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Virtual brand community engagement practices: a refined typology and model

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite Schau *et al.*'s (2009) pioneering research addressing consumers' community engagement practices, scholarly understanding of the nature and dynamics characterizing consumers' engagement practices in virtual (online) brand communities, and their inter-relationships, is limited to date. Building on these authors' study, this paper aims to develop a refined typology and process model of virtual brand community engagement practices (VBCEPs).

Design/methodology/approach – Using the netnographic methodology, the authors analyze 20 luxury handbag community members' entries posted on the brand's particular section of The Purse Forum.

Findings – The authors develop an eight-component VBCEP typology that refines Schau *et al.*'s (2009) four-component model of brand community engagement practices. The model comprises "greeting", "regulating", "assisting", "celebrating", "appreciating", "empathizing", "mingling" and "ranking". These practices contribute to and maintain the community's vision and identity, and strengthen shared community consciousness.

Research limitations/implications – A key limitation of this research lies in its findings being generated from a single, luxury virtual brand community. Future research may thus wish to validate the VBCEP typology and model across different contexts.

Practical implications – The authors provide strategic managerial recommendations designed to leverage virtual brand community performance, which center predominantly on the social (altruistic) and achievement-based VBCEP sub-processes.

Originality/value – The eight-component VBCEP typology refines Schau *et al.*'s four-component model of brand community engagement practices with particular applicability to virtual brand communities.

Keywords Netnography, Engagement practices, Virtual brand community

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The information and communication technologies, which have developed in conjunction with the rise of the internet (e.g. social media, online brand communities), have served as influential engagement platforms facilitating interactions with and among consumers (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Gummesson and Mele, 2010, Breidbach *et al.*, 2014). Central to discussions of brand communities is the use of the terms "engage(ment)" to describe the nature of participants' co-creative, interactive experiences (Brodie *et al.*, 2011, 2013; McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2015) that entail consumer investments of focal operant (e.g. knowledge, skills) and/or operand (e.g. equipment) resources in specific interactions (Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Russell-Bennett and Baron, 2015; Yi and Gong, 2013; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016). Under service-dominant (S-D) logic,

"service" denotes "the application of operant resources (knowledge, skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity, or the entity itself" (Vargo and Lusch, 2008, p. 26). In virtual brand communities, consumers can thus make contributions (i.e. provide service) either to themselves (e.g. by learning about products through community membership and participation) or to others (e.g. by sharing focal product- or brand-related information with other community members).

In the literature, consumer engagement has been depicted, typically, as a mechanism facilitating the development of value-laden consumer/firm interactions and relationships (Akaka and Vargo, 2015; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2015); thus reflecting the concept's particular relevance in service contexts (Williams and Anderson, 2005; Nambisan and Baron, 2007). Overall, consumer engagement is viewed both as a strategic

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imperative for establishing and sustaining competitive advantage, as well as a valuable predictor of business performance (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; O'Brien *et al.*, 2015; Voyles, 2007; MSI, 2016). Given the increasing importance of understanding and leveraging consumer engagement in brand communities (Brodie *et al.*, 2013), we extend Schau *et al.*'s four-component model of community engagement practices by developing a refined, eight-component typology of *virtual* brand community engagement practices (VBCEPs), and explore their focal interrelationships.

De Valck *et al.* (2009, p. 185) define a "virtual brand community" as "a specialized, non-geographically bound online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand's consumers". These authors also call for further research on brand communities, consumer engagement practices in these communities and ensuing consumer behavior outcomes (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014), which we directly respond to in this research. The development of a more in-depth understanding of consumers' VBCEPs is expected to be of significant interest to managers seeking ways to cultivate and advance dialogue with consumers, facilitate service provision to their customers and generate improved returns from their community investments. Given engaged consumers' tendency to display elevated levels of brand-related activity (e.g. by disseminating positive brand-related word-of-mouth), the development of improved understanding of consumers' specific practices undertaken in virtual brand communities represents an important opportunity area for marketers (Zaglia, 2013; Tsai *et al.*, 2012), which we address in this paper.

Our key contribution is as follows. Building on Schau *et al.* (2009), we adopt a social practice theory-informed perspective to better understand consumers' VBCEPs. Specifically, deploying netnographic methodology, our analyses culminate in the development of a refined, eight-component VBCEP typology. Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006, p. 3) denote practices as repeated, routinized actions and behaviors that provide shared meaning among community members, generate consumption-related opportunities or (co-)create value with/for other members. By adopting a practice-based perspective, we thus focus on the behavioral facet of engagement (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010), which, when repeated and routinized over time, develops into specific engagement practices. Schau *et al.* (2009) view "community engagement practices" as a particular sub-set of broader "brand community-based value-creating practices", which also include social networking, impression management and brand use. We, by contrast, adopt a more specific focus on consumers' *virtual* community engagement practices, develop a refined, eight-component VBCEP typology and explore focal VBCEP interrelationships. This research thus reflects MacInnis' (2011, p. 138) "revising" (i.e. to reconfigure or amend existing insight) of Schau *et al.*'s (2009) four-component community engagement practice typology, with specific applicability to *virtual* community engagement practices that are centered on the co-creation of experience and value between and among community members (Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Lusch and Vargo, 2014; Wieland *et al.*, 2012; Mele *et al.*, 2014).

Overall, its interactive, many-to-many and co-creative capabilities render the online brand community a suitable platform for the study of community engagement practices (Sawhney *et al.*, 2005; Schau *et al.*, 2009), as we explore in this study. This paper is structured as follows. We proceed with a literature review addressing the conceptual foundations of consumers' VBCEPs, followed by an overview of our research approach. Next, we present our key findings, which are summarized in a typology of eight VBCEPs and an accompanying conceptual process model of VBCEPs. We conclude with an overview of key academic and managerial implications arising from this research.

