

Marketing Ethics and Participation in Online Brand Communities: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

Research on brand communities in online scenarios has seen a significant surge over the past two decades, fueled by an increased interest among scholars in areas such as online commerce, especially through social media platforms. This study aims to present a novel approach to map the literature related to marketing ethics with respect to participation in brand communities in online scenarios. The study was conducted with 336 research articles obtained from Scopus database, for the period 2000 to 2025. VOSviewer v1.6.20 and Biblioshiny tools were used to analyze the meta-data, further.

Participation in brand communities in online scenarios, coupled with marketing ethics, are the central purpose of discussion. Using bibliometric tools such as R Studio and Biblioshiny – an online tool based on Bibliometrix platform, meant for scientific analyses (Aria M., and Cuccurullo C. (2017), the major findings of this research reveal significant opportunities areas for enhancing present literature, on marketing ethics while seeking participation by members in brand communities in online scenarios, as well as the highest cited authors, the most influential journals, and countries producing maximum research articles that enriched the field of ethics and participation in brand communities in online scenarios

The objective of this study is to contribute to the present-day literature in the fields of marketing, business ethics, as well as social media.

Keywords : Ethics in marketing, Participation, Online Brand Community, Social Media, VOSviewer

Introduction

Brands have evolved from fulfilling functional and emotional needs of consumers, that are centered on the relationship between individual and the brand (Fournier and Alvarez, 2013), by leveraging affective needs of collectives that are built on mutual admiration for the brand (Fernandez and Moreira, 2019). The evolution of collectives, pivoted on the fan-following for a brand, has been evidenced by the growing adoption of brand-focused groups, and brand communities. Interactions between individuals within and outside the community, as well as those between the brand and the collective, serve as the basis of relationship building, that has progressed from fulfilling functional needs to providing hedonic experiences, as a means of keeping the consumers enticed.

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As technology evolved, brand communities also moved from physical gatherings to virtual congregations, leveraged by the ease of access and affordability of the internet. Concomitantly, emerging platforms on social media, for example, Instagram, LinkedIn, facebook, X etc. emerged as effective channels for marketing by brands. Over time, social media platforms added features that further fueled the opportunity for brands, as an effective means of communicating with and listening to brand fans (Kozinets, 2010), by creating brand communities on these platforms. In the process, brand communities in online scenarios

have found a favorable position in brands' overall marketing strategies, and level and quality of participation by members, in brand communities in online scenarios developed on social media, has emerged as an important measure of the success of their branding exercise. This measure has also served well, as a source of innovation, based on members' contributions through co-creation in brand communities in online scenarios (Wang, et al., 2020).

Recent research explicates how brands harvest a deeper understanding of the members' attraction for enrolling and participating in brand communities in online scenarios. With the brands exploiting new features offered by social media networks like facebook, Instagram, Linkedin etc. for growing their brand communities in online scenarios, the question of marketing ethics has come to the limelight. The growing reliance on technology for engaging with members in brand communities, indicates that extant literature on participation by members in brand communities in online scenarios could require a revisit, in order to elicit the emerging dynamics of adhering to marketing management ethics (Kaith & Sachdeva, 2024 ; Das & Das, 2015).

Social media platforms, brands and members of brand communities in online scenarios can draw benefit from this study, by following ethical means of attracting participation, growing membership, as well as protection of members' personal data .

Past research that has focused on online marketing (Zollo L. et al.,2020; Lick E. et al.,2024), social media marketing (Huangfu Z. et al.,2022 ; Bao Z. & Wang D.,2021 ; Rasheed Gaber H. et al.,2019), participation in brand communities in online scenarios (Sneath J.Z., 2012), and ethics in digital marketing (Proffitt J.M. et al.,2012 ; Papa E. et al.,2024 ; Campelo A. et al.,2011 ; Drago C. & Gatto A., 2022), concluded, that brand communities on social media, continue to play an increasingly critical role, in the overall online marketing strategies of brands. However, scant research has been found that presents a comprehensive perspective of adherence to marketing ethics within online marketing through

brand communities operated by brands on social media platforms.

A comprehensive view of marketing ethics duly corroborated with the domain of brand communities in online world is addressed by the research questions mentioned below :

RQ1 : Does ethical marketing represent its presence in brand communities in online context ?

