Most Important Factors Influencing Consumer Engagement with an Online Brand Community

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Abstract

This study aims to explain members’ online brand community (OBC) engagement and participation based on their relationships with other members and with the community sponsor. It proposes a conceptual model integrating variables that have been studied in previous research on brand trust, OBC identification, and satisfaction, and others that have received little or no research attention, including the OBC sponsor’s opportunism, sponsor’s control, and OBC experience, with OBC engagement playing a key role. The theoretical model has been tested by applying structural equation modelling to a database of 628 consumers belonging to over 260 different online brand communities OBC from diverse economic sectors: for example, brands involving sports (Adidas and Nike), fashion (Mango, Stradivarius and Zara) and technology (Apple, Samsung and Sony). In general, the authors conclude the importance of engagement in explaining a member’s involvement in a community, and the important role played by antecedents such as online brand community experience and trust, not only directly but also indirectly via identification with the community. The results confirm the influence of engagement upon a member’s participation in a community. Our study supports this direction of the relationship over the reverse – participation engagement – as suggested by other previous works. With regard to the antecedents of trust in the online brand community, it has been concluded that using the community for mainly commercial purposes has a negative effect.

Key Words: Online brand community, engagement, sponsor’s opportunism, sponsor’s control and identification and brand trust.
1. Introduction

A brand community, defined as a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001), allows an organization to establish a series of links with its consumers (Thompson and Sinha, 2008). In them, the consumers play a significant role. The online brand community (OBC) is a necessary platform for companies to improve their differentiation and competitive position; it allows them to strengthen relationships with customers and involve them in brand co-creation (Tsai et al., 2012).

Increasing numbers of consumers are participating in online platforms to interact with other consumers and with brands (Kelley & Alden, 2016; Tonteri et al., 2011). Marketing professionals are making efforts to understand how to create and maintain communities to increase customer value (Martínez-López et al., 2016). By using and promoting brand communities in general, and OBC in particular, companies manage to avoid current consumer resistance to traditional marketing programs based on traditional media. What’s more, their use is in line with the “consumer empowerment” approach: companies see customers as their allies when it comes to developing products, taking decisions, defending the brand and, in general, creating value (Hassan & Casaló, 2016; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), so that they can become more engaged with brands (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006).

Examining literature on OBC, one can appreciate two main focuses of research: firstly, understanding the nature of these communities and, secondly, studying consumer engagement and participation in communities, as well as the consequences thereof for brands (Hartleb and Blut, 2008). Our research focuses on the latter. We analyze how consumer participation in OBC arises and what variables impact upon it. In doing so, we assign a core role to OBC engagement and participation. Understanding these two aspects is key for any community (Casaló et al., 2013).

Previous studies (e.g. Brodie et al., 2013; Tsai and Pai, 2012; Wirtz et al., 2013) have analyzed how identification with the online community and engagement are key to understanding this participation, and this identification and engagement have been highlighted by a number of authors (e.g. Abfalter et al., 2012; Gummerus et al., 2012) as the variables with the greatest impact upon the degree of user participation. Nevertheless, engagement has been gaining ground as the core variable explaining OBC participation, mediating the effects of other variables upon it (see Brodie et al., 2011, 2013; Vivek et al., 2012).

These variables have been studied from the perspective of different theories and focuses. Here, we adopt an inclusive approach to expand the scope of previous research into OBC.

The article begins presenting our proposed theoretical model to explain the process of creating identification and engagement with OBC. Next, it describes the methodology
employed, the analyses performed and the results obtained, which confirm the central role played by engagement in user participation in OBC. Lastly, it discusses the main conclusions and implications.

2. Conceptual Model

Research for this article has taken into account the following OBC-related variables: perception of the control of the environment by the OBC sponsor, perception of the OBC sponsor’s opportunism, satisfaction with past experiences with the OBC, the experience provided by the OBC, OBC identification and trust. These variables, and their relationships, are covered in more detail later on.

The kind of experience provided by the OBC and members’ trust in it are the variables that have been most broadly studied as the antecedents for a sense of belonging to and identification with communities and engagement therewith. Their inclusion is, therefore, inevitable. These variables have, in turn, other variables that explain them. Even though taking them into account increases the complexity of our model, we decided to use them to enhance their explanatory power. More specifically, based on previous studies (e.g. Porter and Donthu, 2008; Wirtz et al., 2013), we included the following variables: perception of sponsor’s control of the environment, perception of sponsor’s opportunism and satisfaction with past experiences in the community. These have been chosen over other, more widely studied variables or those that are less useful in explaining behavior experienced by the consumer in the community in their relations with other users and the brand. We have thus not taken into account variables such as attitude, subjective rules and control over own behavior, as they have already been subject to a great deal of research. We have also excluded variables more associated with the technology used by the online community, as this has more to do with platforms than users.

