



Model of Brand Community Identification on Brand Loyalty in a Human Brand's Community: A Study of BTS ARMY on Weverse

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Abstract. This study identified the antecedents of brand community identification based on the uses and gratification theory while examining the relationship between brand community identification and brand loyalty. Structural equation modeling was used to test the theoretical framework based on an online survey of 315 BTS brand community members (ARMY) in Indonesia. The analytical results revealed that perceived human value and brand-related value led people to identify with a brand community, while information value did not. Furthermore, brand community identification could also explain attitudinal, behavioral, and oppositional loyalty although it scored low on oppositional loyalty due to the existence of multi-group fans in the fandom.

Keywords: Brand community · brand community identification · brand loyalty · uses and gratification theory

1 Introduction

A brand community is considered to be the right platform for a company to build interactions and create harmony between what message a company wants to deliver and what value is held by the consumers [1]. It consisted of a customer- customer-brand triad which displays the relationship of a customer-to-customer and also customer-to-brand [2]. To a brand, a community can bring many short and long-term benefits such as a continuation of membership, positive word-of-mouth, active participation, brand loyalty, increase in market penetration, income, and committed customers [3]. Therefore, in 2020, a study of 155 brands from the United States, Aspire found that 70.4% of the respondents said that they already created a brand community, while the other 26.3% claimed to want one in the future.

To a customer, a brand community can also bring several benefits such as finding emotional support, making contributions, self-expression, and developing interest and talents. Other than that, the customer's interaction with the brand will also help them in upgrading their social status and building their social identity through brand affiliation [4].

Social Identity Theory and Uses and Gratification Theories are the two commonly used theories to describe a brand community and its participation drivers [5]. On the

2017 systemic review done by Kamboj and Rahman, it is known that there are four main categories of the reason why people participated in a community [6]. They are social, psychological, hedonic, and functional attributes. In order to understand the motivation of brand community identification in a specific media, Dessart and Veloutsou [7] discovered five main needs that customers want to fulfill by identifying themselves to a brand community. They are connecting with people and brands, information needs, emotion and personal needs, self-related factors, and content and technology-related factors.

BTS is one of the brands that uses brand community in its business strategy since the group's formation date. In the beginning, the South Korean boy group created ARMY in order to help them spread words about the group through social media such as Twitter, YouTube, Sound cloud, and their own fan café [8].

In order to accommodate the growing number of fans around the world, BTS's agency decided to create their own social media platform called Weverse, which then used to maintain the relationship of community- community-brand. While many previous studies have examined the impact of BTS brand community identification and participation towards BTS brand loyalty, word-of-mouth, and intention to recommend, there is still no research that digs into why ARMY joins the brand community, especially in Weverse. Therefore, this study was done to understand why people identify themselves as ARMY in Weverse, and what the impacts on BTS brand loyalty are.

1.1 Brand Community

A brand community is a specialized group of brand lovers that is not bounded geographically and has a structured social relationship. In this group, there are two kinds of relationships: customer-to-customer and customer-to-brand [2]. A brand community enables people to share their life, interest, and desires [9]. It also allows people to show their love for their favorite brand, as well as find people with the same interests whom they can communicate with regularly. Through the interactions within the community, a brand community contributes to the development of social ties and exchange between its members [1] and will create ritual and brand-related practices that can only be understood by the community members.

According to McAlexander et al. [10], there were no rigid boundaries as to how a group of people can be identified as a brand community. It can be geographically bounded or not at all, the interaction can be high in a social context or totally product-related, the communication can happen face-to-face or virtually, and the members' identity can openly be shared or entirely pseudonym. However, Muniz and O'Guinn [2] specifically described three distinct markers that make a community: (1) shared consciousness, which is a connection, belief, and understanding shared between community members that create a sense of belonging; (2) shared ritual and tradition, which is a symbolic marker in a relationship between members that forms an identity of the community; and (3) obligation to society, which is a social responsibility held by the members as a commitment to share good things to the society.

1.2 Brand Community Identification

Brand community identification is an act in which an individual is internalizing the shared value held by the community they are in [3] by equating themselves to the group norms and values [9]. When brand community identification happens, an individual can assess whether a community is “same as me” or “not me” [11].

