

The Dark Side of Brand Community: Inter-Group Stereotyping, Trash Talk, and Schadenfreude

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ABSTRACT

Prior work on brand communities has emphasized the positive aspects of community participation on brand involvement and loyalty. Qualitative studies have noted the possibility that involvement in brand communities may encourage participants to adopt disparaging views of rival brands and their users, but little research has tested these assumptions using structured measures. The present study investigates the relationship between identification with a brand community, and such “dark” behaviors as inter-group stereotyping, “trash talking” rival brand communities, and feeling pleasure at the misfortune of rival brands and their users.

The sociological aspects of consumer behavior, and in particular the phenomena surrounding membership in brand communities, have become a focus of increasing research attention in recent years. Prior work (e.g., Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and Schau 2005; Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrman 2005) has concentrated on exploring the effects of community membership on loyalty toward a brand, and the effects of participation on involvement with other brand loyal consumers. The potential for brand community membership to provoke negative attitudes and actions toward rival brands and their users has been noted, but not systematically investigated using structured measures. The focus of the present paper is to explore how loyalty to one brand community provokes negative views of not only rival brands but their users. Moreover, we introduce and explore the concept of “trash talk”—negative communication about a rival brand provoked not by specific unsatisfactory experiences with the brand (like negative word-of-mouth) but instead provoked by a sense of inter-group rivalry. Our study furthermore explores the effect of inter-group stereotyping on emotions toward the rival brand, and particularly the emotion of “schadenfreude,” a German term denoting pleasure felt in response to another’s misfortune. The present study’s investigation of the relationships among identification with a brand community, negative stereotyping of rival users, “trash talk,” and feelings of schadenfreude makes distinctive contributions to consumer research.

THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF BRAND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Past research on brand community participation has emphasized the effects of participation on brand loyalty. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) explored how participation in the Harley-Davidson motorcycle subculture encouraged users to link their biker personas more closely to the Harley-Davidson brand. They observed that participants in the brand community required ownership of a Harley-Davidson to be accepted an authentic “insider” in the community. Once inside, they noted that community status was related to the purchase of progressively higher status Harley-Davidson bike models. Members also engaged in status competition with respect to the assemblage of “authentic” branded parts, accessories, and apparel related to their biker persona. As members became involved in user groups such as “HOG” (the Harley-Davidson Owners Group), they became bound to the brand through social ties to other members. Through these ties, the Harley owners studied exchanged mutual ratification and social support in their usage of the brand. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) note, but do not emphasize, the tendency of Harley owners to make invidious

distinctions between Harley-Davidson and other motorcycle brands, especially Asian brands.

Muniz and Schau (2001) explored the positive aspects of brand community among Macintosh and Saab owners. The researchers investigate how brand communities are defined by, and engender, shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility among members to the brand and one another. Muniz and Schau observed that participants in brand communities tend to develop a “consciousness of kind,” a sense of “we” versus “them.” The positive consequences of this sense of wholeness included, in their observation, a focus on rituals and traditions involving celebration of the brand’s distinctive, positive qualities often through the sharing of stories about the brand’s extraordinary performance (e.g., the ability of Saab’s to negotiate icy roads or the power of Macintosh computers to render graphics). Moreover, they found that participation in a brand community entailed a sense of “moral responsibility” to the brand and fellow owners. Thus, community participants felt an obligation to recruit new members to the community, encourage new users to become involved with the brand, and lend technical as well as moral support to fellow users. In a later study, Muniz and Schau (2005) found that participants in the Apple Newton brand community displayed a devotion to their obsolete brand bordering on religious fervor. As Newton users interacted with one another, they constructed a shared mythology emphasizing the unfair abandonment of their brand, its miraculous abilities, and its potential resurrection in the form of a rumored new model. They found that community participation and interaction tended to reinforce the reality of this brand mythology encouraging users to continue to use an outmoded technology.

