Overseeing Brands and Client Interaction In Virtual Brand Communities

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Info Article

Abstract

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The creation and significance of virtual brand communities (VBCs) are of great interest to scholars and practitioners alike, given the enormous shifts in the marketplace driven by technology. This essay's goal is to investigate VBCs from the viewpoints of both businesses and consumers. In order to further our understanding of VBCs, the study synthesises the body of existing VBC literature and identifies areas of future focus for VBC research. We are given a conceptual framework that broadens our comprehension of VBCs and customer involvement. There are three hypothesised antecedents of consumer-VBC involvement: brand-related, social, and functional, coupled with the designation of four crucial elements of VBC (finance, governance, internet use, and brand orientation). The primary characteristics of VBCs and the various but connected viewpoints of the organisations and customers involved are examined for the first time in this study.

Mengawasi Merek dan Interaksi Klien Dalam Komunitas Merek Virtual

Abstrak

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Penciptaan dan pentingnya komunitas merek virtual (VBC) sangat menarik bagi para akademisi dan praktisi, mengingat pergeseran besar di pasar yang didorong oleh teknologi. Tujuan dari esai ini adalah untuk menyelidiki VBC dari sudut pandang bisnis dan konsumen. Untuk memajukan pemahaman kita tentang VBC, penelitian ini mensintesiskan literatur VBC yang sudah ada dan mengidentifikasi bidang-bidang yang akan menjadi fokus penelitian VBC di masa depan. Kami diberikan kerangka kerja konseptual yang memperluas pemahaman kami tentang VBC dan keterlibatan pelanggan. Tiga anteseden (terkait merek, sosial, dan fungsional) dari keterlibatan konsumen-VBC disarankan, bersama dengan identifikasi empat aspek VBC yang penting (orientasi merek, penggunaan internet, pendanaan, dan tata kelola). Karakteristik utama VBC dan berbagai sudut pandang yang berbeda namun saling terkait dari organisasi dan pelanggan yang terlibat diperiksa untuk pertama kalinya dalam penelitian ini.

JEL Classification: Research Paper

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of our communities is a clear reflection of the profound shift that has occurred in our economy and cultures since the eighteenth century. Consumption communities, formerly unseen, appeared with the introduction of modern marketing and mass media. People have thus established rather distinct consumer identities, linked their identities to the products they purchase, and increasingly predicated their society identities on their consumptive role. Although significant amounts of brand-customer interaction resulted in the creation of the first brand communities (BCs), due to the widespread acceptance of advancements in internet, social media, and mobile technologies, the last ten years have witnessed a growth of virtual business communities (BCs), many of which are now global in scope. Organisations have been forced by these changes to adopt virtual brand communities, or VBCs; by 2012, around half of the top 100 global companies have done so (Manchanda et al., 2012). However, what precisely defines customer participation in such a community is a crucial topic for businesses looking to create an effective VBC. Before getting straight to the topic at hand, we give a brief introduction to VBCs and discuss how they vary from more conventional BCs.

Important traits of VBCs

BCs were first defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) as "a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand". This definition was first published in marketing literature. This definition, which adopts a sociological viewpoint, is based on the idea that a community is a web of social connections characterised by social relationships and mutuality (Bender, 1978). From the standpoint of the customer, a brand is described as the assurance of happiness resulting from a collection of features connected to a transaction (Ambler, 1992). This definition makes the assumption that an item is purchased through a transaction. We adopt the standard in this work that a brand community (BC) is a collection of consumers who think their association with the brand provides value. We exclude other types of interactions individuals may have with brands, such as those between fans and activists. According to these criteria, political groups and organisations like Greenpeace that don't have any customers are likewise excluded.

The above-mentioned customer viewpoint on a brand is very different from the provider's, who usually considers his brand in relation to marketing management initiatives. The provider must consider the brand's name, design, symbol, and any other feature that distinguishes it from rivals (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007, pp. 187–189). Although a business transaction is still necessary in this provider-focused perspective, the emphasis is on selling rather than purchasing. Apart from examining brands as connections between suppliers and customers, De Chernatony and Dal'Olmo Riley (1998) offer an analysis of brands from the

viewpoints of both businesses and consumers. First, they state that the brand of the supplier must have an identity that enables customers to engage with it. Combining these perspectives, we define BCs as a network of connections between brand consumers and providers who prioritise communicating with both the provider and other brand consumers.

According to Muniz and O'Guin (2001), BCs differ from other communities in the following three ways:

1. A common awareness, or the innate bond that participants have with one another. Another way to put it is that individuals "sort of know each other" even if they have never met, there's a "we-ness" about it. This collective awareness is frequently linked to a feeling of distinction from those who are not part of that group.
2. Ceremonies and traditions that preserve the shared past, culture, and consciousness of the group as well as instill specific behavioural standards and values, most of which are centred around common brand consumption experiences.
3. A feeling of moral obligation, or a sense of obligation or accountability to both the community as a whole and to each member personally, is what fosters social cohesiveness and collective action.