Literature review: virtual brand community engagement practices

Brand community engagement: conceptual foundations

Dholakia and Algesheimer (2009, p. 3) define "brand community" as:

> [. . .] a collective of consumers organized around a particular brand [. . .] sustained through repeated online/offline social interactions and communication amongst members who possess a consciousness of moral responsibility toward one another, and embrace and propagate the collective's rituals and traditions. In their study of customer engagement in online brand communities

Wirtz *et al.* (2013, p. 224) define "brand community" as "a community of consumers who perceive added value from the relationship with the brand", thus excluding other forms of relationships that consumers might have with a brand (e.g. fans or activists; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002, p. 39). Relatedly, several "brand community engagement" definitions exist in the literature, including:

- "Positive influences of identifying with the brand community through the consumer's intrinsic motivation to interact or co-operate with community members" (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005: p. 19);
- "The compelling intrinsic motivations to continue interacting with an online brand community" (Baldus *et al.*, 2015: p. 978); and
- "Specific interactive experiences between consumers, the brand, and other community members" (Brodie *et al.*, 2013: p. 107).

Our behavioral view of engagement (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010) renders relevance of Brodie *et al.*'s (2013) perspective, which extends beyond mere consumer motivations to include consumers' actual interactive experiences in, or related to, a virtual brand community.

Wirtz *et al.* (2013, p. 229) identify three broad types of online brand community engagement antecedents. First, brand-related factors include the consumer's brand identification and the brand's symbolic function to the individual. Second, social factors include social benefits and social identity. Third, functional drivers include functional benefits, uncertainty avoidance and information quality. In terms of brand community engagement outcomes, Wirtz *et al.* identify online brand community outcomes (e.g. brand community commitment, satisfaction and loyalty), brand-related outcomes (e.g. brand commitment and engagement, brand satisfaction and loyalty) and organizational outcomes (e.g. idea generation for improved products/services,

heightened brand equity through enhanced customer relationships). Despite its insight, however, this research does not address consumers' VBCEPs undertaken in their virtual brand communities.

VBCEPs are expected to generate five broad types of value to individual consumers (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Tang, 2010). First, purposive value comprises instrumental (utilitarian) value from engaging in specific community practices (Nelson and Otnes, 2005; Zhou *et al.*, 2013), thus reflecting more cognitive, rational consumer motivations. Second, self-discovery is based on consumers' intrinsic need for self-exploration and learning (e.g. discovering one's tastes and preferences through social interactions). Third, interpersonal connectivity is centered upon individuals' desire to meet with like-minded others and receive companionship and social support (McKenna and Bargh, 1999). Fourth, entertainment value reflects a consumer's desire for enjoyment through engaging with the community (Teichmann *et al.*, 2015). Finally, consumers may seek social enhancement by means of engaging with virtual brand communities, including by gaining other members' acceptance or approval, or enhancing one's status within the community (Postmes *et al.*, 2000; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002).

Community engagement has also been found to have a positive association with favorable community behaviors, including helping other community members, participating in joint activities to enhance value for oneself and others and the conduction of offline member meetings (De Valck *et al.*, 2009). As a result, brand community members may develop affinity, bonds or a level of empowerment resulting from their community engagement practices (Cova and Pace, 2006). These brand community capabilities, coupled with consumers' perceived credibility of relevant individuals and online content, render the virtual brand community a powerful, interactive engagement platform for consumer-to-consumer interactions (Van Dijck, 2009). Virtual brand communities thus provide an environment where community members, through individual or collaborative effort, may (co-)create value for themselves, other members or organizations (Porter and Donthu, 2008; Porter *et al.*, 2011; Wirtz *et al.*, 2013). Next, we address community engagement practices in further depth.

Virtual brand community engagement: a practice perspective

The concept of "practices" has been widely cited in the social sciences, including sociology, anthropology and archaeology, and refers to individuals' actions; that is, "anything people do" (Ortner, 1984). Under social practice theory, practices are repeated actions, which may provide shared meaning among users, generate consumption opportunities or be used to (co-)create value (Holt, 1995). Despite scholarly interest in practice theory in the social sciences, this perspective has transpired in the marketing literature only relatively recently (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

Practices are repeated actions or behaviors, which have an anatomy comprising:

- general procedural understandings and rules (i.e. explicit/discursive knowledge);

- skills, abilities, and culturally appropriate consumption projects (i.e. tacit/embedded knowledge); and
- emotional commitments expressed through focal actions (Schau *et al.*, 2009).

In brand communities, consumers engage in particular activities or behaviors, which, when repeated and routinized over time, develop into specific brand-related practices (Tang, 2010). Reckwitz (2002, p. 250) defines practices as "routinized ways in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood". Practices are comprehensible not only by the executor but also by potential observers sharing the knowledge of the particular practice (e.g. other community members; Schatzki, 1996; Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Community practices are thus predicted to foster enhanced inter-member interactivity (Schau *et al.*, 2009). While VBCEPs primarily reflect individuals' behavioral engagement (i.e. particular actions taken), practices also have important underlying cognitive and emotional foundations (Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b, 2013), thus reflecting the broader, multidimensional nature of engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2011).

Schau *et al.* (2009, p. 35) identify four types of consumer engagement practices in brand communities. First, "documenting" occurs when brand community members construct a narrative of their brand experience. Second, "badging" transpires when a consumer creates a specific signifier of a milestone (e.g. a fan purchasing a concert t-shirt; p. 35). Third, "milestoning" represents the recounting of salient episodes in brand or community relationships (p. 35). Fourth, "staking" refers to community members' delineation of their community engagement, and their role within the community (e.g. solely posting on a particular blog, acting as a community moderator; p. 34). Despite this insight, research uniquely focused on consumers' VBCEPs remains extremely scarce. Thus, the primary contribution of this research is to develop a typology of consumers' VBCEPs in a particular virtual brand community, which is introduced in the next section.

