

# How Does Brand Community Identity Affect Brand Loyalty and Brand Recommendation?

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**Abstract.** Once consumers identified a brand community, will they be loyal to the brand or recommend it to others? To answer the question, our study investigated the relationship between brand community identity and consumer behaviors (brand loyalty and brand recommendation); also, we examined the mediation role of brand identity. Results showed that brand identity can fully mediate the relationship between brand community identity and brand loyalty. However, as for the impact of brand community identity on brand recommendation, it can only play a partial mediation role. Specifically, when consumers identified with a brand, they are certainly loyal to it instead of recommending it to others. These conclusions complement brand community theory and provide significant guidance to corporate marketing activities when building brand community.

**Keywords.** Brand community identity, brand identity, brand loyalty, brand recommendation.

## Introduction

Brand communities offer a fresh, effective, and viral approach to building brands in the unresponsive marketing environment [1]. With the development of market economy, marketers have become more interested in learning about, organizing and facilitating brand community [2]. From the perspective of consumer-brand relationships, previous studies indicated that brand satisfaction and brand trust are important antecedents of brand loyalty [3], and brand loyalty is an important antecedent of brand recommendation. The proposal of brand community provided a new idea for cultivating brand loyalty. Brand trust or brand satisfaction describes the relationship between the brand and consumers; while brand community is concerned with relationships among consumers [4].

Existing studies found that community identity and participation can lead to brand identity and consumer's purchase behavior [5]. That is to say, by cultivating brand community, companies can obtain consumer brand loyalty and brand recommendation [6]. However, how members with brand community identity develop brand loyalty and recommend the brand? Does brand community identity lead to brand loyalty and brand recommendation directly? Answers to these questions will help companies to promote consumer brand loyalty and brand recommendation through brand community.

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Prior research has analyzed this topic from different perspectives. Based on social practice theory, Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009) found that brand community participation could influence brand loyalty and brand recommendation through brand identity, respectively [7]. However, from social identity and social impact perspective, other scholars have proposed that virtual brand community identity does not always affect brand commitment positively; instead, it may affect brand loyalty negatively [8]. That is to say, the impact of brand community identity on consumer behavior (such as brand loyalty and recommendation) is also affected by other factors. In this study, we introduced brand identity as a mediator to study the relationship between brand community identity and brand loyalty and recommendation.

## 1. Hypotheses Development

### 1.1. *Social identity theory*

Social identity theory believes that group identification is the basis of group behavior. Tajfel (1972) defined social identity as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” [9]. It believes that 3 steps existing in social identity development: social categorization, social comparison and positive distinctiveness. Because social identity is self-evaluative and derives its value from the evaluative properties of the ingroup, social comparisons between groups are focused on establishing positive distinctiveness for one’s own group. Intergroup relations involve a process of competition for positive identity in which groups and their members strive to protect or enhance positive distinctiveness and positive social identity. The specific way this occurs is governed by people’s subjective understanding of the psychological permeability of group boundaries and the stability and legitimacy of status relations between groups.

### 1.2. *Brand Community Identity and Brand Loyalty*

Brand community identity is the application of social identity theory to brand research. It reflects the extent to which people see themselves as members of the brand community and their sense of belonging to the brand community [1]. Once people see themselves as members of a brand community, they will offer emotional and moral support for the long-term development of the community [10]. Some studies have suggested that social identity with an organization includes two aspects: cognitive and affective identity [11]. The cognitive factors of brand community identity are mainly related to the categorization theory; people see themselves as members of the group and stress similarity with other members of the community and dissimilarity with members of other communities [1]. Affective factors of brand community identity are based on the relationship theory and stress the affective commitment of members to the community [12] and intimate relationships among members of the community [2].

