

## **Off line brand community dynamics: An empirical study of antecedents and brand consequence of participation**

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### **Abstract**

Brand relationship, community identification and community participation represent the pillars of brand community dynamics. While brand relationship refers to the consumer's positive attitude to a unique brand, by identification a consumer expresses the sense of belonging to the community, and through participation he or she shows the enthusiasm to run brand and community activities. Existing literature neglects the nature and the roles of participation, the identification and the differences between the constructs. Based on the ABC model (Attitude, Behavior and Cognitive), the paper empirically analyzes the antecedents of participation by a survey of 223 members belonging to the Vespa motorcycle off line communities. Data analysis is carried out by structural equation modeling through Lisrel software. The results show that the consumer's brand responses are driven, in the attitudinal and behavioral aspects, more by participation than identification. From the other side, the last one has a great influence on the attitudinal brand dimension. From a managerial point of view, the paper suggests the importance of distinguish clearly between participation and identification: by leveraging identification, companies could manage brand community membership and access, modeling brand community size and structure; and by leveraging participation, they might increase the quality of the relationship with the brand, the socialization among customers and the customer's loyalty to both the brand and the company.

**Key-Words:** Brand Community, Participation, Behavioral responses

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## I. Introduction

Brand relationship, community identification and community participation represent the pillars of brand community dynamics<sup>1</sup>. Brand relationship constitutes the point of departure of any brand community and it refers to the consumer's positive attitude in terms of commitment, attachment and loyalty to a unique brand. By identification a consumer expresses the sense of belonging to the community, acquiring the formal status of member, and through participation it is expressed the enthusiasm to run brand and community related activities. While in the existing literature the role and the nature of brand relationship has been well documented<sup>2</sup>, the impact and the distinction between *identification* and *participation*, especially in the case of off line brand community, is less analysed yet.

Off line brand communities, although sharing some similar characteristics with on line communities, also have many distinctive traits, such as reduced size, requirement for product ownership, members' hierarchy, stronger personal ties, geographical connotation, and low frequency of contacts with a reduced rate of abandonment<sup>3</sup>. Thus, these differences translate into quite diverse concepts of *identification* and *participation*.

In an online community the identification captures mostly the formal status of member, expressing for example "I have my account on the X on line brand community"; membership is easier and faster, due to the smaller number of requirements and barriers for access, such as product ownership or identity obligation<sup>4</sup>. Identification in most of cases does not translate to a sense of belonging to a group since consumers are not conscious of community boundaries, size, location and, moreover, personal traits, like culture, politics and religious orientations remain secret<sup>5</sup>. In the same vein, participation in an on line community is mostly time based, ranging from lurking to posting comments and uploading digital content<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, identification and participation in off line contexts cover larger and deeper meanings. The first one categorizes the member as part of a defined,

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<sup>1</sup> Black, I. and Veloutsou, C. (2017), *Working consumers: Co-creation of brand identity, consumer identity and brand community identity*, Journal of Business Research, Vol. 70, pp.416-429.

<sup>2</sup> Schouten, J. W., McAlexander, J. H., and Koenig H. F. (2007), *Transcendent customer experience and brand community*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Vol. 35(3), pp.357-368.

<sup>3</sup> Bradford Williams, T., and Sherry J. F. (2018), *Dwelling dynamics in consumption encampments: Tailgating as emplaced brand community*, Marketing theory, Vol. 18(2). pp.203-217.

<sup>4</sup> Hollebeek Linda, D., Biljana J., and Wenyan T. (2017), Virtual brand community engagement practices: a refined typology and model, *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 31(3), pp.204-217.

<sup>5</sup> Schau, H. J., Muñiz Jr. A. M. (2002), *Brand communities and personal identities: negotiations in the cyberspace*, Association for Consumer Research, Vol. 29, pp.344-349.

<sup>6</sup> Catterall, M., and Maclaran, P. (2002), *Researching consumers in virtual worlds: A cyberspace odyssey*, Journal of Consumer Behaviour, Vol. 1(3), pp.228-237.

bounded group with a specific set of shared values<sup>7</sup>. For instance, Harley-Davidson clubs are organized on a geographical basis and members share and experience the same values, such as freedom and patriotism. Participation, founded on face-to-face interaction and on running specific tasks, requires physical displacement and a higher personal involvement in terms of economic and psychological effort<sup>8</sup>.

Participation in off line brand communities materializes in the form of brand fests, meetings and reunions. Such events are a complex blend of consumer- and firm-planned activities. We can quote, for instance, the case of the Jeep brand community, where members cover long distances in order to participate in brand events where specific activities, such as ride shows, parades and competitions are scheduled.

Participation and identification then assume key roles in characterizing an off line community, representing central constructs for both managers and marketers. While identification has been explored by several studies<sup>9</sup>, participation, surprisingly, received less attention especially within a marketing context.

Despite this, few studies have assumed participation to have a strong impact on the brand. On the one hand, it could lead to a deeper relationship between the product and the member, by new usage experiences, affecting the consumer attitude toward the brand. On the other hand, participation, leading to high member interaction and engagement, favors information and knowledge exchange, increasing word of mouth and brand expertise<sup>10</sup>.

In light of this, the paper explores empirically the nature and role of participation within an off line brand community. In particular, by underlining the differences among the two different constructs of participation and identification, we analyze the antecedents of participation. On the basis of the ABC (Attitude, Behavior and Cognitive) model, we argue that the responses of a consumer's brand are driven more by participation than identification in the affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. We test our model with a survey of members belonging to different off line communities built around the Vespa motorcycle brand<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Bradford Williams, T., and Sherry J. F. (2018), *Dwelling dynamics in consumption encampments: Tailgating as emplaced brand community*, Marketing theory, Vol. 18(2). pp.203-217.

<sup>8</sup> McAlexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W., and Koenig, H. F. (2002), *Building Brand Community*, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 66(1), pp.38–54.

<sup>9</sup> Dholakia, U. M., Bagozzi, R. P., and Klein Pearo, L. (2004), *A social influence model of consumer participation in network and small group based virtual communities*, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Vol. 21(3), pp.241-263.

