

**Sense of Virtual Brand Community:  
A Conceptual Framework for Digital  
Belonging, Engagement, and Brand Loyalty**

الإحساس بالانتماء إلى مجتمع العلامة التجارية الافتراضي: إطار  
مفاهيمي للانتماء الرقمي والمشاركة والولاء للعلامة التجارية

Mohammad Abuljadail

محمد أبو الجدايل

Marketing Communication Department, Faculty of  
Communication and Media, King Abdulaziz University,  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

قسم الاتصال التسويقي، كلية الاتصال والإعلام، جامعة الملك عبد العزيز، جدة،  
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**الملخص:**

أحدثت المنصات الرقمية تحولاً جوهرياً في العلاقات بين العلامات التجارية والمستهلكين، حيث انتقلت من الاتصال أحادي الاتجاه إلى تفاعل تشاركي قائم على المجتمعات. ورغم أن الأدبيات السابقة تناولت التفاعل عبر الإنترنت على نطاق واسع، إلا أن الاهتمام النظري بالآلية النفسية التي من خلالها يتحول هذا التفاعل إلى ولاء دائم للعلامة التجارية لا يزال محدوداً. تطور هذه الدراسة مفهوم الإحساس بالانتماء إلى مجتمع العلامة التجارية الافتراضي لتفسير هذه العلاقة. ويستند البحث إلى مفاهيم تدمج بين علم نفس المجتمع، ونظرية الهوية الاجتماعية، وتسويق العلاقات من أجل اقتراح إطار مفاهيمي أكثر وضوحاً. ويوضح الإطار المقترح كيف يسهم الانتماء الافتراضي في تعزيز كل من الالتزام المعرفي والالتزام العاطفي، بما يدعم استدامة الولاء للعلامة التجارية في نظم رقمية ديناميكية تقوم على تعدد المنصات.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الإحساس بالانتماء إلى مجتمع العلامة التجارية الافتراضي، الولاء للعلامة التجارية، الترويج الطبيعي، المشاركة الرقمية، أصالة العلامة التجارية

**Abstract:**

This paper develops the concept of Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC) to explain how perceived belonging mediates this relationship. Drawing on sense of community, sense of virtual community, and sense of brand community traditions, the paper integrates community psychology, social identity theory, and relationship marketing to propose a clarified conceptual framework. SOVBC is defined as consumers' perceived membership, emotional connection, and interactive engagement within brand-related digital environments. The framework specifies how virtual belonging fosters cognitive and affective commitment, thereby sustaining loyalty in fluid, platform-mediated ecosystems. The paper contributes by theoretically integrating fragmented community constructs and re-specifying belonging as a central mechanism linking digital participation to brand loyalty, while outlining implications for future empirical research.

**Keywords:** Sense of Virtual Brand Community, Brand Loyalty, Brand Advocacy, Digital Engagement, Brand

## 1. Introduction

The rapid transformation of communication technologies has profoundly altered how consumers construct relationships with brands. In today's digital environment, individuals interact with organizations through networks of peers, influencers, and algorithms, producing new forms of socially embedded consumption (Brodie et al., 2013). These interactions transcend the transactional logic of marketing to create shared spaces of meaning—virtual brand communities—in which members co-create brand value through emotional expression, storytelling, and symbolic participation (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2022).

Despite the proliferation of studies on online engagement, there remains limited theoretical clarity on how belonging itself functions as the psychological mechanism that transforms digital participation into loyalty. Existing models often operationalize engagement behaviorally—likes, shares, or comments—without fully capturing the internal experience of attachment and identification that motivates enduring commitment (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Gupta, 2023). This paper argues that such emotional and identity-based processes constitute the sense that binds individuals to communities and, ultimately, to brands.

### 1.1 Background and Theoretical Context

Research into Sense of Community (SOC) (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) introduced the foundational elements of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. As communication migrated online, scholars such as Blanchard and Markus (2002) extended this framework into the Sense of Virtual Community (SOVC), demonstrating that belonging could persist even in the absence of physical proximity. In parallel, Carlson et al. (2008) conceptualized the Sense of Brand Community (SOBC), emphasizing consumers' psychological attachment to brand-centered collectives. While each construct provides valuable insights, they have evolved largely in disciplinary silos—community psychology, information systems, and marketing communication—resulting in conceptual fragmentation. Contemporary digital ecosystems now demand integration: consumers navigate hybrid spaces that combine social-network features, algorithmic feeds, and immersive media (Dwivedi et al., 2021). These environments blur the line between virtual and brand communities, requiring a unifying theoretical construct—Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC)—to explain belonging in this convergent context.