Our theoretical model is depicted in Figure 1, which also sets out its components and relationships.
3. Background and Hypotheses

3.1 Perception of Opportunism

Users participate in the social web in general, and OBC in particular, because they have greater trust in other consumers than in the companies owning the brands (Kotler et al., 2010). Given this fact, companies must adjust their business models to take advantage of the available potential (Hanna et al., 2011). This means taking part in conversations in online communities dedicated to their brands (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Weber, 2007). However, organizations do not always know how to make use of their online platforms and communities (Kietzmann et al., 2011). In many cases, their actions have a negative impact upon consumer perception of the brand (e.g., Huber et al., 2010): a brand will find it difficult to make its online community a success if its members feel manipulated by it (Clemons, 2009). Companies should therefore change their focus to interact with consumer communities and not merely transmit information (Weber, 2007). This entails acknowledging the active role played by consumers in managing the brand: they become co-creators of the brand, meaning that companies must necessarily relinquish full control of this brand and hand part of it over to consumers (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Muñiz and Schau, 2005). So it is that, in OBC, members and community sponsors (companies/brands) share control over the brands (e.g., Belk, 2010; Healy and McDonagh, 2012).
It is nevertheless understandable that companies wish to control the content created by consumers, the members of the communities, to minimize any messages contrary to the interests of their brands (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012). However, the way in which this is done impacts upon the credibility consumers attach to the community (Wirtz et al., 2013); if badly done, they may regard the company’s action as an intrusion into the community. It is therefore important to understand the boundaries of the control accepted by a community’s consumers so as not to overstep them (Fournier and Lee, 2009).

Furthermore, when a company uses an OBC as a space to promote its products and services (Harris and Rae, 2009; Jang et al., 2008; Pentina et al., 2008), consumers may regard this as opportunism on the part of the sponsor (Porter and Donthu, 2008). This is because consumers see OBC as a forum for relationships with other consumers, for searching for information and even for defining their personalities, and not as a purely sales-oriented commercial environment (e.g., Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012; Wirtz et al., 2013).

In sum, although each individual will have a different perception of a sponsor’s control and opportunism (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Porter and Donthu, 2008), consumers as a whole will regard a brand as opportunist when they perceive that it has a greater level of control over the community. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

\[ H1: \text{The greater a consumer's perception of a sponsor's (brand's) control over its online community, the greater his/her perception of sponsor/brand opportunism.} \]

3.2 The Experience Provided by the Community

Consumers’ experiences allow them to satisfy psychological and personal needs (Chang and Horn, 2010). The result of these experiences is key in establishing and maintaining long-term relationships between the parties involved. This is why companies have focused value creation on providing positive brand experiences for their customers (Payne et al., 2009). Brakus et al. (2009) define brand experience as “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli” (p. 53), although they warn that it should not be confused with evaluative, affective, and associative brand-related constructs (e.g. brand attitudes, involvement and personality, among others). Brand experience has been studied in a digital context (Rose et al., 2011).

Online brand experience captures the consumer’s subjective response to an online brand (Morgan-Tomas and Veloutsou, 2012).

Within the context of an online community, the consumer’s experience with an online brand community is the result of interactions with both other members and the community itself (Nambisan and Watt, 2011). An OBC’s continued survival over time partly depends upon the experience the company is capable of providing to its members (Lin, 2007, 2008). Nevertheless, this process is cumulative over time (Rose et al., 2012).
We have conceptualized the OBC experience by adapting the Brakus’ et al. (2009) definition to its specific context. However, instead of using their neutral statement, we have followed one of their suggestions and opted to approach it with a positive valence, so it would be “positive OBC experience: positive subjective and behavioral consumer responses evoked by online brand community-related stimuli”.

