Community

2.1.2.1 Definition of the Term *Community*

In 1887, Tönnies defined the German term *Gemeinschaft*, as each individual oriented personal activities and thoughts toward a higher social purpose. For him, *Gemeinschaft* is characterized by familiarity, common rituals and symbols, and the aspiration of a community toward achieving common goals. He distinguishes three types of communities: blood (family), location (neighborhood), and spirit (friendship).⁴⁷ Herewith *Gemeinschaft* should be understood as a living organism."⁴⁸

Many definitions for community can be found in the literature. Hillery classified 94 definitions in 1955. Herewith, he mentioned social interaction as a key element, followed by a strong bonding and physical proximity.⁴⁹ The majority of them show four main characteristics⁵⁰:

1. Self-sufficiency (independence and differentiation from others outside the community),
2. Common life,
3. Consciousness of kind,
4. Possession of common ends, norms, and means.

⁴⁷ Cf. Tönnies (1974), pp. 7-9.

⁴⁸ Cf. Tönnies (1974), p. 8.

⁴⁹ Cf. Hillery, G. A. (1955), p. 118

⁵⁰ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), pp. 20-22.

Muniz and O'Guinn build on these findings and define three commonalities for communities. They write, the most important element is consciousness of kind, which is understood as "the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community."⁵¹ The second commonality is rituals and traditions that represent the "process by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community."⁵² Finally, communities are marked by the sense of moral responsibility, which is understood as "sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to individual members."⁵³

Algesheimer summarizes these findings in his community definition: Communities are social networks of individuals who are in continuous interaction. They influence one another within a specific time period and develop a sense of togetherness. The social interaction between members is facing a well-understood focus around a common purpose sharing identity, common ownership and common interests.⁵⁴

Today, communities are independent from local restrictions.⁵⁵ Thanks to the internet and other modern communication tools, communities can increasingly develop in the virtual, online world. On the one hand, new media results in isolation and a sense of strong individualization, because face-to-face and real-time contact is no longer needed for communication. On the other hand, new media can be a driver for the development of new types of social relationships, such as virtual communities.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 413.

⁵² Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 421.

⁵³ Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 413.

⁵⁴ Cf. Algesheimer (2006), p. 48

⁵⁵ Cf. Algesheimer (2006), p. 66

⁵⁶ Cf. Cova / Cova (2002), p. 596.

Muniz and O'Guinn write that a "community became more than place. It became a common understanding of a shared identity."⁵⁷ Communities seem to become the online extension of the stage of social life. This is especially the case for those individuals with high involvement for the community. They feel a big need to get into and identify with these social fellowships to enjoy life. They can be understood as fans of the respective community.⁵⁸

Therefore, a community can be understood in the internet age as "a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds"⁵⁹, as stated by Bender. This definition means the overcoming of loneliness by connection with others either locally or even wide-area.

With focus on internet, Rheingold defined virtual—online communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace"⁶⁰.

2.1.2.2 Classification of Communities

In the literature, several classification approaches concerning the community phenomenon can be found.⁶¹ One of the most cited classifications is the one by Hagel and Armstrong. They distinguish four categories of communities split based on the needs that they satisfy⁶²:

- Communities of Interest: focusing the intense exchange about a specific topic (e.g., cooking communities),

⁵⁷ Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 413.

⁵⁸ Cf. Bauer (2009), p.113.

⁵⁹ Bender (1978), p. 145 as cited by Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 413.

⁶⁰ Rheingold (1993), p. 5.

⁶¹ Cf. Hartleb (2009), pp. 11-14 referring to Hagel / Armstrong (1996), Schubert (2000), Markus (2002), Kholoshoie (2006), von Loewenfeld (2006).

⁶² Cf. Hagel / Hagel (1996), pp. 135-136.

- Communities of Relationships: build on common experiences, geographical proximity or common stories (e.g., lokalisten.de, stayfriends.de),
- Communities of Fantasy: creating new, cyber worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft, Second Life); members interact as avatars, not with their true personality,
- Communities of Transaction: focusing on transaction relationship with no focus on social aspects (e.g., commercial communities, ebay).

Cova and Pace mention a different typology. They classify communities on the basis of the two dimensions: level of required investment, which can be weak, medium, or strong, and the retail strategy, which can be either niche, mixed, or large.⁶³ This perspective has its focus on the commercial perspective of communities and allows, therefore, classifying all types of brand related communities— regardless of whether firm established or consumer driven.

Most of these classifications refer to traditional community forms and do not take into account community development over the time. Therefore, von Loewenfeld developed a categorization method focused on modern communities, which increasingly exist virtually, are spontaneously established, and much more diverse in their topics.⁶⁴ These aspects are also of high relevance for the present research. For this reason, von Loewenfeld's classification scheme is explained in more detail in the following.

His framework consists of two dimensions⁶⁵:

⁶³ Cf. Cova / Pace (2006), p. 1091.

⁶⁴ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), pp. 44-47.

⁶⁵ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 44.

- First, the type of primary commonality, which refers to the approach of Cova, who differentiated among three concepts: brand community, consumption subcultures, and consumer tribes / brand tribes.⁶⁶
- Second, the focus of the community, which represents the community's development over time.

The first dimension, the *type of primary commonality*, distinguishes between three attributes as the basis for community membership⁶⁷:

- Common origin, which can be either geographical proximity or family relationship.
- Common (non-)physical characteristics, such as age, family situation, education level, phase of life, profession.
- Common interests.

The second dimension, *focus of the community*, reflects the three phases of community development⁶⁸:

- Focus on values: Mainly, traditional, non-commercial communities are based on common values, trust, and mutuality. The community itself represents a value as such.
- Focus on needs: This second phase in community development is characterized by the impact of industrialization and technical improvements. Community members strive for the satisfaction of functional (e.g., transactions, information), as well as individual needs (e.g., hedonism). This dimension focuses less on the community as a value as such, but rather its representation as a tool to satisfy the needs.
- Focus on values and needs: This phase represents the progression of the two previous stages in community development. The community

⁶⁶ Cf. Cova / Cova (2002), p. 603 and p. 612-616.

⁶⁷ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 44.

⁶⁸ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 44 et seq.

itself regains the state of a value, whereas functional and individual needs remain important for the members. In this cluster, both commercial and non-commercial communities can be found.

The community phenomenon started in a non-commercial manner, with a strong focus on the values represented by the community itself and its members. Over time, communities became increasingly commercial. After a transition phase, when communities had their focus mainly on members' needs—and no longer on the community values, today communities focus on both values and needs. These modern types of communities can be both commercial as well as purely non-commercial. The 3x3 matrix allows for classifying all types of communities—regardless whether they are purely private or commercial, with strong or weak rules and rituals.⁶⁹ Figure 4 provides an overview on von Loewenfeld's matrix.

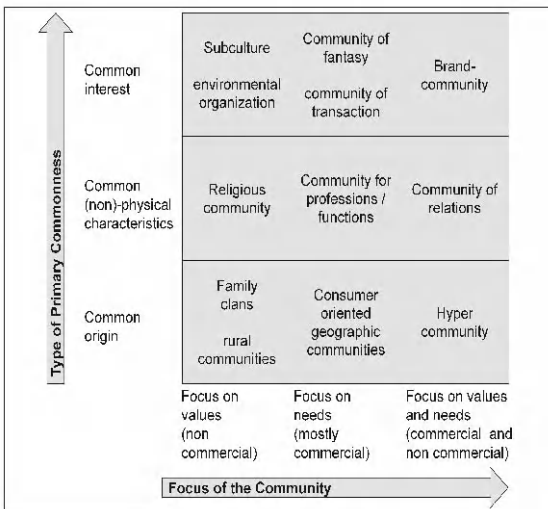


Fig. 4: Community classification scheme⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 45 et seq.

⁷⁰ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 46.

Brand communities are positioned top right. Membership is driven by a common interest in a brand-related topic—not necessarily in the brand itself. These topics can range from cooking (food brands) to clubbing (alcoholic drinks (e.g., Rezeptwiese by Dr. Oetker, Absolut VODKA on Facebook)). Brand communities by brands with high consumer-involvement such as automotive or IT brands are more focused on the brands themselves than on other topics (e.g., BMW M Power World or Audi R8 Pilots).

In modern communities that are mainly online driven, brand-community members focus on values and needs. For them, being a part of the community represents a value in and of itself. They are seeking information and opportunities for exchange with other, like-minded consumers.

The following section provides an overview on this specific type of community.

2.1.3 Brand Communities

As described in Section 2.1.2, brand communities represent a specific type within the universe of communities, which will be explained in the following sections in more detail.

Due to their commercial orientation, brand communities play an important role for marketers. Thanks especially to the technical improvements and the significant penetration rate of the internet, the number of brand communities in all product categories is continuously growing with no end in sight.

2.1.3.1 Brand Communities—Definitions

The Harley-Davidson community can be seen as the „mother“ of the brand-community phenomenon. Its members, a group of brand admirers and hardcore users, have been intensively studied by Schouten and McAlexander starting in the 1990s. They describe the “subcultures of consumption” as groups of members with complex and hierarchical social structures, committed to a group’s ideology of consumption, and committed to the same

set of values, which also represent the life mottoes of each member.⁷¹ Figure 5 shows the internet site of the Harley-Davidson owner group in the U.S.



Fig. 5: Harley-Davidson owner group (U.S. online site)⁷²

Hagel and Armstrong, who focus on the brand-community phenomenon in a very early stage, believe that people are attracted by—as they called them—virtual communities. They state that virtual communities offer their members an attractive environment in which to both express themselves and connect with others. Therefore, virtual communities fulfill the following four basic human needs⁷³:

- To enjoy one’s interests,
- To build interpersonal relationships,
- To live out one’s dreams and fantasies,
- To transact business.

Muniz and O’Guinn contradict the subculture approach. They disagree with the classification of brand community as subculture and place greater emphasis on the commercial aspect of brand community. They declare brand communities as explicitly commercial.

⁷¹ Cf. Schouten / McAlexander (1995), p. 50 et seq.

⁷² Source: www.harley-davidson.com, (07/23/2010).

⁷³ Cf. Hagel / Armstrong (2000), p. 32 et seq.

From their point of view, “a brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized, because at its center is a branded good or service.”⁷⁴

Brand communities help to embed brands in consumers’ daily lives. They are based on the connection between brand and consumer, and consumer and consumer.⁷⁵ Figure 6 shows the brand-community triad.

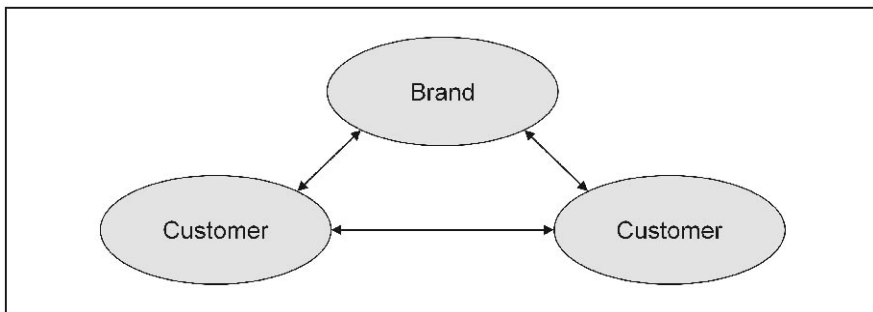


Fig. 6: Muniz and O'Guinn's brand-community triad⁷⁶

As described in Section 2.1.2.1, they mention three essential markers for communities, which are also valid for consumption-oriented brand communities⁷⁷:

- Consciousness of kind,⁷⁸
- Rituals and traditions,
- Moral responsibility.

⁷⁴ Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 412.

⁷⁵ Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 418.

⁷⁶ McAlexander et al. (2002), p. 39.

⁷⁷ Cf. Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 418.

⁷⁸ Remark: Muniz and O'Guinn define *consciousness of kind* as “the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community.” (cf. Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 413).

This model is enlarged by McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig in 2002. Based on their findings from the Harley-Davidson and the Jeep brand communities, they develop the customer-centric model of brand community. As shown in Figure 7, this model is based on a network of relationships between customers, brand, manufacturer / brand owner, and the product itself. “Each relationship connects to all the others through the central nexus of consumer experience, creating the holistic sense of a surrounding community. Moreover, each relationship acts as a personal linkage to the brand community. The more each relationship (within the model) is internalized as part of the customer’s life experience, the more the customer is integrated into the brand community, and the more loyal the customer is in consuming the brand.”⁷⁹

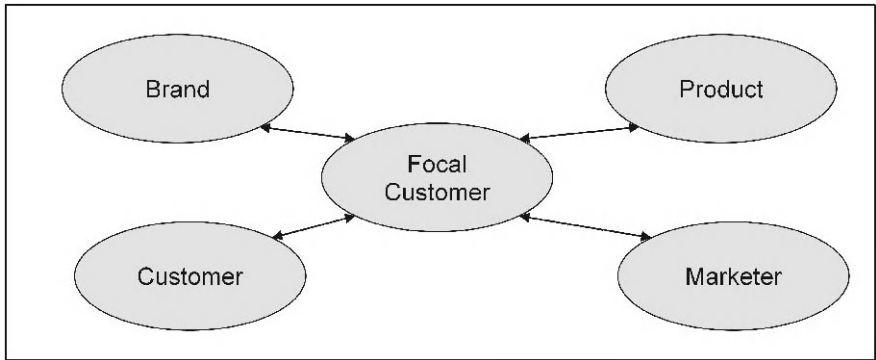


Fig. 7: Customer-centric model of brand community⁸⁰

The customer-centric model understands brand communities as appropriate marketing tools used to create consumer loyalty and establish long-term connections with the brand. The marketer therefore must play an active, supportive role, creating and facilitating interaction between all participants

⁷⁹ McAlexander et al. (2002), p. 48.

⁸⁰ McAlexander et al. (2002), p. 39.

of the network.⁸¹ To strengthen the customer connection with the brand community, the online activities must be supported by offline events.⁸²

Additionally, Bagozzi and Dholakia define brand communities as venues for consumer empowerment, which allow members to build relationships with other like-minded consumers who share interest in the brand. This leads to strong bonds between consumers and the brand and results in a positive impact on purchase behavior and brand loyalty.⁸³

Based on this approach, Dholakia and Algesheimer describe brand communities as social systems, characterized by four essential markers⁸⁴:

1. Members have consciousness of kind,
2. They share a sense of moral responsibility for other members and the community,
3. They know and accept the collective's rituals and traditions, and
4. They are part of a dynamic and active network.

The Latin School of Societing proposes an additional view on the community phenomenon. Cova recommends going "a step further in the understanding of the communal dimension of consumption by developing the concept of "linking value" of a product or a service."⁸⁵ His postmodern tribal marketing approach is founded on the idea that nowadays, consumers are searching for products and services that provide them with the freedom to connect with others temporarily. This connection can happen in what he terms postmodern tribes, groups that build on common emotions and passions and "exist in no other form but the symbolically and ritually manifested commitment of their members."⁸⁶

⁸¹ Cf. McAlexander et al. (2002), p. 51.

⁸² Cf. McAlexander et al. (2002), p. 49.

⁸³ Cf. Bagozzi / Dholakia (2006), p. 46,

⁸⁴ Cf. Dholakia / Algesheimer (2009), pp. 4-6.

⁸⁵ Cova (1997), p. 297,

⁸⁶ Cova / Cova (2002), p. 598.

He defines a tribe as “a network of heterogeneous persons—in terms of age, sex, income, etc.—who are linked by a shared passion or emotion; a tribe is capable of collective action, its members are not simple consumers, they are also advocates”⁸⁷ of the brand. Members share a common interest in the brand and “create a parallel social universe (...) with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary, and hierarchy.”⁸⁸

Cova shares Muniz and O’Guinn’s view that rituals and shared experiences are strong markers as well as the desire to connect with others and an aspiration for *we-ness*, which Muniz and O’Guinn call “consciousness of kind.”⁸⁹

In comparison with this approach, Cova and Cova state that “brand communities are explicitly commercial, whereas tribes are not. However, when a tribe is organized around a same passion for a cult-object such as the Harley-Davidson motorcycle, it exhibits many similarities with a brand community.”⁹⁰

The tribal approach focuses on the customer-customer relationship. The marketer functions as support between the customers with the aim fostering emotions and building long-term relationships and customer loyalty.⁹¹

Von Loewenfeld combines these approaches, devising a new definition of brand community. The following definition of a brand community is based on the triad approach of Muniz and O’Guinn: A brand community is an existing, special interest community with a focus on a specific brand that exists either on- or offline and that is able to interactively unify fans and brand lovers, as well as customers, by creating an environment with high-identification

⁸⁷ Cova / Cova (2002), p. 602.

⁸⁸ Cova / Pace (2006), p. 1089

⁸⁹ Cf. Cova / Cova (2002), p. 603.

⁹⁰ Cova / Cova (2002), p. 603.

⁹¹ Cf. Cova / Cova (2002), p. 613.

potential.⁹² Specific markers are the development of a strong sense of community as well as its own social identity. Ideally, in this community, functional and individual needs combine with traditional community values.

In this context, it is important that the brand community has a commercial purpose and a focus on one specific brand. The commercial orientation is important, because non-commercial brand-related communities cannot be controlled and managed by the marketer. They carry the risk that users will develop and distribute their own ideas about the brand, which are not necessarily in line with the official beliefs of the brand and might even extend to negative word-of-mouth (WOM).⁹³

Von Loewenfeld defines seven important characteristics brand communities exhibit⁹⁴:

1. Based on interests and geographically independent,
2. Offline and / or online,
3. Environment with high-identification potential,
4. Fans, admirers of the brand, and customers with a general interest in the brand,
5. Social interaction of brand-community members and between brand and members,
6. Sense of community and social identity,
7. Connection of values and needs.

Brand communities are distinct from other online communication approaches, which de facto compete for brand loyalty and high customer involvement.

The social interaction of brand-community members is a key distinguishing mark. This characteristic differentiates a brand community from a brand-

⁹² von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 133.

⁹³ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 127.

⁹⁴ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 131 et seq.

related website or a valued-customer club.⁹⁵ The valued-customer club is also brand-specified and offers consumers an environment with high-identification potential, providing information about the brand or brand-related topics. This marketing tool helps to increase customer retention by means of special offers exclusively for its members. As in brand communities, consumers may become members in the valued customer club, but the main difference is that members do not have the chance to exchange information. Often, even their possibilities to upload own content or give comments are limited.

In this study, a brand community is defined as a social network initiated by a company around its brand. It allows brand-interested customers to interact and exchange information with other customers, with the brand, and with the brand-owning company. Furthermore, the brand community provides the opportunity to build long-term relationships between all participants, which can even reach the state of friendship. The brand community is based on common interests and values shared by all participants that reflect the brand's key characteristics.

The following table provides an overview of brand-community definitions found in the literature.

⁹⁵ Cf. Algesheimer (2006), p. 410.

Author	Year	Definition
Muniz / O'Guinn	2001	"Brand communities are social entities that reflect the situated embeddedness of brands in the day-to-day lives of consumers and the way in which brands connect consumer to brand and consumer to consumer. Three essential markers of community (consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility) are present, but differences in their expression make brand communities something significant in their own right." (p. 418)
McAlexander / Schouten / Koenig	2002	"Brand community is customer-centric, (...) the existence and meaningfulness of the community inhere in customer experience rather than in the brand around which that experience revolves." (p. 39)
Cova / Pace	2006	Brand tribe = brand community: "Any group of people that possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe (subculture) rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary, and hierarchy." (p. 1089)
Bagozzi / Dholakia	2006	"Brand communities are venues where intense brand loyalty is expressed and fostered, and emotional connections with the brand forged in customers." (p. 45)
Von Loewenfeld	2006	A brand community is a location-independent, offline and / or online existing community focusing on a specific brand. Brand communities unify brand enthusiasts as well as customers with general interest in the brand, because they offer a high potential for identification. A strong sense of community and social identity are key characteristics. (p. 133)

Author	Year	Definition
Sicilia / Palazón	2008	“We can define a virtual brand community as a group of individuals with common interest in a brand who communicate with each other electronically in a platform provided by the company, which supports the brand.” (p. 257)
Dholakia / Algesheimer	2009	A brand community is “a collective of consumers organized around one particular brand, which is sustained through repeated online and/or offline social interactions and communication amongst its members who possess a consciousness of kind, feel moral responsibility toward one another, and embrace and propagate the collective’s rituals and traditions”.

Tab. 2: Overview of brand-community definitions

2.1.3.2 Brand Communities as Part of Social Media

By building intense networks between members, brand and company, brand communities are part of the social media.

Social media can be defined as “electronic media for social interaction ... [which allow] to transform and broadcast media monologues into social-media dialogues”⁹⁶. It combines all social-networking sites (SNSs) that allow internet users “to join, own and edit a personal profile page for publicly connect to other members, and to communicate with other members”⁹⁷. This description summarizes not only SNSs in the „classical sense“ (e.g., Facebook, Myspace, Xing, Google+), but also communication platforms like Twitter, YouTube, message boards, forums, blogs, as well as brand communities.

⁹⁶ Brennan / Schafer (2010), p. 13.

⁹⁷ Thelwall / Stuart (2010), p. 265 referring to Boyd / Ellison (2007).

Social Media is a consistently growing phenomenon with a high impact on both social life, but also on marketing activities.⁹⁸ The most popular and fastest growing social media is Facebook with more than 800 million active users. Herewith Facebook is the 3rd biggest „nation“ of the world after China and India. 50% of the Facebook members log on the network every day. Hereby more than 2 billion posts are commented or liked, and 250 million photos are uploaded every day.⁹⁹ Interestingly, more and more brands are discovering Facebook as platform for their social media activities building large networks of so called „friends“. One of the leading brand profiles within Facebook belongs to Coca-Cola with more than 34 million „friends“ in September 2011.¹⁰⁰ This example shows that platforms such as Facebook can be used as host for brand communities. Herewith the brand community can leverage the potential of the hosting network. Not only brand manufacturer themselves offer brand profiles / communities on Facebook, but also privately initiated brand profiles exist (e.g., www.facebook.com/nutellalovers, a community of consumers loving the brand Nutella).

Social media can be differentiated by the type of communication. This approach distinguishes between a one- and a two-way communication. Blogs, message boards or even YouTube provide the users by a mainly one-way communication. On the other hand, discussions in forums and also online communities have to be seen two-way, with social interaction of the members which resembles WOM communication.¹⁰¹ In both cases, social media allows “general users to go from being content consumers to content producers”¹⁰².

⁹⁸ Cf. Ang (2011), p. 31.

⁹⁹ Cf. <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. www.facebook.com/cocacola.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Stephen, Galah (2010), p. 11.

¹⁰² Brennan, Schafer (2010), p. 13.

There are three key functions of social media, which—depending on the social media approach—might be more or less pronounced¹⁰³:

- Networking: main objective is people-finding by supporting nonsocial interpersonal communication (e.g., Xing, LinkedIn).
- Socialization: support of informal social interaction between members (e.g., Twitter).
- Navigation: support of finding resources, such as videos, blogs, or even web pages, via interpersonal connections (e.g. YouTube, but also blogs or message boards).

Brand communities often have a focus on socialization, but can also allow navigation (e.g., finding recipes on Dr. Oetker's Rezeptwiese) and networking (e.g., finding people in your city to organize an offline cooking party as by Knorr). By means of the socializing function, brand communities allow members to communicate with each other, but also to exchange with the brand and the company. Herewith, brand communities represent probably one of the broadest types of social media, which offers consumers a wide range of functionalities.

In addition to the social exchange, SNSs can also facilitate education and information to satisfy users' content-related motives. Consumers actively seek out social media to get satisfaction of their motives or needs, which are either utilitarian or hedonic (e.g., facilitating interpersonal relationships or getting entertained).¹⁰⁴

From a marketer's point of view, SNS—especially the brand-community approach—can be easily used for marketing purposes, to promote brands. For this reason, social media can be understood as “an ongoing, persistent driver of media activity and sales activity”¹⁰⁵ and contributes to long-run

¹⁰³ Cf. Thelwall / Stuart (2010), p. 265 et seq.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Taylor et al. (2011), p. 260.

¹⁰⁵ Stephen / Galah (2010), p. 27.

sales growth. As shown by Stephen and Galah, especially forum activity in online communities proved sales impact and emphasizes the importance of consumers' social interaction.¹⁰⁶

2.1.3.3 Categorization of Brand Communities

Based on the definitions above, brand communities can be easily distinguished from other forms of community. Nevertheless, there are several designs and structures for brand communities in practice.

To identify the key differentiators, the author performed a content analysis of leading FMCG online brand communities. Herewith, five key categories could be identified characterizing the different types of brand community approaches found in practice:

- Initiator of the brand community,
- Content leadership,
- Type of access,
- Online vs. offline,
- Host.

Figure 8 summarizes the findings of the content analysis. The following sections provide further information about the each of the differentiators.

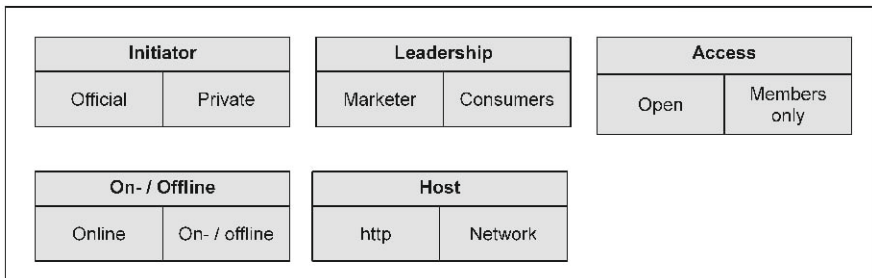


Fig. 8: Characteristics for brand-community categorization

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Stephen / Galah (2010), p. 27 et seq.

2.1.3.3.1 Initiator

A brand community can be initiated by either officially by the brand-owning company or as a private initiative by a group of brand enthusiasts or consumers.¹⁰⁷ Both variants can be found in practice.

The first group, with the marketer as initiator, is called *firm-managed* or *company-run community*.¹⁰⁸ They are often used as a tool to create customer loyalty.¹⁰⁹ The brand owner provides consumers and admirers of the brand with a platform that allows communication and exchange about the brand or brand-related topics. This type of brand community permits the marketer to control and influence brand-community members and to prevent negative effects, such as negative WOM.

The second type, the so called *customer-managed* or *privately-run community*¹¹⁰, is based on the consumers' collective interest in creating an exchange and communication platform.¹¹¹ Usually, these brand communities are places where brand lovers assemble, exchanging information and sharing their enthusiasm about the brand and their brand experiences. However, there are also negative examples (e.g., *ihatedell.net*, a brand community run by consumers disappointed about the computer brand DELL, which they use to exchange complains about products and services of DELL and provide one another with self-help in answer to problems). These non-company initiated communities "bear the risk of community members conveying brand information in a non-company-intended way"¹¹².

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Dholakia / Algesheimer (2009), p. 9 et seq.

¹⁰⁸ Von Loewenfeld uses the term *official* vs. *unofficial brand communities* (cf. Von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 127)

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Almeida et al. (2007), p. 645

¹¹⁰ Cf. Almeida et al. (2007), p. 645.

¹¹¹ Cf. Hennig-Thurau / Walsh (2003), p. 283.

¹¹² Stokburger-Sauer (2010), p. 363.

2.1.3.3.2 Driver / Leader

As can be observed in practice, official, firm-managed brand communities can be distinguished according to their driver. Brand communities can be driven either by the marketer or by their members.

Depending on how much freedom the marketer wants to give to the members and how much trust to place in them, a decision is made as to who assume the leadership role, providing most of the content, choosing the topics, and allowing comments or discussions.

Marketers that give the leadership to the brand-community members often argue that they want to increase the credibility of the brand community as a brand-related—not brand-dominated—communication platform. Therefore, customers are free to say what they want about the brand, but also about competitors. They are afraid that if is overly dominated by the marketer, consumers will believe it is purely being promoted as an advertising tool.¹¹³

Such marketers provide a framework allowing their members to upload their own content and to have extensive exchanges among one another. The brand integration into this type of community is often subtle or discreet. The brand has the role of a door-opener or host of the brand community's main topic. Some members even do not realize that the brand community is officially operated by a specific brand. Dr. Oetker's Rezeptwiese cooking and baking community represents a good example of this type of group as shown in Figure 9.

¹¹³ Cf. Dholakia / Vianello (2009), p. 8.



Fig. 9: Example of a member-driven brand community (Rezeptwiese by Dr. Oetker)¹¹⁴

If a marketer wants to make a significant impact on the brand community and push forward the brand into the minds of consumers' awareness, then the company keeps leadership to itself. This allows for control of platform content and avoids the possibility of negative WOM or even the promotion of competitive brands. An example here is the MeinMaggi cooking community by Nestlé (Figure 10).

¹¹⁴ Source: www.rezeptwiese.de, Dr. August Oetker Nahrungsmittel KG (02/19/2012).

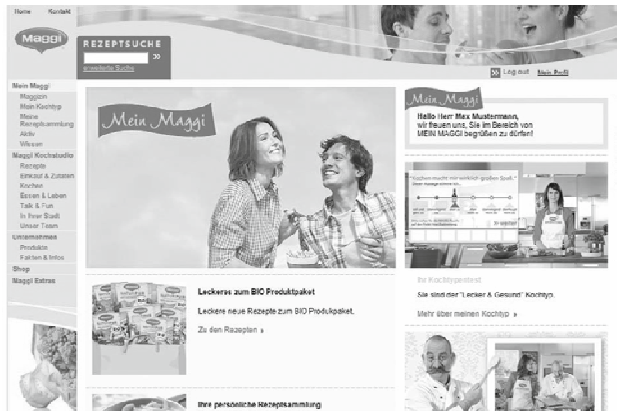


Fig. 10: Example of a marketer-driven brand community (MeinMaggi by Nestlé)¹¹⁵

2.1.3.3.3 Access

An additional criterion of categorization is the form of community access or boundedness.¹¹⁶ Two general types can be found in practice: *open access* or *members-only access*.

The first type, *open access*, allows both members and non-members access to the community site, at least for information-gathering purposes. Anyone can access almost all sections of the brand community in a reading-only mode, although in most cases they are not allowed to upload their own content.

Closed-brand communities offer access to their members only, and purposely exclude non-members. They insist on a registration and therefore promote a clear commitment to both the brand and the community. The drawing community toonity.com by STABILO is one example of this type of community as shown in Figure 11.

¹¹⁵ Source: www.maggi.de, Nestlé AG, (10/08/2010).

¹¹⁶ Cf. Von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 39.

Limited access is often connected with the objective to select customers from the defined target groups as members by using established segmentation and targeting methods. Hereby, marketers understand the brand community as yet a further marketing tool to accomplish the marketing objectives and risk to miss out the benefits of participant diversity.¹¹⁷



Fig. 11: Example of a members-only brand community (toonity.com by STABILO)¹¹⁸

2.1.3.3.4 Online vs. Offline

Today, most brand communities are operated online via the internet as purely virtual communities.

Nevertheless, there are also internet brand communities offering offline activities, (e.g., Mitkochzentrale (“cooking partner sharing agency”) by the Knorr Family cooking community, or driving and safety trainings offered by car communities). According to research findings by McAlexander,

¹¹⁷ Cf. Dholakia / Vianello (2009), p. 5 et seq.

¹¹⁸ Source: www.toonity.com, STABILO International (04/18/2010).

Schouten, and Koenig, offline events strengthen the relationship between the customer and the brand community as well as the bond between the customer and the company / brand.¹¹⁹ Stokburger-Sauer supports these results by confirming a stronger impact of offline activities (vs. online) on the customers' relationships with the brand, company, and other members.¹²⁰

2.1.3.3.5 Host

Brand communities can be operated in several ways: with websites of their own using an http-address; via hosting on the company website; or even within a social-networking site such as Facebook.

To integrate the community into a SNS allows for a rapid build-up of awareness for the community. Connecting with the community is simple, with each consumer becoming a friend. Even activities with "friends of friends" are possible, thus increasing awareness as well as the number of members. On the other hand, these types of low barriers to entry carry the risk of diminished commitment as well.

2.2 State of Research on Brand Communities

2.2.1 Empirical Research on Brand Communities

From a marketer's point of view, brand communities offer three implications concerning marketing management¹²¹:

1. They deliver important information for market research.
2. They promote market segmentation, because members group themselves according to their interests.
3. They play an important role in building and increasing brand loyalty, sales, and positive WOM.

¹¹⁹ McAlexander et al. (2002), p. 48 et seq.

¹²⁰ Cf. Stokburger-Sauer (2010), p. 360 et seq.

¹²¹ Cf. Kim et al. (2008), p. 410.

The basic research conducted by Schouten and McAlexander (1995) on the Harley-Davidson brand community as well as the survey of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) regarding the three communities of Ford Bronco, Macintosh, and Saab offers a fundamental understanding of the brand-community phenomenon. They developed a framework of the customer-brand-company relationship and defined the three key markers of brand communities: Consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. They identified brand community as an appropriate marketing tool to build long-term relationships between brand and consumers that lead to loyal brand consumption.

Additionally, Cova's research on postmodern tribalism (1997 and 2002) has to be mentioned, for it provides an understanding of how customers connect in networks, the tribes, to share passions, to exchange about their emotions, and to act collectively.

Besides these fundamental studies, further research has been conducted on the brand-community phenomenon. The following section provides an overview of the main studies structured according to these areas:

1. Motivation to participate and community bonding.
2. Impact on consumers' brand preference and on economic determinants of the brand success.
3. Value creation: innovation and consumer insight.

2.2.1.1 Motivation to Participate and Community Bonding

Considerable research has been conducted concerning the motivation to participate and community bonding. Key questions are how brand communities work and which characteristics make them attractive for consumers.

The fundamental studies of Muniz and O'Guinn as well as that of Schouten and McAlexander form the basis of this topic, as described in Section 2.1.3.1.

Kozinets (1999) names community engagement and consumption activities as the main characteristics of brand-community members and therefore as motivators for participation. He identifies four groups of members¹²²:

- Devotees with high consumption activities but low community engagement,
- Insiders with high consumption activities and high community engagement,
- Minglers with high community engagement but low consumption activities,
- Tourists with low consumption activities and low community engagement.

With their survey of transcendent customer experience and brand community, Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig (2007) demonstrated the effect on the bond between individual members and the community. Transcendent customer experiences “are characterized by feelings such as self-transformation or awakening, separation from the mundane, and connectedness to larger phenomena outside the self.”¹²³ Not only does the bond between member and community get stronger, but also transcendent customer experience together with brandfest¹²⁴ has an impact on the relationship to the brand itself, the company, and other members. The three researchers conclude that individual transcendent experiences can develop strong emotional connections among the people involved. Social and emotional experiences are therefore the main drivers for participation and bonding.¹²⁵

¹²² Cf. Kozinets (1999), p. 254 et seq.

¹²³ Schouten et al. (2007), p. 358.

¹²⁴ Remark: In this context brandfests are understood as marketer-facilitated consumption activities, cf. Schouten et al. (2007), p. 357.

¹²⁵ Cf. Schouten et al. (2007), p. 365.

Along the same lines are the results by Muniz and Schau (2005). Based on their study about the Apple Newton brand community that arose after the Newton was withdrawn from the market, they suppose that “the capacity for magic and mysticism may be one factor that attracts people to form communities around these brands, as well as the quality that facilitates the transformative, liberatory, and emancipator aspects of consumption sometimes enacted in them.”¹²⁶ Thus, within brand communities, consumers can create meaningful connections and networks that even help them to protect against others and keep the myth of their brand alive.¹²⁷

The research team of Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) investigated the determinants of behavior within small-group brand communities (Harley-Davidson and other motorbike brand communities). With a focus on social identity, they posited explanations for participation. The results of this study show that social identity (meaning the cognition of the group membership and the emotional involvement) drives the individual desire to participate in group activities. Additionally, subjective norms and positive emotions have an impact on the participation. “Customer participation in collective activities within small-group brand communities can be explained by a combination of social and psychological variables.”¹²⁸ Finally, the behavior of the group influences the individual behavior toward the brand. “Brand-related behaviors were found to be consequences of group behavior.”¹²⁹ The stronger the activities within the brand community, the stronger the sense of identification with the brand.¹³⁰

In their survey on the Swatch and Settler of Catlan BCs, Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) found that brand-community participants can be

¹²⁶ Muniz / Schau (2005), p. 746.

¹²⁷ Cf. Muniz / Schau (2005), p. 740.

¹²⁸ Bagozzi / Dholakia (2006), p. 58.

¹²⁹ Bagozzi / Dholakia (2006), p. 59.

¹³⁰ Cf. Bagozzi / Dholakia (2006), p. 59.

divided into five groups according to their motivations. They distinguish between¹³¹:

- *Users* with average or high interest in the product, other customers, and the brand, but no interest in the company,
- *Behind the scenes* with average interest in company, product, and brand, but no interest in other customers,
- *Enthusiasts* with interest in all four motives who just want to be partially involved,
- *Socializers* with emphasis on the customer-customer relationship,
- *Not-Me* with low interest in all four motives.

In contrast to the findings of Muniz and O’Guinn, these results show that the social aspects, such as the relationship to the company or the customer-customer relationship, have very low impact on the participation. Brand communities do not result from the idea of “social bond.” In both brand communities investigated the relationship between brand-community member and the brand, as well as between brand-community member and the product itself, are much more pronounced.¹³²

The study on the Nutella brand community in Italy by Cova and Pace (2006) shows similar results. Based on Cova’s concept of brand tribes, they identified the Nutella brand-community members as hard-core fans of the brand, “enabled by Ferrero to (re)shape the meaning of the brand they love.”¹³³ Members can end their isolation and exhibition of their para-social relationships.¹³⁴ For Cova and Pace, the Nutella community represents a model of communal customer empowerment built on the willingness of the

¹³¹ Cf. Ouwersloot / Odekerken-Schröder (2008), p. 578 et seq.

¹³² Cf. Ouwersloot / Odekerken-Schröder (2008), p. 579.

¹³³ Cova / Pace (2006), p. 1098.

¹³⁴ Cf. Cova / Pace (2006), p. 1100.

members to show their brand enthusiasm to others and to create relationships with other fans of the brand.¹³⁵

The importance of offline activities for motivating participation and creating customer integration is shown in the study of Stokburger-Sauer (2010). According to her findings on a brand community for diabetics, offline activities of the community have a stronger impact on members' connectivity with the brand community as purely online activities.¹³⁶ Brand-community activities influence the relationship to the brand community and community integration. One reason why offline activities are important might be that consumers continue to seek out face-to-face contact with others.¹³⁷ The results of Stokburger-Sauer's study show that the higher the customer integration, the more consumers feel satisfied with and loyal to the brand and intend to recommend it.¹³⁸

In summary, it can be stated that two main motivators for participation are observed in most of the research:

1. The social and emotional aspects of relationship building,
2. The emotional connection with the brand or the product.

Relationship-building is based on the idea of a human desire to connect and bond emotionally with others. The community represents a place to find social identity, to share common interests, and to build emotional connections with people who have similar interests, values, and norms. The behavior of the group has an impact on individual behavior. This social bond can be online as with para-social relationships or within offline events or brandfest, which can strengthen the willingness to join the brand community as well as to develop community engagement.

¹³⁵ Cf. Cova / Pace (2006), p. 1102.

¹³⁶ Cf. Stokburger-Sauer (2010), p. 361.

¹³⁷ Cf. Stokburger-Sauer (2010), p. 363.

¹³⁸ Cf. Stokburger-Sauer (2010), p. 362.

Relationship-building as a motivator is found by almost all researchers. Only in the study of Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder did social bonding show a rather low impact.

The second aspect, emotional connection or brand-loving, demonstrates that brand-community members are brand enthusiasts with a deep knowledge of the brand or product. The brand community offers them a platform of customer empowerment allowing consumers to show their emotional bond with the brand. Furthermore, it lets them communicate about the brand and to exchange information. As members of the brand community, customers can act out their enthusiasm about the brand and shape its meaning. Uploading photos about a specific car or posting reports on one's experiences with this car on a brand community of this car brand might be a way of doing so.

2.2.1.2 Impact on Brand Preference and Economic Determinants

Several researchers investigated the effects of the brand community on brand loyalty, WOM, and brand commitment. They tried to understand to what degree the community itself leads to an increase of the individual brand preference. They ascribe to the brand community a motivating or even a persuasive power to influence members positively and herewith an economic relevance for the marketer.

With a study of brand communities in the automotive sector, Algesheimer shows that brand communities can strengthen brand loyalty and WOM. In 2006, he and Dimpfel find that brand communities have an impact on the company's success, because loyal brand-community members also demonstrate a high level of brand loyalty. The quality of the social experience with the brand community influences its loyalty toward the brand.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Cf. Algesheimer et al. (2006), p. 951.

Furthermore, Algesheimer (2006) also examines the effect of—as he calls it—group pressure and group pull. He states that in addition to feeling loyal to the brand community, group pull also exerts a positive impact on brand loyalty. Group pull and group pressure influence the effect between perceived brand-community quality and the measures brand loyalty and WOM.¹⁴⁰

Von Loewenfeld (2006) defines the term „brand-community quality“ and investigates the impact of brand-community quality on brand loyalty and WOM. Brand-community quality describes the perceived strength and quality of the brand community around the brand as displayed by the members.¹⁴¹ By examining several brand communities from the automotive sector, as well as the brand communities of Sony Playstation and Cortal Consors, he finds that the level of the brand-community quality has an impact on brand loyalty and positive WOM. Furthermore, brand-community members showed a higher level of customer retention (brand loyalty and WOM) than did non-members.¹⁴²

These results are supported by Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, Kim, and Kyungtae (2008). This group investigates members' brand-community commitment and its impact on brand loyalty. They survey official and unofficial brand communities from the automotive and telecommunication sector in Korea. They learn that the higher the community commitment, driven by interaction and reward, the higher the brand loyalty.¹⁴³

With a focus on the BMW M Power World, the official brand community by BMW, Wiegandt (2009) investigates the question whether companies might build long-term brand loyalty by means of establishing and operating a brand

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Algesheimer (2006), pp. 394-399.

¹⁴¹ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 134.

¹⁴² Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 251 and p. 275 et seq.

¹⁴³ Cf. Jang et al. (2008), p. 69 et seq.

community over time.¹⁴⁴ According to his findings, in comparison with non-members, brand-community members do not have higher levels of either brand loyalty or of WOM. The marketer's creation and ongoing support of the brand community have an impact on both brand loyalty and the WOM intentions of the members. The effect on these two dimensions is higher in official brand communities compared with less firmly established ones.

In a survey conducted by Shang, Chen, and Liao (2006), they studied the significance of active or passive participation within the brand community and its effect on brand loyalty. They used the Taiwan Apple brand community, frostyplace.com, to examine the effect of brand involvement as well as of both lurking and posting behaviors concerning consumers' brand loyalty. They find that both brand involvement and lurking have a direct and positive effect on brand loyalty. Posting behavior is not affected by brand involvement. One reason might be that posting has an impact on the relationship to the brand community itself but not necessarily to the brand.¹⁴⁵

Thompson and Sinha (2008), who ask whether the two aspects—high level of participation and long-term membership in a brand community—have impacts on new product adoption and oppositional brand loyalty, have investigated an additional aspect concerning brand loyalty. They investigate four brand communities for microprocessors and PC video cards. Their results show that a higher level of participation and longer-term membership in a brand community increase the likelihood that a customer adopts a new product of the brand and reduces the risk of adopting a new product of a competing brand.¹⁴⁶ In case the competing brand is first-to-market with its innovation, oppositional loyalty leads to a preference of the competing brand.¹⁴⁷ This result regarding oppositional loyalty leads to the conclusion

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Wiegandt (2009).