According to Muniz and O'Guin (2001), the evolution of contemporary marketing and mass media, which began in the early nineteenth century, is the backdrop against which the formation of brands and BCs occurs. These developments have imitated the characteristics of the long-standing geographic communities, if not exactly mirrored them. This hypothesis contends that a long history of community transformation precedes the emergence of VBCs in modern society. Businesses cannot overlook this growth since customers have been known to initiate VBCs independently of the supplier. Furthermore, certain VBCs could align themselves with rival brands, and the more appealing VBCs might receive assistance from rival companies.

Based on a survey of the literature and discussions with professionals in the field, the following is our interpretation of the characteristics of BCs. We pinpoint four essential characteristics that profoundly influence an VBC:

1. *Brand Orientation.* An VBC's primary emphasis may be the brand itself.
2. *Internet-use.* Both virtual and offline BCs are possible. This article's definition of VBCs includes both fully virtual and virtual/offline hybrid BCs.
3. *Funding and Governance.* VBCs can be fully funded in a number of ways by the business or the enthusiast group. Similar to this, VBCs might be fully controlled either entirely by the brand at one end or by the BC at the other.

The interaction between the first two previously stated dimensions is broadly depicted in Figure 1. The top right quadrant (dark shading) represents the typical VBC, where the brand itself is the community's primary emphasis and its essential value is given through an virtual platform. Offline communities focused on a common interest among its members are in the lower left

quadrant. These communities are outside the purview of this essay and do not sit well within the above-discussed evolutionary development of internet-enabled consumer communities. We go into further detail on the first two VBC dimensions in the next section.

Brand Orientation

Figure 1's vertical dimension depicts the BC brand's orientation. BCs have often placed a great emphasis on the brand itself. Members of these BCs are referred to as "active loyalists" by Gruen and Ferguson (1994) because they frequently have a strong commitment to the brand—almost to the point of passion. The most prominent BCs in literature have vibrant loyalists and distinct brand identities. These consist of the X Owners Groups (HOGs) (Fournier and Lee, 2009) and a few auto companies (Algesheimer et al., 2005).
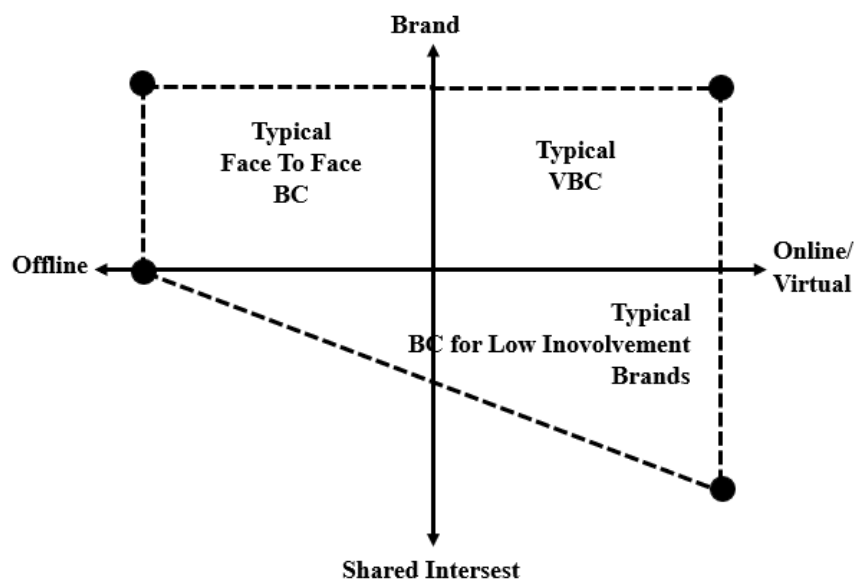
Figure 1.
VBC's modes of interaction and core focus

If brands concentrate on a broader common interest rather than the brand itself, they may also effectively generate VBCs even for brands whose identities seem less defined. A new platform made possible by the internet and mobile technologies allows for the low-cost development of communities and connections. These media also offer a strategic chance to create a BC that might expand a provider's current brand identity. The ensuing virtual community might provide a venue for suppliers and customers to collaborate according to Schau et al. (2009), on the development of fresh value that surpasses the brand's existing identity and value proposition. For example, the VBC of the wheat brand King Arthur Flour is centred on baking in general rather than specific products. This might be as a result of community members' frequent more interest in the social links that come from BCs than they are in the brands

themselves," as noted by Fournier and Lee (2009, pp. 106–107).