Research approach

The purpose of this research is to investigate consumers' VBCEPs in the context of a particular virtual brand community. To collect the data, we used netnography, which is an unobtrusive, naturalistic method of inquiry permitting the investigation of focal online communities without researcher participation or interference in the community members' activities (Kozinets, 2002; Cova and Pace, 2006). Netnography may be used to develop in-depth, rich descriptions conveying virtual community members' interactively generated, routinized VBCEPs based on the researchers' interpretations of predominantly text, which may be supplemented with insight gained from images, symbols, videos, fonts, spacing, etc. (Kozinets, 2010).

Netnography permits researchers to observe consumers in virtual brand communities, thereby generating enhanced scholarly understanding of consumers within the broader consumption system (Cavana *et al.*, 2001). We collected the data through observation of text and images sourced from a particular online brand community within The Purse Forum

(http://forum.purseblog.com; Tang, 2010). Founded in 2005, The Purse Forum represents a leading online brand community focused on consumer discussions regarding authentic designer handbags and accessories for a number of luxury brands, including Dior, Hermès, Jimmy Choo and Louis Vuitton. In 2010, with over 270,000 active members accounting for over 15 million blog posts, the forum's rapid growth, and important role in consumer communication and engagement regarding luxury handbags and accessories, is evident.

The Purse Forum comprises a number of sub-forums, including the community for our particular brand, which we selected for investigation in this research. Specifically, this particular brand community incorporated the largest number of (i.e. over 2 million) blog-posts at the time this research was conducted (i.e. January 2008-May 2010; Tang 2010, p. 88). Further, the community featured a number of highly engaged, regular bloggers, thus offering a rich perspective of the virtual community members' engagement practices. We identified highly engaged consumers by their elevated activity on the forum, including postings, participation in discussions, sharing of their collections of the focal brand, etc. (Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b; Calder *et al.*, 2009; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002).

In the analysis, we deployed the total number of blog posts, discussion threads and the duration of member visits to the studied community to attain insight into consumers' VBCEPs. Specifically, we drew on a sample of 20 members of our chosen brand's community members of The Purse Forum, who represented the most active individuals in terms of making contributions to this particular community during the period investigated (e.g. through posting, commenting, etc.; Tang, 2010). We selected this particular sample based on the expected rich, deep insight these members were expected to provide (e.g. through their high frequency of posts in the community). Each of our 20 members had been a member of this particular community for a minimum of two years and had made at least 2,000 blog entries during this period. *Four of the observed members had an assigned role of community moderator* (Table I). While these members reflected a global presence, they were predominantly based in the USA and Canada. Further, the majority of these members were females aged 20-50 years, as expected given the product category studied (i.e. designer handbags). The selected consumers interacted with this particular brand community more frequently, and for longer periods than with any of the other Purse Forum brand communities (e.g. the Dior community).

We discontinued data analysis when saturation was reached, i.e. when we ceased gaining significant new insight from the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The vast amount of data led the researchers to focus the analysis on the particular discussion threads commenced by the selected community members and subsequent member communications related to these initial topics. To illustrate, in our initial six-month observation period, the data comprised 802 discussion threads, 90,308 words and 489 images. We present further detail regarding our sample and data in Table I.

We also developed a journal containing notes of other community members' key activities during the research period with a view to developing enhanced understanding of the community's idiosyncrasies (e.g. language used) and, consequently, facilitate our interpretation of the data. We also kept key data-derived information in this journal, thus permitting the undertaking of comparisons between individual posts (Klein and Myers, 1999).

Although the analysis focused on the discussion threads commenced by the 20 selected community members, the researchers also assessed the communication between members related to these particular discussion threads. Specifically, we also included replies to the selected discussion threads that were sufficiently rich and insightful in the analysis. Further, we scrutinized members' personal Web pages containing demographic or psychographic information (e.g. birth year, location, interests), which further enhanced the researchers' understanding of the members (Tang, 2010). Two researchers independently coded and catalogued the data into themes, thus permitting data triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

To analyze the data, we deployed open, axial and selective coding using NVivo 11. First, during open coding, we analyzed the data line-by-line to identify relevant concepts based on the actual language participants used and then grouped concepts related in meaning into relevant open codes (Homburg *et al.*, 2017). Second, during axial coding, we contextualized the open codes with supplementary literature, assessed relationships between these, and developed theoretically abstract categories (Nag and Gioia, 2012; Table II). Third, during selective coding, we further regrouped the axial codes by distilling eight VBCEP types. Selective coding was thus used to integrate all coded categories into a unifying VBCEP framework (Homburg *et al.*, 2017). We adopted an integrative inductive/deductive research approach; that is, our analyses were conducted inductively from the raw data and deductively from our review of key literature (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984; Tang, 2010). Analytical emphasis, however, was placed on the data-based, inductively emergent findings. An overview of our coding results is provided in Table II.

Findings

Virtual brand community engagement practice typology

Our findings reveal the existence of eight recurring VBCEPs in our virtual brand community (also see Tang, 2010). VBCEPs have the capacity to create, enhance and sustain social ties among community members through interactions transcending beyond purely brand-based interactions (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). We also find VBCEPs contributing to the development of community purpose, vision, scope and shared meaning among community members, thus contributing to members' perceived sense of belonging and homogeneity, relative to out-group members and generating heightened community commitment (Ma and Chan, 2014; Gummerus *et al.*, 2012).