RQ2 : Which authors and journals play a critical role in marketing ethics literature towards brand communities in the online context, across nations?

RQ3 : Which clusters of brand communities in online mode play a critical role in the domain of marketing management ?

This study employs a bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer v 1.6.20 and R Studio 4.4.2 – Biblioshiny, to address the abovementioned research questions.

Review of Literature

Brand Communities in Online Scenarios

Brand communities in online scenarios can be sponsored by the brand or initiated by the brand fans themselves. According to Poter et al., (2011), customer-initiated virtual communities can engage organically, as compared to form sponsored communities, that need to cultivate engagement with the communities. While there are several examples of brands setting up their own brand community page, for example, Bajaj Avenger started with 'The Avenger Gods' (TAG for short), others rely on popular social media platforms for example facebook, Instagram as well as Linkedin etc., in order to setup their community, for example, Bajaj Avenger has since moved to operating their community on facebook, instead of the standalone webpage, that was originally dedicated for the purpose of attracting members.

Additionally the sphere of activities of brand communities in online scenarios could be offline, such as Pulsar Maniacs, that primarily focus on gathering physically, for outdoor activities, while

other brands like Samsung, Nykaa, etc., focus singularly on online participation through their communities.

Consumers have relied on brand communities to fulfil their needs with respect to search for brand and product information, post purchase reviews of existing consumers. At the same time, brands have benefitted from first hand feedback about their products or marketing campaigns, as a source of innovation, as well as by responding to adverse word of mouth, or improving speed of customer service (Chen and Tsai, 2020).

Despite their adoption widely across industries, the understanding of drivers of participation, in brand communities in online scenarios remains insufficient (Baldus et al., 2014). several authors have studied various intentions behind joining and participating in brand communities in online scenarios, ranging from forming opinions (Kozinets, 1999), purchasing products (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997), information gathering (Constant, 1996) to fostering relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1996).

The success of an online brand community lies in growing membership sufficiently, so that members are attracted to participate, even if passively (Kumar & Nayak, 2019) , for gratifications that could range from information related, entertainment related, technology related, self and social related (Hook et al., 2018)

Marketing Ethics in Brand Communities in Online Scenarios

The framework of moral values and the principles of a brand, that are acceptable to the members of it's community, defines the ethics of that community. With respect to brand communities, this may include aspects such as transparency, respect, inclusivity, authenticity and a mutual respect for protecting members' privacy, and opinion (Proffitt J.M. et al., 2012, Papa E., 2024, Drago C. & Gatto A., 2022).

Various authors have focused their attention on different aspects, in so far as ethics is concerned (Pandey, 2016 ; Moitra et al., 2022). From member privacy to marketing ethics of brands leveraging

brand communities in online scenarios, to ethics of brand communication within a community, researchers have highlighted the growing importance of ethics in all aspects of operating a successful online brand community. For example, in their article titled, 'Exploring the moderating role of ethics position between community commitment and oppositional loyalty in Huawei's brand communities', Cheng et al., (2025), have addressed the Understanding of high ethics position for marketing through brand community and its implications for oppositional loyalty. Campelo et al., (2011), have explored the ethics of representing places, communities, people, and their culture in destination marketing. The increasing importance of including virtual brand communities as part of their marketing strategy, highlights the importance of an organized analysis of the literature on adherence to ethical marketing practices, by brands.

Participation

As per Chen et al., (2016), participation in OBCs could include contributions such as posts, responses to posts by fellow members, sharing knowledge, seeking information, active search, or merely spending more time on the community, browsing and searching (Sun et al., 2014), leading to members' enhanced brand knowledge (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Participating in an online brand community, keeps it's members involved in the community activities, and serves as a bond between members that keeps them connected over a longer period (Tsai et al., 2012 ; Malinen, 2015). This leads to 'we-intentions' among group members, as explained by Dholakia et al., (2004). In short participation is the lubricant that not only keeps the community going but also the cohesion produced, as a result of participation, is a key contributor to the success of an online brand community (Madupu & Cooley, 2010).

