Drivers of brand community engagement

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ABSTRACT

Brand community engagement is evolving as a prominent relationship marketing variable that yields promising outcomes for the firms. Drawing upon the relevant premises of social exchange theory, this paper proposes a theoretical model portraying the role of online brand community based benefits (experience based and self-esteem based) and the community relationship investment in predicting the levels of brand community engagement.

Data collected through a survey questionnaire technique from 925 members of the firm created online brand communities was employed to test the measurement and structural theory using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling respectively. The empirical results reveal that the customers' experiential and self-esteem based benefits drive their brand community engagement. The perceived community relationship investment of the members also drives their brand community engagement positively. The sequential structural model also supported a positive impact exerted by brand community engagement on brand community commitment and brand loyalty. Additionally, it is observed that the focal brand ownership moderates the effect of community benefits and community relationship investment on brand community engagement.

This study contributes to the nascent academic research on online brand communities and to the existing understanding of the brand community managers in managing customer engagement in online brand communities, thereby of profound theoretical and managerial relevance.

1. Introduction

Firms are increasingly becoming keen on the creation of online brand communities (OBCs) to manage customers because OBCs exert more power and influence on the brands and offer brand relationships a broader meaning (Cova and Cova, 2002; Porter and Donthu, 2008; Fournier and Lee, 2009; Baldus et al., 2015). Brand community relationships (BCR) have been attracting research attention since the inception of OBCs in the marketing literature (McAlexander et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014; Kumar and Nayak, 2018). BCR promise favourable consumer attitudes and behaviours towards the community and the focal brand (McAlexander et al., 2002; Algesheimer et al., 2005) and have enduring strength due to its multifaceted (psychological, emotional, behavioural, social) manifestations than traditional relationship variable like loyalty (Oliver, 1999; Schouten et al., 2007). Due to the aforementioned prominence of relationships formed with the community, contemporary relationship marketing variable like 'engagement' (Dwivedi, 2015) has transcended from brand level to brand community level (see Baldus et al., 2015; Dessart et al., 2016). Brand community engagement (BCE)[1] has emerged as a powerful and influential community relationship variable (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Schau et al., 2009). BCE is defined as the identification with and participation in the brand communities and acts as a strong predictor of community based and brand based relational outcomes like satisfaction with the brand and the community at the same time (Wirtz et al., 2013). BCE is vital for brand community success (Fournier and Lee, 2009) as it reduces the normative community pressure (Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2018) which promotes members to perform favourable voluntary behaviours towards OBCs.

Despite the importance of online brand community (OBC) engagement, the concept remains underexplored in extant brand community research (Zhou et al., 2012; Sierra et al., 2016; Kumar and Nayak, 2018). Marketing Science Institute (MSI) and researchers have repeatedly called for the identification of factors influencing BCE (MSI, 2010, 2014; Hoffman and Novak, 2012). Dessart et al. (2016) call for empirical studies exploring customer engagement with virtual brand

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[1] Brand community engagement (BCE) and Online brand community engagement are used interchangeably to represent customer engagement with OBCs in this study.

communities. Internal customer motivations to their engagement with the community also need to be identified and tested (Simon et al., 2016). Prior studies aiming at exploring community engagement fail to accommodate the aspect of investments made by the owner brands in the OBCs as well (Baldus et al., 2015). All these gaps create a fertile ground to further explore engagement in online brand communities.

In order to address abovementioned gaps, a theory based approach is undertaken and a brand community engagement model is proposed by drawing upon the relevant premises of social exchange theory (SET). It is proposed that the customers tend to reciprocate to the perceived benefits and investments from the community by engaging with the community. The relevant variables were identified considering the existing theoretical evidence. It is observed in the literature that the consumers' needs and motivations to associate with OBCs guide in predicting consumer behaviour in virtual brand communities (e.g. Porter et al., 2011), however, the consumer motivations behind BCE remains largely underexplored. The literature repeatedly highlights the role of consumers'[2] perceived benefits in OBCs, e.g., perceived benefits act as the predictors of consumers' attitudes towards the community (Jung et al., 2014) and perceived benefits drive engagement in OBCs (Wirtz et al., 2013; Zheng et al., 2015). It is believed that experiences (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) and self-transformation (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) based benefits with reference to the brand explains customer-brand relationships to a great length (Trudeau H and Shobeiri, 2016). Building on this premise, the role of experiences and self-esteem (self-transformation) based benefits with reference to the brand communities is proposed as the predictors of BCE that remains largely obscure in extant literature.

Another important driver of BCE is identified as 'community relationship investment'. Brand relationship investment influences brand relationship quality (De Wulf et al., 2001; Shi et al., 2011) that can enhance consumers' behavioural intentions towards the brand, however, the perceived relationship investment has been underexplored in brand community context until now. Brand communities' creation involves substantial monetary and non-monetary resources (funding, appointment of community moderators, resolution of members' problems/issues which require time and effort etc.) to create, communicate, and maintain the relationship with the customers and this perceived relationship investment of OBCs can impact the customers' behavioural intentions and ultimate behaviours in turn. Overall, customers' derived benefits in the community (experiences and self-esteem) and community relationship investment are proposed as the drivers of BCE in this study. To assess the community based and brand based outcomes of BCE, brand community commitment and brand loyalty are proposed as the outcomes of BCE.

It is evident from the literature that all the members in OBCs are not identical and there exists members who own the brands (brand owners) and who don't (non-brand owners) (Kumar and Nayak, 2018, 2019b). Since these groups of members can differ in terms of their perceived benefits and perceived community investment valuation, we split the customers into two groups considering this classification, and thereby propose focal brand ownership in OBCs as a moderator in the relationship between the proposed BCE drivers and BCE in the proposed model. In this way, the objectives of the study become:

- To explore the role of OBC experiences in predicting BCE.
- To explore the role of OBC self-esteem in predicting BCE.
- To explore the role of perceived community relationship investment in predicting BCE.
- To explore the role of BCE in predicting brand community commitment and brand loyalty.
- To test the moderating effect of brand ownership on the effect of

OBC experiences, OBC self-esteem, and perceived community relationship investment on BCE.

The empirical analysis was conducted on the data collected from OBC members and the results adds to the existing theory that the experiential and self-esteem based benefits have a noteworthy role in engaging customers with OBCs in addition to the information based benefits highlighted in prior literature. The role of perceived community relationship investment in stimulating BCE is new to the theory and practice. The sequential framework establishes the role of BCE in enhancing the levels of community commitment as well as the brand loyalty of the customers. The results also establish the role of brand ownership as an influential moderator in OBCs which is another unique contribution of this study. The study has implications for the managers in terms of the identification of variables that can help in stimulating engagement in the OBCs, potential outcomes of engagement, and the external factors to be considered while generating BCE.