Brand community identification consists of two dimensions, cognitive and affective. The cognitive dimension means that brand community identification happens when a person can see their resemblance in the community, and see their difference from other communities. On the other side, the cognitive dimension means that brand community identification happens when a person feels emotionally attached and committed to a community.

Fulfilling cognitive needs (i.e., looking for information), emotional needs (i.e., looking for entertainment), personal integration, and escaping from reality are some reasons why someone identifies themselves with a community [12]. The higher their identification level is, the more benefits that a brand can reap from it such as positive word-of-mouth, brand loyalty, and increasing consumer engagement [13].

1.3 Uses and Gratification Theory

Uses and Gratification is a theory used to explain the reason why someone chooses a particular media to satisfy their needs or reach their goals [7]. In the study of 285 articles about brand community, Bhattacharjee et al., [5] found that this theory is the 2nd commonly used theory to describe drivers of brand community identification or participation. UGT is perceived to be useful to explain what benefits customers can get upon participating in a brand community, and understanding the perceived value that a person wants and cognitive evaluation that a person does to judge what they can give to the community and what they would get in return.

Despite the broad body of literature that uses UGT as its main theory, there is no consensus about what dimensions it is made out of as explained in Table 1 below, while there are many dimensions mentioned in previous literature. Dessart and Veloutsou [7] categorized it into five main dimensions. They are related to people and brands, information needs, emotion and personal needs, self-related factors, and content and technology-related factors.

Human value is described as the social and psychological aspects of consumer participation in a community. Based on the social identity theory, it is said a person join a brand community to fulfill their need of belonging as the community facilitates the exchange of resource and information that they want [3]. Through these exchanges, an individual could share their expertise in consuming and experiencing the brand by giving suggestion and recommendation, hence their image and social status are also increased as they are perceived as an “important” person.

H1: Human value has a positive impact on brand community identification

A brand is used by its customer to communicate their self-concept as a brand has symbolic meanings formed by its positioning, use of celebrity endorsers, and customer actions that are not controlled by the company [1]. Therefore, customers usually choose a brand that has the most similarity to their own self-concept and identity. Besides that, an

Table 1. Comparison of UGT dimensions across literature

Author	Year	Needs/Gratifications
Kamboj [6]	2019	Gratifications: 1. Social participation (informational participation, attitudinal participation, and actionable participation) 2. Cognitive (information sharing and acquisition) 3. Hedonic (aesthetic and entertainment)
Sung et al. [14]	2006	1. Interpersonal utility 2. Incentive seeking 3. Entertainment seeking 4. Information acquisition 5. Convenience seeking 6. Brand likeability
Kamboj, based on Sung et al. and Yuan et al. [15]	2016	1. Building an interpersonal relationship 2. Seeking information 3. Entertainment/fun experience 4. Brand likeability (attractiveness and credibility to have a feeling of attachment and love toward the brand) 5. Incentives as a part of special treatment
Claffey and Brady [16]	2017	Motivations: 1. Hedonic motives (engage in enjoyable activities) 2. Social integrative motives (desire to attain and develop social and relational ties) 3. Personal integrative motives (Desire for positive recognition from others) 4. Positive self-enhancement motives 5. Utilitarian motives (attainment of instrumental benefits such as money-saving, convenience, and time-saving)

individual will also try to enhance their identity by using a brand that has high symbolic values in order to show their superiority and exclusivity.

H2: Brand-related value has a positive impact on brand community identification

1.4 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is defined as a deeply held commitment by a customer to consistently repurchase the product/service they choose despite the situation and marketing factors that potentially form a switching behavior [17]. Loyalty is valuable to a company because