<sup>10</sup> Algesheimer, R., Borle, S., Dholakia, U. M., and Singh Siddharth, S. (2010), *The Impact of Customer Community Participation on Customer Behaviors: An Empirical Investigation*, Marketing Science, Vol. 29(4), pp.756-769.

<sup>11</sup> Vespa is a brand of Piaggio Company.

At the academic level, the results allow us to propose first, a more actionable measure of off line brand community participation, and second, to find empirical evidence of the brand consequences of participation.

From the marketers' point of view, by analyzing and leveraging participation, firms could better target and cluster members according to the degree of community involvement they show, and they could engage them for future brand related activities such as promotions as well as new product development and testing.

The paper is organized as follows: first, we describe our conceptual model and the literature supporting our hypothesis. Second, we introduce the research setting and the methodology. Third, we test our model and show the main findings. We conclude with underlying implications for both academics and marketers, evidencing limitations and directions for further research.

## II. Literature review

Our model is based on the premise of differences between on line and off line brand community<sup>12</sup>.

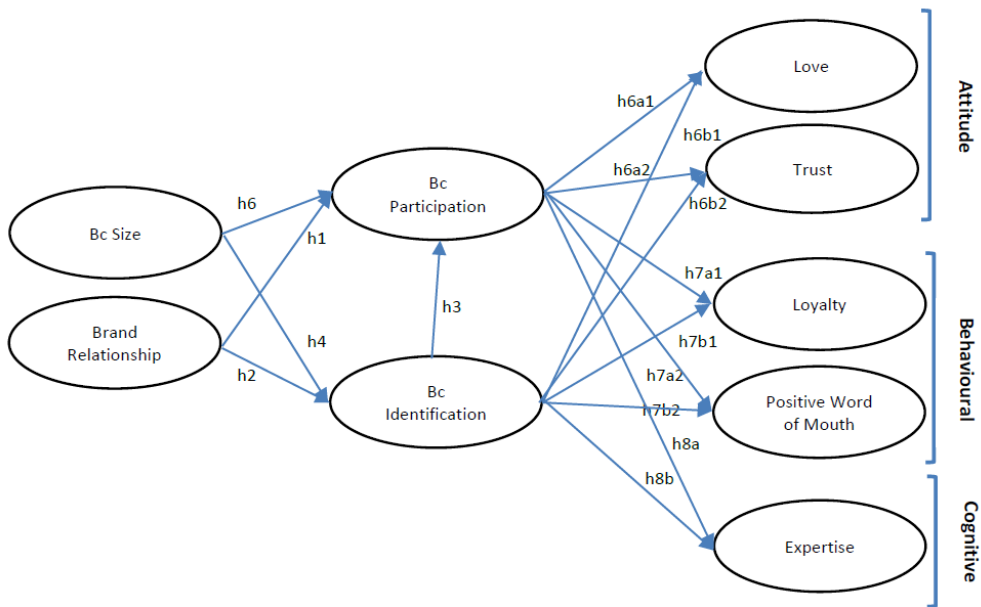
In off line brand community, first consumers select, choose and value the brand, according to symbolic and functional elements<sup>13</sup>. Later, on the basis of the shaped relationship with the brand, a consumer decides to join the community by first identifying himself with the community (membership), and later on participating in brand community activities<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Hollebeek Linda, D., Biljana J., and Wenyan T. (2017), Virtual brand community engagement practices: a refined typology and model, *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 31(3), pp.204-217. Woisetschläger, D. M., Hartleb, V., and Blut, M. (2008), *How to Make Brand Communities Work: Antecedents and Consequences of Consumer Participation*, *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, Vol. 7(3), pp.237-256.

<sup>13</sup> Fournier, S. (1998), *Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research*, *The Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 24(4), pp.343-373.

<sup>14</sup> Cova, B., Pace, S., and Park, D. J. (2007), *Global brand communities across borders: The Warhammer case*, *International Marketing Review*, Vol. 24(3), pp. 313-329.



**Figure 1. Conceptual model of antecedents and consequences of participation in brand community (bc)**

Source: Own elaboration.

Based on this premise, Figure 1 summarizes our model. Although the main goal of the paper is to examine the role of community participation compared to identification, we include in the model a well-acknowledged determinant of participation and identification: specifically, as literature underlines, brand relationship figures as an antecedent of community participation and identification. Including brand relationship allows us to test our main hypotheses, reducing the risk of omitting variables<sup>15</sup>. We expect that at the brand level, the consequences of participation are manifold: experiencing a deep relationship with the product and a stronger interaction with other members, consumers should increase their level of commitment to the brand in terms of attitudes, behaviors and knowledge. Next, we support and present our hypothesis by illustrating the participation construct, its antecedents and the brand consequences.

### A. Participation and its antecedents

Participation in an off line community implies a face-to-face interaction and, in most cases, requires the consumer to travel in order to take part in in events and activities planned by the community and/or firm<sup>16</sup>. According to the characteristics

<sup>15</sup> Wittink, D R. (1988), *The Application of Regression Analysis*, Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

<sup>16</sup> Bradford Williams, T., and Sherry J. F. (2018), *Dwelling dynamics in consumption encampments:*

of the brand and its usage context, participation implies different levels of involvement where consumers play different roles and reach different statuses. In the Jeep communities, driving a car is just the first step; next come rallies, parades, car tests, and tourist travels until a full immersion in the community life-style is reached<sup>17</sup>. In the Apple Mac community, members organized celebrative reunions with a degree of involvement and devotion not so far from religious events<sup>18</sup>. Ducati club members meet for a 4-day-long annual meeting promoted by the brand, where entertainment (music concerts) as well as brand related activities (race or parade) are planned.

Motivations for participation in a brand community rely on two main interrelated factors: the relationship with the brand and the identification with the group. On one hand, the closer and loving relationship with the brand, in term of brand personification and brand identification, as well as the need for more and higher information about the brand and its usage, represent the basis of brand community participation. On the other hand, self-awareness of being a member of a specific group, sharing the same values, desiring social identification within the community and self-enhancement emerge as drivers of participation<sup>19</sup>. The earliest and influential paper on brand community by Schouten and shows how participation in the Harley-Davidson communities is driven by consumer identification with a collective value system with specific beliefs (freedom, patriotism, American heritage). In such a context, the brand acts as a self-presentation tool and pass to join the group.