Members who join brand communities in online scenarios, fulfil their various needs participating therein (Porter, 2011 ; Tsai et al., 2013). As per McWilliam (2000) active participation by it's members, is the most critical aspect, of any online brand community. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002), found that the level of participation by members in

an online brand community, serves as an indicator of its success.

Participation in brand communities in online scenarios has distinct advantages for brands as well. Cheung et al., (2015), concluded that participation in virtual brand communities, stimulates purchasing intentions among its members (Kumar and Nayak, 2019). Brand communities in online scenarios are also beneficial for brands, as members who participate actively, tend to be more loyal to the brand (Liao et al., 2021). In the long run, active participation among members of brand communities in online scenarios, leads to increase in intentions to adopt new products launched by the brand (Chi, 2018), as compared to those launched by competing brands (Thompson and Sinha, 2008).

In recent years, brand communities in online scenarios on social media have also attracted attention, due to rapid evolution in technology. Thanks to increased technology adoption, online brand community accessibility has made it conducive for members to participate from their hand held devices such as smartphones, tablets and ipads. Additional features, such as multimodal interaction, and online content editors, has also contributed to making brand communities in online scenarios more attractive for participation by its members. The extant literature on participation in brand communities in online scenarios has since proliferated and it warrants an organized review for both industry and academia to leverage.

Methodology

For this study, articles indexed in the SCOPUS data base were searched and extracted. SCOPUS is an important scientific database respected by authors from a wide variety of fields, spanning Life Sciences, Social Sciences, Physical and Health Sciences. Four numerical scores namely, Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP), h-index, CiteScore, and SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) are

used to assess and rank the quality of Journals in this database, and are thus deemed Peer-reviewed benchmark, acceptable to boards granting degrees, or agencies offering grants. Several features of the database make it conducive for researching the database, such as the one undertaken herein.

For the purpose of this article, the SCOPUS database was scanned with the following search query :

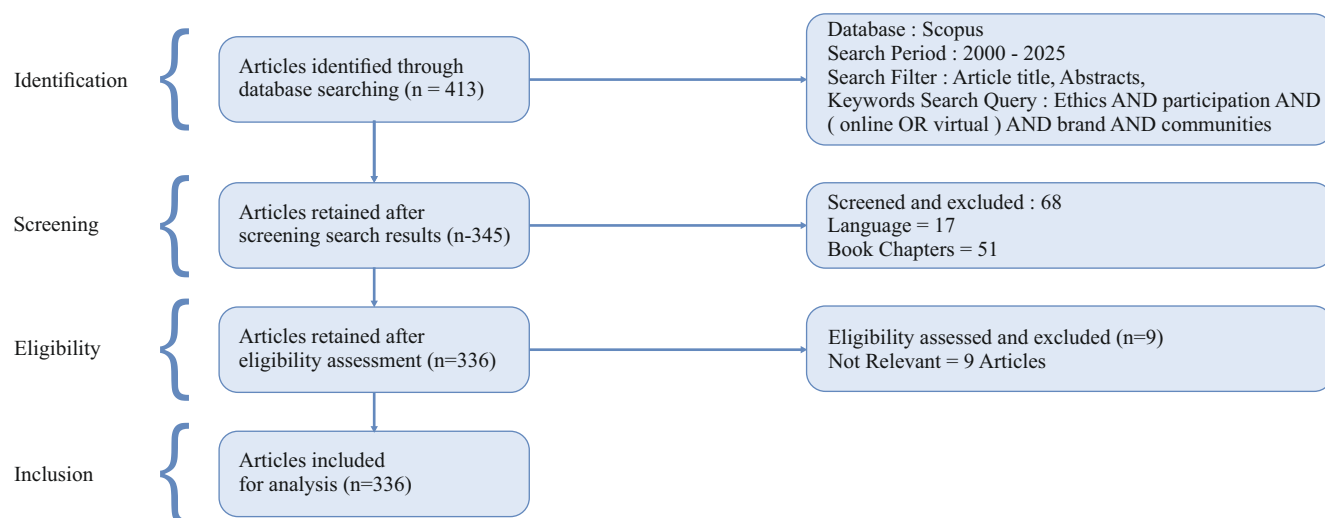
Ethics AND participation AND (online OR virtual) AND brand AND communities

with the search filter set to 'Article title, Abstracts, Keywords', for the period twenty years 2000-2025.