Virtual As Opposed To Offline BCs

Many BCs were initially introduced before the internet and only later developed virtual capabilities and visibility. For example, the 1983-founded X Group has grown to include both live events and a robust virtual community. Similar to this, Lego created virtual spaces for the numerous offline Lego fan organisations. The organisations have now come together to form a worldwide VBC (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). When this is seen to be of additional value, a BC that is begun today may likewise evolve in reverse, beginning virtual before a real-world dimension appears. Members could appreciate getting together in person after interacting virtual for a while, and they might also take part in activities like baking, cake tasting, or Lego trading that aren't possible to do virtual.

The boundary between an individual's virtual and offline presence will likely become one of their most distinctive characteristics as social media and the internet continue to grow quickly and profoundly influence ideas of identity and community. To illustrate the contrasts and novel aspects of VBCs, Table I presents the salient features of strictly offline and purely virtual communities. One important finding from Table I is that VBCs are different from offline BCs in that they are more widely available and less expensive. One the single hand, the VBC allows its members to hide a large portion of who they are and to simply take a passive

role in interactions, to contribute very little to the preservation of customs and rituals, as well as to the emergence of a feeble sense of moral obligation (for a discussion of the actions of "lurkers") (see, for example, Preece et al., 2004). The virtual element makes involvement significantly more active than it would be in the absence of such a useful medium, even though this severely undermines the community. Additionally, it makes it possible for relationships to develop amongst community sections that may not otherwise have the chance to engage.

From The Viewpoint Of The Consumer, VBCs

Consumers hope to receive benefits from the business and its brands when they take part in a VBC. Positive interactions with these brands strengthen the relationship between the consumer and the brand (Algesheimer et al., 2010). Brand loyalty and customer advocacy are the results of active involvement, which takes the shape of participation, referrals from other VBC members, and membership continuation (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Customers who actively engage in these business clubs (BCs) are more likely to be open to embracing consumers are more inclined to pick a company's new products than competing brands (Thompson and Sinha, 2008). The factors that influence consumer-VBC engagement, the intermediaries in the link between these factors and real engagement, and the effects of VBC engagement on consumers and brands, and the company are all included in the

conceptual framework for VBCs that we propose in this section.

Virtual Participation In BC

The term "VBC engagement" describes the beneficial impact of customers who identify as VBCs. This is characterised as the customer's innate desire to engage and collaborate with additional community members. According to Algesheimer et al. (2005), VBC participation implies that members are eager to assist one another, engaged in group activities, ... prepared to act freely in ways that benefit the community and raise the value of the VBC for others as well as themselves. While Algesheimer et al. (2005) define BC involvement as essentially an attitude (showing interest in), we contend that real participatory behaviour is also necessary. The results of van Doorn et al. (2010), who assert that customer interaction transcends attitude, are in line with this and that its behavioural expression towards a company or brand (beyond purchase) is the outcome of the consumers' motivating motivations. The authors state that there is a wide range of customer interaction practices, such as word-of-mouth referrals, consumer assistance, blogging, review writing, and even filing a lawsuit (van Doorn et al., 2010). A few of these actions are ideal inside the framework of VBCs. Thus, according to Brodie et al. (2011a), VBC involvement is defined as an identification with the VBC that leads to active participation in the VBC.

Customers may usually easily join an VBC and establish connections with other members. With little membership fees and exit obstacles, they are able to keep their privacy and stay anonymous (Table I). But persuading individuals to join an VBC necessitates knowing the route that customers take when interacting with companies and other VBC members. Three fundamental brand-related motivations that encourage customer participation in VBCs have been identified.

Drivers Connected To Brands

Brand Identification

The social construct of brand identification pertains to the assimilation of one's perceived brand identity into one's self-identity. According to Hughes and Ahearne (2010), a person's brand identity is the culmination of their brand relationships that offer them practical benefits, affective, and self-expressive. The customer's involvement and ties to the community may precede this kind of identification. For example, Algesheimer et al. (2005) investigate brand identification among European automobile clubs and discover that associating with brands and associated BCs positively impacts BC participation. The clients have a strong innate desire to interact and work together with other community members. Therefore, the authors propose that developing a strong relationship with a brand might motivate consumers to look out and interact with other passionate, like-minded customers. Furthermore, it is expected that a preexisting brand identity will aid while integrating and recognising the BC (Algesheimer et al., 2005). This suggests that brand enthusiasts who are already familiar

with and invested in the brand would find the BC more appropriate and useful.

The Symbolic Role Of Brands.
Consumers who wish to fulfil the symbolic role of the brand may choose to take part in a BC. One essential component of brand identification that frequently transcends the typical range of correlations is symbolic meaning (Aaker, 1996). Some companies, like Z, Y, and X, become renowned in part because of their symbolic value. According to Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroeder (2008), a community might serve as a platform for members to show their dedication and reinforce the meaning of such brands.