The consumer experience of a community is affected by the way in which the sponsor (brand) administers the OBC (Payne et al., 2009). A sponsor’s control plays a significant role in how members establish relationships amongst each other, as it might affect topics, conversations and actions within the community (Porter and Donthu, 2008; Wirtz et al., 2013). A brand must not act intrusively: it should encourage personal expression on the part of the community’s members (Cova and Pace, 2006; Parmentier, 2015), and grant them some degree of control (Fournier and Lee, 2009; Wirtz et al., 2013). Otherwise, if a consumer feels that the sponsor controls the community, his or her experience will be less positive. We thus suggest the following hypothesis:

**H2. The greater the degree of a company’s control over its brand community, the worse the community experience evoked by its members.**

An OBC is regarded as a forum for searching for information, social relationships and of creating a personal identity linked to the brand (e.g., Hartleb and Blut, 2008; Laroche et al., 2012; Scarpi, 2010). Therefore, the inclusion of commercial actions may be negatively perceived by consumers (Clemons, 2009). The brand community experience will be less positive if consumers see the company is using the community for commercial purposes, rather than as a forum for conversations and relationships (e.g. Li and Bernoff, 2009; Wirtz et al., 2013). Based on this, we propose:

**H3. The more members perceive opportunism by a brand in its online community, the worse their brand community experience.**

### 3.3 Trust in the Community

Trust is key to developing relationships, especially those with a long-term orientation, between two or more parties, and this construct is especially significant in understanding long-term relationships (e.g. Morgan and Hunt, 1994), like those observed in communities. For online brand communities, in particular, where relationships also take place within a social space, trust has been found to be pivotal: a community cannot be successful if its members are unable to rely on it (Belanger et al., 2002; Corritore et al., 2003). We define trust in an OBC as its members’ overall reliance on each other and the brand sponsoring it; members have trust helps stabilize relationships and enables cooperative and useful interactions between its members when they believe that other members and the sponsor will not act opportunistically. This trust (Bruhn et al., 2013).
Consumers believe more in other consumers than in companies, as they tend to attach more credibility to horizontal relationships (Kotler et al., 2010). In order to boost trust, brands sponsoring a community need to properly manage the community’s mission and its policies, as well as the effects of relations between its members (Porter and Donthu, 2008; Preece, 2000). However, this control should not be perceived as meddling or as the sponsor placing restrictions upon relationships occurring within the community (Clemons, 2009; Popp and Woratschek, 2016); otherwise, it could negatively affect trust (Fournier and Lee, 2009). Consumers expect the brand sponsoring the community to act as just another member, providing information and sharing control over it with them, but without taking advantage of its position (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Accordingly, consumers show less confidence in an OBC when they perceive that the environment is tightly controlled by the sponsor. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H4. The greater members’ perception of a company’s control over its brand community, the lower the members’ trust in such an OBC.**

Organizations can participate in OBC started by users or in-house ones (Casaló et al., 2013; Sung et al., 2010). Generally speaking, although members are predisposed to interaction, those OBC started by other consumers or users are more likely to be trusted (Jang et al., 2008; Jung et al., 2014; Shang et al., 2006), as the relations are between equals seeking to achieve common goals (Wirtz et al., 2013). Those started by the companies themselves, however, exist—to a greater or lesser extent—for commercial purposes (Sung et al., 2010).

Communities can be used as a means to promote products and services (Harris and Rae, 2009). Members tend to trust the brand that is sponsoring it (Porter and Donthu, 2008) and have no problem in accepting certain kinds of commercial behavior (McWilliam, 2000; Sung et al., 2010). Nevertheless, such behavior will be regarded as opportunistic on the part of the sponsor when it is carried out in a forced, excessively controlling or manipulated manner (Lee et al., 2014). Therefore, in the case of opportunistic brand behavior in the community, consumers might decrease their trust in both such a brand and its community. So, when an OBC has a more commercial purpose, consumers might perceive opportunism in the brand sponsoring it, and their trust in its community can become accordingly reduced. This idea is reflected in the hypothesis below:

**H5. The greater members’ perception of opportunism exercised by a brand in its online community, the lower the members’ trust in such an OBC.**

The type of experience provided by a brand community impacts members’ trust in it and amongst each other. Proper content management, navigability, ease of use, etc., help achieve the goals set by the members. Furthermore, good experiences help ensure more stable and frequent relations between members, which also promotes interpersonal trust (Hung et al., 2011; Porter and Donthu, 2008). Therefore:
H6. The more positive the online brand community experience evoked by its members, the greater their trust in the community.