The remainder of the article starts with the literature review and covers different sections related to hypotheses development, methodology, results, conclusion, and limitations and future research agenda in chronological order.

2. Literature review and research hypothesis

2.1. Brand community engagement

Brand community engagement has been defined as the holy grail of social media (Habibi et al., 2014). Algesheimer et al. (2005) describe BCE as the "consumer's intrinsic motivation to interact and cooperate with community members" (p. 21). "Community engagement reflects on customers' altruistic behaviours towards other members, dynamic participation in joint activities, and voluntary actions in the support of the initiatives endorsed by the community to enhance community value for oneself as well as for others" (Kumar and Nayak, 2018, p. 66). Wirtz et al. (2013) emphasized on the addition of behavioural dimension to the existing conceptualization of BCE, primarily attitudinal in nature and described BCE as "an identification with the OBC that results in interactive participation in the OBC" (p. 230). This is because the members' active participation in the OBCs literally means creation and sharing of content on a regular basis which leads to their interactions with other members, brands, and/or the owner firm, symbolizing engagement behaviours (Zheng et al., 2015). The behavioural dimension of BCE was also captured by Porter et al. (2011) as a set of behaviours reflecting volunteer participation and cooperation creating value for oneself, other members, and the community creator. Lately, the BCE was described as an outcome of both the internal (customer) as well as external (social) forces (Simon et al., 2016). More recently, Baldus et al. (2015) described BCE as the intrinsic motivation to continue interactions with OBC by following the key role of interactions in brand engagement as proposed by Brodie et al. (2013) in their conceptualization of customer brand engagement in OBCs.

Brand community engagement is important for the sustainability of the community and strategically improving value for the customers (Ray et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2015) as BCE positively influences brand usage intentions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hollebeek et al., 2014), enhances members' participation in OBCs (Martínez-López et al., 2017), and results in community integration and stronger brand relationships (Casaló et al., 2007; Habibi et al., 2014). In view of all these outcomes, academic attention is necessitated to conduct more research on BCE. It has become imperative to identify drivers of BCE that can help the management in deciding upon the variables to stimulate engagement, e.g., Wirtz et al. (2013) have identified brand related, social, and functional drivers of BCE in their conceptual framework. Chan et al. (2014) described community characteristics as antecedents of BCE. Affection with the community motivates OBC members to perform engagement behaviours such as liking, commenting, sharing, etc.

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[2] Members, customers, OBC members are used interchangeably to represent the online brand community members.

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(Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2018).

Despite these notable works, BCE remains in an underexplored state because the drivers of community engagement (e.g. Algesheimer et al., 2005; Dholakia et al., 2004) have turned insufficient over time (e.g. Baldus et al., 2015). The research on the antecedents and consequences of community engagement is scant in extant literature (Sedley and Perks, 2008; Chan et al., 2014) and initial investigations fail to cover the role of perceived investments in the OBCs by the owner brands in engaging customers with OBCs (Baldus et al., 2015). There is a call for research on moderators and consequences of BCE as well (Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2018). Amidst changing business landscape, the motivations to engage in OBCs need to be relooked in order to keep up with the evolving changes (Brodie et al., 2013). Therefore the motivational benefits and perceived investment in the brand community have been explored for its role in engaging customers in the OBCs. This study proposes and tests a community engagement model comprising the antecedents, consequences, and moderators as elaborated in the following sections.

2.2. Perceived customer benefits

'Offering benefits to the customers' has been an influential tactic for brand community success and survival for years (Kang et al., 2007; Kang, 2011). The literature reveals that customers participate in brand communities in the search for functional, psychological, social, and hedonic benefits/needs (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). The extent of entertainment benefits, economic benefits, and social benefits can influence the levels of customers' satisfaction with and loyalty towards the community (Dholakia et al., 2004; Gummerus et al., 2012). The informational benefits and perceived social benefits derived from the community account for customer participation in OBCs (Zhou et al., 2013). The perceived benefits of the brand community drive members' engagement in the community as well (Zheng et al., 2015). The role of experience-based and self-esteem based benefits centred on the brand can be seen in the branding literature where the subjective valuation of the focal object (brand) for further proximity is made on the basis of experiences offered by the brand and the extent of self-esteem it offers to the customers (e.g. Trudeau H and Shobeiri, 2016). OBC is also treated as a home for experiences and self-esteem by customers but community-based experiential and self-transformation benefits remain underexplored in this context. The role of perceived consumer benefits in influencing consumer behaviour, however, can be seen in previous brand community literature (e.g. Jung et al., 2014). Therefore, this study analyzes the role of perceived consumer benefits in BCE.

2.2.1. Experiential benefits in OBCs and BCE

Postmodern customers' consumption is steered not by the functional benefits received from the brand but by the meaningfulness of the brand (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009; De Chernatony, 2010). The experiential dimension of consumption led by sensations, emotions, and fun has become important in shaping the consumer decision making as consumers are making their product/brand related choices on the basis of pleasurable and stimulating experiences attached to the brand (object) (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Brakus et al., 2009; Mishra et al., 2014). To elaborate, to satisfy the experiential desires of the customers, brands should contain a sensory (sense), intellectual (think), affective (feel), behavioural (act), and relational (relate) elements (Schmitt, 1999). Similarly, aesthetics, playfulness, customer return on investment, and service excellence are the experiential values to be offered by a retailer (Mathwick et al., 2001). Explaining the customer brand experience, sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural dimensions have also been grounded by Brakus et al. (2009).

The role of brand community experiences in shaping consumers' beliefs and attitudes is not altogether new in the marketing literature (Schouten et al., 2007). Experiences help customers in satisfying their cognitive and physical needs and in this way experiences help in the establishment of long-term relationships between the two partners (Chang and Horng, 2010). Experiences are one of the potent reasons behind consumers' association and membership to the brand communities and experiences help in increasing the value of the community in the minds of the customers, which is why firms try to offer multiple experiences to the members through brand communities (Payne et al., 2009).

Consumers derive experiential benefits or values from the brand communities (Nambisan and Watt, 2011). Brand communities try to offer customers various experiences through community events, workshops, and games where customers feel warmth, pleasure, excitement, and fun (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). OBC based experiences are primarily rooted in four dimensions, viz., sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural (Martínez-López et al., 2017). These experiences are the part of the larger hedonic perspective of brand communities and members place a higher value on experiences (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Vogt and Fesenmaier, 1998). The experiences or experiential benefits derived from the brand communities (by creating and sharing content, contributing to group discussions, accessing fan pages) enhance the participation levels of the members (Dholakia et al., 2004).