Table 2. Demographic of Respondents

No	Demographic	Category	Freq	%
1	Age	16—20 y.o.	111	35.2%
		21—25 y.o.	144	45.7%
		26—30 y.o.	52	16.5%
		31—35 y.o.	6	1.9%
		36—40 y.o.	2	0.6%
		> 40 y.o.	0	0
2	Education (Last)	SD	0	0
		SMP	14	4.4%
		SMA	166	52.6%
		D3	10	3.1%
		D4	3	0.9%
		S1	105	33.3%
		S2	17	5.3%
4	Current place to stay (Based on island)	Java	259	82.2%
		Sumatera	31	9.8%
		Bali	15	4.8%
		Borneo	6	1.9%
		Sulawesi	3	0.9%
		Nusa Tenggara	1	0.3%
5	Monthly income	< Rp 5.000.000	205	65.1%
		Rp 5.000.001 – Rp 10.000.000	88	27.9%
		Rp 10.000.001 – Rp 15.000.000	17	5.4%
		> Rp 15.000.000	5	0.16%
6	Gender	Woman	289	91.7%
		Man	26	8.3%

it is believed that 80% of the customer's income is coming from 20% of repeated purchases from the customers [18]. Customer loyalty is also beneficial to the company because it lowers the cost they need to educate and serve the customers.

In a brand community, it is known that the more time a customer spends in a community interacting with the brand or other customers, the possibility of them adopting the brand's new products is increasing while the possibility of adopting a rival brand's new product is decreasing [19]. While describing brand loyalty, it is important to differentiate it into three types:

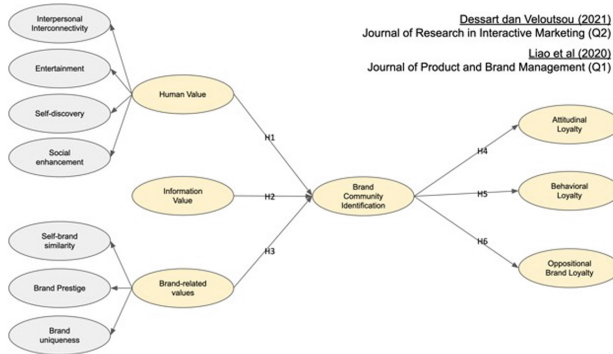


Fig. 1. Research Model

- 1) attitudinal loyalty: customer's psychological commitment stick with a brand they love,
- 2) behavioral loyalty: the act of repurchasing products of the brand they love,
- 3) oppositional loyalty: the rejection of the competing brand's products.

H3: Brand community identification has positive impact on attitudinal loyalty

H4: Brand community identification has positive impact on behavioral loyalty

H5: Brand community identification has a positive impact on oppositional loyalty

The complete research model is depicted in Fig. 1.

2 Methods

2.1 Population and Sample

The population of this research was ARMY (fans of BTS) from Indonesia who have registered themselves in the page of BTS on Weverse. However, not everyone was able to participate in this research. Due to the use of purposive sampling, respondents of this survey have to match some criteria, such as: were at least 16 years old in 2022, joined BTS's page in Weverse, and had purchased official merchandise of BTS at least once. Using an online survey, this study managed to receive 327 responses in which 315 of them were deemed valid.

2.2 Data Analysis

Before entering the main test, a pre-test was done by analyzing 40 responses. Using SPSS, the items and variable validity and reliability were checked to avoid problems in the main test. As the result, all items were valid and reliable to move forward to the main test without any alteration. On the main test, AMOS was used to perform confirmatory factor analysis, structural model test, and hypotheses test.

Table 3. Result of Each Indicator

No.	Variable	Indicator	Mean
1	Human Value	HV1–HV9	5,676,666,667
2	Information Value	IV1–IV5	6,224
3	Brand-related Value	BV1–BV8	6,21
4	Brand community identification	BC1–BC4	6,1425
5	Attitudinal Loyalty	AL1–AL4	6,4475
6	Behavioral Loyalty	BL1–BL4	5,5575
7	Oppositional Loyalty	OL1–OL6	3,46

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Descriptive Analysis

Most respondents in this study are women (91.7%) that fall into the category of 21–25 years old (45.7%), staying in Java (82.2%), with monthly income under Rp 5.000.000 (65.1%). Out of 315 people, 51.7% (163 people) have become an ARMY for 1–3 years and 61.3% (193 people) have spent Rp 1.000.000—Rp 5.000.000 to buy official merchandise of BTS.

As seen in Table 3, out of 7 variables tested in this study, attitudinal loyalty received the highest mean of 6.4/7 while oppositional loyalty received the lowest mean of 3.46/7.