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Shang et al. (2006), pp. 406-410.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Thompson / Sinha (2008), p. 75.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Thompson / Sinha (2008), p. 76.

that “brand communities can be particularly valuable for companies that are the first to market with a new product.”¹⁴⁸

Another discovery of such communities’ economic relevance is found by Kim, Choi, Qualls, and Han (2008), who survey the impact of brand-community commitment on brand commitment and on customer retention. They mention that brand-community commitment, which “refers to the extent of members’ psychological attachment of an online community and their belief in the value of the relationship”¹⁴⁹ has a positive impact on brand commitment. Furthermore, brand commitment affects the economic determinants “purchase intention,” “cross-over buying,” “WOM,” and the willingness of consumer’s involvement in a firm’s marketing practice as well as sponsored marketing activities. Brand-community members show a stronger and significant effect over non-members.¹⁵⁰

Overall, the emphasis of the research on brand preference and economic relevancy of brand communities is set on the determinants “brand loyalty” and “customer retention” with focus on WOM intention. All the studies share a requirement of participation in the brand community. Brand-community members are affected in specific ways, which have an impact on the two indicators. These effects are driven by the membership itself. Aspects such as group pull or pressure, brand-community creation and support, and community commitment have been examined and confirmed in regards to their role as drivers for brand loyalty and WOM.

The question as to whether members have a higher brand loyalty compared with non-members has not been clearly answered thus far. Only the study published by Wiegandt offers some negative indications.

¹⁴⁸ Thompson / Sinha (2008), p. 78.

¹⁴⁹ Kim et al. (2008), p. 412 referring to Bettencourt (1997) and Morgan / Hunt (2004).

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Kim et al. (2008), p. 420 et seq.

2.2.1.3 Value Creation: Innovation and Consumer Insight

Brand communities and especially brand-community members can play an important role in the value creation process of the company, either as sources of innovation and consumer insights or, on an even broader level, by the co-creation of marketing programs.

The study by Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009) confirms from a consumer-centric perspective that brand communities create value for consumers and marketers. Brand-community members might have a strong impact overall on the marketing-mix. They identified four subject areas that can be used for value creation¹⁵¹:

- Impression management: Brand-community members cultivate the outward image of the brand by creating favorable impressions and showing enthusiasm beyond the brand community.
- Brand use: The company uses members' experience with the brand and the product for improvement or enhancement of the brand.
- Community engagement: The company provides members with social capital to reinforce members' engagement in the brand community.
- Social networking: The company strengthens similarities across brand-community members and their normative behavioral expectations as a basis for shared understanding and common competencies of the brand-community members.

By working on these four subject areas, marketers have the chance to strengthen the brand-community members in terms of engagement and understanding of the brand. Therefore, brand-community members might contribute to the value creation process by delivering input for product improvement or even new product development as well as for the brand

¹⁵¹ Cf. Schau et al. (2009), p. 34 et seq.

communication and the development and execution of competitive strategies.¹⁵²

The power of brand-community members regarding product innovation management is also confirmed by Füller, Matzler, and Hoppe (2008). According to their findings, companies may benefit from members' knowledge as well as from their passion and creativity within the company's innovation process. They recommend that marketers build open innovation networks with consumers.¹⁵³

Especially as regards the collecting of consumer insights, brand communities represent a very efficient tool. Walter (2008) states in her survey on the online community *womensnet.de*, operated by Henkel KGaA in Germany, that marketers can benefit from their community by communicating with its members, as well as by observing the communication between members. Furthermore, community members can be used as spokespersons for the brand, because they usually have a huge social network and high credibility. From Walter's point of view, communities allow for identifying potential in both optimization and innovation.¹⁵⁴

In addition to the surveys presented in this section, it seems to be common sense that because of their substantial knowledge and their emotional bond with the brand, customers organized in brand communities are unquestionably a good source for consumer insights. They deliver value for the marketer in terms of insights offered and inspiration for product innovation or modification.

¹⁵² Cf. Schau et al. (2009), p. 40.

¹⁵³ Cf. Füller et al. (20058), p. 615 et seq.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Walter (2008), p. 406 et seq.

2.2.2 Overview of the Existing Brand-community Research

Table 3 provides an overview of the studies in chronological order in support of the research presented above.

Especially at the beginning of the brand-community research, a number of studies deal with the definition and the characteristics of communities. Furthermore the impact of offline activities, as well as the impact of the community size has been explored.

Recent studies focus on the effect of brand communities on the brand. Herewith especially brand recommendation, brand commitment, and brand loyalty are often research objectives.

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Schouten / McAlexander (1995)	Subcultures of consumption—definition and characteristics	Ethnographic research	Harley-Davidson	Subcultures of consumption are formed based on the consumption habits and the brands or goods consumed. Members of these groups go through a socialization process, which influences their behavior, their values and motivation. “A unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression.” (p. 43)
Cova (1997)	Definition of postmodern tribes and role of tribal marketing	Ethnographic research	---	Postmodern tribes are social dynamics without central power and without coded rules. They represent a counterpart of institutional power. Members are connected by a shared passion or emotion. Tribal marketing allows consumers to satisfy not only their desire for specific products or brand, but also for linking values and wellness.
McAlexander / Schouten (1998)	Definition of brandfest, characteristics, and effects	Ethnographic research	Harley-Davidson, Jeep	“Brandfests are corporate-sponsored events provided primarily for the benefit of current customers. Their primary function is the celebration of brand ownership.” (p. 378) Brandfests are characterized by consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, moral responsibility and support.

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Muniz / O'Guinn (2001)	Brand-community definition and characteristics	Ethnographic research	Ford Bronco, Macintosh, Saab	Brand communities consist of the customer-brand triade. They allow consumers to communicate and are therefore "consumer agencies." Strong communities can lead to high loyalty and commitment.
McAlexander / Schouten / Koenig (2002)	Brand-community definition and characteristics; consumer-centric model;	Ethnographic research and four-factor confirmatory model	Jeep, Harley-Davidson	Consumer-centric model: relationship of customer, brand, company and product in use. Offline events strengthen the relationships within the customer-centric model. The stronger the relationships, the more loyal the consumer.
Bagozzi / Dholakia (2002)	Exploration of intended participation in virtual communities	Ethnographic research	Virtual communities	Positive anticipated emotions and desires, as well as social identity are key drivers of participation
Schau / Muniz (2002)	Impact of brand community on personal identity, commitment and brand-community	Netnographic research ¹⁵⁵	Apple, Harley-Davidson, Saab, Tom Petty, Xena Warrior Princess	Consumers present a varying level of commitment to the brand and the community. Four distinct relationships between individual identity and community membership have been found.

¹⁵⁵ Remark: Netnographic research analyses the behavior of individuals on the internet. It can be understood as online ethnographic research.

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Cova / Cova (2002)	Definition of postmodern tribes and role of tribal marketing	Ethnographic research	---	Postmodern tribes are networks of heterogeneous persons, linked by a shared passion or emotion. Tribes can act collectively. Members are not only consumers, but advocates. In contrast with brand communities, tribes are not explicitly commercial. Internet allows members to link and act together.
Brown / Kozinets / Sherry (2003)	Brand community as tool to reactivate retro brands	Netnographic research	VW New Beetle, Star Wars: Episode I	Community has an impact on the opinion of single consumers. The brand must inspire a solidarity and sense of belonging.
Dholakia / Bagozzi / Pearo (2004)	Impact of group norms and social identity on participation in network and small-group brand communities	Structural equation model	264 virtual communities	Impact of group norms and social identity on community participation depends on type of community.
Algesheimer (2004)	Impact of interaction and group-specific processes on recommendation and brand loyalty	Structural equation model	Harley-Davidson, Jeep	Community quality and attractiveness have strong impact on brand loyalty and recommendation. The so-called group-pull and group-pressure influence the relationship between the perceived quality dimensions and brand loyalty and brand recommendation.

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Algesheimer / Dholakia / Hermann (2005)	Impact of identification with the brand community on community engagement, loyalty, normative group pressure and reactance	Structural equation model	Car club members in Germany and Switzerland	Strong brand community identification leads to greater community engagement and reduces normative community pressure. But the higher the community engagement, the higher the normative community pressure, which has a negative effect on the intention to participate and recommend the community. These effects are stronger for members with high brand knowledge and in small communities.
Muniz / Schau (2005)	Exploration of "religiosity" in brand communities	Netnographic research	Apple Newton	In Newton community, supernatural, religious, and magical motifs play a central role in the conversation of the members. The brand can reflect deeper, symbolic, sometimes spiritual meanings.
Bauer / Grether (2005)	Impact of brand community on customer relationship and social capital	Structural equation model	Puschkin Bar	The more customers feel trust within a virtual community, the higher their satisfaction, commitment, and trust in the business relationship. Virtual communities can be useful tools for establishing long-term customer-relationships.

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Algesheimer / Herrmann / Dimpfel (2006)	Impact of brand community on brand loyalty and recommendation	Empirical study, structural equation model	Brand communities from automotive sector	Brand communities strengthen the brand loyalty and recommendation. This leads to an increase in brand loyalty and attracting new customers. Brand communities offer new dimensions of psycho-social product benefits ¹⁵⁶ .
Cova / Pace (2006)	Definition "customer empowerment"; brand community in FMCG market	Netnographic research	Nutella	Members of the Nutella brand community in Italy are "hard-core" fans of the brand. The community allows them to get out of their isolation and to connect with others brand enthusiasts.
Von Loewenfeld (2006)	Brand-community definition; examination of brand community-quality and impact on brand loyalty and recommendation	Structural equation model	Brand communities from car sector (7er.com, bmw-syndikat.de, bmw-treff.de, mbsIK.de, skodacommunity.de), Sony Playstation	Brand community quality is mainly driven by the support among members and brand-customer interaction. Brand community quality has an impact on customer retention (brand loyalty and recommendation). Members show higher customer retention as non-members.
Shang / Chen / Liao (2006)	Impact of lurking and posting on brand involvement	Structural equation model	frostyplace.com (Apple)	Cognitive and affective involvement has an impact on lurking, but no effect on posting. Lurking and involvement effect brand loyalty.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Algesheimer et al. (2006), p. 951

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Bagozzi / Dholakia (2006)	Impact of social identity on participation in small-group brand communities	Structural equation model	Harley-Davidson and other motorcycle riding groups	Social and psychological variables are drivers for brand community participation, whereas social intention has strongest impact on group behavior. Brand identification depends on social identity and is influenced by activities of the group.
Schouten / McAlexander / Koenig (2007)	Impact of transcendent customer experience and brandfest on brand commitment and loyalty	Ethnographic research and structural equation model	Jeep Camp	Transcendent customer experience and brandfest strengthen the connection with the brand, product, company and other customers. By facilitating transcendent customer experiences, marketers build loyalties that are immune to vagaries of product performance.
Hellmann / Kenning (2007)	Brand-community commitment and bonding (five concentric circles)	Exploratory study (automotive and media brands)	Automotive and media brands	Intensity to connect with community increases from circle to circle. Critical step between circle 1 (interest) and 2 (information exchange). High fluctuation rate even in the center.
Ouwersloot / Odekerken-Schroeder (2008)	Examination of four reasons for participation	Cluster analysis	Settlers of Catan and Swatch	Relationship with brand and product has the strongest impact on willingness to participate. Social aspects (relationship with the company or between consumers) play a subordinate role.

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Sicilia / Palazon (2008)	Functional and social values as motivators for participation	Case study; netnographic research	Coca-Cola	The Coca-Cola brand community in Spain offers functional, social, and entertaining values as motivators for participation.
Woitschläger / Hartleb / Blut (2008)	Impact of community integration on the brand image	Structural equation model	Official brand community on soccer supporters	Satisfaction with the community, integration, and degree of influence determine the level of participation. Participation has a positive impact on recommendation and image of the community sponsor.
Thompson / Sinha (2008)	Impact on brand-community participation and membership on brand loyalty and innovation adoption as well as on oppositional loyalty	Structural equation model	Brand communities for microprocessors (Intel and AMD) and 3-D-video cards (ATI and NVIDIA)	High participation, as well as long-term membership in a community lead to early adoption of brand innovation, but can also increase oppositional loyalty in case the competing brand is first-to-market.
Jang / Olfman / Ko / Koh / Kim (2008)	Impact of community interaction, rewards for activities, information quality and system quality	Regression analysis	Official and unofficial brand communities from automotive and telecommunications sector	Interaction and reward have a significant impact on community commitment. The higher the community commitment, the higher brand loyalty.

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Füller / Matzler / Hoppe (2008)	Factors for participation of brand-community members in the innovation process	Structural equation model	VW GTI offline community	Extroversion and openness of the members have a significant impact on brand passion, creativity, and identification with the community. Members have large product knowledge and provide support in the development of new product ideas.
Kim / Choi / Qualles / Han (2008)	Marketplace communities: Impact of brand-community commitment on brand commitment; comparison between members and non-members	Structural equation model	Brand community from cosmetics sector	Community commitment is driven by communication support, perceived community values, recognition of members' contribution and freedom of expression. Community commitment has an impact on brand commitment. Members show higher effect as non-members.
Madupu / Krishnan (2008)	Impact of brand-community participation on three brand-community characteristics: consciousness of kind, moral responsibility, shared rituals and traditions; scale development for the three brand-community characteristics	Structural equation model	Yahoo groups, Google groups, and MSN groups (motorcycle, car, and camera brands)	Positive relationship between online community participation and the community characteristics: consciousness of kind, moral responsibility, and shared rituals and traditions.

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Walter (2008)	Brand communities for dialog marketing	Case study	womensnet.de (Henkel KGaA)	Companies benefit from brand communities in terms of generating consumer insights and connecting with lead users.
Dholakia / Vianello (2009)	Effective Brand community management; differences between company- and brand-enthusiast-run communities	Case study	Over 200 observed brand communities from all kind of industry	Customer-enthusiast-run communities are more effective in establishing strong community bond because: 1.) they have a diverse consumer base, 2.) allow free expression of the members, 3.) encourage a broad range of activities around the brand.
Hoppe (2009)	Exploration of informal membership on brand trust, brand loyalty and brand emotion	Structural equation model	VW GTI offline community	The motifs information value, social enhancement value, and entertainment value have a strong impact on the sense of belonging and identification with the brand community. Brand trust and positive brand emotions influence brand loyalty. Herewith, the participation in brandfest, as well as the duration of the membership have a moderating effect on these relationships.

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Schau / Muniz / Arnold (2009)	Exploration of value-creation within brand communities from a consumer-centric perspective; identification of 12 practices	In-depth interviews, netnographic research, literature research	9 brand communities from diverse product categories	By means of brand communities, consumers can become part of the marketing process by participating in practices. These practices cover the areas of social networking, impression management, community engagement, and brand use. Hereby they link behaviors, performances, and representations and can enhance the value people realize when engaging in brand communities.
Thurston / Buff / Devasgayam (2009)	Impact of spatial-, temporal-, and exchange-related aspects of brand-community participation on community-integration; scale development for brand-community participation	Confirmatory factor analysis and regression analysis	Brand community around a college's basketball program	Students with strong preference for spatial-, temporal-, and exchange-related aspects of the community participation showed a higher level of community integration regarding the team. Those with long-term membership showed higher level of community integration regarding the fans. And finally, those with strong preference of relationship related aspect of community participation proved higher community integration regarding the colleges.
Wiegandt (2009)	Impact of official brand community on building long-term brand loyalty and customer-firm-interaction by customer integration in innovation process	Structural equation model	BMW M Power World	User of virtual toolkit (integration of community users in innovation process) can lead to an increase of involvement and therefore of brand loyalty and WOM. A permanent dialog and interaction between company and community can increase long-term brand loyalty.

Author (Year)	Research Objective	Methodology	Subject of the Study	Key Results
Stokburger-Sauer (2010)	Relevancy of online and offline activities for community and customer integration as well as customer-brand identification; impact of members' age	Structural equation model	Brand community for diabetes	Offline activities have a stronger impact on community integration. This is especially the case for older members. The higher the community integration the higher the customer-brand-identification and the higher the customer-brand-identification, the higher customers' satisfaction, loyalty, and recommendation of the brand.

Tab. 3: Overview of brand-community research

2.3 Consumer Behavior from a Brand-community Perspective

To understand the behavior of consumers is one of the key issues for marketers. If they fail to do so, consumers cannot be converted into customers. Only if the key aspects and the determinants of the behavior are understood, goal-directed actions can be developed and implemented.

This chapter aims to describe the key aspects and determinants of consumer behavior, as well as to provide an overview of the main behavioral explanatory approaches. The author keeps a special focus on those aspects relevant in respect of the participation in brand communities.

2.3.1 Key Aspects of Consumer Behavior from a Brand-community Perspective

Consumer behavior consists of two key aspects: *information processing* and *purchase decision*,¹⁵⁷ which together build the purchase-decision process. Brand communities influence this process as shown in Figure 12.

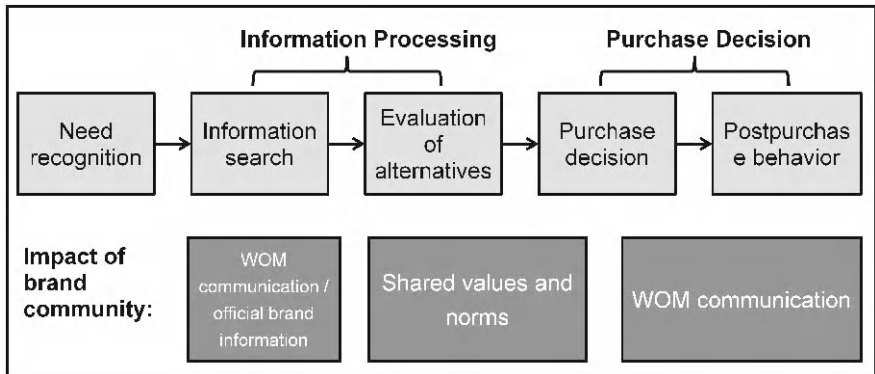


Fig. 12: Stages of the purchase-decision process with impact of brand community¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Homburg / Krohmer (2006), p. 28.

¹⁵⁸ Adapted and expanded from Kotler (1994), p. 194.

As the internet—and herewith online brand communities—stands for a medium that enables its users to interact and strengthens interpersonal communication, it has an impact on users' purchasing process.¹⁵⁹

The *information processing*, which consist of the two phases „searching for information“ and „comparing the alternatives,“ is initiated by a specific need, which activates consumers to search for information. This need recognition occurs when the consumer feels a difference between the perceived ideal state of affairs compared with the actual state of affairs,¹⁶⁰ e.g., when the consumers feels a lack in his / her life because s/he does not own a specific product or brand. This causes the desire to search for information to get their state of affairs back into balance.

The need for information can be triggered either by internal or external stimuli.¹⁶¹ Hereby they can use either internal information stored in their memory based on experience or external information sources.¹⁶² Apart from traditional advertising, personal or public recommendations, or their own experiences, brand communities represent an additional good source for information. Hereby brand communities combine official information about the brand with experiences and recommendations of other community members. Especially this WOM-function of brand communities makes them to an extensive source of information and provides help in the evaluation process. This information function of brand communities helps consumers not only when searching information, but also when comparing the alternatives. Hereby, consumers seek specific product attributes and benefits, in line with their perceptions. Therefore, they use individual evaluation procedures with an individual set of evaluation criteria.¹⁶³ This

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Riegner (2007), p. 436 and 442.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Engel et al. (2006), p. 71.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Kotler (1994), p. 193.

¹⁶² Cf. Kotler (194), p. 194; Engel et al. (2006), p. 74.

¹⁶³ Cf. Kotler (1994), p. 196.

decision process can be rational and purely cognitive, spontaneous and emotional or even reactive and automatically.¹⁶⁴

Due to shared values and norms among the members¹⁶⁵, the brand community might even influence the individual's evaluation system. Consumers receive influences in developing their decision pattern and in making the final decision in part based on the opinions, attitudes, and values expressed within the community. Discussions about specific attributes and even complaints about unsatisfying issues can have an essential impact on how consumers give weight to their decision criteria.

The second phase of the process, the *purchase decision*, is divided into the purchase itself and the after-buying behavior.

The purchase decision is often characterized by changes to the purchase intention due to influences by the social environment. These influences can be¹⁶⁶:

- Unexpected changes to the personal situation, e.g., job loss leads to a change in need.
- Other people influence the purchase decision with their attitudes, experiences, or values, e.g., exchange among brand-community members lead to a specific purchase.

After purchasing, consumers evaluate their purchase decision, which can lead to either satisfaction or discontent with their choice. This evaluation process has two dimensions: cognitive and affective.¹⁶⁷ Here once more, the exchange with other brand-community members can influence the perception of the purchased / used product.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Kroeber-Riel et al. (2009), p. 411.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Among others: Cova / Pace (2006), p. 1089; Dholakia / Bagozzi / Paero (2006), p. 254; Kim et al. (2008), p. 413.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Kotler (1994), p. 197.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Homburg et al. (1999), p. 176.

Brand communities have the potential to influence the two phases of the purchase-decision process because they offer the ideal platform for WOM communication. Members can exchange both positive and negative experiences with the brand or company and can have a great impact on other consumers' purchasing decisions.

Hereby, the WOM communication is not necessarily linear (from one consumer to another consumer). Due to the network structure between the community members, it can be expected that messages and meanings flow multi-directionally, that means, one community member communicates with a network of other members. The WOM communication is therefore coproduced in consumer networks.¹⁶⁸ The following figure shows this network coproduction model.

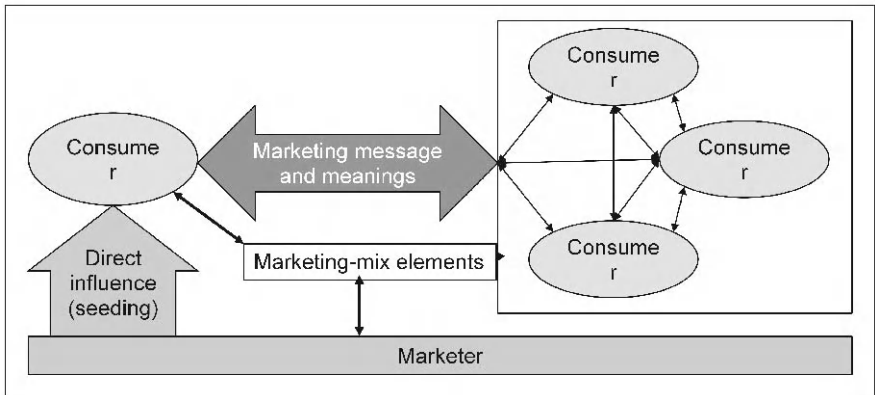


Fig. 13: The Word-of-mouth network coproduction model¹⁶⁹

To summarize the impact of brand communities on customer behavior and specifically on the purchase-decision process:

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Kozinets et al. (2010), p. 72 et seq.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Kozinets et al. (2010), p. 72.

- Brand communities are venues of brand enthusiasts, highly involved in the brand. High involvement leads to a more intense information processing.
- Brand communities are specific information platforms about brands, which allow responding to consumers on both, a cognitive and emotional level.
- Brand communities are based on the communication exchange between brand and consumers but also among consumers themselves. The WOM communication allows members to influence one another, which has an impact the brand perception and herewith on the purchase decision.

The following sections will provide details on the determinants for brand-community impact on the behavioral processes.

2.3.2 Determinants of Consumer Behavior Relevant for Brand Communities

Consumer behavior is influenced by several determinants. Some are intrapersonal determinants emanating from the individual. Others are more interpersonal and influenced by external factors, such as culture, norms, or other individuals.¹⁷⁰ The first group considers the psychological and emotional determinants, whereas the latter includes the social determinants. The following two sections provide an overview on the key aspects of these determinants that affects the behavior of brand-community members regarding their purchase-decision process.

2.3.2.1 Psychological and Emotional Determinants

The intrapersonal perspective focuses on the psychological and emotional determinants, as well as on determinants of the personality. With respect to the brand-community phenomenon, the author considers *involvement* as the most important aspect concerning the purchase-decision process, followed

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Meffert et al. (2008), p. 107.

by *cognition* and *emotions*. All three determinants have a great impact on brand-community members' willingness to engage with the brand, as well as with the process of information processing and purchase decision.

Involvement represents a specific type of activation. *Activation* energizes the human organism and transfers the individual in an inner state of commitment and performance capability.¹⁷¹

"Involvement is an individual difference variable found to influence consumers' decision making and communication behavior."¹⁷² Focusing on products, Zaichkowsky describes involvement as "a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests"¹⁷³, whereas Mittal and Lee lay the emphasis on product category, defining product involvement as "the degree of interest of a consumer in a product category on an on-going basis."¹⁷⁴ Involvement is focused on the acquisition and processing of information about the respective product or brand.¹⁷⁵

The level of involvement plays an essential role in the purchasing process. Involvement triggers the motivation to search for information, as well as the attention to product related messages.¹⁷⁶ In case of high-involvement purchases, the goods or services are psychologically important and carry social, financial, or psychological risks for the consumer.¹⁷⁷ According to Dholakia, a high level of perceived risk leads to a higher level of involvement and subsequently, higher involvement leads to lower perception of risk. Additionally, Dholakia's research supports the fact, that situational involvement influences the propensity to seek information prior to

¹⁷¹ Cf. Kroeber-Riel et al. (2009), p. 55.

¹⁷² Michaelidou / Dibb (2008), p. 83.

¹⁷³ Zaichkowsky (1985), p. 342.

¹⁷⁴ Mittal / Lee (1988), p. 44.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Trommsdorf (2009), p. 41 and Kroeber-Riel et al. (2009), p. 303 et seq.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Richin / Bloch (1986), p. 281.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Mullins et al. (2005), p. 109.

purchase.¹⁷⁸ For this reason, involvement can also be understood as a cognitive response to overcome uncertainty.¹⁷⁹

In high-involvement situations, consumers are intensively dealing with the object and are seeking information; therefore, they can quickly form an opinion.¹⁸⁰ Each time consumers feel highly interested in a specific product or brand, they feel high involvement. “Social networks play an important role in facilitating product involvement.”¹⁸¹ Besides friends and family, brand communities are great sources for information—official and informal—, which has a positive impact on the product involvement.

Even if a product is perceived in general as offering low involvement, as FMCGs usually do, the feeling can turn into one of high involvement when consumers start thinking about making the actual purchase, e.g., in a concrete buying situation.¹⁸² This effect plays also an essential role for the brand-community strategy of FMCG companies. Buying a FMCG brand happens most of the time by force of habit and is therefore perceived as low involving for the consumer. By successfully establishing a brand community, companies can increase the involvement level by offering specific information and services and turn the brand—from a community-member’s point of view—into a high-involvement product. This thesis is supported by Bloch and Richins, who state that, under the influence of specific situational factors, low importance products (such as FMCG) can be perceived as highly important.¹⁸³

The research by Coulter, Price, and Feick suggest, that involvement is also “affected by the extent to which and how consumers link the product

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Dholakia (2001), p. 1353.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. George / Edward (2009), p. 9.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Kroeber-Riel / Esch (2004), p. 147.

¹⁸¹ Coulter et al. (2003), p. 53.

¹⁸² Cf. Kroeber-Riel et al. (2009), p. 545.

¹⁸³ Cf. Bloch / Richins (1983), p. 75.

category to key life themes and life projects”¹⁸⁴. Self-relevant products cause product involvement¹⁸⁵; the more consumers perceive a product as „me“, the more they feel personally involved. This offers great chances for brand communities in the FMCG segment to increase the involvement level. By offering, e.g., a great platform for cooking-enthusiasts, communities such as Rezeptwiese by Dr. Oetker may increase the relevance level of their products and their brand, and herewith the level of product involvement. The community helps to skim those consumers for whom the topic „cooking“ and the related products have a high self-relevancy.

As a second determinant, *cognition* plays an essential role for processing the information provided by the brand community. Cognition is defined as individual thoughts and knowledge that can be activated as personally stored information (memory) or externally perceived information.¹⁸⁶ The cognitive process “identifies measurable aspects of information processing including beliefs, perceptions, comprehension, memory, and recall.”¹⁸⁷ It tries to find an answer to the question regarding which kind of behavior is adequate in a certain situation.¹⁸⁸

Cognition is part of the intrapersonal behavioral process, because it is quite individual. The level of cognition is influenced by the level of activation and involvement: the higher the involvement, the higher the perception and processing of information about a certain object.¹⁸⁹

Brand communities as tools for brand information and communication focus on cognitive processes. The processing of information and perceptions, as well as learning processes are serving as key elements within the connection of brand, consumers, and company.

¹⁸⁴ Coulter et al. (2003), p. 52.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Coulter et al. (2003), p. 52

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Trommsdorf (2009), p. 88.

¹⁸⁷ Coyne (1982), p. 153.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Meffert et al. (2008), p. 113.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Meffert et al. (2008), p. 114.

Emotions are defined as inner states of excitement perceived consciously or subconsciously that trigger either pleasant or unpleasant feelings.¹⁹⁰ They comprise a class of mental phenomena which are characterized by a consciously experienced, subjective feeling state.¹⁹¹ Emotions help consumers to differentiate between products and brands, and to develop an emotional brand profile. Emotions are always connected with a subjective inner state of the individual. Because of the complexity of emotions, individuals can experience both, positive or negative emotions at the same time.¹⁹²

Advertising and communication have an impact on consumers' emotions, on their information processing, on the evaluation of products or brands, and finally on consumers' behavior.¹⁹³ By means of emotional product differentiation, consumers follow a learning process that allows them to differentiate products based on emotions and experiences. This is especially important for mass-market brands such as FMCG brands.¹⁹⁴

Emotions offer a holistic evaluation of the stimuli and conclude that 'I just don't like it'.¹⁹⁵

In respect to the brand-community phenomenon, these two psychological determinants, emotions and cognition, are essential for the individual decision making. The more emotions are involved, the more the decision is likely to occur automatically. In contrast, cognition leads to more controlled and deliberate decisions.¹⁹⁶ But finally, the two entities have to be seen in a

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Trommsdorff (2009), p. 59.

¹⁹¹ Cf. Chea / Luo (2008), p. 32.

¹⁹² Cf. Chea / Luo (2008), p. 34.

¹⁹³ Cf. Homburg / Krohmer (2006), p. 37 et seq.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Kroeber-Riel et al. (2009), p. 150 et seq.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Sojka / Giese (2006), p. 998 referring to Cacioppo / Gardner / Berntson (1999).

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Chea / Luo (2008), p. 32.

co-existence. In “human experience and action, they are difficult to separate and even fused”.¹⁹⁷

Consumers make a rational decision to sign-in, use and (actively) participate in a brand community. Accordingly, these decisions must be driven by either emotion or cognition.

Brand communities try to create a special bond on the emotional level between brand, and consumers. As shown in various research studies discussed above, this emotional process is capable of attracting true brand lovers who want to experience an intense, close relationship with their brand or for those others who simply seek to appreciate and connect with the brand or with other consumers.

The cognitive impact on behavior occurs if consumers take advantage of the brand community on a more rational level, e.g., for specific information gathering purposes or exchange with others. According to Homburg, Koschate, and Hoyer, the cognitive factors gain importance the more experienced consumers are with a respective product or brand, whereas the impact of emotions and affective factors decreases.¹⁹⁸ That means, that for the information processing and the following purchase-decision process, the gathering of information becomes more and more important, whereas the „I just like it“-attitude declines.

Additionally, brand communities offer the great advantage in the mediation of information and therefore in addressing both, cognitive and emotional aspects of customer behavior at the same time. Because the medium internet allows communicating by text, picture and voice, cognition and emotions can be addressed at the same time. This effect allows best to address both groups of consumers, the more emotional and the more cognitive ones. As shown by Sojka and Giese, high-emotion individuals

¹⁹⁷ Coyne (1982), p. 153.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Homburg et al. (2006), p. 27 et seq.

seem to prefer visual approaches, whereas high-cognition consumers prefer more verbal communication elements.¹⁹⁹

2.3.2.2 Social Determinants

The *social determinants*, which are part of an *interpersonal perspective*, affect the behavior of the brand-community. They are influenced by the environment that is near to the individual, such as family or peer groups, as well as by the broader environment of the individual, such as culture, social level, or even mass-media communication.²⁰⁰ Relationships between customer and customer, but also between customer and marketer, can both become part of the member's immediate environment. As stated by Muniz and O'Guinn, common experiences (we-ness) strengthen the consciousness between the brand-community members.²⁰¹ This shows the close connected relationship between social determinants and the psychological and emotional determinants.

The social determinants are strongly linked with the information processing and influence herewith the purchase-decision process. As mentioned above, brand communities are venues for WOM communication. The information acquisition and processing are key determinants of consumer behavior for the analysis of brand-community participation. In this paper they are considered using the concepts of brand advocates, opinion leaders, as well as market mavens. All these concepts represent consumer types "who are more likely to disseminate product or marketplace information to other consumers, and who also tend to exert influence over other consumers"²⁰². This interpersonal communication –especially via the internet– is "playing an

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Sojka / Giese (2006), p. 1008.

²⁰⁰ Cf. Kroeber-Riel et al. (2009), p. 458.

²⁰¹ Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 418.

²⁰² Laughlin / MacDonald (2010), p. 55.

increasingly important role in consumer's choices by helping consumers make decisions about ... product"²⁰³.

The term *brand advocate* is one of the *buzz*-words in modern marketing.²⁰⁴ Brand advocates actively tell other consumers about their experiences with the brand²⁰⁵; they are in general satisfied, loyal and happy brand consumers²⁰⁶.

Several brand icons, such as Apple, Google, or Harley-Davidson have been grown thanks to brand advocates.²⁰⁷ For this reason, from a marketer's point of view, brand advocates have the "potential to become living advertising space"²⁰⁸. As recommended for the creation of advocacy, marketers should be looking to emotionally engage the potential brand advocates, making them feel part of a tribe by creating an intense customer-brand relationship.²⁰⁹

One marketing tool to do so is by establishing a brand community. The phenomenon of brand advocates has potentially a close connection to the brand-community approach—as in the case of Harley-Davidson Owner Groups. As argued, brand communities can be understood as social entities, sharing brand stories based on common experiences.²¹⁰ The community members are active loyalists, committed and passionate about the brand.²¹¹ Additionally, brand-community members often recommend the brand.²¹² Brand communities seem to be the appropriate venues for brand advocates.

²⁰³ Laughlin / MacDonald (2010), p. 57.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Wragg (2004), p. 37.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Schultz (2000), p. 8.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Wragg (2004), p. 36.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Wragg (2004), p. 36.

²⁰⁸ Wragg (2004), p. 37.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Wragg (2004), p. 37.

²¹⁰ Cf. Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 422.

²¹¹ Cf. Gruen / Ferguson (1994), p. 3.

²¹² Cf. Researches by: Algesheimer (2004); Algesheimer / Herrmann / Dimpfel (2006); von Loewenfeld (2006);

Very close to the concept of brand advocates is the concept of *opinion leaders*. Opinion leaders are supposed to possess domain specific expertise, which they gained by means of an enduring involvement with a particular product category.²¹³ They understand themselves as highly involved specialists of a product category²¹⁴, which is the main difference to brand advocates, who focus on a specific brand. Opinion leaders communicate frequently with others regarding their chosen product expertise; hereby they are constrained by the norms of the social system in which they operate.²¹⁵ They exert an important impact on the communication process and exercise their personal influence over the other group members.²¹⁶ By means of communicating with others, opinion leaders can affect the information process and the purchase decision.

Very close to the concept of opinion leaders is the approach of *opinion seeking*. As mentioned by Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman, opinion leaders are also seeking out for information and can therefore take over the role of an opinion seeker.²¹⁷ For this reason opinion seeking can be interpreted as a co-phenomenon of opinion leadership. Opinion seeking occurs, when consumers search for information and advice from knowledgeable others.²¹⁸ Even though the two constructs seem to be very close and interlinked, research could confirm their independency.²¹⁹ In contrast with opinion leaders, opinion seekers tend to be less interested in obtaining product information from magazines or by visiting stores;²²⁰ they prefer receiving information from other consumers.

²¹³ Cf. Flynn et al. (1994), p. 62.

²¹⁴ Cf. Brüne (1989), p. 121.

²¹⁵ Cf. Clark / Goldsmith (2005), p. 299.

²¹⁶ Cf. Kroeber-Riel et al. (2009) p. 553.

²¹⁷ Cf. Flynn et al (1996), p. 138.

²¹⁸ Cf. Flynn et al. (1996), p. 138.

²¹⁹ Cf. Shoham / Ruvio (2008), p. 291.

²²⁰ Cf. Shoham / Ruvio (2008), p. 289.

As general market influencer, *market mavens* are “individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information.”²²¹ They are highly social consumers drawing their expertise from high levels of marketplace involvement, which is connected with a high level of media consumption. Herewith they also seek for information they do not even purchase or have experienced.²²²

Market mavens are driven by two key motives: (1.) they feel an obligation to share information with other consumers. They want to be knowledgeable consumers and it provides pleasure to be part of the information process. (2.) They have an altruistic and general desire to support other consumers. They tend to initiate discussions with others, as well as to respond to requests for information.²²³

The study by Clark and Goldsmith indicates that market mavens seem to have a low level of self-esteem. Nevertheless, they have a need for uniqueness, which they express in their brand and product choice. “They are looking for products and brands that will distinguish themselves from the crowd, but are still acceptable to the normative beliefs of the consumers that interact with them.”²²⁴

The research by Fitzmaurice proves that market mavens actively seek information to maximize their consumption benefit („to make the best deal“). In contrast with that, social norms did not show a positive impact on mavenism. Additionally, mavenism is not a driver for materialism. Market mavens were not more materialistic than other consumers.²²⁵

²²¹ Feick / Price (1987), p. 85.

²²² Cf. Walsh et al (2004), p. 112.

²²³ Cf. Walsh et al (2004), pp. 112-114.

²²⁴ Clark / Goldsmith (2005), p. 306.

²²⁵ Cf. Fitzmaurice (2011), p. 79.

This specific group of market communicators becomes an active part of consumers' information processing, and influences the purchase-decision process, independent from a specific product category. Herewith they are active influencers of customer behavior.²²⁶ They are perceived as trustworthy, gathering information from market mavens has a positive impact on the knowledge and trust of the receiving customer.²²⁷

The concepts presented here are linked with another. As mentioned, opinion leaders can also function as opinion seekers. Market mavens are the same: "information seekers and diffusers"²²⁸. At the same time, the concept of market mavens seems to be correlated to opinion leadership, as shown by van der Merve and van Heerden. They could prove that domain specific opinion leaders are often also leaders or influences in general.²²⁹

Section 3.2.3 of this paper will provide further details of the above concepts concerning measurement and distinction.

2.3.3 Main Theories on Consumer Behavior Relevant for Brand Communities

This section provides an overview regarding the most relevant theories on customer behavior from a brand-community perspective. It focuses on the motivations that cause people to join online communities operated by consumer goods companies, and the selected theories present a theoretical base allowing a next step in deducing the hypotheses of brand-community members' behavioral profiles.

Section 2.2.3.1 discusses the theory of social cognitive learning offered by Bandura. The influence of the brand community, the brand, and the other members on each participant has an effect on the individual's brand

²²⁶ Cf. Clark / Goldsmith (2005), p. 297 and Feick / Price (1987), p. 85.

²²⁷ Cf. Puspa / Tjandra-Rahardja (2009), p. 33.

²²⁸ Price et al. (1987), p. 332.

²²⁹ Cf. Van der Merve / van Heerden (2009), p. 69 et seq.

perception in terms of involvement and loyalty. The willingness to join a brand community voluntarily can be defined as an indicator for those consumers who search for such influences and stimuli in their learning process.

Section 2.2.3.2 covers the social identity theory offered by Tajfel and Turner. They note that belonging to a group and thereby confirming its values and emotions play an essential role in achieving social recognition and verifying self-worth. Membership in a brand community offers such a platform to verify the social identity of the members.

Section 2.2.3.3 discusses Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance. Brand communities represent platforms for information exchange and venues for brand enthusiasts. They assist their members in confirming their beliefs and knowledge about the brand and contribute to the reduction of cognitive dissonances.

Finally, Section 2.2.3.4 covers the self-perception theory proposed by Bem. This theory assumes that consumers behave in a way that does not contradict their attitudes and beliefs. For brand-community members, that means that connectivity with a brand due to membership leads to the need to remain faithful to the respective brand outside the community as well.

2.3.3.1 Social Learning Theory

The social learning theory advanced by Bandura (1976) is based on the assumption that people do not always learn from their own experiences, but from one another, via observation, imitation, and modeling. It tries to explain "the human behavior in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental determinants"²³⁰. Bandura's approach is rather broad and includes learning from models that can be presented either verbally or by means of pictures, e.g., as shown on the

²³⁰ Cf. Bandura (1977), p. vii.

internet or television. These models have an impact on the behavioral patterns.²³¹

The social learning theory is about how people learn to respond to their environment, and concerns with the patterns of reponse they learn and apply in live.²³²

Individual learning is based on external influences but also the possibility for self-created stimuli. These stimuli can be positive (reward) or negative (punishment).²³³ According to Bandura, both individuals and their environment have to be seen as reciprocal determinants of each other.²³⁴ As shown in Figure 14, Bandura’s learning model assumes reciprocal influences on the learning person.

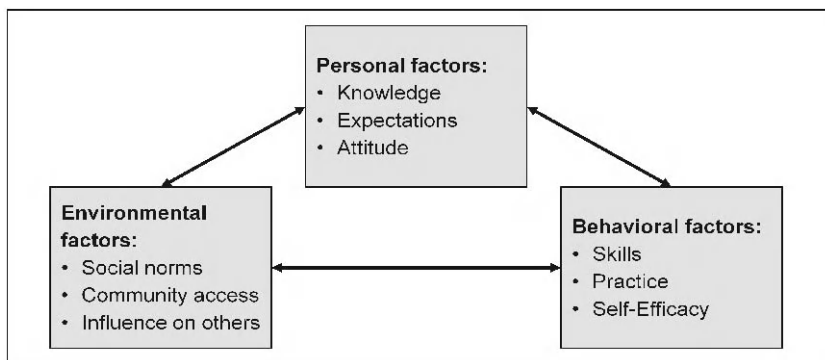


Fig. 14: Social learning theory²³⁵

Bandura’s theory includes what is understood as imitation as well as identification. These two effects are called modeling. The modeling can cause four types of learning effects²³⁶:

²³¹ Cf. Bandura (1976), p. 9.

²³² Cf. McGregor (2009), p. 258 referring to Martiskainen (2007).

²³³ Brehm et al. (2005), p. 410.

²³⁴ Cf. Bandura (1977), p. vii.

²³⁵ Adopted from Bandura (2001), p. 266.

Learning by observation: By observing others, people can acquire new behavioral patterns. This is especially the case when the model shows new reactions that are reproduced identically by the learning person.

Inhibition effect: The model can either strengthen or reduce the inhibition to show reactions learned earlier. The inhibition effect depends on the consequences of the action. If the action leads to punishment, the person is inhibited and does not strengthen or even show his learned reactions.

Disinhibition effect: The disinhibition effect represents the opposite of the inhibition effect. A person observes from the model that the strengthening of a reaction goes without punishment or even is rewarded by other individuals. This observation causes him to lose his inhibition.

Release effect: Reactions of others releases the same reaction in someone else, e.g., one person starts laughing, which and makes others laugh, too. This effect is not connected with the learning of new reactions or with disinhibition, because it is based on known actions and is not sanctioned by other individuals.

During the exposure to the model, the individual acquires guidelines for an appropriate performance mainly through symbolic representation of the model and its informative function.²³⁷

The initial learning process runs through four sub-processes. The first sub-process describes the awareness phase for the modeling stimuli, which depend on an individual person's unique observational characteristics and skills. After the awareness phase, the memory process starts. This phase encompasses the decoding of the observed symbols and thoughts. Following this phase, the third sub-process deals with the physical reproduction of the observed and decoded reactions. Finally, the fourth sub-

²³⁶ Bandura (1976), p. 13 et seq.

²³⁷ Cf. Bandura (1977), p. 22.

process ensures that the person is motivated and willing to strengthen his reactions in the future. The completion of these four steps describes the internal learning process of a person, which ends with reproduction of the learned reaction.²³⁸ A flowchart depicting this process is shown in Figure 15.