The next sections describe brand relationship and identification with group as the antecedents of participation and introduce the hypothesis.

## **B. Brand relationship**

The relationship with the brand, in an off line community, is one of the most important drivers for joining the brand community. It is previous to the one with the community: buying a Harley-Davidson is required to be part of HOG, the Harley Owners Group<sup>20</sup>.

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*Tailgating as emplaced brand community*, Marketing theory, Vol.18(2). Algesheimer, R., Dholakia, U., and Herrmann, A. (2005), *The Social Influence of Brand Community: Evidence from European Car Clubs*, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 69(3), pp.19–34.

<sup>17</sup> McAlexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W., and Koenig, H. F. (2002), *Building Brand Community*, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 66(1), pp.38–54.

<sup>18</sup> Muñiz, A. M., and Schau J. H. (2005), *Religiosity in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community*, Journal of Consumer Research, Vol. 31(4), pp.737-747.

<sup>19</sup> Schau, H. J., Muñiz Jr. A. M. (2002), *Brand communities and personal identities: negotiations in the cyberspace*, Association for Consumer Research, Vol. 29, pp.344-349.

<sup>20</sup> Schouten, J. W., Mc Alexander, J. H., and Koenig H. F. (2007), *Transcendent customer experience and brand community*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Vol. 35(3), pp.357–368.

The nature of brand relationship covers utilitarian and emotional issues ranging from the fulfilment of a functional need to an intimate connection, in a very similar way to the one people built relationship with their similar<sup>21</sup>. In the brand community context, the emotional component of brand relationship prevails on the utilitarian one. Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann<sup>22</sup>, in their analysis of European Car Clubs, value brand relationship in the line of Fournier's approach considering the brand as a partner in an ongoing relationship. In particular they include an identification facet which is the degree of overlap between consumer self-image and brand image, a cognitive component referring to the self-awareness of closeness of relationship and an evaluative component based on the positive evaluation of self-worth that stems from a relationship with the brand. The stronger the link is between the consumer and the brand in terms of personality, image and values, the higher is the probability of identification and participation in brand community. Cova, Pace and Park<sup>23</sup>, in the analysis of Games Workshop's Warhammer, a strategic battle game played with real miniatures, by interviewing members during the game playing, reported brand love as driver of participation. In the same line, the attachment and the high passion consumers experience with their motorcycles are the main drivers of joining the Ducati clubs. In line with previous statements we hypothesize:

H1: Greater brand relationship leads to higher brand community (BC) identification

H2: Greater brand relationship leads to higher BC participation

### C. Identification

Identification constitutes a fundamental driver of community participation. Although participation and identification could overlap they are not synonyms. Identification or social identity "is the perception of belonging to a group with the result that a person identifies with that group (i.e., I am a member)"<sup>24</sup>.

Within off line brand communities, identification captures the community membership and sense of belonging<sup>25</sup>, while participation captures the set of activities members do. In community literature two main facets emerge:

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<sup>21</sup> Pankaj, A. (2004) The Effects of Brand Relationship Norms on Consumer Attitudes and Behaviour, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 31(1), pp.87-101.

<sup>22</sup> Algesheimer, R., Dholakia, U., and Herrmann, A. (2005), *The Social Influence of Brand Community: Evidence from European Car Clubs*, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 69(3), pp.19-34.

<sup>23</sup> Cova, B., Pace, S., and Park, D. J. (2007), *Global brand communities across borders: The Warhammer case*, *International Marketing Review*, Vol. 24(3), pp. 313-329.

<sup>24</sup> Bhattacharya, C. B., Rao, H., and Glynn, M. A. (1995), *Understanding the bond of identification: An investigation of its correlates among art museum members*, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 59(4), pp.46-57.

<sup>25</sup> Bagozzi, R. P., and Dholakia, U. M. (2006), *Antecedents and purchase consequences of customer participation in small group brand communities*, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Vol. 23(1), pp.45-61.

identification as a perceptual cognitive construct that is not necessarily associated with any specific behaviors and identification as behaviors or action. Studies on brand community cover both approaches. On one side, identification is described as a “psychological state” involving cognitive, affective and evaluative components: the self-awareness of membership and the perception of similarity-dissimilarity with members-nonmembers, the group attachment and the collective self/esteem.

On the other side, identification also leads to behaviors consistent with the group identity and the brand. In a study of European car clubs, identification leads to major community engagement (participation) and through “membership continuance intentions” to higher “brand loyalty intentions”. Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo<sup>26</sup> report that stronger social identification will affect the desire for and the intention of participating. The more an individual feels part of the group, and the more he shares the same goals, the more actively he will participate.

Finally, it has to be considered that the link between the brand relationship and the community participation might happen through community identification (see Figure 1) since the desire to be part of a community facilitates the integration and interaction of members.

On the basis of these concerns we hypothesize:

H3: Greater BC identification leads to higher BC participation

#### **D. Community size**

In an off line brand community, size can vary from a few geographically concentrated members, to high numbers of members spread all over the world, as in the case of European Car clubs, Harley-Davidson clubs and Jeep clubs<sup>27</sup>. Small brand communities are strongly sociocentric<sup>28</sup>, where “the link is more important than the think”: members know each other and friendship and socialization are predominant. On the contrary, a large brand community could be perceived as anonymous group, where participation is driven by utility. Previous suggestions show how size negatively affects identification with the group.

We also hypothesize that huge communities, especially if company sponsored, can count on greater financial and organizational resources, boosting member

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<sup>26</sup> Dholakia, U. M., Bagozzi, R. P., and Klein Pearo, L. (2004), *A social influence model of consumer participation in network and small group based virtual communities*, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Vol. 21(3), pp.241-263.

<sup>27</sup> McAlexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W., and Koenig, H. F. (2002), *Building Brand Community*, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 66(1), pp.38-54.