The argument here is that if the benefits of OBCs are perceived as experiential, customers are more likely to engage in community activities. We support this hypothesis from prior literature where the hedonic benefits act as strong determinants of member participation (Kang, 2011). Further support is drawn from the role of perceived customer benefits derived from the OBCs in determining their attitudes and levels of participation in OBCs (Jung et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2015).

H1. OBC based experiences positively influence brand community engagement.

2.2.2. Self-esteem based benefits in OBCs and BCE

Self-esteem is an innate human need and a fundamental element of individual self-concept (Rosenberg, 1979; Sirgy, 1982; Belk, 1988). High self-esteem means someone is accepting his persona (self-certainty); low self-esteem means negative perception about self (Malär et al., 2011). The perception of one's individual self influences his/her behaviour and lifestyle (Wilber, 1996). Self-concept has always played an important role in the marketing literature (Sirgy, 1982; Ferraro et al., 2005). The need for self-esteem has a higher place in the Maslow (1982) hierarchy of needs and motivations; it has been identified as an important self-transformational component defined as the need for self-affirmation, self-worthiness, and feeling good about self.

The concept of individual transformation is embedded in the growth of an individual and the growth perspective deals with the totality of cognitions and skills attained over the period through experiences (Wilber, 1996; Kuhn, 2002). As per (Pine et al., 1999), self-transformation is related to the satisfaction of the highest levels of individual needs and that requires highly inspirational and engaging marketing offers (e.g. brand community). The brands reinforcing consumers' self-concept facilitate meaningful customer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998). Brand consumption enhances the self-esteem of the customers that can strengthen the attachment with the brand, create stronger self-brand connections, and ultimately increases the quality of the relationships (Park et al., 2013; Huang and Mitchell, 2014). Moreover, self-esteem (in relation to the brand) has been identified as an important self-transformational benefit that is critical in shaping the customer-brand relationships (Trudeau H and Shobeiri, 2016).

Individuals always strive for the affirmation of their selves that increases his/her self-esteem (Kunda, 1999). Within the context of an organization, self-esteem reflects the values (benefits) derived from the membership to the group or the feelings of self-worth in the group (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000). The customers who categorize

themselves through brand communities differentiate themselves by positively adhering to the shared values, beliefs, and norms of one community that enhances their self-esteem (Turner et al., 1987). Customers' group self-esteem is assessed through the evaluation with reference to the community (Ellemers et al., 1999) and customers seek self-esteem from OBCs as well (Zaglia, 2013).

It is argued here that the consumers join OBCs to feel good about themselves or self-affirmation (self-esteem), which is achieved for instance, through identification offered by the community. Consumers experience enhancement in their self-esteem in OBCs as brand communities facilitate the identification with the community/brand and facilitate customer-customer interactions (Hogg, 2001; Wilcox and Stephen, 2012). Self-esteem in association with being a part of an OBC (membership) can enhance the engagement practices pertaining to the community (Acar and Polonsky, 2007; Sierra et al., 2016). Also, higher self-esteem among a customer manifests a stronger desire to develop connections with other customers and affirming their self-worthiness (Park and Maner, 2009). Based on these arguments, we contend that consumers' self-esteem based benefits in an OBC can influence their engagement in the community.

H2. OBC based self-esteem positively influences BCE.

2.3. Community relationship investment and BCE

In consumer marketing, 'perceived relationship investment' has been described in the context of retailer-consumer relationships as the retailers' investment of resources (time, efforts) to maintain and enhance relationship with their customers (De Wulf et al., 2001). It is also referred to as the investment made by a salesperson to preserve the relationship with his/her customers (Palmatier et al., 2006). Any investment made in the relationship facilitates the consumers' psychological bond and creates reciprocal intentions and expectations (Smith and Barclay, 1997). Perceived relationship investment has been widely used in marketing literature, viz., perceived retailer (store) investment, perceived relationship investment by a hotel (Han et al., 2011), and perceived brand investment (Zainol et al., 2016).

The creation of brand communities to manage customers makes this aspect peculiar to brand communities where social connections exist among brand admirers (Muniz and Schau, 2005). Moreover, in OBCs, a perception may exist among customers about the community relationship investment that can be defined as an overall perception of the customers about the resource investment made by a brand community to create, maintain, and enhance relationships with the customers or the members. Our argument is that enhanced community relationship investment can account for an increase in the members' engagement in the brand community. Customers joining OBCs are believed to be loyal to the brand or considered having a minimum baseline relationship with the focal brand (Gummerus et al., 2012). When their perceived evaluation of resources invested (time, money etc.) by the community is on the positive/higher side, their tendency to reciprocate to the community by engaging in the community can be well supported on the premise of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). The perceived relationship investment's role in enhancing the relationship quality (De Wulf et al., 2001), relationship commitment (Shi et al., 2011), and customer loyalty (Morais et al., 2004) support our proposition. The overall perceived relationship investment could enhance members' identification with and participation in community activities like the rapid response to the comments, enhanced frequency of interactions and so on.

H3. Community relationship investment positively influences BCE.

2.4. Brand community engagement outcomes

BCE results in community integration and stronger brand

relationships (Casaló et al., 2007). The dual object of foci of engagement in a community is evident in the literature (Dessart et al., 2016) which supports the community based and brand based outcomes of BCE. Members' simultaneous identification with the community and the focal brand in a brand community also supports this dual object aspect (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Following the theoretical framework of OBC engagement of Wirtz et al. (2013), we propose brand community commitment and brand loyalty as potential outcomes of BCE.

Brand community commitment is described as the "degree of strong and positive feelings toward community among members" (Jang et al., 2008, p. 68). Hur et al. (2011) stated that "commitment should be treated as an attitudinal factor that is emphasized when members acknowledge the value of continuing relationships between their community and themselves" (p. 1197). Customers engaging in the community tend to develop interpersonal relationships with other members, which increases the intensity of their social embedment in the brand community (Alon et al., 2002, 2005; Kim et al., 2008). It is also seen that members identifying with the community buy similar brands, develop similar attitudes, follow similar norms, and share similar experiences and values (Hung, 2014). Engaging in various activities in OBCs such as initiating posts, replying to the posts, actively participating in discussion forums, etc., further reinforces their disposition towards the community. Therefore, customers develop a sense of commitment towards the community (Dholakia et al., 2004; Zheng et al., 2015).