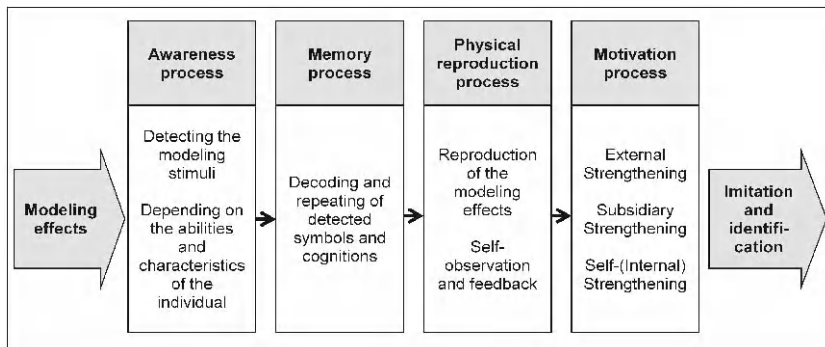


Fig. 15: Process of social learning²³⁹

Using this learning process, people modify not only their expectations concerning the consequences of their behavior but also concerning their own ability—or as Bandura calls it—their self-efficacy to put the behavior effectively into action.²⁴⁰ Herewith self-efficacy includes not only the ability, but also the belief or self-confidence of a person to perform a particular behavior.²⁴¹

It is important to mention that Bandura assumes the perceived stimuli that strengthen or even reduce the individual behavior are not necessarily always external. In addition, internal effects and reflections might lead to sanctioning behavioral reactions.²⁴² Especially imitation involves complex internal learning processes that are not necessarily visible for others.²⁴³ External

²³⁸ Cf. Bandura (1977), p. 23 and Bandura (2001), pp. 272-274.

²³⁹ Bandura (2001), p. 273.

²⁴⁰ Jonas / Brömer (2002), p. 283.

²⁴¹ Cf. Bandura (1997), p. 37.

²⁴² Bandura (1976), p. 52.

²⁴³ Cf. McGregor (2009), p. 258 referring to Martiskainen (2007).

consequences have the largest impact on human behavior, as long as they are in line with the self-developed, internal stimuli and perceptions. This leads to the fact that to assure the fit between external and internal stimuli, people tend to connect with others who exhibit similar behavioral standards. This provides social support for their self-strengthening system.²⁴⁴

Today, social learning theory “is gaining credence as a framework for understanding how consumer behavior”²⁴⁵ explaining how people learn to become consumers.²⁴⁶

By referring to brand communities and their members, the social learning theory can help to understand why brand-community members maintain a strong connection with their brand. The two learning effects, imitation and identification of behavioral reactions, can be supported by the brand community. As mentioned by McGregor, “through social learning (observation), people can learn that they have a responsibility to help other consumer-citizens”²⁴⁷, which will change their way of consumption.

As suggested by Lee, Conroy, and Hii, the internet as a social system” is used mainly for social learning, communication, social relationships and to foster a sense of belonging through shared play and virtual club membership.²⁴⁸ Brand communities are part of this system, representing all features for social learning.

The community represents a place for consumers with similar values and behavioral standards to gather. This turns it easily into a platform for social learning. Members are stimulated to imitate the common behavior of the community, as well as the individual behavioral patterns of single members

²⁴⁴ Bandura (1976), p. 210.

²⁴⁵ McGregor (2009), p. 258.

²⁴⁶ Lee et al. (2003), p. 1709.

²⁴⁷ McGregor (2009), p. 262.

²⁴⁸ Cf. Lee et al. (2003), p. 1710.

or of the brand itself. Furthermore, the community allows the individual to identify with the behavioral standards and patterns.

The brand community supports all four learning effects as described above:

- Learning by observing the behavior of other members and implementing the observed behavioral patterns in one's own behavioral repertoire.
- Learning via the inhibition effect of possible behavioral consequences or even sanctions on a certain behavior as shown by individual members.
- Learning by the disinhibition effect via receiving rewards for a special behavior.
- Adopting behavioral patterns of the community by means of the release effect.
- Thus does the brand community support consumers interested in the brand by "teaching" them patterns used and confirmed by other brand enthusiasts and the brand itself, and by allowing its members to adopt these patterns. Because of learning about the brand and the community, and common habits and characteristics, consumers increase their brand involvement. This learning process strengthens their feeling of belonging. By following the learning process, consumers feel more familiar with the brand and community, which has an effect on their involvement as well as on their loyalty.

2.3.3.2 Social Identity Theory

The social identity theory is based on the question why do people favor their in-groups over out-groups. Herewith in-groups characterize the individuals' social environment, whereas out-groups represent social groups outside these in-groups. Returning to Tajfel and Turner (1979), people strive to enhance their self-esteem. Self-esteem, which consists of personal identity and social identity, can be enhanced through either personal achievements

or through affiliation with successful groups.²⁴⁹ Figure 16 represents an overview of these two basic aspects of social identity theory.

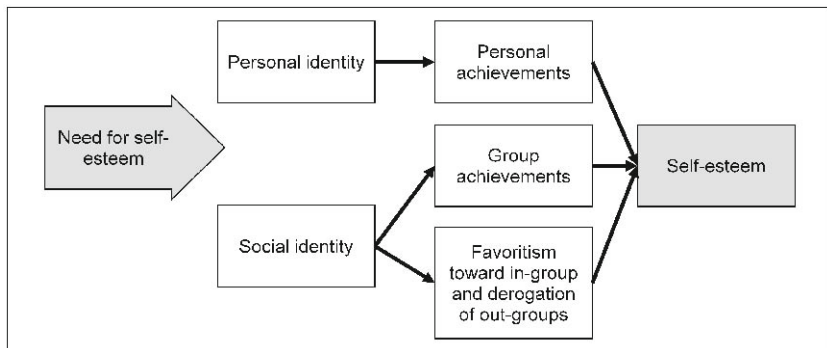


Fig. 16: Social identity theory²⁵⁰

Social identity in this context is understood as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.”²⁵¹ Social identity is one part of a broad self-image. Therefore, it can be stated, that “identity theory emphasizes how self-definition arises from using or contemplating artifacts, symbols, and behaviors [, which] ... represent one’s accumulated commitment to the domain”²⁵² (i.e., to a specific group or even to a specific brand / brand community).

The theory by Tajfel and Turner is based on the following five assumptions²⁵³:

²⁴⁹ Cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 153.

²⁵⁰ Brehm et al. (2005), p. 153.

²⁵¹ Tajfel (1978), p. 63.

²⁵² Cf. Laverie et al. (2002), p. 660.

²⁵³ Cf. Fischer / Wiswede (2002), p. 659 in reference to Tajfel / Turner (1979) and Tajfel (1982).

1. Humans need positive self-esteem.
2. Belonging to a group allows for a positive and / or negative evaluation of one's own social identity compared with the evaluation of out-groups.
3. Social comparison between in- and out-groups allows for building and keeping a positive social identity.
4. Due to social categorization, non-members of the in-group seem to be different from members of the in-group.
5. Group members strive for positive distinctiveness for themselves and for their group.

"Identities are cultivated through social interaction."²⁵⁴ Therefore social identity is based on the connection with others within a group. Group membership defines the social identity of human beings.²⁵⁵

Identification with one's own group and the outward differentiation plays a very important role in this human process. This helps to explain why people feel proud of belonging to groups and being connected with other group members. This pride occurs whether or not they receive personal and direct benefit, e.g., soccer fans that support their national team.²⁵⁶ Conversely, this pride can go so far in the opposite extreme that group members develop prejudices and hostility directed toward out-groups and evaluate people outside their group in a more negative manner.²⁵⁷

Group members do not aim to maximize the benefit or esteem of the own group, but instead to maximize the perceived difference between the in-group and relevant out-groups.²⁵⁸ This aim can be reached by means of the following strategies²⁵⁹:

²⁵⁴ Kleine et al. (2001), p. 38.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Hogg (2000), p. 404 referring to Tajfel (1972), p. 292.

²⁵⁶ Cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 152.

²⁵⁷ Cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 154.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Fischer / Wiswede (2002), p. 663.

²⁵⁹ Cf. Fischer / Wiswede (2002), pp. 666-669.

- Social competition: to be better than the relevant out-groups by using the same resources (“all you can do, I can do even better”).
- Social creativity: to increase the esteem of one’s own group, the strategy of the comparison changes, e.g., comparison of other criteria / dimensions, or comparison with new peer groups.
- Social mobility, e.g., social advancement or physical movement from a ghetto.
- Spatial and / or cultural segregation by, e.g., building ghettos or subcultures.

The more confident people are in their role, the stronger is their picture of the self as competent-in-role. As a result of this process, these people need less external clues of identity through social interaction.²⁶⁰

Related to the brand-community phenomenon, the social identity theory provides an approach to explaining why community members search for strong relationships within the community. The brand community helps them to achieve self-esteem by belonging to a group of people with whom they share values, traditions, and knowledge about a common object of interest, such as the brand. Brand communities help to develop a collective self or public self among their members.²⁶¹ This is based on strong brand identification and the encouragement of consumers by the company to actively participate in activities, which makes them feel belonging to a meaningful group.²⁶²

Additionally, the brand itself can represent a relevant social category with which consumers (such as brand-community members) can identify²⁶³. Meaning can be transferred between the brand and these consumers.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁰ Cf. Kleine et al. (2001), p. 39 et seq.

²⁶¹ Cf. Lam et al. (2010), p. 130.

²⁶² Cf. Lam et al. (2010), p. 142 referring to Bhattachary / Sen (2003) and Prahalad / Ramsawamy (2004).

²⁶³ Cf. Fournier (1998), p. 364.

²⁶⁴ Cf. McCracken (1988), p. 86.

And finally, this consumer-brand relationship allows them to perceive the brand as “me”.²⁶⁵

According to Tajfel and Turner’s theory, brand communities allow members to increase their self-esteem in these two ways: On the one hand, brand-community members participate in group achievements or even support those by interacting within the community, actively posting comments, taking part in raffles or even publishing own ideas (e.g., recipes in cooking communities). On the other hand, by means of their membership, they distance themselves from other communities or non-community members. This second activity results not only because of the bonding and interacting within the community but also because of the information exchange advantages. Members benefit from the frequent exchange of information and knowledge between members and brand or company, but also between the members themselves. For this reason, members can feel dominant in comparison with non-members or members of other communities. Belonging to a brand community can play an important role in the mind of this type of consumer.

2.3.3.3 Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

Based on the irrationality of human behavior, Festinger (1957) developed his theory of cognitive dissonances, which assumes that every human holds cognitions about himself and the world around him; these include beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, and behavior. Once these beliefs, attitudes, and behavior are no longer consistent with the thoughts, dissonances arouse psychological tension and the individual is motivated to reduce the feeling.²⁶⁶ Dissonances are psychologically perceived as uncomfortable and trigger a mental recovery process in the affected individual.²⁶⁷ Therefore, humans add

²⁶⁵ Cf. Kleine et al. (1995), p. 340.

²⁶⁶ Cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 214.

²⁶⁷ Cf. Beauvoir / Joule (1982), p. 112.

new cognitive elements (e.g., additional information) to their cognitive mindset that produce new consonant relationships.²⁶⁸

To reduce dissonances, humans use the following techniques²⁶⁹:

- To change the attitude (“I don’t need to do that”).
- To change the perception of the behavior (“It was not so bad”).
- To add consonant cognitions (“Every cloud has a silver lining”).
- To minimize the importance of the conflict (“It’s not that important”).
- To reduce perceived choice (“I had no choice. What might I have done.”).

However, dissonances do not always lead to a change in behavior or attitude. In an experiment, Festinger and Carlsmith showed that people can also deal with their inconsistent behavior. If they get a reward for an inconsistency and the reward is big enough, the more they justify their response to themselves and the less likely they are to change their attitudes.²⁷⁰ Furthermore, if the dissonance is insignificant, humans tend to have such a diminished or even complete lack of motivation that they do not seek out new or additional information.²⁷¹

The motivation to seek out information is always of high relevance in those situations connected with decision making. Two situations cannot be distinguished. The first is impending or possible future behavior. In this case, a person is motivated to reflect on all aspects and alternatives that can help to take the decision / action.²⁷² The second is following a decision or action: This is the period when humans actively seek out information for

²⁶⁸ Cf. Festinger (2001), p. 126.

²⁶⁹ Cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 215.

²⁷⁰ Cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 216 and Fischer / Wiswede (2002), p. 251; with the so-called “20\$-Experiment,” Festinger and Carlsmith showed that with an increase of the benefit, people act against their initial beliefs—and would even tell lies.

²⁷¹ Cf. Festinger (2001), p. 127.

²⁷² Cf. Festinger (2001), p. 125.

reconfirmation. Following the decision, Festinger observed two possible inner states: 1) an increasing confidence in the decision taken, or 2) an increasing discrepancy in the attractiveness of the choice taken compared with other alternatives. The last point is also connected with the awareness that a retroactive change is often impossible.²⁷³

Purchasing a product might be connected with cognitive dissonances. This is especially the case when the alternative courses of action are nearly equally desirable—that means when the level of differentiation is very low. This is the case for most product categories, especially in the FMCG segment, which explains why consumers torn between equivalent alternatives try to reassure themselves of their choice by justifying their weighting of their decision ratings.²⁷⁴

Dissonance theory has proven evidence with respect to attitude change and has shown predictive effects in the post-purchase-decision process.²⁷⁵ Koller and Salzberger could also prove “evidence that uncertainty and discomfort during the decision seeking phase may be understood as phenomena covered by the concept of cognitive dissonance”²⁷⁶. They recommend marketers to confirm the customer in his or her brand or product choice even prior the final purchase decision.²⁷⁷

Brand communities support customers in their decision process—either for future actions or even after the decision has been made:

1. Brand communities offer additional information about the brand, which helps to reassure the customer about the choice.

²⁷³ Cf. Festinger (2001), p. 83.

²⁷⁴ Cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 217; Brehm (1956) demonstrated in an experiment about the evaluation of various consumer products that under high-dissonance conditions, ratings increased for a chosen item and decreased for the non-chosen item, whereas under low-dissonance conditions, the re-evaluation of the products was about the same.

²⁷⁵ Cf. Cummings / Venkatesan (1976), p.305 and Oshikawa (1969), p. 49.

²⁷⁶ Koller / Salzberger (2007), p. 225.

²⁷⁷ Cf. Koller / Salzberger (2007), p. 225.

2. The interaction between customers within the brand community can also reassure the individual member as regards brand choice. This is especially true, because brand-community members in general represent brand enthusiasts who provide additional arguments and continuous support to justify the brand choice.
3. As members of the community, consumers can tap into not only information and advice but also can take on the role of brand advocate. By communicating and, especially, by recommending the brand to others—both inside and outside the brand community—they justify their choice, strengthen their beliefs, and increase the difference between their brand and alternative brands.

2.3.3.4 Self-perception Theory

The self-perception theory by Bem (1972) postulates that people can gain self-insight by observing and analyzing their own behavior the same way outside observers do. The Bem's behaviorist theory is based on two basic requirements²⁷⁸:

1. Individuals can come to know their attitudes, emotions, and other internal states by observing their own overt behavior and / or the circumstances in which their behavior occurs.
2. In case the cues of the internal state are weak, ambiguous, or non-interpretable, the individual is in the same position as an outside observer, who must rely upon the same external cues to infer the individual's inner state. In this situation, self- and interpersonal perception are partially identical.

The key question for both individual and outside observers is: "What must my (this person's) attitude be if I am (s/he is) willing to behave in this fashion

²⁷⁸ Cf. Bem (1972), p. 5.

in this situation?”²⁷⁹ Therefore, for both judgments, the same internal program is used.

Nevertheless, there are some essential differences between self- and interpersonal perception or the perception an outside observer develops about an individual²⁸⁰:

- Difference between insider and outsider: The insider can often detect additional internal information that is not available to outsiders, e.g., an insider detects the person is trying hard to solve a really difficult problem, whereas an outsider considers the person to be lazy.
- Difference between intimate and stranger: The intimate knows about past behavior that guides the present attitudes, whereas the outside observer lacks this information.
- Difference between self and other: The individual seeks to protect and defend his self-esteem against threats from others.
- Difference between actor and observer: The acting individual has his focus on outward situational cues rather than inward on his own behavior, whereas the outside observer focuses on the individual’s behavior as the stimulus of the situation.

According to self-perception theory, self-definition arises “through contemplating the relative frequency of one’s past identity relevant behavioral choices.”²⁸¹ Herewith, the theory helps people to learn about themselves. To do so, it is necessary that the situation alone is insufficient to have caused their behavior. As long as a situation seems compelling enough to induce a special reaction, individuals do not use their internal state for explanation, e.g., in case of reward or punishment. As an example, someone paid for wolfing down a sandwich, would not assume feeling hungry.²⁸² To

²⁷⁹ Bem (1972), p. 28.

²⁸⁰ Cf. Bem (1972), p. 40 et seq.

²⁸¹ Laverie et al. (2002), p. 660.

²⁸² Cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 59.

be able to learn about oneself, a process must be invoked that puts individuals into an internal state that affects their behavior.

The theory is based primarily on the assumption that individuals show attitude-congruent behavior.²⁸³ It suggest the process by which individuals acquire initial opinions or infer the causes of their own behavior when the initial opinions are not that strong.²⁸⁴ As expressed by Fazio, the behavior provides a clear indication of the attitude toward the object in question.²⁸⁵ Several researchers show that individuals tend to be consistent in perceiving their own attitudes and the ways they behave—even if they must be gently coaxed into doing something they do not feel completely certain about.²⁸⁶

In the early stages of this theory, Bem understood the self-perception theory as an alternative to the theory of cognitive dissonance, even as a shift of paradigm in social psychology. Whereas the dissonance theory is based on cognitive but also motivational processes, the self-perception theory is founded on a behavioral perspective, lacking any motivational construct.²⁸⁷ Today, both theories are confirmed. According to Olson and Stone, the self-perception theory is more focused on attitude change following counter-attitudinal behavior, which results from cognition and inferential processes. The processes are neither emotional nor designed to reduce unpleasant arousal. The dissonance theory investigates counter-attitudinal behavior. This behavior causes an unpleasant state of arousal or tension and motivates individuals to change their behavior or reduce dissonances.²⁸⁸

²⁸³ Cf. Olson / Stone (2005), p. 258.

²⁸⁴ Cf. Tybout et al. (1978), p. 721.

²⁸⁵ Cf. Fazio (1987), p. 130.

²⁸⁶ Cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 59 referring to the studies of Chaiken and Baldwin (1981), Fazio (1987), Schlenker and Trudeau (1990).

²⁸⁷ Cf. Bem (1972), p. 43 et seq.

²⁸⁸ Cf. Henning-Thurau / Klee (1997), p. 740, and cf. Olson / Stone (2005), p. 251.

Self-perception theory complements the cognitive response view, addressing a key source of initial opinion.²⁸⁹ Fazio (1987) states that the self-perception theory can be seen as supportive of dissonance theory, because the self-perception theory seems to be more relevant to the issue of attitude formation than to attitude change.²⁹⁰

The main difference between these two theories can be described as:

- The dissonance theory explains the impact of attitude-incongruent behavior on individuals' attitudes. This attitude-incongruent behavior requires that the individual feels a high divergence of the current state from his or her most preferred position that appears unacceptable.²⁹¹ Festinger's approach is adequate for the phenomena of attitude change in the context of attitude-discrepant behavior.²⁹²
- The self-perception theory focuses on the explanation of attitude-congruent behavior²⁹³, and describes attitude change in the context of attitude-congruent behavior²⁹⁴.

The assumption of attitude-congruent behavior of the self-perception theory explains changes in attitude even in the presence of no arousal,²⁹⁵ meaning in case of no or only little divergence for the position desired. Today, both theories are seen as complementary approaches.

With a focus on the brand-community phenomenon, the self-perception theory can deliver a theoretical approach concerning why community members can be understood as supporters of the brand. As described above, the theory is based on the assumption that individuals' attitudes correspond with their behavior. Thus, it can be expected that for those

²⁸⁹ Cf. Tybout et al. (1978), p. 721 et seq.

²⁹⁰ Cf. Fazio (1987), p. 130, and p. 144.

²⁹¹ Cf. Olson / Stone (2005), p. 251.

²⁹² Cf. Beauvois / Joule (1982), p. 110.

²⁹³ Cf. Olson / Stone (2005), p. 251.

²⁹⁴ Cf. Beauvois / Joule (1982), p. 110.

²⁹⁵ Cf. Olson / Stone (2005), p. 252.

consumers participating in the community and feeling connected with the brand, they will also function as advocates of this brand outside the community, especially in terms of recommending as well as repurchasing the brand. Their positive attitude toward the brand makes them join the brand's community and participate in it. Their attitude-congruent behavior would help them stay connected with the brand even outside the community.

2.4 Customer Retention as Marketing Objective for Brand Communities

Constantly changing business conditions make it more and more difficult and challenging for brands and companies to keep their customers.²⁹⁶ Today customers are more demanding, sophisticated, educated, which makes them speak to the company at eye level.²⁹⁷ They expect more customized approaches and want to be addressed as individuals.²⁹⁸ A brand community can therefore be understood as a tool to build and strengthen customer relationships. As stated by the Communication and Corporate Marketing Director of Nestlé Germany, Lars Wöbcke, brand communities are primarily useful for brand management and customer retention, and secondarily as a means to increase sales.²⁹⁹

To establish and operate a brand community is a rather costly and work-intensive marketing activity. Therefore, customer retention can be used as one key measure of its effectiveness.

The following sections will provide an overview of the key definitions of the term *customer retention* and its determinants.

²⁹⁶ Cf. Carter (2010), p. 20 referring to Carter (1999).

²⁹⁷ Cf. Carter (2010), p. 20.

²⁹⁸ Cf. Raymond / Tanner (1994), p. 67

²⁹⁹ Cf. Wöbecke (2009), p. 127.

2.4.1 Definition of Customer Retention

As discussed in Section 2.2.2 of this paper, from a marketer's point of view, the aim of the purchasing process must be to make the customer feel satisfied with the choice. Customer satisfaction is one key requirement to obtaining customer retention.³⁰⁰

From a customer's point of view, customer retention can be interpreted as an inner state of affinity and / or bonding.³⁰¹ Consumers feel affinity as a voluntary type of connection based on satisfaction, whereas bonding should be understood as a feeling of obligation or commitment.³⁰²

According to Diller (1995), customer retention represents the attitude of a customer toward his or her relationship with the marketer, which finds expression in the willingness for subsequent transactions.³⁰³

Meyer and Oevemann (1995) consider customer perspective including the determinants of customer retention. They think that customer retention includes both actual and future behavior of customers in terms of purchase and recommendation toward the company and brand. It results from psychological, situational, legal, economical, or technological reasons for relationship building and bonding.³⁰⁴

From a consumer's perspective, customer retention is focused on repeating specific activities (repurchase, recommendation, etc.). The marketer's perspective aims for better relationship management with a close relationship the desired outcome.

³⁰⁰ Cf. Homburg et al. (1999), p. 174.

³⁰¹ Cf. Helm (2005), p. 130.

³⁰² Cf. Weinberg / Terlutter (2005), p. 46.

³⁰³ Cf. Diller (1995), p. 6.

³⁰⁴ Cf. Meyer / Oevemann (1995), p. 1341.

Customer retention reflects the current and future behavior of a customer³⁰⁵:

- The current or actual behavior covers repurchase and cross-buying or the purchase of other products of the same brand(s) of the same company.
- The future behavior in customer retention is understood as repurchase intention, cross-buying intention, intention to recommend, and tolerance of price increases.

From a behavioral point of view, customer retention can be understood as a state of commitment and bonding between consumers, or consumers and a brand / company grounded in emotions, motivation, and attitudes.³⁰⁶ The condition of this commitment and bonding can be affective, cognitive, or normative.³⁰⁷ The intensity of emotions, motivation, and attitudes can vary and belongs to both, affective or cognitive conditions. The normative conditions are influenced by group norms creating motivation to behave with or against these norms.³⁰⁸ Figure 17 shows the process of customer retention from a behavioral perspective.

³⁰⁵ Cf. Homburg / Fassnacht (1998), p. 415.

³⁰⁶ Cf. Weinberg / Terlutter (2005), p. 50.

³⁰⁷ Cf. Weinberg / Terlutter (2005), p. 48 referring to Eggert (1999), p. 96 et seq.

³⁰⁸ Cf. Kroeber-Riel et al. (2009), p. 526 et seq.

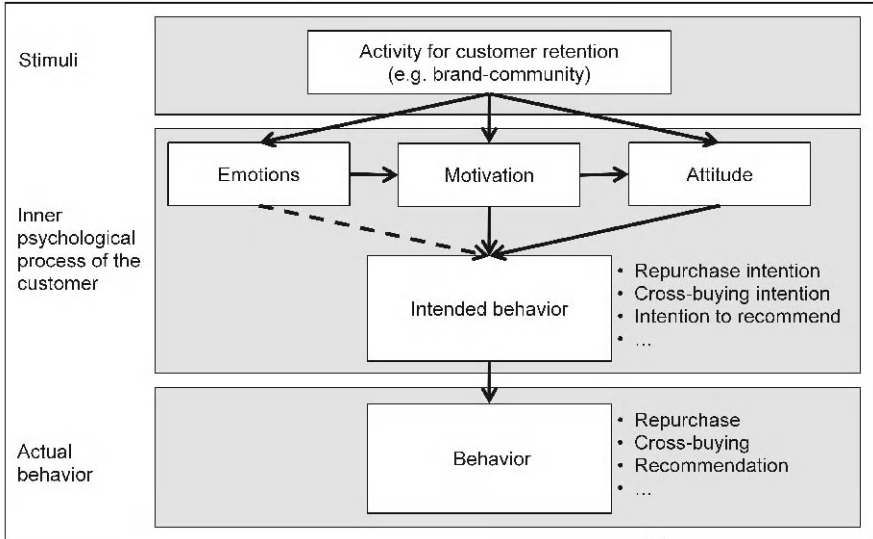


Fig. 17: *Concept of customer retention from a behavioral perspective*³⁰⁹

Other researchers define customer retention from a marketer's perspective.

Homburg and Bruhn (2005) deduce the following understanding with a more company- driven perspective building on the definitions of Diller and Meyer and Oevemann: Customer retention summarizes all activities of a company creating an impact on customers' actual and intended behavior with the aim to build, stabilize, or increase the positive relationship.³¹⁰

Henning-Thurau and Klee (1997) also understand customer retention as a marketing activity in which the company is "taking the active (i.e., retaining) role in the marketer—customer dyad.... Customer retention aims at repeat-purchase behavior that is triggered by the marketer's activities."³¹¹

³⁰⁹ Cf. Weinberg / Terlutter (2005), p. 49.

³¹⁰ Cf. Homburg / Bruhn (2005), p. 8.

³¹¹ Henning-Thurau / Klee (1997), p. 741.

Customer retention represents an important performance figure that provides orientation for marketing and sales. It has an impact on companies' key objectives, such as profit, return on investment, growth, and profitability. As confirmed by Gupta, Lehmann, and Stuart (2004), customer retention has a large impact on firm value. It is a key measurement of the customer value³¹² as well as of profitability³¹³, keeping in mind that the relative costs of customer retention are substantially less than the cost of customer acquisition.³¹⁴

2.4.2 Determinants of Customer Retention

In the literature, several aspects inducing customer retention can be found.

The key requirement to achieve customer retention is customer satisfaction.³¹⁵ Customer satisfaction describes the extent to which a product or service fulfills customer's needs, desires, or expectations and depends on the perceived performance of the product in delivering value relative to a customer's expectations. Herewith expectations are based on product experiences in the past, recommendations, or market information.³¹⁶ Hallowell (1996) confirms a positive inference between customer satisfaction and customer retention.³¹⁷ Seiders, Voss, and Grewal (2005) confirm this point of view and state that "marketing literature consistently identifies customer satisfaction as a key antecedent to loyalty and repurchase"³¹⁸. Figure 18 provides an overview of the functional chain of customer retention.

"Satisfaction is an essential ingredient for the emergence of loyalty"³¹⁹. Satisfied customers develop customer loyalty toward the brand and the

³¹² Cf. Gupta et al. (2004), p. 17.

³¹³ Cf. Hallowell (1996), p. 32.

³¹⁴ Cf. Oliver (1999), p. 33.

³¹⁵ Cf. Kotler (1994), p. 20.

³¹⁶ Cf. Awara (2010), p. 4.

³¹⁷ Cf. Hallowell (1996), pp. 31-32.

³¹⁸ Seiders et al. (2005), p. 26.

³¹⁹ Oliver (1999), p. 42.

company. This statement is grounded on the belief that satisfaction has a positive impact on both the psychological determinants (such as trust) of the customer as well as behavioral attributes (e.g., repurchase, cross-buying, recommendation), which are responsible for the economical success of the company.³²⁰ The research by Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello confirms the significant, positive effect of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty.³²¹ A satisfactory purchase experience is one requirement for a continued interest in the product that leads to repeat purchase.³²²



Fig. 18: Functional chain of customer retention³²³

Dick and Basu (1994) define customer loyalty as the “favorable correspondence between relative attitudes and repeat patronage.”³²⁴ It can be seen as strategic advantage, because it allows the marketer³²⁵:

- To reduce customers’ motivation to change brands,
- To build substantial entry barriers to competitors,
- To reassure other consumers about the brand and its quality,
- To provide time to respond to competitive moves.

Loyalty consist of attitudinal as well as of behavioral elements, which are the “biased (i.e. non-random) behavioral response (i.e., purchase) expressed over time by some decision-making units with respect to one or more

³²⁰ Cf. Weinberg / Terlutter (2005), p. 51 referring to Halstead / Page (1992); Anderson / Sullivan (1993); Zeithaml et al. (1996); Mittal et al. (1999).

³²¹ Cf. Brakus et al. (2005), p. 66.

³²² Cf. Oliver (1993), p. 418.

³²³ Cf. Homburg / Bruhn (2005), p. 10.

³²⁴ Cf. Helm (2005), p. 130 referring to Dick / Basu (1994), p. 102.

³²⁵ Cf. McLoughlin / Aaker (2010), p. 178.

alternative brands out of a set of such brands, which is a function of psychological (decision making, evaluative) processes³²⁶.

According to Homburg and Giering (1995), a customer who is loyal toward the brand can be seen as bound. His loyalty can refer either to his current or to his future behavior.³²⁷

The loyalty to a brand offers several advantages for consumers but also for the company. For consumers the respective brand can symbolize the achieved expectations, which makes them purchasing the brand with more comfort and the confidence that it will meet their expectations. For the company, customer loyalty enhances brand equity and reduces the risk to lose customers because of competitive activities. Customer loyalty can have a positive effect on trade margins as well as on the effectiveness of marketing communication.³²⁸

Customer loyalty allows companies and consumers to establish a high level of customer retention, which represents the next step of the functional chain. The study of Verhoef (2003) confirms this aspect, showing that loyalty programs have a significant and positive effect on customer retention.³²⁹

Eggert (1999) as well as Peter (1999) claim that positive attitude and satisfaction are key requirements for the loyalty of a consumer. This is not necessarily the case for customer retention, which can also occur with negative attitudes (e.g., in case of technical bonding³³⁰).³³¹ Finally, a high level of customer retention leads in general to economical success of a brand or company in the market.

³²⁶ Jacoby / Chestnut (1978), p. 80.

³²⁷ Cf. Homburg, et al. (1999), p. 178.

³²⁸ Cf. Keller (2008), p. 74 et seq.

³²⁹ Cf. Verhoef (2003), p. 39.

³³⁰ Remark: An example for technical bonding is a printer that can be used only with a specific printer cartridge.

³³¹ Cf. Helm (2005), p. 130 referring to Eggert (1999), p. 28 et seq. and Peter (1999), p. 10.

Additional to these key aspects of the functional chain of customer retention, several researchers defined the different perspectives on the determinants. According to the definition by Meyer and Oevermann (1995), psychological, situational, legal, economical, or technological aspects determine customer retention.³³²

Diller (1996) found that customer satisfaction, involvement, commitment and trust are key aspects in building customer retention.³³³ He combined the four factors showing that the strength of their impact can vary depending on the chosen combination.

Peter combines the perspectives of Meyer / Oevermann and Diller and formulates the impact of social, psychological, economical barriers, as well as of variety seeking and of competitor's offers on customer retention and satisfaction as key elements.³³⁴

Another point of view can be seen in the work of Eggert who emphasis voluntary behavior (affinity) versus obligation (commitment).³³⁵ Herewith, commitment can be understood as the "pledging or binding of an individual to behavioral acts"³³⁶. Those consumers that remain customers of a respective brand are likely to be more affectively committed to this brand. Herewith, enhancing satisfaction can increase this level of commitment.³³⁷ Furthermore, a higher level of brand commitment has a positive impact on brand loyalty.³³⁸

Meffert (1999) chooses a higher-level perspective and differentiates between emotional and actual or effective reasons for customer retention. This way of

³³² Cf. Meyer / Oevermann (1995), p. 1341.

³³³ Cf. Diller (1996), p. 85.

³³⁴ Cf. Weinberg / Terlutter (2005), p. 50 referring to Peter (1999).

³³⁵ Cf. Weinberg / Terlutter (2005), p. 50 referring to Eggert (1999), p. 96 et seq.

³³⁶ Cf. Kiesler (1971), p. 30.

³³⁷ Cf. Verhoef (2003), p. 38 and p. 42.

³³⁸ Cf. Kim et al. (2008), p. 110 et seq.

differentiation allows for integrating and combining the different approaches of defining the determinants, as shown in Figure 19.

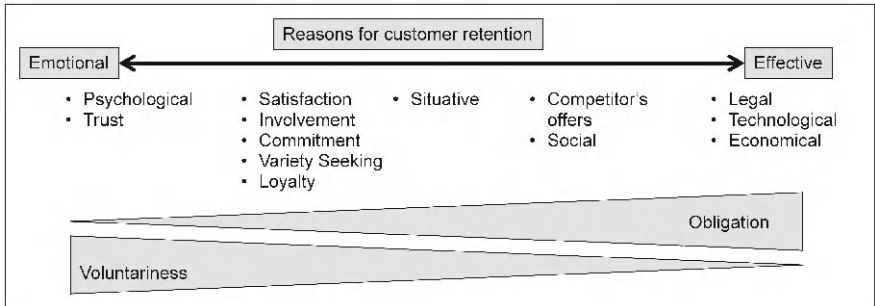


Fig. 19: *Determinants of customer retention*³³⁹

2.5 Delimitation of the Research Object and Additional Need for Research

Marketing experts evaluate the benefit of brand communities positively. From their point of view, brand communities provide the opportunity to increase the brand's attractiveness by strengthening the interaction and exchange between the customers. The intense involvement with the brand has a positive impact on the brand choice.³⁴⁰

This valuation shows that the phenomenon of brand community has not yet reached its end. More and more companies are investing in building, establishing, and operating communities around their brands.

As shown in the sections above, considerable research has been done so far. Most of it considers brand communities from the perspective of the company that uses it as a marketing tool to create bonding between brand and consumers, as well as a means of strengthening brand loyalty. The key

³³⁹ Cf. Meffert (1999), p. 119.

³⁴⁰ Cf. Bauer (2009), p. 118 referring to the Delphi-survey "Interactive Marketing 2020" (2006).

question here is: How does the brand community influence the individual customer?

There are tendencies in research to determine how people engaged in brand communities can be characterized (e.g., study of Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008), Kozinets (1999)), but two questions remain unanswered: Do brand communities really work? Which type(s) of customers feel attracted enough to become members?

Not all consumers wish to join a brand community, which can entail a willingness to officially apply and subscribe for a membership. What attracts some consumers to join? Why do others not feel attracted to do so, even if they love the brand as well?

This raises the question of whether brand-community members have a special behavioral profile compared with non-members. Behavioral aspects of the brand-community membership have been unexplored so far.

Other questions to consider: Is a brand community an appropriate tool when considered from an economic perspective, especially in respect of customer retention of their members? What is different about the behavioral profile of members compared with that of non-members that compels the former to join the community and is it that aspect that leads to a higher rate of retention?

So far, brand communities have served more as a customer relationship tool with the aim of establishing a sustained connection between customer and brand or company. However, can brand communities also be used by the marketer to increase sales?

Finding the answer to this question will provide important information for the design and the management of brand communities. Another important point is related to the product category investigated in the survey. Most of the research has been carried out on high-involvement products, such as automotive products, consumer electronics, or computer games. Consumers

have a higher interest in gathering or exchanging information, and spend more time and attention in dealing with the product or brand. Therefore, the appeal of these product groups for brand communities is rather high.

More and more, FMCG companies establish marketing funding for developing, creating, and managing brand communities. In general, these convenience goods, such as food and beverages, cosmetics and body care, and home and laundry care have only low involvement potential.

To date, it appears that no research explicitly focusing on the low-involvement product categories of FMCG has been conducted. It remains open whether brand communities are an appropriate tool for promoting these types of products—even though FMCG manufacturers invest already important parts of their marketing budgets in this type of media.

FMCG represents an important factor in the advertising market. In Germany, 12% of the total advertising spending is made by FMCG companies.³⁴¹

In summary, the aim of this study is to close the research gap by investigating the behavioral aspects of brand-community membership and their impact on the sales-oriented factors of customer retention: purchase intention and recommendation.

Therefore, to reiterate, this study aims to answer the following four key questions:

1. Can consumers involved in brand communities be characterized by specific behavioral attributes?
2. Are these behavioral attributes economically relevant for the success of the brand in the sense of buying intention and intended recommendation?

³⁴¹ Cf. <http://nielsen.com/de/de/insights/top10s/marktentwicklung-top-50-branchen.html>, Above-the-line, Marktentwicklung Top 50 Branchen, January-July 2011.

3. Are there significant differences between brand-community members and those consumers who are simply visiting the site?
4. Do brand-community members show higher economic relevance compared with non-members?

To reach this objective, the following aspects are considered in the conceptualization and operationalization of the research model:

- Designing a behavioral profile for brand-community members that considers the findings of existing brand-community research,
- Conducting an investigation of these behavioral components concerning their impact on the sales-oriented figures of purchase intention and intent to recommend the brand,
- Analyzing possible moderating effects, e.g., active participation in the community by posting content,
- Comparing the effects of brand-community members and non-members to answer the question whether brand-community members show stronger effects compared with non-members,
- Effective and representative data collection in Germany.

The focus is on brand communities drawn from the FMCG market with the following characteristics:

- Officially initiated and operated by the marketer.
- Both leadership forms—driven by the marketer or by the members.
- Both access forms—open access or access only with membership.
- Online (even though some offline activities are possible).
- Own http-address (not hosted within a social network).

3 Framework of the Study

The aim of this chapter is to develop a research model that allows investigating the impact of selected behavioral attributes on the customer retention of brand-community members.

Section 3.1 provides an overview of the framework's conceptualization. Based on the literature review presented in Chapter 2, indicators of brand-community members' behavior are selected and drawn together to develop a behavioral profile that considers members' reasons for joining and participating in the community.

In Section 3.2, the conceptualized model will be further developed. With regard to the economic impact of brand-community participation, a set of hypotheses is formulated that allows investigating the behavioral effects on sales-oriented measures as purchase intention and intent to recommend the brand. The phrasing of the hypotheses reflects the comparison between brand-community members and non-members.

Section 3.3 provides an overview on the constructs' operationalization. The aim of this section is to turn the developed hypotheses into observable and measurable quantities. This process covers the scale selection for each of the behavioral and performance factors.

Finally, Section 3.4 provides information about the development and implementation of the questionnaire.

3.1 Conceptualization of the Research Framework

As mentioned in Section 1.2, the aim of this study is to develop and to validate a behavioral profile of those consumers participating in official FMCG brand communities and to examine whether these behavioral attributes have an impact on the economic success of the brand.

The literature review on the brand-community phenomenon indicates that the following aspects seem to have high importance for members and should therefore be reflected in the behavioral profile:

- The emotional relationship to the brand and company,
- The social identity through the brand-community membership,
- The social interaction and moral responsibility with other brand admirers.

These three aspects are elaborated in the following sections.

3.1.1 Emotional Relationship to Brand and Company

Brand communities represent a refuge of admirers and heavy users of the respective brand,³⁴² who share the same values, rituals, and experiences.³⁴³ Furthermore, this study includes only brand communities whose members have subscribed actively as members, and log-in with their user-ID and password. The decision to sign-in is a conscious process and can therefore be understood as a confession to the brand community as well as to the brand.

These facts indicate that community members seem to feel highly involved in the brand. Involvement in this context means the perceived value of a brand that manifests as interest in the respective brand.³⁴⁴ According to Laurent and Kapferer, the main antecedents of *brand involvement* are the perceived importance and the personal meaning of the product, as well as the symbolic or sign-value attributed by the consumers to the product, its consumption, and its hedonic value and emotional appeal.³⁴⁵ Beatty, Kahle, and Homer share this point of view. They also emphasize the hedonic, as

³⁴² Cf. among others: Schouten / McAlexander (1995), p. 50 et seq.; Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 412; von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 131 et seq.

³⁴³ Cf. among others: Cova / Pace (2006), p. 1089, Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 418.

³⁴⁴ Cf. Mittal / Lee (1989), p. 365.

³⁴⁵ Cf. Laurent / Kapferer (1985), p. 43.

well as the symbolic value of the product consumption. For them, involvement represents the “importance of a product to the individual, to the individual’s self-concept, values, and ego.”³⁴⁶ This enduring involvement should be understood as ongoing interest in a specific product or brand. It is relatively independent from the purchase situation.³⁴⁷ It is “based on needs, values, and interests that motivate a consumer toward an object (e.g., a brand).”³⁴⁸

Furthermore, *brand loyalty* also seems to play an important role for brand-community members. According to Bloemer and Kasper, true brand loyalty is defined as: “The biased (i.e., non-random) behavioral response (i.e., purchase), expressed over time, by some decision-making unit, with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands, which is a function of psychological (decision making, evaluative) processes resulting in brand commitment.”³⁴⁹ Jacoby and Chestnut believe that brand loyalty has to be interpreted as both an attitudinal and a behavioral concept, and is therefore not limited to repeat-purchase behavior.³⁵⁰

As mentioned by Algesheimer and Dimpfel, brand-community members maintain a high level of brand loyalty.³⁵¹ This finding seems reasonable to keep in mind, namely, that true brand loyalty is based on brand commitment, which is defined as “the pledging or binding of an individual to his / her brand choice.”³⁵² It can be expected that brand-community members are committed to the respective brand and are seen as being loyal consumers.

Being brand-community members allows consumers to increase brand experience. This brand experiences provide value to these consumers which

³⁴⁶ Beatty et al. (1988), p. 150 et seq.

³⁴⁷ Cf. Ganesh et al. (2000), p. 68 referring to Bloch / Richins (1983).

³⁴⁸ Cf. Brakus et al. (2009), p. 53.

³⁴⁹ Bloemer / Kasper (1995), p. 313 referring to Jacoby / Chestnut (1978), pp. 80-81.

³⁵⁰ Cf. Jacoby / Chestnut (1978), pp. 80-81.

³⁵¹ Cf. Algesheimer / Dimpfel (2006), p. 951.

³⁵² Cf. Bloemer / Kasper (1995), p. 313 et seq. referring to Kiesler (1968), p. 448; and Lastovicka / Gardner (1978), p. 90.

makes them more satisfied with the brand; additionally, the more consumers are experienced with the brand, the more likely they are loyal to this brand.³⁵³

This leads to the assumption that brand involvement and brand loyalty play an essential role in the behavioral profile of brand-community members. For this reason, the study examines the construct “emotional relationship to the brand” by means of these two indicators.

3.1.2 Social Identity through Brand-community Membership

Independence and differentiation from others are key characteristics of communities. Thompson and Sinha state that community members encounter out-groups even with a kind of hostility to protect the community against outsiders.³⁵⁴ Muniz and O’Guinn confirmed this assumption by describing the “collective sense of difference from others”³⁵⁵ as part of the *consciousness of kind*. The brand community represents a tool for individuals allowing differentiating from non-members on the one hand and, on the other hand, to self-present—or as Hagel and Armstrong call it: to live out one’s dreams and fantasies, as a means of expressing themselves.³⁵⁶ It helps individuals to develop or define their social identity by being member of a group.