After screening by applying the PRISMA model, this search query yielded a list of 413 documents that met the criteria, however 17 articles written in languages other than English (6 Spanish, 5 Chinese and 2 each in Polish and Russian, and 1 each in Hungarian and Portuguese) were dropped due to language, and 9 items were dropped by virtue of document type being Retracted (3), Note (4) and Erratum (2). Further 14 Books and 37 Book chapters were dropped to bring the number down to 336. After screening the inclusion criteria, the titles, abstracts and keywords were evaluated, and the bibliometric analysis was proceeded with, with these remaining 336 articles.

These 336 documents were analyzed using VOSviewer for bibliometric analysis, which is an arm of research under library and information science, that has been used extensively to study and reveal future areas of interest in economics, education as well as management (Singh et al., 2020 ; Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2021).

Further examination revealed that these 336 were cited as many as 11405 times, with an 'Average times cited' value as 33.94.

Figure 1. Article Screening

Bibliometric analysis is one of the methods to review Literature in research, particularly prevalent in the fields of education, economics, and management (Singh et al., 2020; Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2021). It provides a longitudinal analysis of the chosen topic presented in the form of a concise overview (Donthu et al., 2022). A key objective of this article is to present a tabular and visual commentary on the literature published on the topic related to ethics and participation in brand communities in online scenarios, during the period 2000 – 2025.

Cluster and co-occurrence analyses were performed with the help of VOSviewer (Leiden University v 1.6.20).

Results and Discussions

Key information of all 336 articles included in the study are tabulated Table 1.

The top 3 count of source were Journal of Business Research (9), Sustainability (7), and Frontiers in Psychology (6), as displayed in Table 2 below

Table 1. Count of Source

Source	Count
Journal of Business Research	9
Sustainability (Switzerland)	7
Frontiers in Psychology	6

Figure 2, shows the yearly count of publications. It reveals an increasing need to study the function,

role, and implications of participation in brand communities in online scenarios.

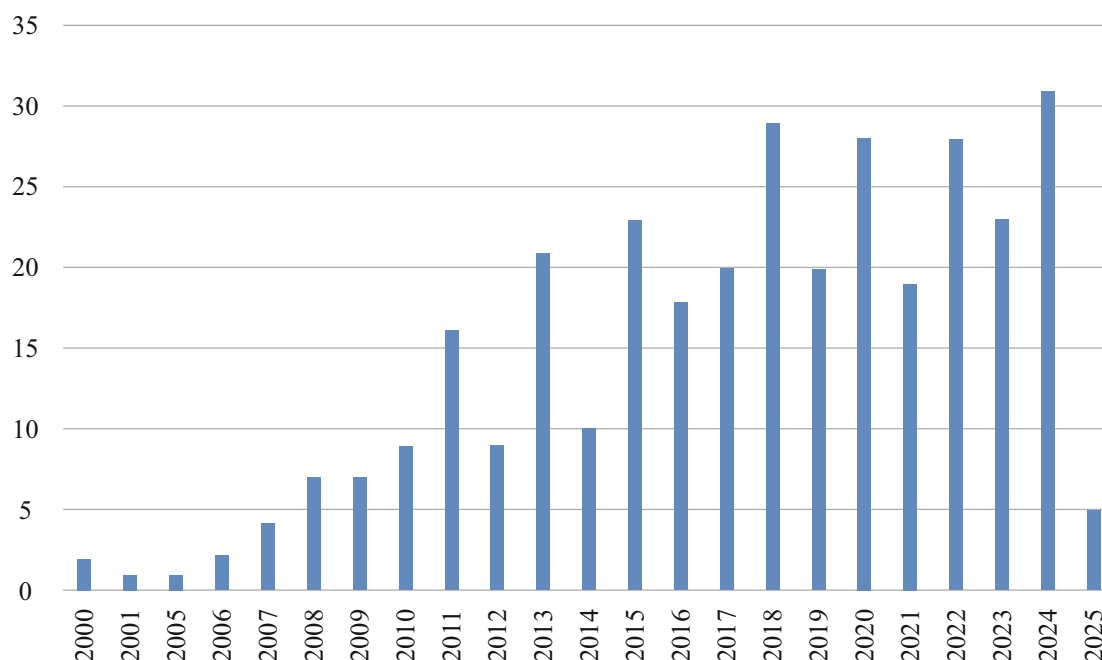


Figure 2. Articles Published by Year

Further, based on the citation report, all items were sorted by the number of citations and the 5 most influential articles related to participation in brand communities in online scenarios were selected. Refer Table 2., whereas an article titled 'Virtual customer environments: Testing a model of voluntary participation in value co-creation activities' by Nambisan et al., (2009), has the highest total citations at 673, a more recent article