In general, satisfaction is an antecedent of trust (see Anderson and Srinivasan, 2003; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006); in particular, when consumers have a satisfactory experience with an OBC, they will tend to trust it more. Also, trust in a community can be the result of a record of positive past experiences in it (Luo and Zhang, 2016); i.e. a record of satisfactory interactions between parties, either between the community’s members or between the community and its members, can lead to positive expectations about future interactions which favors trust (Tickle et al., 2011; Wasko and Faraj, 2005) and long-term relationships (Raies et al., 2015). We assume, then, that higher levels of satisfaction with an OBC experienced by a consumer, based on a series of positive encounters and relationships in such a community, can result in current higher levels of trust in it. The following hypothesis summarizes the above discussion:

H7: Satisfaction with past experiences in an online brand community has a positive influence on current trust in such a community.

3.4 Identification with the Community

Identification with an OBC has mainly been studied from the standpoint of Social Identity Theory in a great number of works (e.g. Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; McAlexander et al., 2002; Scarpi, 2010). It reflects the strength of the relationship between consumer and community, i.e. the brand sponsoring a community and its members (Algesheimer et al., 2005). As a result, members of an OBC see themselves as part of the group (Dholakia et al., 2004). They feel part of such an OBC, different to others outside of it (Ewing et al., 2013), and with their own behavioral norms (Dholakia et al., 2004). Hence, it is a collective feeling (Casaló et al., 2010). This feeling is manifested in a strong bond between the members of a community (Tsai and Huang, 2007) as a result of factors such as the links established, mutual dependency (Woisetschläger et al., 2008), that it enables them to identify themselves socially (Koh and Kim, 2003), and that they can achieve common goals and needs (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

Brands help individuals to feel part of a particular social category, identifying with it and differentiating themselves from other groups (Marzocchi et al., 2013). Identification with the brand is active, selective and voluntary (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). The process of identifying with the brand can be extended to encompass the OBC. In this case, identification with the OBC is defined as the degree to which users see themselves as part of it: in other words, they compare their own identity with that of the community (Dholakia et al., 2004), showing the strength of their relationship with it (Algesheimer et al., 2005). However, a distinction needs to be drawn between identifying with a community and identifying with a company or brand, since the objects of identification are different (Marzocchi et al., 2013). In any case, the relationship between the two is logical and has been examined by a number of
studies: if consumers feel strongly linked to a brand, it will be easier for them to be identified with the community (Marchi et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2012) and vice-versa (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006).

Brands are of great value in helping consumers identify with an OBC (Carlson et al., 2008). This is because, when a consumer feels strongly identified with a brand, this produces, in turn, a feeling of community with regard to his or her relationships with the products, the brand, the company and other consumers (Jones and Kim, 2011; McAlexander et al., 2002). So, with OBC, the brand is regarded as the main source of identification (Wang et al., 2011) and guidance for members’ processes and behavior (Yeh and Choi, 2011). The above discussion prompts the following hypothesis:

H8: The greater the identification with the brand, the greater the identification with the online community sponsored by it.

The experience provided by an online community affects its members’ identification with it (Hsu et al., 2012). In particular, a positive relationship has been proposed by previous studies, which approached it from technical- (e.g. Chen and Lin, 2014; Zhang, 2010) or interpersonal-related (Keng et al., 2015) perspectives defining the quality of such experience. As members experience and share positive encounters within the community, an emotional and identificatory bond is established between them and with the community (Abfalter et al., 2012). Thus, for the specific context of the online brand communities, we propose this hypothesis:

H9: The more positive the online brand community experience perceived by its members, the greater their identification with it.

In online environments, the tendency for consumers to show greater trust in similar people (Wu et al., 2010) helps avoid problems associated with the lack of personal contact between members (Fang and Chiu, 2010). Furthermore, trust bolsters expectations of stable relationships (Wu et al., 2010), creates identification with the object of trust and a sense of community (Lu et al., 2010). According to Yeh and Choi (2011), trust increases stickiness, which makes a user feel part of a community. Thus, we suggest that consumers with more trust in an OBC should be more identified with it than others with lower levels of trust, which leads to the following hypothesis:

H10: The greater a consumer’s trust in the online brand community, the greater his/her identification with it.

3.5 Engagement with the Community

Study of engagement has increased in importance due to the development of the social web (Gummerus et al., 2012; Sashi, 2012; Zhang & Luo, 2016). As far as OBC are concerned, engagement refers to community members’ interactions, with either each other or the brand, carried out on an iterative basis (Baldus et al., 2015; Brodie et al., 2013). Thus, engagement is
the result of a process. It is also associated with the members’ intentions towards interaction (Wirtz et al., 2013), collaboration (Laroche et al., 2012) and participation (Algesheimer et al., 2005) in the community. According to this theory, every aspect affecting this iterative relationship between the consumer and the OBC—e.g. trust or perceived experience with the community—will have an impact upon engagement.