Brand loyalty is a desired business outcome supporting the brand repurchases in the face of competition (Oliver, 1999). BCE refers to continuous customer involvement in the activities, which involves direct or indirect interactions centred on the focal brand in the community that may increase the repurchases and recommendation of the focal brand (Raïes et al., 2015). Therefore the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4. BCE positively influences brand community commitment.

H5. BCE positively influences brand loyalty.

The relationship between brand community commitment and brand loyalty can also be seen in prior literature (Jang et al., 2008; Hur et al., 2011; Zheng et al., 2015; Raïes et al., 2015). Considering the relationship between BCE and community commitment, BCE and brand loyalty, and community commitment and brand loyalty, we propose a mediating role played by community commitment in the relationship between BCE and brand loyalty. The mediating role of community commitment in the relationship between community based variables and brand loyalty can be seen in the literature (Jang et al., 2008; Zheng et al., 2015), but remains under-addressed. The argument is that recurring interactions at the heart of community engagement can bolster customer dispositions towards the community where they feel committed to it and to maintain this relationship with the OBC they turn loyal to the focal brand on the OBC.

H6. Community commitment positively influences brand loyalty.

H7. Community commitment mediates the relationship between BCE and brand loyalty.

2.5. Moderating role of brand ownership

The "ownership or purchase of a product or brand is not a prerequisite of engagement or even of community involvement" (Vivek et al., 2012, p. 126). A long held brand ownership and brand loyalty were considered to be the traditional prerequisites behind brand community membership but the OBCs has redefined this belief (e.g. Jang et al., 2008) as the customers can engage with the virtual brand community without having pre-existing brand ownership and loyalty in place. The non-brand owners also engage with the brands (Kumar and Nayak, 2019b) and in a similar fashion, the individuals not owning

brands can engage with OBCs. It is mentioned in the literature that the brand community is such a loose concept such that even a friend of an admirer can become a member of the community (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). This has become possible due to the anonymity and freedom of self-expression offered by virtual connectivity through OBCs (Turkle, 1997). Hence the liberal procedures for OBC membership practically rule out the condition of essential brand ownership and OBCs turn a home for brand owners and non-brand owners both. There is evidence in the literature supporting the presence of brand community members with and without brand ownership (Kumar and Nayak, 2018, 2019b); the non-owner members have been seen participating in 'brandfests' organized by the Jeep brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002).

In the prior literature, the moderating role of brand ownership is seen among the members' participation in online brand communities (Zhou et al., 2013). Drawing upon the widely adopted perspective on OBCs that customers join brand communities only after having a strong disposition towards a particular brand (e.g. Gummerus et al., 2012), which indirectly refers to the brand ownership. We argue that these members possess a more refined understanding of the respective brand community than those who do not own the brand. In this spirit, we argue that the members owning the brand weigh high on their perceptions about the brand community and their behavioural intentions towards the brand communities. This is because the brand is the raison d'etre of an OBC (O'Guinn and Muniz, 2009) and therefore the members who own the brand will act strongly with regard to the experiences and self-esteem based benefits derived from the OBC and the community relationship investment in comparison to non-brand owners. In this way, the ownership of the brand can moderate the influence of perceived benefits in the community and the community relationship investment on BCE or the strength of proposed relationships will weigh higher in the case of brand owners than non-brand owners (Fig. 1).

H8. The relationship between OBC experiences and BCE will be stronger in the case of brand owners than non-brand owners.

H9. The relationship between OBC self-esteem and BCE will be stronger in the case of brand owners than non-brand owners.

H10. The relationship between community relationship investment and BCE will be stronger in the case of brand owners than non-brand owners.

3. Method

3.1. Sample selection

The conceptual model in the study was tested with the information obtained from online brand community members in India. Data was collected through a self-administered intercept survey questionnaire from the students of higher education (pursuing graduation, post-graduation, and PhD) in five universities in India. Selection of the student sample is supported by prior literature on brand community relationships (Jung et al., 2014; Peters and Bodkin, 2018). The rationale behind selecting student sample is that internet works faster in higher educational institutions in India and students are prominent users of the internet and OBCs (Kumar, 2019; Kumar and Nayak, 2019c). Moreover, students remain an appropriate choice for studies in an online context (Ramkumar and Jin, 2019) and a student sample helps in controlling several errors due to its homogeneous nature (Goldsmith, 2002).

A non-probability convenience sampling was employed to select respondents due to time and resource constraints by not using chance selection procedures but the judgement of the researcher (Malhotra and Dash, 2016). The data collection process started in the middle of May'18 and lasted until the end of July'18. The respondents were briefed about the concept of OBCs created by the firms and about the purpose of the study to avert misinterpretation with consumer-created OBCs. The questionnaires were distributed and students were asked to respond by selecting the OBC (created around product brand) they visit quite often.

3.2. Self-selection bias and non-response bias

The non-probability sampling is prone to the risk of biases due to the self-selection of respondents. To tackle this problem, few precautionary measures were taken such as having a respondents' pool
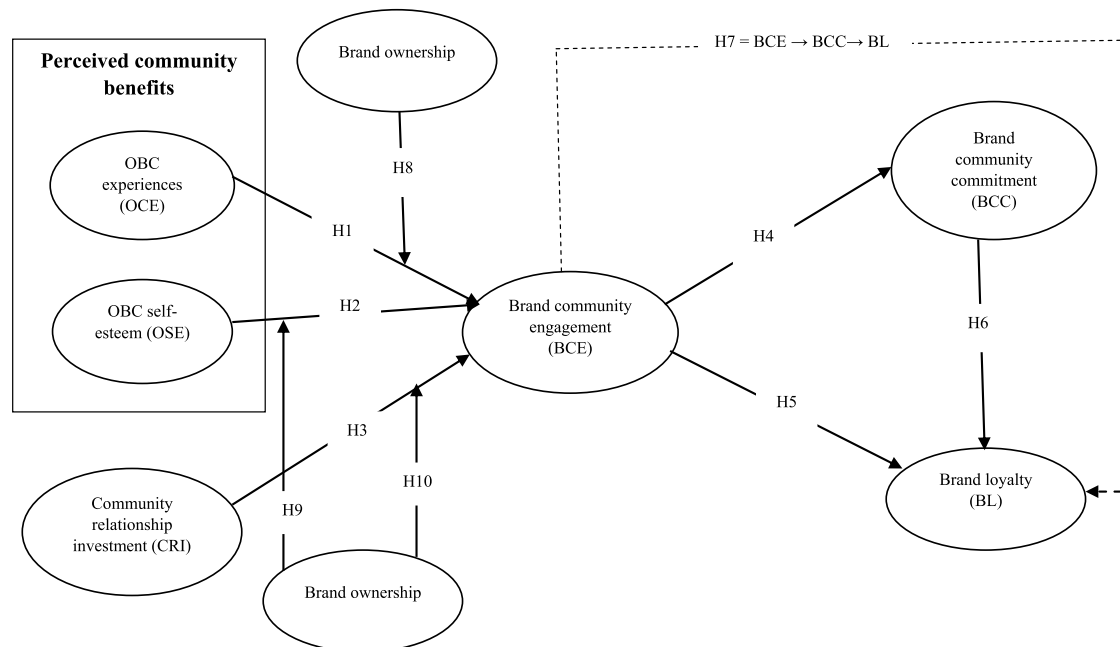