Humans aspire to social recognition and prestige. Prestige characterizes the reputation of a person and is closely linked with his social position. Prestige confers status.³⁵⁷

As found by Bloch and Richins (1983), as well as by Beatty and Smith (1987), specific brands or products are related to an individual’s ego and

³⁵³ Cf. Brakus et al. (2009), p. 63 and p. 65

³⁵⁴ Cf. Thompson / Sinha (2008), p. 70.

³⁵⁵ Muniz / O’Guinn (2001), p. 413.

³⁵⁶ Cf. Hagel / Armstrong (2000), p. 32 et seq.

³⁵⁷ Cf. Trommsdorf (2009), p. 117.

self-image. For this reason, consumers may participate in brand communities when they are involved in a particular brand or product.³⁵⁸ For this type of consumer, brand communities may represent an exclusive—even elite—group of those individuals interested and committed to the respective brand or product. According to the concept of organizational identification, members of a respective organization (e.g., brand community) define themselves in terms of oneness with this organization.³⁵⁹ The membership of a specific brand community might result in a certain importance for the self-definition of these members. This self-definition is “that part of the individuals self-concept which derives from knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to this membership”³⁶⁰. Meaningful relationships, as those related to brand communities, can reinforce individuals’ self-concept by means of mechanisms of self-worth and self-esteem.³⁶¹ Therefore, the attribute “*self-presentation*,” which describes the importance of the membership in a respective brand community, can also be assumed as a key behavioral aspect.

Furthermore, brand-community members seem to be able to play an important role in the value creation process of the brand-owning company.³⁶² Wiegandt showed that brand-community members are very interested in innovation processes.

This leads to the assumption that besides the aspect of *self-presentation*, *innovativeness*, the aspiration and interest in buying and using brand-new and innovative products, might also be one key attribute of brand-community members.

³⁵⁸ Cf. Shang et al. (2006), p. 400 referring to Bloch / Richins (1983), pp. 65-79 and Beatty / Smith (1987), pp. 83-95.

³⁵⁹ Cf. Ashfort / Mael (1989), p. 20.

³⁶⁰ Taifel (1981), p. 225.

³⁶¹ Cf. Fournier (1998), p. 345 referring to Aron, Paris, and Aron (1995).

³⁶² Cf. studies of Schau / Muniz / Arnould (2009) and Wiegandt (2009).

This assumption is supported by the fact that brand communities are great sources for exclusive information about the brand, providing members with first-hand brand news and news about innovations.³⁶³ This makes brand communities especially attractive for those consumers who feel a high level of innovativeness.

3.1.3 Social Interaction

For Hagel and Armstrong, one key element of communities is the possibility for the members to connect with others and build interpersonal relationships.³⁶⁴

The connection between members / customers as one part of the interaction structures of a brand community represents an essential characteristic. As part of the brand-community triad by Muniz and O'Guinn,³⁶⁵ as well as of the customer-centric model by McAlexander and Schouten,³⁶⁶ the exchange between customers concerning the brand plays an important role. Furthermore, the tribal approach by Cova is geared toward this aspect.³⁶⁷

This leads to the assumption that brand-community members, who join the community and thereby connect with other members voluntarily, are seeking opportunities for interaction and exchange. *Sociability* might be another essential behavioral attribute.

The brand expertise of community members may also play an essential role. These consumers are enthusiastic about the brand and are looking for social interaction. As mentioned by Muniz and O'Guinn, they feel a moral responsibility toward the community and the other members.³⁶⁸ This

³⁶³ Cf. among others: Hagel / Armstrong (2000), p. 44; Walter (2008), p. 407; Thompson / Sinha (2008), p. 67.

³⁶⁴ Cf. Hagel / Armstrong (2000), p. 32 et seq.

³⁶⁵ McAlexander et al. (2002), p. 39.

³⁶⁶ McAlexander et al. (2002), p. 39.

³⁶⁷ Cf. Cova / Cova (2002), p. 603.

³⁶⁸ Cf. Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 418.

combination of brand knowledge and social contact might place them in the position of *opinion leaders* or even *market mavens*.

Opinion leadership was first mentioned by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) who described opinion leaders as consumers who actively recommend a product or service and often are asked for advice.³⁶⁹ This group of consumers is characterized by a high level of knowledge and interest in the brand and category as well as a high level of social interaction.³⁷⁰ They are acknowledged experts of specific product categories,³⁷¹ and able to exercise great influence over the purchase decisions of others through communication.³⁷²

In contrast to the opinion leaders, market mavens are shopping experts in general, influencers characterized by general marketplace expertise and high marketplace involvement.³⁷³ They do not limit themselves to specific product categories, but instead they enjoy shopping and are aware of new products early. They use numerous sources of market information extensively, and participate in market activities, such as coupons.³⁷⁴ Quality and price are of high importance to them.³⁷⁵ They “initiate discussions with [other] consumers and respond to requests from [other] consumers for market information.”³⁷⁶

As shown by Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee in the ELMIRA study,³⁷⁷ opinion leaders not only distribute information, but also ask others for

³⁶⁹ Cf. Lazarsfeld et al. (1968), p. 12.

³⁷⁰ Cf. Schranz (1977), p. 308.

³⁷¹ Cf. Brüne (1989), p. 56/57 as well as Lazarsfeld et al. (1968), p. 12.

³⁷² Cf. Flynn et al. (1994), p. 55 referring to Katz und Lazarsfeld (1955), p. 32.

³⁷³ Cf. Feick / Price (1987), p. 85.

³⁷⁴ Cf. Feick / Price (1987), p. 94.

³⁷⁵ Cf. Ailawadi et al. (2001), p. 75 referring to Williams / Slama (1995).

³⁷⁶ Feick / Price (1987), p. 85.

³⁷⁷ The ELMIRA study run by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee in 1948 aimed to probe voting behavior among the U.S. electorate. Therefore, the four-wave data collection contained information on the social and psychological aspects of political behavior among voters in Elmira, New York. The researchers gathered information about labor

advice.³⁷⁸ This result on the opinion exchange between “opinion givers” and “opinion askers” has been confirmed in several studies.³⁷⁹ Accordingly, “*opinion seeker*” also seems to be a relevant attribute.

In this connection, opinion seekers are understood as “individuals who [seek] information and opinions from interpersonal sources in order to find out about and evaluate products, services, current affairs, or other areas of interest.”³⁸⁰ Receiving advice provides them with reconfirmation and reassurance.

Due to the strong interdependence of these three attributes, a factor analysis is conducted to ensure the constructs differ from each other.

3.1.4 Performance Measures

As described in Section 2.3, *customer retention* represents an important marketing objective with respect to marketers deciding to invest in marketing budgets that can be used to create and operate a brand community. As mentioned, customer retention has not only a marketer’s perspective. It is also part of the consumer behavior that focuses on actual and future activities within the purchasing process.

In this study, *customer retention* is understood as the performance measure from a marketer’s point of view. It should answer the question of whether brand-community members contribute to the economic success of the brand to a higher degree than do non-members.

unions and community organizations, social and ethnic differences, perceptions of group voting trends, the influence of family and friends, polarization between social groups, and effects of political campaigns on social groups.

³⁷⁸ Cf. Brüne (1989), p. 31 referring to Berelson / Larzarsfeld / McPhee (1954) and Müller (1970), p. 86

³⁷⁹ Cf. Flynn et al. (1996), p. 138; Brüne (1989), p. 35 referring to Trohldahl / Van dam (1965), p. 631 et seq.

³⁸⁰ Feick et al. (1986) referring to Arndt (1968), Feldman (1966), Sheth (1968), Wright and Cantor (1967).

According to Homburg and Fassnacht, customer retention covers the following aspects³⁸¹:

- Actual purchase or future purchase intention,
- Actual cross-buying or cross-buying intention,
- Intention to recommend the brand,
- Tolerance of price increases.

For practical reasons, the focus of this study is on the intended behavior: Purchase intention, tolerance of price increase, and intention to recommend the brand. All three components are subsumed under the roof of the construct “customer retention.” According to Bagozzi, “intentions constitute a willful state of choice where one makes a self-implicated statement as to a future course of action.”³⁸² Due to the fact that this study is based on consumer interviews, the focus is set on the intended behavior to guarantee reliability of the data. Fishbein and Ajzen recommend: “if one wants to know whether or not an individual will perform a given behavior, the simplest and probably most efficient thing one can do is to ask the individual whether he intends to perform that behavior.”³⁸³ The current behavior could only be effectively measured by means of real sales figures (e.g., household panel data).³⁸⁴

The aspects *purchase intention* and *tolerance of price increase* are interpreted in this study as the “hard currency” of customers’ bonding. Consumers who intend to repurchase and who even accept price increases show a certain level of customer satisfaction or bonding, which makes them stay with the brand and even extends to their disregard of any change of the product or brand.

³⁸¹ Cf. Homburg / Fassnacht (1998), p. 415.

³⁸² Bagozzi (1983), p. 145

³⁸³ Fishbein / Ajzen (1975), p. 368 et seq.

³⁸⁴ For the same reason, the author did not investigate the indicator “cross buying intention.”

As mentioned above, brand-community members are expected being passionate about the brand, with specific beliefs, and profound product knowledge and experience. According to the model of Engel, Backwell, and Miniard, this positive attitude towards the brand can be regarded as direct determinant of purchase intention.³⁸⁵

Additionally, the value of customer recommendation from a marketer's point of view can be understood as the present value of all actual and potential monetary effects provoked by a customer's recommendation behavior.³⁸⁶ It is characterized by the following determinants³⁸⁷:

- Customer satisfaction: Only satisfied customers would recommend a brand or product to others. Otherwise, they risk losing credibility.
- High product involvement: Highly involved customers experience the product or brand as self-relevant and perceive the brand attitudes as in-line with their own values and objectives.
- Reception of recommendations in the past: To receive recommendations has a positive impact on customer satisfaction and purchase decision³⁸⁸ and therefore leads to an even stronger bonding with the brand.

The *intention to recommend* the brand can therefore be interpreted from a marketers' perspective as an important aspect of customers' satisfaction and involvement. It indicates the success of the marketing activities and brings with it a sense of future perspective. On the other hand, it also provides information about the effect of brand-community members' emotional relationship to the brand, as well as the social interaction affecting the future behavior in terms of giving recommendations. It displays the member's emotional connection with the brand to the recipient of the recommendation.

³⁸⁵ Cf. Engel et al. (2006), p. 392.

³⁸⁶ Cf. von Wangenheim (2003), p. 56.

³⁸⁷ Cf. von Wangenheim (2003), p. 272.

³⁸⁸ Cf. von Wangenheim (2003), p. 273.

Recommendations are non-commercial communication, either positive or negative. They are not limited to specific media and can therefore be given verbally, in writing, or even via pictures—digital or non-digital.³⁸⁹ The aim of this study is to examine the intention to give a positive recommendation of the respective brand.

According to the fundamental research of Dichter (1966), there are four motivations that cause consumers to recommend a brand³⁹⁰:

- Product-involvement: Because of personal consumption experience, consumers feel so strongly about the product in order to reduce this built-up tension, they provide others with recommendations.
- Self-involvement: The product allows the consumer to gratify certain emotional needs.
- Other-involvement: By giving a recommendation, consumers share something with the receiver.
- Message-involvement: Consumers feel stimulated by advertising and want to discuss the product.

Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster used these motivation clusters to refine them. They distinguish between positive and negative recommendations with each one having four motivators. They believe that a positive recommendation is based on³⁹¹:

- Altruism: The intention to provide support to others by sharing the own experiences without expecting any reward.
- Product-involvement: The personal interest and excitement about the product, its use and ownership.

³⁸⁹ von Wangenheim (2003), p. 55; Röthlingshöfer (2008), p. 27 (Remark: Röthlingshöfer uses the German term “Mundpropaganda,” which equates to recommendation).

³⁹⁰ Cf. Dichter (1966), p. 152.

³⁹¹ Cf. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), p. 41 referring to Sundaram et al. (1998).

- Self-enhancement: The enhancement of the image among other consumers by projecting oneself as a smart shopper.
- Helping the company: The intention to support the brand-owning company.

These motivators are very close to some of brand-community members' behavioral attributes discussed in the sections above. Product-involvement as well as helping the company refer to the construct „emotional relationship to the brand,“ self-enhancement reflects aspects of the market maven as well as opinion leader, and finally altruism refers to the construct “social interaction and moral responsibility.”

De Matos and Rossi confirmed in their research that high brand commitment, which means the desire to maintain a valued relationship with the brand, is a significant predictor of WOM. Additionally they found that satisfaction with the brand, as well as—to a lower extent—brand loyalty, are associated with WOM.³⁹²

This provides an indication that a connection between the potential behavioral aspects of brand-community members and the intention to recommend the brand should be considered. As mentioned in the objective of this study, the impact of the behavioral attributes on the construct “*customer retention*” represents a key element of the analysis.

3.1.5 Posting as Moderator

In addition to the aspects described above, active participation in the community may have an impact on the strength of the involvement as well as on the performance measures. Members' participation in community activities represents a key indicator in the quality of the community.³⁹³ *Posting* describes the active participation of a member in the community life.

³⁹² Cf. De Matos / Rossi (2008), p. 592.

³⁹³ Cf. Algesheimer (2004), p. 150 referring to Duffy (1999), p. 32 et seq. and Langerak et al. (2003), p. 4 et seq.

This participation can be in the form of raffles, writing comments, composing reports, or publishing personal ideas (e.g., recipes in cooking communities, etc.). The opposite of posting is called *lurking*, passively observing rather than actively participating.³⁹⁴

According to Armstong and Hagel (1996), and Rheingold (1993), the main reasons for actively participating are common interests and values, and the desire to discuss specific topics and themes together.³⁹⁵ The author assumes this attitude as one of the key characteristics of brand-community members, who should have a much higher activity level than non-members.

As a consequence, active participation might have an impact on the involvement level of the respective members, and therefore as well on the economic measures. As discussed above, involvement is not limited to community involvement, but is linked as well with a significant involvement in the brand itself.

The research model includes such active participation in the form of posting as a moderator. As either a qualitative or a quantitative third variable, moderators affect the strength of the relation between an independent / predictor variable and a dependent / criterion variable.³⁹⁶ Because of this, the study examines the relationship between the behavioral-based indicator “brand involvement” and the two economic indicators “purchase intention / tolerance of price increase” and “intention to recommend” by means of the moderator “posting.”

3.1.6 Summary of the Conceptualized Research Model

Figure 20 summarizes the conceptualized research model. This model shows:

³⁹⁴ Cf. Shang et al. (2006), p. 400.

³⁹⁵ Cf. Shang et al. (2006), p. 400.

³⁹⁶ Cf. Baron / Kenny (1986), p. 1174.

- The theoretically deduced indicators of a brand-community member's behavioral profile.
- The measures of the construct „customer retention,“ which have an impact on performance dimensions of the brand, such as sales figures.
- The impact of the behavioral aspects on the dimensions of *customer retention*.

In the next step, by using behavioral theories and research findings on the brand-community phenomenon, the author specifies the relationship between the behavioral profile and the performance measures, and develops a set of hypotheses.

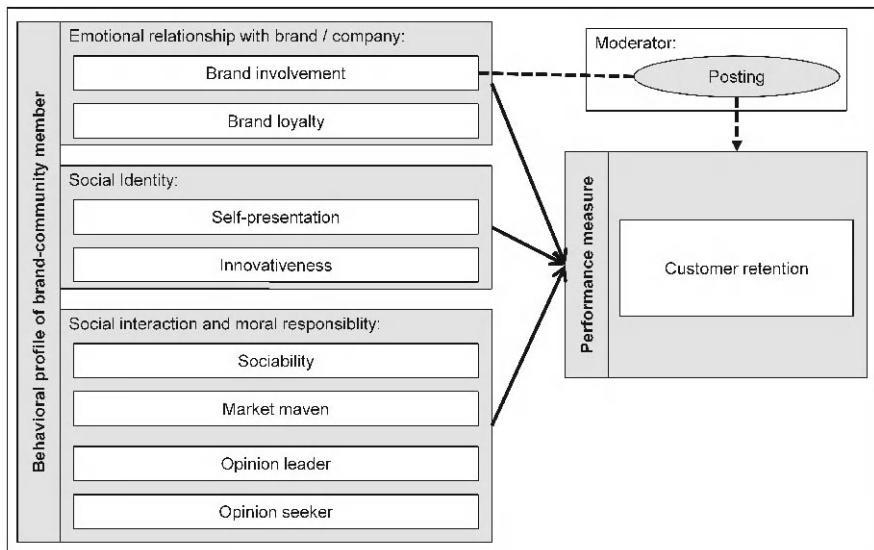


Fig. 20: Overall structure of the research model

3.2 Derivation of the Hypotheses

In the following sections, the author develops a set of hypotheses for each of the constructs of the research model as shown above. These hypotheses help to investigate the two key objectives of the study:

1. An analysis of the impact of brand-community membership (vs. non-membership) on each of the indicators to answer the question of whether brand-community members have a specific behavioral profile.
2. An examination of the relationship between the behavioral attributes and the performance measures: The objective is to show whether or not the behavioral attributes have a specific impact on the performance measures of customer retention.

Section 3.3 provides details about the scale selection.

3.2.1 Hypotheses Concerning the Emotional Relationship to the Brand

As shown in Section 3.1, the *emotional relationship to the brand*³⁹⁷ describes the personal relevance of the brand and the emotional bond for the customer, as well as his or her willingness to be loyal. It is divided into the two constructs „brand involvement“ and „brand loyalty.“

3.2.1.1 Brand Involvement as Specific Behavioral Attribute

The aim of the study is to investigate brand communities officially operated by FMCG brands. FMCG are usually low-involvement products with—in general—low perceived importance and therefore low perceived risk of a mis-purchase.³⁹⁷ The customers do not invest much time in information gathering and processing. Products and brands are bought frequently and are often interchangeable.

As shown in Chapter 2, researchers generally agree that membership in a brand community helps customers feel connected with the brand. As the Nutella study by Cova shows, brand-community members are often hardcore fans of the brand who “are enabled (...) to (re)shape the meaning of the brand by their love.”³⁹⁸ As von Loewenfeld states in his brand-community definition: Brand communities allow for creating an environment with high-

³⁹⁷ Cf. Laurent / Kapferer (1985), p. 45 et seq.

³⁹⁸ Cova (2006), p. 1098.

identification potential for fans and admirers of the brand.³⁹⁹ Brand community makes members feel emotionally activated.

According to the definition of involvement advanced by Laurent and Kapferer (cf. Section 3.1.3 of this paper), emotional activation represents an important antecedent for high involvement. This enduring involvement in the brand is independent of a specific purchase situation and manifests itself, e.g., in a willingness and intention to discuss the brand.⁴⁰⁰

Substantial involvement is driven—among other mechanisms—by familiarity.⁴⁰¹ Brand-community members are familiar with the brand; they join the community because of their affection and interest in the brand, and experience the brand within the community on a regular basis with frequent information exchange.

By making use of a brand community, even FMCG products perceived as traditionally low involvement products may generate a higher level of involvement for those individuals who feel emotionally activated by the brand—such as brand-community members. This activation becomes even more powerful with regular contact with the brand and exchange with other members. Members can even experience social or psychological pressure to act and behave in accord with other members' expectations.⁴⁰² This peer pressure leads to a high level of perceived importance or relevance of the brand for the individual.

Bandura's theory of social learning (cf. Section 2.2.3.1) supports this aspect. Community dynamics might strongly influence individual members in their imitation or identification with the brand. They are afraid of non-conforming behavior that can lead to negative consequences or punishment by the group. This pressure represents an additional activation effect that

³⁹⁹ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 133.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. Richins / Bloch (1986), p. 280 et seq.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. Ganesh et al. (2000), p. 68 referring to Sherif / Cantril (1947).

⁴⁰² Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 225.

strengthens a member's involvement in the community as well as with the brand.

The fact that brand-community members feel a strong emotional activation as well as peer pressure suggests that member exhibit higher brand involvement than do non-members. The reason is that non-members experience neither a personal identification with the brand nor the interaction with other members as part of community life. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Brand-community members have a higher level of brand involvement than do non-members.

3.2.1.2 Brand Loyalty as Specific Behavioral Attribute

The second aspect of the emotional relationship to the brand is brand loyalty. As shown in Section 2.3, brand loyalty represents an important antecedent for customer retention. The strength of brand loyalty depends on consumers' engagement, and their willingness to invest time, energy, money, or other resources in the brand independent of the pure act of purchasing or consuming.⁴⁰³

Brand communities are important in helping firms successfully build brand loyalty.⁴⁰⁴ As described above, brand-community members seem to feel a strong bond with the brand. As Bagozzi and Dholakia state: "Brand communities are venues where intense brand loyalty is expressed and fostered, and emotional connections with the brand forged in customers."⁴⁰⁵ This has been confirmed by the study of Thompson and Sinha (2008) concerning the role of brand communities in new product adoption in which

⁴⁰³ Cf. Keller (2008), p. 74.

⁴⁰⁴ Cf. Kim et al. (2008), p. 410 and cf. Hagel / Armstrong (1997), p. 228.

⁴⁰⁵ Bagozzi / Dholakia (2006), p. 45.

brand-community members always professed their loyalty toward the brand.⁴⁰⁶

From a behavioral point of view, brand-community members experience diverse stimuli due to their membership. These can include receiving additional information and knowledge about the brand, but also stimuli from the inner-community environment, as described by Muniz and O'Guinn,⁴⁰⁷ such as the rituals and traditions, the moral responsibility, as well as the consciousness of kind. Applying the social learning theory, Bandura showed that these stimuli influence the learning process of the individual and his or her perception of the brand. Brand-community members are animated to imitate the behavior within the community or to identify with it as well as with the brand. Furthermore, the brand community seems to have, as Bandura calls it, a disinhibiting effect on the behavior of each member, whereby loyalty is rewarded. This behavioral process and the environmental stimuli are driven by other members, who are in general brand enthusiasts exhibiting a high level of brand loyalty. By going through this process, the brand loyalty of each individual is further strengthened.

The membership of the brand community can have an amplifying effect on brand bonding and can even increase the brand loyalty of the individual member.

Additionally, membership in a brand community can also be interpreted on the basis of the cognitive dissonance theory advanced by Festinger (cf. Section 2.2.3.2). Community members are influenced in their behavior and decision process by the community, e.g., by other members and / or the brand and company. Loyalty toward the brand is rewarded. The individual member feels reassured about his or her brand choice. By means of this process, possible dissonances or doubts concerning brand choice can be eliminated by justifying the weighting of the decision ratings.

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. Thompson / Sinha (2008), p. 78.

⁴⁰⁷ Cf. Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 418.

This leads us to extrapolate that community members possess a high level of brand loyalty.

H2: Brand-community members have a higher level of brand loyalty than do non-members.

It is expected that the relationship of the constructs „brand involvement“ and „brand loyalty“ is very close. As shown in the literature, several researchers suggest that brand involvement represents a critical antecedent of brand loyalty—even for low involvement (e.g., Traylor (1981), LeClerc and Little (1997), Iwasaki and Havitz (1998)).⁴⁰⁸ This thesis has been confirmed by an empirical study conducted by Quester and Lim. They showed that a relationship exists between the two constructs, even though the findings indicate that consumers' involvement profile might vary depending from the product category and therefore have a different influence on brand loyalty.⁴⁰⁹

In his study on the community quality of brand communities in the automotive sector, von Loewenfeld proved that brand involvement has an intensifying effect on brand loyalty.⁴¹⁰ Brand-community members with high brand involvement also show a high level of brand loyalty.

Research conducted by Shang, Chen, and Liao showed similar results. They examined the effect of involvement on the participation within the brand community and the effect on brand loyalty. They found that involvement directly influences the brand loyalty of brand-community members, whereas trust and the perceived attitude toward the product or brand have no impact on loyalty.⁴¹¹

Thus, we can assume a high impact of brand involvement on brand loyalty, which leads to the hypothesis:

⁴⁰⁸ Cf. Quester et al. (2001), p. 2.

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Quester et al. (2001), p. 6.

⁴¹⁰ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 230 et seq.

⁴¹¹ Cf. Shang et al. (2006), p. 410.

H3: The higher the brand involvement, the stronger the brand loyalty.

3.2.1.3 Impact of Emotional Relationship to the Brand on the Performance Measures

Brand-community members are expected to have a higher level of brand involvement than non-members, which also might have an impact on their purchase intention. As Huber, Herrmann, and Huber have shown, the attitude displayed by a customer toward a brand has a strong connection with his or her willingness to buy it.⁴¹²

Kim, Choi, Qualls, and Han support this finding. In their study on brand commitment in marketplace communities, they identified a clear effect of brand commitment on the two key aspects of customer retention: purchase intention as well as the intention to recommend the brand. This effect is even more pronounced for members of an online community compared with non-members.⁴¹³

In the literature, brand involvement is often interpreted as one key determinant for brand commitment.⁴¹⁴ Therefore, the findings by Kim, Choi, Qualls, and Han would indicate that brand involvement has an effect on the performance measures, as defined in this study.

Concerning the intended recommendation, several studies support the assumption that involvement can be seen as an antecedent of recommendation. Product involvement thus represents an important motivator for consumers to recommend the brand. By sharing their own experiences with the product and brand, they also share their enthusiasm.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹² Cf. Huber et al. (2006), p. 357.

⁴¹³ Cf. Kim et al. (2008), p. 423.

⁴¹⁴ Cf. Jaritz (2008), p. 27 referring to Beatty / Kahle / Homer (1988), Bloemer (1998), Mittal / Lee (1989), Traylor (1983), Zaichkowsky (1985).

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Dichter (1966), p. 152; Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), p. 40 et seq.; von Wangenheim (2003), p. 93.

This leads to the following hypothesis:

H4: The higher the brand involvement, the stronger the customer retention.

For the construct “brand loyalty,” the author anticipates a similar effect. As shown in Section 2.3 of this paper, brand loyalty is one requirement for customer retention.

Brand-community members are understood to feel a high level of brand loyalty (cf. hypothesis H2). According to the self-perception theory, they aim to behave in a way that corresponds their attitudes and to avoid dissonances between their brand loyalty and their customer retention. This leads to two effects:

1. Their sense of brand loyalty affects their purchase intention of the brand. Only by buying the brand do they behave in a consonant way. To achieve this aim, they are impervious to competitors’ offers and more tolerant toward price increases of their brand.
2. They also recommend the brand to others. This helps them create congruency between their sense of brand loyalty and the intended behavior.

In case of diverging behavior—meaning having no intention to either purchase or recommend the brand—dissonances occur. As described by Festinger, dissonances make individuals leave their psychological comfort zone, allowing them to take immediate action to reduce the dissonances and achieve consonance.⁴¹⁶

The following hypotheses summarize these thoughts:

H5: The higher the brand loyalty, the stronger the customer retention.

⁴¹⁶ Cf. Festinger (1962), p. 3.

3.2.2 Hypotheses Concerning Social Identity

The *social identity*, as conceptualized in Section 3.1, consists of the two constructs „self-presentation“ and „innovativeness.“ In this connection, self-presentation targets individuals' intention to use brand-community membership for self-definition and as a status symbol, whereas innovativeness represents consumers' interest in product innovations or variations.

3.2.2.1 Self-presentation as Specific Behavioral Attribute

Several researchers state that brand communities provide independence and differentiation for members from people outside the community. By means of this membership, consumers feel themselves to be distinct from those consumers outside the community who presumably do not share the same values and interests (cf. Section 3.1.2). The brand must meet specific requirements targeting the opportunity for consumers' self-presentation. As formulated by Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry, the brand must inspire the sense of belonging and should ensure its relevance to consumers, who constantly revise their own identities.⁴¹⁷ For this reason, brand communities can be assumed as venues for those consumers striving for differentiation and self-definition.

The social identity theory advanced by Tajfel and Turner supports this assumption. As shown in Section 2.2.3.2, social identity, as defined by Tajfel, is part of a person's self-concept. It is based on his or her membership in a group, as well as on the values and the emotional meaning of this membership.⁴¹⁸

His theory states that individuals aspire toward a positive social identity and a verification of their sense of self-worth. To reach this aim, they compare

⁴¹⁷ Cf. Brown et al. (2002), p. 30.

⁴¹⁸ Cf. Tajfel (1970), p. 153.

themselves and the group they belong to with outer-groups. This in-group, its norms and values, provides these individuals with self-esteem and helps them to define their social identity.⁴¹⁹

Therefore, based on this theory, brand-community members define themselves in two ways: first, as a member of a group of customers who buy a specific brand (the brand operating the community) and second, as a brand-community member.

This membership allows to distance themselves from non-members and therefore to strengthen the prestige and social recognition of the brand-community members.

This is confirmed by Mühlenbeck und Skibicki, who describe such membership as a conscious choice to belong to a defined group of individuals that cannot be entered by others. From their point of view, not being a member means being not recognized socially.⁴²⁰

These reflections lead to the following hypothesis:

H6: The majority of brand-community members use their brand-community membership for self-presentation.

Because self-presentation refers in this instance to the meaning of membership, only brand-community members are examined. Additionally, the author considers an effect of self-presentation on brand involvement.

Due to the fact that self-presentation is understood in this study as a conscious decision to join a specific brand community, it can be assumed that before gaining membership, consumers actively consider the brand and the community in depth and evaluate whether or not they fit with their attitudes and expectations.

⁴¹⁹ Cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 153.

⁴²⁰ Cf. Mühlenbeck / Skibicki (2008), p. 57.

After joining the community, members repeat this evaluation process constantly to establish that the fit is still valid. If not, they leave the community. As long as members' expectations and attitudes coincide with the community, they can play important roles for the self-presentation of each individual member.

It should be kept in mind that the brand communities are operated by specific brands and therefore have a strong connection with the brand. They are marketing and communication tools between the brand, the brand-owning company, and consumers. By joining the community, the potential member evaluates not only the offer of the community but also his or her relationship to the brand. This process leads to a higher level of involvement in the brand.

The author expects that those joining the community evaluate the brand positively. As shown above, this evaluation process of community and brand is ongoing. Members are constantly involved in the brand and the brand's activities.

These considerations lead to the assumption that a close relationship between the constructs „self-presentation“ and „brand involvement“ can be expected:

H7: The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the brand involvement.

3.2.2.2 Innovativeness as Specific Behavioral Attribute

Innovativeness represents the second construct of the aspect *social identity*. It is understood as consumers' searching for the newest product innovations and having a willingness to purchase those. This behavior is characteristic of a specific attitude—the desire to be always up-to-date and to maintain an open mindset. Innovativeness is part of people's social identity.

Brand communities are the ideal place for this type of consumer, because they offer additional and early information about innovation—provided by the company or via the exchange among members. Furthermore, brand communities can be particularly valuable for companies promoting new products, as shown by Thompson and Sinha. They found that consumers actively involved in brand communities are highly interested in adopting innovations of the brand. Their research confirms the assumption based on the diffusion theory that brand communities function as social systems and communication channels and thus foster product adoption via this sharing of information.⁴²¹

Therefore, brand communities seem to be meeting places for innovation-seeking consumers who are building groups of innovators. The belonging to a group of innovators—even if an informal group—provides these types of consumers with some kind of social recognition and identity. As shown for the indicator self-presentation, Tajfel’s social identity theory also plays an important role in innovativeness. Membership in the community and more specifically, belonging to a group of innovators, supports the individual’s self-definition process.

The author therefore assumes that joining a brand community is especially attractive for those consumers who exhibit a high level of innovativeness for two reasons. First, brand communities are information and communication channels providing early data about innovations. Second, brand communities allow innovators to meet and connect with like-minded people. This leads to the hypothesis:

H8: Brand-community members have a higher level of innovativeness than do non-members.

As for the attribute „self-presentation,“ it is also expected that „innovativeness“ affects the construct „brand involvement.“ Interest of and an

⁴²¹ Cf. Thompson / Sinha (2008), p. 78.

open attitude toward freshness as experienced by innovators leads to a higher level of information consumption, which indicates a high-involvement level. Therefore, the author formulates the following hypothesis:

H9: The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the brand involvement.

3.2.2.3 Impact of Social Identity on the Performance Measures

Investigating the impact of the two defined constructs on the performance dimension of the brand community's success is the next step of the study to answer one of the central questions: Do brand-community members feel social identity in terms of self-presentation and innovativeness and are these two behavioral attributes more pronounced for members than for non-members? And finally, do self-presentation and innovativeness have an impact on the brand's customer retention?

Membership itself is something to which brand-community members assign value. They feel connected to this specific membership, which is important for their self-esteem and supports them in defining their personality, as well as social status.

As a corollary of this consideration, it is expected that such brand-community members will display a high level of customer retention. Using Bem's self-perception theory to explain the behavior, they strive for an attitude-congruent behavior. As mentioned in Section 2.2.3.4, individuals aspire to consonance between their attitudes and their behavior by observing and analyzing themselves. This helps them to gain self-insights and to balance their attitudes and behavior to reach a state of harmony.

This aspiration can be transferred to the brand-community phenomenon, and the author assumes that members' positive attitude toward their community membership leads to a positive attitude toward the brand. In turn this expresses itself in an intent to purchase as well as to recommend the brand. In doing so, members offer evidence that their conscious decision to

join this specific brand-based community is in line with their behavior in terms of: "I only buy or recommend the brand I can identify with."

To investigate this effect, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H10: The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the customer retention.

The second aspect of *social identity* is the idea of innovativeness, the aspiration to acquire new and innovative products.

As discussed above, social identity theory provides some reasoning why brand communities might present attractive venues for consumers who exhibit this specific behavioral attribute. Joining a community composed of like-minded individuals can be interpreted as a belief that the specific brand meets the desire for innovativeness. From the consumers' perspective, the brand delivers enough freshness on a regular basis to make them stay with the community. Otherwise, they would quit the community and switch to another brand that fits better with their attitudes.

Keeping self-perception theory in mind, this commitment to the brand ultimately leads to the same reaction as mentioned for the construct „self-presentation“: Brand-community members with the behavioral attribute of innovativeness will try to behave in-line with their attitude. Therefore, they will show loyalty regarding their intention to purchase or to recommend the brand.

For the construct „innovativeness,“ the author expects also a close relationship between this specific behavioral attribute and the performance measure, leading to the following hypothesis:

H11: The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the customer retention.

3.2.3 Hypotheses on Social Interaction

The aspect *social interaction and moral responsibility* is the broadest one. It focuses on the fact that brand communities function as places for social exchange among members. This exchange can be based on either sociability or on specific brand- / product-related aspects that lead to the constructs „market mavens,“ „opinion leaders“ and „opinion seekers.“

In the following sections, the author develops the hypotheses concerning these four constructs.

3.2.3.1 Sociability as Specific Behavioral Attribute

Sociability means the general seeking of companionship and interaction with others. This is not limited to a specific brand, nor need it be a product-specific or consumption-related relationship. This construct must be seen more broadly, as in the sense of searching for friendship and interpersonal connectivity.

Muniz and O’Guinn describe the social bond between members as a key aspect of brand communities: “The link is more important than the thing.”⁴²² They believe that the relationship between consumers is a more important reason for joining and participating in brand communities than is the theme (or even brand) of the community itself.

Sicilia and Palazon note that social values such as friendship, emotional support, or self-esteem and interpersonal connectivity are key motivators for participating in brand communities.⁴²³ The community delivers the value of interpersonal connectivity for the individual member.⁴²⁴

⁴²² Muniz / O’Guinn (2001), p. 419.

⁴²³ Cf. Sicilia / Palazon (2008), p. 259.

⁴²⁴ Cf. Sicilia / Palazon (2008), p. 259 referring to Mathwick (2006).

In their survey of the Nutella brand community in Italy, Cova and Pace come to the conclusion that Nutella lovers use the community to connect with each other and to escape their solitude, even though the relationship remains para-social, because the platform does not allow direct communication between members.⁴²⁵ Hagel and Armstrong share this finding. They believe that people feel drawn to virtual communities, because they represent an attractive environment to get in contact with others.⁴²⁶

Bagozzi and Dholakia share this same point of view and define brand communities as places that allow consumers to build relationships with others of a like-mindset with whom they can share their interest in the brand.⁴²⁷ They discovered that members wanted to participate in group activities because of the feeling of the self-enhancement they received from doing so.⁴²⁸

Flanagin and Metzger found that communication features in the internet are mainly used for entertainment and fun reasons before one begins to search for information.⁴²⁹ This finding indicates that sociability—spending time with others and sharing activities such as entertainment and fun—also plays an important role for brand-community members.

Sociability is part of an individual's search for social identity and can be seen in the context of Tajfel's theory of social identity. When an individual strives for connectivity with others, the emotional and cognitive sense of belonging to a group plays an important role regarding joining the community. The individual uses community membership as the vehicle to strengthen personal self-image and self-esteem. Via the social bonding within the community and by establishing relationships, brand-community members define the network they have built within the community as a group to which

⁴²⁵ Cf. Cova / Pace (2006), p. 1101.

⁴²⁶ Cf. Hagel / Armstrong (2000), p. 32.

⁴²⁷ Cf. Bagozzi / Dholakia (2006), p. 46.

⁴²⁸ Cf. Bagozzi / Dholakia (2006), p. 49.

⁴²⁹ Cf. Flanagin / Metzger (2000), p. 169 et seq.

they belong. As mentioned by Tajfel, this in-group allows members to distance themselves from those outside the community and thereby strengthen their social identity as members of the in-group.

These thoughts lead to the following hypothesis:

H12: Brand-community members have a higher level of sociability than do non-members.

3.2.3.2 Market Maven, Opinion Leader, and Opinion Seeker as Specific Behavioral Attributes

As mentioned in Section 3.1.3, both the shopping and the product expertise of the brand-community members are assumed to play important roles in the behavioral profile of brand-community members. Therefore, the study considers the three constructs of market maven, opinion leader and—because it is strongly connected with opinion leadership—the construct „opinion seeker.“

Communication, as one of the basic needs of socialization, plays an important role in this context. As shown by Bauer and Grether, the more intense the communication within the community, the higher the social capital and the perceived quality of the network.⁴³⁰

As described in Section 2.1, several studies prove that brand-community members are often hard-core fans of the brand and are enthusiastic about it with high brand involvement.⁴³¹ They bring to the community a high potential for information exchange about the brand and brand category. This is in line with the findings of Algesheimer, who describes brand communities as platforms that are used by their members to support each other.⁴³²

⁴³⁰ Cf. Bauer / Grether (2005), p. 94.

⁴³¹ Cf. et al.: Kozinets (1999), p. 259, Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 412, von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 131, Cova / Pace (2006), p. 1098.

⁴³² Cf. Algesheimer (2004), p. 151.

Brand communities seem to be the ideal place for information exchange, either information seeking or advice giving. They are venues for consumers to exchange information about the brand and about product-related topics. Furthermore, their members are supposed to possess a broad knowledge about the products and higher engagement level in product-related discussions that allows them to support each other.⁴³³

According to the cognitive dissonance theory by Festinger, consumers seek out information. They do so actively and with a high level of motivation when the information has an impact on some impending or possible future action—in the case of brand community, purchasing the brand or alternative brands of the same product category. In this situation, consumers are motivated to acquire data about all aspects and alternatives.⁴³⁴

Information can be either consonant with consumers' thoughts or divergent, which can lead to strengthening existing dissonances or creating new ones. Most of the time, consumers live with a little or moderate amount of dissonance. In this case, they exchange and select information that is consonant with their thoughts and beliefs.⁴³⁵

As mentioned in Section 2.2.3.3, brand communities help consumers to reassure themselves of their brand choice and their enthusiasm about the brand by interacting with other members. The community provides the individual with the opportunity to be a brand advocate and to advise others about it. Furthermore, it allows for acquiring information that is not available outside the community.

The social interaction and sense of we-ness are the key motivators of participation in virtual communities. Herewith the information exchange plays an important role. Participants tend to search for purposive values such as

⁴³³ Cf. Füller et al. (2008), p. 616.

⁴³⁴ Cf. Festinger (2001), p. 125.

⁴³⁵ Cf. Festinger (2001), p. 128.

information.⁴³⁶ Therefore, the brand community can be assumed to be a venue for market mavens, opinion leaders, as well as for opinion seekers for the following reasons:

1. By communicating about the brand and gathering specific and exclusive information within the community, market mavens and opinion leaders can strengthen their role as experts in- and outside the brand community. They obtain additional arguments to give others helpful advice.
2. By interacting with other brand enthusiasts in the community, they may reduce possible dissonances. Market mavens and opinion leaders collect additional consonant information about the brand by actively talking about it and offering recommendations to other members. Opinion seekers do the same by asking others for advice.

This two-way communication about the brand helps all three groups to strengthen their confidence in their brand choice and to minimize their doubts. As stated by Scheier and Held, communities can affect the sustainability of opinions and beliefs of the users because they use the heuristics of „follow-the-leader“ or „follow-the-crowd.“⁴³⁷

These thoughts lead to the following set of hypotheses:

H13: Brand-community members are more often market mavens than are non-members.

H14: Brand-community members are more often opinion leaders than are non-members.

H15: Brand-community members are more often opinion seekers than are non-members.

⁴³⁶ Cf. Dholakia et al. (2004), p. 259.

⁴³⁷ Cf. Scheier / Held (2008), p. 239.

3.2.3.3 Impact of Social Interaction on the Performance Measures

Hagel and Armstrong describe brand communities as an appropriate tool to strengthen the repurchase of a brand. They justify this assumption because brand communities allow more intense communication between company and customers with a higher level of information. In addition, though, they offer the possibility for members to build relationships with other consumers around the brand.⁴³⁸ This assumption provides an indication of the impact of social interaction on the economic measures, which is further explored in this section.

Consumer interaction influences the customer behavior of each individual in the brand community.⁴³⁹ This finding by Algesheimer indicates that the sociability aspect especially, which is an indicator for people's interest and affinity to interact and cooperate with others, might influence the economic measures of the brand.

Bagozzi and Dholakia mention brand communities as an appropriate tool to strengthen consumers' purchase behavior and brand loyalty by forming relationship among like-minded consumers.⁴⁴⁰ This gives an indication that relationship building and socializing seems to have a positive effect on the purchase intention.

As reported by Reynolds and Beatty, for consumers with a high score in sociability, purchasing seems to provide them with social benefit, which makes them become frequent buyers.⁴⁴¹

For this specific group of consumers, the social benefit of socializing and connecting with others can be assumed to be more important than even price increases of the respective brand.

⁴³⁸ Cf. Hagel / Armstrong (2000), p. 228.

⁴³⁹ Cf. Algesheimer (2004), p. 406.

⁴⁴⁰ Cf. Bagozzi / Dholakia (2006), p. 46.

⁴⁴¹ Cf. Reynolds / Beatty (1999), p. 517.

The intention to recommend the brand, however, should be influenced by sociability. According to Helm, providing a recommendation feels like gratification and the sender perceives a psychological benefit from the conversation.⁴⁴² Therefore, the author assumes that consumers with high level of sociability want to be rewarded and strive for this benefit. For this reason, their intention to recommend the brand should be strong.

These causalities lead to the following hypothesis:

H16: The higher the sociability, the stronger the customer retention.

Another aspect of the social interaction and moral responsibility for the brand is providing other consumers with advice, as is offered by opinion leaders and market mavens. Consumers provide recommendations when they feel satisfied with the brand and situationally involved.⁴⁴³ Providing others with recommendations of the respective brand leads to an increase of satisfaction and customer retention, with a positive effect on purchase behavior and brand selection.⁴⁴⁴

Eggert, Helm, and Garnefeld show in their study that consumers recommending a brand demonstrate a high level of brand loyalty and bonding. Providing others with a recommendation leads to an increase in customer loyalty of the recommender.⁴⁴⁵

Opinion leaders and market mavens give advice and should therefore show similar reactions to those mentioned above. They use the brand community to gather information, which strengthens their position as experts of the respective brand category or even for shopping in general. However, their membership in the community can be interpreted by others as a certain level of interest or even loyalty and bonding with the brand.

⁴⁴² Cf. Helm (2000), p. 42.