In this research work, we have studied the impact of the following antecedents: experience with the OBC, trust in the OBC and the sense of belonging to the OBC. We have therefore cast a wider net over possible antecedents than earlier studies (e.g. Pham and Avnet, 2009; Sprott et al., 2009; Vivek et al., 2012).

Greater identification with a group has a positive impact on motivation to interact with its users (Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Zhou, 2011). A consumer who feels identified with a community will regard interaction therewith as consistent with his or her personal values (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) and may receive recognition from other similar persons (Davis et al., 2014). Identification with a community is a strong predictor of engagement with it (Yeh and Choi, 2011). The social relationships established help to create engagement with the community (Parmentier, 2015). The concept of OBC engagement basically refers to the positive influence of a consumer's identification with the community (Wirtz et al., 2013). There should therefore be a positive relationship between consumer identification with an OBC and their degree of engagement (Chou et al., 2016). So, the more a consumer identifies with an OBC, the greater his/her engagement with it. Therefore:

H11: The greater a consumer’s identification with the OBC, the greater his/her engagement with it.

Trust is a critical factor for establishing long-term relationships in OBC (Jung et al., 2014). When there is trust between the parties, it is more probable that there will be engagement (Fang and Chiu, 2010). As consumers develop trust in a brand, the relationship with it becomes more emotion-based (Hess and Story, 2005), and engagement intensifies when ties to the brand are more emotional and less cognitive (Franzak et al., 2014). Trust in the brand community might, therefore, help consumers to become engaged with the brand community they belong to. Trust is formed through a process of repeated positive experiences in the community, and steers consumer intentions towards engaging with it. An absence of trust is the main reason for consumers not interacting with online brands (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013). Accordingly, we propose the following:

H12: The greater a consumer’s trust in an OBC, the greater his/her engagement with it.

A brand community able to provide its members with good experiences to is likely to see them have more stable relationships with it (see Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013). Online engagement entails consumers’ cognitive and affective dimensions leading to an active relationship with the brand; the experiential value of such a relationship has a positive impact
upon engagement (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). The process describing a consumer’s engagement with a brand is influenced by the outcome of interactive experiences within its OBC (see: Brodie et al., 2013; De Valck et al., 2009). Therefore:

H13: The more positive the online brand community experience felt by its members, the greater their engagement with it.

3.6 Participation in the Community

One of the main challenges faced by brands in their social web platforms is to ensure that consumers participate in their OBC. Participation is particularly important for such communities’ success and longevity (Woisetschläger et al., 2008). It helps win new members and strengthens ties between existing ones (Tsai et al., 2012), and helps with the achievement of goals by both the brand sponsoring the community and its members (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006).

There are different levels of user participation. The lowest is that of merely belonging to a community without actively participating in it (lurking) (Li and Bernoff, 2009; Zhou et al., 2012), but an online presence on its own (see Naylor et al., 2012) is not sufficient for an OBC’s success (Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson, 2013). However, there are further levels. Literature provides a number of suggestions based upon the degree of participation by a community’s members (e.g., Kozinets, 2006; Wang and Yu, 2012). In any case, all these works suggest that there is a relationship between the number of members in the most active participation categories and a community’s success.

As noted above, the definition of engagement focuses on the concept of participating in the OBC: it describes the nature of the interactions carried out by the members of the community, either with each other or with the brand, interactively and to differing degrees (Brodie et al., 2013). Engagement with an OBC should, therefore, favor active participation in it (Brodie et al., 2011; Wirtz et al., 2013), and might find form in behavior such as word-of-mouth, recommendations, activities in support of other consumers, blogging, product reviews, etc. (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Zhang & Luo, 2016). Also, some studies have noted that members who are more engaged with the community should show a greater intention to participate in the community in the future (e.g., Kuo and Feng, 2013; Raies et al., 2015; Relling et al., 2015). In this study, we focus on community members’ current levels of participation. Given the above ideas, it is reasonable to expect that consumers engaged with a community will be more participative than others less engaged with it. Thus:

H14: The greater a consumer’s engagement with an OBC, the greater his/her participation in it.
4. Methodology

4.1 Sample

The sample was obtained in March 2015. Participants in the study had to be Internet users, members of at least one OBC and to have accessed it during the ten previous weeks, irrespective of their level of activity. To increase the rate of participation in the survey, interviewees were entered into a draw for a tablet. Total valid questionnaires finally obtained stood at n=628, fairly evenly distributed between men (49.4%) and women (50.6%). Questionnaires were completed mainly by students at the University of Malaga (Spain); the age ranges were mainly 17-20 (47.5%) and 21-30 (50.9%).