### 1.2 The Emergence of Virtual Brand Belonging

The digitalization of everyday life has normalized continuous co-presence with brands. Individuals join online communities not only for information but for emotional validation, social identity, and shared purpose (Amoah, 2022). The resulting phenomenon—virtual brand belonging—extends beyond engagement

metrics to encompass affective commitment and moral responsibility toward the community. As Hollebeek and Belk (2024) observe, authenticity and co-created meaning have become central to modern engagement. Yet, marketing scholarship still lacks an integrative explanation of how this sense of belonging emerges and operates across virtual platforms. SOVBC proposes that digital brand loyalty arises when consumers internalize membership within an online collective devoted to the brand. This internalization manifests as three interrelated dimensions:

- 1) Cognitive identification—recognition of oneself as part of the brand community.
- 2) Affective emotional connection to fellow members and the brand.
- 3) Behavioral participation—active contribution that reinforces both identity and belonging.

By synthesizing these dimensions, SOVBC offers a psychologically grounded view of engagement that complements but extends beyond behavioral analytics.

### 1.3 Conceptual and Managerial Gaps

Existing engagement frameworks (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015) primarily measure observable interaction without tracing its emotional depth. Relationship-marketing research explains loyalty through satisfaction and trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) but seldom incorporates communal identity as a mediating factor. As digital ecosystems become more participatory, consumers expect recognition, inclusion, and shared authorship of meaning (Nguyen et al., 2023). Without a unifying construct capturing this psychosocial experience, scholars risk underestimating the mechanisms driving sustained brand relationships.

From a managerial perspective, understanding SOVBC is equally vital. Companies invest heavily in community platforms and influencer collaborations but often evaluate success using short-term engagement metrics rather than psychological belonging. This mismatch between managerial practice and consumer motivation results in communities that attract attention but fail to cultivate loyalty (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2022). By articulating how belonging functions as a cognitive-emotional bridge between participation and loyalty, the present framework provides both theoretical and practical value.

### 1.4 Research Purpose and Contribution

The objective of this paper is to develop and conceptualize the Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC) as a construct that integrates the psychological insights of community theory with the relational focus of marketing communication. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

- 1) Clarify the conceptual boundaries between SOC, SOVC, SOBC, and SOVBC.
- 2) Propose an integrative model explaining how SOVBC mediates the relationship between virtual participation and brand loyalty.

3) Identify theoretical propositions that can guide future empirical testing.

This study's contribution lies in theoretical integration and re-specification. By synthesizing established constructs from community psychology, digital communication, and brand relationship theory, the paper advances a clarified and operationalizable framework that explains how belonging functions within digitally mediated brand ecosystems. This integrative contribution addresses fragmentation in existing literature and provides a theoretically parsimonious foundation for future empirical.

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

SOVBC matters because belonging has become the emotional currency of the digital era. As consumers migrate across platforms, the durability of loyalty depends less on functional satisfaction and more on psychological rootedness within brand communities. Understanding the antecedents and consequences of SOVBC can therefore enhance predictive models of consumer retention and inform the design of human-centered engagement strategies. Moreover, by extending sense-of-community theory into marketing, this paper enriches interdisciplinary dialogue between psychology, communication, and management.

### 1.6 Positioning Within Conceptual Scholarship

Following calls for stronger theory development in marketing (Yadav, 2010; MacInnis, 2011), this paper adopts a conceptual synthesis approach that integrates established theories to advance new understanding. It follows the trajectory of Brodie et al. (2013) in conceptualizing engagement, Veloutsou and Moutinho (2022) in examining brand authenticity, and Hollebeek and Belk (2024) in linking authenticity to meaning co-creation. The proposed SOVBC framework extends these contributions by articulating the psychological mechanisms through which community belonging translates into brand loyalty.

### 1.7 Structure of the Paper

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations, tracing the evolution from SOC to SOVC to SOBC and identifying their convergence in SOVBC. Section 3 presents the conceptual framework and propositions linking belonging to loyalty. Section 4 discusses theoretical and managerial implications. Section 5 outlines directions for future empirical research, followed by concluding remarks and verified references.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Origins of Sense of Community (SOC)

The concept of sense of community (SOC) emerged in community psychology to explain how individuals perceive belonging within social systems. McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined SOC as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members

matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). They identified four core elements:

- 1) Membership – a subjective feeling of investment and identification with the group.
- 2) Influence – the bidirectional process through which members affect and are affected by the community.
- 3) Integration and fulfillment of needs – the perception that membership satisfies personal and collective goals.
- 4) Shared emotional connection – a sense of bonding based on shared history, interaction, and meaning.