Brand community can promote consumer brand commitment and brand loyalty because repeated brand purchase and usage are important symbol of brand community members [1]. McAlexander, Kim, and Roberts (2003) proposed that brand community has a positive impact on brand commitment from the perspective of brand community integration [13]. Additionally, studies from the perspective of consumer participation

showed that brand community has a positive impact on brand loyalty [14]. Accordingly, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Brand community identity has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

### *1.3. Brand Community Identity and Brand Identity*

Lastovicka and Gardner (1979) defined brand identity as a declaration of personal brand choice and an emotionally or psychologically attachment towards a brand [15]. Sven and Sue (2010) further suggested that brand identity is the extent of the common characteristics between the perceived consumer personality and the conveyed brand personality [16]. Brand community identity and brand identity are essentially similar terms and both come from consumer self-image and brand community or brand image. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) proposed that brand community identity has a positive impact on brand identity [5], while Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005) proposed the opposite view through additional studies [1]. Therefore, a two-way relationship exists between community identity and brand identity. Given the research objective, this paper focuses on the impact of brand community on brand. Brand community identity helps members define their self-image through community membership. Members will be grateful when they are appreciated by society because of their special membership. Therefore, members who are proud of their brand community membership will also be proud to become brand advocates. Accordingly, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**H2:** Brand community identity has a positive impact on brand identity.

### *1.4. Brand Community Identity and Brand Recommendation*

Community engagement results from the overlaps that members perceive between their own unique self-identity and their group-based identity [1]. It is viewed as an expression of personal value [11]. When acquiring brand community identity, members will share experiences, information and brand value, and even recommend the brand to others [6]. Therefore, community engagement has a positive impact on brand recommendation [14]. Additionally, brand community is formed around a particular brand [4] and is composed of brand enthusiasts. Once community members have developed a community identity, they will strive to maintain this positive social identity. At the same time, to achieve self-affirmation, they will take the initiative to recommend this brand to others. Accordingly, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**H3:** Brand community identity has a positive impact on brand recommendation.

### *1.5. Brand Identity and Brand Loyalty*

Studies have shown that consumers usually maintain self-identity and define their relationships with others through the consumption of product or brand [17]. Consumers tend to purchase the brands that are consistent with self-image and personality [18]. When consumers perceived that a brand can reflect their personality, improve their self-image and social status, long-term relationship might develop [16]. Thus, when consumers have developed a strong brand identity, their satisfaction with the self-definition conferred by the brand will promote brand loyalty. Accordingly, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**H4a:** Brand identity has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

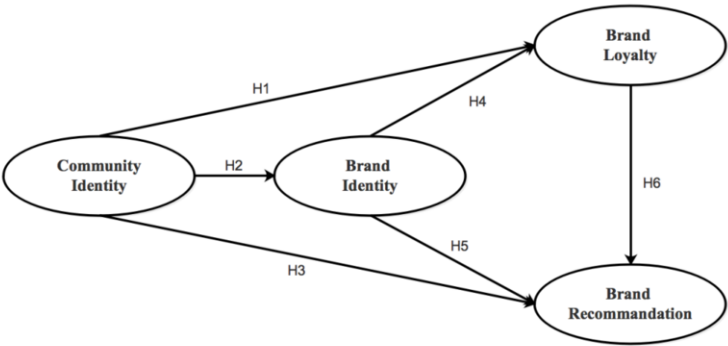
**H4b:** Brand identity mediates the positive influence of brand community identity on brand loyalty.

*1.6. Brand Identity and Brand Recommendation*

Brand identity reflects the extent of common characteristics between the self-perceived personality and the personality conveyed by the brand [16]. Brand recommendation is one of the best indicators of brand association. When consumers associate a brand with a highly affective experience, they are more likely to recommend the brand to others [19]. Consumers recommended a brand to others not only indicates their belief about the brand, but also the intimate association between the brand and their reputation. Consumers will recommend the brand to others when brands are conducive to self-expression. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**H5a:** Brand identity has a positive impact on brand recommendation.

**H5b:** Brand identity mediates the positive influence of brand community identity on brand recommendation.



**Figure 1.** The conceptual model.

*1.7. Brand Loyalty and Brand Recommendation*

Brand recommendation is the result of brand loyalty. Consumers with brand loyalty will actively provide feedback to the company and recommend the brand to their friends. In a brand community, members who are loyal to the brand and the community are usually very concerned about the long-term development of the community and the brand. They not only exchange brand information in the community, but also actively recommend the brand to others and generate positive publicity for the brand. Accordingly, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**H6:** Brand loyalty has a positive impact on brand recommendation.