<sup>28</sup> Bagozzi, R. P., and Dholakia, U. M. (2006), *Antecedents and purchase consequences of customer participation in small group brand communities*, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Vol. 23(1), pp.45-61.



participation through more appealing events, and incentives (e.g. new product tests, discounts). Thus,

H4: The bigger the brand community, the lower the brand community identification

H5: The bigger the brand community, the greater the participation

### III. Brand consequences of participation

Nowadays, many firms belonging to different sectors are promoting community programs and brand communities both on line and off line<sup>29</sup>. Within a community, members show higher attachment to the brand and as a consequence, a positive brand loyalty and brand awareness, higher satisfaction and repurchase intention<sup>30</sup>. Participation impacts all of the marketing mix<sup>31</sup> and firms are engaged in consumption related activities such as brand promotion during brand events and celebrations.

Brand community helps firms to overcome resistance to direct marketing activities, reducing space and time constraints and increasing brand image and brand recognition. In the brand perspective, then, participation plays a key role in enforcing brand-related feelings and behavioral response. Attitude is related to emotions toward the brand in terms of love and trust, in line with the seminal study of Fournier<sup>32</sup>. Behavioral response deals with brand-related consumer actions, such as positive (and negative) word of mouth and loyalty, that is, the action or likelihood of buying in the future as well as of continuing the use of the product. Finally, cognitive refers to the stock of brand-related skills and competence that consumers acquire and develop. Following the well-known brand evaluation framework based on the affective, behavioral and cognitive model of brand attitude<sup>33</sup>, hypotheses related to brand community participation in an off line community are next described.

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<sup>29</sup> Cova, B., Pace, S., and Park, D. J. (2007), *Global brand communities across borders: The Warhammer case*, International Marketing Review, Vol. 24(3), pp. 313-329.

<sup>30</sup> Coelho Simões, P., Rita, P., and Zélia Santos, R. (2018), *On the relationship between consumer-brand identification, brand community, and brand loyalty*, Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, Vol. 43, pp. 101-110. Thompson, S. A., and Rajiv K. S. (2008), *Brand Communities and New Product Adoption: The Influence and Limits of Oppositional Loyalty*, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 7(6), pp.65-80.

<sup>31</sup> Schau, H. J., Muñoz Jr., A. M., and Arnould E. J. (2009), *How Brand Community Practices Create Value*, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 73(5), pp.30-51.

<sup>32</sup> Fournier, S. (1998), *Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research*, The Journal of Consumer Research, Vol. 24(4), pp.343-373.

<sup>33</sup> Czellar, S. (2003), *Consumer attitude toward brand extensions: an integrative model and research propositions*, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Vol. 20(1), pp.97-115.

## A. Affective responses toward the brand

McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig<sup>34</sup> in their empirical study of Jeep and Harley-Davidson brand fests reported how members' participation determines positive relationships with their own vehicles and with the brand, as well as with the whole company. They also report that participation in brand fests, such as Camp Jeep events, means to live a profound and enduring experience, named "transcendent customer experience". Participation, then, positively impacts the affective dimension of brand relationship. Muñiz<sup>35</sup> shows how members, by exchanging information and support in the Macintosh computer community, increase the attachment to and the involvement with the brand.

One of the pillars of brand communities' proliferation is the exchanging of information about the brand and its usage, as well as receiving assistance and support<sup>36</sup>. Information exchanged in the brand community is considered more objective, since it is provided by other consumers or experienced members. Members gain security and experience higher trust toward the brand.

According to previous assumptions, then, we can hypothesize the effect of participation on the components of affective dimensions:

H6a: Greater BC participation leads to higher brand love than identification

H6b: Greater BC participation leads to higher brand trust than identification

## B. Behavioral dimension

Participation in the brand event increases brand loyalty. Schouten, Mc Alexander and Koenig<sup>37</sup> note that members of Harley-Davidson clubs tend to buy upper models of bike in order to increase their status in the group. Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann<sup>38</sup> show that engagement in European car clubs positively

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<sup>34</sup> McAlexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W., and Koenig, H. F. (2002), *Building Brand Community*, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 66(1), pp.38–54.

<sup>35</sup> Muñiz, A. M., and Schau J. H. (2005), *Religiosity in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community*, Journal of Consumer Research, Vol. 31(4), pp.737-747.

<sup>36</sup> Kozinets, R. (2002), *The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities*, Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 39(1), pp.61-72. Szmigin, I., and Reppel, A. E. (2004), *Internet community bonding: the case of macnews.de*, European Journal of Marketing, Vol. 38(5/6), pp.626-640.

<sup>37</sup> Schouten, J. W., Mc Alexander, J. H., and Koenig H. F. (2007), *Transcendent customer experience and brand community*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Vol. 35(3), pp.357–368.

<sup>38</sup> Algesheimer, R., Dholakia, U., and Herrmann, A. (2005), *The Social Influence of Brand Community: Evidence from European Car Clubs*, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 69(3), pp.19–34.

affects loyalty toward those cars. Belk and Tumbat<sup>39</sup> by interviewing members of the Apple community, reported feeling a “fierce loyalty” to Apple’s products.

Firms also influence brand loyalty by using the brand fests as promotional channels for new product launches, where exposure to new Jeep models could increase the purchase intention. Thus:

H7a: Greater participation leads to higher loyalty than identification

Face to face interaction in off line communities leads to an incredible amount of brand word of mouth. Members share consumption experiences with other members, as well as receiving information and assistance on product use by other members, dealers and by the companies<sup>40</sup>.

Members of Harley-Davidson like to talk during their meeting about the latest model as well as related accessories. Muñiz and Shau<sup>41</sup> reveal an intriguing aspect of word of mouth in the brand community: within participation rituals, members celebrate the story of the brand and share brand stories, becoming “brand advocate[s]”. Hence,

H7b: Greater brand participation leads to higher word of mouth (wom) than identification

### **C. Cognitive dimension**

Part of word of mouth is related to acquiring and exchanging brand knowledge. Increasing participation in brand events increases socialization and then the chance to interact with more experienced consumers, learning from them and acquiring new skills, as in the Jeep Camp events. Through “the moral responsibility”, that is, the perceived obligation toward recent members, experienced members share their knowledge, and offer assistance and support. Firms also contribute to the process, providing customer service to the community as in the case of Harley-Davidson<sup>42</sup>. Thus,

H8: Greater BC participation leads to higher brand knowledge than identification

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<sup>39</sup> Belk, R., and Tumbat, G. (2005), *The Cult of Macintosh*, Consumption, Markets and Culture, Vol. 8(3), pp.205–217.

