



From Belonging to Broadcasting: The Role of Social Identity in Youth-Driven Online Brand Advocacy (Working Paper)

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1. Introduction

In today's social media-saturated landscape, young people are not just passive recipients of brand messaging—they are active storytellers, curators, and advocates who bring brands to life through their digital identities.

The concept of social identity plays a crucial role in understanding youth-driven online brand advocacy. Social identity refers to how individuals define themselves through their social group memberships, which influences their behaviours toward brands. This connection is vital in online brand advocacy, where young people use social media to promote brands as part of expressing their identities.

A significant aspect is how community and social identity on online platforms contribute to brands being loved and advocated for by consumers. Studies show that community and social identity have a positive influence on brand affection, which in turn enhances brand advocacy. This advocacy responds to community belongingness and identity, suggesting community elements mediate the relationship between identity and brand love, leading to advocacy (Burnasheva et al., 2019).

The constructs of online brand advocacy (OBA) reveal a complex relationship with brand loyalty. Social identity theory shows that consumers who identify strongly with a brand are

more likely to advocate for it online. This advocacy strengthens their brand loyalty and purchase intentions, creating a reinforcing loop crucial for brands (Wilk et al., 2021).

Youth engaged in digital activism use platforms for social change and brand advocacy. Through active online participation, young individuals express their identity through brand support. This use of digital tools highlights youth's potential to leverage online platforms for social and brand-related change (Stornaiuolo and Thomas, 2017; Thackeray and Hunter, 2010).

The engagement in brand communities demonstrates how social identity mediates feelings of brand love and advocacy. This emphasises organisations' need to harness social identity within communities to foster authentic brand narratives that resonate with youth advocates (Wong & Hung, 2022).

The role of social identity in youth-driven online brand advocacy involves community belonging, identity expression, and digital activism. This dynamic influences brand perceptions and consumer behaviours, highlighting brands' need to engage with social identity elements in fostering advocacy among young consumers. These insights encapsulate the connections between social identity and online brand advocacy among youth, as supported by current literature.

Thus, this study explores the evolution of youth-driven online brand advocacy, examining how social identity influences the transition from a sense of belonging to active brand promotion in digital spaces. Drawing on social identity theory, this research examines the mechanisms by which young consumers form strong connections with brands and subsequently become advocates in online communities. This research reveals that for youth, branding is not solely commercial—it also has personal significance.

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine how the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of social identity influence youth behaviour in online brand advocacy. It explores how young people move from simply identifying with a brand to actively

promoting, defending, and sharing it online. The study also looks at how factors like brand engagement, visual digital cues, and brand knowledge contribute to this shift. By connecting identity and engagement, the research aims to better understand what drives youth to become active brand advocates in digital spaces.

3. Literature Review

In recent years, the digital landscape has become a powerful area for youth-driven brand advocacy. Central to this phenomenon is social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their group affiliations. This framework is particularly pertinent for comprehending how young consumers engage in online brand communities. They participate not only as purchasers but also as social actors articulating their identities and values. Social Identity Theory (SIT) breaks this process into three parts: the cognitive aspect, where individuals recognise and categorise themselves as part of a group (Khadka, 2024); the affective aspect, which involves emotional attachment to that group; and the evaluative aspect, where individuals assess the group as positively distinct from others. Together, these elements help explain how brand communities become meaningful parts of young consumers' identities. When youth align themselves with certain brands, they often move beyond consumption into advocacy—defending, promoting, and broadcasting their affiliations online. SIT thus offers a valuable lens to understand the shift from belonging to broadcasting in digital spaces.

Numerous studies demonstrate that a sense of belonging within online communities has a significant impact on consumer–brand relationships. It is found that the feelings of community in online spaces, especially among luxury fashion consumers, positively influence brand love. This emotional attachment often motivates individuals to share brand-related content, signalling a transition from passive participation to active OBA, i.e., online brand advocacy (Burnasheva et al., 2019).

Social media further intensifies these dynamics. According to Labrecque (2014), parasocial interactions—where individuals feel a one-sided connection to brand figures, it enhance the perceived intimacy between consumers and brands. For younger users who are highly

active online, these interactions often substitute for real-world relationships and can lead to enthusiastic brand support, particularly on platforms like Instagram and YouTube. This can be extended by highlighting the dual role of social and personal drivers. They argue that both external social forces (such as peer influence) and internal motives (such as selfexpression) shape how users engage with brands on social media. Youth who are navigating identity development are particularly susceptible to such influences (Simon et al., 2016).

Emotion also plays a crucial role. It is one of the important reasons why certain brand messages go viral. Shared emotional experiences amplify collective behaviour (Hatfield et al., 1994). Among youth, where peer reinforcement is strong, emotional branding strategies can lead to more enthusiastic and widespread advocacy.

Brand advocacy often goes hand in hand with brand loyalty, especially in digital spaces where young people see the brands they support as part of their personal identity (Wilk et al., 2021). Rather than focusing only on trust and commitment, recent research highlights the growing importance of brand engagement, like how emotionally, mentally, and behaviorally consumers are involved with a brand. For many young users, especially those active on platforms like Instagram or YouTube, engagement isn't just about liking a post. It includes commenting, sharing content, participating in challenges, and even creating their own brand-related material. This kind of active involvement shows a deeper connection, where the brand becomes a way to express who they are and what they stand for. When youth feel that a brand reflects their values or lifestyle, they are more likely to speak up for it, recommend it to others, and stay involved over time. In this way, brand engagement becomes a key driver of ongoing advocacy, as young people move from just consuming a brand to becoming a part of its story.