Consumer engagement with fast-moving consumer good (FMCG)-based brand communities is centered on individuals' self-exhibition to other consumers through particular brand-related artefacts and rituals (Cova and Pace, 2006). Our findings obtained from a luxury brand community suggest a greater role of *sense of belonging*-based practices, as

Table I Participants studied (Chosen brand's section of The Purse Forum)

Name[a]	Observed [Brand] threads	Observed word count in [Brand] threads	Average No. of words in [Brand] threads	Threads in [brand] (%)	Total threads made in [brand]	Total threads made in tPF	Total posts made in tPF	Average No. of daily posts	Year joined
Amy	28	4,092	146	93	28	30	3,336	4	2007
Frank	34	4,095	120	92	34	37	3,925	4	2007
Vivian	62	8,309	134	92	234	255	6,083	4	2006
Donald	49	3,108	63	91	95	104	6,309	4	2006
Lucy	101	7,676	76	90	294	328	5,039	4	2006
Cathy	32	3,298	103	89	32	36	8,543	13	2008
Daisy	42	3,564	85	89	74	83	2,012	2	2006
Lizzy[b]	11	3,866	351	84	16	19	30,686	21	2006
Cecilia	56	4,032	72	82	242	295	5,163	4	2006
Dilly	61	7,015	115	79	112	141	10,503	8	2006
Tracy	13	1,976	152	78	83	107	9,027	6	2006
Sandy	40	2,920	73	77	40	52	5,365	9	2008
Lindy	16	1,759	110	75	142	190	7,713	5	2006
Jimmy[b]	30	4,140	138	71	72	101	26,818	17	2006
Wendy	43	5,504	128	60	55	91	17,180	17	2007
Jenny	35	5,845	167	58	46	80	6,299	6	2007
Nina	39	4,914	126	53	39	74	3,879	4	2007
Amanda[b]	50	5,350	107	51	96	187	49,653	33	2006
Alice[b]	19	3,980	209	44	36	81	23,595	14	2006
Angela	41	4,865	119	26	49	192	20,555	16	2006
Total/Average	802	90,308	130	74	1,819	2,483	12,584	10	2006

Notes: [a] For the purpose of confidentiality, the names of the selected members were amended; [b] Moderator in the chosen brand's community of the Purse Forum [Brand] = Our chosen luxury handbag brand; tPF = The Purse Forum; table extracted/adapted from Tang, 2010

illustrated by our VBCEPs of "celebrating" and "ranking" (discussed below). Thus, while particular social motives are observed in both Cova and Pace's (2006) FMCG-based, as well as our luxury-based virtual brand community, individuals' particular expression of their social practices differs across these community types. We next introduce our eight-component VBCEP typology (Table III). In addition to identifying our VBCEPs *individually*, we also sought to establish relevant linkages *between* particular VBCEPs, which comprise focal VBCEP sub-processes that collectively unfold in a broader VBCEP process. While the notion of engagement processes has been documented (Bowden, 2009), little is known regarding its relevant constituents or sub-processes, which we develop in Figure 1 and also discuss in this section.

The first VBCEP of "greeting" refers to the polite welcoming of new members, and responding with pleasure to their joining, and new and future participation in the community (Beibei, 2015; Schau *et al.*, 2009; Tang, 2010), as the following data excerpts illustrate (cf. also Table II):

Amanda: "Welcome and congrats on having a lovely XX family!"

Jimmy (one of the moderators): "All you have to enjoy and worry about is the XX addiction. 😈

Congrats to you [. . .] Welcome to XX I'm really excited for you [. . .] .! 🤗"

Greeting is used to informally initiate new members into the virtual brand community. This practice purports to engender positive feelings about the community to newcomers, transition them into first-time posters and encourage community revisits and future contributions, thus showing a

level of conceptual overlap with Schau *et al.*'s (2009) "welcoming". The duration and intensity of greeting may vary based on individual characteristics (e.g. degree of extraversion), interest in the community or the nature of the particular community (e.g. perceived user-friendliness; Skalen and Hackley, 2011). In line with engagement's multidimensional nature (Brodie *et al.*, 2011), the VBCEP of greeting, which at first sight appears primarily *behavioral* in nature, also reflects members' underlying cognitive and/or emotional engagement (Blasco-Arcas *et al.*, 2016; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1977). For example, Selena indicates her emotional community engagement, as follows: "You have joined a special club".

Second, "regulating" refers to existing members' provision of information about particular community rules, norms and guidelines to new community members (De Valck *et al.*, 2009; Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Tang, 2010), thus exhibiting a level of theoretical similarity to Schau *et al.*'s (2009) "governing". To illustrate regulating, Jimmy posts (cf. also Table II):

> Important Reminder For XX Forum- Please Read!! - 1. Please do a search before you create a thread; 2. This forum is for XX discussion only, not general discussion topics. Simply adding the name "XX" to the title or to mention it in the thread itself is not sufficient; 3. Please post all questions as to authenticity in the Authenticate This XX thread located here: - XX. We work very hard and appreciate all of your effort to make this sub-forum the best it can be.

This illustration provides a clear example of the ways in which regulating serves to prescribe and enforce the undertaking of specific VBCEPs, such as by setting rules and delineating the community's scope of interest (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010), thus emphasizing and