<sup>40</sup> Thompson, S. A., and Rajiv K. S. (2008), *Brand Communities and New Product Adoption: The Influence and Limits of Oppositional Loyalty*, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 7(6), pp.65-80.

<sup>41</sup> Muñiz, A. M., and Schau J. H. (2005), *Religiosity in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community*, Journal of Consumer Research, Vol. 31(4), pp.737-747.

<sup>42</sup> Schouten, J. W., Mc Alexander, J. H., and Koenig H. F. (2007), *Transcendent customer experience and brand community*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Vol. 35(3), pp.357–368.

#### **IV. The data collection and analysis**

Our specific research setting was the 44th Vespa World Days (VWD), held in 2010 in Portugal and organized by the Vespina Club of Fatima. World Vespa days is an official brand event where registered Vespa clubs from all over the world can participate. It is held each year in different places. Each club has the right to put itself forward as a candidate for hosting and organizing the World Vespa Days and an appropriate committee assigns, by majority, the organization of the future event.

The 4-day program of VWD 2010 included a set of activities ranging from touristic rides to concerts, ride shows, fundraising, a gala dinner and an awards ceremony. (Awards are given for the nicest or oldest Vespa, the member from the greatest distance, most senior or junior member, Vespa club most represented, etc.) Participation in the event requires prior ownership of a Vespa motorcycle.

##### **A. Procedure and item generation**

After securing permission from the Vespa Company and from the VWD 2010 Organizing Committee, questionnaires were distributed to participants. In detail, respondents were selected at the main meeting point (named “Recinto”, an arena of almost 1500 m<sup>2</sup> including facilities and services) at the end of the daily activities. The decision to administer the survey after the event ensured that participants would be more relaxed and accommodating in their environment. Responses were obtained on a voluntary basis, without any kind of compensation.

The questionnaire includes three sections. The first one is related to the Vespa, ranging from the number of motorcycles owned/bought over the respondent’s lifetime to different aspects of the relationship with the brand. Most of the constructs reported in the paper have been operationalized by using existing scales from the brand community literature. Brand relationship is measured with a 3-item scale. Respondents had to rate on a 7 point Likert scale their agreement with the following statements: “This brand says a lot about the kind of person I am” “The Vespa’s image and myself image are similar in many respects” “Vespa plays an important role in my life”. Brand expertise, reflecting the member’s brand knowledge, is measured using a 7-point Likert scale with 3 items scale. Items read “When compared to other people, I know a lot about Vespa”; “I consider myself very experienced with Vespa”; “My friends consider me to be an expert regarding Vespa.” For loyalty intention we used a reduced seven point Likert scale version of the brand loyalty intention scale, limited to only one item: “I will continue driving Vespa in the near future.”

Items used to measure brand trust (2 items: “Vespa is an honest brand”; “I trust Vespa”) and brand love (2 items: “I have feelings for Vespa that I do not have for a lot of other brands”; “If it is about scooters, Vespa is my most favorite brand”) have

been adapted using the items reported by Smit, Bronner and Tolboom<sup>43</sup>. All items were measured with a seven points Likert-type scale, anchored by (1) “strongly disagree” to (7) “strongly agree”. Word of mouth has been operationalized by the 7-point Likert statement: “I have recommended Vespa to lots of people” anchored by 1= “strongly disagree” to 7= “strongly agree”.

The second section deals with the community, including size and measures of identification and participation. Community size reflects the number of members who are part of each club. The construct of brand community identification captures the relationship a member has with his club in terms of sense of belonging as well as goal sharing. It has been operationalized by the 7-point scale of club identification. A sample item reads “Other Vespa Club members and I share the same objectives” and another one “I see myself as a part of the Club”.

In order to define brand community participation, we first analyze how participation has been operationalized. Table 1 reports the main studies on participation.

The only two studies where participation has been measured focus on the frequency of participation<sup>44</sup>, looking at how many times or how often consumers participate in the community’s activities. Such measures are not sufficient to capture all the facets of participation, especially with respect to the intensity and the effort of consumer participation. To address this point, we conducted in-depth interviews with 4 brand managers and 3 brand community managers belonging to Vespa, Motoguzzi, Ducati and Fiat brands. Second, we strengthened our results by interviewing several Italian (Vespa country of origin) and Portuguese (hosting event country) brand community members. Two main dimensions emerged to define participation: frequency of participation and intensity. The first is defined by how many times per year the member participates in events organized by his club such as excursions, regional meetings, national appointments or international events. Intensity is the effort the member makes in order to participate in each club’s events as well as the official role the member assumes within the club. Intensity could be measured by amount of money spent, time consumed, distance covered or how many times the member participates in events organized by other clubs, at national or international events. Roles show instead the consumer’s attitude toward holding a formal position inside the club, completing on a voluntary basis different tasks needed for the management and well-being of the community.

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<sup>43</sup> Smit, E., Bronner, F., and Tolboom M. (2007), *Brand relationship quality and its value for personal contact*, Journal of Business Research, Vol. 60(6), pp.627–633.

<sup>44</sup> Algesheimer, R., Dholakia, U., and Herrmann, A. (2005), *The Social Influence of Brand Community: Evidence from European Car Clubs*, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 69(3), pp.19–34. Bagozzi, R. P., and Dholakia, U. M. (2006), *Antecedents and purchase consequences of customer participation in small group brand communities*, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Vol. 23(1), pp.45-61.