Social Motivators

Social Benefits.
According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), the VBC-facilitated community contact offers its members a greater range of social and affective advantages, just like a conventional community would. Customers frequently engage in community activities in order to ask for and get support from more participants (Dholakia et al., 2009). For example, sellers frequently exchange information on dishonest bidders, identify pricing patterns, and offer tips on how to effectively post an auction in the eBay Help Forums. In these situations, social talks and support discussions are connected (Dholakia et al.,2009). VBC members become closer to one another as a result of these encounters, and they later start to have a stronger sense of community. Members' perceptions of

the social advantages from these contacts are also raised, which raises their level of participation in the VBC.

Social Identy.
As to the social identity hypothesis, an individual's self-concept is shaped by their psychological involvement in various social groups. The goal of most people is to feel good about themselves, and being a part of a social group can help them achieve this. Members of social groups use in-group and out-group comparisons to preserve and reinforce their social identities (Hughes and Ahearne, 2010). The interactions between customers who create social groups because they identify with the same brands have been the explicit subject of research on BCs. This kind of research usually emphasises on the collective self, or the self that is assimilated into a larger community or collective (Lam et al., 2010).

Several well-known consumer groups have grown to be so powerful bonds among its members that members now use brand affiliation as a means of expressing their individuality. Even companies that haven't achieved legendary stature might encourage individuals to become a member of a community using a personal identity method; the HOG is one such example. For instance, these businesses have the ability to create a community centred on a cause marketing campaign, wherein individuals join primarily because they identify more with the cause than the brand. Customers' identification with the brand will be strengthened, for example, if they are health-conscious. They may show their

ideals by participating in walkathons or signing petitions to fund health initiatives in poor nations.

Functional Drivers

Factors that affect the performance or functional outcome of a system, product or service.

Functional Benefits.
Functional improvements are frequently the result of a client receiving direct, information-based help from the VBC (Dholakia et al., 2009). VBC members have access to a wealth of combined experience. They provide details about a range of topics, such as whether or not to make a particular purchase and which products are recommended and why, probable reasons for issues that could arise, workable fixes, and general advice on how to utilise things (Dholakia et al., 2009).

Uncertainly Avoidance.
According to Adjei et al. (2010), VBCs may play a significant role in helping a consumer feel more at ease about a purchasing choice, according to the uncertainty reduction theory (URT). According to URT, partners interact and seek information to ease each other's discomfort during an early period of a relationship characterised by a great deal of uncertainty (Weiss et al., 2008). According to Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008), BCs help by assuring consumers of the product's quality, which lessens discomfort and worry. Even in cases when the information seeker considers herself to be an informed and skilled product user,

this uncertainty reduction function can still be beneficial (Adjei et al., 2010; Mattila and Wirtz, 2002).

Information Quality.
Participants in the OCB experience advantages that are mostly determined by the calibre of the data they are provided (Dholakia et al., 2009). In a well-established VBC, community members may easily resort to one another for brand-related information (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Members' learning is facilitated by access to current, broad-based material, and Open and Distance Certificates (VBCs) are well positioned to provide interactive learning and communications for knowledge integration and gathering (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007; Porter and Donthu, 2008). According to Hung et al. (2011), VBCs offer a high degree of information trustworthiness.

Both explicit normative incentives and monetary ones.
Businesses sometimes use financial incentives like price reductions, loyalty points, and random giveaways to boost engagement and involvement in their VBCs. All categories of community members have demonstrated to have higher short-term engagement intentions when given monetary incentives; however, the effect is greater for passive members than for active ones (Garnefeld et al., 2012). However, the long-term intentions of active virtual community members to engage tend to decline in response to monetary benefits, i.e., an extrinsic motivation. Because of this, active members experience a long-term

crowding-out effect, which trades the immediate benefits of a financial incentive for a longer-term decline in engagement. However, as passive members do not suffer The advantages of the financial reward do not diminish for them over time due to a long-term crowding-out effect.

Normative incentives that are explicitly articulated, such as calls to maintain reciprocity and solidarity rules or to strive towards a common goal, highlight the community's normative standards and so incite or heighten feelings of obligation among its members. The active community members' intentions to participate in the short term are increased by these benefits, but their intentions to post in the long run are not much affected. According to Garnefeld et al. (2012), these clear normative incentives also don't make passive community members more eager to give back either now or in the future, to the community.

Moderators of the connection between VBC involvement and drivers.
It is suggested that a variety of factors modify the association between the drivers and VBC involvement. These are covered in the section that follows.

