# WHY WE JOIN

## A Sociological and Psychological Analysis of Brand Communities

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For decades, marketers have been preoccupied with finding the true pathways to customer loyalty. This paper aims to clarify the psychological drivers and social processes underlying customer loyalty through the lens of brand communities. We'll look at different perspectives from developmental and social psychology to uncover the determinants of authentic customer loyalty.

## The Search for Oneself

We might recall an intense period during adolescence when we experienced an "identity crisis." As we grow older, however, we experientially understand this tension to find ourselves appears throughout our lifetimes. In searching for our identities, we may define ourselves through *fidelity* towards certain ideas or causes. And as a consumerist nation, we may even look towards brands to give us direction in the proverbial search for ourselves.

Through the lens of developmental and social psychology, we can better understand consumer behavior and the ongoing quest for identity.

## Key Lessons from Developmental Psychology

Eminent developmental psychologist Erik Erikson organized the lifespan into eight distinct stages extending from birth until death.[i] Within each stage, the individual is faced with a specific task or developmental conflict. For example, the psychosocial stage of *Identity vs Role Confusion* typically defines the period of adolescence (from 12 to 18 years of age). The central task of adolescence is identity formation in which childhood values and commitments are reconsidered and examined.

The identity crisis may be the most pronounced and have the greatest chance for expression during adolescence, but it continues to resurface during the crises of later years.[ii]

At each psychosocial stage, different virtues can be attained. *Fidelity*, a virtue of the identity stage, is the capacity to maintain loyalties and allegiances, as seen through pledges of commitment to valued institutions and ideals.[iii] *Fidelity* is a marker of the individual's psychosocial wellbeing, supporting a sense of identity, belonging, and purpose in life especially in relation to social groups.[iv,v]

## The Power of the Community

Erikson underscored the importance of the community in identity development. He wrote, "Fidelity is that virtue and quality of adolescent ego strength which belongs to man's evolutionary heritage, but which—like all the basic virtues—can arise only in the interplay of a life stage with the individuals and the social forces of a true community."[vi] Beginning with adolescence and the life stages beyond, we identify with social communities that bring importance and meaning to our lives.

Identity development is both a psychological and social process. The psychological dimension of identity development occurs internally, in the mind of the individual, whereas the social dimension occurs externally, through interactions with other people. For the latter, we develop a sense of ourselves through our interactions with others in the social collective. The community gives importance to the individual life, while the newly adapted individual identity is recognized by the group through a sense of communal solidarity.[vii]
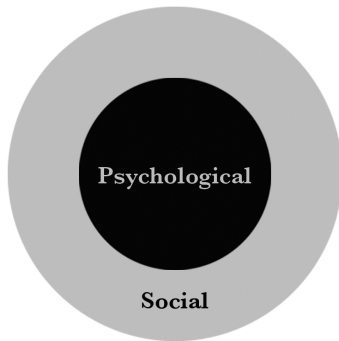
In other words, the dimensions of identity development reflect two sides of the same coin, mutually influencing each other in a dynamic process that happens throughout our lives.

## Brand Communities

With a basic understanding of developmental theory, identity development is understood in the context of the community. Yet what do we mean by community? Communities can be found anywhere and everywhere—in schools, among friends, through religious institutions, along political party lines, even among consumer brands that promote certain lifestyles. Brand communities, as they are known, offer the individual the opportunity to find meaning and a sense of self through commitment to the particular lifestyle promoted by the brand.

Albert Muniz, Assistant Professor of Marketing at DePaul University, and Thomas O'Guinn, Professor of Marketing at the Wisconsin School of Business, introduced the idea of a brand community, which they define as "a special-ized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand."[viii] Brand communities are seen as a segment of the brand's larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand's ongoing legacy. Knowing the importance of the community in identity development, we can see how brand communities can further support the development of the virtue of fidelity, or in another word, *loyalty*. In fact, research points to the salience of brand communities, which have been talked of as "the Holy Grail of brand loyalty."[ix]

In Muniz and O'Guinn's view, brand communities are believed to be distinguishable from marginalized groups that reject the prevailing culture.[x] They believe that

brand communities rarely exhibit extreme degrees of commitment as seen in certain consumption subcultures like Harley-Davidson, typically characterized by outsider and outlaw status.[xi]

On the topic of communities, we take a slightly different perspective. The degree of extremism, in our view, is not a distinguishing marker that separates brand communities from consumption subcultures. Brand communities may exhibit high levels and even extreme degrees of commitment among their members.