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

containing members who were visiting the OBC very frequently and those less frequently, both. The members with high visiting frequency might have a higher disposition towards the community than those with comparatively lower visiting frequency that may cause a bias towards community engagement. Secondly, the respondents were asked to voluntarily name the OBC they were referring to while undertaking the survey. The brand communities selected by the respondents were cross-verified for its presence on the web to detect any fictitious entries and to avoid the misleading information not meeting the set criterion.

Non-response bias was checked through Armstrong and Overton's (1977) extrapolation method by comparing the early respondents and late respondents. The two groups of 47 respondents each were created; the first group contained the respondents who voluntarily responded to the survey questionnaire and the other group contained those who initially refused but later agreed on the behest of the surveyor. The two groups were compared for the variability in their responses. No significant difference was observed between the means scores for the variables among the two groups that rule out the possibility of non-response bias in the study.

3.3. Data collection and sample details

The survey questionnaire was distributed among 1000 target respondents and 973 agreed to undertake the survey, out of which 946 completed surveys were received. The response rate turned out to be 94.60% and completion rate 97.23%, both being substantially high (Malhotra and Dash, 2016). After screening the data for missing values and unengaged responses, 925 surveys were finally retained for further study. The responses with missing values in the data were not more than five percent of total that did not require further treatment. The final sample contained 73 percent male and 27 percent female students (see Table 1). Owing to the sample type of the study, 93 percent members were aged in the range of 18–30 years and 7 percent in the range of 31–43 years. Out of 925 respondents, 58 percent were pursuing graduation, 31 percent were pursuing post-graduation (masters degree courses), and 11 percent were pursuing their research (PhD). More than 50 percent of the members were visiting the OBCs monthly or more than once in a month. 40 percent of the members visited the community once in three months or once in more than a three months period.

More than 70 OBCs or the brands behind the OBCs were mentioned by the respondents. The OBCs selected by the students were primarily centred on the sports brands (Nike, Adidas, Decathlon), mobile devices (Apple, One plus, Xiaomi, Samsung), and automobiles (Royal Enfield, Harley Davidson, Honda) among others. The brand communities

created around sports, electronics, and automobile brands correspond to the student sample as seen in prior studies (e.g. De Vries and Carlson, 2014). The OBCs selected by the students also appear appropriate from a practical standpoint and provide coverage to a diverse set of brands.

3.4. Measures

The variables in the study were operationalized through existing scales in the literature. However, the items were modified for the latent constructs in consultation with three Marketing Professors to ensure the face validity of the instrument so as to make measures more relevant in the context of the study. The pretesting was carried out on 55 students (OBC members). Following Trudeau H and Shobeiri (2016) we used 12 items from Brakus et al. (2009) to measure OBC experiences, without accounting for the multi-dimensional nature of OBC experiences considering the objective of the study. OBC self-esteem was measured through six items adapted from Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) and community relationship investment was captured through five items borrowed from De Wulf et al. (2001) and Han et al. (2011). BCE was measured through the scale developed by Algesheimer et al. (2005) with slight adjustment; community commitment was measured through items adapted from Hur et al. (2011) and Zheng et al. (2015). Following Jang et al. (2008), brand loyalty was measured through brand repurchase and brand recommendation related items adapted from Zheng et al. (2015). All the items were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 'strongly disagree' (1) and 'strongly agree' (7) where the stimulus objects were rated in an independent, non-comparative manner.

3.5. Data analysis technique

The proposed model involved six latent constructs with multiple measurement and structural relationships. Since the objective was to test multiple dependence relationships simultaneously for the validation of the theory with the data, structural equation modeling or SEM was used following Hair et al. (2010). SEM is a multivariate analysis technique that takes into account the measurement error in the model unlike other multivariate techniques such as multiple regressions; it is recommended for theory testing and suitable in case of large datasets (Malhotra and Dash, 2016). The sample size of this study also permits the usage of multivariate analysis techniques like SEM considering the thumb rule of 1:10 (items: responses) of Hair et al. (2010).

3.6. Common method bias

The behavioural studies where the data is collected from the same set of respondents at one point in time for predictor as well as criterion variables using similar instruments, there is a possibility of variance sharing between variables due to the method rather than the theory and this may cause an error termed as common method bias or common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To tackle the problem of common method bias (CMB) due to the behavioural nature of this study, we took precautionary measures (assuring respondents about response anonymity, eliminating vague and ambiguous questions, randomising questions, and adding reverse coded items to control the automatic flow in responses) (Podsakoff et al., 2003). As a diagnostic measure suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003), we ran Harman's single-factor test as the exploratory approach which resulted in single factor accounting for only 23.01% variance for all variables. Hence a single factor is not sufficient to explain the complete variance which discards the presence of CMB in the study (Malhotra et al., 2006). We also used common latent factor (CLF) as a confirmatory approach in AMOS where the introduction of CLF caused a negligible difference among path coefficients of the two models (with and without CLF). Following this procedure, we concluded that CMB did not cause any problem in our research. The values of the inter-construct correlations found below

Table 1
Sample profile.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	673	73%
Female	252	27%
Age (in years)		
18–30	863	93%
31–43	62	7%
Education (Pursuing)		
Graduation	535	58%
Post graduation	287	31%
Ph.D.	103	11%
Community visiting frequency		
Daily	197	21%
Weekly	203	22%
Monthly	158	17%
Quarterly (three months)	204	22%
More than three months	163	18%
Total	925	

Table 2
Measurement theory testing results.