Components of the product.
1. Product involvement: Participants engage in BCs to the degree that their knowledge of the product is evident. Pre-purchase searches for high-involvement purchases are usually rather thorough (Arnould et al., 2002). Customers feel obligated to discuss their consuming experience when they make such a purchase

with others and they want to feel linked beyond the instant of consumption (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Finding, interacting with, and exchanging ideas with like-minded people is made possible by VBCs (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). Consequently, the degree of customer interaction with the product will determine how strongly or weakly the consumer engages with an VBC.
2. Product complexity: When it comes to sophisticated products, information from a VBC is often more persuasive and beneficial than information provided by the manufacturer (Adjei et al., 2010). When assessing complicated items, consumers must put in more work (Johnson and Payne, 1985). Therefore, we anticipate that when presented with a less complex product, consumers would try to simplify the decision-making process by placing greater reliance on the data provided by other VBC members (Adjei et al., 2010). Therefore, we propose that the influence of the drivers on VBC involvement will be moderated by the complexity of the product.

Situational aspects of OCB.
1. Size of VBC: The bulk of VBC members socialise in small groups, usually with little more than 10 close friends in each. These buddies have stronger interpersonal ties than those in big BCs since they contact with each other in person on a regular and frequent basis (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). Additionally, members of small group BCs typically exhibit a stronger desire to

participate for social purposes and a stronger sense of community. According to Dholakia et al. (2004), they exhibit higher levels of involvement, normative pressure, and overall connection quality with the group. Because of this, small group BCs are very sociocentric, with members who strongly identify with the brand as well as with the group, and who often find it difficult to distinguish between group social activities and brand-related activities since they overlap.

People in large BCs are more inclined to identify with the community as a whole than with any particular person (Dholakia et al., 2004). It's possible that people seek membership in these huge groups for utilitarian rather than social reasons. In a big group, for instance, it could be simpler to locate an expert who can address a specific product-related issue than in a smaller one. Conversely, individuals within this kind of group are probably going to feel less a part of the BC. Businesses may wish to exploit small group effects considering that VBC size acts as a modulator of VBC participation, to enhance VBC involvement. Making smaller subgroups that are linked by common interests or geography might be one method to achieve this.

2. VBC governance: According to Adjei et al. (2010), there is a basic contextual difference amongst VBCs in terms of who manages their websites and how. Customers' opinions of the reliability of information sources vary between independent, community-governed VBCs and firm-governed VBCs, which were established to market the company's products and unite customers with similar brand-specific interests (Figure 1). Customers believe the latter to be less biassed, which is not unexpected, according to one research (Xue and Phelps, 2004). Therefore, We propose that the reliability of information perceived by consumers is worse for corporate-governed VBCs than for member-governed VBCs.

3. In the context of communication exchange, the value of information relates to how much the information influences the product under consideration, either favourably or unfavourably (Adjei et al., 2010). In their talks, VBC members share both positive and bad information. Research has generally shown that negative information has a greater impact than positive information because it is more uniquely encoded in memory (Ba and Pavlou, 2002). On the other hand, research indicates that when it comes to VBCs, positive information has a greater impact than negative information. (Adjei et al., 2010). This is because it gives customers the crucial reassurance that their choice is appropriate before they make a purchase. While community members may disseminate bad information, companies with VBCs can take heart from the fact that good information has a greater impact. It implies that companies who offer superior goods and first-rate client support may not need to worry as much about the bad information that is shared virtual as long as there are a enough amount of positive comments made as well.

Aspects pertaining to customers.
1. According to Adjei et al. (2010), Customer expertise is the extent to which an individual considers herself to be knowledgeable, capable, skilled, and experienced. High expertise customers typically place less weight on information from other consumers than do less knowledgeable consumers (Punj and Staelin, 1983; Mattila and Wirtz, 2002).

In contrast, member communications reduced product uncertainty even when information seekers believed they possessed in-depth product knowledge and competence, according to a research on VBCs (Adjei et al., 2010). A more thorough investigation showed that personal competence and communication quality interacted. To be more precise, individuals with high competence tended to ask more focused, technical enquiries, while those with low experience tended to ask more generic, wide queries. Additionally, it was shown that seasoned consumers digested information more effectively and efficiently than inexperienced ones, and they were also better suited to sort through vast volumes of information. We thus propose that VBC interaction is moderated by customer expertise and information level.

2. It has been demonstrated that VBC members' acceptance of new items is influenced by the length of their membership. In particular, Longer-term members are more likely than short-term members to embrace a new product from the preferred brand and to do so sooner.

Additionally, long-term members embrace new items from rival companies less frequently and do so more slowly (Thompson and Sinha, 2008).

Results of VBC Customer Interaction

VBC Outcomes
Participating in an VBC may lead to a variety of benefits for the consumer, such as improved trust and dedication to the VBC, customer happiness, and continued involvement in the VBC.

