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# Examining a psychological sense of brand community in elderly consumers<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

As the affluent baby-boomer segment rapidly approaches retirement, marketers are becoming more aware of elderly consumers. Carlson, Suter, and Brown (2008) recently introduced the psychological sense of brand community (PSBC) construct. This research extends their work by examining new antecedents and consequences of PSBC in the context of elderly consumers. Moreover, the study examines how older consumers' brand equity perceptions contribute to brand advocacy through a psychological sense of brand community (PSBC). Survey data is collected from 592 elderly customers (all over the age of 60) of a luxury motorcycle components and accessories manufacturer. Results suggest that three core facets of consumer-based brand equity contribute to older consumers' PSBC: perceived quality, perceived value for the cost, and brand uniqueness. Moreover, a PSBC motivates older consumers to participate in (and pay for) social brand communities as well as increases positive word of mouth and brand evangelism.

*“The purpose of any business is to create a customer who creates customers.”*

Shiv Singh, Head of Digital Marketing, Visa Inc.

## 1. Introduction

Marketing managers are increasingly aware of the importance of constantly perpetuating customers. Research from more than a dozen industries suggests that companies' sustained growth and profitability are strongly linked to the percentage of customer advocates, or brand enthusiasts that actively promote the brand to others (Reichheld, 2003). Remarkably, the findings indicate that ‘word of mouth’ surpasses brand image and even satisfaction in predicting profitability and growth. New customers evaluate the credibility of brand claims based on the experiences and judgments of past users (Filiari, 2015). One segment that is particularly relevant and lucrative to marketers is elderly consumers. United Nations' estimates project that people aged 65 and older currently earn roughly half of all discretionary income in the US and will constitute more than one fourth of the total population in Western countries by 2050 (Uncles & Lee, 2006; United Nations, 2008). A growing body of research suggests that, compared to their younger counterparts, elderly consumers are more brand-loyal, experience higher emotional attachment to brands, and are more likely to pay a premium for trusted brands (Amatulli, Guido, & Nataraajan, 2015; East,

Uncles, & Lomax, 2014; Jahn, Gaus, & Kiessling, 2012). Seniors are also more likely to ascribe brand perceptions from employee interactions leading researchers to call for more age-friendly policies (Wang, Ma, Hsu, Jao, & Lin, 2013).

Elderly consumers tend to be community-oriented and served as a point of reference for brand community research in the past (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). A social brand community refers to a group of acknowledged brand admirers that have structured relations based on their attachment to the brand, its products, marketing agents, and/or its parent institution (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Research suggests that social interaction between members of brand communities leads to positive word of mouth, educating and socializing new customers, forgiveness of product failures and/or lapses in customer service, resistance to switching temptations, participation in marketing research efforts, generating and testing product innovations, and purchasing related products and brand extensions (Algesheimer & Dholakia, 2006; Dholakia & Vianello, 2011; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009; Zhou, Zhang, Su, & Zhou, 2012).

Virtual exchanges of branded content or entertainment between customers are also encompassed under social brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Social network services like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat have revolutionized the way customers interact and share their experiences with brands and each other. Companies are increasingly utilizing social media to reach customers with branded

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information and many have established loyal followings as a result. Brand communities embedded within social networks ascertain a degree of authenticity and camaraderie not easily achieved through traditional mediums making them highly effective tools for customer acquisition and relationship management (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Zaglia, 2013). However, populating virtual communities with the critical mass of engaged and loyal supporters remains a daunting challenge given online distractions and customers' increasing selectivity toward digital content. Virtual communities expand as new members join and become acculturated to the norms of interaction and reciprocity.

The next level of abstraction is a psychological sense of brand community (PSBC), or the extent to which brand admirers *perceive* a relational bond with other brand users (Carlson et al., 2008). The authors illustrate that, “the brand, not communal relations or shared consciousness, is the impetus behind their sense of community” (p.285). Therefore, PSBC is a perceived affiliation with other brand users that is rooted in the brand and not based on any form of communication or interaction. Given this interpretation, are certain brand attributes more likely to incite a sense of brand community? Are consumers with PSBC more likely to evangelize their affection for the brand and participate in brand communities? If so, can managers influence brand impressions by focusing marketing communications on brand equity? Extant research has largely overlooked PSBC, and the only study that exists on the topic does not examine customer-based brand equity as an antecedent (Carlson et al., 2008).