titled 'Examining brand co-creation in brand communities on social media: Applying the paradigm of Stimulus-Organism-Response' by Kamboj et al., (2018), has the highest average citations per year at 76.33. It is also remarkable that articles where 'ethics' was the keyword have not found their way to the top of the citations ranking shown in table 2.

Table 2. Total and Average Citations per year

Authors	Title	Source title	Total Citations	Avg Citations per year
Nambisan et al., (2009)	Virtual customer environments: Testing a model of voluntary participation in value co-creation activities	Journal of Product Innovation Management	673	44.87
Baldus et al., (2015)	Online brand community engagement: Scale development and validation	Journal of Business Research	472	52.44
Kamboj et al., (2018)	Examining branding co-creation in brand communities on social media: Applying the paradigm of Stimulus-Organism-Response	International Journal of Information Management	458	76.33
Arvidsson et al., (2016)	Brand Public	Journal of Consumer Research	286	35.75
Shang et al., (2006)	The value of participation in virtual consumer communities on brand loyalty	Internet Research	260	14.44

Thereafter, the indices namely, g_index, h_index, and m_index were mapped using biblioshiny to identify the journals that have the maximum influence along with total citations, respectively. H_index is a composite index based on both the count of citations as well as the count of publications. However, in order to mitigate any bias caused by high concentration of citation contribution by few articles, we follow the g_index, which depicts the cumulative citations. On the

other hand, in order to eliminate the bias due to academic age, we track the m_index to compare the influence of a journals.

The 5 most influential Journals based on these indicators are the “Journal of Business Research”, the “Stability”, the “Online Information Review”, “Information and Management” and the “Internet Research”, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Journal Index rankings

Source	h_index	g_index	m_index	Total Citations
JOURNAL OF BUSINESS RESEARCH	8	8	0.615	1106
SUSTAINABILITY (SWITZERLAND)	6	6	0.857	77
ONLINE INFORMATION REVIEW	5	5	0.263	637
INFORMATION AND MANAGEMENT	5	5	0.455	285
INTERNET RESEARCH	4	4	0.200	329

Countries with the highest contribution to literature in this field were identified through the analyze functionality provided in the scopus database accessible at scopus.com. As shown in Figure 3., China emerged as the top contributing nation with 61 articles, closely followed by the US which

contributed 56 articles during the period under study ie. 2000-2025. During the same period, the UK and India contributed 31 and 24 articles respectively, while Spain followed closely behind with 22.