Interestingly, even studies outside the branding field provide insights into youth behaviour online. Like Savolainen et al. (2020), in their research on online gambling, found that peer influence and digital relationships have a significant impact on youth decision-making. This underscores the broader importance of social media interactions and digital belonging in shaping how young people behave, including how and why they advocate for brands.

Thus, we can say that youth-driven online brand advocacy is not merely a marketing trend—it is a complex social behavior rooted in identity, emotion, and community. Understanding this behavior requires a multidimensional approach that considers psychological motivations, social influences, and the evolving dynamics of digital communication.

4. Conceptual Model

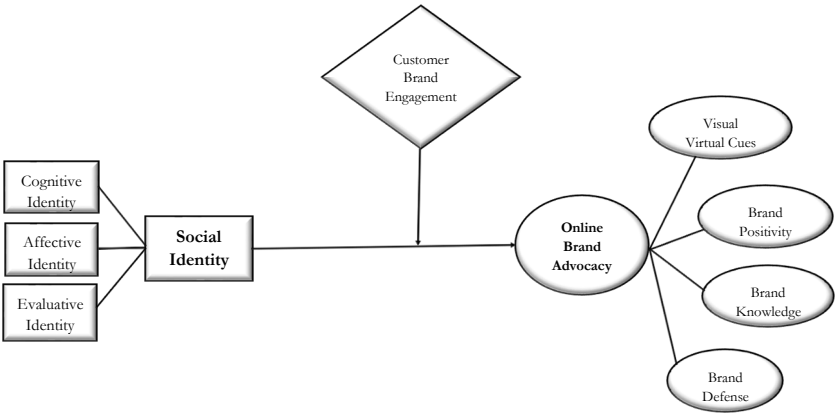


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Customer Brand Engagement

5. Objectives

1. To examine the influence of the cognitive, affective, and evaluative components of social identity on online brand advocacy behaviours among youth.
2. To investigate the mediating role of customer brand engagement in the relationship between youth social identity and their brand advocacy behaviour.
3. To analyse how visual virtual cues (e.g., aesthetics, brand imagery, influencer content) shape youth perceptions and strengthen their online brand advocacy.
4. To assess the impact of brand knowledge on youth-driven online brand advocacy, particularly in fostering brand positivity and brand defence.
5. To develop and validate an integrated model that links youth social identity, engagement factors, and advocacy outcomes in digital brand communities.

6. Materials and Methods

This study followed a quantitative research approach to explore how social identity influences youth-driven online brand advocacy. To ensure relevance, purposive random sampling was used to target young individuals who are active in digital brand communities. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, covering key constructs such as the cognitive, affective, and evaluative aspects of social identity, customer brand engagement, visual virtual cues, brand knowledge, and advocacy behaviours like brand defence and brand positivity. The survey was distributed across three central universities in Delhi, yielding 126 valid responses. These participants were specifically chosen because of their active presence on social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, which made them ideal for the study's youth-focused objectives. For data analysis, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is being applied to test the relationships between variables and to validate the proposed conceptual model. SEM is particularly suitable for the research, as it allows for examining complex interactions

among multiple constructs, including potential mediating and moderating effects. This method provides a solid foundation for understanding how elements of social identity translate into brand advocacy among young consumers in digital spaces.

7. Data Analysis and Results

The key variables included in this research study are

1. Social Identity Dimensions:

- Cognitive Identity (CI)
- Affective Identity (AI)
- Evaluative Identity (EI)

2. Brand Engagement (CBE)

3. Online Brand Advocacy (OBA) Dimensions:

- Visual Virtual Cues (VVC)
- Brand Knowledge (BK)
- Brand Defence (BD)
- Brand Positivity (BP)

7.1 Reliability Analysis

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Cognitive Identity	0.608
Affective Identity	0.846
Evaluative Identity	0.765
Customer Brand Engagement	0.805
Visual Virtual Cues	0.807
Brand Knowledge	0.825

Brand Defense	0.897
Brand Positivity	

The reliability analysis of the study's constructs indicates that all variables exhibit acceptable to excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.608 to 0.897. Constructs such as Affective Identity (0.846), Brand Engagement (0.805), Visual Virtual Cues (0.807), and Brand Knowledge (0.825) demonstrate strong reliability, signifying consistent responses among participants. Notably, Brand Defense achieves an alpha of 0.897, reflecting excellent reliability in assessing youth's propensity to defend brands online. Although Cognitive Identity presents a slightly lower alpha of 0.608, it remains within the acceptable range, suggesting the potential for minor improvement. Overall, the findings affirm that the survey items are robust and effectively capture the intended psychological and behavioral dimensions associated with youth-driven online brand advocacy.

7.2 Factor Analysis

The factor analysis results indicate that the data is well-suited for exploratory factor analysis, with a meritorious Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.760 and a highly significant Bartlett's Test ($p < 0.001$), confirming sufficient correlations among variables. Using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation, eight meaningful factors were extracted, explaining approximately 79.17% of the total variance. This high cumulative variance suggests that the identified factors effectively represent the underlying dimensions of the constructs, supporting the validity of the research model.

8. Conclusion

This working paper presents preliminary findings from an empirical investigation into the role of social identity in youth-driven online brand advocacy. The results from the reliability analysis demonstrate that all constructs exhibit acceptable to excellent internal consistency, indicating sound measurement scales. Factor analysis further supports the construct validity, with eight components explaining a significant portion of the variance

(79.17%) and a KMO value of 0.760 confirming sampling adequacy. These initial analysis validate the robustness of the research model and provide a strong foundation for further testing. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), which is currently underway, will help examine the hypothesized relationships among the variables in greater detail. The study contributes to the growing literature on identity-driven brand behavior in digital spaces and offers practical insights for marketers aiming to engage youth as brand advocates. Future iterations of this paper will include SEM-based validation of the conceptual model and deeper inferential insights.

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