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Brand community

Social identity theory postulates that individuals identify with similar others and derive a sense of social identity from joining groups and/or communities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Community membership is characterized by a sense of belonging to the in-group and a desired differentiation from the out-group. Therefore, it is not necessarily tied to the acknowledgement of other members and may only be perceived by the individual (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This conceptualization extends to brand communities. Branded possessions are often viewed by consumers as extensions of self and communicators of identity to others (Belk, 1988; Schau et al., 2009). While some consumers express their brand attachment by joining loyalty programs and brand communities, others may merely perceive a psychological connection with a brand and its affiliates. Despite the commercial nature of brand communities, strong mutual bonds are forged between members that may resemble those of a benevolent family (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

In a traditional sense, brand communities are comprised of three components 1) shared consciousness, 2) rituals and traditions, and 3) a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Shared consciousness refers to the collective sense of solidarity that binds members to the brand and each other. Commonalities between members of brand communities are rooted in mutual affection for the brand, opposition to other brands, and perceived differences between the in-group and out-group. Research suggests that members of brand communities view corporate employees as manifestations of the brand extending feelings of trust and commitment accordingly (McAlexander et al., 2002). Moreover, members express their allegiance to the community and vet the commitment of other members based on participation in branded events and/or rituals. These venues are used to congregate members under the umbrella of the brand and establish a sense of community and tradition. Such events cultivate shared behaviors among members such as certain dress codes or vernacular that reinforce community bonds. Lastly, a sense of moral responsibility reflects the perceived obligation felt by members toward the community and the brand. Members can express their devotion in various ways such as providing voluntary feedback to brand representatives, integrating new members into the

community, and spreading positive word of mouth.

The dearth of prior brand community research and theory focuses on the post hoc outcomes of membership with significantly less attention on the conception of brand attachment in the minds of consumers. Alternatively, this research extends current knowledge by providing a retrospective view of brand communities in elderly consumers. Carlson et al. (2008) propose that a PSBC reflects the degree to which consumers cognitively 1) identify with a brand, and 2) identify with users that purchase or utilize that brand. That is, identification with the brand unites the minds of PSBC consumers *before* any formal acknowledgment is made. In extension of this premise, the current study investigates the impact of customer-based brand equity on PSBC.

### 2.2. Customer-based brand equity

Customer-based brand equity refers to “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (Keller, 1993, p.2). Although some frameworks identify a number of common facets of customer-based brand equity such as perceived quality (PQ), perceived value for the cost (PVC), and brand uniqueness (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993), there has been no consensus on how the construct should be conceptualized or measured. Conceptual models that link price, perceived quality, and perceived value are based upon the means-end chain model. This model suggests that consumers store brand-related information in memory at different levels of abstraction; and retrieve this information from memory when making brand decisions (Zeithaml, 1988). Proponents assert that lower levels of brand abstraction are concerned with the functional benefits and/or utilitarian value of owning the brand. Conversely, higher levels of abstraction reflect more personal experiences with the brand (symbolic or experiential) that are both memorable and easily accessible (Netemeyer et al., 2004).

Perceived quality (PQ) is a consumer-based assessment of a brand's relative performance as compared to other brands and represents a higher level of abstraction than functional quality (Netemeyer et al., 2004). The authors define perceived value for the cost (PVC) as a comparative evaluation of brands based on two factors: what can be derived from the brand in terms of utilitarian and/or hedonic value and what must be sacrificed to obtain it (time, money, efforts). Though conceptualized at different levels of abstraction, research suggests that consumers are unlikely to distinguish between a brand's PQ and its PVC (Aaker, 1996). Holbrook and Corfman (1985) argue that an understanding of PQ is necessary in making accurate PVC judgments and is a component of “what is received” in PVC. Likewise, Netemeyer et al. (2004) asserts that PVC is conceptualized at a higher level of abstraction than any combination of attributes or benefits (functional, experiential, or symbolic), and, thus includes PQ.

Following the long tradition of viewing possessions as part of the extended self (Belk, 1988), customer-brand identification theory suggests that consumers attach symbolic meaning to brands not only based on how brands help define the inner self, but also the social self. Symbolic and experiential attributions (including an assessment/evaluation of other users of the brand) are more accessible, in a cognitive sense, than functional benefits and costs. Evidence suggests that elderly consumers pay less attention to functional deficiencies when emotional attachment to the brand is high (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Sikkell, 2013). Therefore, symbolic attributions about PQ and PVC may contribute to elderly consumers' perceived value and attachment to the brand.