In the book, *The Power of Cult Branding*, Harley-Davidson is profiled as one of nine brands that exemplify undying customer loyalty.[xii] While Harley-Davidson was originally embraced by single blue-collar males living in rural areas, today's Harley nation reveals a diverse cross-section of America. The color of your collar is irrelevant in this lively consumer culture. Whether you're a shopkeeper, a contractor, a blacksmith, a professor, a doctor, or a lawyer, membership is open. In fact, one of the Golden Rules of Cult Brands, according to the authors, is their inclusive nature.

At the recent 105th Harley-Davidson Anniversary celebration in Milwaukee, you find people from all over the world, across every age bracket, representing diverse backgrounds. What draws them together is the joy they derive from being part of the collective. One rider described his experience of the three-day festival, "It's like a big family. It's the best because a bike is just a bike. But the friendship, just the people, is something more important."[xiii] Another rider expressed similar sentiments, "You are here because you truly feel it and it calls the heart."[xiv]

What Harley owners share is a love of the open road, the freedom that comes along with the ride, and membership in the Harley family. Their once regarded outlaw status, upon closer examination, morphs into a group of individuals drawn to the collective experience of Harley-Davidson, fulfilling their human need for belonging.

In our view, brands categorized as extreme examples of brand communities, like Harley-Davidson, are not so dissimilar from brands like Apple. Harley has its Harley Owners Groups (HOGs) and Apple has its Mac User Groups (MUGs). While tattooing a Harley-Davidson logo on your arm might have been evidence of an

extreme form of outlaw culture in the past, tattoos have become more or less ubiquitous. Branding yourself with the Apple logo, or any other logo for that matter, is not necessarily a rejection of the mainstream culture as it might have been decades ago.

Overall, brand communities like those of Harley-Davidson and Apple may offer like-minded individuals something they feel is missing from their lives. Through social interaction with others who share similar interests, individuals search out meaning for their lives and develop a sense of themselves in the process.

With this perspective in mind, we take a closer look into the factors that foster community.

## Three Signatures of Community

Brand communities demonstrate three attributes according to Muniz and O'Guinn: 1) a shared consciousness; 2) rituals and traditions; and 3) a sense of moral responsibility.[xv]

**1) Shared Consciousness:** A shared consciousness is the connection members have with the brand and with one another. Through this constellation of social bonds, members feel as if they know each other even in the absence of face-to-face contact. This connection creates a feeling of "specialness" among brand users. For example, since Mac users are a minority in a PC-dominated world, there may be an instant feeling of camaraderie with fellow Mac users who are strangers in every other way. Mac users share a creative lifestyle aligned with a certain aesthetic appeal that makes them stand apart from the masses. Yet in their separation, they stand together in their bonds of shared consciousness.

**2) Rituals and Traditions:** The second marker of community is rituals and traditions. These may involve public greetings that recognize and acknowledge fellow brand users. For example, Harley owners share a special handshake that consolidates the brother-sisterhood of riders. MINI also proudly fosters a solid network of customer communities—the MINI Family, as it's called—connected throughout the world. MINI explains, "Dating back to its birth in the UK, there's a long-standing tradition of MINI owners acknowledging each other when they pass on the streets … so when you pass another MINI, don't be shy. Give them a wave. It could be as subtle as raising an index finger off the steering wheel or as enthusiastic as two hands out

the sunroof."[xvi] You'll also hear MINI drivers acknowledging one another by flicking their headlights, and even giving high fives out the window while passing each other by. These rituals and traditions help reinforce the shared consciousness among brand users.

**3) Moral Responsibility:** Brand communities are further marked by a collective sense of moral responsibility to individual members as well as the community-as-a-whole.[xvii] This marker can be seen in MUGs, independent clubs supported by users who convene to share their love of Mac. Apple's Web site reads, "As a Mac user, you can experience a feeling of connectedness by finding other Mac users in your community."[xviii] One benefit of MUG membership is to teach others: "Maybe you've got some of the answers. User groups are a rewarding way for you to share your expertise. Someone may have helped you learn about technology; now you can repay the favor while meeting new people and making new contacts."[xix]

Furthermore, people tend to think they are attracted to others because they have similar opinions and not because they participate in similar activities. Research on friendships has found that participation in mutually pleasurable activities may be a stronger motivator for friendship choice and maintenance, compared to the satisfaction in knowing that someone agrees with you.[xx] Friendships are born out of participation in shared activities, which are the main attractions that brand communities offer.