Based on the above literature review and rationale, the research model of this study is shown in Figure 1.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample

The automotive community is more suitable for empirical research due to the members' higher participation [1]. Currently, China has a large number of domestic automobile brand communities (such as Chery and BYD), which have become the sources of data in this study. We collect data from Sojump ([www.sojump.com](http://www.sojump.com)), which is a popular online survey platform in China. Compared with Dichehui (a BYD automobile brand community), it is easy to collect member's e-mail addresses from Xinqijun (a Chery automobile brand community) forum. We published the URL link to the questionnaire on the Dichehui Forum and also sent the URL link via e-mail to more than 5000 members of the Xinqijun community. A total of 820 enthusiastic members visited the online questionnaire, totally, we got 394 valid questionnaires. The demographic informations like gender, age, education and income (RMB) are collected. Among them, 97% were male and only 3% were female, this is possible due to the community we chose are car communities. And for age, most of the people are between 31-40; more than 97% are junior college and higher and their income is evenly distributed between 2000-15000.

### 2.2. Measures

Scales from prior research were adapted or combined to measure all the constructs included in the conceptual model. According to Rungson Chomeya (2010), the Likert's scale 6 points tend to give the discrimination and reliability values which are higher than the Likert's scale 5 points. If we wanted to emphasize the discrimination and reliability high, therefore they should use the Likert's scale 6 points, also, if want to reduce the deviation to be the least or reduce the risks which might be happened from the deviation of personal decision making, it should choose the Likert's scale 6 points. So, all of the measurement scales were 6-point Likert scales [20]. Brand community identity refers to a scenario in which community members define themselves as a part of the brand community; it was measured by 6 items [1, 21]. For brand identity, we referenced Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Kim, Han, and Park (2001) and selected 5 items [21, 22]. Brand loyalty refers to consumer desire to maintain a relationship with the brand, which was measured by 3 items [23, 24]. Items selected from Zeithaml (1988) were used to measure brand recommendation [25].

### 2.3. Method of data analysis

In this paper, the partial least squares (PLS) was used to test the hypotheses. PLS is a useful multivariate causal modeling tool that can be used to analyze the relationships between several dependent and independent latent constructs [26]. That is, PLS considers the relationships among all variables at the same time but does not require multivariate normality. Thus, SmartPLS 2.0 was used to test the hypotheses.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Measurement model

In this study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and confirmatory factor analysis were used to test the internal consistency. The results indicate that all 17 items have relatively significant standardized factor loadings (SFL > 0.606). As expected, four factors were extracted and the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  were all above 0.830 ( $\alpha$  > 0.70), which indicates the high internal consistency of the items [27]. The composite reliabilities (CR) of all of the constructs exceed 0.900 (CR > 0.70), suggesting that the measurement items have adequate reliability.

Average variance extracted (AVE) and the coefficient of combination reliability were used to test convergent and discriminate validity. The overall model fit indices are fairly satisfactory. All of the AVEs (>0.729) were greater than 0.50, and the square root of each construct's AVE exceeds the coefficients of the relationships between the measure and other constructs [28]. Therefore, the items possess adequate convergent and discriminate validity.

#### 3.2. Tests of hypotheses

In order to test the mediation effects, this study uses two models. In model 1, we introduced 3 variables (brand community identity, brand loyalty and brand recommendation) to test the total effects. Brand identity is added in Model 2 to test the mediation effects.

The results from the model 1 analysis supports H1 by showing that brand community identity impacts brand loyalty significantly ( $\beta = 0.284$ ,  $t = 6.663 > 1.96$ ), supports H3 by showing that brand community identity impacts brand recommendation significantly ( $\beta = 0.208$ ,  $t = 4.832 > 1.96$ ) and supports H6 by showing that brand loyalty impacts brand recommendation significantly ( $\beta = 0.535$ ,  $t = 13.234 > 1.96$ ).