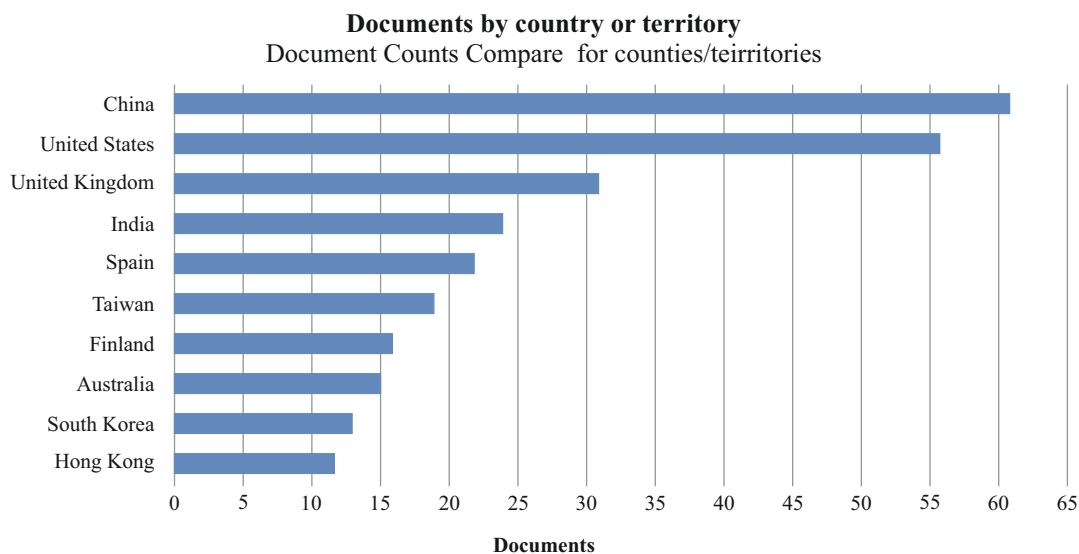


Figure 3. Highest contributing Countries (source:scopus.com)

Word Cloud

The frequency with which keywords have been used in literature are depicted in Figure 4, using a word cloud. A word cloud relies on the frequency of occurrence of each word, to capture the relative

importance of keywords used by authors across all articles under study, represented by the font size and color. While the most frequently used keywords appear in cluster, the less important ones appear in smaller fonts.



Figure 4. Word Cloud

As observable from the word cloud in Figure 4, apart from the search terms (ethics and participation), the most frequently appearing keywords were social networking, consumer behavior, and virtual brand communities.

Co-occurrence Network

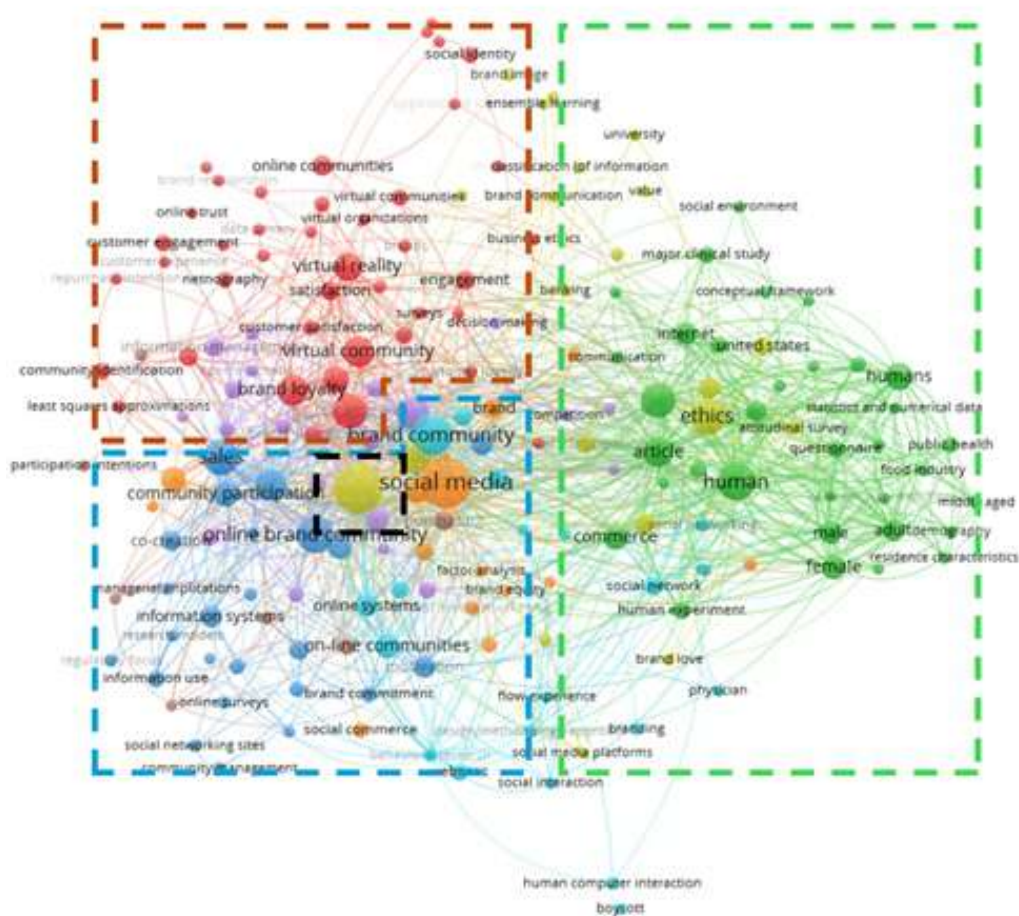
A keyword co-occurrence network analysis revealed 4 distinct clusters (Figure 5)