Construct	λ	α	CR	AVE
OBC experience (Source: Modified from Brakus et al., 2009)				
Being in this online community results in constructive behavioural experiences	0.80	0.88	0.93	0.52
This community makes a strong positive impression on my visual sense or other senses	0.59			
I engage in constructive actions and behaviours within the online community while accessing it	0.61			
This online community is an emotional brand community (i.e., it takes care of its member's emotions)	0.62			
This brand community induces constructive feelings and sentiments	0.85			
I do possess strong positive emotions for this community	0.73			
This community is action-oriented	0.53			
I find this community interesting in a sensory way	0.91			
This community stimulates my curiosity and problem-solving	0.60			
This community make me think positively	0.89			
I engage in a lot of constructive thinking in this online community	0.72			
This community appeal to my senses	0.70			
My experiences with this community are worthless (R)	0.22			
OBC self-esteem (Source: Modified from Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000)				
Being a member of this community …				
I feel confident about my abilities	0.93	0.79	0.94	0.72
I feel that others respect and admire me	0.85			
I feel as smart as others	0.80			
I feel good about myself	0.86			
I feel confident that I understand things	0.79			
I feel aware of or conscious of myself	0.84			
Community relationship investment (Source: Modified from De Wulf et al., 2001 and Han et al., 2011)				
This community makes efforts to keep members associated and loyal	0.75	0.83	0.92	0.69
This community continuously tries to improve its ties with its members	0.83			
This community offers reliable benefit programs and services	0.91			
This community is not bothered about its members (R)	0.17			
This community really cares about its members	0.88			
I am confident that this community provides best deals	0.79			
Brand community engagement (Source: Modified from Algesheimer et al., 2005)				
I benefit from following the community's rules	0.88	0.90	0.94	0.80
I am motivated to participate in the activities because I feel good afterwards or because I like it	0.91			
I am motivated to participate in the community's activities because I am able to support other members	0.86			
I am motivated to participate in the community's activities because I am able to reach personal goals	0.92			
OBC commitment (Source: Modified from Hur et al., 2011 and Zheng et al., 2015)				
I feel a sense of belonging in this community	0.77	0.91	0.93	0.72
I will visit this community continuously	0.91			
I will exchange information and opinions with the members of this community	0.90			
I do not feel like staying associated with this community (R)	0.20			
I feel this community as a part of living	0.84			
I feel attached to this community	0.82			
Brand loyalty (Source: Modified from Zheng et al., 2015)				
I am committed to purchasing the focal brand in this community	0.93	0.85	0.94	0.84
Purchasing from the brand of this community would be likely	0.90			
I would recommend the focal brand in this community to other people	0.92			
I will not refer this community to anyone (R)	0.13			

Notes: All factor loadings (λ) significant at p < 0.01; R = Reverse coded items (removed from the measurement model due to low loadings); α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

0.50 in Table 3 also render support to the absence of CMB (Bagozzi et al., 1991).

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model

Estimation of the measurement model for testing the measurement theory was done through the assessment of the reliability and validity

(see Table 2 and Table 3). The reliability was checked through the composite reliability (CR) measure of the constructs which were found above the cut-off value of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2010). Internal consistency reliability of the latent constructs was also established by finding Cronbach's alpha (α) value above 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010).

Regarding validity, the convergent validity of the indicators was assessed by checking whether the items loading on to their respective constructs are high (λ > 0.50) and significant (p < 0.01) (Hair et al., 2010). Discriminant validity was established by finding that no cross-

Table 3
Descriptive statistics and correlations among latent constructs.

Variables	Mean (SD)	OCE	OSE	CRI	BCE	BCC	BL
OBC experiences (OCE)	5.12 (0.81)	0.72	–	–	–	–	–
OBC self-esteem (OSE)	3.80 (0.73)	0.29*	0.85	–	–	–	–
Community relationship investment (CRI)	4.12 (1.72)	0.35*	0.43*	0.83	–	–	–
Brand community engagement (BCE)	4.75 (1.27)	0.31*	0.29*	0.40*	0.89	–	–
Brand community commitment (BCC)	5.19 (0.98)	0.42*	0.48*	0.33*	0.36*	0.85	–
Brand loyalty (BL)	4.87 (1.89)	0.46*	0.31*	0.38*	0.35*	0.44*	0.92

Notes: Items in bold represent square-root values of AVE scores *p < 0 0.01 (two-tailed).
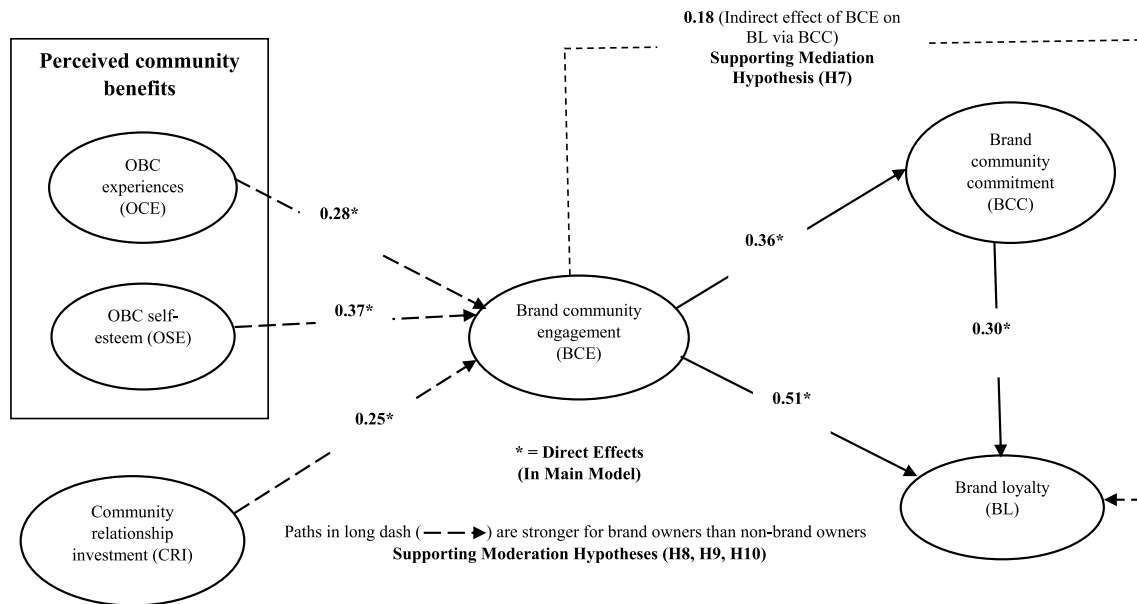
Fig. 2. Estimated model.

loadings are present, i.e., the items are loading on to their respective constructs only as per the existing theory. Another approach for establishing discriminant validity was referred to the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion, where the square root (SQRT) value of AVE score of the latent constructs was compared to their inter-construct correlations (ICC); SQRT(AVE) > ICC established the discriminant validity of the study (see Table 3). It implies that the variance explained by the latent construct in its variables is higher than the variance shared with any other latent constructs. The overall measurement model exhibited a good fit [χ^2/d(f) = 2.95, GFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.065] confirming the adequacy of the measurement model (Fig. 2).