Dedication and desire to stay involved in an VBC.
An VBC's long-term existence is largely dependent on its members' dedication and ongoing involvement in community relations. Due to the ease with which members can convert to a different VBC virtual, such dedication and involvement are especially crucial. To ensure life and longevity, members must be unified and possess a strong feeling of belonging (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). Numerous research works have verified that the involvement of VBCs has a good impact on community engagement (Jang et al., 2008; Casaló et al., 2007). The beneficial impact of VBC engagement on participants' intentions to remain community members is further supported by an examination of a sizable data set from research involving VBCs (Woisetschlager et al., 2008).

VBC loyalty and contentment.
Through participating in an VBC, customers aim to learn more and engage with others more. Customers are likely to be happy with an VBC when

it meets or beyond their expectations in accomplishing these aims (Woisetschlager et al., 2008). Customer satisfaction with the VBC directly influences their inclination to engage in behaviours like promoting the brand, telling people about it, and sticking with it when making purchases.

Additionally, customers' knowledge-driven interactions with other members reinforce in-group awareness, and their active participation raises their level of pleasure with the social connection and information they get from VBCs (Schouten et al., 2007). Long-term membership retention has also been demonstrated to be a result of stronger community involvement (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Therefore, we propose that a high level of VBC participation positively affects the satisfaction and loyalty of community members to the VBC.

Brand results

Engaging customers in active involvement in VBCs would likely benefit the brand by fostering greater brand commitment, brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, and fervent brand engagement.

Engagement and dedication to a brand.

Strong brand commitment and vested interest in the triumphs and failures of a brand are characteristics of consumers with strong VBC dedication (Kim, J.H. et al., 2008). (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Therefore, it stands to reason that those who are devoted to an VBC would probably adopt favourable views and actions towards the brand.

It should come as no surprise that a customer's participation in an VBC raises their level of brand engagement overall. Theoretically, consumer engagement stems from the broader field of relationship marketing, which highlights the concepts of interaction and customer experience (Vivek et al., 2012). "The cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the web site or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value" is how Mollen and Wilson (2010, p. 5) described brand engagement in virtual contexts. In addition to the instrumental value that may be received from encounters with the brand, brand engagement encompasses an interactive connection with the brand and needs the perception of experience value.

Brand loyalty and pleasure.

From the perspective of the consumer, the accomplishment of requirements and the enjoyment of the activity itself serve as the driving forces behind engagement behaviours. According to Brodie et al. (2011b), customer participation and a number of brand relationship outcomes, including loyalty, emotional commitment, trust, and satisfaction, are highly correlated. Therefore, it seems sense to believe that a customer's pleasure with a brand will rise if their interaction with an VBC adds value. Furthermore, it is anticipated that strategic actions aimed at improving relevant client brand-engagement levels would result in improved customer loyalty (Hollebeek, 2011). According to McAlexander et al. (2002),

interacting with a brand's BC can increase brand loyalty even more.

In the context of British Columbia, higher levels of community participation are positively correlated with membership retention and intentions to suggest others (Algesheimer et al., 2005). This is supported by Kim and Jung (2007), who claim that two important possible results of community involvement are word-of-mouth and community loyalty. Therefore, we suggest that consumers' participation in VBCs will increase their brand loyalty.

From an organisational standpoint, VBCs

Numerous patterns indicate that organisations should seriously contemplate the creation and administration of VBCs. According to Kim, J.H. et al. (2008) and Shankar et al. (2003), more and more people are relying on the internet to research products and make purchases. This is especially true for members of Generation Y, who are individuals born between 1981 and 1999. They are the first generation to have lived their whole lives in the digital era. (Bolton et al., 2013). 32.7 percent of people use the internet globally, and this percentage is rising yearly. Internet use increased by 528.1 percent between 2000 and 2011. In line with this, an increasing number of individuals are using VBCs as a forum for idea sharing and exchange. On the other hand, not much study has looked into VBC-related difficulties from an organisational standpoint (Porter et al., 2011).

VBCs' benefits to organisations
Because they improve the organization's interaction with individuals, VBCs are a significant new development for organisations (Fournier and Lee, 2009). Customers of the company are not the only people affected by this trend; everybody involved in the market, including staff members, customers of rival companies, and industry experts, should also be concerned. Organisations gain from customers' VBC participation in four key ways overall.

First, VBCs provide a valuable source of consumer data that will support the organisation in its market research since members freely share their thoughts and experiences with branded items (Kim, J.W. et al., 2008; Kozinets, 2002). The VBC makes unprecedented levels of "access to the voice of loyal customers" conceivable (Kim, J.W. et al., 2008, p. 409). Promoting communication between the company and its customer base can help identify the advantages and disadvantages of both newly launched and well-established goods and services (Kumar et al., 2013). According to Kim, J.H. et al. (2008), VBCs may therefore assist organisations in gaining insight into customer wants, desired aspects of new goods, and trends for the development of future products or services.