## Opposition Loyalty: The US vs THEM Phenomenon

Shared consciousness can also be explained through the lens of social psychology. One of the founders of social psychology Muzafer Sherif conducted his famous Robbers Cave experiment on intergroup conflict and cooperation.[xxi] After boys were divided into two groups, each group spontaneously developed its own identity centered on group rules, individual roles, and a hierarchical structure. One group named itself the "Rattlers" and the other group called itself the "Eagles." Both groups demonstrated strong territorial reactions, fostering a demarcation between "us" and "them." Sherif and his colleagues concluded that groups naturally develop their own cultures, with specific structures and boundaries. When placed under conditions of competition, solidarity among the in-group is

fostered while hostile reactions towards the out-group emerge.

Like the boys in the Robbers Cave study, brand communities exhibit similar social behaviors. According to social identification theory, group membership produces obvious in-group bias in which the in-group is evaluated more favorably while the out-group is evaluated more negatively.[xxii]

Oppositional loyalty is a social process that reinforces shared consciousness in brand communities.[xxiii] The experience of community members is consolidated through in-group bias, and the adversarial stance taken against competing brands. Oppositional loyalty may decrease the likelihood that members will patronize the competition, and increase the likelihood of adopting new products from the chosen brand.[xxiv]

For example, unity within the Mac community is created through its opposition to PC users and the PC software behemoth Microsoft.[xxv] This is best illustrated in the *Mac vs PC campaign* where Justin Long plays Mac and John Hodgman plays PC. Mac is personified as casual, hip, young, and creative, usually seen wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and skater sneakers. PC is personified as a stodgy man wearing a drab suit and tie, and square glasses. Throughout their interaction, Mac underscores the important differences between them, "You should see what this guy can do with a spreadsheet. It's insane. Yeah, but he knows I'm better at lifestyle, like music, pictures, movies, stuff like that." In this exchange, PC is established as a traditional businessperson, stuck inside his box filled with spreadsheets, time sheets, and pie charts. Mac, as a certified lifestyle brand, understands the emotional connection users have to their creative endeavors.

In another commercial, PC starts to sneeze uncontrollably, explaining, "I have that virus that's going around." Mac is seen as relatively immune to viruses, healthier and stronger than its deficient counterpart. This campaign strengthens the shared consciousness within the Mac community by promoting an *us-versus-them* mentality, fostering a more favorable view of the in-group and a more negative view of the out-group. These dynamics also reflect another Golden Rule of Cult Brands, namely that of promoting personal freedom and drawing power from enemies.[xxvi] Apple,

by standing apart from the massive reach of PC, carves out a unique brand space where personal freedom—manifested through artistic pursuits—prevails.

## Brand Communities Aren't Just Social Phenomena

Although we've focused our attention on brand communities that are largely defined by social interaction, a different type of community has emerged in the literature: the *psychological brand community*.[xxvii] While social brand communities are composed of brand admirers engaged in social relations, a psychological brand community is "an unbound group of brand admirers, who perceive a sense of community with other brand admirers, in the absence of social interaction."[xxviii] From this context, consumers can perceive a sense of community that precedes or even works in lieu of social interaction. These unobservable bonds are felt among brand users, driven primarily through identification with the brand.

With this understanding, a Mac user can still perceive a sense of community with other users, without social interaction either in person or via the Internet. This line of research focuses less on the brand community itself and more on the *psychological relationships* between those who perceive a sense of community and the brands around which the communities have been formed.[xxix] This distinction expands the notion of social identification, shifting the viewpoint from interpersonal dynamics between people to the internal dynamics within the individual.

In our view, brand communities start out as psychological communities in the mind of the brand users. When users first identify with a brand, they eventually find a connection to other people who are involved in the same activities because of the central role it plays in their lives. This attraction leads to social groupings that eventually create social brand communities. In other words, the psychological precedes the social. Psychological brand communities initially lay the foundation for social brand communities to emerge.

Researchers have argued that brand communities be classified as either social or psychological.[xxx] Our understanding, research and experience of brands, however, points to an integration of the two perspectives.
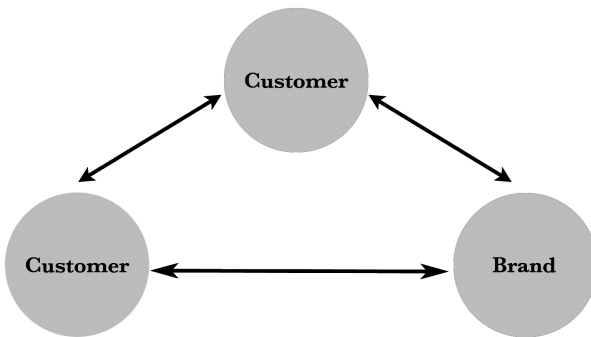
## Different Models of Brand Communities