⁴⁴³ Cf. von Wangenheim (2003), p. 273.

⁴⁴⁴ Cf. von Wangenheim (2003), p. 272 et seq.

⁴⁴⁵ Cf. Eggert et al. (2007), p. 241.

Keeping Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance in mind, due to their apparent connectivity with the brand, opinion leaders and market mavens are forced to purchase and to recommend the brand to avoid dissonances. Opinion leaders and market mavens are thus motivated to keep their status as an acknowledged advice giver. The psychological pressure they feel in the community due to their apparent bond toward the brand would create cognitive dissonances in the case of purchasing and recommending another brand. In this instance, the perceived relationship toward the brand as a highly interested and involved community member does not fit their customer retention. To avoid this uncomfortable state, they aspire to consistent behavior by choosing the respective brand while shopping or providing recommendation to others. The following hypotheses summarize these thoughts:

H17a: The higher the value of opinion leader, the stronger the customer retention.

H18: The higher the value of market maven, the stronger the customer retention.

Concerning the behavioral attitude of opinion seeker, von Wangenheim, Bayón, and Weber state that those consumers who have received a recommendation are more satisfied and committed to the brand and most notably willing to recommend the brand themselves compared with consumers who have not having received a recommendation.⁴⁴⁶ This behavior seems comprehensible, keeping in mind that recommendations are usually perceived as highly credible. As a main reason for credibility, Eggert, Helm, and Garnefeld argue that in general the recipient of the recommendation imputes no egoistic motive to the sender.⁴⁴⁷ This effect is

⁴⁴⁶ Cf. von Wangenheim et al. (2002), p. 17 et seq.; von Wangenheim (2003), p. 273.

⁴⁴⁷ Cf. Eggert et al. (2007), p. 233.

even strong in communities in which consumers discuss their own experiences with the brand without commercial interest.⁴⁴⁸

Additionally, getting advice also has an impact on the purchase behavior. As Chevalier and Mayzlin have demonstrated, product ratings have a direct impact on sales.⁴⁴⁹ They examined ratings for books on Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com and found that good and numerous ratings increased sales of the specific book.

McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig state that consumers purchasing a branded product often do so with the support of other consumers. This social support, based on brand-focused interpersonal bonds, can increase the individual consumption of the brand.⁴⁵⁰ Interpersonal communication in terms of recommendation is considered quite effective, because the recipient feels socially recognized by the person providing recommendation and therefore can be easily influenced in his behavior.⁴⁵¹ As key determinants of the reception of recommendation, von Wangenheim identified the perceived expertise, affinity, and commitment of the sender as well as the perceived risk of the decision.⁴⁵²

By transferring these results to brand communities, the author considers that within the environment of the community, opinion seekers find advice and obtain brand recommendations from other enthusiastic members. They are easily influenced in their perception of the brand, which should have a positive impact on their purchase behavior as well as on their recommendation behavior. This seems reasonable, keeping in mind that

⁴⁴⁸ Cf. Meyer (2003), p. 151.

⁴⁴⁹ Cf. Chevalier / Mayzlin (2006), p. 349 et seq.

⁴⁵⁰ Cf. McAlexander et al. (2002), p. 50.

⁴⁵¹ Cf. Brüne (1989), p. 27.

⁴⁵² Cf. von Wangenheim (2003), p. 272 et seq.

individuals often take on both roles, that of opinion seeker as well as opinion leader.⁴⁵³

Because of the high credibility placed on interpersonal communication, the relationship to the brand built on received recommendation can be considered as strong. Therefore, even price increases should have no or only a low impact on the purchase intention. The following hypotheses summarize these thoughts:

H19a: The higher the value of opinion seeker, the stronger the customer retention.

3.2.4 Hypotheses on the Performance Measures

As shown in Section 3.1.4, the performance measures of this study are brought together under one roof, that of the construct „customer retention,“ which consists of the branches „purchase intention,“ „tolerance of price increase“ and „intended recommendation“ of the brand.

Customer retention is characterized by emotion, motivation, and attitude.⁴⁵⁴ It is based on a positive attitude toward the vendor and a motivation to contribute to a positive relationship. It describes the aim of the brand-owning company to build a long-term relationship with the customer and thereby to increase the economic relevance of this relationship. It is the measure of success of all customer-focused marketing activities.

Brand-community members are supposed to have higher customer retention than do non-members. As von Loewenfeld showed in his research on communities from the automotive sector, brand communities are economically relevant in the sense of customer retention. From his point of

⁴⁵³ Cf. Brüne (1989), p. 15 and Meyer (2003), p. 46 referring to Kaas (1973), p. 47 et seq.; Price / Feick (1984), p. 250 et seq.

⁴⁵⁴ Cf. Weinberg / Terlutter (2005), p. 50.

view, the brand seems to be more relevant for the members, and they are supposed to have a high level of trust in the brand.⁴⁵⁵

Brand communities are indentified as venues of knowledgeable brand users with highly emotional engagement. They link consumers with high interest in the brand, or even hard-core fans of the brand.⁴⁵⁶ Particularly for those brands with steady consumers, brand communities seem to represent an appropriate marketing tool.⁴⁵⁷

According to the self-perception theory, individuals strive for attitude-congruent behavior.⁴⁵⁸ To reach this aim, they learn about themselves by observing their own behavior and attitudes, keeping in mind the key question of this theory: "What must my attitude be if I am willing to behave in this fashion in this situation?"⁴⁵⁹

By transferring such thoughts to the brand-community phenomenon, consumers joining a brand community are thought to align their brand engagement with their buying attitude. That means their enthusiasm and commitment to the brand lead them to repurchase the brand. By doing so, they make sure that their attitudes and behaviors are consonant.

This is in line with the repurchase definition by Newman and Werbel (1973) who note that repurchase as a measure can be only meaningful as long as it reflects consumers' resistance to switch brands.⁴⁶⁰ Based on this, even price increases should have less effect on these consumers, as long as they are committed to the brand.

⁴⁵⁵ Cf. von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 276.

⁴⁵⁶ Cf. among others: Cova / Pace (2006), p. 1100; Füller et al. (2008), p. 616; Sicilia / Palazon (2008), p. 257; Ouwersloot / Odekerken-Schröder (2008), p. 573; Algesheimer (2004), p. 153, Muniz / O'Guinn (2001), p. 414; von Loewenfeld (2006), p. 133; McAlexander / Schouten (2002), p. 42

⁴⁵⁷ Cf. Hellmann / Kenning (2007), p. 609.

⁴⁵⁸ Cf. section 2.2.3.4 and cf. Brehm et al. (2005), p. 59.

⁴⁵⁹ Cf. section 2.2.3.4 and Bem (1972), p. 28.

⁴⁶⁰ Cf. Homburg et al. (1999), p. 179 referring to Newman / Werbel (1973), p. 404.

Bughin and Hagel support this assumption. They suppose the likelihood of community members to purchase the brand to be twice as high, which points toward communities functioning as appropriate tools to convert consumers into loyal buyers.⁴⁶¹

Additionally, these considerations made for purchase intention and tolerance of price increase are transferable to the intention to recommend the brand. Both self-perception and the intention to avoid dissonances play important roles in this context.

Helm shares this point of view, mentioning that people who recommend brands are highly interested in retaining their credibility, reliability, and their status as experts and therefore ensure that their recommendations are in line with their behavior.⁴⁶²

As shown by Eggert, Helm, and Garnefeld, behavioral-based customer retention (purchase intention / tolerance of price increase and recommendation) strongly depends on bonding driven by attitudes. Only if a customer has developed positive attitudes toward the brand, can he or she also establish a real and actual bond based on solid purchase and recommendation behavior.⁴⁶³

Attitude-congruent customer behavior manifests itself as well in recommendation behavior. Brand-community members who share a high level of emotional- and attitudinal-brand bond are—in a way—obliged to recommend the brand. In contrast with them, non-members who are not as bound to the brand as a consequence feel much freer in making their recommendations.

This makes the author consider the following hypothesis:

⁴⁶¹ Cf. Meyer (2004), p. 61 referring to Bughin / Hagel (2000), p. 237 et seq.

⁴⁶² Cf. Helm (2005), p. 135.

⁴⁶³ Cf. Eggert et al. (2007), pp. 237-238.

H20: Brand-community members have a higher level of customer retention than do non-members.

3.2.5 Hypotheses on the Moderator Posting

As mentioned above, the activity of posting as an aspect of active participation in the community is integrated into the study as a moderating variable affecting the relationship between the behavioral construct „brand involvement“ and the performance construct „customer retention.“ Brand-community members share a common interest that increases their willingness to actively share information and to create a sense of *we-ness*.⁴⁶⁴ This type of participation is expressed via their posting behavior.

Thompson and Sinha showed that active participation in brand communities leads to early adoption of innovations.⁴⁶⁵ One reason for doing so is the higher level of information these members draw from their active involvement in the community. The two researchers also state that active community members celebrate the brand and the stories around it,⁴⁶⁶ which can be considered as an indicator for their brand involvement. Even though the impact of active participation on brand involvement was not explicitly part of this study, the results provide an indication of a possible connection between brand involvement and active community engagement. Furthermore, these results allow for concluding that active participation has also an effect on the performance measures, such as the purchase intention.

The brand-community study of the Taiwanese researchers Shang, Chen, and Liao showed that brand involvement has an impact on lurking, but they could not find an effect on posting.⁴⁶⁷ Although they try to explain this result with the fact that posting can be understood as a social act with an impact

⁴⁶⁴ Cf. Kim et al. (2008), p. 412.

⁴⁶⁵ Cf. Thompson / Sinha (2008), p. 75.

⁴⁶⁶ Cf. Thompson / Sinha (2008), p. 78.

⁴⁶⁷ Cf. Shang et al. (2006), p. 406.

on community involvement but not on the brand relationship, this finding still seems to be astonishing.

Posting is related to a high engagement level in the information exchange on the community platform. Members who post information need to deal not only with the community but also with the brand itself to gain the ability of active participation in terms of knowledge about the brand as well as about brand-related topics. This absorption of information can be interpreted as an indicator for high brand involvement.⁴⁶⁸

As mentioned in Section 3.1.5 of this paper, the moderator „posting“ is expected to influence the strength of the effect between the predictor variable „brand involvement“ and the outcome variable „customer retention.“ The author considers the hypotheses that actively engaged community members show a stronger effect on the performance measure:

H21: Posting delivers additional predicting power concerning the positive impact of brand involvement on customer retention.

3.2.6 Summary of Hypotheses

The study investigates the following set of hypotheses as shown in Tables 4 and 5. It is divided into two parts:

- First a verification of the behavioral attributes in which the strength of the characteristics has been compared between brand-community members and non-members is displayed.
- Second a path model is presented which analyses the relationships between the attributes and the performance factor „customer retention.“

⁴⁶⁸ According to Kroeber-Riel / Esch, high brand involvement means that consumers intensively deal with information about the relevant attributes of the product and use them to form an opinion about the brand (cf. Kroeber-Riel / Esch (2004), p. 147).

The Table 4 summarizes the hypotheses verifying the strength of the selected behavioral attributes:

Hypotheses Concerning the Behavioral Attributes		
Behavioral attributes	H1	Brand-community members have a higher level of brand involvement than do non-members.
	H2	Brand-community members have a higher level of brand loyalty than do non-members.
	H6	The majority of brand-community members use their brand-community membership for self-presentation.
	H8	Brand-community members have a higher level of innovativeness than do non-members.
	H12	Brand-community members have a higher level of sociability than do non-members.
	H13	Brand-community members are more often market mavens than are non-members.
	H14	Brand-community members are more often opinion leaders than are non-members.
	H15	Brand-community members are more often opinion seekers than are non-members.
Performance measures	H20	Brand-community members have a higher level of customer retention than do non-members.

Tab. 4: Hypotheses on the strength of the behavioral attributes

The path model (Figure 21) shows the set of hypotheses used to analyze the impact of the behavioral attributes on the performance factor.

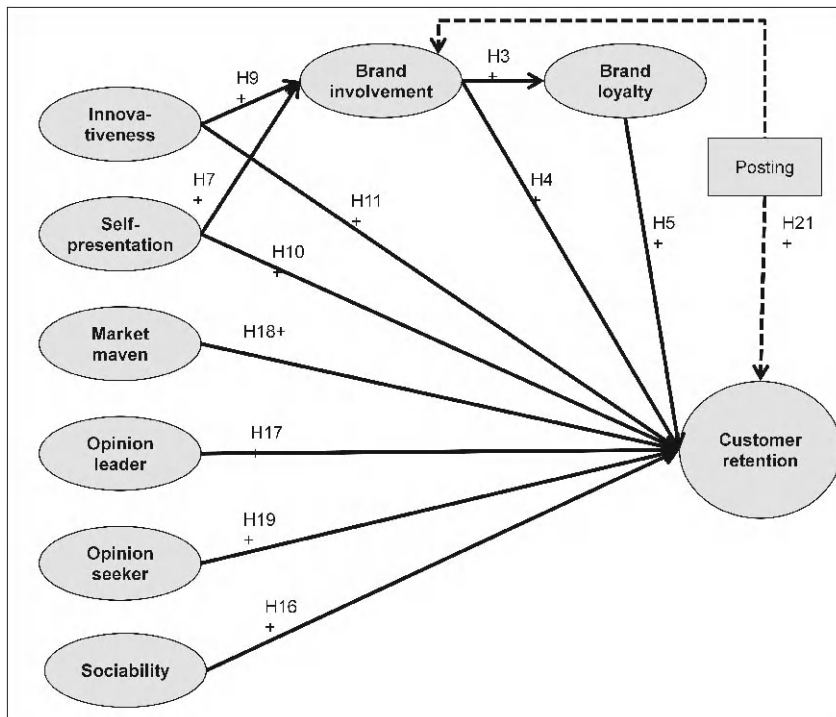


Fig. 21: Path model and research hypotheses

The Table 5 summarized the hypotheses evaluating the impact of each behavioral attribute on the performance measure „customer retention.“ The moderating effect expected through posting behavior is also integrated.

	Hypotheses Concerning the Performance Effect of the Behavioral Attributes
H3	The higher the brand involvement, the stronger the brand loyalty.
H4	The higher the brand involvement, the stronger the customer retention.
H5	The higher the brand loyalty, the stronger the customer retention.
H7	The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the brand involvement.
H9	The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the brand involvement.
H10	The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the customer retention.
H11	The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the customer retention.
H16	The higher the sociability, the stronger the customer retention.
H17	The higher the value of opinion leader, the stronger the customer retention.
H18	The higher the value of market maven, the stronger the customer retention.
H19	The higher the value of opinion seeker, the stronger the customer retention.
	Hypotheses Concerning the Moderating Effect of Posting
H21	Posting delivers additional predicting power of brand involvement on customer retention.

Tab. 5: Hypotheses on the path model

3.3 Operationalization of the Constructs

After deriving the hypotheses of the study, the following section describes the selection of the scales as well as the development of the questionnaire.

To operationalize the constructs, a set of descriptive items are selected for each of the behavioral attributes and the performance measure. For each of the constructs, the author chooses approved scales for the first step. These scales are characterized by high reliability and validity as demonstrated in earlier research studies. In the second step, these scales are completed with additional questions where appropriate to obtain an all-encompassing view.

3.3.1 Measuring the Behavioral Attributes

3.3.1.1 Measuring Brand Involvement

To measure brand involvement, the author chooses the modified 5-item Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) by Mittal.⁴⁶⁹ He extrapolated five items relevant for involvement out of the original 20 items of Zaichkowsky's PII scale.⁴⁷⁰ These five items display high levels of construct reliability and captured variance for both product involvement and purchase decision as summarized in Table 6.

	Product Involvement		Purchase Decision	
	Construct reliability	Captured variance	Construct reliability	Captured variance
Modified PII	.90	.64	.90	.67

Tab. 6: Statistical relevance of the modified PII by Mittal⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Mittal (1995), p. 670.

⁴⁷⁰ Cf. Mittal (1995), p. 666.

⁴⁷¹ Cf. Mittal (1995), p. 673.

To analyze this scale, Mittal used the product and purchase decision categories of beer, cameras, jeans, and video cassette recorders for a confirmatory factor analysis.⁴⁷²

Due to the product categories selected for his research, the scale fulfills the requirements for (fast-moving) consumer goods.

The five monopolar items score on a 7-point semantic differential.

In addition, INV6 has been integrated as a control question, scoring on 7-point Likert scales. Table 7 summarizes the items.

	Brand Involvement
INV1	Is important – is unimportant*
INV2	<i>BRAND</i> means a lot to me – <i>BRAND</i> means nothing to me*
INV3	<i>BRAND</i> matters to me – <i>BRAND</i> does not matter*
INV4	Is significant as a brand – is not insignificant as a brand*
INV5	Is for me of no concern – is of concern to me
INV6	<i>BRAND</i> is more important to me than other brands.

Tab. 7: Brand involvement scale; Note: *reverse scored item⁴⁷³

This 6-items questionnaire covers all relevant aspects of brand involvement for this study in terms of individual engagement or interest of the consumer in the brand.

3.3.1.2 Measuring Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty measures the willingness of a consumer to stay with the brand, protecting this decision against competitors.⁴⁷⁴ This loyalty is often grounded in consistent satisfaction with the brand.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷² Cf. Mittal (1995), p. 665 et seq.

⁴⁷³ Cf. Mittal (1995), p. 670.

To measure this indicator, the author selects the 3-item scale developed by Campo, Gijsbrechts, and Nisol (2000) complemented by additional items.

In their study on consumers' reaction on out of stocks, Campo, Gijsbrechts, and Nisol (LOY1–LOY3) measure a consumer's tendency to buy the same brand within a specified product category rather than seek variation.⁴⁷⁶ Therefore, the items focus on a strong bonding with the brand, which indicates a non-willingness to change. With an alpha of 0.856 for cereals and 0.890 for margarine, the scale showed good reliability.⁴⁷⁷

In using this scale, the three researchers refer to another scale originally developed and used by Baumgartner and Steenkamp (1996), who investigated exploratory consumer buying behavior. They developed a 10-item scale on the exploratory acquisition of products that entails potential simulation in product purchase through risky and innovative product choices and changing purchase experiences.⁴⁷⁸ They report a standard deviation of 2.81 (LOY1), 2.62 (LOY2), and 3.00 (LOY3 "I enjoy taking chances in buying unfamiliar brands just to get some variety in my purchase") using a 5-point Likert scale.⁴⁷⁹

In addition to these three items, four more are integrated (LOY4–LOY7). The aim of these questions is to deepen the aspects of confidence and trust in the brand and to take into account customer satisfaction.

All items, as shown in Table 8, are scored on a 7-point Likert scale.

⁴⁷⁴ Cf. Mc Laughlin / Aaker (2010), p. 178.

⁴⁷⁵ Cf. Mullins et al. (2005), p. 116.

⁴⁷⁶ Cf. Campo et al. (2000), p. 230.

⁴⁷⁷ Cf. Campo et al. (2000), p. 239.

⁴⁷⁸ Cf. Baumgartner / Steenkamp (1996), p. 123.

⁴⁷⁹ Cf. Baumgartner / Steenkamp (1996), p. 135.

	Brand Loyalty
LOY1	I think of myself as a loyal buyer of <i>BRAND</i> .
LOY2	I would rather stay with <i>BRAND</i> than try a different brand I'm not very sure of.
LOY3	I like to switch between different brands.*
LOY4	I can identify with <i>BRAND</i> .
LOY5	<i>BRAND</i> stands for quality.
LOY6	I can trust <i>BRAND</i> more than other brands.
LOY7	<i>BRAND</i> is a brand I can rely on.

Tab. 8: Brand loyalty scale; Note: *reverse scored item

3.3.1.3 Measuring Self-presentation

The construct „self-presentation“ is part of individuals' search for social identity. It stands for the aspiration to belong to a group and the use of this membership to differentiate from others outside this group.

To measure self-presentation, the author selects a 5-item scale used by Markert (2008). In his study concerning the recommendation of cell phone companies, Markert used this scale to validate the impact of the customer's need for self-presentation of their recommendation behavior.

Three of the five items used by Markert (SEL2, SEL3, SEL5) are originally developed by Ganesh, Arnold, and Reynolds (2000) researching the customer base of banks. By means of these three items, they measured the ego-involvement of brand switchers and stayers.⁴⁸⁰ They reported an alpha of 0.71.⁴⁸¹ Markert completed the scale by adding two additional items,

⁴⁸⁰ Cf. Ganesh et al. (2000), p. 73.

⁴⁸¹ Cf. Ganesh et al. (2000), p. 71.

aiming to reduce the bias and increase the reliability of the original scale by Ganesh.⁴⁸²

In his analysis, Markert had to eliminate the items SEL2 and SEL4 due to low factor loading. He assumed that they were too subtle on self-presentation regarding the product group he chose. For the three remaining items, he reported an alpha of 0.79 and a composite reliability of 0.86.⁴⁸³

Even though the two items SEL2 and SEL4 did not work for Markert's study, they are kept in this study, because they seem to provide interesting aspects regarding the motivation of a consumer to chose and connect with a special brand community. Table 9 summarizes the items.

	Self-presentation
SEL1	To be a member of the <i>XY</i> community means a lot to me.
SEL2	The image of <i>BRAND</i> was crucial for my decision to become a member of the <i>XY</i> community.
SEL3	The community I have joined as a member says something about me and my attitude.
SEL4	I am expecting a lot from the <i>XY</i> community.
SEL5	It is important for me that I can identify with the <i>XY</i> community.

Tab. 9: Scale on self-presentation

3.3.1.4 Measuring Innovativeness

The indicator „innovativeness“ stands for customers' interest in new and innovative products and the desire to always buy the latest product.

The 4-item scale by Klink and Smith (2001) provides a good description of this content (INO1–INO4). Additionally, one more item focusing the interest

⁴⁸² Cf. Markert (2008), p. 166ff. and Ganesh et al. (2000), p. 73.

⁴⁸³ Cf. Markert (2008), p. 176 et seq. and p. 187.

in testing new products is added (INO5). This additional question takes into account that brand-community members, as shown in the studies of Füller, Matzler, and Hoppe (2008), as well as Wiegandt (2009), might also take an active role in the innovation process of the company.⁴⁸⁴

Klink and Smith modified the 6-item innovativeness scale by Goldsmith and Hofacker (1991). The original scale has been developed “to measure the extent of domain-specific innovativeness across a sample of consumers wherever the interest is in assessing relationships between this variable of interest and other theoretically relevant variables.”⁴⁸⁵ Goldsmith and Hofacker integrated items focusing on a comparison of one’s own innovation behavior compared with that of friends. This perspective is very close to the aspect of opinion leadership.

Klink and Smith eliminated these components, concentrating purely on searching for newness. Klink and Smith’s scale of a 7-point Likert-type measures a person’s desire and willingness to try the latest products within a specific product category without waiting for feedback from others before doing so. They reported an alpha of 0.84 using this scale.⁴⁸⁶

In contrast to Klink and Smith, the author chooses a more open approach and keeps the wording of the four items even more neutral and less focused on a specific product category. The reason for doing so is because the aim of this study is to determine whether brand-community members are in general more open to innovation than are non-members, e.g., innovativeness is part of their behavioral profile. Table 10 summarizes the selected items.

⁴⁸⁴ Cf. Section 2.1.4.1.3 Value Creation: Innovation and Consumer Insight.

⁴⁸⁵ Goldsmith / Hofacker (1991), p. 219.

⁴⁸⁶ Cf. Klink / Smith (2001), p. 330.

	Innovativeness
INO1	I like buying the latest.
INO2	If a new <i>PRODUCT</i> is introduced, I don't wait to buy it until others have bought it.
INO3	While shopping, I watch out for innovations.
INO4	When I see something new in the store, I buy it because it is new.
INO5	I like testing new products.

Tab. 10: Scale on innovativeness

3.3.1.5 Measuring Market Maven

A market maven can be interpreted as shopping specialist in general independent from specific product categories. Knowing where to buy, what to buy, and providing the best information about this to others are characteristics of such a person.⁴⁸⁷

To investigate the indicator „market maven,“ the 3-item scale by Ailawadi, Neslin, and Gedenk (2001) is used. This scale is inspired by the work of Feick and Price (1987), which developed a 6-item scale to demonstrate the existence of the market maven as a consumer type independent from the product-specific opinion leader.⁴⁸⁸

Ailawadi, Neslin, and Gedenk report an alpha of 0.852 with a composite reliability of 0.876.⁴⁸⁹

Originally, a 5-point Likert-scale is used. Due to reasons of simplification and standardization, the author changes to a 7-point Likert-scale for this study. The three selected items are shown in Table 11.

⁴⁸⁷ Cf. Feick / Price (1987), p. 90 et seq.

⁴⁸⁸ Cf. Feick / Price (1987), p. 88.

⁴⁸⁹ Cf. Ailawadi et al. (2001), p. 79.

	Market Maven
MAV1	I am an expert when it comes to shopping.
MAV2	People think of me as a good source of shopping information.
MAV3	I enjoy giving people tips on shopping.

Tab. 11: Scale on market maven

3.3.1.6 Measuring Opinion Leader and Opinion Seeker

In contrast to the market maven concept, opinion leader and opinion seeker have a clear reference to a specific subject or product category.⁴⁹⁰

For the analysis of the two constructs „opinion leader“ and „opinion seeker,“ the author selects the scales by Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman (1996), who conducted five studies using data from 1.128 test persons measuring the behavior toward a specific product category.⁴⁹¹ Finally, they extracted six items for each of the two indicators using a 7-point agree-disagree response format.⁴⁹²

The items have been tested across the five studies and achieved alphas between 0.78 and 0.87 for opinion leader and between 0.75 and 0.93 for opinion seeker.⁴⁹³

In this study, the measurement of opinion leader is composed of six items (OPL1–OPL6) and opinion seeker of five items (OPS1–OPS5) scoring on 7-point Likert scales.⁴⁹⁴ The Tables 12 and 13 provide an overview on the selected items.

⁴⁹⁰ Cf. Feick / Price (1987), p. 84.

⁴⁹¹ Cf. Flynn et al. (1996), p. 139.

⁴⁹² Cf. Flynn et al. (1996), p. 146.

⁴⁹³ Cf. Flynn et al. (1996), p. 141.

⁴⁹⁴ Remark: Due to a mistake by the author, the item on opinion seeking: “When choosing CATEGORY, other people’s opinions are not important to me” is missing in this research.

	Opinion Leader
OPL1	My opinion on <i>CATEGORY</i> seems not to count with other people.*
OPL2	When they choose a <i>CATEGORY</i> , other people do not turn to me for advice.*
OPL3	I often influence people's opinions about <i>CATEGORY</i> .
OPL4	I often persuade others to buy the <i>CATEGORY</i> that I like.
OPL5	People that I know pick <i>CATEGORY</i> based on what I have told them.
OPL6	Other people (rarely) come to me for advice about choosing <i>CATEGORY</i> .*

Tab. 12: Scale on opinion leader; Note: *reverse scored

	Opinion Seeker
OPS1	When I consider buying a <i>CATEGORY</i> , I ask other people for advice.
OPS2	I don't need to talk to others before I buy <i>CATEGORY</i> .*
OPS3	I rarely ask other people what <i>CATEGORY</i> to buy.*
OPS4	I like to get others' opinions before I buy a <i>CATEGORY</i> .
OPS5	I feel more comfortable buying a <i>CATEGORY</i> when I have gotten other people's opinions about it.

Tab. 13: Scale on opinion seeker; Note: *reverse scored

3.3.1.7 Measuring Sociability

Sociability represents the behavioral aspect of enjoying and even searching for others' company.

The scale developed by Reynolds and Beatty (1999) gives a good description of this attitude and is therefore selected to measure this construct. In their study on customer relationships, they integrated the social

need of human beings to have and maintain relationship with retail salespeople. To compile the sociability scale, the two researchers used items from the sociability scale by Cheek and Buss (1981) as well as from the California Personality Inventory.⁴⁹⁵

Their scale contains seven items scored on 7-point Likert scales measuring the degree to which an individual expresses his or her interest and enjoyment in being around others rather than being alone. They reported an alpha of 0.82.⁴⁹⁶ Table 13 provides an overview on the selected items.

	Sociability
SOC1	I like to be with people.
SOC2	I prefer working with others than working alone.
SOC3	I tend to be a loner.*
SOC4	I find spending time with people more enjoyable than solitary activities, such as reading a book.
SOC5	I am not very sociable.*
SOC6	I prefer to do things alone.*
SOC7	I do not like parties and social events.*

*Tab. 14: Scale on sociability; Note: *reverse scored*

3.3.2 Measuring Customer Retention

To measure the construct „customer retention,“ scales for each of the three dimensions „purchase intention,“ „tolerance of price increase“ and „intention to recommend“ are combined.

Starting with the two aspects of purchase intention and tolerance of price increase, the author selects a battery of eight items consisting of: two items

⁴⁹⁵ Cf. Reynolds / Beatty (1999), p. 513.

⁴⁹⁶ Cf. Reynolds / Beatty (1999), p. 520.

of the scale by Baker and Churchill (1977) on purchase intention (PUI2, PUI3)⁴⁹⁷ completed by an additional item developed by Stafford (1998) (PUI1)⁴⁹⁸, two-item scale by Ganesh, Arnold, and Reynolds (2000) on passive loyalty (PRE1, PRE2),⁴⁹⁹ and the additional item PRE3.

The author chooses this approach because none of the existing scales completely fit the need of this study:

- Baker and Churchill's scale on purchase intention originally consisted of three items scored on 7-point semantic differential scales within a series of bi-polar items. Stafford used two of the items for her study and completed her scale by an additional third item on patronizing the brand.

For Baker and Churchill's scale, Kilbourne (1986) reported an alpha of 0.73,⁵⁰⁰ Neese and Taylor (1994) of 0.81⁵⁰¹. Stafford calculated an alpha of 0.81 for her 3-item scale.⁵⁰²

Both studies used an item asking about trying the brand, which is not the focus of the construct within this research, assuming that users of the respective brand community already consume the brand. Therefore, this item is replaced by an additional item that combines the aspects of purchase intention and brand-community membership (PUI4).

- The scale on passive loyalty by Ganesh, Arnold, and Reynolds is originally based on three items and scores on 5-point Likert scales.⁵⁰³ It measures the extent to which a customer remains a customer of a

⁴⁹⁷ Cf. Baker / Churchill (1977), p. 543.

⁴⁹⁸ Cf. Stafford (1998), p. 69.

⁴⁹⁹ Cf. Ganesh et al. (2000), p. 74.

⁵⁰⁰ Cf. Kilbourne (1986), p. 45.

⁵⁰¹ Cf. Neese / Taylor (1994), p. 61.

⁵⁰² Cf. Stafford (1998), p. 70.

⁵⁰³ Cf. Ganesh et al., (2000), p. 71.

specific bank despite market actions such as price changes. They calculated an alpha of 0.72 for the items loading on the factor.⁵⁰⁴

One of the items focused strongly on competitor activities, which are expected to have less impact in the context of brand community. Therefore, this item is excluded and replaced by two additional items on price sensitivity.

In this study the items, are measured on 7-point Likert scales.⁵⁰⁵

The willingness to recommend the brand is investigated by means of the 3-item scale by Price and Arnould (1999), which has been developed to measure WOM as one aspect of the commercial friendship between service provider and client (REC1-3).⁵⁰⁶ They reported an alpha of 0.95.⁵⁰⁷ The items scored on 7-point Likert scales.⁵⁰⁸

The author chooses this scale, because it perfectly fits the needs of this study to investigate the brand-consumer-relationship moderated by the brand community. Table 16 provides an overview on the items of the customer retention scale as described above.

	Customer Retention
PUI1	I would patronize this <i>BRAND</i> .
PUI2	Next time shopping, I would buy this <i>Brand</i> . ⁵⁰⁹
PUI3	I would actively seek out this <i>BRAND</i> .

⁵⁰⁴ Cf. Ganesh et al. (2000), p. 71.

⁵⁰⁵ Remark: Baker and Churchill used semantic differential scales to measure purchase intention, because these three items have been included in a series of bi-polar items, even though they were composed in the sense of statements responding to the level of agreement.

⁵⁰⁶ Cf. Price / Arnould (1999), p. 39.

⁵⁰⁷ Cf. Price / Arnould (1999), p. 54.

⁵⁰⁸ Cf. Price / Arnould (1999), p. 49.

⁵⁰⁹ The original phrasing by Baker and Churchill was: "Would you buy this BRAND if you happened to see it in a store?" The author modified the phrasing in order to make the question more tangible for the participants and to reduce the impression of eventuality.

PRE1	If my current <i>BRAND</i> were to raise the price of its services, I would still continue to be a customer of <i>BRAND</i> .
PRE2	As long as I am member of the <i>XY</i> community, I do not foresee myself switching to a different <i>BRAND</i> .
PRE3	I watch out for promotional offers.*
PRE4	I am willing to pay more for <i>BRAND</i> than for other brands.
REC1	I would recommend this <i>BRAND</i> to someone who seeks my advice.
REC2	I say positive things about this <i>BRAND</i> to other people.
REC3	I would recommend this <i>BRAND</i> to others.

Tab. 15: Customer retention scale; Note: *reverse scored item⁵¹⁰

3.3.3 Measuring Posting as Moderator

The moderating variable „posting“ provides information about the activity level of a brand-community member. To obtain information about the intensity of participation, the author has chosen one question about members' posting activities with five answering options based on the posting frequency:

- Never,
- Several times per month,
- Monthly,
- Rare, 3-6 times per year,
- Extremely rare.

⁵¹⁰ Adapted by Baker / Churchill (1977), Stafford (1998) and Ganesh et al. (2000).

	Posting
POST	Have you ever posted something in XY community (e.g., comments, message board, raffles)

Tab. 16: Posting question

3.4 Development of the Questionnaire and Implementation of the Survey

Based on the selected scales, the author develops the questionnaire for the study by using the UNIPARK tool for online-surveys EFS Survey. This online tool provides the facility to set up the questionnaire, to run test trials, and to conduct the survey. Additionally UNIPARK offers the hosting of the survey within a secure environment. A tracking of the progress of the survey is also possible as a statistic of the participants.⁵¹¹

The online survey consists of two sections:

- First, a general section that allows collecting data about the socio-demographic profile (e.g., age, sex, family situation, professional aspects) as well as the internet usage patterns of the participants, such as frequency, where to access, knowledge, and usage of the most relevant social media platforms and of selected brand communities. This section contains ordinal as well as nominal scales for the socio-demographic profile, in which only nominal scales are used to investigate the internet usage patterns.
- Second, the specific part concerning the specified brand communities that contains the selected behavioral aspects as well as the economic measures. In this section of the questionnaire, each test person is asked specifically about the brand community of which he or she is member. In case of a membership in more than one of the preselected

⁵¹¹ For further information on the EFS survey see: (unknown author) Globalpark Enterprise Feedback Suite 7.0, EFS Survey, Version 1.2 accessed from: http://www.unipark.info/files/efssurvey_eng_2008-11-03.pdf (11/4/2009).

communities, the test person is routed to the one he or she visits most frequently.

For this second, brand-community-specific part of the survey, the author uses 7-point Likert scales for all questions except for measuring brand involvement. By means of monopolar rating scales, the test persons are asked to estimate their level of agreement for each of the defined items (1 = I totally agree ... 7 = I totally disagree).⁵¹²

By using 7-point Likert scales for all items, the procedure is simplified for the test persons due to a consistent design. Additionally, the 7-point scale offers the advantage of a broader answering spectrum than a non-multilevel rating or even 5-point scales that offer the advantage of more precise information and analytical possibilities without overburdening the test person.⁵¹³ These advantages are more important, as the disadvantages discussed in the literature mention the risk of scoring always at the same level or even extreme positions.⁵¹⁴

Brand involvement scores on a 7-point semantic differential,⁵¹⁵ which is used in the sense of Likert scales. Due to the fact that both brand-community members and non-members are investigated to allow a comparison between the attitudes of these two groups, the second part of survey is specified for both targets. Only the brand-community member-section contains the questions on self-presentation and posting. All other questions were identical for members and non-members.

To avoid the missing value problem, participants were not allowed to skip questions.

⁵¹² For further information on Likert scales: cf. Kuß (2010), p. 89 et seq.

⁵¹³ Cf. Fantapié Altobelli (2011), p. 170; Kuß (2010), p. 186; Atteslander (2010), p. 240.

⁵¹⁴ Cf. Guilford (1954), p. 263.

⁵¹⁵ For further information on semantic differentials: cf. Kuß (2010), p. 91 et seq.; Koeber-Riel et al. (2009), p. 243 et seq.; Hair et al. (2009), p. 163 et seq.

After setting up the preliminary questionnaire, the author organized two test runs. The first test took place from 12/10/2009 until 12/21/2009, with the aim to validate the items and check, especially, the general part for completeness. The test group consisted of 12 members with professional marketing and marketing research backgrounds. Based on the comments of this group, the author reworked the wording of some of the questions to enhance their comprehensibility and integrated some additional questions.

The second test was conducted from 01/07/2010 until 01/15/2010, with nine participants. The objective of this test phase was to control and modify the clarity and comprehensibility as well as the practicability of the survey design. Therefore, the test group structure was much more focused on "normal consumers" than on marketing specialists. After completion of the second test phase, the author made the final improvements on the questionnaire based on the comments given, which contains finalization of the wording, the functionality and handling of the survey (e.g., no skipping over questions, „go back to previous page“-function, and progress bar).

The finalized questionnaire consists of 76 questions for community members and 71 for non-members. The first, general part of the questionnaire consisted of 23 questions. In the second, community-specific part, members of the respective brand communities answer 53 questions, and non-members, 48. Answering the questionnaire takes about 10 minutes.

Due to the fact that only German brand communities are involved, the survey is in the German language.

With the finalization of the questionnaire, the survey has been implemented. The final questionnaire for one of the brand communities examined can be found in Appendix A.

4 Empirical Study

This chapter describes the empirical study on the behavioral attributes of brand-community members and their economical impact for the brand. It is divided into four parts:

- Section 4.1 describes the data collection and the selection of the analyzed dataset.
- Section 4.2 provides an overview of the analytical approach and method.
- Section 4.3 presents the results.
- Section 4.4 gives a summary of the results and interpretation.

4.1 Data Collection and Dataset Selection for the Empirical Study

4.1.1 Selecting Brands and Brand Communities

Due to the great importance of FMCG products in the advertising market and the lack of knowledge about the effect of brand communities in this product category, the focus of this research is on FMCG brands.

FMCG or convenience goods are products of daily needs such as soap or candy bars,⁵¹⁶ consumed or used by the consumer. They are purchased frequently and are characterized by generally low consumer involvement, low importance and low perceived risk of a mis-purchase.⁵¹⁷ Baron, Davies, and Swindley summarize FMCG as low-priced items that are used with a limited number of consumptions⁵¹⁸, such as food, detergents or cosmetics. FMCG are also referred to as *consumer packaged goods* or *groceries*.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁶ Cf. American Marketing Association—Dictionary (online).

⁵¹⁷ Cf. Laurent / Kapferer (1985), p. 45 et seq.

⁵¹⁸ Cf. Francis (2009), p. 2 referring to Baron / Davies / Swindley (1991).

⁵¹⁹ Cf. Francis (2009), p. 2.

FMCG brands establish brand communities to maintain the brand and to intensify their customer-brand relationship.⁵²⁰ The interaction between brand and consumers is one key criterion for the selection of the brand communities incorporated in this study.

Based on the five characteristics of brand communities defined in Section 2.1.3.2 of this paper, the brand communities preselected for the empirical research must fulfill the following dimensions:

- Initiator: The FMCG brand itself must be the initiator of the brand community. Therefore, the brand-owning company initiates and operates the community.
- Leadership: The brand-owning company is also a leader of the community. Depending on the brand equity, it selects the fields of content and drives the development of the community.
- Access: To distinguish between members and non-members, the selected communities have to have a log-in process for members offering specific features for members only. A purely open access is not preferred, because it does not allow identifying members.
- On- / Offline: Focus is on online communities.
- Host: The brand community should be hosted with own URL. The author expects specific effects for those brand communities using, e.g., SNSs such as Facebook as host, which might have an impact on both the member's profile as well as on the economical effects.

For the recruitment of an adequate number of consumers involved in the respective community, the selected brand has to be well-known. The marketer has to actively deal with brand and community. Furthermore, the topic of the brand community has to be broad enough—not being too niche or too specific—to guarantee a certain number of people feeling attracted.

⁵²⁰ Cf. Wöbecke (2009), p. 127, and Klingsporn (2009), p. 60.

Additionally, all communities are located in Germany to avoid a bias based on specific national origins (e.g., „the American dream“).

Based on these thoughts and restrictions, the author selected the following seven brand communities, which are integrated into the questionnaire of the empirical study:

Name of the Brand Community	Brand	Product Category	Topic of the Brand Community
Rezeptwiese (Rezeptwiese.de)	Dr. Oetker	Food (baking, cooking)	Baking and cooking
Knorr Family (Knorr.de)	Knorr	Food (cooking)	Cooking
MeinMaggi (Maggi.de)	Maggi	Food (cooking)	Cooking
Optiwell (Optiwell.de)	Optiwell	Food (dairy)	Weight management
toonity (toonity.com)	STABILO	Writing and drawing equipment	Drawing and Comics
NiveaforMen (NiveaforMen.de)	Nivea for Men	Body care	Men's Challenge
V+ Friends (Vplusfriends.de)	Veltins V+	Beer / beer-mix	Party / Friendship

Tab. 17: Overview on the preselected brand communities

Finally, four of these seven communities reached a sufficient number of responses and are therefore used for further analysis. Table 18 provides an overview of the final selection. The fact that Dr. Oetker and STABILO supported the study on their community sites certainly has an impact on the selection.

Name / Brand	Topic	Size	Content
Rezeptwiese / Dr. Oetker	Baking and cooking	15,500 members	Recipes for baking and cooking posted and tested by community members (>47.000 recipes); chat and forum on baking- / cooking-related topics; friendship-function to connect with other members; raffles; subtle integration of the brand; strongly member-driven
MeinMaggi / Maggi	Cooking	n/a (25,000 subscribers of the newsletter)	Cooking recipes developed by Maggi, tested and commented on by community members; personal recipe-collection online; tips and tricks around cooking topics; raffles; strongly company / brand driven; cross-recommendation of other Nestlé brands
Knorr Family / Knorr	Cooking	n/a	Cooking recipes developed by Knorr; personal recipe-collection online; tips and tricks around cooking topics; individual cooking-dating; raffles and couponing; email function between members; company / brand driven; cross-recommendation of other Unilever brands
Toonity / STABILO	Drawing and comics	>10,000 members	Usable for members only; posting and commenting of drawings; cartoon / manga workshops; chat and forum; raffles; subtle integration of the brand; strongly member-driven

Tab. 18: Brand communities for the empirical study

4.1.2 Collecting Data and Data Editing

The empirical study took place from January 2010 to April 2010. During this period, participants could access the online survey via the URL: <http://www.unipark.de/uc/BrandCommunities/>. UNIPARK hosted the survey, guaranteeing a secure server environment.

Conducting the survey online offers the following advantages⁵²¹:

- Fast recruitment of the participants,
- Expedient implementation and completion of the field work because no limitation of interview capacities,
- Real-time control of the field work,
- High transparency of the results and the evaluation,
- Error-free interviews,
- No interviewer bias and reduction of “interview evaluation,” meaning the respondent worries less about giving the right or wrong answer,
- Higher level of activation and cooperativeness of the respondents.

Additionally, using the online survey tool allows for preparing the results for further analysis and transferring them to statistical analysis software.⁵²²

To route participants to the survey, the following activities took place:

- Dr. Oetker posted an online-banner with a direct link to the online questionnaire on the starting page of Dr. Oetker’s baking and cooking community Rezeptwiese for a three-week period. (Figure 22).
- STABILO invited the members of its drawing community toonity via newsletter and link to participate for a two-week period (Appendix B).

⁵²¹ Cf. Pepels (2008), p. 307; Kuss (2010), p. 122 et seq.; Bruns / Bush (2010), p. 248.