Research indicates that perceptions about brand quality and/or cost impact the level of engagement experienced by customers in brand communities (Brodie, Whittome, & Bush, 2009). Customers are increasingly immersed in brand claims. Elderly customers are especially prone to brand attachment and are likely to associate with those that exhibit high value for the cost (Charles & Carstensen, 2010; Jahn et al., 2012). As such, brands that demonstrate superior value for the cost may

be perceived as market leaders by elderly customers, thereby engendering a connection with the brand and its users. Based on this reasoning, perceptions of brand quality and value for cost should increase mental associations with the brand and perceived connections with like-minded others. Formally:

**Hypothesis 1.** PQ/PVC will be positively related to PSBC in elderly consumers.

Customer-based brand equity also encompasses brand uniqueness or the extent to which the brand is perceived as distinct from competing brands. A brand's uniqueness describes the idiosyncratic aspect(s) of brand equity that customers recognize as original and unparalleled by other brands. Research suggests that customers prefer brands that stand out from the competition and this preference is reflected in their purchase decisions and willingness to pay a higher price premium (Netemeyer et al., 2004). The authors point out that inferences about uniqueness are often generated from advertising claims and personal experiences with the brand. Such information is generally used as a heuristic to simplify the decision-making process and differentiate between brands. Stemming from social identity theory, consumer-brand identification suggests that consumers recognize and appreciate the originality of unique brands and develop strong emotional connections that are expressed through group membership (Keller, 1993; Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010). Research demonstrates that these bonds are more pronounced in elderly consumers since they attach greater importance to abstract product attributes (Charles & Carstensen, 2010; Jahn et al., 2012; Sikkel, 2013). Moreover, established brands with distinct attributes and characteristics have been shown to resonate highly with elderly customers (Lambert-Pandraud & Laurent, 2010). Based on this reasoning, brand uniqueness should partly determine the extent to which consumers feel a psychological connection with other users of the same brand. Subsequently:

**Hypothesis 2.** Brand uniqueness will be positively related to PSBC in elderly consumers.

PSBC reflects the cognitive and emotional bonds that are forged with other users of the same brand. Although PSBC in itself does not require any social interaction, it may be that PSBC makes customers more likely to acknowledge and formalize bonds with the organization through participating in social brand communities. Moreover, PSBC accentuates brand commitment in consumers and in turn, increases positive word of mouth and participation in brand events (Carlson et al., 2008). In a similar vein, elderly consumers with a psychological connection to the brand and its users may be more likely to pay a premium to activate their membership and support the community. Linkages have also been established between customer-based brand equity and willingness to pay a premium for the brand (Netemeyer et al., 2004). Customers' willingness to pay a price premium indicates a strong sense of brand loyalty; to the extent that they would rather pay a higher price than settle for comparable brands. The relational bonds established through a PSBC may trigger a similar effect particularly since PSBC has been associated with strong feelings of brand commitment (Carlson et al., 2008). Hence:

**Hypothesis 3.** PSBC will be positively related to a willingness to participate in social community events in elderly consumers.

**Hypothesis 4.** PSBC will be positively related to a willingness to pay a premium for brand community membership in elderly consumers.

Reference groups influence the self-concepts and behaviors of individuals (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, when elderly consumers sense a cognitive connection with a brand, they may externalize those feelings by sharing positive brand information with their sphere of influence. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) note that brand loyal consumers become champions of the brands and companies that they accept to represent them. Moreover, loyal consumers express and transpose their

commitment by advocating the brand to nonusers (Matzler, Pichler, & Hemetsberger, 2007). In other words, consumers that are convinced of a brand's value feel an obligation to share this information with others. Accordingly, Carlson et al. (2008) report that PSBC indirectly impacts brand advocacy behaviors through brand commitment. We argue that word of mouth promotions are not necessarily confined to expressly committed customers, but even psychologically connected customers may vocalize their brand attachment to others.

Obsessive brand passion refers to an internalization of the brand into one's social identity in a way that transcends mere brand commitment (Swimberghe, Astakhova, & Wooldridge, 2014). The researchers argue that obsessive brand passion spurs brand evangelism, which reflects how 'die hard' proponents of a brand strive fervently to persuade others to join their ranks. By definition, PSBC consumers internalize the brand and view the brand as an attribution of their identities (Carlson et al., 2008). As such, PSBC consumers that are mentally sold on the value of the brand are likely to propagate that perceived equity to others despite a lack of social engagement. Therefore, we posit that PSBC will be directly related not only to word-of-mouth promotions but also to brand evangelism. Thus:

**Hypothesis 5.** PSBC will be positively related to positive word-of-mouth in elderly consumers.

**Hypothesis 6.** PSBC will be positively related to brand evangelism in elderly consumers.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Study design

The data collection process consists of paper and pencil mail surveys sent to a sample of 2200 existing customers of a motorcycle accessories and components manufacturer. To control for customer familiarity/experience with the brand, screening questions filter respondents that are not repeat customers with at least two purchases from the organization within the past 3 years. An additional filter question eliminates respondents that report past participation in brand community events. The total collection returns 803 surveys of which 592 are useful responses, for a response rate of 26%. Given the rather homogenous composition of the luxury motorcycle market, the sample is predominantly male and Caucasian with an average age of 68. The respondents are randomly selected and geographically dispersed across the United States. A complete demographic description of the sample can be found in Table 1.