Building on past work, Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrman (2005) introduced a conceptual model emphasizing the relationships among brand community identification, community engagement, normative community pressure, brand loyalty, and such behavioral correlates of loyalty as brand re-purchase. Their study emphasizes the positive impact of community identification on community engagement and loyalty behaviors, but notes that community engagement can also result in an unwelcome feeling of reference group pressure to conform to community norms for participation and brand use. Algesheimer et al (2005) test their model using structured measures and a large sample of European car club members. Their study illustrates an effort to test and quantify insights about the largely positive effects of brand community using structured measures drawn from prior work in social psychology. Our study follows in this tradition, but focuses on the “dark side” effects of brand community.

THE “DARK SIDE” OF BRAND COMMUNITY IDENTIFICATION

Past work, particularly in the qualitative research tradition, has noted that brand community members may define their identities in opposition to rival brands. For example, Muniz and Schau (2001) discuss the concept of “oppositional brand loyalty.” They observe that groups define themselves not only in terms of who they are, but who they are not. They observed that Macintosh users were prone to view themselves as different from, and perhaps better than, PC and Windows users. In general, Apple users seemed to characterize themselves as more individualistic and creative than PC and win-

dows users, dimensions convergent with Apple's brand image as a computer for creatively inclined individualists. In a later qualitative study of the Apple Newton community, Muniz and Schau (2005) likewise found that Newton users contrasted themselves favorably with the users of more mainstream PDAs. In particular, they seemed to view themselves as more individualistic, creative, and technically adept than mainstream PDA users. In both studies, Muniz and Schau suggest that inter-group rivalry, and particularly the threat users of a small market share brand felt from dominant competitors and mainstream users played a role in the genesis of hostile views toward the out-group. Although Muniz and Schau have provided rich qualitative insight into what brand community members say about rival users, little work has so far investigated these perceptions using structured measures. Moreover, the influence of inter-group rivalry on the perception of rival users personalities, although hinted at by Muniz and Schau's work, has been little investigated. Finally, the relationship of negative inter-group stereotyping to community members' communications about rival brand communities and their emotions toward these communities has been little explored by past studies.

In recent work, Escalas and Bettman (2005) found that consumers felt stronger self-brand connections to brands whose images were consistent with the consumers' in-groups, and felt less connection to brands whose images were not consistent with their in-groups. Furthermore, they found that brands whose images were consistent with consumers' out-groups were less likely to be rated as close to the self. Their study demonstrates the powerful effect of group membership on the brand-self connection. Relevant to "dark side" effects, they show that consumers are reluctant to connect brands associated with out-groups to their self-image. However, their study little explores the potential for highly identified brand community members to derogate out-group brand users, engage in negative communications toward these users, or feel pleasure at their misfortunes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION, STEREOTYPING, AND BRAND-RELATED TALK

Henri Tajfel, an influential scholar in the development of social identification theory, defined social identification as 'the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership,' (Tajfel 1972, p. 292 as cited in Hogg and Terry 2000). When individuals adopt a social identity, they are motivated to think of themselves as positively distinct from other groups. Thus, social identification implies inter-group stereotyping. When a consumer identifies himself or herself as a member of a social group (e.g., a young person or an old person) or, more relevant to the present study, a member of a brand community, that consumer will have a natural tendency to seek information that positively discriminates his or her own brand community from others (Hogg and Terry, 2000). In most cases, consumers seek favorable information about their own group, and either seek or accept negative information about others groups. Inter-group stereotyping is especially likely to emphasize the negative aspects of out-groups that are perceived as in competition for scarce resources or threatening. In the case of brand communities, the threat posed by one brand to the resources of another may not at first be apparent. However, consumers may be aware that dominant brands often seek to eliminate weaker brands from the market, and thus deny further purchase of the brand to loyal users. Muniz and Schau (2001) note such concerns among Apple computer users. In communities of sports fans, rivalry over which team (and set of fans) will win a game and

eventually progress to championship games is likely to encourage inter-community hostility.