One additional advantage of VBCs and social media usage in general is the potential for cultural transformation inside an organisation. According to Kim, J.H. et al. (2008), VBCs may foster communication across many departments engaged in the creation of

a new product and produce significant insights that aid in expanding the scope of marketing initiatives. More opportunities for departmental and geographic collaboration frequently translate into higher output and fewer shortcomings (Benhoff and Li, 2008). For instance, Given that they are now on the same platform and can therefore clearly see consumer demand, marketing, and product development teams may argue less over priorities (Benhoff and Li, 2008).

Third, brands gain from VBCs. It has been discovered that participation in virtual communities improves brand commitment and the relationship between customers and the brand. Members of virtual communities also form greater connections with the brand than do customers who don't participate (Kim, J.W. et al., 2008). Stronger VBC involvement is likely to lead to more intense brand engagement, better brand satisfaction, brand trust, commitment, loyalty, and advocacy, all of which contribute to improve brand equity, as was covered in the section on consumer behaviour.

Ultimately, it has been discovered that VBCs are useful instruments for affecting sales. They are useful tools for keeping both seasoned and inexperienced customers (Adjei et al., 2010) and directly positively impact the propensity to make an instant buy (Blazevic et al., 2013). Indirectly, the higher brand equity can enhance brand performance even more. It has been demonstrated that brands with more equity may demand larger price premiums, benefit from better trade

support and collaboration, and communicate more effectively, among other things (Keller, 2008).

Problems with overseeing VBCs

The emergence of an VBC also poses a number of obstacles to organisations and their brands, even if a sizable percentage of the science and even popular literature that is now available highlights the many potential and advantages VBCs provide. For instance, VBCs may attract discussions and remarks that are critical of the brand. Users can publish information on the VBC regarding the brand's product's detrimental effects on socially conscious concerns. Amway and the "Boycott Y Company Product" website are two targets of anti-band communities (Maclaren and Catterall, 2002). A small number of users may control the majority of the communication in these communities, voicing their opinions on topics unrelated to the brand.

Because an VBC's members have a strong mental association between the brand and the community, everything that happens there is tied to the brand. As a result, connections that are not intended are formed if anti-brand remarks and conversations occur, and the VBCs themselves may cause a diminution of brand equity (Buchanan et al., 1999). Handling this is a particularly challenging and delicate responsibility since for the community to work properly, its members must feel free to voice their ideas. VBC members aspire to be actively involved in the community and engage freely, in addition to having comparable interests (Kim, J.W. et al., 2008).

Virtual and offline BCs are already common for many companies. Confusion results from non-conforming virtual and offline messages, which might lessen the potency and distinctiveness of any prior connections. Consequently, it is ideal to maintain consistency at all communication levels. This is challenging to do in an VBC, though, particularly if members rather than the firm rule the organisation.

Developing suitable knowledge and allocating adequate resources are also necessary for managing an VBC. More significantly, it necessitates a desire to collaborate across functional boundaries and an organisational commitment at all levels (Fournier and Lee, 2009). Brand managers should be in charge of overseeing the VBCs even if they cannot be fully handled and are not company assets (Fournier and Lee, 2009). They ought to do this by providing support and taking the place of authority with a sensible balance of structure and adaptability. Since we are co-creators of the community, they ought to support and foster VBCs by establishing and preserving the circumstances necessary for communities to flourish. Benhoff and Li (2008) underline that social applications, particularly VBCs, necessitate adaptability and agility from their developers in line with this logic. Adjei et al. (2010) discovered, more precisely, that improving the calibre of information exchanged within the community should be the primary emphasis of VBC management and governance. This is a far more significant

and difficult issue for VBCs than it is for offline BCs.

VBCs operate in a virtual environment where its members might choose to remain anonymous, as shown in Table I. This presents more difficulties since there is less moral obligation on participants to act and engage in ways that are morally just than there would be in an offline BC. Furthermore, individuals from all over the world who speak and interpret information differently might be included in the VBC, which can occasionally lead to misunderstandings.

Another difficulty that is essential to an VBC's success is customer involvement (Fournier and Lee, 2009). According to Porter et al. (2011), encouraging collaboration and encouraging involvement should come after a thorough understanding of the demands and motives of the customer. There can be no real link between the company and the community unless there is a co-ownership component to the brand. As a result, it is crucial to involve the community so that people are aware of the organization's inner workings. Establishing appropriate channels of communication between customers and staff is the first step in this process. "Without organisational skills that connect the outside-in 'customer to employee' experience with the inside-out 'employee to customer' experience,' co-creation of value with clients would be challenging to do.," states Ramaswamy (2009, p. 33). The author also stresses the value of empowered staff members who can contribute to the problem-solving

process for customers. Since the co-producers' shared experiences leave a lasting impression on each other, staff engagement is crucial for a community in addition to customer engagement.