⁵²² Cf. (unknown author), Globalpark Enterprise Feedback Suite 7.0, EFS Survey, Version 1.2, Chapter 13, pp. 528-564, accessed from http://www.unipark.info/files/efssurvey_eng_2008-11-03.pdf (11/4/2009).

- The online panel Sozioland⁵²³ supported the study by inviting 3,000 panelists (two waves, 1,500 per wave) via email by sending the URL as a direct link.

To make the participation more attractive, a raffle of 25 pairs cinema vouchers took place among all test persons completing the questionnaire. Additionally, those test persons participating via the Sozioland panel benefit from the Sozioland bonus system.



Fig. 22: Integration of the survey on Rezeptwiese.de⁵²⁴

The questionnaire allowed the participants to choose between the seven preselected official brand communities. Those participants not knowing and using one of these communities were screened out. Figure 23 shows the decision tree for the screening of the test persons.

⁵²³ Remark: Sozioland is an online panel with 40,000 panelists running surveys about economical, political, or socio-cultural topics in Germany. Panelists receive invitations for specific surveys by e-mail. Sozioland is run by respondi AG. The internet address is www.sozioland.de. Due to its topical subject matter, this study has been selected by UNIPARK and respondi to be supported by using the panel free of charge.

⁵²⁴ Download from <http://rezeptwiese.de> on 02-01-2010.

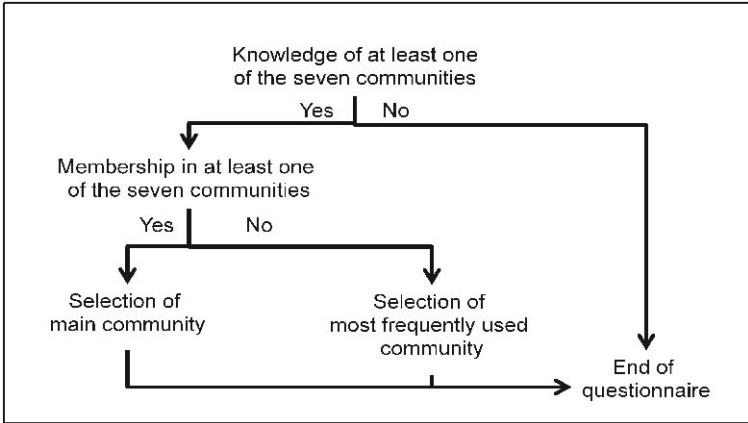


Fig. 23: Screening questions

Due to this structure, even test persons who knew nothing about the communities could complete the general part of the survey. Community members and community site users were routed through additional and specific branches for each community or community site.

Thanks to the strong support of Sozioland panel, Dr. Oetker’s Rezeptwiese and STABILO’s toonity, the survey was accessed 2,809 times with 2,104 completed questionnaires during the field work. When considering these results, one should keep in mind that the recruitment via the Sozioland panel was very broad and did not specifically target those consumers familiar with the preselected brand communities.

Focusing on those participants knowing at least one of the pre-selected communities, three hundred fifty-two brand-community members and three hundred eighty-nine intensive users—the non-members of the seven proposed official brand-community sites—finalized the survey, which represents 35.2% of the 2,104 questionnaires completed.

Due to low response rates, three of the communities were sorted out. The results for Rezeptwiese.de, MeinMaggi, Knorr Family, and toonity.com were

selected for further research. Thus, 655 questionnaires were used for further analysis.

To prepare these data for further analysis, the answers for the final four communities were extracted and analyzed by community, as well as by members versus non-members. The purpose of data editing is to guarantee a minimum quality standard of the raw data. Therefore, each questionnaire was inspected and, if necessary, corrected.⁵²⁵

In the next step, the scales for all negatively phrased questions were changed to reflect if the questions are positively formulated (negatively phrased: 7→1, 1→7). This procedure of re-reversing allows comparison of the data for all indicators.⁵²⁶

To obtain a relatively consistent and significant dataset, the data of each test person were checked according to certain criteria. The author withdrew those questionnaires from the survey showing the following characteristics:

- Answering all questions with same value, e.g., 1 = fully agree, because these test persons can be assumed to have a lack of interest or only want to run through the questionnaire quickly to participate on the raffle.⁵²⁷
- Inconsistent answers especially in case of reverse questions, i.e., the value given for a negatively phrased question does not correspond with that given for the positively phrased control question.⁵²⁸
- Very fast answering of the questions compared with mean time used, which can also indicate a lack of interest.

⁵²⁵ Cf. Churchill / Iacobucci (2010), p. 350.

⁵²⁶ Cf. Churchill / Iacobucci (2010), p. 240.

⁵²⁷ Cf. Churchill / Iacobucci (2010), p. 351.

⁵²⁸ Cf. Fantapié Altobelli (2011), p. 214.

- Questionnaires with a very strong spread for most of the questions, i.e., individual answer = 7 differs significantly from mean = 2.4. These outliers can be indicators for low validity of the answers.⁵²⁹

As a result of the data-cleaning process the number of questionnaires completed has been reduced to the following:

- *Rezeptwiese* from 143 members to 130, and 50 non-members to 43,
- *toonity* from 86 members to 82,
- *Knorr family* from 62 members to 59, and 106 non-members to 99,
- *MeinMaggi* from 44 members to 40, and 164 non-members to 145.

The toonity community is accessible for members only, which explains why no non-members participated in the survey.

4.1.3 Characteristics of the Samples

Table 19 gives an overview of the socio-demographics of each sample of community members and non-members.

All brand communities show a high share of female members and users. Apart from the very young target group of the toonity community, all age groups are represented, even though the group of the above 60 years-old is rather poor for all communities. There are no remarkable differences between members and non-members.

For the three cooking communities, members live more often with kids than do non-members. For these, the percentage of households with kids is very high. Almost two-thirds of the members of *Rezeptwiese* and *MeinMaggi* live with kids. The emphasis is on “older” school kids aged 10-18 years old.

⁵²⁹ Cf. Churchill / Iacobucci (2010), p. 256 et seq.

Both members and non-members are mainly working full- or part-time. Because of the very young target, the majority of the toonity members are students.

For all four brand communities, the majority of test people reports being a member of the respective brand community for at least 1.5 years or longer.

Community	Rezeptwiese		toonity	Knorr Family		MeinMaggi	
Status	Member	Site user	Member	Member	Site user	Member	Site user
Number of test persons	130	43	82	59	99	40	145
Women	95%	88%	78%	76%	75%	70%	66%
Men	5%	12%	22%	24%	25%	30%	34%
Age group:							
≤ 25 y	8%	30%	93%	3%	27%	8%	18%
26-35 y	28%	31%	6%	44%	34%	23%	37%
36-45 y	30%	14%	0%	24%	18%	28%	20%
46-60 y	30%	14%	1%	28%	15%	40%	17%
>60 y	3%	12%	0%	1%	5%	3%	8%
With kids	62%	30%	8%	41%	25%	63%	31%
Professional life:							
Full time	28%	37%	7%	44%	46%	53%	52%
Part time	39%	19%	2%	19%	15%	15%	10%
No profession / students	33%	44%	91%	37%	39%	32%	38%
Period of membership of the respective brand community							
≤ 6 months	32%	n/a	44%	12%	n/a	25%	n/a
approx. 1 y	14%		23%	3%		25%	
≥ 1.5 y	55%		33%	85%		50%	

Tab. 19: Sample structure of the empirical study

4.2 Methodology and Approach for the Analysis

The following section is divided into two parts. The first part provides an overview on the partial least squares (PLS) method used in this study. It shows the structure of the method and compares the variance-based PLS approach with other covariance-based methods. The second part of this section provides information about the concrete research approach used in this survey. For each step of the analysis, the author defines the goodness-of-fit indicators.

4.2.1 The PLS Method

The following sections provide an overview on the analysis method used in this study. Starting with a description of the PLS approach, the author delimitates this variance-based method from covariance-based approaches. Finally, the usability of PLS for this research is discussed.

4.2.1.1 Description of the PLS Method

The PLS approach was been developed by Wold circa 1975 for the modeling of complicated path models.⁵³⁰ It is a variance-based method analyzing causal connections within structural equation models (SEM). PLS offers an approach for application and prediction with little demand on measurement scales, sample sizes, and residual distributions.⁵³¹

SEMs allow for mapping theoretically formulated hypotheses concerning the causality of defined variables in a linear system and estimation of the correlation as well as the measurement error between these variables.⁵³² Path models illustrate the relationships between the variables.

⁵³⁰ Cf. Wold et al. (2001), p. 110.

⁵³¹ Cf. Chin et al. (1996), p. 39.

⁵³² Cf. Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 6.

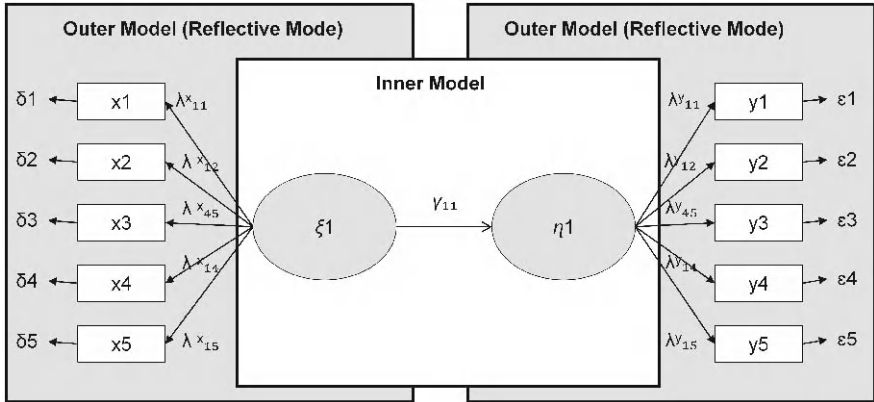


Fig. 24: Example of a PLS path model⁵³³

PLS path models consist of two sets of linear equations⁵³⁴:

- The inner model specifies the relationships between unobservable, latent variables (LVs). This structural model illustrates the cause-and-effect between the exogenous LVs ξ and the endogenous LVs η . Hereby the exogenous LVs are not explained by the model, whereas the endogenous LVs are. The path coefficient γ describes the relationship between ξ and η .
- The outer model specifies the relationships between a LV and its observed or manifest variables (MVs). Herewith the MVs of the exogenous LVs are marked with x , those of the endogenous LVs with y . The outer model is also called the measurement model. It estimates the LVs as an exact linear combination of the observed measures. The factor loading λ describes the relationship between the LV and its MVs. The residuals of the indicator variable x and y are marked with δ and ε .

⁵³³ Adapted from Backhaus et al. (2011), p. 519.

⁵³⁴ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 284; Schloderer et al. (2009), p. 576; Tenenhaus et al. (2005), p. 161 and p. 166.

There are two general types of PLS path-model structures. The example shown in Figure 24 presents the outer models in a reflective mode. In the case of a reflective relationship between LVs and their related MVs, the indicator variables determine the respective LV. This approach is based on factor analysis and assumes a high correlation between the MVs.⁵³⁵

In contrast with the reflective mode, in a formative measurement model, the respective LV represents the result of its defined MVs.⁵³⁶ This research uses a reflective measurement model. The selected behavioral attributes as well as the two economic measures are each defined by a set of MVs as described in Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2.

Figure 25 provides an overview of the analysis flow, which consist of two steps: first, the analysis of the outer model and second, the assessment of the inner model. Based on least squares estimation, the assessment of the outer model delivers the construct values of the LVs that are used in the second step, the inner model assessment, to estimate the parameters of the structural model.⁵³⁷

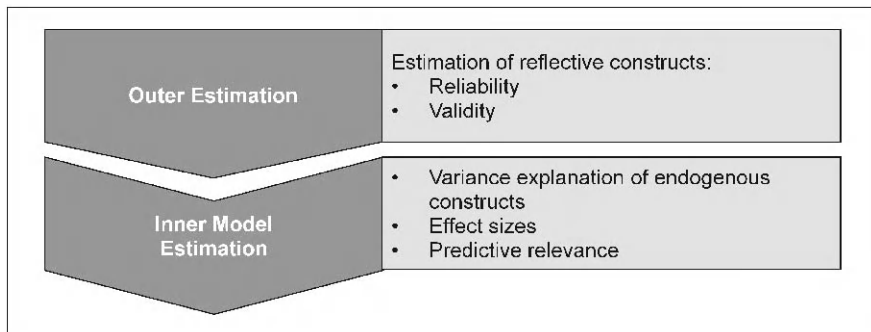


Fig. 25: Two-step process of PLS path model⁵³⁸

⁵³⁵ Cf. Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 35.

⁵³⁶ Cf. Schloderer et al. (2009), p. 577.

⁵³⁷ Cf. Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 58.

⁵³⁸ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 298.

This assessment process underlies the PLS algorithm. Consisting of three stages, the PLS algorithm starts with the 4-step iterative estimation of the LV scores beginning with step 4 followed by step 1:

4. Outer estimate of the standardized LVs (mean = 0, standard deviation = 1) as linear combinations of their related MVs.
1. Estimation of the inner weights for each LV.
2. Estimation of the LV scores as linear combinations of the outer proxies of their respective adjoining LVs using the inner weights from step 2.
3. Estimation of the outer weights calculated as the covariance between the inner proxy of each LV and its MVs (reflective Mode A).⁵³⁹

The looping of these four steps continues until the weights remain unchanged, which indicates convergence of the LV scores has been reached. Stage 1 is followed by the second stage of the PLS algorithm: the inner approximation. Here, the loadings and the inner regression coefficients are calculated. The PLS algorithm ends with stage 3 delivering the path coefficients conducting a linear regression for each endogenous LV.⁵⁴⁰ Figure 26 provides an overview of the stages of the algorithm.

⁵³⁹ Remark: In formative mode B, the calculation of the outer weights is based on the multiple regression of the inner estimate on the centered MVs related to the same LV (cf. Tenenhaus et al. (2005), p. 168).

⁵⁴⁰ Cf. Tenenhaus et al. (2005), pp. 167-169; Henseler et al. (2009), p. 287 et seq.; Ringle (2004), p. 8 et seq.

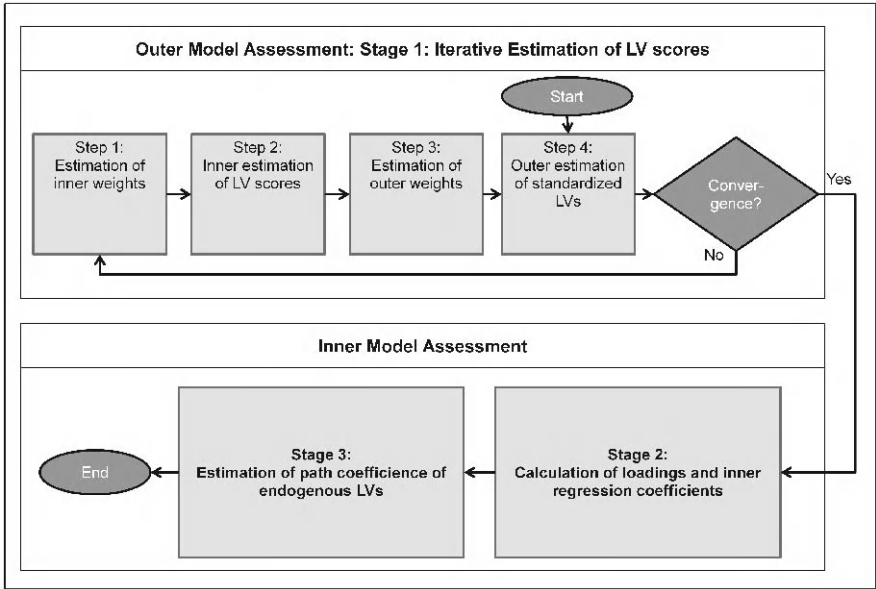


Fig. 26: Flow of PLS algorithm

4.2.1.2 Comparison between Variance- and Covariance-based Methods

Even though the covariance-based techniques can be seen as the statistically more precise methods,⁵⁴¹ PLS has become more popular in research of various social science fields.⁵⁴² Compared with covariance-based methods, the PLS approach offers some important advantages, such as the following capabilities:

- Modeling latent constructs under conditions of non-normality and small-to-medium sample sizes,⁵⁴³
- Handling even very complex models with many LVs and MVs,
- Delivering LV scores that are measured by one or several MVs,

⁵⁴¹ Cf. Schloderer et al. (2009), p. 575.

⁵⁴² Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 277.

⁵⁴³ Cf. Chin et al. (1996), p. 25 and cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 283.

- Handling both reflective and formative outer models, and
- Using less stringent assumptions about the distribution of variables and error terms.⁵⁴⁴

The aim of the variance-based PLS technique is to reduce the variance of the error variables for both inner and outer models.⁵⁴⁵ PLS is preferable for the assessment of causalities on the indicator level, because it offers a high predicting power of the parameters, due to its ability to reproduce the data matrix.⁵⁴⁶

The covariance-based approach follows the fundamental theorem of the factor analysis.⁵⁴⁷ Jöreskog (1970/1973) developed this holistic technique that allows for simultaneously estimating all parameters of the structural model based on the results of the variance-covariance matrix.⁵⁴⁸

As one of the most frequent used methods of the covariance-based approaches, LISREL (Linear Structural RELationships) must be mentioned. Compared with the PLS approach, it requires both normal distribution of the data and independence of the observations, as well as a larger sample size.⁵⁴⁹ By means of significant statements, the method allows for reproducing the population parameters. In doing so, it delivers a more precise estimation.⁵⁵⁰

In structural equation modeling, PLS and LISREL have different objectives and show different results. LISREL tries to account for observed correlations and is a model for theory testing. PLS attempts to explain variances of

⁵⁴⁴ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 283.

⁵⁴⁵ Cf. Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 58.

⁵⁴⁶ Cf. Huber et al. (2007), p. 10.

⁵⁴⁷ Remark: The fundamental theorem says that each MV can be expressed as a linear combination of the hypothetical factors. The factor loadings, as well as the correlations between the factors can reproduce the correlation matrix completely (cf. Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 48 et seq.).

⁵⁴⁸ Cf. Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 47.

⁵⁴⁹ Cf. Huber et al. (2007), p. 9.

⁵⁵⁰ Cf. Chin (1995), p. 3; Huber et al. (2007), p. 9; Fornell / Bookstein (1981), p. 21.

observed or abstract variables. Therefore, it sacrifices efficiency for simplicity and fewer assumptions.⁵⁵¹

There is agreement in the literature that the sample size of covariance-based methods should be at least five times higher as the number of parameters ($\geq 5 \cdot t$) to be estimated.⁵⁵² Boosma and Hoogland (2001) recommend a size of 200 cases.⁵⁵³ In contrast, the sample size required for PLS-based analysis as mentioned by Chin, Marcolin, and Newsted is approximately 100, but even a sample of 20 can achieve satisfying results.⁵⁵⁴ It is not only the sample size that makes PLS preferable, but also the complexity of the model. PLS is able to deal with higher numbers of exogenous LVs or more constructs as covariance-based methods.⁵⁵⁵

Whereas PLS is able to deal with even non-linear data, LISREL requires normal distribution.⁵⁵⁶ In addition, the introduction of formative measurement models can be handled more easily with PLS. To model formative measures in covariance-based approaches, the formative indicators must be re-specified as exogenous LVs with single indicators, fixed unit loadings, and a fixed measurement error.⁵⁵⁷

A further aspect of PLS is the fact that it does not suffer from identification and convergence problems and therefore rarely delivers improper solutions. To reach the same effect for covariance-based models, the number of observations has to be increased significantly.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵¹ Cf. Fornell / Bookstein (1981), pp. 19-23.

⁵⁵² Cf. Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 56.

⁵⁵³ Cf. Reinartz et al. (2009), p. 23.

⁵⁵⁴ Cf. Chin et al. (1996), p. 34; Reinartz et al. (2009), p. 36 et seq.

⁵⁵⁵ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 293.

⁵⁵⁶ Cf. Homburg et al. (2008), p. 571.

⁵⁵⁷ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 290 referring to Williams, Edwards, and Vandenberg (2003).

⁵⁵⁸ Cf. Reinartz et al. (2009), p. 37.

In comparison with the covariance-based methods, PLS shows clear weaknesses concerning two aspects: First, it needs to use the alternative method of bootstrapping⁵⁵⁹ to calculate *t*-values. The validation of the significance is not included in PLS. Second, there are no global fit measures available for PLS. To validate the consistency of the model and the data, covariance-similar approaches must to be used.⁵⁶⁰

Table 20 provides an overview of the main differences for both methods.

Criterion	Variance-based Approach (PLS)	Covariance-based Approach (e.g., LISREL)
Analytical focus	Prediction and theory development	Confirmation and theory testing
Global fit measures	Not available, therefore assessment of model and data consistency difficult	Yes, simultaneous estimation of all equations for best replication of covariance matrix
Local fit measures	Yes	Yes
Distribution of data	Robust against non-normal distributed data	Normal distribution required
Restrictions for measurement model	Reflexive and formative model	Reflexive model, formative model with restrictions
Evaluation of significance / <i>t</i> -values	Via bootstrapping	Yes

⁵⁵⁹ The bootstrapping method is used to provide confidence intervals for all parameter estimates. Further information: cf. Henseler et al. (2009), pp. 305-307.

⁵⁶⁰ Cf. Homburg et al. (2008), p. 573.

Criterion	Variance-based Approach (PLS)	Covariance-based Approach (e.g., LISREL)
Improper solutions	Very rare, because of no identification and convergence problems	Sample size >500 required
Model complexity	Suitable for complex models with large number of indicators	Not suitable
Sample size	Also for smaller samples (<100)	Large sample size ($\geq 5 \cdot t$)

Tab. 20: Comparison of variance- vs. covariance-based methods⁵⁶¹

4.2.1.3 Reasoning for the Use of PLS in this Study

The aim of this research is to examine a set of behavioral attributes, as well as their impact on the customer retention in the context of FMCG-brand communities. Because of its ability to maximize the variance explained for all endogenous LVs, PLS is recommended for identifying relationships between the LVs within a structural equation model. Accordingly, this study can benefit from PLS' strength in terms of prediction and theory development, rather than on the confirmation of theoretically indicated relationships.⁵⁶²

The effect of brand-community members' behavioral aspects on the performance measures describes a research area that is rather unexplored. It is therefore not a key objective to calculate precise statistical results, but rather to identify the main determinates. For this reason, the variance-based PLS approach is preferable to the more accurate estimations offered by covariance-based methods.

A further argument for the use of PLS is the sample size. Because this study aims to analyze several brand communities subdivided into members and

⁵⁶¹ Referring to Homburg et al. (2008), pp. 571-573; Reinartz et al. (2009), p. 16 and pp. 35-37; and Henseler et al. (2009), pp. 289-297.

⁵⁶² Cf. Reinartz et al. (2009), p. 31 et seq.

non-members, the size of the seven samples varies strongly between a range of only 40 MeinMaggi members and 140 cases for MeinMaggi non-members. None of the samples exceeded the recommended number of cases for the covariance-based analytical approach. The smaller sample sizes are indicative for the use of PLS.

Using PLS offers further convenience in the processing of the empirical study. PLS does not require normal distribution. As the requirement is not necessarily fulfilled by the data of a survey, PLS guaranties reliable results independently from the distribution of the data.

As a last point, the developed research model of this study is rather complex containing 10 LVs with, to some extent, a rather large number of indicators (e.g., opinion leader is measured with six items, sociability with seven, brand loyalty with eight items). As mentioned above, the use of PLS is preferable to deal with such large model structures.

4.2.2 Analysis Flow and Quality Criteria

The next sections describe the analysis approach of this study. It is divided into three steps, whereby the first step deals with the estimation of the behavioral attributes of brand-community members compared with non-members. The following two steps contain the estimation of the PLS path model, divided into the estimation of the outer model followed by the analysis of the structural model. Figure 27 illustrates the analysis flow.

For each step, the author particularizes the specific quality criteria.

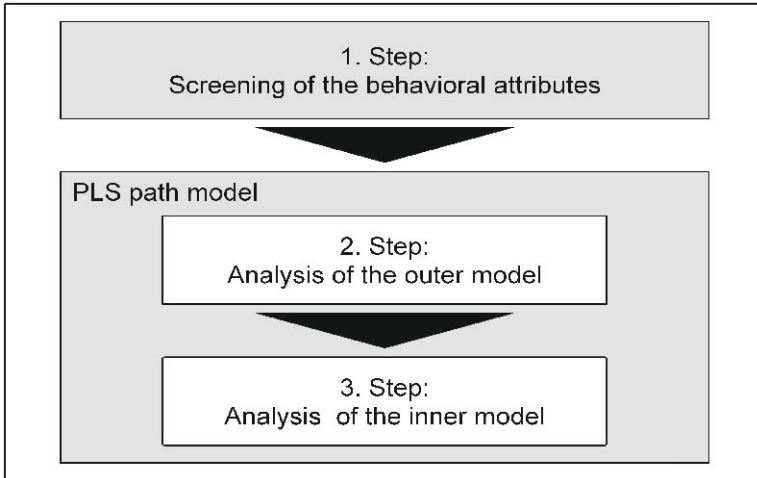


Fig. 27:

Flowchart of the analysis

4.2.2.1 Estimation of the Behavioral Attributes (Step 1)

Step 1 of the analysis contains the behavioral attribute screening. This step allows answering the question concerning how far brand-community members and non-members show the selected behavioral characteristics and how relevant the characteristics are for each of the samples. Table 21 shows the three stages of the analysis.

Step 1: Screening of the Behavioral Attributes	
Analysis	Criteria
Existence of attributes	Percentage of top-two box answers for selected items
Test for normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test)	Rejection: Level of significance <0.05
Significance of the mean value (Mann-Whitney <i>U</i> -test)	Confidence level of 95% for difference of mean value for selected items

Tab. 21: Flowchart of the analysis of the behavioral attributes

To find out whether the selected behavioral attributes exist for the panelists, the author chooses the following procedure for each community, differentiated between members and non-members:

- Selection of the most meaningful items per behavioral attribute, i.e., those items describing and expressing the behavior very clearly, and allowing an understanding of consumers' attitudes,
- Counting of top-two box („I fully agree“ and „I agree“) answers for the most meaningful items of each attribute,
- Calculating the percentage of top-two box answers measured against the total number for each item,
- Comparing the results between the samples and especially between brand-community members and non-members.

The procedure of comparing the percentage rates gives an initial indication of the importance of each attribute.

Based on these results, the author assesses the significance for each of the counted attributes. For this reason, each item is tested with Mann-Whitney *U*-test, comparing brand-community members and non-members of each community. By doing so, the Mann-Whitney test allows verifying the hypotheses whether the distribution of the two samples is identical.⁵⁶³

To verify the assumption of normality, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is used beforehand. It assumes normality for the null hypothesis. Normal distribution is given for a confidence interval of 95%, meaning normality is rejected for a level of significance <0.05 .⁵⁶⁴

The Mann-Whitney *U*-test, as nonparametric equivalent to the *t*-test, allows comparing the median of specific items for two independent samples by testing the independence of the median of one sample differs significantly

⁵⁶³ Cf. Kirk (2008), p. 502.

⁵⁶⁴ Cf. Kuss / Eisend (2010), p. 210.

across the categories of another sample. Hereby, it performs all calculations on the rank position of each data point.⁵⁶⁵

The Mann-Whitey test does not require normal distribution of the samples, but assumes that the samples are independent and randomly assigned to the conditions.⁵⁶⁶

The results of the Mann-Whitney test allow formulating statements regarding the predominance of some behavioral attributes for community members compared with non-members. This delivers important findings about the structure of the communities and the relevance of brand community as a tool to attract specific groups of consumers, such as market mavens or opinion leaders.

The author uses SPSS version 18 to conduct the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and the Mann-Whitney *U*-test.

4.2.2.2 Estimation of the Outer Model (Step 2)

The outer model of the SEM displays the relationship between the unobservable LVs and their descriptive and observable MVs.⁵⁶⁷ This set of variables is also called the measurement model.

In the research model of this study, all MVs are assumed to represent a linear function of their LVs and the residuals. This relationship is called the reflective mode (in contrast to the formative mode, in which an MV is related to its LVs).

The analysis of the outer model contains the assessment of the reliability and of the validity.⁵⁶⁸ Table 22 shows the relevant quality criteria for both stages.

⁵⁶⁵ Cf. Wheater / Cook (2000), pp. 74/75.

⁵⁶⁶ Cf. Kirk (2008), p. 502.

⁵⁶⁷ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 284.

Step 2: Analysis of Outer Model (Reflective Measurement Model and Reflective MVs)		
Analysis		Criteria
Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)		Test for unidimensionality and reduction of items
Factor structure ⁵⁶⁹ :	Reliability	Cronbach's alpha $\alpha \geq 0.7$ Composite reliability $p_c > 0.7$ Indicator reliability ≥ 0.7
	Validity	Average variance extracted (AVE) ≥ 0.5 Cross loadings: loading of each indicator > cross loadings

Tab. 22: Flowchart of the analysis of the outer model

Because using a reliability coefficient such as Cronbach's α is not sufficient for evaluating the unidimensionality, several researchers recommend starting the analysis of the outer model with an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for each of the 10 identified LVs and their conceptualized MVs.⁵⁷⁰

The EFA aims to explain the variance of the variables entirely from the factors. Hereby, the data structure is reproduced with as few factors.⁵⁷¹

The EFA help 1) confirming that each variable is supported only by the items allocated to this variable and 2) reducing the number of items to the essential factors. For this reason, the author applies the principal component. This type of analysis displays the data structure as well as possible with as few factors as possible. It allows for evaluating whether the

⁵⁶⁸ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 298.

⁵⁶⁹ For criteria on factor structure cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 300 et seq.; Ringle et al. (2006), p. 87.

⁵⁷⁰ Cf. Tenenhaus et al. (2005), p. 163; Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 115; Ebert / Raitheil (2009), p. 520.

⁵⁷¹ Cf. Fantapié Altobelli (2011), p. 241.

selected MVs can be seen as unidimensional.⁵⁷² A key question for factor interpretation is: How can the variables highly loading on one factor be summarized under a common umbrella?⁵⁷³

The principal component analysis uses the following criteria:

- The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO), also called the measure of sampling adequacy (MSA), which is an indicator for the usefulness of a factor analysis.⁵⁷⁴ The MSA answers the question how closely the variables fit together. It is measured within a range of 0 and 1. According to Kaiser and Rice, an MSA <0.5 cannot be used for further factor analysis, of value of at least >0.8 is preferable.⁵⁷⁵
- The test of sphericity (Bartlett's test) helps to validate the hypothesis that the items contemplated were uncorrelated. The Bartlett's test can only be applied in case of normal distribution.⁵⁷⁶
- The varimax rotation using the KMO criterion with an eigenvalue >1, which gives the number of factors extracted.⁵⁷⁷ The aim of varimax is to simplify the factors analyzed. Therefore, it improves the interpretation of the factors by a reduction on those few variables with high factor loading.⁵⁷⁸

To conduct the factor analysis, the author uses SPSS 18.

The next stage analyzes the factor structure of the outer model. For this assessment, the PLS path modeling is finally started. By means of the SmartPLS⁵⁷⁹ software, the author examines the dependence structure of

⁵⁷² Cf. Schendera (2010), p. 218.

⁵⁷³ Cf. Backhaus et al. (2011), p. 357.

⁵⁷⁴ Cf. Schendera (2010), p. 263.

⁵⁷⁵ Cf. Backhaus et al. (2011), p. 342 et seq. referring to Kaiser / Rice (1974), pp. 111-117.

⁵⁷⁶ Cf. Backhaus et al. (2011), p. 341.

⁵⁷⁷ Kaiser's eigenvalue explains the part of the variance of a factor consisting of n variables that exceed the variance of each variable. Therefore, Kaiser recommends an eigenvalue for the factor of >1. (Cf. Fantapié Altobelli (2011), p. 243; Schendera (2010), p. 210).

⁵⁷⁸ Cf. Schendera (2010), p. 206.

⁵⁷⁹ Ringle, C.M. / Wende, S. / Will, S.: SmartPLS 2.0 (M3) Beta, Hamburg (2005), <http://www.smartpls.de>.

LVs and MVs. The SmartPLS software has been developed at the Hamburg University for modeling and PLS-based calculation of path models. For this study, the author chooses the software version 2.0 (M3) Beta.

First, the factor structure is tested to confirm the theoretical framework by means of the criteria of reliability. The first criterion is Cronbach's alpha α , which allows for estimating the consistency reliability of an LV and its set of indicators. According to Nunnally, the set of indicators should only be used if $\alpha \geq 0.7$.⁵⁸⁰

Because Cronbach's alpha α underestimates the internal consistency reliability of LVs in the PLS path model, it is recommended to use the composite reliability as a second-quality criterion.⁵⁸¹

The composite reliability ρ_c as another indicator for the internal consistency of the model explores the relationship of LVs toward their related set of indicator variables.⁵⁸² A value of at least 0.7 meets wide approval.⁵⁸³

As a third criterion, the indicator reliability provides information about the absolute standardized component loading of each LV.⁵⁸⁴ It evaluates the fit of each indicator variables as a measure of the respective LV.⁵⁸⁵ Its score should be at least 0.7.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁰ Cf. Ebert / Raithel (2009), p. 520; Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 110 all referring to Nunnally (1978), p. 245.

⁵⁸¹ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 299.

⁵⁸² Cf. Ringel (2004), p. 19.

⁵⁸³ Cf. Schloderer et al. (2009), p. 580; Henseler et al. (2009), p. 300; Homburg / Plesser (2000), p. 651 referring to Homburg / Baumgartner (1995), p. 172; Bagozzi / Yi (1988), p. 82.

⁵⁸⁴ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 300.

⁵⁸⁵ Cf. Schloderer et al. (2009), p. 580.

⁵⁸⁶ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 300; Schloderer et al. (2009), p. 580. Remark: Several researchers postulate a value of at least 0.4 (cf. Homburg / Plesser (2000), p. 651 referring to Homburg / Baumgartner (1995), p. 172; Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 127 referring to Bagozzi / Baumgartner (1994), p. 402). Other studies recommend a benchmark of at least 0.5 (Bagozzi / Yi (1988), p. 82).

The second stage of the assessment of the factor structure starts with the average variance extracted (AVE) as a criterion of convergent validity. The AVE is also called the Fornell-Larckner criterion (Fornell and Larckner (1981)). It postulates that a latent variable shares a higher level of variance with its assigned indicators than any other latent variable does.⁵⁸⁷ Therefore it should be higher than 0.5.⁵⁸⁸

As a second criterion of discriminant validity, the author examines the cross-loading of each indicator variable. The correlation of an indicator with its respective LV is supposed to be higher than with all other LVs of the model. If not, the appropriateness of the model should be reconsidered.⁵⁸⁹

4.2.2.3 Estimation of the Inner Model (Step 3)

After validation of the measurement model in step 2, the assessment of the inner path model can start using the following goodness-of-fit criteria as shown in Table 23.

Step 3: Analysis of the Inner Model (Structural Model and LVs)	
Analysis	Criteria
Structure model	<p>Coefficient of determination R^2: 0.19 = weak, 0.33 = average, 0.67 = substantial</p> <p>t-value: >1.96 (mistake probability 5%), >1.65 (mistake probability 10%)</p> <p>Cross-validated redundancy $Q^2 > 0$</p> <p>Cross-validated communality q^2: 0.02 = low, 0.15 = medium, 0.35 = high</p>
Factor Value	Standardized path coefficient >0.2

⁵⁸⁷ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 299f.

⁵⁸⁸ Cf. Bagozzi / Yi (1988), p. 82.

⁵⁸⁹ Cf. Ringle (2004), p. 21.

Tab. 23: Flowchart of the analysis of the inner model

The coefficient of determination R^2 represents the first criterion for the assessment of the structure model. This measure describes the ratio of the variance extracted compared with the total variance by means of a regression equation. As mentioned by Chin, R^2 of 0.19 can be seen as weak, 0.33 as moderate, and 0.66 as substantial.⁵⁹⁰

By means of the bootstrapping method⁵⁹¹, the t -values can be generated for each LV, providing information about the significance of the path coefficients. The t -value is the quotient of the path coefficient's mean and its standard deviation. A t -value above 1.96 implies a significant result with a probability of error of 5%, and a t -value above 1.65, a significance with 10% probability of error.⁵⁹²

Using the blindfolding approach⁵⁹³ to validate the predicting relevance, as an additional method to validate the structure model, the cross-validated redundancy Q^2 should be mentioned. The Stone-Geisser criterion Q^2 is an indicator for the quality in which the empirically surveyed endogenous LVs can be reconstructed by the model without loss of degrees of freedom. If $Q^2 > 0$, the model represents predicting relevance for the endogenous LV and its associated exogenous LVs.⁵⁹⁴

In addition, by means of the blindfolding method, the cross-validated communality q^2 measures "the relative impact of the predictive relevance.... Values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 reveal a small, medium, or large predictive relevance of a certain latent variable, thus explaining the endogenous latent variable under evaluation."⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹⁰ Cf. Chin (1998), p. 323; Weiber / Mühlhaus (2010), p. 257.

⁵⁹¹ For information on the bootstrapping method, cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 305 et seq.

⁵⁹² Cf. Schloderer et al. (2009), p. 582.

⁵⁹³ For information on the blindfolding approach: cf. Tenenhaus et al. (2005), p. 174 et seq.

⁵⁹⁴ Cf. Chin (1998), p. 317; Ringle (2004), p. 16 et seq.; Henseler et al. (2009), p. 303.

⁵⁹⁵ Henseler et al. (2009), p. 305.

Finally, the standardized path coefficients show the impact between exogenous and endogenous LVs. A value of at least 0.2 is required.⁵⁹⁶

4.3 Results

Following the three steps of the analysis as described in Section 4.2, the presentation of the results is subdivided into the following sections:

Section 4.3.1 shows the results of the screening of the behavioral attributes,

Section 4.3.2 describes the analysis of the outer model, and

Section 4.3.3 presents the results of the structural model.

4.3.1 Results of the Analysis of the Behavioral Attributes (Step 1)

This section presents the results of the screening, as well as the significance testing of the behavioral attributes. Finally, the author shows some additional findings from the survey which help in the interpretation of the results.

4.3.1.1 Screening of the Attributes

Table 24 shows the results of the evaluation of the behavioral attributes for each community separated by community members and non-members.

Overall, it shows that all the selected attributes show relevance for brand-community members, as well as for non-members.

⁵⁹⁶ Cf. Chin (1998), p. 324 et seq.

Item	Item formulation	Rezept-wiese Members n = 130	Knorr Family Members n = 59	MeinMaggi Members n = 40	toonty Members n = 82	Rezept-wiese Non-members n = 43	Knorr Family Non-members n = 99	Mein Maggi Non-members n = 145
INV2	"Brand" means a lot to me.	22%	50%	40%	40%	35%	20%	23%
INV3	"Brand" matters to me.	29%	48%	35%	43%	26%	22%	19%
SEL1	To be member of "brand community" means a lot to me.	14%	52%	30%	43%	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
SEL3	The community I'm a member in says something about me and my attitude.	24%	32%	28%	44%	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
SEL5	It's important to me that I can identify with "brand community."	12%	50%	25%	50%	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
INO1	Overall, I like buying the latest.	56%	43%	60%	38%	33%	38%	34%
INO3	If I needed to purchase "category," I would buy the latest one.	56%	60%	70%	49%	35%	47%	43%

Item	Item formulation	Rezeptwiese Members n = 130	Knorr Family Members n = 59	MeinMaggi Members n = 40	toonty Members n = 82	Rezeptwiese Non-members n = 43	Knorr Family Non-members n = 99	MeinMaggi Non-members n = 145
INO5	I like testing new products.	63%	71%	88%	61%	35%	47%	43%
MAV1	I am a shopping expert.	56%	43%	58%	39%	26%	44%	34%
OPL3	I often influence people's opinions about "category."	29%	22%	30%	43%	21%	14%	17%
OPL4	I often persuade others to buy "category" that I like.	32%	23%	33%	50%	33%	25%	26%
OPS4	I like to get others' opinions before I buy "category."	19%	20%	20%	33%	14%	13%	12%
OPS5	I feel more comfortable buying "category" when I have gotten other people's opinions on it.	15%	18%	15%	38%	12%	11%	6%

Item	Item formulation	Rezeptwiese Members n = 130	Knorr Family Members n = 59	MeinMaggi Members n = 40	toonty Members n = 82	Rezeptwiese Non-members n = 43	Knorr Family Non-members n = 99	Mein Maggi Non-members n = 145
SOC1	I like to be with people.	47%	68%	68%	57%	63%	53%	50%
SOC4	I find spending time with people	24%	32%	33%	40%	29%	31%	33%
PUI1	I would patronize this BRAND.	32%	53%	58%	32%	23%	31%	37%
PUI2	I would buy this BRAND next time shopping.	39%	62%	63%	46%	35%	43%	47%
PRE1	If the price of this BRAND increases, I would buy it nevertheless.	20%	22%	30%	22%	7%	16%	15%
REC3	I would recommend this BRAND.	46%	77%	65%	67%	47%	45%	49%
POST	I have never posted anything.	49%	8%	58%	12%	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

Tab. 24: Presence of selected items (top-two box)

Brand-community members show a higher rate of brand involvement than do non-members. However, Knorr Family presents an exception. Here, there is little difference between members and non-members in their answering level. Furthermore, members and non-members of the Knorr community display a very low level of involvement for the brand.

The attribute „brand loyalty“ seems to be much more pronounced for brand-community members, who reach a higher rate than do non-members. Only the toonity community shows some exceptions, which might be linked with the much younger target group in comparison with the other communities.

The attribute „self-presentation“ is not tested with non-members because it strongly depends on the membership itself. It is much more distinct for the Rezeptwiese and the toonity brand communities than for Knorr Family and MeinMaggi. One reason why the meaning of the membership seems to be much more important for the communities Rezeptwiese and toonity might be that their members have much more influence over the content of the community and have greater opportunities to post their own content, whereas Knorr Family and MeinMaggi are much more controlled and driven by their marketers. Only Rezeptwiese members show a high level of self-presentation, whereas most of the members of Knorr Family, MeinMaggi and toonity do not. Therefore, hypothesis H6 “the majority of brand-community members use the brand-community membership for self-presentation” cannot be confirmed.

The interest in innovation is very pronounced among brand-community members. In addition, a large number of non-members feel attracted, but newness seems to be an even stronger trigger for members.

The attribute „market maven“ is strongly present in all communities. With about 40% and above, a high number of members consider themselves as shopping experts, independent for product categories. Even for the non-members, the percentage of self-described market mavens is surprisingly important with clearly above one-quarter of all respondents.

Except for the toonity members, opinion leadership, the expertise of the respective product category, is considerably less important than the market maven attribute.

Opinion seeker is one of the weakest attributes for all respondents. Only toonity members (about 1/3 of all respondents) seem to have an interest in getting advice and collecting information.

Sociability plays an important role for both members and non-members. Both groups believe that being with others is an important aspect in their lives. There is no great difference between the communities or user-groups.

The performance related behavioral aspects of the construct „customer retention“: purchase intention, tolerance of price increase and intention to recommend show no consistent picture and delivers several interesting results. First, the purchase intention differs strongly between the communities.

- Rezeptwiese and Maggi show clear differences between members and non-members. Members reach a much higher level of purchase intention.
- For the Knorr Family community, there seem to be no difference between members and non-members. Both target groups display similar answering levels clearly below the ones of Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi.
- The toonity members also failed to display the high level of purchase intention of the Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi members.

The tolerance of price increases is a critical issue for all four communities. The tolerance of community members seems to be slightly higher but still on a very moderate level. Even though the results are not completely homogeneous, it allows for assuming that the intention to purchase the brand is in general higher for brand-community members than for non-members.

For the intention to recommend, only for Knorr is found no difference between members and non-members. This community reached with 46% the lowest rate of all, whereas two-thirds of the Knorr and toonity members and three-quarters of the Rezeptwiese members would recommend their brand. The non-members of these three brand communities display a much lower level and do not exceed the level of 50%. Therefore, it seems that in general, brand-community members display the intention to recommend the brand more often than do non-members.