Respondents were asked to answer the questionnaire thinking of the OBC in which they participated and, if there was more than one of these, of that in which they most participated. The average degree of participation stood at 4.16 (SD = 1.557) on a Likert scale from 1 (“I haven’t participated at all”) to 7 (“Very often”). The number of communities indicated by respondents exceeded 260 and belonged to a wide variety of sectors and company sizes. Worthy of particular note, due to the number of respondents, were sports (such as Adidas and Nike), fashion (e.g. Mango, Stradivarius and Zara) and technology (e.g. Apple, Samsung and Sony) brands.

4.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was prepared based on the information presented in the appendix, which contains the multi-item scales associated with the constructs of the conceptual model. Items were measured according to 7-point Likert-type scales (1: completely disagree - 7: completely agree).

An explicit and short note should be made here, though, regarding the measurement of OBC experience, the second-order construct of our model. We have taken as our basis a four-dimensional proposal of first-order constructs (sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioral) and 12 items validated by Brakus et al. (2009) to measure the brand experience construct. The authors convincingly argued that the starting point for dimensionally structuring any provided an online brand community. Following a comprehensive and rigorous procedure, they developed the structure of the dimensions and items we have used and adapted to form the basis of measuring the experience of OBC. Furthermore, taking advantage of one of the author’s experience is multi-dimensional. This logic must, therefore, also be valid for the experience by suggestions, we presented the items’ statements positively. This allowed us to orient this construct positively and facilitate formulation of the hypotheses. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time this second-order construct and its related measurement scales have been applied in the context of online brand communities.
The survey was self-administered, in hard-copy (paper) format, to individuals belonging to at least one online brand community. The authors themselves supervised this phase. They introduced the questionnaire in order to ensure that the respondents had a general understanding of it before they proceeded to complete it. If respondents belonged to several communities, they were asked to choose one of them and mentally focus on it when answering the questions. The first question we asked was to explicitly indicate the chosen community that the respondent would bear in mind when assessing every item.

5. Results

5.1 Measurement Model Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

Before carrying out our EFA, we verified that our study’s database met the associated sample size requirements (see Hair et al., 2008). The values resulting from our analysis of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator were above the required minimum in every case. Additionally, Bartlett’s sphericity test was significant for all dimensions (p-value < 0.005). For the second-order construct OBC experience, we also performed an individual EFA of each of its four dimensions (sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioral).

We also performed a principal component EFA with varimax rotation (see Netemeyer et al., 2003). The results confirmed that the number of factors equaled the number of latent variables under consideration, and that the explained variance value was over 0.5 in every case. We also found that the indicators were significant, with factor loadings of around or above 0.5. Three indicators were not significant and were removed: OBC Experience_Affective2, OBC Experience_Intellectual2, and OBC Experience_Behavioral_3.

Once the scales were refined, we proceeded to evaluate their reliability by analyzing each one’s internal consistency. The values we obtained for each proposed scale were satisfactory. We checked that each variable comfortably exceeded the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.7 for Cronbach’s alpha (see Cronbach, 1970; Nunnally, 1978). The exceptions were the scales corresponding to the OBC experience’s affective and intellectual first-order constructs, which had a slightly lower alpha (0.64 and 0.69, respectively). Even so, we opted to retain them for the confirmatory analysis, on the grounds that said values were above 0.6 (see Robinson et al., 1991). We also verified that each scale had acceptable item-total correlation values (Bagoszi, 1981) of greater than 0.3 (Nurosis, 1993). Item 1, sponsor’s opportunism (Oportunism_1), was finally removed to obtain high internal consistency for the scale.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Our measurement model was estimated on the basis of a joint confirmatory analysis of all the scales included in our proposed theoretical model (see Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The four scales of the first-order constructs of OBC experience have also been taken into account.
in this overall measurement model. The overall model’s goodness of fit and the quality of the measurements used were evaluated together with their unidimensionality, reliability and convergent and discriminant validity. Given the model’s conditions (i.e., non-multinormal distribution of data, rating scales and the use of a polychoric correlation matrix), we applied the robust weighted least squares (RWLS) estimation method, which is recommended as the most appropriate means of dealing with the relevant shortcomings and providing proper solutions (see Martínez-López et al., 2013).