3.2 CFA, Structural Model, and Hypotheses Testing

Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted using AMOS. The analysis showed that 4 out of 40 items were not valid because the factor loading value was below 0.5. Therefore, the items had to be deleted before proceeding to the structural model analysis. After the deletion, all variables were proved reliable with the AVE value > 0.5 and construct reliability (CR) > 0.7 .

After the model re-specification, RMSEA, CFI, PGFI, and GFI were all within the acceptable value, therefore the model was deemed fit. After the model is considered fit, the next process was to see the significance of the exogen variable to the endogen variable.

From Table 4, it can be concluded that:

1. Human value is positively significant to brand community identification (P value < 0.05 , S.E + 0.036).
2. Brand-related value is positively significant to brand community identification (P value < 0.05 , S.E + 0.037).
3. Information value is not significant to brand community identification (P value < 0.05 , S.E + 0.047).
4. Brand community identification is positively significant to attitudinal loyalty (P value < 0.05 , S.E + 0.060).

- 5. Brand community identification is positively significant to behavioral loyalty (P value < 0.05, S.E + 0.074).
- 6. Brand community identification is positively significant to oppositional loyalty (P value < 0.05, S.E + 0.103).

This study found that human value and brand-related value were significant to brand community identification. However, information value was proved not to have a significant effect to brand community identification. This is consistent to the findings of Dessart and Veloutsou [7] that information value was only effective to enhance brand community identification only if mediated by human value. In the context of ARMY, the explanation as to why this happened is because, in gathering information, most fans usually use other social networking sites such as Twitter and YouTube. Meanwhile, Weverse is used by fans to directly communicate with BTS members.

Based on the analysis, this study can contribute to the academic world by adding brand-related value and oppositional loyalty to the previous model proposed by Dessart and Veloutsou [7]. Unlike the previous research that found that information value has the biggest significance to brand community identification, this study found brand-related value to have the most significant effect on brand community identification. This implies that, in the context of BTS ARMY in Weverse, interacting with BTS contents is deemed as more important than interacting with other ARMY or fulfilling their need for information. This study also proves that oppositional loyalty did exist because of brand community identification. This phenomenon happens because ARMY wants to build a connection with other community members by accepting and following the norms of the group—even if it is in a form of rejection of rival brands.

Table 4. Results of Significance Test

Relationship			Estimate	S.E	C.R	P	Label
BC	<-	IV	,015	,029	,327	,744	Not significant
BC	<-	BV	,809	,252	4,670	***	Significant
BC	<-	HV	,271	,042	4,937	***	Significant
IC	<-	HV	,714				
EN	<-	HV	,828	,092	8,878	***	Significant
SD	<-	HV	,893	,118	12,388	***	Significant
SE	<-	HV	,935	,106	11,374	***	Significant
BS	<-	BV	,589				
BP	<-	BV	,850	,320	4,963	***	Significant
BU	<-	BV	,904	,250	4,973	***	Significant
AL	<-	BC	,866	,145	7,792	***	Significant
BL	<-	BC	,776	,153	7,296	***	Significant
OL	<-	BC	,519	,236	7,113	***	Significant

4 Conclusion

This study has shown many customers' motivation in joining a brand community—especially in human brands—and the effect of brand community identification to brand loyalty. In this study, brand-related value, especially regarding brand distinctiveness, has the biggest impact on brand community identification. This result means that a brand has to create a strong positioning and differentiation compared to another brand. This can be achieved by analyzing what the customers want and who the direct competitors are, and then creating a totally different identity from the competitor while still fulfilling customer's expectations.

Aside from having managerial and theoretical contributions, this study also has several limitations that can be the source of further research.

1. The kind of human brand studied in this research was limited to a celebrity who already has a very structured community. Therefore, the next research can try addressing different kinds of human value in a different industry, such as CEO, influencer, chef, etc.
2. The respondents of this research were limited to the younger group of fans (16—25 y.o.). Therefore, the next research can try addressing the other age group.
3. The dimension of the Uses and Gratification Theory studied in this research was limited to human, information, and brand-related value. Therefore, the next research can try addressing emotions & personal needs, self-related needs, and content and technology-related needs.

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