**Table 1: Empirical studies on participation**

<b>Authors (year)</b> <b>Brand community</b>	<b>Definition /Measure</b>	<b>Drivers and consequences of participation</b>
Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann (2005) European Car club	How often did you participate in activities of this brand community within the last ten weeks? Likert scale 1-7	Participation intention, community engagement and normative pressure → participation
McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) Jeep and Harley-Davidson	Indirect measure. Effects of participation are deduced by analysing four relationships pre and post brand event: 1-owner-product relationship 2-owner-brand relationship 3-owner-company relationship 4-owner-owners relationship	participation → brand loyalty participation → merchandising participation → product usage
Bagozzi, and Dholakia (2006) Harley-Davidson	“About how many outings do you think you will participate in with the group of club friends you mentioned above in the next month?” (Open-ended response scale) About how many outings do you think you will participate in next year in a typical month?” (Open-ended response scale)	participation → buy accessories, participation → visiting dealer participation → money spent.
Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder, (2008) Settlers of Catan games Swatch community	Customer-customer relationship (1) I have met wonderful people because of my [brand] [product]. (2) I feel a sense of kinship with other [brand] owners. (3) I have an interest in more interpersonal contact with other members of the [brand] community. 7 point Likert scale	Reassurance of quality for products with significant credence attributes; high involvement with the branded product category; opportunity for joint consumption; brand symbolic function → participation

Source: Own elaboration based on research data

All the mentioned roles imply a different level of participation in terms of frequency, responsibility within the club and time-cost efforts. Roles include marketers, who care about promotion of club events and activities; treasurer, responsible for club budget and costs; vice president, usually responsible for relationship with street police, political authorities, and health assistance service; public relations, in charge of relationships with other club and institutions; secretary, who handles the administrative part; and the president, who officially represents the club at the national and international meetings. The first set of items, based on the qualitative study, were submitted for final minor changes to the Vespa Brand Community Manager, the World Vespa Club president and the president of the Club in charge of organizing the WVD 2010. We borrow seven items in order to capture the frequency and the intensity of a member's participation in his respective club activities. In detail, we asked the frequency (expressed by percentage of times) of participation in "daily", "weekend" and "more than 3 days club events" using a scale anchored by 1=0%, 2=25%, 3=50%, 4=75%, and 5=100%). Another measure of frequency was the number of times members participated in national or international events, such as the WVD 2010. With respect to intensity of participation, respondents were asked to indicate 1-the maximum distance they covered to participate in any event including the WVD 2010; 2-the role members have within the club, reflecting an increasing involvement in the club activities (1=just member 2=secretary 3=public relations 4=marketing 5=finance 6=vice-president 7=president).

Finally, the third part of the questionnaire includes demographics of the brand event participants. The total number of participants, as reported by the organization committee, was 1650 members. Eliminating incomplete questionnaires, our final sample consists of 223 respondents, corresponding to 13.5% of the population. The percentage of males in the population is 89.2, with an average of 2.57 family members. Ages range from 19 to 74 years with an average of 39.57; by nationality Italy, Portugal and Spain count for 22%, 21% and 14% respectively. Other represented nationalities are: United Kingdom 6%, Belgium 5%, Germany 6%, France 7%, Norway 1.4% and USA 0.8%. With respect to membership duration, participants show an average of 8.54 years with a range between 1 and 30. On average each participant owns an average of 3 Vespas and in all his life he has owned about 4 Vespas.

## **B. Findings**

Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics and Cronbach's for the main constructs. Cronbach's alpha for the participation construct (.926) has been improved by eliminating two items that show low corrected item-to-total correlation ( $\alpha=.945$ ).

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the main constructs**

Construct	Items	Mean	s.d.	C.Alpha
<b>Brand relationship</b>	3			<b>.945</b>
Br 1		4.91	1.419	
Br 2		4.97	1.579	
Br 3		4.89	1.482	
<b>Brand community identification</b>	5			<b>.920</b>
Bci1		4.84	1.344	
Bci2		4.57	1.181	
Bci3		4.64	1.246	
Bci4		4.43	1.183	
Bci5		4.73	1.316	
<b>Brand participation *</b>	5			<b>.915</b>
Bcp1		3,22	1,308	
Bcp2		2,91	1,483	
Bcp3		2,98	1,135	
Bcp4		10,45	9,283	
Bcp5		5,75	4,881	
<b>Brand love</b>	2			<b>.817</b>
B1 1		4.00	1.463	
B1 2		3.87	1.425	
<b>Brand trust</b>	2			<b>.837</b>
Bt 1		4.59	1.387	
Bt 2		4.67	1.250	
<b>Brand loyalty</b>	1			
<b>Word of mouth</b>	1			
<b>Expertise</b>	3			<b>.927</b>
Bk1		4.42	1.609	
Bk2		4.29	1.588	
Bk3		4.48	1.734	

\*the items have been standardized for structural analysis.

Source: Own elaboration based on research data.



Table 3 reports factor loadings, composite reliability scores ( $\rho_\epsilon$ ) and AVE (average variances extracted,  $\rho_{vc(\epsilon)}$ ) for all constructs in order to provide evidence of convergent validity, that is, the degree to which the items load highly on the same construct they are supposed to measure. In detail, the loadings are high, the AVEs are greater than 0.7 for all constructs and the composite reliability scores are greater than 0.7 and both statistically significant, indicating a good internal consistency<sup>45</sup>.

**Table 3: Standardized factor loading, composite reliability and square root of AVE**

Construct-item	Loading (standardized loading)	t-value	Composite reliability ( $\rho_\epsilon$ )	Square root of AVE ( $\rho_{vc(\epsilon)}$ )
<b>Brand relationship (br)</b>			85.60%	0.93
Br 1	0.90			
Br 2	0.95	23.612		
Br 3	0.93	21.938		
<b>Brand community Identification (bci)</b>			69.69%	0.84
Bci1	0.86			
Bci2	0.79	15.754		
Bci3	0.82	15.920		
Bci4	0.84	16.854		
Bci5	0.86	17.928		
<b>Brand community participation (bcp)</b>			77.17%	0.88
Bcp1	0.88			
Bcp2	0.87	20.660		
Bcp3	0.91	18.627		
Bcp4	0.83	16.623		
Bcp5	0.90	19.644		
<b>Brand love(bl)</b>			69.81%	0.84
B1 1	0.84			
B1 2	0.83	16.718		

<sup>45</sup> Fornell, C., and Larcker, D. F. (1981), *Evaluating Structural Equation Models with Unobservable Variables and Measurement Error*, Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 18(1), pp.39-50.

