

Investigating benefits and tensions within brand communities

Lena Kemna

Nova School of Business and Economics

Catherine da Silveira

Nova School of Business and Economics

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Investigating benefits and tensions within brand communities

Abstract:

Through a comprehensive literature review within the field of marketing, this research aims to explore benefits and tensions inherent in brand communities. The analysis leads us to question the idea of mutual benefits and suggest the frequent imbalance of benefits between members and brand to be a main source of tensions. We further investigate the dynamics that both parties develop to alleviate tensions. The research suggests that there is a constant push and pull between brand and members in order to cope with them. As a result, brand communities tend to navigate along a spectrum that ranges from brand-managed to member-managed brand communities.

Keywords: Brand Community, Brand community benefits, Brand community tensions

Track: Product and Brand Management

1. Objectives:

A prevailing idea is that communities built around brands are "generally a good thing" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 428), marked by symbiotic relationships between brand and members, and mutual benefits (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The positive character of brand communities is often described through the seeking of positive benefits by members, such as information or social ends (Relling et al., 2015), or the general feeling of *communitas* (Kozinets, 2001). Brand communities are also credited with benefits for brands, such as loyalty (Dessart et al., 2015) which ultimately result in profits (Algesheimer et al., 2005). As such, members of brand communities are thought to form close relationships (Bowden & Mirzaei, 2020), and the brand, at times personified through its marketers or community administrators, is a member in itself (Dessart et al., 2015). Lines between brand and members blur and there is a mutually beneficial relationship (Kozinets, 2002; Langer, 2007). This research aims to further explore benefits inherent in brand communities from the perspective of brands and members. The analysis leads us to question the idea of mutual benefits and suggest the frequent imbalance of benefits between members and brand to be a main source of tensions. We further investigate the dynamics that both parties develop to alleviate tensions and draw implications for brand community research.

2. Research methods:

Our exploration of the benefits inherent in brand community is grounded on an extensive literature review of the brand community field. After a careful article selection, we conducted a manual review of 152 articles from top marketing journals. For the literature selection process, our method is based on previous research (Paul et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019; Vom Brocke et al., 2009; vom Brocke et al., 2015) and consists of four stages combining systematic and non-systematic searches. The four stages are summarised in figure 1. For the content analysis, a qualitative topic analysis was used, following Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2012): During the manual review of the full articles, an extensive selection of topics emerges ground-up. Three researchers, including the authors, noted these topics down until saturation was reached. Based on discussions between researchers, topics were then clustered into larger themes and further aggregated into dimensions resulting in the final list used for the in-depth review of all 152 articles (see table 1). This research focuses on the insights from the analysis of the topics of brand community benefits and tensions.