Researchers have illustrated the traditional brand model as a simple, two-way relationship between the customer and the brand.[xxxi]



*Two Way Customer-Brand Relationship*

When the brand community was introduced, the *Brand Community Triad* emerged. There is a relationship not just between the customer and the brand, but with other customers as well. In this model, community members play an interactive role in the social construction of the brand.[xxxii]



*Brand Community Triad*

The *Customer-Centric Model* of the brand community extends the previous model, but shifts the focus back onto the customer.[xxxiii] The diagram shows the focal customer at the center with different outside influences including the brand, the product, other customers, and the marketer. This model illustrates that the meaningfulness of the brand community is in the customer experience (the focal point) rather than in the brand itself. In this model, brand communities encompass more than just customer groups. It is the transformation of the self, the individual, that is primary, rather than the secondary influence of the social collective.[xxxiv]
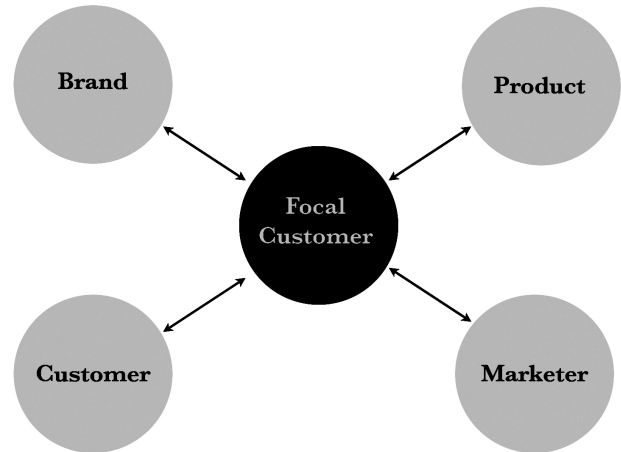


*Customer-Centric Model*

While the *Brand Community Triad* takes a social constructionist perspective, the *Customer-Centric Model* of brand community adopts an individual-centered approach. We extend both models through our understanding of both the individual and the collective, guided by the theoretical underpinnings of developmental and social psychology.

## A New Brand Model: The Brand Collective

We consider the *brand collective* as representative of various aspects of the brand including the brand itself, its product, its services, the company, the marketer, and the consumers who take membership in the social communities that rally around the brand. Given that people tend to define themselves according to group memberships,[xxxv] the individual finds meaning through the collective.



The **Brand Collective** includes all aspects of the brand, including the product, its services, the marketer, and the other consumers in the brand community.

The **Individual Consumer** is connected to the Brand Collective through psychological and social means. The consumer holds the collective in mind both internally (psychologically) as well as externally (socially).

*Brand Collective Model*

This model highlights identity development as a process that occurs both within the individual and through social identification with the brand collective. The brand collective is tangible as an external construct as well as intangible so far as it exists within the mind of the individual. As Erikson originally theorized, identity formation is both *social* and *psychological.* Since identity develops in the context of social groups, individuals find meaning in the brand community and also within themselves.

As mentioned earlier, however, the psychological dimension of brand communities is primary since it lays the foundation for the social process to unfold. To access the drivers to customer loyalty, the point of entry is through a psychological understanding of the individual consumer. Here, we understand the customer's experience of the brand collective.

## The Human Needs of Brand Communities

How can you apply the theoretical knowledge of psychological and social brand communities in order to build them? If brand communities are intrinsically tied to customer loyalty, how can you foster and assemble a community around your brand?

When marketers understand the human need the brand satisfies for the consumers, they can begin to develop and sponsor social events that promote these values. Lifestyle brand Life is Good embraces a clear philosophy: "simple, timeless messages of optimism, a celebration of life's simple pleasures, and a bedrock belief in leaving the world a better place than we found it."[xxxvi] The brand sponsors festivals throughout the year that "rally good people around a great cause."[xxxvii] Grounded in its mission, the brand is dedicated to making the world a better place through the Life is Good Kids Foundation, which supports charities that have a lasting positive impact on children. Project Joy, for example, is a major beneficiary whose mission is "to use the healing power of play to transform kids sidelined by violence, poverty and loss into healthy and joyful players in the game of life."[xxxviii]

Life is Good fulfills a human being's innate need towards self-actualization and possibly even transcendence, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs.[xxxix] The brand and its consumers are aligned to a singular vision. Together, they create a social brand community that reflects and wholeheartedly embraces the mission to make the world a better place.