The model was correctly identified, its degrees of freedom were above zero, its error variances were significant and positive in every case, and the (standardized) parameter estimations all gave values of over 0.5 (Hair et al., 2008). The confirmatory model’s goodness of fit indicated that our proposed factor structure had been correctly specified. Our results pointed to a good model fit ($\chi^2$/d.f. = 2.401; GFI = 0.916; RMSEA = 0.047; CFI = 0.927; TLI = 0.915; NFI = 0.917; IFI = 0.927).

After analyzing the measurement model’s overall goodness of fit, we carried out a study of the composite reliability (CR) and validity of the scales for the model’s constructs. In accordance with Steenkamp and Van Trijp (1991), we tested the scales’ convergent validity by verifying that the loadings for the observable variables (indicators) with the latent variables were significant and above 0.5.

We also analyzed the average variance extracted (AVE) to confirm the convergence of the model's scales (Ping, 2004). The results were satisfactory for most of the model’s constructs: OBC identification and sponsor’s control showed lower AVE, though the other measures considered to assess its convergence were within the recommended ranges. The constructs’ CR, meanwhile, were above the recommended cut-off value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2008) in every case (see Table 1).
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<th>Brand Identification</th>
<th>OBC Identification</th>
<th>OBC Engagement</th>
<th>OBC Experience (Second-order construct)</th>
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Table 1. Lambda Loadings and Reliability
With regard to the discriminant validity of the model’s latent variables, we applied two methods (see Martínez-López et al., 2013): a confidence interval (95%) for the correlation between pairs of constructs, without detecting unity in any case, and the square root of each construct’s AVE, which exceeded the construct’s correlations with the other constructs of the model.

5.2 Structural Model Testing

To perform structural analysis, we first analyzed the second-order model and then, subsequently, the global model with the set of all the variables.

Second order model

For the sake of rigor, regardless of the analyses performed of the OBC experience in the full structural model, we previously separately analyzed it; i.e. the structural model of this second-order construct with its four first-order constructs: sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioral. We began by assessing the measurements of goodness of fit, followed by the structural parameters. The overall fit indices of the structural model were very satisfactory ($\chi^2$/d.f. = 3.783; GFI = 0.971; RMSEA = 0.067; CFI = 0.973; TLI = 0.958; NFI = 0.964; IFI = 0.974). So, the dimensional structure concluded by Brakus et al. (2009) to measure brand experience seems to work well when the online brand community is specified as the concrete object of the experience. This finding is also confirmed in the next section.

Full model

Fit indices were quite acceptable ($\chi^2$/d.f. = 2.174; GFI = 0.890; RMSEA = 0.063; CFI = 0.932; TLI = 0.909; NFI = 0.877; IFI = 0.913). The estimation of the model’s structural coefficients showed our hypotheses to be significant, with the exception of Hypothesis 2 (sponsor’s control → OBC experience) and Hypothesis 4 (sponsor’s control → OBC trust), a point on which we wish to briefly comment here. Rather than a direct effect, as we initially hypothesized, these results would point to a sponsor’s control having an indirect effect of on both OBC experience and OBC trust due to sponsor’s opportunism.

We proceeded to re-estimate the model in accordance with the widely accepted protocol (i.e. introducing or removing parameters one by one and re-estimating the model). We undertook an initial reformulation of the model we had initially proposed, excluding only the least significant relationship, that of Hypothesis 4. The values of the fit indices improved once the model was re-estimated, but the results showed that the relationship between sponsor’s control and OBC experience (H2) remained non-significant. We then re-specified the model, removing this relationship, and re-estimated it once again. The results this time showed all the model’s relationships to be significant, with a better fit than previously ($\chi^2$/d.f. = 2.018; GFI = 0.910; RMSEA = 0.057; CFI = 0.949; TLI = 0.937; NFI = 0.901; IFI = 0.950). We decided not to undertake any further re-specification for two reasons: the modification indices were
below the minimum value for consideration and, more importantly, even though these modification indices had suggested changes to improve the structural model’s fit, they would have been mostly data-driven, and thus difficult to justify theoretically (see Martínez-López et al., 2013). Figure 2 shows the standardized structural coefficients for the final structural model. The coefficients between OBC experience and its four first-order constructs are also provided.