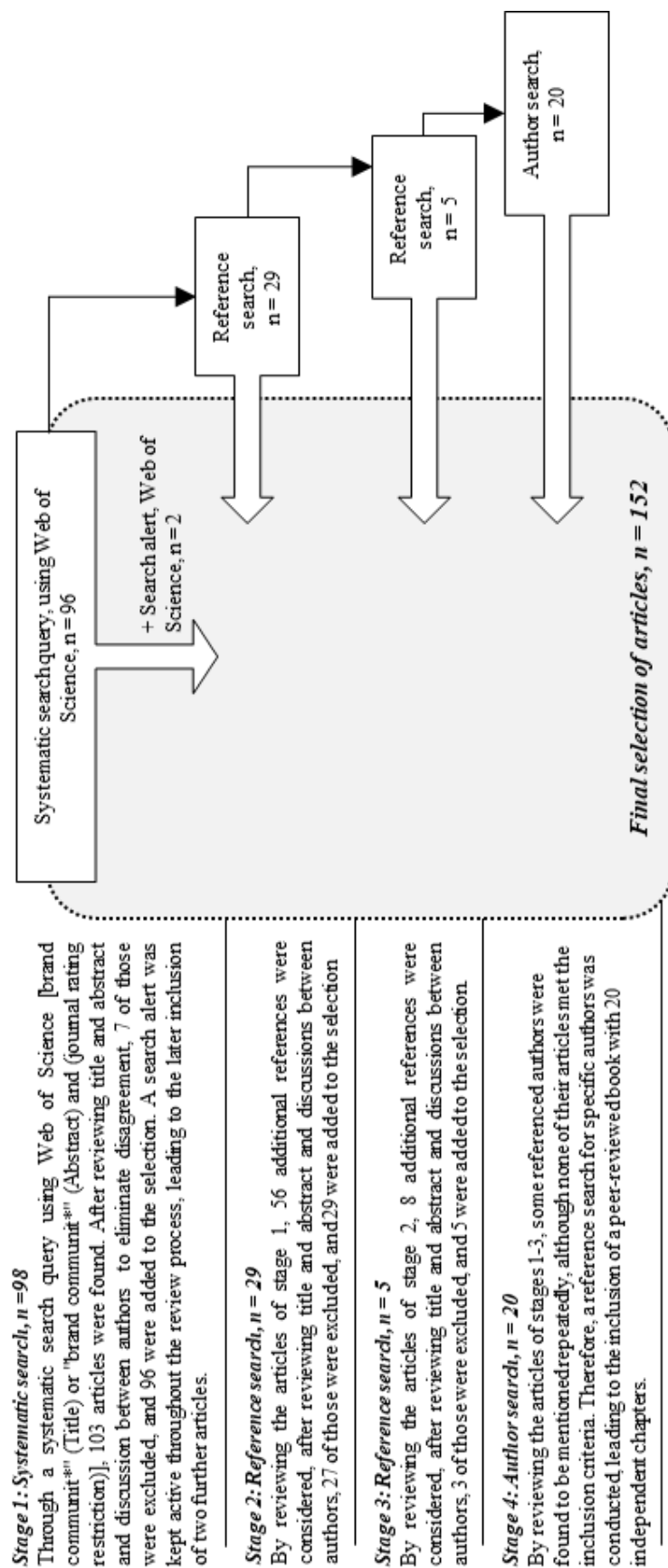


Figure 1: Research methodology: Four-stage literature review, Source: Authors

3. Research insights:

3.1 Benefits in brand communities

When categorising benefits of brand communities, our research suggests that the types of benefits are quite distinct depending on whether one takes the perspective of members or brands. We therefore took all the articles together and mapped the perceived benefits of brand communities for each party (members and brands) and for both (i.e., shared benefits), using the empirical and conceptual insights from all articles. We summarise and provide the list of references in figure 2.