4.2. Structural model

The structural theory testing results are presented in Table 4. The analysis reveals that OBC experiences, OBC self-esteem, and community relationship investment positively influence brand community engagement (β = 0.28; β = 0.37; β = 0.25, p < 0.01), which supports hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 respectively. Subsequently, brand community engagement influences brand community commitment and brand loyalty (β = 0.36; β = 0.51, p < 0.01), supporting hypotheses H4 and H5 respectively. The effect of brand community commitment on brand loyalty also turned significant (β = 0.30, p < 0.05), supporting

H6. The overall model exhibited a good fit [χ^2/d(f) = 1.83, GFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.045].

The mediating effect of brand community commitment between BCE and brand loyalty was checked by testing the model by removing the path (BCC → BL). The resulting model exhibited a comparatively worse fit [χ^2/d(f) = 3.37, GFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.072] than the mediated model. Therefore the role of the mediation path (H7: BCE → BCC → BL) is supported in the model.

The moderating effect of brand ownership was checked through a multiple-group SEM analysis on the subsamples of brand owners (n = 423) and non-brand owners (n = 502) in the total sample. The necessary measurement invariance test was conducted through multi-sample CFA (Hair et al., 2010). The moderation hypotheses (H8 - H10) were tested by creating two structural models for BCE (without BCC and BL) for the individual subsamples. The moderating effect was tested by carrying out a chi-square (χ^2) difference test by comparing the constrained model to unconstrained model; the statistical significance of the difference among path coefficients (β) is tested in this process. The path coefficients between the three antecedents and BCE turned significant for both subsamples and path coefficients weighed higher among the group of brand owners in comparison to non-brand owners in line with the proposed hypothesis (see Table 4). To check the statistical significance of the difference among path-coefficients between two groups, we conducted a chi-square difference test. A change in χ2

Table 4
Structural theory testing results.

Main model (n = 925)			Moderating effect of Brand Ownership			
Hypothesis	β	Result	Hypothesis	β [Brand owners (n = 423)]	β [Non brand owners (n = 502)]	$\Delta\chi$2
H1: OCE → BCE	0.28**	Supported	H8: OCE × Brand Ownership → BCE	0.24**	0.18**	12.28**
H2: OSE → BCE	0.37**	Supported	H9: OSE × Brand Ownership → BCE	0.31**	0.25*	10.55**
H3: CRI → BCE	0.25**	Supported	H10: CRI × Brand Ownership → BCE	0.22**	0.21**	14.03**
H4: BCE → BCC	0.36*	Supported	–	–	–	–
H5: BCE → BL	0.51**	Supported	–	–	–	–
H6: BCC → BL	0.30*	Supported	–	–	–	–
H7: BCE → BCC → BL	0.18**	Supported	–	–	–	–
Construct	R^2					
BCE	0.33					
BCC	0.42					
BL	0.24					

Notes: **p < 0 0.01 (2 tailed) *p < 0 0.05 (2 tailed); β = Standardized path coefficient.

revealed that for brand owners, the relationship between OBC experiences and BCE [H8: $\Delta\chi2$ (1) = 12.28, p < 0.01]; OBC self-esteem and BCE [H9: $\Delta\chi2$ (1) = 10.55, p < 0.01]; and community relationship investment and BCE [H10: $\Delta\chi2$ (1) = 14.03, p < 0.01] are stronger. Hence, the statistical evidence supports the moderating role of brand ownership as proposed. All the five research objectives of this study have been achieved in this process.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Theoretical implications

The simultaneous role of perceived experiential benefits in OBCs, self-esteem based benefits in OBCs, and the perceived relationship investment by the OBC in predicting brand community engagement had been obscure until now to the best of authors' knowledge and this study forwards in that direction. The empirical investigation of brand community commitment and loyalty towards the focal brand as the potential outcomes of BCE observed in this study is also unique. Further, this study pioneers in assessing the role of brand based moderator in the relationship between brand community engagement and its drivers. The moderation effect caused by brand ownership (brand owners and non-brand owners) offers a nuanced picture of the implicit brand related forces in play in the engagement of the customers in OBCs. The model is relatively new to brand community literature as the proposed relationships had neither been explored exhaustively nor tested quantitatively as a whole.

To elaborate, this study establishes the role of two types of community-based benefits over which consumers place high value, viz., experiences based and self-esteem based. The positive influence of experiential benefits and self-transformational (self-esteem) benefits on relationship enhancement is consistent with the prior branding literature (Trudeau H and Shobeiri, 2016). Specifically, the role of experiential benefits in stimulating community engagement is in line with previous studies (Martínez-López et al., 2017). The role of experiences in OBCs remained largely underexplored (Nambisan and Watt, 2011) and this study is a contribution in this direction. This study also adds to the theory that the members feeling high self-esteem in an OBC get highly engaged with the brand community. The positive effect of community based self-esteem on community-centric behaviours (engagement) is endorsed by the findings of prior studies (e.g. Wilcox and Stephen, 2012; Sierra et al., 2016). Therefore, we conclude from the empirical analysis that the benefits or needs of the customers have shifted from traditional informational and socialization (e.g. Jung et al., 2014) to experiential and self-esteem based benefits and gaining traction in the theory. The first two objectives of this study thereby stand achieved.

The third objective of the study was achieved by observing that the perceived relationship investment by the community plays an important role in enhancing the BCE levels. This relationship is supported by the prior studies about the role of perceived investment of an entity/object (brand) in positively influencing the engagement of the customers towards it (object) (Zainol et al., 2016). It is to be noted that the investments made by the OBCs in relationship creation, maintenance, and enhancement have vital importance for the engagement of the customers with OBCs in theory. Until now, the investments made by the brands have gained importance in the literature and relationship investment aspect was missing at OBC level.