In general, communication within the community determines whether and to what extent the organisation and its brand(s) profit from VBCs and endure any potential drawbacks.

Establishing organisational goals for the VBCs

Based on their resources, competencies, and overarching strategic aims, organisations set the goals for their VBCs. Our analysis suggests that VBC goals may be roughly divided into four groups:

1. as a source of innovative concepts to enhance goods and services;
2. as an aid in modifying the corporate culture;
3. to enhance consumer connections and brand image; and
4. to boost revenue.

While it is possible to pursue all four goals at once, most businesses would benefit from setting priorities, especially if they are strapped for cash. The difficulties in managing VBCs should also be addressed by such a strategic prioritisation.

In conclusion, we advise businesses to take the initiative to create and maintain their Open-ended business contracts (VBCs) since the advantages of doing so significantly outweigh the risks (Adjei et al., 2010).

Summary, Conclusions and Future Research

This section summarises the main results of the research conducted, the main conclusions drawn from the results, as well as some limitations that can be improved by future research.

Summary and Conclusion

The value that consumers, users, and providers place on building connections with brands unites them, and this study emphasises the role that VBCs play in enabling these networks. Four factors—brand orientation, internet use, finance, and governance—were found to have a major impact on the form of VBCs. Figure 1 illustrates how the first two dimensions interact. Table I lists some of the distinctive features of VBCs and compares the features of completely virtual and totally offline BCs. The most significant factor is the virtual vs offline continuum, which has several consequences for BCs. The potential financial and governance configurations for VBCs are depicted.

Customers' interactions with an VBC typically foster interactivity that is advantageous to both parties. The foundation for the VBC drivers in this study—brand-related, social, and functional—as well as the outcomes—VBC- and brand-related and potentially moderating elements of the interaction between them—are shown.

Important elements pertaining to VBCs are also examined in this study from a corporate standpoint. Companies should take the initiative to assist in the creation and growth of their VBCs as they offer insightful information on how consumers see their offerings. This kind of knowledge enables the creation of

new goods with greater levels of value and develops a company culture that is customer-centric and prioritises building strong relationships with customers in order to increase sales.

Further Research

Following the presentation of a compelling conceptual framework for understanding VBCs,, the models shown in Table I and Figures 1 should be tested and refined. Based on our literature evaluation and conceptual framework, we have determined the following specific study priorities:

- Test empirically the distinctions between offline and virtual BCs as shown Table 1. Examine the best times and methods for businesses to integrate their virtual and physical BCs.
- Analyse when VBCs should be more generally focused on relevant shared interests and when they should be primarily focused on the primary brand (Figure 1).
- Examine the factors that indicate when it is better for the company to control the VBC and when the customer should take charge. Analogously, investigate methods for figuring out how much money should be allocated to the company and the consumer.
- Examine the moderators and drivers of VBC involvement empirically. Examine the situations and methods in which VBCs may foster connections both between the brand and its customers.
- Examine the effect of VBC involvement on brand performance empirically.
- Create a reliable and valid scale to gauge VBC involvement.

Rapid technological advancements that provide instantaneous visual communication may be leveraged to foster increased social consciousness and customer involvement. Regarding the impact of visual communication channels like tablets and smartphones on improving consumer engagement with VBCs, we know relatively little (Lariviet al., 2013). How VBC members use new technology to engage and connect with their communities should be the subject of future research.

The field of consumer insight is another crucial one. For example, we need to understand how to segment customers based on their likelihood of engaging with VBCs and what motivates them to do so. What functions do personality traits, individual histories, and cultural distinctions serve in this kind of division? By providing answers to these queries, businesses would be better able to target the most prospective customers and develop a value offer specifically for their VBC engagement.

The main reason why most businesses are interested in VBCs is the idea that customers develop a personal relationship with the brand. To determine the most crucial processes for sustaining a community-brand relationship that enables customers to feel close to and emotionally engaged with the brand, more study is required. Future studies can also create contingency models to help in decision-making on the best finance plan, governance framework, and organisational structure for an VBC's growth and successful operation. What organisational procedures and tactics support the efficient administration of

VBCs, who in an organisation should be in charge of VBC management, and how businesses maintain participation in VBCs without too controlling them are further concerns to consider. It's also critical to look for more inventive solutions to the problems that VBCs frequently confront, such certain members' improper behaviour. By answering these issues, businesses will receive useful advice on how to use their VBCs strategically. This will enable them to create and put into practice efficient brand management plans in the current state of the world economy, virtual social networks are growing more and more significant.

In conclusion, more investigation is necessary to assess the suitability of our suggested frameworks in scenarios with distinct focal points, such as B2B and B2C enterprises, products and services, and profit-oriented vs non-profit endeavours. We hope that this paper will stimulate additional conceptual, theoretical, and empirical study on VBCs because there is a great deal of room for improvement.

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