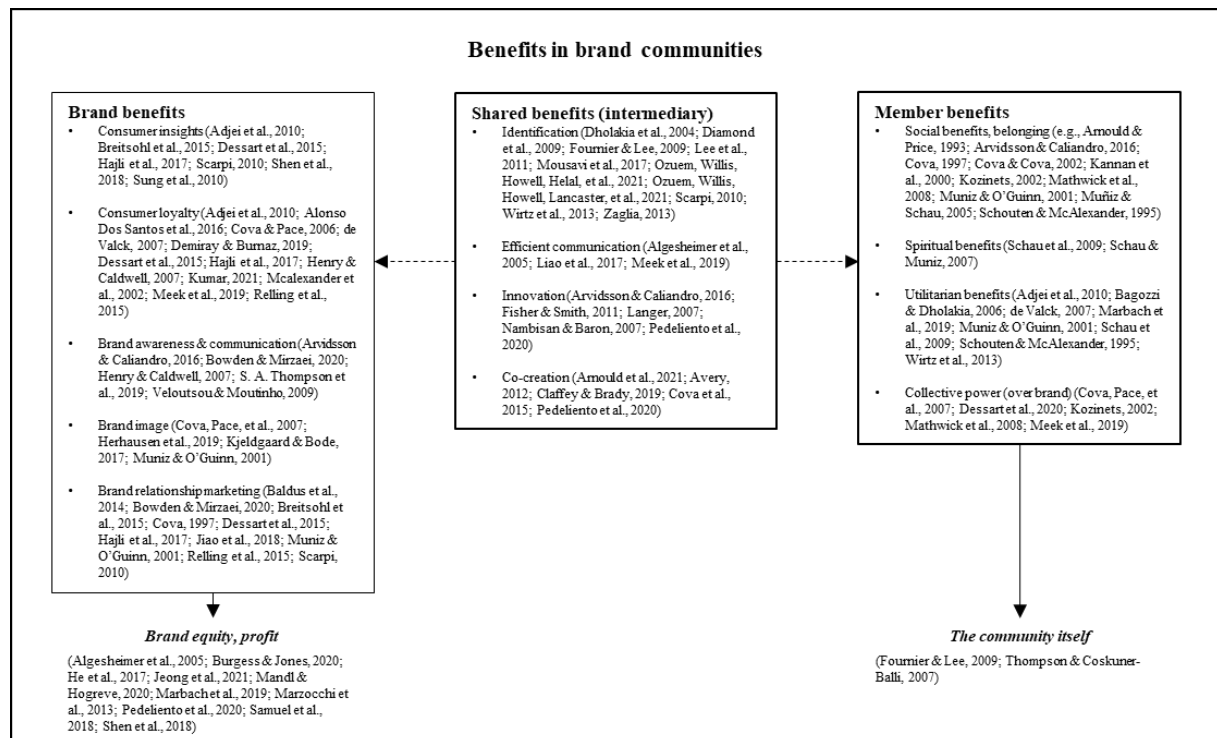


Figure 2, Benefits of brand communities for brands and members, Source: Authors

On the brand side of benefits received through brand communities, research converges on the main categories of consumer insights, consumer loyalty, brand awareness and communication, brand image and brand relationship marketing. When taking a meta-perspective, we however find that ultimately, all these benefits lead to the overall goal of increasing brand equity and profits. The brand community is a platform, tool or strategy to reach these benefits.

On the member-side, however, benefits are more complex. There are many categorizations of benefits for members in brand communities, such as differentiating between social and functional benefits (e.g., Relling et al., 2015) or between individual and collective benefits (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011). We took all categorizations as well as

individual mentions of benefits together and grouped them into social benefits and belonging, spiritual benefits, utilitarian benefits, and the benefit of having collective power.

In some cases, the brand community is reported to result in shared benefits in the form of identification between the brand and members, efficient communication between brand and members, innovation within the brand community, and general co-creative practices. However, when looking at each of these benefits, we find that each party interprets them differently and therefore, they appear as intermediaries for other benefits. For example, the shared benefit of identification between brand and members is on the brand side an intermediary to the benefit of brand image and loyalty, whereas on the member side, it is rather an intermediary to social benefits and belonging.

As such, our research challenges the established understanding of shared, mutual benefits in brand communities (Kozinets, 2002; Langer, 2007) and suggests instead a *perceived balance of benefits*. For example, in the Jeep brand community, members may gain the social benefits of the community life either in the form of belonging or for more experienced members, the benefit of demonstrating their expertise to newer members. The brand, on the other hand, gains a positive brand image by being at the centre of those social benefits (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Building on the idea that members are not naïve to the commercial nature of the community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), we suggest to broaden that notion to both brand and members being aware that the respectively other party receives different benefits but, as long as each party perceives a balance of benefits, they continue to engage productively in the brand community.

3.2 Tensions in brand communities

When analysing the brand communities described in the selected articles, a challenge arises: Rather than a symbiotic brand community life, we find these brand communities to be marked by tensions. Muniz and O’Guinn already acknowledged that there might be tensions between the community and the commercial aspect of the brand community (2001). However, while tensions have not yet been the focal point of most research within the field (de Valck, 2007), the idea that a certain degree of tensions may be considered as an integral part of brand community, is gaining traction (Adjei et al., 2010; de Valck, 2007).

Literature reports different types of tensions: i) tensions between the brand community and the outside (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001b); ii) tensions between members of a brand

community (Algesheimer et al., 2005) and; iii) tensions between members and brand. This type of tensions can for example happen in the case of altered brand meanings, up to contested ownership of the brand. This happens when members feel they own the brand and don't agree with the management over the brand direction (Burgess & Jones, 2020; Muñiz & Schau, 2007). When this occurs, members can react by creating alternative brand associations (Adjei et al., 2010). In extreme cases, members may weaponize collective practices against the brand to express their dissatisfaction (Weijo et al., 2019). The most prominent aspect of these tensions is the scepticism of the brand community members towards the commercial orientation and the commoditization of community (Kozinets, 2002; Langer, 2007). This can be the result of dissatisfaction with the brand's parent company (Cova et al., 2015) or when members feel their community participation is being (doubly) exploited (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Veloutsou & Black, 2020). Literature analyses some ways of how members cope with tensions in brand communities, for example through decreasing their engagement (Breitsohl et al., 2015), leaving the brand community or creating split-off communities (de Valck, 2007).