Finally, the attitude to post one's own content presents a clear difference between those communities strongly driven by their members, such as Rezeptwiese and toonity and those communities that are more managed by the marketer, e.g., Knorr Family and MeinMaggi. It seems that the more impact the community members have, the higher the interest and willingness to upload their own input.

The following table provides an overview of the findings.

Attribute	Members		Non-members
Brand Involvement	++ (Knorr Family: +)	>	+
Brand Loyalty	++	>	+
Self-presentation	Rezeptwiese / toonity: ++ MeinMaggi: + Knorr Family: 0	n.a.	n.a.
Innovativeness	++	>	++
Market Maven	++	>	+ (Knorr Family: ++)
Opinion Leader	+ (toonity: ++)	≥	+ / 0

Attribute	Members		Non-members
Opinion Seeker	0 (toonity: +/++)	>	0
Sociability	+ / ++	=	+ / ++
Purchase Intention	++	>	+ / ++
Tolerance of Price Increase	0 (MeinMaggi: +)	>	0
Intention to Recommend	++	>	++
Posting	Rezeptwiese / toonity: ++ Knorr Family / MeinMaggi: 0	n.a.	n.a.

Tab. 25: Comparison of behavioral attributes (+: at least 40% of top-two box answers; +: 25-39%; 0: under 25%)

4.3.1.2 Test for Significance

To verify the significance of the above findings, the author conducts a test of the independence of the mean value for all selected items.

Beforehand, all 55 indicator variables for the exogenous LVs are tested for normality. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test shows highly significant results for all indicators (significance < 0.05). Therefore, the assumption of normality is rejected.

By means of the Mann-Whitney *U*-test, the author validates the significance of the mean value for each selected behavioral attribute comparing members and non-members of each of the communities Rezeptwiese, Knorr Family and MeinMaggi.

Table 26 shows the results of the Mann-Whitney test. Overall, it can be noted that none of the constructs shows significant differences between members and non-members of the three observed brand communities. That means a

statement noting a general difference concerning the value of the behavioral attributes cannot be made. To learn more, the most meaningful items of each attribute are examined.

For the attributes „brand involvement“ and „brand loyalty,“ Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi show significant differences between their member and non-member samples, while Knorr Family members do not deliver significant differences in comparison with Knorr Family non-members. Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi brand-community members are significantly superior in these two attitudes compared to the respective non-member samples. Hypotheses H1 on brand involvement and H2 on brand loyalty are confirmed for Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi, whereas they have to be rejected for Knorr Family.

MeinMaggi members show a significant higher level of innovativeness as the non-members, whereas Rezeptwiese shows a mixed picture: members are significantly more interested in innovations, but they seem not to feel a higher need to get them immediately as non-members. Knorr Family does not show any significant differences. Therefore, the hypothesis H8, “brand-community members have a higher level of innovativeness than do non-members,” can only be confirmed for MeinMaggi, but must be rejected for all other communities.

For the attribute „sociability,“ no significant difference between members and non-members can be stated. Here, brand-community members and non-members show rather comparable behavior. The hypothesis H12 concerning sociability must be rejected.

Even though the attribute „market maven“ seems to be pronounced for brand-community members, it does not deliver overall significant results. Knorr Family shows no significance at all. Rezeptwiese members reach a significant higher result for MAV1, but the two other items MAV2 and MAV3 are not significant. MeinMaggi shows significance for MAV2 and MAV3 and just missed for MAV1. Therefore, the hypothesis H13 has to be rejected.

The two attributes „opinion leader“ and „opinion seeker“ do not show significant differences between the member and non-member samples of the three communities. For this reason the hypotheses on these two attributes, H14 and H15, must be rejected.

Finally the performance related hypothesis H20 on the higher importance of customer retention for members compared with non-members must be rejected overall. The three dimensions „purchase intention,“ „tolerance of price increase“ and „intention to recommend“ show a very mixed picture:

For the aspect „purchase intention,“ Rezeptwiese shows a significant difference between members and non-members, whereas the results of Knorr Family are not significant. MeinMaggi members show a significant higher level of purchase intention with the exception of PUI1.

For tolerance of price increase, only MeinMaggi shows a significant superiority of its members.

And finally, Rezeptwiese members have a significant higher intention to recommend the brand as non-members, whereas Knorr Family does not show any significant differences. MeinMaggi shows a mixed picture: while REC3 displays a difference between both targets, REC1 and REC2 do not support this result.

Item	Criteria	Rezeptwiese	Knorr Family	MeinMaggi
INV2	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	2113.000	2853.000	2139.000
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	10628.000	4623.000	2959.000
	Z	-2.455	-.250	-2.607
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.014	.803	.009
INV3	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	1922.500	2836.000	2189.500
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	10437.500	4606.000	3009.500
	Z	-3.144	-.312	-2.436
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.002	.755	.015
LOY1	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	1770.000	2683.500	2125.000
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	10285.000	4453.500	2945.000
	Z	-3.677	-.869	-2.637
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.000	.385	.008
INO1	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	2328.000	2497.000	1964.000
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	10843.000	4267.000	2784.000
	Z	-1.678	-1.562	-3.186
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.093	.118	.001
INO3	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	2085.500	2596.000	2000.000
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	10600.500	4366.000	2820.000
	Z	-2.559	-1.197	-3.094
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.010	.231	.002
INO5	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	1723.500	2389.000	1478.000
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	10238.500	4159.000	2298.000
	Z	-3.916	-1.967	-4.907
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.000	.049	.000

Item	Criteria	Rezeptwiese	Knorr Family	MeinMaggi
MAV1	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i> Wilcoxon- <i>W</i> Z Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	2222.500 103737.500 -2.075 .038	2643.500 4413.000 -1.033 .302	2339.000 3159.000 -1.922 .055
OPL3	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i> Wilcoxon- <i>W</i> Z Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	2548.000 3494.000 -.881 .378	2495.500 4265.500 -1.567 .117	2141.500 2961.500 -2.596 .009
OPL4	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i> Wilcoxon- <i>W</i> Z Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	2494.500 3440.500 -1.073 .283	2688.500 4458.500 -.853 .394	2441.500 3261.500 -1.571 .116
OPS4	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i> Wilcoxon- <i>W</i> Z Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	2709.500 3655.500 -.305 .761	2789.000 4559.000 -.481 .631	2667.000 3487.000 -.792 .429
OPS5	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i> Wilcoxon- <i>W</i> Z Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	2656.000 3602.000 -.496 .620	2884.000 7834.000 -.133 .894	2370.500 3190.500 -.792 .429
SOC4	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i> Wilcoxon- <i>W</i> Z Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	2745.000 11260.000 -.180 .857	2570.000 7520.000 -1.292 .196	2879.500 13464.500 -.070 .944

Item	Criteria	Rezeptwiese	Knorr Family	MeinMaggi
SOC5	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	2263.000	2398.500	2856.000
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	10778.000	4168.500	13441.000
	Z	-1.922	-1.906	-.149
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.055	.057	.881
PIU1	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	1583.000	2682.000	2483.000
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	10098.000	4452.000	3303.000
	Z	-4.368	-.876	-1.422
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.000	.381	.155
PIU2	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	1720.500	2887.500	2218.500
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	10235.500	7837.500	3038.500
	Z	-3.892	-.122	-2.337
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.000	.903	.019
PRE1	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	2534.500	2782.500	2213.000
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	110449.500	4552.500	3033.000
	Z	-.937	-.505	-2.343
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.349	.613	.019
REC3	Mann-Whitney- <i>U</i>	1855.500	2744.000	2191.000
	Wilcoxon- <i>W</i>	10370.500	7694.000	3011.000
	Z	-3.461	-.651	-2.461
	Asymptotic significance (2-tailed)	.001	.515	.014

Tab. 26: Results of the Mann-Whitney-*U*-test

Even though Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi could confirm the hypotheses on brand involvement and brand loyalty, and additionally MeinMaggi could confirm the hypotheses on innovativeness, none of the selected behavioral attributes showed a significant higher level for members compared to the non-member samples overall for all four communities. This leads to the

assumption that the selected attributes do not seem to be key drivers for joining a brand community. Section 4.3.1.4 provides further interpretation.

4.3.1.3 Further Important Findings of the Data Assessment

Further analysis of the data shows another interesting finding: An important share of brand-community members confirms the membership of SNSs, such as Facebook, Wer-kennt-wen.de or Stayfriends.de. Table 27 provides an overview of the membership in the different social networks for each sample.

Community	Rezeptwiese		toonity	Knorr Family		MeinMaggi	
	Member	Site user		Member	Member	Site user	Member
Membership in SNSs:							
Facebook	15%	42	34%	34%	34	33%	34
MySpace	2%	%	16%	10%	%	18%	%
Schüler VZ	1%	12	46%	3%	17	5%	17
StudiVZ	9%	%	5%	7%	%	20%	%
MeinVZ	13%	12	7%	19%	4%	23%	4%
Wer-kennt-wen	46%	%	9%	27%	32	33%	32
Stayfriends	31%	30	0%	41%	%	30%	%
Xing	6%	%	1%	15%	19	23%	19
Others	15%	16	44%	12%	%	18%	%
		%			20		20
		33			%		%
		%			32		32
		33			%		%
		%			14		14
		12			%		%
		%			9%		9%
		9%					

Tab. 27: Membership in social networks

Additionally, brand-community members also tend to be members in several thematically related communities. Many members of the three cooking communities Rezeptwiese, Knorr Family, and MeinMaggi can be found in more than one of the brand communities examined in this research or additionally on cooking internet sites, such as www.chefkoch.de (either as signed-in member or as occasional user). Forty percent of the Rezeptwiese, 57.7% of the MeinMaggi members, and 44.1% of the Knorr Family members also use the other two cooking brand communities.

toonity members show the same results. Forty-two percent mention using additional on-topic sites, such as www.Mangaka.de, www.Animexx.de, or www.deviantART.com. The following figures provide an overview on the cooking community results.

Figure 28 shows the awareness of three cooking brand communities, whereas Figure 29 provides an overview of the membership.

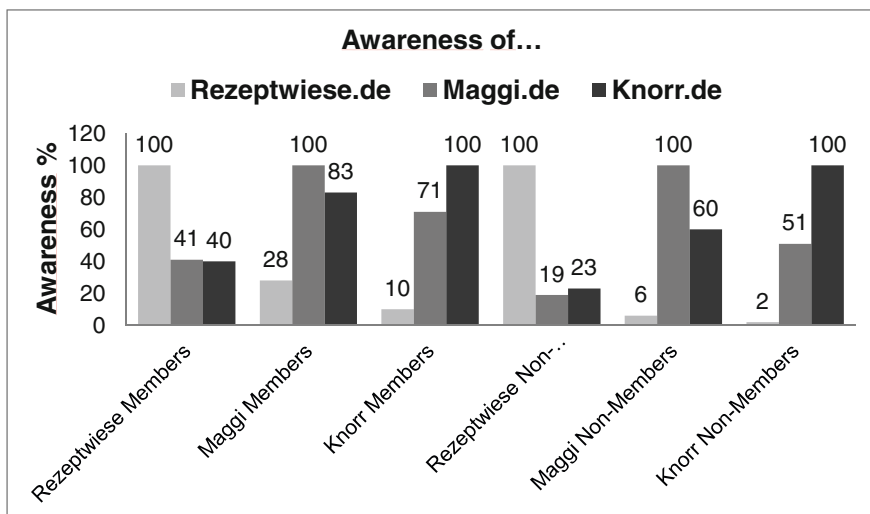


Fig. 28: Cooking communities: Awareness of topic-related brand communities

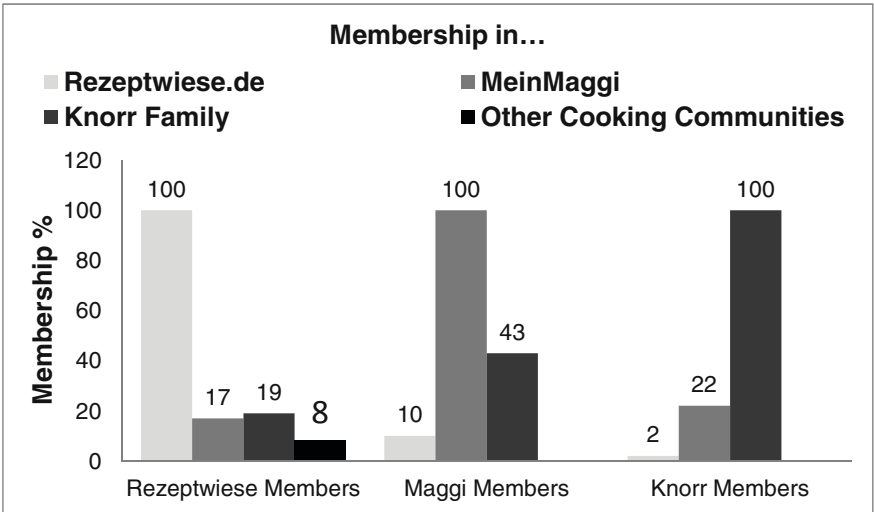


Fig. 29: Cooking communities: Use of thematically related internet sites or brand communities⁵⁹⁷

In answering what they like about their preferred brand community, the participants of the survey reveal a divided picture. While the members of the two member-driven communities, Rezeptwiese and toonity, emphasize the fun factor, getting inspiration and tips as well as the active exchange with other members, the members of the brand-driven communities, Knorr Family and MeinMaggi, do not assign much importance to communication. They like to participate in raffles, get tips, and find inspiration. Figure 30 provides an overview of the preferences.

⁵⁹⁷ Remark: The awareness of additional cooking communities was not prompted.

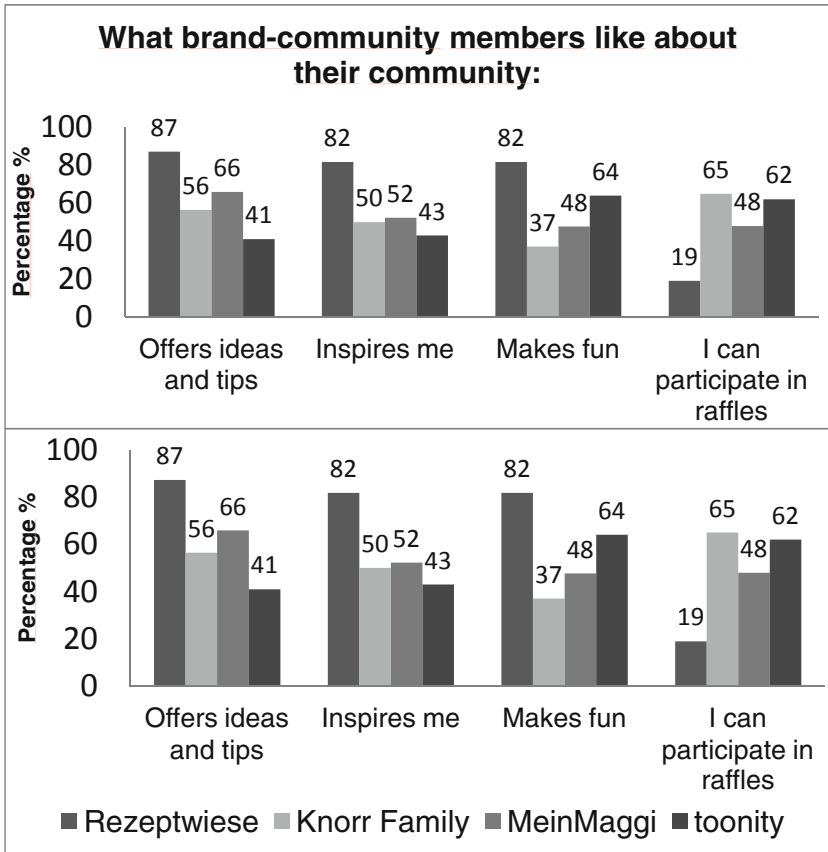


Fig. 30: Likes about the respective brand communities

4.3.1.4 Intermediate Findings of Analysis (Step 1)

To some extent, the screening of the behavioral attributes (percentage of top-two box answers) seems to support the hypothesis that brand-community members have a specific behavioral profile. Members of the selected brand communities show a higher interest in innovation. Additionally, the attribute “market maven” is pronounced. In contrast, the attributes „opinion leader,“ „opinion seeker“ and „sociability“ do not show any important differences. The attribute „self-presentation“ is much more

pronounced in the two member-driven communities, Rezeptwiese and toonity.

Interestingly, none of the conceptualized attributes shows a significant difference of the mean value between members and non-members for all three observed brand communities. The Rezeptwiese samples as well as the MeinMaggi samples confirm the hypotheses concerning the attributes „brand involvement“ and „brand loyalty“ with significant differences between their members and non-members. Additionally Rezeptwiese confirms the hypotheses on customer retention by means of the dimensions „purchase intention,“ and „intended recommendation,“ whereas MeinMaggi confirms a significant difference for the attributes „innovativeness,“ and „tolerance of price increase.“ Due to this very inhomogeneous picture all hypotheses concerning the behavioral attributes and the specific behavioral profile of brand-community members must be rejected.

Another interesting finding is that brand-community members seem to have a higher interest in several on-topic communities / internet sites than do non-members. This leads to the assumption that members are very focused on their specific topic (e.g., cooking) and tend to cherry-pick over the platforms, taking the best, most useful, or attractive information from each offer.

Another interesting result shows that posting is much more common and intensively used within the two member-driven communities, Rezeptwiese and toonity, whereas those communities with brand domination (e.g., MeinMaggi, Knorr Family) tend to be used as platforms for gathering inspiration and advice. The exchange with other and the active involvement in the community represents key features for the members of Rezeptwiese and toonity. Interestingly, the fun factor scores higher for the two communities with high member participation as well.

The fact that both posting as well as self-presentation are both strongly marked in the two member-driven communities might be an indication that the identification and activation within a brand community is much higher

when each member is allowed more power. Therefore, the more they are invited to actively participate, the greater responsibility members seem to feel for the brand community in certain ways.

These findings give an indication that specific behavioral attributes do not seem to be key drivers to join a brand community. As the results for Knorr Family show, brand-community members do not even have necessarily a profound relationship to the respective brand.

The fact that brand-community members tend to participate in several communities of the same topic (e.g., cooking) might be an indicator for a reason to join a community. Section 4.4 presents further interpretation.

4.3.2 Results for the Outer Model (Step 2)

4.3.2.1 Results of the EFA

The author conducts an EFA for the eight exogenous LVs of the research model, the conceptualized behavioral attributes, and an EFA for the performance measure, the endogenous LV „customer retention.“ Because brand-community members and non-members are analyzed and compared in this study, both data are used for the EFA.

For the exogenous LVs, the model delivers very good results for the MSA and the test of sphericity. The MSA reaches a preferable value of 0.887, confirming the usefulness of the EFA. Due to the rejection of normality, the Bartlett-test cannot be applied as an additional criterion.

The variables pay in eight factors, which explain 65.8% of the total variance. Herewith the EFA confirms the independence of four of the eight constructs as conceptualized. The variables „self-presentation,“ „market maven,“ „innovativeness“ and „sociability“ show very clear results and have therefore no need of modification.

The two LVs „brand involvement“ and „brand loyalty“ pay in the same factor and are therefore one-dimensional. They are summarized under the roof of

emotion brand bond for further analysis. Additionally the indicators LOY3 and INV5 are sorted out. LOY3 cannot be allocated to one of the eight factors, whereas INV5 shows low correlation results. Both items do not meet a factor loading of 0.5.⁵⁹⁸

For the variable „opinion seeker“ all items pay in one factor, with the exception of OPS3 which cannot be clearly allocated and does not reach a factor loading of 0.5 as requested.

Finally the items of the variable „opinion leader“ load on two factors. This LV is two-dimensional. For further analysis, this behavioral aspect will be split into two factors: The three reversed scored items play in one factor, the not asked for advice. The positively formulated items pay in another factor, the asked for advice.

Table 28 provides an overview of the results.

Factor	Items	Factor							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Factor 1: Emotional brand bond	LOY1	.739	.045	.203	.047	.011	.012	-.006	.034
	LOY2	.690	.100	.098	.046	.056	-.018	-.055	.082
	LOY4	.758	.054	.121	.042	.035	.065	-.102	.082
	LOY5	.756	.062	.009	.021	.075	-.095	.021	.033
	LOY6	.787	-.028	.073	.054	.086	-.036	-.019	.094
	LOY7	.834	.019	.095	.033	.095	-.073	.028	.041
	INV1	.811	-.011	.093	.088	-.028	.216	-.071	-.031
	INV2	.851	.036	.099	.094	-.024	.123	-.110	-.028
	INV3	.839	.028	.141	.099	-.060	.159	-.110	-.002
	INV4	.758	.008	.048	.066	.038	.111	.038	-.062
	INV5	.463	-.040	.067	-.022	.003	.080	.250	-.125
	INV6	.738	.033	.065	.037	.052	.048	-.100	.097

⁵⁹⁸ Remark: Backhaus recommends at least a factor loading of >0.5; cf. Backhaus et al. (2011), p. 362.

		Factor							
Factor	Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Factor 2: Self- presen- tation	SEL1	.067	.935	.009	.050	.007	.031	-.019	-.017
	SEL2	.077	.885	.058	-.010	-.032	.005	-.012	-.075
	SEL3	-.017	.905	-.017	.024	-.048	.036	-.004	.075
	SEL4	.008	.939	-.020	.038	.040	.019	-.007	.050
	SEL5	.050	.949	-.005	.067	.021	.030	.012	.044
Factor 3: Innova- tiveness	INO1	.167	.036	.854	.122	-.008	.093	-.052	.048
	INO2	.149	.006	.755	.119	-.007	.208	-.027	.152
	INO3	.191	.014	.782	.094	.102	.184	.074	-.008
	INO4	.102	.046	.782	.131	-.012	.023	-.096	.142
	INO5	.205	-.100	.672	.107	.088	.199	.079	-.065
Factor 4: Opinion seeker	OPS1	.054	.082	.059	.796	.017	-.059	-.112	-.032
	OPS2	.124	.07	.103	.810	.044	.184	.074	.054
	OPS3	.055	-.046	.002	.343	.106	.003	.214	-.546
	OPS4	.062	.018	.139	.832	-.007	.048	-.061	.110
	OPS5	.111	-.014	.161	.783	-.007	.055	-.169	.037
Factor 5: Sociability	SOC1	.184	.027	.189	-.003	.674	.135	-.059	.241
	SOC2	.146	.057	.175	.034	.698	-.018	-.180	.135
	SOC3	-.020	-.029	-.038	-.006	.802	-.017	.140	-.147
	SOC4	.069	.077	.157	.096	.633	.014	-.176	.285
	SOC5	-.031	-.082	-.098	.004	.611	.063	.240	-.210
	SOC6	.007	-.021	-.030	.000	.698	-.017	.022	-.075
	SOC7	-.036	-.014	-.065	-.009	.576	.157	.122	-.046
Factor 6: Market Maven	MAV1	.083	.033	.170	.000	.073	.856	.015	.033
	MAV2	.109	.044	.218	.074	.065	.831	.109	.170
	MAV3	.143	.052	.209	.191	.138	.774	.048	.130
Factor 7: Opinion Leader (reverse scored items)	OPL1	-.125	.002	.034	-.098	.051	.014	.703	.016
	OPL2	-.066	.009	-.065	-.101	.069	-.009	.669	-.110
	OPL6	-.004	-.026	.002	.058	-.004	.161	.719	.187

		Factor							
Factor	Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Factor 8: Opinion Leader (positive formulation)	OPL3	.060	-.023	.153	.444	.036	.371	.205	.639
	OPL4	.134	.035	.204	.438	.060	.252	.167	.650
	OPL5	.140	.040	.198	.426	.021	.397	.197	.580
Items not allocated:	LOY3	.291	.011	-.061	.022	.145	-.039	.046	-.095

Tab. 28: Rotated component matrix of the exogenous variables

For the endogenous variable „customer retention,“ the model delivers also very good results for the MSA. With an MSA of 0.913, the usefulness of the EFA is confirmed. As mentioned for the exogenous variables, the test of sphericity is not applicable due to missing normality.

Table 29 provides overview on the results of the EFA for the endogenous variable „customer retention.“ It shows that the 10 items load on two factors. The construct is therefore not one-dimensional as expected. Therefore it will be split into two variables for further analysis:

- Factor 1 summarizes the items REC1, REC2, REC3, PUI1, PUI2 and PRE3. These items focus mainly on patronizing the brand by recommending or repurchasing the brand. Therefore this factor is called brand patronage.
- Factor 2, which is called price tolerance, combines the items PUI3, PRE1, PRE2 and PUI4. All items exceed the benchmark of factor loading of >0.5.

		Factor	
	Items	1	2
Factor 1: Brand patronage	REC1	.856	.286
	REC2	.853	.242
	REC3	.857	.301
	PUI1	.668	.512
	PUI2	.767	.439

	PRE3	.621	.114
Factor 2:	PUI3	.430	.699
Price	PRE1	.271	.808
tolerance	PRE2	.117	.748
	PRE4	.308	.803

Tab. 29: Rotated component matrix of the endogenous variables

To implement these results in the research model, the author modified the model as shown in Figure 31.

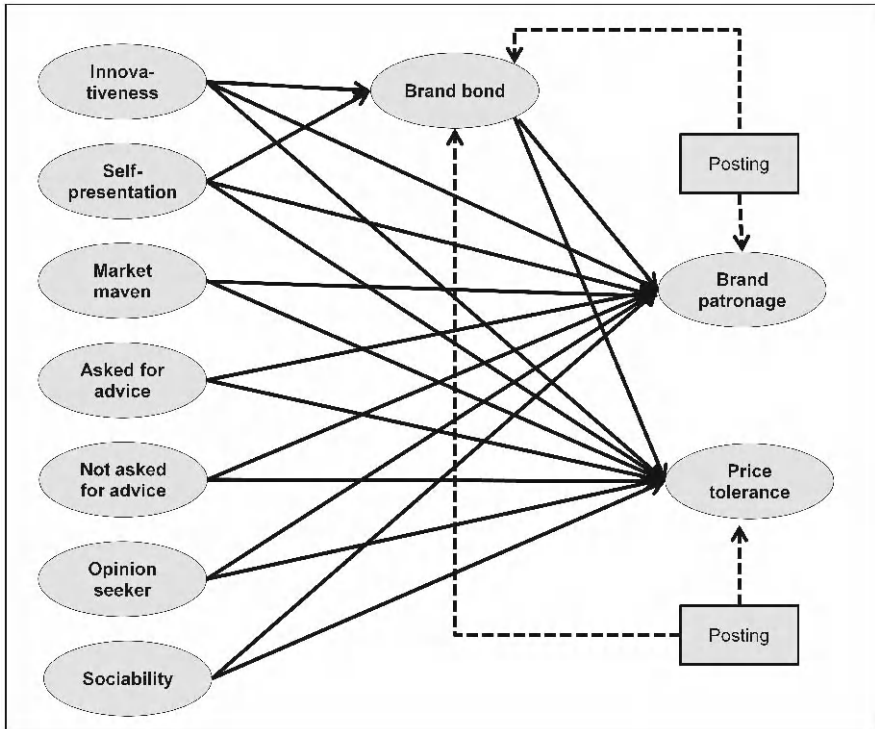


Fig. 31: Path model based on EFA results

These findings have an impact on the hypotheses formulated in Section 3.2. For this reason, the author modified the set of hypotheses as shown in the following two tables.

Hypotheses Concerning the Behavioral Attributes			
	Before EFA	Modification based on EFA Results	
Behavioral attributes	H1	Brand-community members have a higher level of brand involvement than do non-members.	Brand-community members have a higher level of brand bond than do non-members.
	H2	Brand-community members have a higher level of brand loyalty than do non-members.	
	H6	The majority of brand-community members use their brand-community membership for self-presentation.	No changes!
	H8	Brand-community members have a higher level of innovativeness” than do non-members.	No changes!
	H12	Brand-community members have a higher level of sociability than do non-members.	No changes!
	H13	Brand-community members are more often market mavens than are non-members.	No changes!
	H14	Brand-community members are more often opinion leaders than are non-members.	No changes!

Hypotheses Concerning the Behavioral Attributes				
		Before EFA	Modification based on EFA Results	
		H15	Brand-community members are more often opinion seekers than are non-members.	No changes!
Performance measures	H20	Brand-community members have a higher level of customer retention than do non-members.	Brand-community members have a higher level of brand patronage than do non-members.	
			Brand-community members have a higher level of price tolerance than do non-members.	

Tab. 30: Modified set of hypotheses on the behavioral attributes

Hypotheses Concerning the Performance Effect of the Behavioral Attributes			
		Before EFA	Modification based on EFA Results
H3	The higher the brand involvement, the stronger the brand loyalty.		Deleted!
H4	The higher the brand involvement, the stronger the customer retention.		H4a: The higher the brand bond, the stronger the brand patronage. H4b: The higher the brand bond, the stronger the price tolerance.
H5	The higher the brand loyalty, the stronger the customer retention.		
H7	The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the brand involvement.		The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the brand bond.
H9	The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the brand involvement.		The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the brand bond.

Hypotheses Concerning the Performance Effect of the Behavioral Attributes		
	Before EFA	Modification based on EFA Results
H10	The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the customer retention.	H10a: The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the brand patronage. H10b: The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the price tolerance.
H11	The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the customer retention.	H11a: The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the brand patronage. H11b: The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the price tolerance.
H16	The higher the sociability, the stronger the customer retention.	H16a: The higher the sociability, the stronger the brand patronage. H16b: The higher the sociability, the stronger the price tolerance.
H17	The higher the value of opinion leader, the stronger the customer retention.	H17a: The higher the value of opinion leader, the stronger the brand patronage. H17b: The higher the value of opinion leader, the stronger the price tolerance.

Hypotheses Concerning the Performance Effect of the Behavioral Attributes		
	Before EFA	Modification based on EFA Results
H18	The higher the value of market maven, the stronger the customer retention.	H18a: The higher the value of market maven, the stronger the brand patronage. H18b: The higher the value of market maven, the stronger the price tolerance.
H19	The higher the value of opinion seeker, the stronger the customer retention.	H19a: The higher the value of opinion seeker, the stronger the brand patronage. H19b: The higher the value of opinion seeker, the stronger the price tolerance.
Hypotheses Concerning the Moderating Effect "Posting"		
H21	Posting delivers additional predicting power of brand involvement on customer retention.	H21a: Posting delivers additional predicting power of brand bond on brand patronage. H21b: Posting delivers additional predicting power of brand bond on price tolerance.

Tab. 31: Modified set of hypotheses on the performance impact

4.3.2.2 Results of the Factor Structure

The author investigated the factor structure for all seven samples (4x brand-community members, 3x non-members) according to the criteria described in Section 4.2.2.2.

Overall, the outer model is confirmed with some corrections.

The LV „sociability“ shows problems in terms of AVE, indicator reliability, composite reliability, and cross loadings for all samples. All MVs deliver in several samples indicator reliability below the benchmark of 0.7 and show problems in their cross loadings. Additionally, for all seven samples, the AVE does not reach the requested 0.5. For the toonity members, both MeinMaggi members and non-members, as well as for Knorr Family members the composite reliability ρ_c does not reach the benchmark of 0.7. Due to these results, the LV „sociability“ does not seem to fit with the model and is therefore excluded from further analysis.

Another critical issue represents the LV „not asked for advice,“ which combines all three reversed scored items of the opinion leading aspect. This variable only fits with the MeinMaggi member sample. For all other six samples this construct does not deliver Cronbach's α of at least 0.7. Additionally, the MVs OPL1 and OPL6 show problems in terms of indicator reliability in all six samples. Based on these results, the author decided to exclude this construct also from further analysis. The aspect of opinion leadership is therefore represented in this study by the three-items construct „asked for advice,“ which does not show any weaknesses in this step of the analysis.

The MV PRE3, representing the pricing aspect of the customer retention based construct „brand patronage,“ delivers low indicator reliability (>0.7) for all samples, with the exception of Knorr Family members. Therefore it seems not to fit the construct and is therefore also excluded for all samples.

For the members of Knorr Family, the associated MVs describe all remaining LVs as conceptualized after the EFA. For all other samples additional corrections have to be made. As pointed out by Tenenhaus, in reflective

path models those MVs that are too far from the model have to be removed. The data must fit the path model.⁵⁹⁹

The Rezeptwiese member sample shows weaknesses in terms of indicator reliability for the indicators INV4, PRE2, LOY5 and SEL2, therefore these four items are removed. After correction, the benchmarks of all criteria are fulfilled.

For the MeinMaggi members the MVs OPS1 and LOY2 deliver indicator reliability below benchmark and are therefore excluded for this sample.

For the toonity members, the indicator reliability of some MVs is below the benchmark. Therefore, the author reduces the model by the indicator LOY5 and INO5. Additionally the items SEL2, SEL3, and SEL4 show poor results. This leads to two remaining items for the construct „self-presentation.“ Due to this fact, this construct is withdrawn from the model for the toonity member target. After correction, the model meets all benchmarks.

For the Rezeptwiese non-members, indicator reliability for INO2, INO5, INV4, and LOY5 shows results below the 0.7 benchmark. Furthermore, two of the three items describing market maven reach only poor levels of indicator reliability and do not exceed the benchmark of 0.5 for AVE and 0.7 for composite reliability. For this reason, the items INO2, INV4, and the construct „market maven“ are excluded for this sample in the next step.

The same procedure is applied for the MeinMaggi non-members. Here, the indicators INV4, PRE2, INO3 as well as INO5 are removed. The MVs OPS1 and OPS2 also do not meet the benchmark for indicator reliability of 0.7. Due to the fact that only two of the four items of this construct fulfill this criterion, this LV is also removed.

⁵⁹⁹ Cf. Tenenhaus et al. (2005), p. 164.

Finally the Knorr Family non-member model is modified by removing the following MVs which do not meet the benchmark for indicator reliability: LOY2, LOY5, INV6. All other variables are in line with the criteria.

Based on these results, Table 32 shows which of the following items per sample are kept for further analysis.

Variable	Rezept-wiese Members <i>n</i> = 130	Knorr Family Members <i>n</i> = 59	MeinMaggi Members <i>n</i> = 40	toonty Members <i>n</i> = 82	Rezept-wiese Non-members <i>n</i> = 43	Knorr Family Non-members <i>n</i> = 99	MeinMaggi Non-members <i>n</i> = 145
Brand Bond	INV1, INV2, INV3, INV6, LOY1, LOY2, LOY4, LOY6, LOY7	INV1, INV2, INV3, INV4, INV6, LOY1, LOY2, LOY4, LOY5, LOY6, LOY7	INV1, INV2, INV3, INV4, INV6, LOY1, LOY4, LOY5, LOY6, LOY7	INV1, INV2, INV3, INV4, INV6, LOY1, LOY2, LOY4, LOY6, LOY7	INV1, INV2, INV3, INV6, LOY1, LOY2, LOY4, LOY6, LOY7,	INV1, INV2, INV3, INV4, LOY1, LOY4, LOY6, LOY7	INV1, INV2, INV3, INV6, LOY1, LOY2, LOY4, LOY5, LOY6, LOY7,
Self-presentation	SEL1, SEL3, SEL4, SEL5	SEL1, SEL2, SEL3, SEL4, SEL5	SEL1, SEL2, SEL3, SEL4, SEL5		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

Variable	Rezeptwiese Members $n = 130$	Knorr Family Members $n = 59$	MeinMaggi Members $n = 40$	toonity Members $n = 82$	Rezeptwiese Non-members $n = 43$	Knorr Family Non-members $n = 99$	MeinMaggi Non-members $n = 145$
Innovativeness	INO1, INO2, INO3, INO4, INO5	INO1, INO2, INO3, INO4, INO5	INO1, INO2, INO3, INO4, INO5	INO1, INO2, INO3, INO4	INO1, INO3, INO4	INO1, INO2, INO3, INO4, INO5	INO1, INO2, INO4
Market maven	MAV, MAV2, MAV3	MAV, MAV2, MAV3	MAV, MAV2, MAV3	MAV, MAV2, MAV3		MAV, MAV2, MAV3	MAV, MAV2, MAV3
Asked for Advice	OPL3, OPL4, OPL5	OPL3, OPL4, OPL5	OPL3, OPL4, OPL5	OPL3, OPL4, OPL5	OPL3, OPL4, OPL5	OPL3, OPL4, OPL5	OPL3, OPL4, OPL5
Opinion seeker	OPS1, OPS2, OPS4, OPS5	OPS1, OPS2, OPS4, OPS5	OPS2, OPS4, OPS5	OPS1, OPS2, OPS4, OPS5	OPS1, OPS2, OPS4, OPS5	OPS1, OPS2, OPS4, OPS5	
Brand patronage	PUI1, PUI2, REC1, REC2, REC3	PUI1, PUI2, REC1, REC2, REC3	PUI1, PUI2, REC1, REC2, REC3	PUI1, PUI2, REC1, REC2, REC3	PUI1, PUI2, REC1, REC2, REC3	PUI1, PUI2, REC1, REC2, REC3	PUI1, PUI2, REC1, REC2, REC3
Price tolerance	PRE1, PRE4, PUI3	PRE1, PRE2, PRE4, PUI3	PRE1, PRE2, PRE4, PUI3	PRE1, PRE2, PRE4, PUI3	PRE1, PRE2, PRE4, PUI3	PRE1, PRE2, PRE4, PUI3	PRE1, PRE4, PUI3

Tab. 32: Indicators per sample after EFA and analysis of the factor structure

The tables 33-39 show the results of the factor structure analysis based on the modified outer models as described above. All LVs of all seven samples meet the benchmarks of composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha as well as AVE.

Rezeptwiese Brand-community Members			
	Composite reliability p_c	Cronbach's alpha α	AVE
Brand Bond	0.9467	0.937	0.664
Self-presentation	0.900	0.853	0.694
Innovativeness	0.909	0.875	0.667
Market maven	0.913	0.863	0.779
Asked for advice	0.960	0.938	0.888
Opinion seeker	0.9105	0.870	0.718
Brand patronage	0.952	0.936	0.797
Price tolerance	0.908	0.847	0.766

Tab. 33: Results of the outer model for the Rezeptwiese members

Knorr Family Brand-community Members			
	Composite reliability p_c	Cronbach's alpha α	AVE
Brand Bond	0.965	0.959	0.713
Self-presentation	0.925	0.899	0.713
Innovativeness	0.930	0.905	0.727
Market maven	0.924	0.900	0.804
Asked for advice	0.952	0.926	0.869
Opinion seeker	0.903	0.857	0.699
Brand patronage	0.970	0.962	0.867
Price tolerance	0.918	0.881	0.736

Tab. 34: Results of the outer model for the Knorr Family members

	MeinMaggi Brand-community Members		
	Composite reliability p_c	Cronbach's alpha α	AVE
Brand Bond	0.970	0.965	0.765
Self-presentation	0.931	0.907	0.732
Innovativeness	0.895	0.853	0.633
Market maven	0.966	0.948	0.904
Asked for advice	0.972	0.957	0.920
Opinion seeker	0.923	0.875	0.801
Brand patronage	0.957	0.942	0.816
Price tolerance	0.888	0.832	0.665

Tab. 35: Results of the outer model of the MeinMaggi members

	toonity Brand-community Members		
	Composite reliability p_c	Cronbach's alpha α	AVE
Brand Bond	0.946	0.937	0.638
Innovativeness	0.899	0.850	0.691
Market maven	0.912	0.855	0.775
Asked for advice	0.933	0.895	0.824
Opinion seeker	0.930	0.902	0.767
Brand patronage	0.924	0.898	0.710
Price tolerance	0.924	0.890	0.752

Tab. 36: Results of the outer model of the toonity members

Rezeptwiese non-members			
	Composite reliability p_c	Cronbach's alpha α	AVE
Brand Bond	0.952	0.942	0.686
Innovativeness	0.899	0.849	0.751
Asked for advice	0.955	0.932	0.877
Opinion seeker	0.920	0.890	0.743
Brand patronage	0.950	0.935	0.793
Price tolerance	0.887	0.830	0.663

Tab. 37: Results of the outer model of the Rezeptwiese non-members

Knorr Family non-members			
	Composite reliability p_c	Cronbach's alpha α	AVE
Brand Bond	0.926	0.908	0.612
Innovativeness	0.920	0.891	0.697
Market maven	0.901	0.837	0.752
Asked for advice	0.937	0.900	0.831
Opinion seeker	0.933	0.906	0.776
Brand patronage	0.952	0.936	0.798
Price tolerance	0.901	0.853	0.696

Tab. 38: Results of the outer model of the Knorr Family non-members

	MeinMaggi Non-members		
	Composite reliability ρ_c	Cronbach's alpha α	AVE
Brand Bond	0,947	0,938	0.644
Innovativeness	0,914	0,860	0.780
Market maven	0,922	0.877	0.798
Asked for advice	0,920	0,877	0.794
Brand patronage	0,942	0,923	0.764
Price tolerance	0,863	0,763	0.678

Tab. 39: Results of the outer model of the MeinMaggi non-members

4.3.2.3 Intermediate Findings of Analysis (Step 2)

Overall, the analysis of the outer model confirms the basic structure of the research model, even though some modifications are required.

In the first stage of this assessment, the author uses an EFA to investigate the independence of the variables. Of the original 8 exogenous LVs, four are confirmed as such. The constructs „brand loyalty“ and „brand involvement“ pay in the same factor and are therefore combined to the new construct „brand bond“. Additionally, two items must be reduced. The variable „opinion leader“ shows a two-dimensional structure and must be split into two independent variables „asked for advice“ and „not asked for advice“. Finally, opinion seeking must be modified by reducing one item.

The EFA for the endogenous LV „customer retention“ shows a two-factor structure. For this reason, this constructs has to be split into the factor „brand patronage,“ combining the indicators related to the recommendation and the purchasing aspects, and the factor „price tolerance,“ which is mainly driven by the tolerance to price increase-items.

The variables „sociability“ and „not asked for advice“ deliver very ambiguous results and have to be withdrawn from the model after the second stage of this analysis. In the assessment of the factor structure of the seven samples (4x brand-community members, 3x non-members), these constructs do not meet the benchmark of the defined criteria composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, and AVE.

The eight remaining LVs are confirmed by the analysis of the factor structure. The author makes some slight modifications: The item PRE3 is taken out of the model because of poor indicator reliability for all seven samples. For all samples with the exception of Knorr Family members, some single items are taken out of the model. Additionally for the toonity member sample, the variable „self-presentation“ is withdrawn. The same procedure is applied for the Rezeptwiese non-member sample and the LV „market maven,“ and finally, for MeinMaggi non-members and „opinion seeking.“ After these corrections, all constructs and items for all of the seven samples meet the benchmarks.

The fact that with the exception of sociability and the reversed scored items of opinion leader, this step of the analysis approves the selection of the constructs; most descriptive items confirm the adequacy of the model as such.

4.3.3 Results for the Inner Model (Step 3)

In the third step, the author performs the assessment of the inner model according to the criteria described in Section 4.2.2.3. To do so, the assessment uses the findings and corrections of the outer model made in step 2 of the analysis.

4.3.3.1 Results of the Inner Model of Brand-community Members

The quality criteria are fulfilled by the four samples of brand-community members.

The coefficient of determination R^2 shows at least moderate, but in most cases substantial values. The quasi-endogenous LV “brand bond” achieves moderate results for all four samples, whereas the LVs “brand patronage” and “price tolerance” reach substantial levels.

The quasi-endogenous LV “brand bond” is explained by only three exogenous LVs: „brand bond“ itself, „innovativeness“ and „self-presentation“ (in case of toonity only the LVs „brand bond“ and „innovativeness“). According to Henseler, Ringle, and Sinkovics, a moderate R^2 value might be acceptable if an endogenous LV is explained by only a few exogenous LVs.⁶⁰⁰ The endogenous LVs „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance,“ explained by several exogenous LVs, show a substantial level (in case of toonity members, a level close to substantial).