- Brand communities built on social media
- Participation within brand communities built on social media
- Social Networking in online communities
- Ethics in brand community

Cluster 1 : Brand Communities built on social media

Brand communities have formed an important part of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) strategy of brands, that aim to influence social relationships, communication process, and purchasing behavior of its audience (Chen & Zhao, 2021). And, the contribution of social media in aiding the rapid expansion of brand communities' reach, in the age of internet, makes it deserving of the attention of researchers in the field of branding, and brand management.

Figure 5. Co-occurrence Network



Cluster 2 : Participation within brand communities built on social media

Various authors have studied the change in consumer behavior contributed by the emergence of brand communities built on social media. From building brand loyalty through participation (Lim et al., 2020 ; Hsieh & Lee, 2022), to influencing consumer perceptions (Liao et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2021) to promoting co-creation (Zhang & Zheng, 2021), to driving purchase intention (Zhang & Zheng, 2021, Asbar et al. , 2021), the contributions to literature have added to the understanding of the growing importance of brand communities in online scenarios in the purchasing process, as well as guiding the preferences of consumers.

A study by Marčinko Trkulja et al.,(2024) examining the participation of members, in brand communities in online scenarios has explicated a variety of contributions by members of brand communities in online scenarios, according to their expectations from

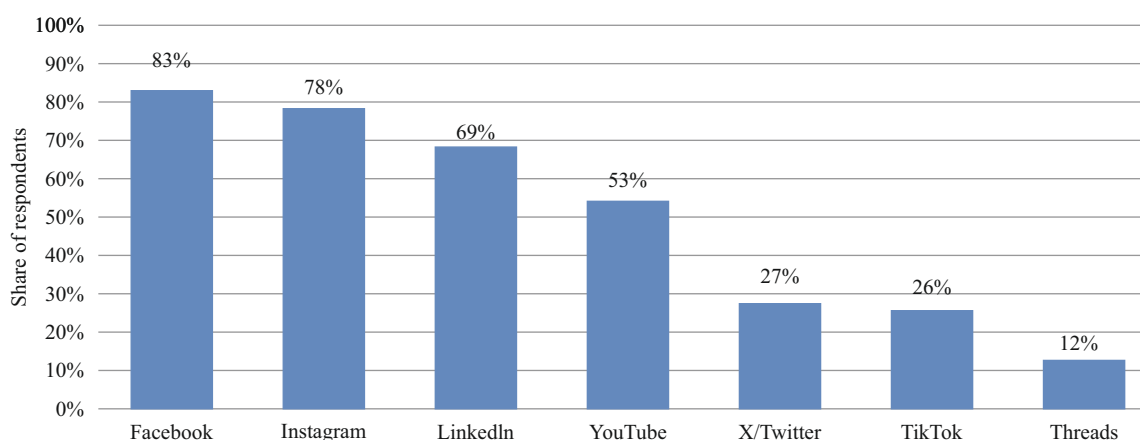
the online brand community. Their study divides the members' motives to participate in brand communities in online scenarios into intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors include those that are internal to the members' thought process, such as brand love and entertainment, whereas extrinsic factors deal with social interaction and economic benefits of participation in brand communities in online scenarios (Li et al., 2020 ; Chen Y., 2019).

Brand interaction and seeking brand oriented information, have the highest influence on participation in brand communities in online scenarios (Li et al.,2020). Other motivations to participate in brand communities in online scenarios, include self-expression, and socializing (De Vries et al., 2017), social identity (Qin, 2020), economic benefits (Jayasingh, 2019), and entertainment (Nguyen & Park, 2024).

Various authors have explored and found types of participation in brand communities in online scenarios,

such as passive vs active participation (Aydin et al., 2021 ; Yang et al., 2021), content creation, and user generated content (Arif, et al., 2020 ; Wang et al., 2021 ; Phua et al., 2020), brand advocacy (Wong, et al., 2023 ;

Wilk et al., 2021), interacting (Bilro, et al., 2023), collaboration and co-creation (Wong et al., 2022 ; Nohutlu et al., 2022).