<b>Brand trust(bt)</b>	0.83		72.30%	0.85
Bt 1	0.87	13.438		
Bt 2				
<b>Brand loyalty (bl)</b>				
<b>Word of mouth (wom)</b>				
<b>Brand knowledge (bk)</b>			81.03%	0.93
Bk1	0.89			
Bk2	0.92	21999		
Bk3	0.89	19.315		

Source: Own elaboration based on research data

In order to provide evidence of discriminant validity, that is, how well a measure measures the underlying constructs and does not correlate highly with the measure of other constructs, the square root of AVE for an individual construct must be higher than its correlations with other constructs<sup>46</sup>. Table 3 reports that the square root of AVE of each construct is greater than 0.8 and greater than the correlations with any other constructs; Table 4 reports the correlations among construct.

**Table 4: Correlation among Constructs**

	BCI	BCP	BL	BT	BK	BR
BCI	1					
BCP	.816	1				
BL	.767	.752	1			
BT	.701	.708	.696	1		
BK	.771	.809	.750	.744	1	
BR	.819	.821	.746	.713	.758	1

Significant at  $p < .05$ ; all correlations are significantly less than 1.00.

Notes: BCI= brand community identification; BCP=brand community participation; BL=brand love; BT=brand trust; BA=brand attachment BK=brand knowledge BR=Brand relationship

Source: Own elaboration based on research data

<sup>46</sup> Fornell, C., and Larcker, D. F. (1981), *Evaluating Structural Equation Models with Unobservable Variables and Measurement Error*, Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 18(1), pp.39-50.

Exploratory factor analysis has been employed to assess measurement quality and has shown a good overall fit. The goodness-of-fit statistics for the model are as follows:  $\chi^2 (155) = 256.607$ ,  $p < 0.0$ , the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .0543, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .0307, the normed and nonnormed fit indexes are NFI = .984 and NNFI = .992 respectively and the comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .993.

### C. Structural model estimation

As previously articulated we first argue that higher relationship with the brand leads a consumer to join a brand community (through identification and participation). Second, in comparison with identification, greater participation will lead to a greater affective attitude toward the brand, greater word of mouth and loyalty, and increased brand knowledge. To test the hypothesized structural model the Maximum Likelihood (ML) method has been used by LISREL 8.54<sup>47</sup>. According to the assumption of the Structural Equation Model all the indicators must follow a multivariate normal distribution. To check if this assumption was satisfied multivariate skewness and kurtosis were calculated and the test of multivariate normality was performed<sup>48</sup>. The test rejected the multivariate normal distribution of the data at 99.9% of confidence level. To obtain accurate estimation of goodness of fit statistics and standard errors of parameters in the presence of severe non normality, a robust ML estimator has been used (Bentler 1990). The robust ML estimator provides ML parameter estimates with standard errors and mean adjusted  $\chi^2$  test statistics that are robust to non-normality.

Goodness of fit has been assessed by the chi-square test, the RMSEA, the SRMR, the NFI and NNFI, and the CFI. According to Bentler<sup>49</sup> and Byrne<sup>50</sup> adequate model fits are indicated by nonsignificant chi-square tests, SRMR and RMSEA values  $\leq .08$ ; and NFI, NNFI, and CFI values  $\geq .90$ .

Statistics for the hypothesized model report good fit (Satorra-Bentler Scaled  $\chi^2[217] = 251.189$ ,  $p = .0555$ , RMSEA = .0266, NFI = .980, NNFI = .990, CFI = .991 SRMR = .0380). See table 5 for the Lisrel standardized path diagram output.

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<sup>47</sup> Jöreskog, K., and Sörbom D. (1999), *LISREL 8: User's Reference Guide*, 2d ed. Chicago: Scientific Software International.

<sup>48</sup> In performing this test, all the variables were assumed to be continuous as for each of them the Likert scale has more than five points.

<sup>49</sup> Bentler, P. M. (1990), *Comparative Fit Indexes in Structural Models*, Psychological Bulletin, Vol. 107(2), pp.238-46.

<sup>50</sup> Byrne, B. M. (2009), *Structural Equation Modeling with Lisrel, Prelis and Simplis*, United States: Psychology Press.

**Table 5: Results of the hypothesis testing**

Path	Hypothesis	Coefficients	Sign. level
brand relationship → brand community participation	H <sub>1</sub> - supported	0.48	<0.001*
brand relationship → brand community identification	H <sub>2</sub> - supported	0.85	<0.001*
brand community identification → brand community participation	H <sub>3</sub> - supported	0.41	<0.01**
brand community size → brand community participation	H <sub>4</sub> –not supported	-	
brand community size → brand community identification	H <sub>5</sub> -not supported	-	
brand community participation → brand love	H <sub>6a</sub> H <sub>6b</sub> - not supported	0.37	<0.001*
brand community identification → brand love		0.49	
brand community participation → brand trust		0.39	<0.001*
brand community identification → brand trust		0.42	
brand community participation → brand loyalty	H <sub>7a</sub> - supported	0.41	<0.001*
brand community identification → brand loyalty		0.40	
brand community participation → word of mouth	H <sub>7b</sub> - supported	0.44	<0.001*
brand community identification → word of mouth		0.35	
brand community participation → brand knowledge	H <sub>8</sub> - supported	0.52	<0.001*
brand community identification → brand knowledge		0.6	

\* Significant at 99.9% level

\*\* Significant at 99% level

\*\*\* Significant at 90% level

Source: Own elaboration based on research data

With respect to hypothesis testing, (Figure 2), hypotheses H1 and H2 that posited positive relations between brand relationship and both brand community identification and brand community participation were supported, with completely

standardized coefficients  $\gamma = 0.481$  (s.e. = .0070) and  $\gamma = 0.85$  (s.e. = .0047) respectively.

Tests of H3 also confirmed the positive relationship between brand community identification and brand community participation ( $\beta = .416$ , s.e. = .080).

Table 5 reports the coefficients measuring the influence of participation and identification on the brand dimensions.

Hypotheses H6a and H6b are not confirmed. Identification has a bigger impact on the attitude toward the brand in terms of love and trust.

With respect to behavioral dimensions of brand attitude our results support our propositions. Brand community participation is significantly and positively related to word of mouth ( $\beta = .409$ , s.e. = .154) and brand loyalty ( $\beta = .443$ , s.e. = .158)

Hypothesis H8 that predicted the positive relationships between brand community participation and brand knowledge ( $\beta = .524$ , s.e. = .179) was supported as well. Finally, tests of H4 and H5 show that the effects of brand community size on participation and identification are not significant.