Table II Overview of coding activities

Sample open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
"Welcome . . . Please take the time to read this thread . . ." (Lee69) "Welcome to the fabulous world of XX! To make your visit here much more enjoyable, please take the time to read this thread as it contains details about how the XX forum is set up and great information for those new to XX" (Amanda) "Welcome, welcome. You have joined a special club!" (Selena)	Receiving and acknowledging new members (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004)	Greeting
"There is NO buying/selling/trading or soliciting allowed on tPF [The Purse Forum]. If you are found to be doing so, your membership maybe revoked" (Amanda) "It is preferable for posters to respect each other and post in a courteous manner – the mods [moderators] are not here to be the opinion police, nor should we have to police every post" (Alice).	New member initiation to the community's rules (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Viswanathan *et al.*, 2017)	Regulating
"This wonderful tPF member offered to search for a pair [of XX shoes] in my size for me at her local US boutique. . . She offered to get them sent to her store, picked them up for me and right now I am just waiting for her to send them to me" (Wendy) "I'm a cancer survivor as well. I had a different type of cancer but would be more than happy to try and help in any way I can" (Jimmy)	Helping other community members (Baldus *et al.*, 2015; Kumar and Pansari, 2016)	Assisting
"I am very happy I found this site in 2006, and since then my beautiful collection has grown. Here's an updated video. . ." (Very-Happy-with-XX) "I feel so lucky right now. Thank you dear Nicole!" (Wendy) "Why XX is so addictive. . . . I love this bag" (Donald)	Community members' valuing of particular brand- or community-related items or activities (Blasco-Arcas *et al.*, 2016; Pansari and Kumar, 2017)	Appreciating
"Think positive thoughts. I know a few people that have survived breast cancer. . ." (Jimmy) "Re: My mom was diagnosed with breast cancer – I'm so sorry for your news. . .you have to stay positive for her and you! . . . Everyone on tPF is here for you so keep positive, my prayers and thoughts are with you and your mother right now!" (Tracy)	Community members showing compassion for other members' community, brand, or life-related challenges (Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Schau *et al.*, 2009)	Empathizing
"Alberta, Canada Meet 2010 – August 22: http://doodle.com/8za9yuq66fdwmqan"(Amanda) "I had a blast! I am so glad that a fair amount of people showed up" (Jimmy) "The second PF meet in Houston was today. Sadly, only three of us showed up [A (carried her Palermo PM), B (carried his Cabas Vail Blanket in red/black), and myself (carried Taiga Sayan)]. So we were in XX checking out all of the stuff [. . .]" (Jimmy)	Community members arranging and/or attending community or brand-related events (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010)	Mingling
"I reached over 8k posts and deserve XX2 item I crossed off my wish list. I want to add indigo Bedford in the future" (Tracy) "I love the Purse Forum!! This is my 5,000th post!!" (Lindy)	Commemorating and rejoicing in members' particular achievements (Bäuml *et al.*, 2016; Schau *et al.*, 2009)	Celebrating
"I'm so happy to be graduating!!! I'm a Psych. Major for those you who don't know, btw. . . "(Lindy) "Not many people understand my fetish. . . passion. . . uh, addiction. But it's getting better, they just accept it now" (Very-Happy-with-XX)	Members' positioning of themselves within the community (Fournier and Lee, 2009; Schau *et al.*, 2009)	Ranking

Note: For further detail please refer Tang (2010)

safeguarding the community's heterogeneity, relative to other communities (Tian *et al.*, 2001; Wirtz *et al.*, 2013). Upon completion of greeting and regulating, new members are deemed to have acquired an understanding of the basic principles, customs and norms maintained in the virtual brand community and are ready to engage appropriately with the community (e.g. without offending other members; De Valck *et al.*, 2009). Similar to our observation under greeting, regulating not only reflects members' behavioral engagement but also their underlying cognitive and/or emotional engagement. For example, reflecting cognitive engagement, Alice states: "Posters [should] respect each other and post in a courteous manner".

Greeting and regulating, collectively, comprise our first, *procedural VBCEP sub-process*, which reflects a new member's community initiation phase (Figure 1). During the procedural VBCEP sub-process, new members are welcomed into the community and are made aware of the community rules, norms and guidelines. For example, *regulating* the undertaking of offline community-related events (i.e. mingling), Alice posts:

> Welcome! [New members] please DO NOT post too many specifics about your gathering (exact location, time, etc.) [. . .] Use the PM [private messaging] system to convey such pertinent details, and work together to keep each other safe.

Third, "assisting" denotes helping other community members with specific brand-, community- or other issues or queries,

Table III Virtual brand community engagement practice (VBCEP) typology

VBCEP type	Description
1. Greeting	Politely welcoming new members, and responding with pleasure to their joining and novel/future participation in the community
2. Regulating	Providing rules and guidelines to develop members' norms and guide their behavioral expectations in the community
3. Assisting	Helping other community members with specific (non-)brand-related issues or queries (e.g. regarding community use)
4. Appreciating	Display of thankfulness and gratitude to the community and/or specific other community members
5. Empathizing	Showing support or understanding for other community members' feelings about specific community, brand-related or other issues
6. Mingling	Specific online or offline interactions between community members that extend beyond the focal brand. Mingling includes the development of specific relationships (e.g. friendships) among community members, which may be maintained by undertaking offline meetings, brand-related events (e.g. shopping excursions), etc.
7. Celebrating	Noting and commemorating significant member-, brand- or community-related events or milestones (e.g. the community reaching a particular number of members)
8. Ranking	Virtual brand community members' investments into the development (including formation, maintenance, etc.) of their personal community role, position or status

Note: Table extracted/adapted from Tang (2010)

Figure 1 The VBCEP process and VBCEP sub-processes
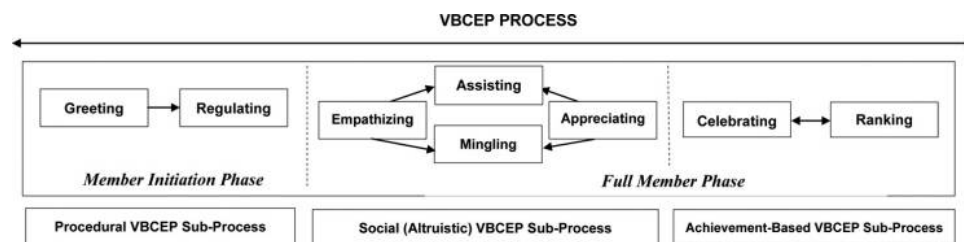
Note: VBCEP = Virtual brand community engagement practice

including in the area of computer literacy, community navigation, brand usage-related skills, etc (Baldus *et al.*, 2015; Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Tang, 2010). In contrast to greeting and regulating, which occur relatively early in the new community member initiation process (Figure 1), assisting addresses focal actions undertaken by more established community members who, typically, have spent a significant amount of time in the community (De Valck *et al.*, 2009) and have attained a feeling of responsibility for, and ownership of, the community. These individuals have developed into proficient community members willing to be accountable for helping other members (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). Observed examples of "assisting", which is not part of Schau *et al.*'s (2009) model, include individuals protecting other community members from purchasing counterfeit goods of our chosen brand and instructing them how to report the presence of imitation goods on eBay, as Jimmy's post illustrates (cf. also Table II):

> It seems that there have been a lot of inquiries about reporting counterfeit items on eBay. I just thought I'd make this thread for people who are wondering how to report counterfeit XX items on eBay.