#### 3.2. Measures

Brand equity is measured in a manner consistent with previous theoretical and empirical work (Netemeyer et al., 2004). A 6-item, one-factor PQ/PVC measure is utilized with three items measuring PQ and three items measuring PVC (Chronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$ ). A 4-item scale developed by Netemeyer et al. (2004) measures brand uniqueness (Chronbach's  $\alpha = 0.94$ ) and psychological sense of brand community is measured using an adapted 5-item scale (Chronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$ ) (Carlson et al., 2008). Following a similar approach, four items measure willingness to participate in brand community events and willingness to pay a premium for membership, respectively (Chronbach's  $\alpha = 0.90, 0.93$ ). In accordance with Matzler et al. (2007), positive word-of-mouth and brand evangelism is measured with four items and three items, respectively (Chronbach's  $\alpha = 0.96, 0.86$ ).

### 4. Results

Results are presented in three parts. First, means, standard deviations and correlations for and among all variables in the study are

**Table 1**  
Sample Composition details.

Characteristic	Percentage (%) of respondents
Average age of respondents	65 (Range 39–91) 20% of respondents were within 52–61 range and 60% of respondents were within 62–72 range
Gender	
■ Male	90%
■ Female	10%
Marital Status	
■ Married	83%
■ Unmarried	17%
Ethnicity	
■ Caucasian	94%
■ African American	3%
■ Hispanic	0.7%
■ Other	2.3%
Education	
■ Less than high school	3%
■ High school	36%
■ Some college	37%
■ College	18%
■ Advanced degree (PhD, MD, etc....)	6%
Income	
■ < \$15,000.00	1%
■ \$15,000.00–\$ 29,999.00	7%
■ \$30,000.00–\$ 39,999.00	13%
■ \$40,000.00–\$ 49,999.00	12%
■ \$50,000.00–\$ 59,999.00	12%
■ \$60,000.00–\$ 69,999.00	11%
■ \$70,000.00–\$ 79,999.00	8%
■ \$80,000.00–\$ 89,999.00	7%
■ > \$90,000	9%
	20%

presented in Table 2. Next, a review of the model evaluation criteria is presented as well as a discussion of the various tests used to evaluate construct validity. Finally, an examination of the individual path coefficients of the structural model is conducted to test the hypotheses.

4.1. Measurement model

Using LISREL 8.80, a series of dimension-level confirmatory factor analyses examine whether the seven variables capture distinct constructs rather than common source effects. Further analysis revealed that the seven-factor model fits the data well ( $\chi^2 = 962.31$ , d.f. = 277,  $p < 0.001$ ; NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04; RMA = 0.04; AIC = 10,737.61). The study tests two alternative models: (1) a six-factor model, where perceived quality and value for cost and brand uniqueness merge into a single factor exhibited a less satisfactory fit ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 745.83$ , d.f. = 7;  $p < 0.001$ ; NNFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.06; RMR = 0.04; AIC = 1753.91); and (2) a single-factor

**Table 2**  
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 PQPVC	5.84	1.14	0.95						
2 Brand uniqueness	5.67	1.13	0.76	0.94					
3 Psychological sense of brand community	5.12	1.22	0.55	0.52	0.95				
4 Willingness to participate in social brand community events	4.31	1.57	0.38	0.30	0.43	0.90			
5 Willingness to pay premium for brand community membership	3.73	1.68	0.33	0.28	0.42	0.68	0.93		
6 Positive word of mouth	6.09	1.14	0.78	0.65	0.52	0.38	0.30	0.96	
7 Brand evangelism	5.21	1.41	0.73	0.61	0.59	0.43	0.37	0.75	0.86

Note. All correlations coefficients are significant at  $p < 0.01$ . The reliabilities (Chronbach's alphas) are reported in the diagonal.

model also exhibited less than adequate fit ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 9600.91$ , d.f. = 21;  $p < 0.001$ ; NNFI = 0.89, CFI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.17; RMR = 0.14; AIC = 10,636.65). These findings provide support for the discriminant validity of the seven constructs used in the study. In addition, all the individual scale properties exceed the recommended cutoff proposed by Bagozzi and Yi (1988). Specifically, composite reliabilities are greater than 0.60 and percentage of variance extracted by the latent constructs (AVEs) all exceed 0.50. The factor loadings for individual items, average variance extracted, and composite reliability are presented in Table 3.

The use of single rater responses to measure variables in this study presented a risk of common method bias. In order to assess whether common method bias stemmed from the use of common rater measurements, a Harman's single-factor test is conducted for all measurement items (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). If common method bias exists in the data, a single factor would account for most of the variance in these variables. Exploratory factor analyses revealed seven factors with eigenvalues greater or close to 1.0, with the first factor accounting for 49.26% of the total variance. Consistent with the poor fit results from the confirmatory factor analysis with a single-factor solution, these findings suggest that common source bias did not constitute a legitimate threat to the validity of the study.