Source: www.statista.com

Figure 5. Leading social media platforms used by marketers worldwide as of January 2025

Cluster 3 : Social Networking in online communities

Consequently, gathering information online is a key facet of modern day consumer behavior, and brand communities in online scenarios remain an effective source of such information for consumers (Bowden & Mirzaei, 2021).

Since past two decades, social networks have emerged as a key source of information for consumers, as well as a unique source of electronic-Word-Of-Mouth, for brands. With the proliferation of brand pages and brand communities, on social media, brands have discovered a powerful means of disseminating information, as well as capturing consumer sentiments (Dhir et al., 2016 ; Chen Y., 2021)

Cluster 4 : Ethics and brand communities

While social commerce brings a variety of benefits to business, it also poses challenges such as

marketing ethics related to online consumer privacy (Wang, et al., 2020). The need has been felt by brands operating communities for social commerce, for co-creating brand value, built on ethics and trust. (Wang et al., 2020). Cheng et al., (2025) investigated the importance of ethics, in the context of managing oppositional loyalty in brand communities and found that ethics position of a brand in its community, can play a key role in mitigating negative oppositional behaviors, as well as enhancing positive loyalty towards the focal brand. The soaring popularity of influencer marketing through brand communities has also raised several questions, in the context of ethics associated with marketing practices adopted by virtual influencers (Rossi & Rivetti, 2023). In a mixed method approach for examining the advertising of the 100% New Zealand campaign, Campelo et al., (2011) have highlighted the influence of ethics of representing people and places, such as in the context of travel marketing. Thus, the study of marketing ethics within brand communities in online scenarios, requires a distinct

field of investigation, in order to capture a deeper insight about the practices that breach the ethics of branding and brand management, and can adversely impact the level of participation among enthusiastic members of brand communities in online scenarios.

Discussion and Scope for Future Research

The foundations of the study of brand communities, were laid by Muniz and O'guinn (2001), in their article titled "Brand Community), however various aspects of the online behavior of consumers, has been studied by several authors, in an online brand community environment. Jung et al., (2009), examined the importance managing consumer relationships in brand communities in online scenarios, especially for industries where participation in brand communities in online scenarios, leads to brand purchasing behavior. Thereafter, authors have focused on the antecedents of participating in brand communities in online scenarios, for example, information, self-discovery, social integration, social enhancement, and entertainment, examined by Madupu and Cooley, (2010),

Madupu and Cooley, (2010), in their article titled 'Cross-cultural differences in online brand communities: An exploratory study of Indian and American online brand communities, explicated how consciousness of kind is exhibited more strongly in collectivistic cultures, as compared to individualistic cultures. In 2012, Pahnla et al., while examining the motivations to participate in brand communities in online scenarios, identified, the opportunity for open innovation activities as a key factor, apart from information and knowledge sharing.

While on one hand virtual brand communities have shown the way to social commerce, this study has highlighted, ethics of marketing in brand communities on social media as a cluster has

attracted the highest attention of researchers during the period under study. This study brings into focus the need for following marketing ethics w.r.t consumer privacy (Wang et al., 2020), and the critical role of ethics position of an online brand community in countering negative oppositional disposition of members. In this light, it becomes extremely important for brands to ensure that ethics are upheld (Kumar et al., 2018), in the ever evolving landscape of brand communities in online scenarios, in particular, with respect to the challenges of employing virtual influencers, in brand communities in online scenarios, and that of deploying tools and techniques, that are built with artificial intelligence (Bowen et al., 2023).

Although Varsha et al., (2021) had elucidated the cross section of artificial intelligence and branding, through a bibliometric analysis, in their article titled 'The impact of artificial intelligence on branding: a bibliometric analysis (1982-2019)', there has been a quantum leap in both artificial intelligence technologies as well as its adoption, since that publication, and therefore a bibliometric analysis particularly dedicated to brand communities in online scenarios, in the context of marketing ethics of adoption of artificial intelligence by brands is justified and much warranted.

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