Similar to our observation for greeting and regulating, assisting also incorporates members' underlying cognitive and/or emotional engagement. For example, reflecting her emotional engagement, Vivian states: "[I] would [. . .] help any way I can".

Fourth, "appreciating" refers to members expressing gratitude and thankfulness towards the community and/or its members (Thomas *et al.*, 2013; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002;

Tang, 2010), such as by communicating a sense of gratefulness for being part of the community, or for the resultant benefits accruing to the individual (De Valck *et al.*, 2009, p. 199). Appreciating is not part of Schau *et al.*'s (2009) model. To illustrate appreciating, Wendy posts (cf. also Table II):

> Dear all, please allow me to share my excitement with you. [. . .] I am soooo excited right now. She was even nice enough to take some pictures for me to show me the condition of the shoes.

Similar to the other VBCEPs, appreciating has an underlying cognitive and/or emotional basis. To illustrate, Wendy proceeds: "I feel so lucky right now [. . .] 🙂🙂😘 I love TPF and you are all my friends in my head". Further, the VBCEPs of celebrating and appreciating often coincide, as Amanda's post illustrates:

> Hi everyone, this is my 5,000th post!! 😲 I cannot believe that I have posted 5,000 times! I just want to say that I have enjoyed being here and making some wonderful friends. I love this place!!!

Other members' replies to such posts, displaying their appreciation for their community membership, demonstrate and validate the posting member's valued role in the community (Skalen and Hackley, 2011). Further, several members expressed their appreciation for locating the community, which they have grown to perceive as a "safe haven" where they are able to communicate with like-minded others (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005), whom they do not always have in the real world, as Angela illustrates (cf. also Table II):

[The virtual brand community, to me, is a place] where everyone understands this handbag "obsession" that I have, and that I can share opinions and thoughts.

Fifth, "empathizing" reflects the display of emotional support or understanding for other community members' feelings about specific community-related, brand-related or other issues. Empathizing can thus extend beyond the community's focal brand of interest (Muñiz and Schau, 2011; De Valck *et al.*, 2009; Tang, 2010). Empathizing, which is not part of Schau *et al.*'s model, provides affective resources and serves to build, as well as reinforce, an individual's bonding with the virtual brand community (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). To illustrate "empathizing", Lindy's thread titled "My Mom Was Diagnosed with Breast Cancer This Morning" received 156 replies, including the following (cf. also Table II):

Lindy, I'm so sorry for your news, first things first, you have to stay positive for her and you! [. . .] Think positive thoughts. I know a few people that have survived breast cancer. Please PM me if you need to talk. I'm a cancer survivor as well.

Similar to the other VBCEPs, Tracy's post reflects the underlying cognitive and/or emotional bases of empathizing: "My prayers and thoughts are with you [. . .] right now". Sixth, "mingling" reflects virtual community members' online or offline social interactions with the community or its members that extend beyond the boundaries of the community's focal brand or topic of interest (Skalen and Hackley, 2011; Seraj, 2012; Tang, 2010), thus exhibiting conceptual resemblance to Brodie *et al.*'s (2013) socializing. Examples of mingling, which is not part of Schau *et al.*'s model, include developing friendships with other community members and organizing offline meetings or events with them (De Valck *et al.*, 2009; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Tang, 2010). Dilly illustrates (cf. also Table II):

Let's start 2010 off right with a meet at Short Hills! Our last meet was July 2007. We are overdue! I thought perhaps we could set a date soon before everyone's schedule fills (No. of Views: 4,085, No. of Replies: 198).

As another illustration, Jimmy posts: "I am so glad that a fair amount of people showed up", thus indicating that not only the participating members but also the event organizers can experience underlying cognitive and/or emotional engagement with focal community-related events. Further, while we have addressed members' desired heterogeneity *vis-à-vis* other virtual brand communities, we also observe members' desire for uniqueness *within* the community. Routinely adopted, repeated VBCEPs may thus serve to foster members' perceived heterogeneity, or unique roles, relative to others (Healy and McDonagh, 2013; Thomas *et al.*, 2013), as illustrated by the VBCEPs of "ranking" or "mingling".

Based on assisting, appreciating, empathizing and mingling, we identify our second VBCEP sub-process which we term the *social (altruistic) VBCEP sub-process* (Figure 1). During the social (altruistic) VBCEP sub-process, which follows the procedural VBCEP sub-process, members are operating as full community members. The four component VBCEPs of the social (altruistic) VBCEP sub-process may each be observed to varying degrees and may also interrelate. For example, reflecting empathizing, assisting and potential future mingling, Tracy states: "Everyone on tPF [The Purse Forum] is here for you so keep positive, my prayers and thoughts are with you".

Seventh, "celebrating" refers to the noting and commemoration of particular achievements, successes or special occasions (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002), thus exhibiting conceptual overlap with Schau *et al.*'s (2009) "milestoning". Celebrations can center on particular member- (e.g. a member's 1,000th post in the community), brand- (e.g. the focal brand's anniversary) or community-related (e.g. reaching 100,000 members) events or milestones (De Valck *et al.*, 2009). To illustrate, Jimmy posts (Table II):

Hello to you all! I miss you all! [. . .] I miss reading everyone's posts and most of all, authenticating!!! Also pictured is a late $200 gift card pressie that I received from Vlad and Megs for my 21st b-day!!! Thanks again V and M!!

Similar to the other VBCEPs, celebrating not only reflects members' behavioral engagement but also reveals their underlying cognitive and/or emotional engagement. For example, Tracy states: "[Yay] I reached over 8k posts". Further, we note from Jimmy's post (above) that particular VBCEPs may coincide, or overlap, with one another. Specifically, Jimmy's post reflects the VBCEP of celebrating (i.e. of his twenty-first birthday; Skalen and Hackley, 2011), as well as appreciating (i.e. of his gift).