To take a step back, we need to find out how social connections are made, which brings us back to the issue of psychological brand communities. In our view, when a psychological connection to the brand is established, the social connections between and among members become more likely. Those who embrace Life is Good may be attracted to the brand because it embodies personally meaningful values and fulfills the human need towards self-actualization, including values of personal growth and self-fulfillment. Through their connection with the brand, customers develop a psychological sense of a brand community, even without attending festivals or interacting face-to-face with other consumers. A shared consciousness, a psychological kinship with other brand lovers is established, with or without social interaction.

A community—whether psychological or social—transcends the individual consumer. It even rises above the brand itself. What's important to keep in mind, however, is the interdependency between the whole and the parts. The brand and its consumers support the community, while the community takes care of the brand and its consumers.

## How to Build Brand Communities

A complete understanding of the journey that your best consumers take with you is an essential first step. A thorough brand assessment can help clarify this journey—looking at the broader brand landscape, but most of all, digging deeper into the unconscious motivators and images in the minds of your best customers.

An understanding of the biological drivers and the archetypes that help fulfill certain human needs is important to cultivate authentic customer loyalty. For example, community members of Life is Good may be drawn to the archetype of the Angel or Inner Child, which personifies goodness and altruism. Harley owners are connected through the archetype of the Eagle, which represents personal choice and freedom.

To complicate matters further, brands have a co-dependent relationship not only with their consumers, but also with everyone who contributes to the creation of the brand's perception. This means that employees are just as important as consumers in fostering the

brand's image. At Zappos, every customer service representative is a spokesperson for the brand and referred to as "customer loyalty team reps." CEO Tony Hsieh writes, "We decided a long time ago that we didn't want our brand to be just about shoes, or clothing, or even online retailing. We decided that we wanted to build our brand to be about the very best customer service and the very best customer experience. We believe that customer service shouldn't be just a department, it should be the entire company."[xl] In fact, Zappos provides a four-week training for new hires where they are immersed in the company's culture. After one week of training, Zappos provides an offer and asks them to quit today, in exchange for the time worked plus a $2000 bonus. The rationale is: Employees who take the offer obviously don't have the conviction necessary for the job. For Zappos, it's more economical to determine a bad fit between an employee and the company early on in the relationship, and weed out those employees who are not aligned with the brand's culture.

With this understanding, the steps to foster brand communities can be broken down into psychological and social components. Although both aspects are important, as we've mentioned, the psychological lays the foundation for the social. Decoding the psychological dimensions will provide the necessary insights that will help materialize tangible offerings within the social dimension.

*Psychological components:*

- Understand what needs your brand fulfills in your best customers.
- Identify your brand's archetype.
- Align your efforts to one singular vision and keep your message consistent. Knowing what your business stands for makes it easier for consumers to commit to your brand.
- Use the insights gained from your customers' psychological attraction to the brand as inspiration for developing programs to support community.

*Social components:*

- Sponsor social events, whenever possible, that reflect your brand's mission.
- Acknowledge and authenticate the community. Strong communities provide a sense of identity to their members and become an integral part of their lives.
- Support the community so that it reinforces the psychological attraction customers have towards your brand.
- Set up the conditions for a fun, playful environment where friendships can be made. The stronger the bond members have to one another, the stronger the bond members will have with your brand.
- Don't control the community. Instead, participate as a cocreator. View communities as an opportunity to stay close to your consumers and to discover ways to innovate around their needs.
- Communities aren't focus groups. Don't think of them as a way to gather data but as a way for customers to fall in love with your brand.
- Differences help define group identity. Look to your competitors and see how your "enemies" can be leveraged to reinforce the culture of the community (think Mac vs. PC).
- Understand that every touch point contributes to the perception of your brand.
- Lastly, sell into your internal team, aligning them to a shared vision of what your brand represents.

## Final Thoughts

In this paper, we described the three core attributes of social brand communities: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. We saw how brands with loyal customers share these characteristics, and how friendships are cultivated through participation in shared activities. Great brands with a devoted following support and nurture communities where friendships are born.

We also distinguished between the social and psychological brand community, and attempted to integrate the two models into a holistic understanding of customer loyalty. Through an understanding of the individual's psychological drivers, we can uncover how the consumer perceives the brand in the context of his or her cosmos. From this position, supporting the brand community can then reinforce the psychological attraction customers have towards the brand.

Ultimately, the key resides in understanding the individual's psychological experience of the brand collective.

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# Notes

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