With respect to  $R^2$ , brand relationship and brand identification explain 74.3% of the variance in brand community participation. The percentages of variance in brand love and trust, as explained by brand community participation and identification, are 67% and 59% respectively. Participation and identification also explain 58.8% of the variance in loyalty and 57.2% of the variance in word of mouth. Finally, 72.1% of the variance in brand knowledge is explained by brand community participation and identification.

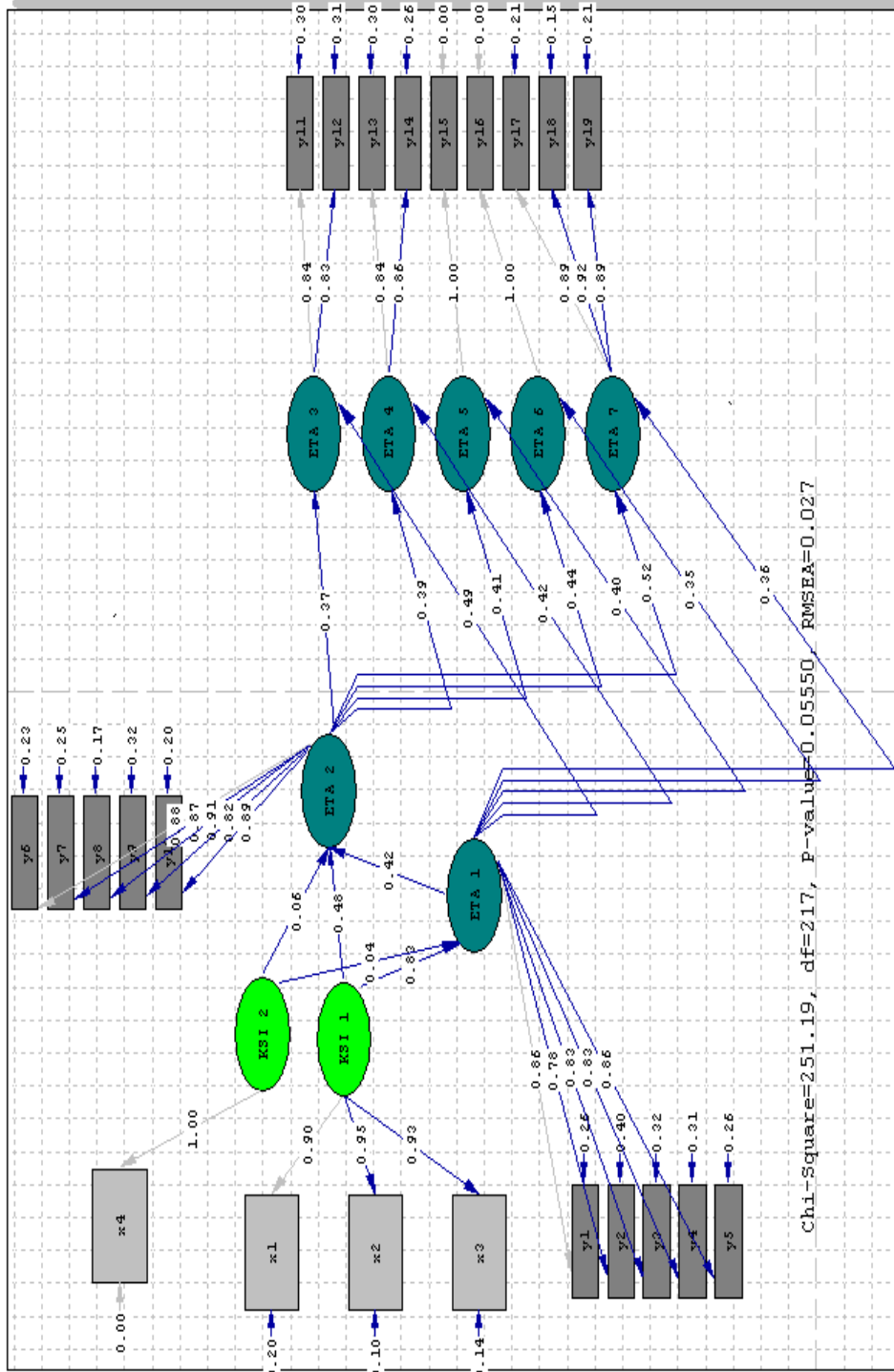


Figure 2: Lisrel output

Source: Own elaboration based on research data

## **V. Conclusion**

Our results provide empirical evidence for prior qualitative research on brand community where the relation with the brand is the “first driver” of every decision concerning identification and participation in the community. Following a temporal sequence, the consumer first frames a strong relationship with the brand, second decides to join a brand community, and consequently chooses to participate in community life. By identification the consumer enters the community, accepting a role and a code of conduct, and by participation the member actively lives the community, its events and activities. At the brand level, through participation, members reinforce their relationship with the brand, especially in terms of positive word of mouth and loyalty. Participation also increases brand knowledge since members are more exposed, through socialization, to brand related information. Identification, in contrast, has a slightly higher impact on the affective dimension of the brand. Community size seems not to impact identification and participation: the issue remains controversial and needs specific in depth examination. On one hand bigger clubs, due to bigger financial and organizational resources, can encourage force participation and organize more frequent meetings and brand related events; on the other hand, smaller clubs, configured as big families with strong social ties, could also positively impact the level of participation and community identification.

The paper suggests that managers should, first, distinguish between on line and off line brand communities. Off line communities are smaller, geographically positioned and have specific patterns of membership. Second, identification and participation might be leveraged differently. By leveraging identification, companies could manage brand community membership and access, modeling brand community size and structure. Levering participation might increase the quality of the relationship with the brand, the socialization among customers and the customer’s loyalty to both the brand and the company. Companies can foster participation by increasing brand community events and meetings, by actively participating in brand community life (i.e., providing organizational and financial support); by distinguishing among different levels of participation managers can easily segment and profile members, targeting opinion leaders, early adopters, and lead users.

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