Trash Talk

Social identification theory predicts that group members have a strong motivation to portray their group in a positive light (Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers 1997; Tesser 2001). Drawing on social identification theory, Schnake and Ruscher (1998), leading scholars in understanding intra-group communication about out-groups suggest that motives to create a positively differentiated group identity and build group cohesion typically encourage group members to develop and repeat shared negative beliefs about out-groups. In a series of studies (e.g., Ruscher and Hammer, 1996; Schnake and Ruscher, 1998; Beal, Ruscher, and Schnake 2001), Ruscher and colleagues have confirmed that in-groups are strongly motivated to develop negative views of out-groups that tend to be repeated and affirmed in intra-group communication. These negative beliefs help the in-group achieve a sense of positive differentiation from other groups, and promote intra-group cohesion. In the present study, we borrow a term from the sports world to describe such negative intra-group communications about rival brands and their users. We use the term "trash talk" to describe such communications to underline the differences between trash talk and "negative word-of-mouth," the type of negative consumer communication most often studied by marketers. In past studies, negative word-of-mouth has usually been conceived and studied as negative communication about a brand resulting from a specific unsatisfactory experience with the brand. Thus, the assumption has been that negative communications about a brand are most likely to result from the purchase or use of the brand, and the failure of the brand to perform to an expected level. Thus, negative word-of-mouth has been conceived as originating from individual transactions and largely controllable causes. In contrast, trash talk arises from the desire of brand communities to positively differentiate themselves from rivals, is a fundamental sociological process, and is largely uncontrollable.

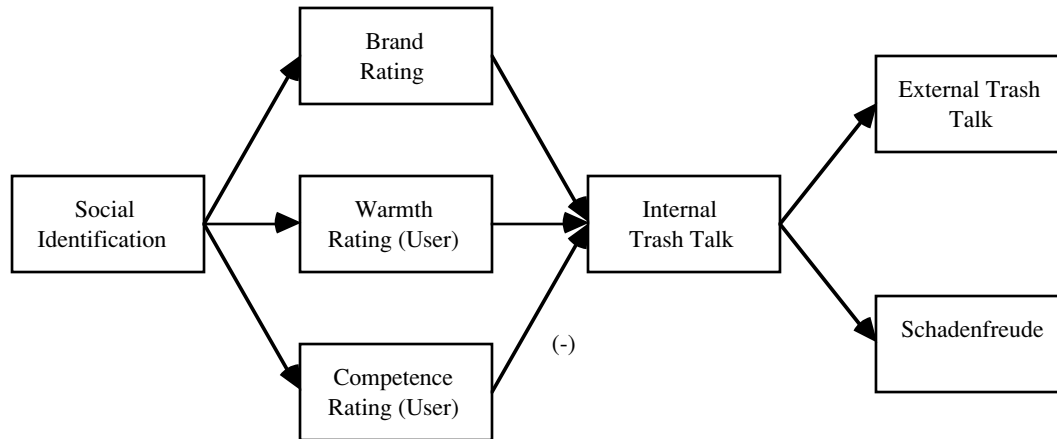
Hypotheses

Figure 1 depicts the full model tested in the research. All relationships are hypothesized as positive unless noted. The model begins with the construct of social identification. The study predicts that consumers who identify more with a brand community, will be more likely to hold negative stereotypes of out-group brands, and in particular the users of these brands. The model in particular predicts that consumers who identify more highly with their own brand community will perceive members of rival brand communities to be less warm and less competent than members of their own community. Our focus on warmth and competence is drawn from work by Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002) who found that in-groups structure their perceptions of out-groups along two primary dimensions: warmth and competence. We thus predict that:

- H1: Brand community members who identify more strongly with their brand community will (a) rate their brand as better than rival brands, (b) will perceive their fellow brand community members to be more warm than the members of other brand communities, and (c) will perceive their fellow brand community members to be more competent than rival community members.

We further predict that consumers who have a stronger bias against rival brands will engage in more intra-group "trash talk" about the rival brand. Moreover, we predict that brand community

FIGURE 1



members who perceive their members as more warm (rivals as more cold) will engage in more trash talk about the rival brand community. In addition, we predict that brand community members who perceive their own community members as more competent (rivals as less competent) will engage in less trash talk about the rivals, since they represent less of a threat to their personal brand community and identity.

H2: Brand community members who report more inter-group bias on (a) brand ratings and (b) user warmth ratings will report engaging in more intra-group trash talk about the rival brand. However, (c) group members that report more inter-group bias on the competence dimension will report less frequent intra-group trash talk.