4.2. Structural model

The structural model displayed in Fig. 1 and estimated using LISREL 8.80, exhibits an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 = 1102.94$ , d.f. = 257,  $p < 0.001$ ; NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04). The individual path coefficients are examined to test the hypotheses. Results indicate that PQ/PVC is positively associated with a psychological sense of brand community ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $t = 6.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), thus supporting Hypothesis 1. As predicted, brand uniqueness also has a positive effect on psychological sense of brand community ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $t = 2.43$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), providing support for Hypothesis 2. Hypotheses 3–6 capture the relationship between PSBC and behavioral outcomes. Results indicate that PSBC is significantly and positively associated with participation in social community events ( $\beta = 0.53$ ,  $t = 13.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and willingness to pay a premium for brand community membership ( $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $t = 2.38$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), thereby confirming Hypotheses 3 and 4. PSBC also has a significant positive effect on positive word-of-mouth ( $\beta = 0.64$ ,  $t = 15.29$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and brand evangelism ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $t = 4.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming Hypotheses 5 and 6. Hence, all six hypotheses are supported (see also Fig. 2).

5. Discussion

This research extends prior research by exploring additional antecedents and consequences of PSBC within the context of elderly consumers. The results suggest that perceived quality and perceived value for costs contribute to PSBC, as does brand uniqueness. Moreover, those with PSBC are more likely to participate in social brand community activities, engage in brand evangelism, pay for brand community membership, and spread positive word-of-mouth to others. These



**Table 3**  
Scale items for construct measures.

Latent variables with indicators	Factor loadings	Average variance extracted (in %)	Composite reliability
PQ/PVC		84.39	0.99
Compared to other brands, brand X is of very high quality	0.93		
Brand X is the best brand in its product category	0.94		
Brand X consistently performs better than other brands	0.89		
All things considered, brand X is a good buy	0.95		
Compared to other brands, brand X is a good value for the money	0.91		
With brand X, I feel I am getting my money's worth	0.89		
Brand uniqueness		84.12	0.99
Brand X is "distinct" from other brands in the same product category	0.90		
Brand X really "stands out" from other brands in the same product category	0.96		
Brand X is very different from other brands in the same product category	0.90		
Brand X is "unique" from other brands in the same product category	0.89		
Psychological sense of brand community		84.01	0.99
I feel strong ties to other brand X users	0.88		
I find it very easy to form a bond with other brand X users	0.95		
I feel a sense of being connected with other brand X users	0.96		
A strong feeling of camaraderie exists between me and other brand X users	0.89		
I feel a sense of community with other brand X users	0.90		
Willingness to participate in brand community social events (If given the opportunity, how likely would you...)		66.61	0.97
Become a member a brand X owners group?	0.91		
Participate in a brand X on-line owners' group forum?	0.80		
Attend brand X events at the local brand X dealer?	0.83		
Attend an annual event at brand X headquarters/plant?	0.77		
Purchase brand X licensed gear, accessories, and clothing?	0.76		
Willingness to pay a premium for brand community membership		78.08	0.99
I would be willing to pay an annual fee (renewable every year) for brand X owner group membership	0.85		
I would be willing to pay a one-time fee for brand X owner group membership	0.90		
I would be willing to make an annual donation to a charitable cause (renewable every year) in exchange for brand X owner group membership	0.92		
I would be willing to make a one-time donation to a charitable cause in exchange for brand X owner group membership	0.90		
Positive word-of-mouth		89.00	0.99
I have recommended brand X to friends	0.93		
I "talk up" brand X to friends	0.95		
I try to share good things about brand X	0.95		
I give brand X positive word-of-mouth advertising	0.95		
Brand evangelism		79.30	0.99
I try to convince as many people as possible of brand X	0.92		
I feel the need to tell the world that brand X is the best brand in the world	0.90		
If someone tries to say something bad about brand X, I will immediately correct that person	0.85		

findings have both theoretical and managerial implications.