"Ranking" appears as the eighth and final VBCEP (Skalen and Hackley, 2011; De Valck *et al.*, 2009; Tang, 2010) and denotes virtual brand community members' investments into the development of their personal community role, position or status (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). For example, a member wishing to claim a community leadership (e.g. moderator) position may do so by greeting, regulating (e.g. instructing) newcomers regarding community norms, warning them about specific implications of non-compliant behaviors, celebrating members' achievements or organizing offline meetings for community members (i.e. mingling; cf. Schau *et al.*'s (2009) "staking"; Table II), thus serving to substantiate our earlier observation that specific VBCEPs may coincide. To illustrate, Jimmy undertakes multiple VBCEPs, as reflected by his illustrative data excerpts above (e.g. greeting, regulating, assisting, etc.). We also observe the potential underlying cognitive and/or emotional bases of ranking, as Lindy illustrates: "I'm a Psych major" (i.e. predominantly cognitive engagement).

Celebrating and ranking, *collectively*, comprise our third, *achievement-based VBCPE sub-process*. In this VBCEP sub-process, members were found to display their specific community-related (e.g. one's 5,000th posting in the community), brand-related (e.g. purchase of a long-desired item/model of the brand) or general life achievements (e.g. University graduation), as well as commemorating these achievements for and with other members (Tang, 2010; Naidoo and Hollebeek, 2016). For example, Lindy posts: "I'm so happy to be graduating!!!". In the next section, we proceed to discuss key conclusions and implications arising from this research.

Conclusions and implications

Contributions, limitations and research implications

This study makes one key contribution. Building on Schau *et al.*'s (2009) four-component community engagement practice model, we develop a refined, eight-component typology of consumers' *virtual* (i.e. online) brand community

engagement practices (VBCEPs). While four of our identified VBCEPs exhibit a level of conceptual overlap with Schau *et al.*'s model (i.e. greeting, regulating, celebrating and ranking), the other four newly developed VBCEPs (i.e. assisting, appreciating, empathizing and mingling) are unique to the virtual brand community context (Tang, 2010). Additional differences between our VBCEP typology and Schau *et al.*'s (2009) model reside in the authors' inclusion of "badging" and "documenting", which we did not identify as community engagement practices in the virtual brand community studied.

One possible explanation for the absence of badging in our model is as follows. "Badging occurs when a semiotic signifier (artefact) of a milestone is created", such as a fan purchasing a concert t-shirt (Schau *et al.*, 2009, p. 35). Given the nature of the virtual brand community studied, which is created explicitly for individuals to share their experiences and contribute to an online blog focused on particular designer handbags, badging may be less relevant for this particular context or brand, given that the focal product *is* the key artefact. Distinct dynamics may thus be observed for other brands/categories, their associated virtual brand communities and VBCEPs, thus representing an avenue for future research.

Our VBCEP typology reflects a greater focus on the sense of belonging-based aspect of VBCEPs, relative to Schau *et al.*'s (2009) model. Future research may thus wish to explore or test the effects observed in virtual brand communities for other (e.g. non-luxury) brands or categories and establish relative frequencies of occurrence, or relative importance weightings for relevant VBCEPs. We also expect the undertaking of comparative analyses across focal online, versus offline, brand communities and their associated community engagement practices, to yield findings of significant scholarly and managerial interest.

Overall, we provide a refined, eight-component taxonomy of consumers' VBCEPs (see Tang, 2010) and, in contrast to Schau *et al.* (2009), offer a model of the broad VBCEP process and focal VCEP sub-processes. We thus extend the literature on consumer engagement behaviors (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Groeger *et al.*, 2016), which, when repeated and routinized over time, develop into particular engagement practices. In other words, our analysis provides an overview of "what members do" within our studied virtual brand community and how these practices combine into VBCEP sub-processes, thereby culminating in a broad VBCEP process (Figure 1). Understanding the VBCEP process and the unfolding of its component sub-processes is useful for managers and scholars seeking to better understand VBCEPs and their interrelationships.

This research, broadly, contributes new insight into consumers' VBCEPs. Specifically, by proposing a VBCEP typology, this study contributes to the development of enhanced understanding of consumers' (customer-to-customer) interactions, behaviors, co-creation and relationships in online brand communities, thus providing managers with enhanced insight into relevant practices undertaken in virtual brand communities, which they may deploy to devise tactics to engage and bond with consumers, enhance the customer value proposition and, ultimately, generate improved organizational

performance. Specific examples include the undertaking of consumer-hosted, brand-related events, which may provide an opportunity for the brand to get closer to customers (e.g. by offering free giveaways or merchandise).

Despite its contribution, this study is also subject to a number of limitations. First, the study was limited to a single virtual luxury brand community, thus resulting in limited generalizability of our findings. Future research may thus wish to replicate the present research design across different contexts and validate its findings. Second, we deployed a small sample of 20 highly engaged members of our chosen luxury handbag brand community within The Purse Forum. Hence, future research may wish to deploy quantitative research methodology (e.g. regression analyses to identify key trends), which permits the adoption of larger sample sizes to further investigate, and validate, our findings. Future research may also wish to deploy a more representative sample comprising highly engaged, less engaged and/or disengaged respondents, which may generate distinct insight, relative to ours that is based on a sample of highly engaged members. Third, given the rapidly developing nature and dynamics pertaining to virtual brand communities, the current findings are limited to our observed period, thereby providing an opportunity for future research to investigate more recent or emerging patterns in consumers' VBCEPs.