On the consequences side of BCE, the OBC based and brand related positive outcomes on this research draws support from the theoretical framework of Wirtz et al. (2013). The influence of BCE on brand community commitment is supported by the claims of Algesheimer et al. (2005) where engaged customers commit to continue their membership to the community. The role of BCE in generating brand loyalty answers to the call of Baldus et al. (2015) to explore this relationship. These outcomes of BCE are in support of the achievement of

the fourth research objective.

The fifth and last objective of the research was met by identifying the moderating role of brand ownership. Brand ownership has been described as an interesting issue in brand communities' context (see Kumar and Nayak, 2019a, 2019b). This study took a concerted view and explored BCE from the lens of brand ownership by considering brand owners and non-brand owners in OBCs. By taking a diversion from the point that engagement is independent of the ownership of the brand (Vivek et al., 2012), current research established a more pragmatic and intuitive view that ownership of a brand helps in strengthening the disposition towards the brand community and enhances BCE. This might be due to the fact that an OBC is an assimilation of members around a brand and brand ownership holds members closer to the community.

In nutshell, the studies conducted on 'OBC engagement' are limited in literature and this research work offers additional evidence to expand its scope in marketing literature.

5.2. Managerial implications

The management is consistently pursuing new tactics to manage brands through brand communities by engaging customers with the OBCs (Baldus et al., 2015). Current research offers management with relevant variables to focus upon to achieve brand community engagement because it can lead to favourable (for firm) community based as well as brand based outcomes, viz., brand community commitment and brand loyalty. Therefore, the study has promising implications for marketers tasked with brand community management.

It has been a while since OBCs are being considered as a vibrant source of informational and social benefits (Zhou et al., 2013; Jung et al., 2014), but the management needs to take a leap forward and build a new narrative around OBCs where OBCs are promoted as a home for experience-based and self-esteem based benefits. Considering the findings of this study, the marketers are advised to design strategies aimed at stimulating members' experiences and self-esteem. Marketers can do so by inviting customers to participate in online interactions such as brand related quizzes, offering experiences as well as strengthening their self-beliefs, organizing offline sponsored events, organizing trips on a lottery basis and many more. A feedback mechanism can be helpful that captures the level of these benefits as derived to select activities aimed at offering experiences and self-esteem inside OBCs. Customers experience positive self-esteem when they are recognized and appraised by others (Roberts et al., 2014). This may include the community owners or other members in the OBCs. Therefore, the OBC administrators should regularly praise, appraise, support, acknowledge, and reward the contribution the members are making in the community individualistically and they should make OBCs a place where the customers get recognition and reward for their being (acts) (which rarely happen in OBCs due to a large number of members). The OBC managers need to introduce mechanisms to curtail unwanted criticism and similar dysfunctional behaviours in OBCs that may interfere with positive experiences of others (Verhoef et al., 2009) and may result in negative self-esteem of the customers.

It is also recommended to the management to make the brand community investment more apparent in protecting and preserving relationships with the customers. It is seen in literature that brand communities should be steered and brands will follow thereon (Fournier and Lee, 2009). The key recommendation from this study is that the managers need to strategically mobilize resources (financial or non-financial) towards OBC relationship investment and increase the visibility of the investments made. Majority of the OBCs are being considered just as an online interaction platform and regarded by the customers as an initiative with no investment by the owner firm/brand (community) and no efforts (in terms of time invested and funds arrangement) that may inhibit the engagement of the customers in the OBCs. The recommendation to the management is in that direction only

that they need to work on the enhancement of perceived community relationship investment among members to increase their engagement levels.

Since brand communities are centred on a brand, managers are advised not to take their eyes off the brand based factors while managing OBCs. Brand ownership can moderate the effect of BCE drivers, which means that experiential and self-esteem based benefits and perceived relationship investment can generate high levels of BCE in case the members own the brand. Therefore the greater focus of the managers should be on the members who own the brand. Managers can put a filtering criterion to identify members who own brands and who don't; such provision is largely absent in OBCs where a large number of members are present without any clue about brand ownership. This may help managers in categorizing the members and designing corresponding engagement strategies. The mediating role of community commitment between BCE and brand loyalty shows that ultimate outcomes of the model, viz., brand loyalty can be created by engaging customers with OBCs but a sense of commitment towards the community reinforces this effect. Hence the management needs to focus more on members committed to the community to have more brand loyal customers. Mere engagement of members might not result in staunch brand loyalists who may engage but not purchase and repurchase the brand at higher frequencies or quantities.

In sum, this study has important implications for managers in terms of tactics in engaging customers with the OBCs and reaping the benefits which are desirable of the firm for the long term success of a brand community program.

6. Limitations and future research agenda

The main limitation of this study is the exclusive focus on OBCs created by the firms only, which may limit the generalization of the findings to a large number of OBCs created by members. There is evidence that the two community type exhibit differences (Lee et al., 2011) and the researchers, therefore, are advised to explore the proposed model across these two OBC types and assess the similarities and differences. All OBCs were created around product brands exclusively to target the specific segment but the role of service brand communities cannot be ignored as service brands are also vibrantly expanding. The BCE model is recommended to be validated among OBCs centred around service brands in future studies and tested for any significant difference with product brand communities.

The perceived relationship investment benefits of a community can be further classified into economic (brand related) investment and social investment that can be considered separately in future works.

The student sample is appropriate in line with study objectives but limited in terms of representation of all OBC members in the marketplace. A sample composed of more general OBC members in the marketplace can be more representative of all OBC users consequently providing coverage to diverse consumer segments but not just the students. The students (OBC members) are the only unit of analysis in the study, whereas the information about the benefits offered and relationship investment made can be captured at OBC (firm) level as well and the assessment of BCE by the OBC itself. This could be an insightful research agenda and the results could be then compared for any differences in the designated paths in the proposed model.

It would be highly inappropriate to rule out the possibility that the results of the study are unaffected by the self-selection bias irrespective of the precautions taken. This can be because of the over-representation of the sample where all elements are OBC members and are believed to be emotionally sensitive to the OBC. Also, the members who participate in the OBCs might have been more inclined to take part in the research project. Nevertheless, further scrutiny is recommended in this regard in future studies.

The cultural context (Indian) of the study limits the generalization of the model (findings) that needs to be tested in other cultures as in the Middle East, European, and western world countries to see the effect of culture on BCE.

Lastly, members were asked to think of the OBC and their frequency of visit was recorded but not the time spent in the community. Choosing a technique such as longitudinal design where time spent by members can be arranged and the responses can be reviewed over the period of time could offer deeper and meaningful insights. Time-contingent dynamic nature of engagement (Brodie et al., 2011) calls for the adoption of a longitudinal research design in future works on brand community engagement.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.101949.

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