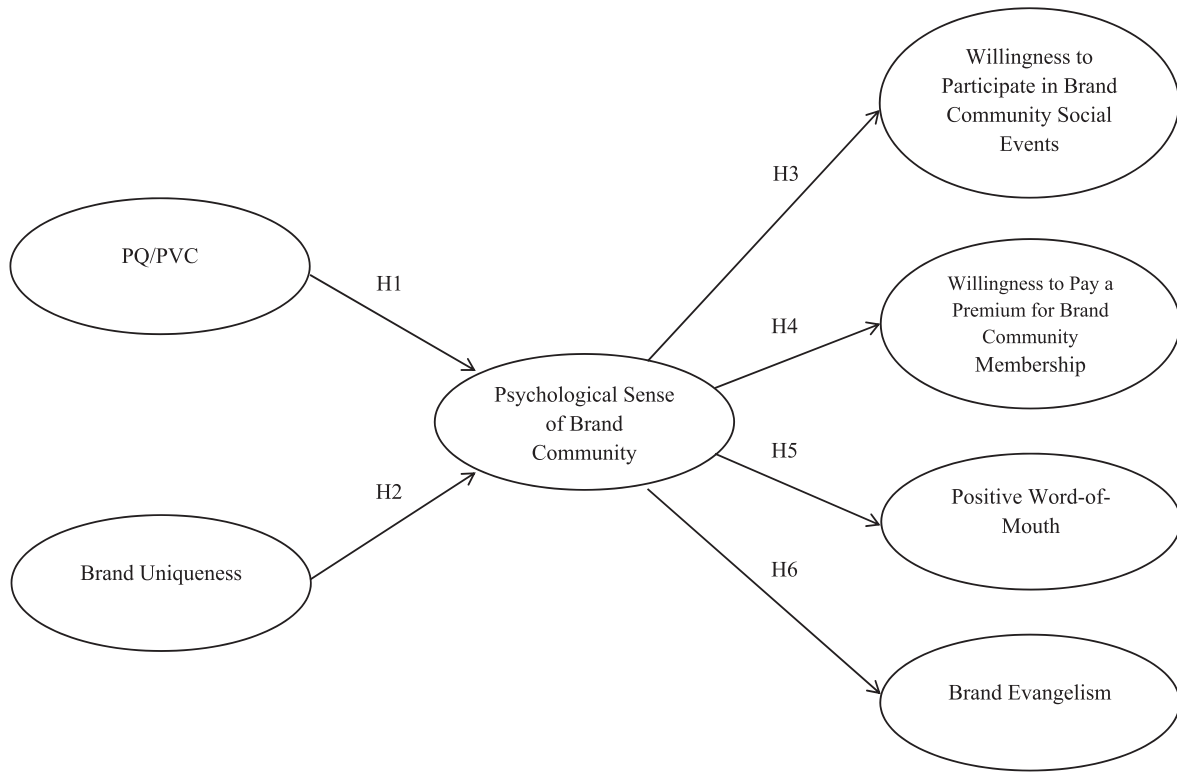
This discussion is not meant to weigh in on the larger ontological debate surrounding brand communities, but to explicitly investigate the psychological component behind them. PSBC, by definition, is an imagined sense of community since members have no formal interactions. Given this interpretation, do psychological communities really exist? If consumers—*independently and without social confirmation*—feel a sense of community, can their brand perceptions be converted into actions that promote the brand? The results confirm that PSBC plays a transformative role in converting brand equity perceptions (PQ/PVC, brand uniqueness) into positive word of mouth and brand evangelism. According to this study, psychologically connected consumers are not only more likely to join social brand communities, but they are also more likely to pay for membership. Also, consumers with a PSBC are more likely to advocate and even evangelize the brand to non-users. Therefore, in certain respects, psychological brand communities may work in lieu of social brand communities.

## 6. Managerial implications

Given the rising number of Americans aged 65 and older (one out of every five Americans by 2030), managerial implications abound from this research. Perhaps the most significant is that brand advocacy behaviors can be initiated with elderly consumers through a strong