**Figure 2: Final Model (Standardized Solution)**

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Brand communities play an important role in customer relationship management. Literature has highlighted the influence of engagement as a key factor in understanding participation, but there has, until now, been a lack of an inclusive approach to its analysis. This research makes a contribution in this regard by expanding upon previous studies using a holistic approach to the process.

With regard to antecedents, in line with previous studies (Brodie et al., 2013; Chou et al., 2016; De Valck et al., 2009), our results indicate that experience of and identification with an OBC stand out above other antecedents such as trust, due to their greater impact upon engagement.

The results show the influence of engagement upon a member’s participation in a community, and this is consistent with the works of Brodie et al. (2011) and Wirtz et al. (2013), amongst others. This conclusion provides support for this direction of the relationship over the reverse (participation-engagement) suggested by other previous works (Vivek et al.,
We conclude that engagement with the OBC has a positive influence upon more frequent participation.

Identification with a community increases a consumer’s engagement. The results are consistent with previous works highlighting engagement’s mediating role in the relationship between identification with and participating in an OBC. This is a significant contribution, as it validates the results of recent studies (Chou et al., 2016; Wirtz et al., 2013) and qualifies those of other research suggesting a direct OBC identification-participation relationship (e.g. Hartleb and Blut, 2008). Additionally, to develop a consumer’s relationship with an OBC, it is important for three antecedents to be present: identification with the brand sponsoring the community, a positive experience and trust in the OBC. These results are consistent with previous studies analyzing the influence of these three antecedents—identification with the brand (Marchi et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2012), trust (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013; Yeh and Choi, 2011) and an assessment based on prior experiences in the OBC (Abfalter et al., 2012; Brodie et al., 2013)—on identification with the community. This contribution is, therefore, important, as it shows the combined influence of these antecedents.

With regard to the OBC experience, this research makes a further contribution by validating the second-order construct, brand experience, proposed by Brakus et al. (2009), as a measurement instrument in the context of OBC. The results also show the positive influence of OBC experience upon engagement, both directly and indirectly via trust in and identification with the OBC. Indeed, OBC experience stands out amongst engagement antecedents. The results are consistent with previous works, which have shown the positive influence of experience upon trust (Hung et al., 2011; Porter and Donthu, 2008), identification (Chen and Lin, 2014; Hajli et al., 2015; Keng et al., 2015) and engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013). This contribution is especially important, as unlike other studies measuring user experience on the basis of an assessment of the quality of the content and features of the online platform, this research shows its effect via the four dimensions making it up: the sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioral aspects related to this construct. Furthermore, with regard to its antecedents, we show that a perception of opportunism in a sponsor’s management of a community has a negative impact upon the OBC experience. This relationship has been suggested in previous research (e.g. Porter and Donthu, 2008; Wirtz et al., 2013), but had never previously been directly studied. On the other hand, we have been unable to conclude that a sponsor’s control over an OBC has a negative effect on its members’ OBC. This could be due to a number of reasons, including the community administrators successfully working to avoid this feeling of control over content and the flow of communications between members.
With regard to the antecedents of trust in the OBC, the results confirm that using the community for mainly commercial purposes has a negative effect, a conclusion in line with previous studies (e.g. Lee et al., 2014; Marzocchi et al., 2013; Porter and Donthu, 2008). Similarly, the OBC experience has a positive influence on trust in the community. This is a fresh contribution as, until now, this relationship had not been studied by means of a multidimensional construct, but rather taking into account aspects such as the quality and design of the platform (e.g. Hung et al., 2011; Leimeister et al., 2005). Furthermore, the results confirm that the degree of satisfaction in past experiences with an OBC also has a positive impact upon trust (see also Elliot et al., 2013). On the other hand, the results do not support the theory that sponsor control has an impact upon user trust. As we have noted above, this could be due to a low level of perceived control, which would reduce the affect upon trust.

Finally, in general, the model highlights the importance of engagement in explaining a member’s involvement in a community, and the important role played by antecedents such as OBC experience and trust, not only directly, but also indirectly via identification with the community. Again, this is an important contribution because, until now, research into community engagement had focused mainly on the influence of identification with the community (e.g. Algesheimer et al., 2005; Chou et al., 2016; Yeh and Choi, 2011).

References


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