These elements describe not merely participation but a psychological state of connectedness. Subsequent work demonstrated that SOC enhances well-being, cooperation, and civic engagement (Pretty et al., 1996; Obst & White, 2004). The theory's strength lies in its dual focus on cognition and emotion—belonging is simultaneously rational and affective. From a marketing-communication perspective, SOC provides the first systematic explanation of why groups matter in shaping attitudes and behaviors. It anticipates relational paradigms in marketing by emphasizing identity and mutual dependence rather than individual utility (Bagozzi, 1975). However, SOC was developed for geographically bounded communities such as neighborhoods or workplaces. Its applicability to dispersed, computer-mediated groups required theoretical adaptation.

### 2.2 Transition to Virtual Environments

The advent of networked computing and the Internet challenged traditional assumptions about proximity and interaction. As early as the mid-1990s, scholars observed that individuals formed meaningful social bonds online despite physical separation (Rheingold, 1993). To account for these relationships, Blanchard and Markus (2002) proposed the Sense of Virtual Community (SOVC), redefining belonging within electronic networks of communication. They argued that SOC's psychological mechanisms persist in mediated contexts when interaction frequency, reciprocity, and shared purpose substitute for physical closeness. SOVC maintained the four original elements but reframed them for digital conditions. Empirical studies verified that SOVC predicts participation, trust, and retention in online groups ranging from health forums to fan communities (Blanchard, 2008; Koh & Kim, 2004; Zhou et al., 2013). In marketing, SOVC became instrumental in explaining consumer engagement in brand-hosted virtual environments (Casaló et al., 2008). Yet, its psychological depth is often under-represented when reduced to metrics of activity rather than emotion.

### 2.3 Psychological Mechanisms of SOVC

At its core, SOVC represents a social cognition, the internalized belief that one is part of a cohesive collective online. Blanchard (2008) emphasized that SOVC operates through identity cues (names, avatars, rituals) that signal inclusion. Members construct self-concepts

partly from their online affiliations, supporting Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These cues foster depersonalized trust: even without face-to-face contact, members attribute reliability and empathy to others because of perceived group similarity (Ridings et al., 2002). Together, these processes explain persistence and loyalty in virtual settings. They also foreshadow brand-related phenomena: consumers who feel recognized and emotionally supported within a brand's digital ecosystem display behaviors consistent with SOVC dynamics (Habibi et al., 2016).

#### 2.4 Strengths and Limitations of SOVC

**Strengths.** SOVC's strength lies in demonstrating that social presence and shared identity can emerge without physical proximity. This insight legitimized online communities as authentic social structures rather than ephemeral gatherings. For marketers, it provided a psychological rationale for investing in digital engagement platforms (Casaló et al., 2008). It also linked participation to relational outcomes such as trust and satisfaction, aligning with relationship-marketing theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

**Limitations.** However, SOVC is agnostic about brand meaning. Its focus is interpersonal rather than symbolic. It explains how members bond with one another but not how those bonds translate into loyalty toward a focal brand or organization. Moreover, the model predates the algorithmic and multi-platform nature of current digital ecosystems (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Consumers today interact simultaneously across branded communities, influencer networks, and user-generated spaces, making belonging more fluid and identity more performative (Hollebeek & Belk, 2024). Another limitation is methodological: SOVC research often relies on survey items adapted from SOC scales, which may not capture the affective intensity of digital belonging (Obst et al., 2002). Thus, while SOVC established the psychological viability of online communities, it requires extension to encompass brand-specific symbolic attachment. This gap motivates the conceptualization of Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC) presented later in the paper.

#### 2.5 Bridging to Marketing Communication Theory

Migration from SOC to SOVC parallels the evolution of marketing thought from transactional to relational paradigms. Both emphasize ongoing interaction, mutual value, and identity co-construction. Brodie et al. (2013) and Hollebeek and Macky (2019) extended these ideas under the construction of consumer engagement, positioning digital participation as a co-creative process. SOVC complements engagement theory by revealing its psychological antecedent—belonging. Engagement behaviors are expressions of an underlying sense of community; without belonging, they remain superficial and fleeting.

From a communication standpoint, SOVC provides a lens for analyzing how message exchange, feedback,

and ritualized participation produce collective meaning. Community members enact shared symbols—hashtags, emojis, recurring content themes—that perform the same integrative function as rituals in offline communities (Schau et al., 2009). These symbolic acts build shared emotional connection, the cornerstone of SOVC. However, SOVC stops short of articulating how brand narratives intertwine with these communal processes. When community discourse revolves around a brand, belonging acquires commercial and identity significance simultaneously. The next stage of theory, the Sense of Brand Community (SOBC)—extends SOVC by incorporating the brand as a central actor within the psychological experience of belonging.