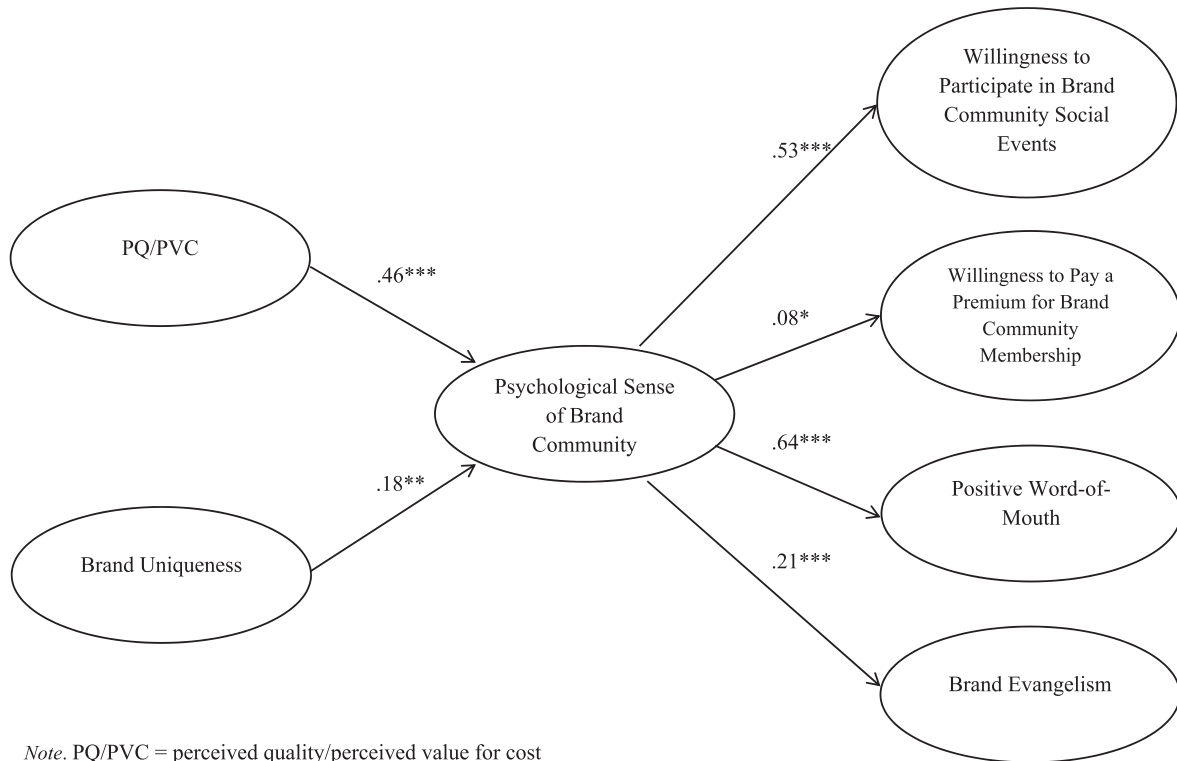
psychological connection with the brand and its users. This research indicates that managers can elicit a PSBC in elderly consumers by emphasizing what sets the brand apart from the competition in terms of differential value. Elderly consumers may be more likely to formulate a psychological brand connection if the brand is perceived to be superior in terms of price, quality, and/or uniqueness.

Results suggest that a PSBC strongly influences positive word of mouth and may be induced by aligning the brand with three customer value drivers: quality, value for the cost, and uniqueness. Research suggests that individuals over the age of 50 represent an important segment for television advertisers, watching 30–40% more than the rest of the population (The Economist, 2002). According to the results, industries targeting this growing segment (real estate, luxury, cosmetics, healthcare, insurance), may be wise to pivot advertising toward value drivers. That is, television advertising may be effective in eliciting a mental connection with elderly consumers if the brand is portrayed as comparably superior on value and uniqueness to category. Megabrands such as Kate Spade and Estee Lauder are spending an increasing amount of advertising dollars on actors and spokespeople that relate to elderly consumers (Adweek, 2015). Recently, Estee Lauder recruited Karen Graham (the brand's poster model in the 70s) to promote a premium face cream to the elderly, while Quicken Loans has enlisted the help of Henry Winkler (Fonzy from Happy Days) to encourage seniors to invest in reverse mortgages. Endorsements such as these are intended to



Note. PQ/PVC = perceived quality/perceived value for cost

Fig. 1. Proposed model.



Note. PQ/PVC = perceived quality/perceived value for cost

\*\*\*p < .001  
 \*\* p < .01  
 \* p < .05

Fig. 2. Structural model.

attract elderly consumers by imposing a familiar face on the brand and establish trust in the value proposition.

Appealing to elderly consumers requires an understanding of their goals and aspirations. In the past, advertisements have portrayed the elderly in helpless states shackled by sickness or frailty such as the infamous 'I've fallen and I can't get up' campaign. However, the results suggest a markedly different approach to generate a psychological connection with elderly customers. It may be in the best interest of advertisers to communicate the triumphs rather than the traumas of maturity. Consumers strongly identify with brands that communicate an emotionally engaging narrative where the brand plays a central role (Genco, Pohlmann, & Steidl, 2013). A recent ad submission to Adidas by an aspiring talent, Mehrer (2016), is a powerful illustration of this approach. The ad opens with a former marathon runner who is confined to the dullness of a retirement home until he finds an old pair of Adidas running shoes that reignite his passion for running. Similarly, an arthritis pain reliever may advertise the rejuvenating power of the medication rather than mere pain relief using imagery of outdoor activities such as hiking or cycling with grandchildren. In this way, the brand is framed as a facilitator of an active and healthy lifestyle that promotes vitality and wellness. Consumers consume products as well as concepts. To create a lasting impression that motivates action, the brand should be reflective of customer aspirations.