In addition, we predict that brand community members who engage in more intra-group trash talk about rival brands will emerge as “apostles” of the rival brands failings to people outside the brand community. Thus, we predict that:

H3: The level of intra-group trash talk is positively related to respondents’ tendency to communicate negatively about a rival brand to people outside the brand community.

INTER-GROUP STEREOTYPING, COMMUNICATION, AND SCHADENFREUDE

The emotional feelings that rivals have for each other cannot be taken lightly. The animosity typically spills over to feelings of satisfaction and joy whenever the rival suffers failure. Schadenfreude is a social hostility that has been defined as the malicious pleasure that an individual or group derives by observing the failure of a relevant out-group (Feather and Sherman 2002; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, and Doosje 2003). Leach et al (2003) believe that while schadenfreude is directed at others, it is essentially a product of self-identity. They lend further insight with their finding that Dutch soccer fans with a higher interest with the sport experienced more malicious pleasure at the failures of German soccer than did those fans who responded lower on the interest scale. Put another way, those with greater passion for their team felt greater joy in the

demise of their rival. As a result of the close connection between social hostility, trash talk, and schadenfreude we believe that:

H4: Group members who report more frequent trash talking will experience higher levels of schadenfreude

METHODOLOGY

The hypotheses were tested in a field study using actual members of two sets of competing brand communities. We sought two sets of brand communities meeting a number of criteria. In each set, we sought two communities of consumers devoted to rival brands. Although little investigated, communities of users who perceive themselves in competition with rival brands are common (PC vs. Apple users, Chevy vs. Ford owners, fans of rival sports franchises). For the present study, two sets of brand rival brand communities in widely different industries were chosen. One set of rival communities included a user club devoted to Apple computers and a user group devoted to personal computers (PCs). The other set of rival communities included fan clubs devoted to two college football teams—one devoted to the University of Iowa and one devoted to Purdue. Although seemingly not a classic “brand” context, sports teams are brands that a large percentage of the world’s population spend time and money to support. Moreover, inter-community rivalry can be intense in these communities (e.g., the riots that sometimes accompany soccer competitions around the world). Although not classic rivals, the fans of Iowa and Purdue compete in the same conference, and thus issues of which brand is the “best” are salient.

The research team attended group meetings and events prior to the collection of structured measures to better understand the social dynamics of each community and build trust. We found that each user group—the Apple club, the PC club, the Iowa fan club, and the Purdue fan Club—was a living brand community with at least 50 active members. Each club meant periodically (usually about monthly) to celebrate its brand. At the computer user group meetings, participants focused on talking about their own brands, but also indulged in comparing their computer brand to rivals, usually to the rival’s disadvantage. The research team observed the classic signs of brand community in each group—consciousness of kind, a

sense of moral responsibility to the group, and special catch phrases describing the brand and its rivals (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Moreover, variance in devotion to the brand was observed among the active members of each of the four brand communities.

The leadership of each club agreed to encourage members to complete a set of structured measures. The structured measures were distributed to club members via e-mail lists that each club maintained. Each respondent completed a survey that included a three item social identification scale adapted from Elmers, Van Knippenberg, and Wilke (1988). (Example item: "I identify with this group" measured on a 7 point strongly agree-strongly disagree scale). Respondents rated their image of their own brand (e.g., Apple) and their rival brand(s) (PC computers) on a three item brand image scale adapted from Brown (1995). (Example item: "Compared to all other brands, I believe Macintosh to be the very best" on a strongly agree-strongly disagree scale). In addition to brand images, respondents rated their image of the users of their own brand and rival brand(s) on scales measuring "warmth" (three items) and "competence" (three items) adapted from Fiske, Cuddy, Click, and Xu (2002). (Example items are: "How warm are members of this group?" "How competent are members of this group?") Once again, these items were measured on seven point strongly agree-strongly disagree scales. Participants rated their propensity to engage in "trash talk" about their rival brand(s) to other group members on an adaptation of Homer's (1995) scale of within group communication. This scale included three items measured on seven point always-never scales. (Example item: "Other group members and I talk about how negative we feel about [the rival]"). Respondents reported their tendency to "trash talk" rivals to people outside their group on a three item word-of-mouth scale adapted from Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996). (Example item: "Say negative things about [the rival] to other people" measured on a seven point very likely-not very likely scale).