3.3 *The dynamic nature of brand communities*

Our analysis of the tensions involved in brand communities suggests that there is a constant push and pull between brand and members in order to cope with them. As a result, brand communities tend to navigate along a spectrum that ranges from brand-managed to member-managed brand communities. When there is an imbalance of perceived benefits, either party may attempt to pull the brand community to its side, thereby increasing its benefits, or push it away, thereby decreasing the other party's benefits in an attempt to achieve a balance and alleviate the tensions. Our research suggests that this movement prompts a reaction from the other party, leaving the brand community in constant flux (figure 2).

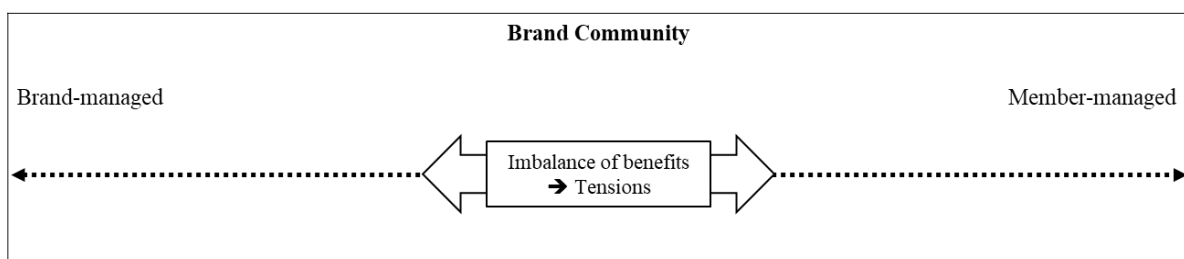


Figure 2: *Brand community spectrum, source: Authors*

We analysed various instances where movement along the spectrum was described in the selected articles: The Nike runners' community, previously a purely member-managed community, was then adopted by a commercial brand (i.e., Nike), through which many benefits for the brand emerged but also many tensions (Kornum et al., 2017). Another instance of this movement along the spectrum is illustrated by the Harley Davidson sub-groups (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). The Harley Davidson brand community grew substantially, originating internal tensions that led to the creation of spin-offs: The initial brand community turned into an array of groupings ranging from brand-managed to entirely member-managed. A similar development has occurred in the Jeep brand community (Kuchmaner et al., 2019; McAlexander et al., 2002; Schouten et al., 2007). An opposed movement is described in the Apple Newton community (Muñiz & Schau, 2005) which is a brand community previously managed by the brand which has since been abandoned. Thus, the brand community moved towards being an almost entirely member-managed brand community. These studies, inferred from the literature, are examples of dynamic movement along the brand community spectrum.

A parallel exercise consists in analysing the current status of brand communities described in the brand community field. When re-visiting the brand community of the Burning Man festival (Kozinets, 2002), one finds today a very different brand community than the symbiotic “hypercommunity” depicted in the article (Kozinets, 2002, p.20). Members report higher levels of commercialisation, a more prominent brand presence and less member management (Burning Man Festival - 9GAG, n.d.; The Financial Diet, 2022). Therefore, this brand community would be placed today much further to the brand-managed side of the spectrum.

4. Implications:

Based on a comprehensive literature review of the field of brand community research, our study questions the concept of brand communities as featuring symbiotic relationships and mutual benefits between brands and members (Kozinets, 2002; Langer, 2007; Wirtz et al., 2013). Although shared benefits are identified, our research suggests that brand benefits and member benefits are quite distinct. Brand communities efficiently fulfil their purpose if each party derives the benefits it wants and perceives the balance to be fair. As long as each party perceives benefits to be in balance, it continues to engage productively in the brand community (Dessart et al., 2015; Langer, 2007). We suggest that an imbalance of perceived benefits between members and brand originates tensions. In order to alleviate these tensions, both

parties pull and push the brand community along a spectrum from brand-managed to member-managed. This analysis adds to the literature on brand communities by proposing the concept as dynamically moving along a spectrum from brand-managed to member-managed.

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