In model 2, we first calculated the path coefficient from brand community identity to brand identity ( $\beta = 0.444$ ,  $t = 11.564 > 1.96$ ) according to the mediating effect test method from Baron and Kenny [28]; which supports H2a. Next, we calculated the path coefficient from brand identity to brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.586$ ,  $t = 12.187 > 1.96$ ); which supports H4a. After the introduction of brand identity as a mediator, the impact of brand community identity on brand loyalty becomes non-significant ( $\beta = 0.023$ ,  $t = 0.744 < 1.96$ ), suggesting that brand identity played a full mediating role in the relationship between brand community identity and brand loyalty, which supports H4b.

Similarly, once brand identity is included in Model 2, the relationships between brand community identity and brand identity ( $\beta = 0.444$ ,  $t = 11.564 > 1.96$ ) and between brand identity and brand recommendation ( $\beta = 0.250$ ,  $t = 4.321 > 1.96$ ) are significant, which support H2a and H5a, respectively. After the introduction of brand identity as a mediator, the impact of brand community identity on brand recommendation decreases substantially (Model 1:  $\beta = 0.208$ ,  $t = 4.832$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Model 2:  $\beta = 0.132$ ,  $t = 2.705$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, brand identity plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between brand community identity and brand recommendation, which supports supporting H5b.

## 4. Discussion

What is the intermediary mechanism from brand community identity to brand behavior and willingness? In this study, we combined with social identity theory and social psychological theory to introduce brand identity as a mediator. The empirical results reveal that brand identity plays a full mediating role between brand community identity and brand loyalty, but a partial mediating role between brand community identity and brand recommendation.

### 4.1. Theoretical implications

Many studies have indicated that brand community identity has positive impact on brand behavior and consumer willingness [6, 8, 14], but relatively few studies have addressed the intermediary mechanism. In this study, we investigate the intermediary mechanism between brand community identity and brand behavior and between brand community identity and brand willingness.

First, brand identity plays a full mediating role between brand community identity and brand loyalty. According to organizational commitment theory, consumers' commitment to a brand community may be based on different psychological bonds, such as need, affect, and/or obligation. When consumers are committed to a brand community based on need or obligation, they will not loyal to the brand. Only when members identify a brand, do they become committed or loyal to the brand.

Second, brand identity plays a partial mediating role between brand community identity and brand recommendation. Sociological studies have noted that there are two types of emotion among Chinese people: "real emotion" and "assumed emotion"; the former is heartfelt, real, and spontaneous, while the latter is what is expected due to obligation and norms. We believe that there are also two pathways of "real" and "assumed" when community members recommend the brand to others. On the one hand, some brand community members may develop feelings of attachment to and identification with a community and thus may feel a sense of belonging. Their participation and interactions with other members help to strengthen their brand experience and value, leading to brand identity, and then recommend the brand to others [6]. This is the "real" part of brand recommendation. On the other hand, brand community is formed around a particular brand [4], and once community members have developed a community identity, they will strive to maintain this positive social identity through social categorization and social comparison, even in the absence of strong feelings towards the brand (brand identity).

### 4.2. Managerial implications

Previous studies have found that participate in a brand community may cultivate consumer brand loyalty. Therefore, it is important to know how brand communities influence brands. The results of this study have several managerial implications. First, to effectively manage the relationship between brand community and brands, companies must cultivate consumer brand community identity. Companies should establish a brand community or help consumers to organize a brand community. Assisting community members is a valuable investment for companies. Next, consumers with brand community identity will not develop brand loyalty until they have developed brand identity. Therefore, it is important for companies to input brand

information such as brand usage experience, brand reward information and new product distribution into the brand community. Additionally, companies can design logos and slogans for the community that are similar to the brand in order to enhance brand identity among the community members. Furthermore, brand community identity has a direct or indirect impact on brand recommendation, which provides a new idea for companies.

#### 4.3. Limitations and further research

Although this paper has provided some ideas regarding the impact of brand community on brand behavior and willingness, there are also shortcomings. First of all, to collect the data, we posted notices of the questionnaire on online forums and sent emails to thousands of members. To our surprise, almost all of the data (97%) were from male participants. This might be because current drivers are mostly male. Therefore, future research may take into account other categories. Second, according to Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann [1], the relationships between brand communities and brands may be bidirectional. But we were only concerned about the impact of brand community on brand behavior and willingness. Further researchers should use longitudinal studies to capture the dynamics of brand communities and their relationship to brands.

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