As part of the survey, respondents read a scenario that describing a blow to the brand equity of the rival brand. In the computer users groups, respondents read a scenario in the form of a news article describing a serious virus afflicting the rival brand of computers. In the college football fan clubs, participants read a scenario describing their rival team reeling from scandals involving player recruiting violations and player misconduct off the field. Following exposure to the scenario, respondents were asked to rate how they felt about reading news of their rival's misfortune. The respondents' tendency to feel *schadenfreude* was measured on a three item scale adapted from Feather and Sherman (2002). (Example item: "I would feel joy" measured on a seven point strongly agree-strongly disagree scale").

RESULTS

The Apple club completed 108 surveys, the PC club 64, the Iowa club 77, and the Purdue club 105. Relative to the number of "active" members of each club (subjectively estimated on the basis of recent event attendance), roughly half the active members of the computer user groups responded to the survey, and roughly one third the active members of the college fan clubs responded.

In order to assess the hypotheses, we utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) with the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) 5.0 software developed by Arbuckle (2003). Prior to analysis, we computed difference scores to measure intergroup bias. For each respondent, we computed the difference between the respondent's rating of their own brand and their rival brand (or set of brand when PCs as a group of brands are considered) on the 1) brand image ratings, 2) user warmth ratings, and 3) user competence ratings. For example, to the extent a respondent rated his or her own brand as better than a rival brand, the resulting difference

score would be more positive. Thus, a positive regression coefficient relating social identity and inter-group brand image bias would mean that as respondents reported identifying more highly with their own group, they tended to rate their brand more positively relative to the rival brand. All measures had Cronbach's alphas greater than .7.

The hypothesized model (recall Figure 1) had a good fit to the data according to the CFI of 0.936 and the RMSEA of 0.079. Moreover, discriminant and convergent validity were tested through a matrix of latent variable scores and individual indicators variables. We found that virtually all the indicator variables were more highly related to their intended latent variable than other latent variables. Overall, the factor loadings displayed strong convergent and discriminant validity.

Hypothesis H1a predicted a positive relationship between social identification with a brand community and inter-brand bias as measured by the brand image measure. This hypothesis was supported by the data. These measures were related by a .473 regression coefficient with a critical ratio of 5.23, significant at $p < .001$. As respondents identified more highly with their own brand community, their tendency to rate their own brand as better than rival brands increased.

Hypotheses H1b and H1c predicted, respectively, that respondents who identified more strongly with their own brand community would tend to rate users of their brand as more competent (H1b) and more warm (H1c) than users of rival brands. These hypotheses were confirmed. As respondents reported higher levels of identification with their own brand community, they rated users of their brand as more competent than users of rival brands (Regression estimate=0.234, critical ratio=5.021, $p < .001$). More identified respondents rated users of their brand as more warm than users of rival brands (regression estimate=.305, critical ratio=6.12, $P < .001$). These results demonstrate that brand users who feel a stronger sense of social identity with their brand community not only feel that their brand is better than the rival, they feel that users of their brand are both more competent and warmer than users of a rival brand. These findings are thus among the first to demonstrate that brand community involvement can result in inter-group stereotyping on such broad dimensions of person perception as competence and warmth.

Hypothesis 2a predicts that brand community members who report a higher degree of bias in favor of their brand's image over their rival brand's image will report a greater tendency to trash talk the rival brand within their own brand community. This hypothesis was confirmed (regression coefficient=0.150, critical ratio=3.57, $p < .001$). Hypotheses 2b and 2c make contrasting predictions about the effect of inter-group bias on the dimensions of warmth versus competence on within group trash talk about the rival brand. Hypothesis 2b predicts that respondents who report that their own brand community members are more warm than rival community members will tend to indulge in more trash talk about the rival brand. Hypothesis 2b was confirmed (regression estimate=0.231, critical ratio=2.79, $p < .01$). Hypothesis 2c predicts that respondents who perceive that their own community members are more competent than the members of the rival community will be less prone to trash talk the rival brand. Convergent with Fiske et al (2002), brand community members who perceive their rivals to be less (vs. more) competent will perceive them as less of a threat, and thus feel less of a need to derogate their brand within their own community. Hypothesis 2c was confirmed (regression estimate=-0.228, critical ratio=-2.52, $p < .05$).