Positive word of mouth is a powerful advertising tool and a principal driver of profitable growth (Reichheld, 2003). As such, the substantial impact of PSBC on positive word of mouth and participation in brand communities is intriguing. Conventional wisdom suggests that a stimulus (purchase, service encounter) is needed to jar a consumer from silent admiration to vocal support of a brand. However, it appears that a PSBC may be all that is required to promote the desirable outcomes of a social brand community. Moreover, a customer-driven approach to brand equity may predispose customers into a PSBC and initiate advocacy behaviors. For this metamorphosis to occur sustainably, managers should keep a constant pulse on customer value drivers and pain points. Few sources of information are more reliable or accessible in this regard than brand communities. Brand community members are more likely to provide elaborate feedback to the company when prompted and remain loyal even when confronted with superior performance (McAlexander et al., 2002). Therefore, tracking the perceptions of advocates may help provide a framework for replication and elucidate what the brand is and/or should be. From a recruitment standpoint, brand communities may also provide a rich pool of candidates for internal and external positions in the organization. Particularly in frontline positions, it is important that employees portray an infectious enthusiasm and commitment to the brand when dealing with customers. Recruiting qualified and outspoken advocates from brand communities is one way to ensure that those selected are not only vested, but actually embody the brand.

Results suggest that PSBC has a differential impact when it comes to participation in brand communities versus paying for membership. It appears that elderly consumers are more likely to acknowledge their attachment to the brand by participating in brand communities than they are to pay for it, at least initially. Although PSBC consumers may choose to participate in brand communities, they may not be as inclined to subscribe until they are sold on the benefits of joining. Therefore, new participants in brand communities should be thoroughly informed of membership perks by fellow members and/or employees prior to any solicitation for payment. PSBC consumers represent potential advocates of the brand and should be nurtured as such.

Customer advocates put their reputations on the line when endorsing the brand and as such, potential advocates (nonusers) must be convinced that the brand is indeed superior and worthy of their endorsement. Therefore, marketing communications should reflect brand elements that resonate highly with loyalists in hopes of attracting the silent admiration of similar others. One course of action is to focus on the unique and relative advantages of the brand to induce PSBC and the

sought after benefits of social brand communities. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that comparative advertisements are perceived as more informative, thought provoking, and generate more purchases than non-comparative ads (Grewal, Kavanoor, Fern, Costley, & Barnes, 1997). Extrapolating from these findings, competitive brand positioning may help to strengthen brand equity perceptions and activate PSBC in elderly consumers. However, comparisons should be factual and clearly convey superiority on customer-generated value drivers. Inaccurate comparisons or disparaging remarks about the competition may alienate customers and generate negative undertones that harm the credibility of the brand (McKay-Nesbitt, Manchanda, Smith, & Huhmann, 2011).

Understandably, the notion of creating customer advocates 'out of thin air' may seem as imaginative as a PSBC. However, it appears that advocacy may actually be induced in elderly consumers by merely focusing on the originality of the brand and the value it provides in marketing communications (quality and value for cost). Effective brand strategy development is based on a clear understanding of the core and supplementary value provided by the brand and whether customers are sold on this value. Therefore, positioning strategists are encouraged to refine and, if needed, reengineer value dimensions to ensure an evolving relevance and psychological connection with customers. Despite the latency of a PSBC, it may be all that is needed to ignite brand evangelism and participation in brand communities.

## 7. Limitations and future research

The current sample is predominantly composed of married Caucasian males above the age of 65, therefore, it is plausible that demographics are impacting the linkages found here. That said, the sample specificity could be a byproduct of the brands examined, given the appeal of motorcycles to established consumers with more disposable income and time for leisure activities. Future research should validate current findings using brands from mainstream industries that appeal to a wider demographic spectrum (automobiles, electronics, apparel, etc.). However, given this segment's pioneering role in the establishment of brand communities (particularly in the motorcycle industry), much can be gained from a deeper understanding of how elderly consumers become attached to brands and subsequently spring into action. Research suggests that managers monitor the brand perceptions of elderly consumers to identify core brand characteristics that may then be applied strategically to the mass market (Lambert-Pandraud & Laurent, 2010).

Perceived brand connections that arise during impression formation can profoundly impact how customers categorize and feel about brands (Lee, Broderick, & Chamberlain, 2007). An unarticulated affinity for a brand and its users implies that such feelings may not be readily accessible or transferrable by respondents using traditional surveys. To our knowledge, neuroscience and brain imaging techniques have not been used to examine the genesis of brand communities. Neural techniques such as affective priming and visual tracking can measure differential brain activity and systematically track the cognitive attention and emotional arousal of respondents when exposed to brands for the first time. Such research may provide managers with a more precise understanding of what aspects of brand equity resonate most with prospects and whether certain brand narratives arouse stronger emotions and mental responses in consumers than others. Brand communities exemplify what is right with a brand and should be utilized as a source of information and analysis. As with any empirical research, this model likely excludes contemporaneous constructs and linkages, and in this respect, represents an imperfect nomological network. It may be that the best "big picture" narrative for the emergence of brand communities (both psychological and social) is that they are reflections of a basic human need for affiliation and brands that can capitalize on that need can expect positive outcomes.



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