Fourth, this study focused on consumers' online expressions of relevant brand community engagement practices. While we gave some attention to specific offline community engagement practices (e.g. through mingling), insight into the relative importance of focal virtual, versus offline, engagement practices remains nebulous, thus offering a further opportunity for future study. Fifth, we also expect the development of members' VBCEPs with particular communities to generate insight into focal VBCEP lifecycles over time. For example, future researchers may wish to investigate how community engagement practices develop as consumers' community membership progresses through relevant stages (e.g. new member initiation- and full member phases). Future research may also wish to focus on the potentially differing consumer behavior dynamics arising from consumers' distinct cultural backgrounds. However, while this research contributes novel insight into consumers' VBCEPs, the undertaking of additional (e.g. large-scale quantitative) research is required to test and validate the current, exploratory findings.

Managerial implications

This research generates several managerial implications (Tang, 2010). Specifically, our refined VBCEP typology provides managers with a tool to enhance their understanding of the nature and dynamics characterizing consumers' VBCEPs. This is important because despite the success of numerous online communities, many also fail. To illustrate, Deloitte's survey of 100 online brand communities reports that even firms investing over US$1m to create online communities fail to attract or engage a critical mass of members (Worthen, 2008). Our findings demonstrate the importance of attaining a group of engaged online members willing to initiate, implement and

distribute specific VBCEPs to other members, which contribute to and maintain the community's vision and identity, and strengthen the level of shared community consciousness. We also identify how each of our VBCEP types relates to broader VBCEP sub-processes and the overall VBCEP process, thus equipping managers with strategic insight regarding VBCEPs and their interrelationships (Figure 1). While the findings were attained in a luxury brand community (i.e. our chosen brand's section of The Purse Forum), we expect the identified VBCEPs and VBCEP processes to hold across a wide range of brands.

Our findings hold relevance for founders of new virtual brand communities seeking to leverage consumers' VBCEPs both individually and collectively in the virtual community engagement practice development process over time. Our results indicate the existence of three VBCEP sub-processes, including procedural, social (altruistic) and achievement-based practices that are central in consumers' virtual brand community engagement. First, procedural VBCEPs, which occur predominantly during the new member initiation phase (i.e. greeting and regulating), have a limited lifespan; that is, once new members are initiated into the community, and are aware of key guidelines, rules and norms governing the community, they are able to act as fully participating community members, activating our other VBCEP sub-process types. Managers are advised to put in place relevant strategies to ensure that new members are suitably greeted and initiated into their communities (e.g. by assigning existing community members as "buddies" to newcomers, or offering rewards), so as to ensure newcomers' progression to the subsequent VBCEP sub-processes.

The social (altruistic) VBCEP sub-process, which comprises assisting, appreciating, empathizing and mingling, is a major driver of members' contributions to the community, thus suggesting that managers seeking to establish and maintain successful online brand communities should focus on stimulating and leveraging the social (altruistic) VBCEP sub-process. For example, this VBCEP sub-process can be leveraged through social media marketing activity integrated with, or linked to, the community and its purpose, including "design your own product of interest" (e.g. luxury handbag), akin to McDonald's *Create Your Taste* (i.e. build your own hamburger, with the option to share one's creation on social media) or Starbucks' interactive drink builder that enables the development of customized beverages, which can also be shared via Facebook. Consumers' desire to act in an altruistic manner by sharing and *mingling* can thus be leveraged via social media marketing campaigns that allow for high levels of content sharing at relatively low cost (Malthouse *et al.*, 2013), and which also allow for consumers' *appreciation* of their friends' product creations (e.g. through sharing on social media).

Another useful tool to engage consumers with brands is gamification (e.g. Shell's *Fishing for Prizes* game), which can be coupled with contests or competitions (as in the Shell example). Gamification, which may also incorporate consumers *assisting* each other (e.g. through jointly played games or contests), can render the most every-day, staple brands engaging to consumers by providing novel or unexpected experiences or gains (e.g. reward points, prizes). The social (altruistic) VBCEP sub-process can also be leveraged by establishing links between the community and relevant social or societal causes, which can generate consumer *empathizing* (e.g. with other consumers' wellbeing being compromised by the purchase of counterfeit goods; by fund raising for charity; Harwood and Garry, 2015). These activities, collectively, reflect inbound marketing, which is predicated on customers finding the firm through the clutter online, as opposed to the firm actively attracting them (Halligan and Shah, 2009). Inbound marketing is focused on the provision of compelling content that engages customers, and by earning their attention, retains them for longer periods. In support of these activities, many firms are offering social commerce as an additional purchase channel (e.g. product sales via Facebook, Instagram or Pinterest).

The third VBCEP sub-process relates to members' achievement-based practices, including "ranking" and the "celebrating" thereof. Building on the suggestion of gamification above, we recommend managers to adopt specific brand-related games or contests that permit the winners of specific events to share their status in the community (e.g. through posting online), not just within the community but also across other online platforms (e.g. social media; Närvänen *et al.*, 2014; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Gummesson and Mele, 2010; Breidbach *et al.*, 2014), thus contributing to the dissemination of viral brand- or community-related content, and raising non-members' awareness of the community. However, while free giveaways (e.g. through gamification) can foster consumer engagement in the short-term, care must be taken so as not to dilute the brand's equity through their long-term adoption.

Our findings also suggest a disproportionately important role of virtual brand communities in the formation and development of consumers' brand-related attitudes and behaviors, relative to that identified in previous research. Specifically, this research shows that consumers may use the virtual brand community as a trusted source for attaining product- or brand-related information, communicating with like-minded others, thereby generating an enhanced sense of self (Rafiq *et al.*, 2012). Virtual brand communities may hence serve to influence and recreate brand meaning, image, personality, as well as contribute to the development of brand equity (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001).

Overall, by developing insight into consumers' VBCEPs, our findings can assist brand managers to successfully establish, maintain and manage their virtual brand communities. Specifically, this research offers novel insight into consumers' brand-related thought processes, motivations, desires, views, dilemmas and consumption habits, which may inform managerial decision-making with respect to virtual brand communities, and the deployment of marketing mix resources related to these. Despite this insight, the development of deeper understanding regarding the key drivers, relative importance and key outcomes of our VBCEPs for particular brands, sectors and industries is still needed, which may be addressed in future research.

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