Hypothesis 3 proposed that the level of intra-group trash talk should predict trash talk to people outside of the brand community. The model shows strong support of H3 (regression estimate=0.333, critical ratio=-6.82, $p < .001$). Thus, users who are prone "trash talk"

rival brands to their own brand community members emerge as more likely to be “apostles” of negative word-of-mouth about the rival to people outside the community. The relationship between brand community loyalty and the tendency to engage in negative word-of-mouth about rival brands prompted by inter-group bias, not specific negative experiences, has been little documented in past studies.

Finally, hypothesis H4 predicted that individuals who were active in derogating a rival brand to fellow brand community members would be especially prone to derive pleasure from news of their rival’s misfortune. Once again, this hypothesis was confirmed (regression estimate=0.168, critical ratio=4.24, $p<.001$). Apparently, highly identified community members who enjoy deriding rival brands also derive emotional pleasure (schadenfreude) from news of their rival’s failures. Perhaps they perceive such news as confirming their own position and providing fodder for further negative talk about their rival brand.

General Discussion

Bhattacharya and Elsbach (2001) illustrate the fire and ice relationship that an in-group and an out-group can have by demonstrating that organizations with a strong and divisive set of values tend to spark feelings of support or opposition and lead to highly polarized opinions. This research amplifies the importance of strong brand communities by providing an in-depth examination of brand community members’ judgment of rival brands and rival brand users. By implementing a quantitative methodology, linkages were found that demonstrated that those members who more strongly identified with the community were more likely to engage in intergroup stereotyping. In turn, this stereotyping was shown to lead to active derogation of the out-group as measured by trash talking. Finally, it was shown that those members who most actively trashed the rival and its users within the group were the most likely to trash the rival to members outside of the community and were the most likely to experience schadenfreude.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends the theoretical knowledge of previous inquiries into our comprehension of brand community behavior by examining two sets of rival brand communities and their perceptions of the rival group. Because this research utilized quantitative measures, it represents one of the most systematic analysis of the impact of social identification of the brand community on the dimensions measured.

This study was also able to successfully extend the work of Fiske et al (2002) through usage of a new construct introduced to the literature—trash talk. It was shown that as brand community members view users of a rival product as increasingly cold that the derogatory commentary directed at the out-group product will increase.

The necessity of the introduction of the trash talk construct becomes clear once the distinction is drawn between it and its more commonly studied predecessor—negative word of mouth. Trash talk is the unusual assessment of negative word of mouth that the commentator has no previous experiences with and has no intentions of using. This lack of usage is diametrically opposed to traditional word-of-mouth studies that rely on past usage with the product.

Finally, this research explored schadenfreude, or the malicious pleasure in the suffering of another. While social psychology has given the topic some recent consideration (Feather 1999; Hareli and Weiner 2002), schadenfreude has largely been neglected in the consumer research arena. Despite the oversight, schadenfreude has

been conjectured about for nearly 200 years dating back to 1817 with Adam Smith’s essay. He stated that, “The hatred and dislike, in the same manner, which grow upon habitual disapprobation, would often lead us to take a malicious pleasure in the misfortune of the man whose conduct and character excite so painful a passion” (Smith 1817/1997). True to the words of Adam Smith, this study showed that brand community members that had a higher propensity to derogate a rival within the brand community were more likely to take pleasure in the hypothetical demise of the rival brand.

Limitations

Like any study, this research is not without its limitations. In terms of data collection, members who are more attached to the group might also be more motivated to complete a survey that allows them to state their feelings about the group. This problem is somewhat mitigated in that academicians and brand managers alike are interested more with the thoughts and actions of dedicated brand community members than they are with peripheral members.

A second limitation is that the sample size collected for each group was too small for individual analysis. This shortcoming is balanced by the fact that the study grouped four diverse brand communities. It was shown that the theory was able to hold across a number of contexts, which is a cornerstone of generalizability. Similar studies utilizing brand communities should have an understanding of this potential shortcoming and choose communities with a large enough base to increase the likelihood that at an adequate sample will be collected to test the hypotheses of the research.

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