The cross-validated redundancy Q^2 of the respective LVs is >0 for all four brand communities, which confirms the relevance of the model. The cross-validated communality q^2 reaches consistently high values in all four samples for all LVs.

Tables 40-43 provide an overview of the results for the inner model.

⁶⁰⁰ Cf. Henseler et al. (2009), p. 303f.

Rezeptwiese Brand-community Members			
	Coefficient of determination R^2	CV redundancy Q^2	CV communality q^2
Brand Bond	0.350	0.230	0.664
Self-presentation	----	----	0.694
Innovativeness	----	----	0.667
Market maven	----	----	0.777
Asked for advice	----	----	0.888
Opinion seeker	----	----	0.718
Brand patronage	0.554	0.441	0.797
Price tolerance	0.691	0.529	0.766

Tab. 40: Results of the structure model of the Rezeptwiese member sample

Knorr Family Brand-community Members			
	Coefficient of determination R^2	CV redundancy Q^2	CV communality q^2
Brand Bond	0.493	0.345	0.713
Self-presentation	----	----	0.713
Innovativeness	----	----	0.727
Market maven	----	----	0.805
Asked for advice	----	----	0.869
Opinion seeker	----	----	0.699
Brand patronage	0.849	0.715	0.867
Price tolerance	0.601	0.428	0.736

Tab. 41: Results of the structure model of the Knorr Family member sample

MeinMaggi Brand-community Members			
	Coefficient of determination R^2	CV redundancy Q^2	CV communality q^2
Brand Bond	0.584	0.440	0.766
Self-presentation	----	----	0.731
Innovativeness	----	----	0.632
Market maven	----	----	0.901
Asked for advice	----	----	0.920
Opinion seeker	----	----	0.798
Brand patronage	0.736	0.595	0.816
Price tolerance	0.754	0.494	0.665

Tab. 42: Results of the structure model of the MeinMaggi member sample

toonity Brand-community Members			
	Coefficient of determination R^2	CV redundancy Q^2	CV communality q^2
Brand Bond	0.274	0.169	0.638
Self-presentation	----	----	----
Innovativeness	----	----	0.692
Market maven	----	----	0.773
Asked for advice	----		0.823
Opinion seeker	----	----	0.768
Brand patronage	0.678	0.461	0.710
Price tolerance	0.563	0.417	0.753

Tab. 43: Results of the structure model of the toonity member sample

The assessment of the path coefficients provides very similar results for all four brand communities.

For all four samples, brand bond shows the strongest and most significant impact on the indicators „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance.“ The hypotheses H4 and H5 are therefore confirmed.

The behavioral attributes „market maven“ and „opinion seeker“ cannot prove relevance and do not even meet the benchmark of 0.2. The LV „asked for advice“ does not play a role for Rezeptwiese, Knorr Family, and toonity, while it shows significant impact on both endogenous LVs „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance“ for the MeinMaggi community. Overall, hypotheses H17, H18 and H19, postulating the impact of these three attributes on the endogenous LVs „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance“ must therefore be rejected.

The attribute „self-presentation“ has an indirect influence on the two endogenous LVs „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance“ via the attribute „brand bond.“ These findings corroborate hypothesis H7, which formulates the impact of self-presentation on brand bond. Additionally, hypothesis H9, postulating the relationship of innovativeness on brand bond is partly confirmed for the toonity and the Knorr Family community. Interestingly, none of these two attributes shows a direct impact on the two endogenous variables.

Figures 32-35 show the results of the Rezeptwiese, Knorr Family, MeinMaggi, and toonity path model.

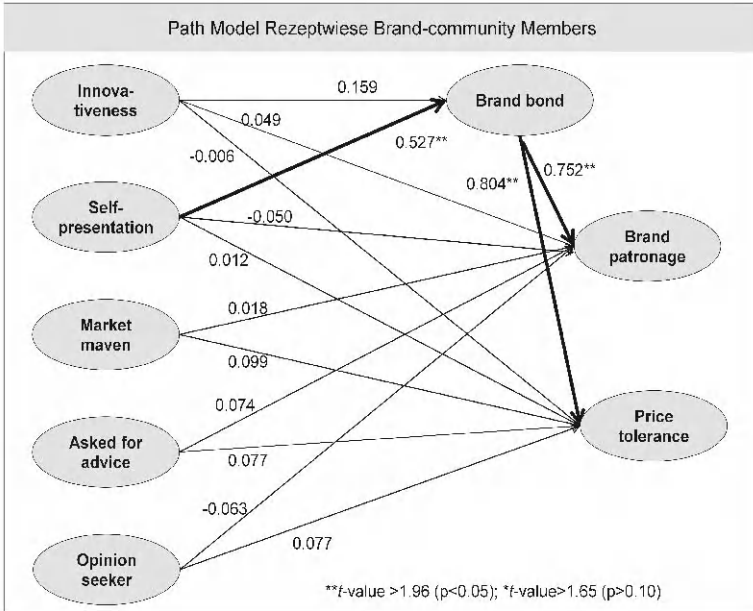


Fig. 32: Path model of the Rezeptwiese members

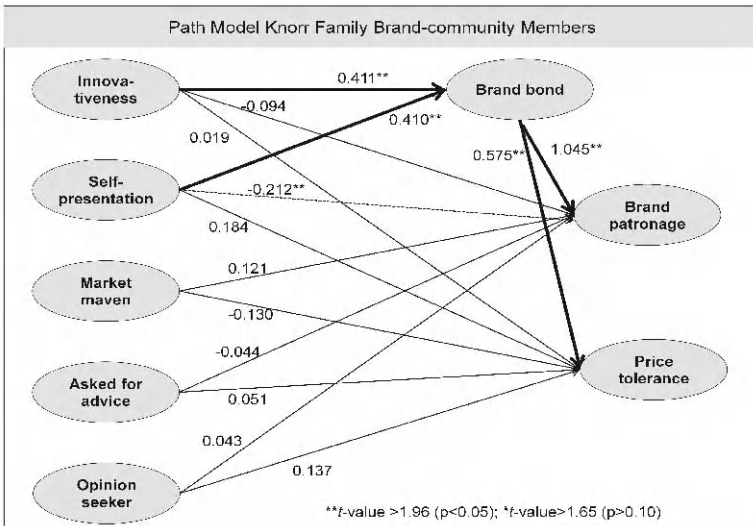


Fig. 33: Path model of Knorr Family members

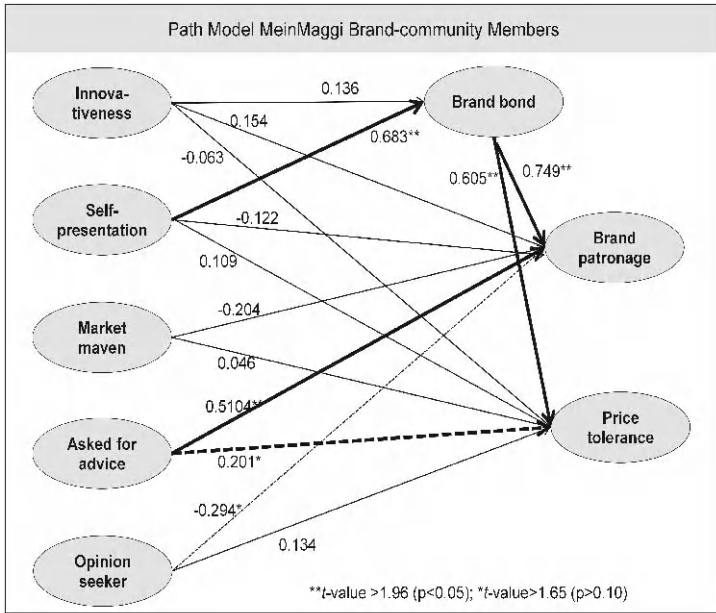


Fig. 34: Path model of MeinMaggi members

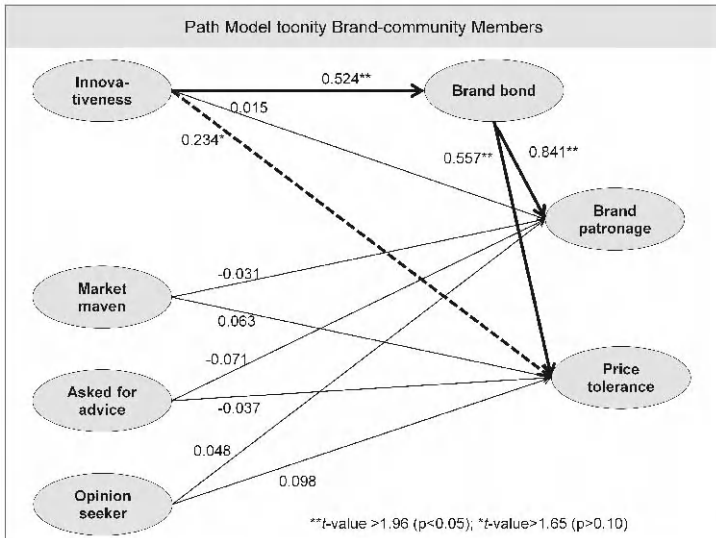


Fig. 35: Path model of toonity members

To summarize these results, the four brand communities investigated confirm the following findings for brand-community members:

- Brand bond is the strongest drivers of the performance measures „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance.“
- Overall, none of the other indicators has a significant effect on the two performance measures (with the exception of the toonity sample, where asked for advice proved a significant impact on both performance dimensions).
- Self-presentation proves significance and is a constant impact on brand bond (with the exception of the toonity community, where self-presentation is taken out).
- Innovativeness gives an indication of a similar effect on brand bond as self-presentation, but shows significance for only two of the four samples.

In the next step, the inner models of the non-member samples are analyzed. Summarizing the results of all seven samples, Section 4.3.3.3 provides further interpretation.

4.3.3.2 Results of the Inner Model of Brand-community Non-Members

The following section describes the assessment of the inner model for the three samples of non-members.

First, in all three samples, the endogenous LVs „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance“ reach substantial results for R^2 . However, the quasi-endogenous LV „brand bond“ delivers consistently poor results for R^2 in all three samples. This finding is in clear contrast with the results of the four samples of brand-community members. For non-members, brand bond does not show a linear relationship with the exogenous LV „innovativeness,“ which means innovativeness does not make a contribution to the explanation of the variance of the variable „brand bond.“

The results of the cross-validated redundancy Q^2 , as well as of the cross-validated communality q^2 are all above benchmark for all three samples. The

cross-validated redundancy Q^2 of the Rezeptwiese non-member sample and MeinMaggi non-members delivers results of 0.015 and 0.004 and can therefore just pass the benchmark. Therefore, the prognostic and predictive relevance of the model is therefore confirmed.

Tables 44-46 summarize the results of the structural model for the three non-member samples.

	Rezeptwiese Non-members		
	Coefficient of determination R^2	CV redundancy Q^2	CV communality q^2
Brand Bond	0.018	0.015	0.686
Innovativeness	----	----	0.764
Market maven	----	----	----
Asked for advice	----		0.878
Opinion seeker	----	----	0.745
Brand patronage	0.714	0.556	0.792
Price tolerance	0.546	0.346	0.663

Tab. 44: Results of the structure model of the Rezeptwiese non-members

Knorr Family Non-members			
	Coefficient of determination R^2	CV redundancy Q^2	CV communality q^2
Brand Bond	0.236	0.146	0.611
Innovativeness	----	----	0.698
Market maven	----	----	0.752
Asked for advice	----		0.833
Opinion seeker	----	----	0.778
Brand patronage	0.708	0.563	0.798
Price tolerance	0.541	0.369	0.696

Tab. 45: Results of the structure model of the Knorr Family non-members

MeinMaggi Non-members			
	Coefficient of determination R^2	CV redundancy Q^2	CV communality q^2
Brand Bond	0.070	0.004	0.644
Innovativeness	----	----	0.778
Market maven	----	----	0.796
Asked for advice	----		0.792
Opinion seeker	----	----	----
Brand patronage	0.660	0.491	0.764
Price tolerance	0.565	0.375	0.678

Tab. 46: Results of the structure model of the MeinMaggi non-members

The analysis of the path coefficients shows some similarities with the four brand-community member samples.

Brand bond is the key driver of the performance related measures „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance.“ All three samples show a significant relationship between the LV „brand bond“ and these two measures.

All other behavioral attributes do not deliver an effect on the two output measures. The LVs „asked for advice,“ „innovativeness,“ „market maven“ (which has no relevancy for the Rezeptwiese non-members, and is therefore excluded for this group), as well as „opinion seeker“ (which is excluded for the MeinMaggi non-member sample) have no influence on the brand patronage and the price tolerance.

As for the Knorr Family member sample, the non-members of Knorr Family show a significant impact of innovativeness on the brand bond. As expected after the results of R^2 , the non-member samples of Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi do not confirm this relationship.

MeinMaggi non-members show a moderate, but significant impact of innovativeness on the performance variable „price tolerance.“ This cannot be confirmed by the Rezeptwiese and Knorr Family non-member samples.

In parallel with the four member samples, the three non-member groups also confirm hypotheses H4 and H5, which describe the impact of brand bond on the performance driven attributes of brand communities. All other hypotheses on the effect of the behavioral attributes on brand patronage and price tolerance are rejected.

Summarizing the key findings of the three non-member samples:

- Brand bond is clearly the key driver of the performance dimensions „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance.“
- The other behavioral attributes do not show significant impact on the performance measures.

- The effect of innovativeness on brand bond, which can be stated for three of the member samples, cannot be reconfirmed for non-members (with the exception of the Knorr Family non-member sample).

The Figures 36-38 provide an overview on the path coefficients of the structure model for the three non-member samples of Rezeptwiese, MeinMaggi, and Knorr Family. The samples of Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi bear great resemblance to one another, whereas Knorr Family shows, as mentioned above, some peculiarities.

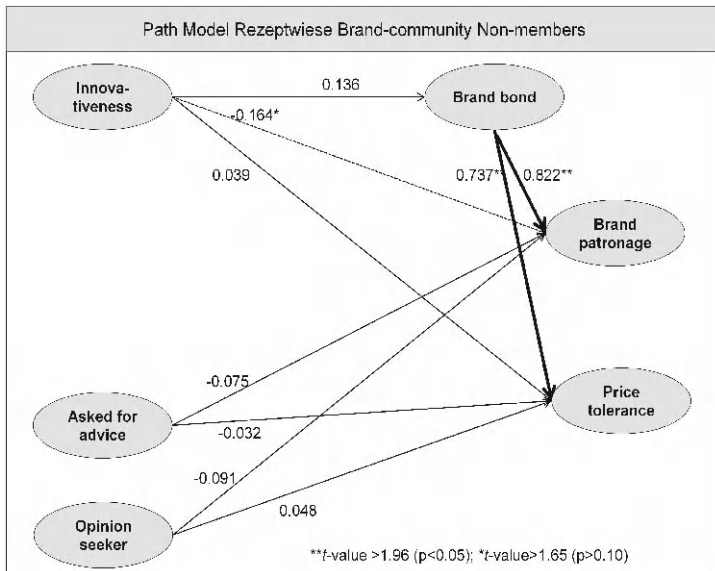


Fig. 36: Path model of Rezeptwiese non-members

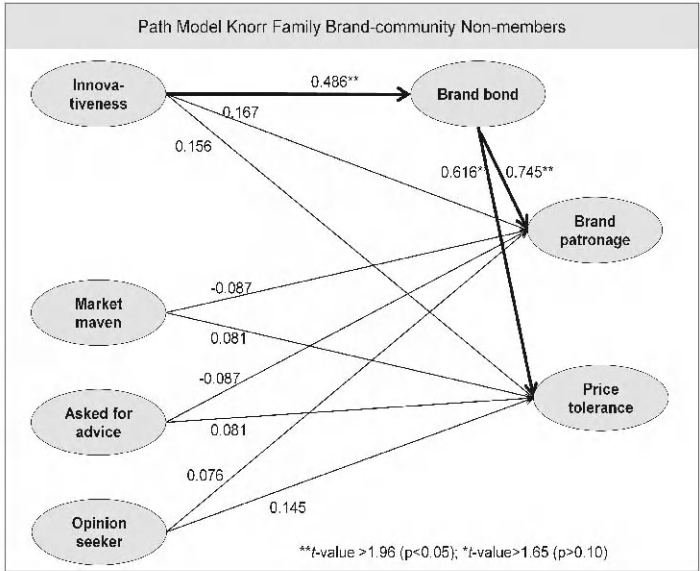


Fig. 37: Path model of Knorr Family non-members

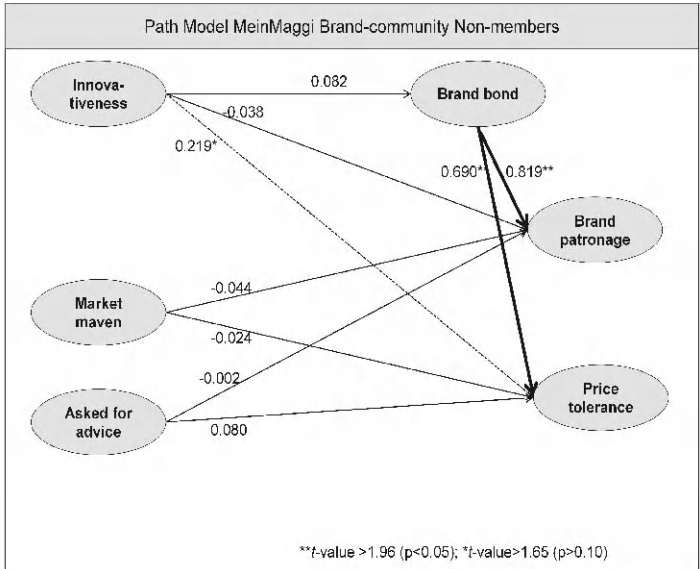


Fig. 38: Path model of MeinMaggi non-members

The following section summarizes the findings on the inner model and provides some first interpretation.

4.3.3.3 Intermediate Findings of Analysis (Step 3)

The results of the structural model rejects the hypothesis that the specific behavioral attributes of the brand-community members work as key drivers of the brand's two performance related measures „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance.“

All seven samples confirm the variable „brand bond“ as the main drivers of the two performance dimensions. For the community-members, the LV „self-presentation“ indirectly exercises an influence over the economic dimensions (through the attribute „brand bond“). For the Knorr Family and toonity members, as well as for the Knorr Family non-members, innovativeness shows a similar effect.

The attributes „market maven“ and „opinion seeker“ do not show any influence. None of the communities succeeded in capitalizing this group of consumers as advocates of the brand. One reason might be that for low involvement products, such as FMCG, the consumers' expertise is much more focused on the category or general topic (such as cooking) itself than on any brand. That means, e.g., Rezeptwiese members use the brand community to communicate about cooking recipes but not to exchange about specific brands for the ingredients.

The LV „asked for advice“ only shows an effect for MeinMaggi members. Here the attribute has a direct influence on brand patronage—and on a smaller level on price tolerance.

Interestingly, the study shows no substantial differences between the consumer-driven brand communities (Rezeptwiese and toonity) and the brand-driven ones (Knorr Family and MeinMaggi). This leads to the belief that a greater presence of the brand, which means more promotional use of the community platform, could lead to a lower activity level in terms of

posting, but not to a lower impact on the two performance dimensions. Section 4.3.4 will further investigate the effect of posting.

The most surprising result is that compared with brand-community members, non-members do not show substantial differences with the only exception of self-presentation and its impact on brand bond.

Summarizing these findings, it seems that brand communities have to be understood as venues of those consumers interested in a specific topic (e.g., cooking). The fact that brand bond is the key driver of the performance dimensions seems to confirm the thesis that the closer the relationship with the brand (in terms of brand loyalty and brand involvement), the higher the intention to repurchase or recommend the brand, as well as to accept price increases. Due to the fact that its effect is the same for members and non-members, it seems to be independent from the brand community membership—and probably also from the brand community as such.

The fact that self-presentation influences brand bond can be an indicator that the decision to join a specific brand community is a very conscious one. The better the community fits with the member and provides this person with a certain importance because of the membership, the more relevant becomes the brand for this consumer. The reasons, why this effect does not exist for the toonity community, might be connected with the young target group or with the fact that it's a members-only community (only members can use it).

Section 4.4 provides further interpretation of the results.

4.3.4 Results of the Moderating Effects

To finalize the research, the author assesses the moderating effect of active participation in brand community—defined as posting. As postulated, the effect of posting on the relationship between brand bond and brand patronage, respectively, on price tolerance is investigated.

Before starting the PLS analysis, all questionnaires with answers confirming the posting are aggregated, independent from the frequency of the posting activity (1 = posting, 2 = no posting).

The results of the step are very clear: both hypotheses are rejected. The path coefficients of both the main effect as well as the interaction effect do not reach the benchmark of 0.2—neither on brand patronage nor on price tolerance. None of the relationships are significant ($t < 1.65$).

Exemplary for the four brand-community member samples, here the results of the Rezeptwiese community:

The impact on R^2 is very small, with even a negative effect on price tolerance:

Brand patronage: $R^2_{\text{interaction effect}} = 0.5683$, $R^2_{\text{main effect}} = 0.5542$,

Price tolerance: $R^2_{\text{interaction effect}} = 0.6866$, $R^2_{\text{main effect}} = 0.6913$.

Figure 39 shows the path coefficients, which do not reach significant results nor at least exceed the benchmark.

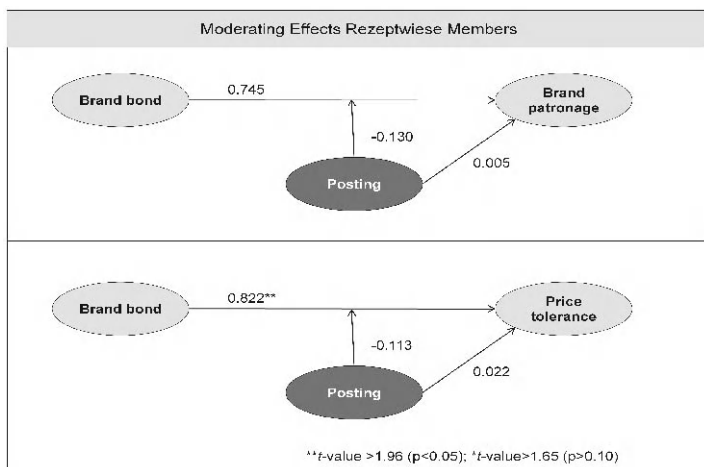


Fig. 39: Moderating effects of brand bond and brand patronage and price tolerance for Rezeptwiese members

4.4 Summary of the Results and Interpretation

This chapter of the study presents the assessment of the research model as conceptualized in Chapter 3.

An online survey has been conducted among brand-community members and non-members, i.e., consumers not registered as brand-community members but who frequently using the community internet site. In sum, 352 members of four well-established brand communities run by FMCG-brands and 389 non-members participated in the research.

To analyze the SEM, the author chose the variance-based PLS approach. The assessment of the results follows three steps:

1. An analysis of the behavioral attributes to verify the relevance of the selected behavioral attributes within the user-groups.
2. An analysis of the outer model to validate the reflective measurement model: An EFA confirmed the unambiguous allocation of the MVs to the conceptualized LVs and reduces the number of MVs of each factor. Two of the LVs have been drawn together while one LV had to be split into two dimensions. Furthermore, in this section of the analysis, the factor structure has been reviewed by means of selected quality criteria.
3. An analysis of the structural inner model: The four samples of brand-community members, as well as the three non-member samples were investigated using the PLS method. Additionally, the author examined the moderating effects of the variable “posting.”

The analysis of the behavioral attributes delivered some interesting findings. Even though some of the attributes were more obvious in the samples of brand-community members, none of the attributes showed significant difference between members and the non-member of the respective community—for all three communities investigated. Table 47 summarizes the results of the hypotheses.

Only Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi could confirm the hypotheses on the attributes „brand involvement“ and „brand loyalty.“

The two member-driven brand communities, Rezeptwiese and toonity, showed very high posting-rates of their members, compared with the two brand-driven communities. Additionally, the attribute „self-presentation,“ which has only been collected for brand-community members, showed a rather high level for Rezeptwiese and toonity. This can be interpreted as an indication that the conscious choice to join a specific community might also lead to a higher willingness to participate actively in the community.

The communication driven attributes „opinion seeker“ or „opinion leader“ delivered low rates for all samples. This is very astonishing especially for Rezeptwiese and toonity, whose members stated that the communication and the exchange with other members is what they like best.

Disappointingly, none of the communities could attract significantly more market mavens or opinion leaders to become a member—and herewith an advocate of the brand. This is especially the case for market mavens, which were strongly present (>40% of the members confirm this attribute).

Finally, the attribute „sociability“ was also not pronounced for brand-community members. Therefore it can be assumed that the aspects of friendship and togetherness are not drivers of brand communities.

	No.	Hypothesis	Confirmed / rejected
Behavioral attributes	H1	Brand-community members have a higher level of brand involvement than do non-members.	Confirmed for Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi
	H2	Brand-community members have a higher level of brand loyalty than	Confirmed for Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi

	No.	Hypothesis	Confirmed / rejected
		do non-members.	
	H6	The majority of brand-community members use their brand-community membership for self-presentation.	Rejected
	H8	Brand-community members have a higher level of innovativeness than do non-members.	Rejected (confirmed only for MeinMaggi)
	H12	Brand-community members have a higher level of sociability than do non-members.	Rejected
	H13	Brand-community members are more often market mavens than are non-members.	Rejected
	H14	Brand-community members are more often opinion leaders than are non-members.	Rejected
	H15	Brand-community members are more often opinion seekers than are non-members.	Rejected
Performance	H20	Brand-community members have a higher level of customer retention	Rejected (confirmed for Rezeptwiese on the aspects purchase intention and

No.	Hypothesis	Confirmed / rejected
	than do non-members.	intention to recommend, not confirmed on tolerance of price increase)

Tab. 47: Results of the hypotheses on the behavioral attributes

Additionally, further validation of the survey data showed that brand-community members were very much aware of social media and often use several networks or community platforms. Interestingly, they also tended to join different topic-related communities at the same time. Accordingly, 40% of the Rezeptwiese members used different cooking / baking-related communities. This might be an indication that they were driven more by the topic itself than by the brand operating the community.

The validation of the outer model confirmed the research model with some modifications. The LV „sociability“ did not fit the model and is therefore withdrawn from further research. Additionally, single MVs had to be taken out. The constructs „brand loyalty“ and „brand involvement“ loaded only on a single factor and were therefore combined in the variable „brand bond.“ In contrast, the variable „customer retention,“ consisting of the dimensions „purchase intention,“ „intention to recommend,“ and „tolerance of price increase,“ showed a two-dimensional structure and has therefore been split into the two factors „brand patronage“ (combining purchase intention and the intention to recommend) and „price tolerance.“

The final analysis of the structural model provided some interesting findings. All four member samples showed rather similar results. Apart from brand bond, none of the behavioral attributes had an impact on the two performance related measures „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance.“ Only self-presentation influenced the model by impacting brand bond.

None of the four brand communities could capitalize on the interesting groups of market mavens or opinion leaders; even though the validation of the behavioral attitudes showed that market mavens especially were clearly

represented in the samples. This finding leads to the assumption that mavens and opinion leaders might join the community because of the topic itself (cooking, drawing...) but not because of the brand. They might live their advice-giving attitude by communicating about the topic (e.g., providing other members with their cooking recipes), but not by recommending to others which brand to use.

The comparison of the brand-community members' results with the three non-member samples showed no essential differences. For these samples, brand bond was the driver of the two variables „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance.“ The other attributes do not deliver any significant impact.

Only the two Knorr Family samples and the toonity member sample showed an additional impact of innovativeness on brand bond.

These results confirm the findings of Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, who found out that brand communities do not result from the idea of social bond. As mentioned above, they proved that participation in brand communities is not driven by the relationship to the company or the customer-customer relationship. As in their study, the study here showed also no impact of social attributes, such as sociability, market maven, opinion leader, or opinion seeker. Additionally, the fact that brand bond has been identified as key driver, is also in-line with the findings of the two researchers. In their study, the customer-brand relationship was very pronounced.⁶⁰¹

Table 48 provides an overview of the results of this step.

No.	Hypothesis	Confirmed / rejected
H3	Deleted after EFA!	----

⁶⁰¹ Cf. Section 2.1.4.1.1

No.	Hypothesis	Confirmed / rejected
H4a	The higher the brand bond, the stronger the brand patronage.	Confirmed
H4b	The higher the brand bond, the stronger the price tolerance.	Confirmed
H7	The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the brand bond.	Confirmed for brand-community members
H9	The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the brand bond.	Rejected (confirmed for Knorr members and non-members, as well as toonity members)
H10a	The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the brand patronage.	Rejected
H10b	The higher the self-presentation, the stronger the price tolerance.	Rejected
H11a	The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the brand patronage.	Rejected
H11b	The higher the innovativeness, the stronger the price tolerance.	Rejected
H16a	The higher the sociability, the stronger the brand patronage.	Rejected
H16b	The higher the sociability, the stronger the price tolerance.	Rejected
H17a	The higher the value of opinion leader, the stronger the brand patronage.	Rejected
H17b	The higher the value of opinion leader, the stronger the price tolerance.	Rejected

No.	Hypothesis	Confirmed / rejected
H18a	The higher the value of market maven, the stronger the brand patronage.	Rejected
H18b	The higher the value of market maven, the stronger the price tolerance.	Rejected
H19a	The higher the value of opinion seeker, the stronger the brand patronage.	Rejected
H19b	The higher the value of opinion seeker, the stronger the price tolerance.	Rejected

Tab. 48: Results of hypotheses on the path model

The investigation of active participation in the community in terms of posting did not show any effect for any of the communities investigated. This is very surprising, especially regarding the two member-driven communities, Rezeptwiese and toonity, which present a high level of active participation in terms of posting but also in terms of most appreciated features of the community, as mentioned above. This leads to the assumption that even a high level of activation for the community itself does not lead to a higher activation level for the brand. As shown in Table 48, the hypotheses formulated on the impact of posting must be rejected.

This result is in-line with the findings of Shang, Chen, and Liao, who investigated the effect of active and passive participation on brand loyalty. In their research on the Taiwan Apple community, they also found no effect of posting.⁶⁰²

Referring to the results of Bagozzi and Dholakia about the participation in small-group brand communities (Harley-Davidson) as mentioned in Section 2.1.4.1.1, the stronger the activities within the community, the stronger the identification with the brand. Transferred to the communities investigated in

⁶⁰² Cf. Section 2.1.4.1.2

this research, a high level of posting, which stands for a high activity level, should lead to a high level of brand bond. This is the case for Rezeptwiese, but not for the toonity members, even though both samples showed very strong posting activities.

No.	Hypothesis	Confirmed / rejected
H21a	Posting delivers additional predicting power on the positive impact of brand involvement on brand patronage.	Rejected
H21b	Posting delivers additional predicting power on the positive impact of brand involvement on price tolerance.	Rejected

Tab. 49: Results of hypotheses on the moderator „posting“

The results of this study provide several indications that brand communities are not necessarily the appropriate tool to attract key users of the brand. Getting a member seems to be strongly connected with the topic of the respective community. Thus, it does not seem to make much difference whether the community is more brand or member driven. The topic is the attractor and driver of the community. The willingness to purchase or recommend the brand relies solely on the level of brand bond of each consumer, his or her brand involvement and loyalty, independent from his or her being or not being a community member.

Here this study shows clear differences to the research results of Algesheimer, as well as of von Loewenfeld. Whereas Algesheimer proved an impact of brand communities on brand loyalty and word-of-mouth, von Loewenfeld found a higher level of brand loyalty and word-of mouth for brand-community members compared to non-members.⁶⁰³ One reason for these different results can probably be driven by the different product

⁶⁰³ Cf. Section 2.1.4.2

categories. Whereas this research focused exclusively on low-involving consumer goods, Algesheimer, as well as von Loewenfeld examined brand communities of the high-involvement sector (automotive, Sony Play Station, Cortal Consors).

To summarize the results, the four key questions of this research as formulated in Chapter 1 are reviewed:

1. Can consumers involved in brand communities be characterized by specific behavioral attributes?

Yes, to some extent, even though brand-community members did not show significant superiority for the selected behavioral attributes. Nevertheless, the aspects innovativeness as well as market maven were much more represented by members. The two member-driven communities also showed superiority in terms of posting. In general, however, the behavioral profile of the members was not significantly different compared with that of the non-members—with the exception that Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi members proved a significant higher level of brand bond (brand involvement and brand loyalty).

2. Do these behavioral attributes have an impact on the performance measures of customer retention: buying intention, intended recommendation, and tolerance of price increase?

Only brand bond proved to be significantly relevant on the defined constructs brand patronage and price tolerance. The attribute „self-presentation“ had an indirect impact via the variable „brand bond.“ None of the other attributes contributes to the performance of the brand.

3. Are there significant differences between brand-community members and those consumers who are simply visiting the brand-community site, the so called non-members?

The answer must be: no. None of the attributes showed significant superiority for all communities investigated. Only the members of Rezeptwiese and MeinMaggi delivered a higher level of brand

involvement and brand loyalty compared to the respective non-member samples.

4. Do brand-community members show a higher level of customer retention in the sense of purchase intention, intention to recommend, and tolerance of price increase, compared with those non-members?

There were no important differences, and the members did not show a higher relevancy for the brand performance. Even active participation in the community showed no impact. Brand-community members did not buy more often nor did they lead other consumers to buy based on their recommendation behavior, which is not superior to that of non-members.

For FMCG brands, brand communities do not seem to attract a specific type of consumer who offers high relevancy for the brand performance. Therefore, brand communities do not seem to be the appropriate marketing tool for FMCG brands to create an impact on the brand performance, i.e., on the sales figures. For this reason, FMCG marketers should think about additional benefits offered by brand communities that can be leveraged, such as generating consumer insights.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Contribution to Brand-community Research

This study delivers further insights on the phenomenon of brand communities. A key objective of this research was to develop a theoretical framework of behavioral attributes that show high relevancy for brand-community members. Additionally, the author evaluated the impact of the behavioral attributes on the performance measures „brand patronage,“ as well as „price tolerance.“ The appropriateness of brand communities to attain marketing objectives with performance impact, such as purchase intention, recommendation intention and tolerance of price increase, is examined.

This study adds new insights to the existing brand-community research: First, this research focuses on brand communities operated by FMCG brands. Most of the research thus far has been based on high-involvement products and brands (e.g., automotive products, information technology, or consumer electronics). The results of those studies are not necessarily transferable to low-involvement brands. Therefore, this research delivers important findings for brands that are used on a daily basis, and provides insights about brand-community members and non-members alike.

Second, it delivers empirical results regarding the behavioral aspects of brand-community members. Using an empirical test, the behavioral framework is investigated and a comparison between members and non-members of three well-established FMCG brand communities is conducted. By comparing select attitudes between members and non-members, a prediction of the significance is made. Therefore, the research provides answers concerning specific behavioral profiles of brand-community members. The results show that some of the selected attributes such as innovativeness or market maven are pronounced among community members, but in the end, none of these attributes delivers an answer of significant superiority in comparison over non-members. The conceptualized profile of brand-community members is therefore not confirmed.

Thus far most of the studies investigated brand communities in the sense of customer relationship, as a communication channel to build and keep a connection between brand and consumer. This study goes further by relating a selected set of behavioral attitudes directly to marketing objectives with performance impact, to the dimensions of customer retention (brand patronage and price tolerance). In doing so, it offers an assessment of the brand community as a marketing tool able to achieve marketing objectives with performance impact above and beyond its use as a communication tool. The results reveal that the impact of the selected attributes on the performance related measures achieves a significant level only for brand bond. None of the other attributes achieve any important effect. Non-members show same results for both sets of attributes. Therefore, the appropriateness of brand communities in the FMCG segment to achieve performance driven objectives cannot be confirmed.

A further insight delivers the assessment of the moderating variable „posting“ and its expected impact on the brand bond of brand-community members. Interestingly, the expected effect of the active participation on the performance dimensions „brand patronage“ and „price tolerance“ fails. Therefore, no difference of active vs. passive members can be stated.

Finally, by comparing three brand communities of the same product segment and the same community topic, this research provides findings about the impact of design and execution elements. The communities of Rezeptwiese, MeinMaggi and Knorr Family differ in the following aspects:

- Rezeptwiese is strongly member driven, whereas MeinMaggi and Knorr Family are under strong management of the brand.
- Rezeptwiese offers many features whereby members can exchange information or communicate with each other, whereas MeinMaggi and Knorr Family provide only very restricted opportunities for members to get in touch.

- MeinMaggi and Knorr Family maintain a high presence of the brand and its products, whereas Dr. Oetker products are integrated very discreetly on Rezeptwiese.

The two member-driven brand communities show specific effects in terms of level of posting, appreciation of communication features, and significant superiority of the attribute „self-presentation,“ which represents the importance of the membership in the respective brand community. In contrast with these findings, the visibility of brand and products does not deliver any differences.

5.2 Implications for Marketing Management

For marketing management of FMCG brands, this study provides some thoughts and indications for the usage, as well as for the design and management of brand communities.

First, the results of the survey do offer strong indications that the interest in the community topic seems to be a key criterion for the decision to join the community—and not the brand itself. This explains why community members often sign in to several topic-related communities at the same time and why the identified market mavens and opinion leaders do not patronize the brand in terms of having a high intention to purchase or to recommend.

Another notable finding is that the level of brand integration, i.e., the presence of the brand and its products, has no influence on the results. Rezeptwiese by Dr. Oetker is a particularly good example for its very sensitive handling of brand and product integration. On Rezeptwiese, its presence is reduced to a minimum for credibility reasons. Dr. Oetker wants to avoid an appearance that is perceived by the users as too promotional. MeinMaggi represents the opposite. The Maggi brand and its products (as well as other related Nestlé brands) are frequently integrated with high visibility. The results of both communities do not reflect this important difference in the community design. This leads to the assumption that brand-

community users do not feel too disturbed by the promotional presence of the respective brand (as long as the content fits their expectations).

Keeping in mind that the topic is the driver for the usage of the community, the integration of brand and products should be maintained. Otherwise, the community tends to become a meeting place for people interested in the topic. Considering the investment made in setting up, maintaining, and operating the community platform, the brand as originator should be clearly identifiable. The use of the community for promotional activities and a clearly visible presentation of the products (as done by Knorr Family and MeinMaggi) does not show any negative effects, according to the results of this survey.

An interesting aspect is the result that in member-driven communities, the level of members actively involved in the community in terms of posting is very important. Features that allow communication between members and support the uploading of members' content are very much appreciated, as the questioning for the most liked aspects of the community demonstrate. Marketers should take advantage of this fact by actively involving community members in brand-related issues, such as innovation development or generating consumer insights.

The aspect of engaging consumers for innovation development might be promising. First, more than two-thirds of all community members confirmed interest in innovation testing. Additionally, the studies by Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009) and Füller, Matzler, and Hoppe (2008) show that brand-community members deliver insights and can contribute to the improvement of the brand, as well as creating innovations.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰⁴ Cf. Section 2.1.4.1 *Empirical Research on Brand Communities* regarding this work.

Those marketers thinking about building / establishing a brand community should weigh several aspects:

- What concrete objective does the company hope to achieve via the brand community? As this study shows, brand communities must be classified as tools for building relationships than as tools for increasing sales.
- Is an intense and active participation of the consumers desirable? If so, how can this communication to improve or enhance the brand (e.g., to gather consumer insights or to develop new products)?
- What is the right topic that will attract the right consumers to reach the defined marketing objectives with the community?
- What do other communities with the same topic offer and how can the new brand community create a unique experience? What is the point of difference, the highly appreciated feature that cannot be found somewhere else that will increase the bond between user and community?
- How much labor and advertising money is the company willing and able to invest for establishing, promoting, and maintaining the community?

The last point is especially relevant in comparison with web sites. The results of this research show great similarities between brand-community members and non-members. For the non-members, the usage of the brand community is comparable to visiting a standard brand website, one that provides information but offers no forum for communication. It can therefore be assumed that, if the communication with the consumers will not be used for value generation in terms of, e.g., product innovation or consumer insight, an ordinary web site might be as efficient as a brand community.

To summarize the findings, brand communities for FMCG are not the appropriate tool to achieve increased sales. However, they can help to establish long-term relationships with consumers. To create a real bond between brand and consumers, it is important that the members be involved

in brand-related issues. In promoting such involvement, the marketer can better leverage members' interest in communicating and exchanging information on the brand-community platform.

Marketers should not be afraid of losing credibility by integrating brand and products. Consumers tend to frequent several communities or online platforms on the same topic; thus it seems important to clearly show who is maintaining the site. This can be achieved by integrating the brand logo, as well as the products (name and visual).

The concept of brand communities as a marketing tool is not yet exhausted. There is still potential to capitalize on the active commitment of the users.

5.3 Limitations of the Study and Further Research Directions

The research model of this study is subject to several restrictions thus pointing toward directions for further research.

The selection of the brand communities should involve only official communities operated by the marketers. Additionally, the selected platforms should be run with their own http-address and not within a social network. These selection criteria deliver already two starting points:

1. At the present time, more and more brands host their community within an established SNSs such as Facebook. To be part of such a network certainly produces some specific effects. It is much easier, e.g., to become „friended“ and be recommended to other members. It might be interesting to investigate whether this process has an effect on the type of consumer interested in the brand community. One hypothesis might be that this type of host attracts consumers who have less affection for the brand but who are willing to be „friended.“
2. A second starting point is the investigation of customer-established communities of FMCG brands. The fact that consumers organize a community around the brand certainly has a special effect on the

consumer-brand relationship and probably also on their purchase and recommendation behavior and finally on sales.

The industry focus of this survey is exclusively on FMCG brands, characterized in general by daily usage and low involvement. To compare the effects of the selected behavioral attributes on the economical dimensions for high-involvement products would deliver interesting insights about the impact of the general product involvement. These results can deliver further aspects for the design and finally the meaningfulness of brand communities to reach specific marketing objectives.

The selected set of behavioral attributes raises no claim to completeness. Other important behavioral aspects might show different results. Brand awareness, interest in entertainment and fun, price sensitivity, or even the integration of socio-demographic determinants, e.g., might have a different impact on customer retention, i.e., consumers' purchase and recommendation behavior. Even the choice of these economical dimensions, however, might be reconsidered in a next step. Therefore, it would be very interesting to compare sales figures of the respective brands to evaluate the purchase behavior of the test persons, without referring to the alternative construct of purchase intention.

Another aspect concerns the comparison of members and non-members. The non-members, as defined in this research, use the community regularly or occasionally without signing-in and using specific members-only functionalities. Future research might consider comparing the online versus the offline world, in other words, comparing community-users with those brand consumers who have no contact with the online community.

Finally, the results of this survey represent only a snapshot of the current development of the brand-community phenomenon. The technical development, especially the further increase of mobile usage of the internet will certainly have an effect on brand communities. It can be expected that the availability of such communities at all time and occasions will have

implications for consumers' attitudes, which in turn might have an impact on their relationship toward brands and also brand communities. At the time of this survey, mobile use of the community was not pronounced. For future research, the technical development, especially the differences in usage of mobile vs. stationary / at home, present a interesting further approach.

APPENDIX B Newsletter integration toonity.com

Onlineumfrage

Hallo,

Deine Meinung ist uns wichtig! Deshalb bitten wir Dich heute um Deine Mithilfe.

Unter folgendem Link findest Du einen Online-Fragebogen:

www.unipark.de/uc/BrandCommunities

Es wäre toll, wenn Du diesen für uns ausfüllst.

Als Dankeschön verlosen wir unter den Teilnehmern je zwei Kinoeintrittskarten und einen STABILO bionic Stift!

Wichtig:

Selbstverständlich werden Deine Daten streng vertraulich behandelt und nicht an Dritte weitergegeben!

Die Angabe der postalischen Adresse wird ausschließlich für die Verlosung und im Gewinnfall für den Versand des Preises an Dich verwendet.

Weitere rechtliche Hinweise und Datenschutzbestimmungen findest Du auf der toonity-Website.

Vielen Dank im voraus für Deine Unterstützung.

Dein toonity.com Team

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