### 3. From Brand Community to Sense of Virtual Brand Community

#### 3.1 The Rise of Brand Community (BC)

The concept of brand community first appeared as a marketing construct in Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), who defined it as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (p. 412). They demonstrated that consumers do not simply buy brands; they form social worlds around them characterized by shared consciousness, rituals, and moral responsibility. Brand communities thus became a powerful counterpoint to the assumption that consumption is an individual, utilitarian act. They are collective, identity-driven systems of meaning. Subsequent research confirmed that brand communities create value by enabling consumers to co-construct narratives that reinforce brand identity (Schau et al., 2009). Members' activities—storytelling, assisting newcomers, and celebrating usage rituals—generate both functional value (information, support) and symbolic value (status, belonging). This duality reflects Bagozzi's (1975) principle that marketing is fundamentally about exchange relationships but extends it into social exchange among peers mediated by the brand. The early literature framed brand community as an organizational asset that strengthens loyalty and advocacy (Algesheimer et al., 2005). However, these studies focused largely on observable behaviors' participation, word of mouth, repurchase intention, rather than the underlying psychological experience of belonging. This limitation gave rise to the notion of Sense of Brand Community (SOBC).

#### 3.2 Sense of Brand Community (SOBC)

Carlson, Suter, and Brown (2008) advanced the discussion by distinguishing between the social and psychological dimensions of brand community. They defined SOBC as the “psychological feeling of belonging to a brand community”, adapting the four components of SOC—membership, influence, integration and needs fulfillment, and shared emotional connection—to the branding context. SOBC marked a theoretical shift: from viewing community as a behavioral network to understanding it as a subjective state of connection

with a brand collective. SOBC research identified key antecedents such as brand identification, perceived similarity, and interaction quality (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Carlson et al., 2008). Outcomes include stronger brand trust and loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), as well as increased advocacy and resilience to negative information (Dessart et al., 2015). SOBC therefore positioned belonging as a mediator between community participation and consumer–brand relationship quality. From a psychological standpoint, SOBC introduces a multi-layered identification process:

- 1) Identification with other community members (social identity),
- 2) Identification with the brand (brand identity), and
- 3) Identification with the community as a symbolic whole (collective identity).

This tripartite structure explains why members defend and promote their brands even in competitive or crisis situations—loyalty becomes part of the self-concept (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2022).

### 3.3 From SOBC to Virtual Environments

The digital transformation of consumer culture relocated many brand communities into virtual spaces, creating Virtual Brand Communities (VBCs)—online environments hosted on social media or brand-managed platforms (Casaló et al., 2008). VBCs preserve the symbolic functions of brand communities while adding immediacy, interactivity, and scalability. They allow members across geographies to connect in real time, share experiences, and influence one another's perceptions. Yet, the psychological depth captured by SOBC does not automatically transfer to the virtual domain. Digital platforms often fragment identity across multiple channels, and algorithmic visibility may substitute popularity for genuine belonging (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Furthermore, members may engage with several brands simultaneously, challenging the exclusivity presumed in earlier SOBC models.

Researchers have begun to address these dynamics. Habibi, Laroche, and Richard (2016) proposed that online brand communities create value through functional, social, and hedonic benefits. Hollebeck and Macky (2019) reframed engagement as a co-creative process encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. However, the common thread across these works is the persistence of psychological belonging as the engine of loyalty. Even in decentralized digital environments, the feeling of being recognized and valued within a brand-related collective remains the strongest predictor of sustained engagement (Gupta, 2023).

### 3.4 Need for Integrative Concept in Digital Contexts

The intersection of SOVC (belonging in virtual spaces) and SOBC (belonging to brand communities) creates fertile ground for theoretical integration. Consumers today experience brands not through linear communication but through ecosystems that blend peer interac-

tion, influencer narratives, and algorithmic curation (Nguyen et al., 2023). Belonging thus becomes multi-anchored—to people, to symbols, and to platforms.

Current literature tends to treat SOVC and SOBC as parallel rather than convergent constructions. SOVC explains social connectedness online but lacks a brand referent; SOBC explains brand attachment but underplays digital mediation. To capture their overlap, this paper proposes Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC) a construct uniting the virtual affordances of SOVC with the symbolic brand focus of SOBC.

### 3.5 Defining Sense of Virtual Brand Community

SOVBC is defined as a consumer's psychological sense of belonging, identification, and emotional connection within a brand-related virtual environment. It encompasses:

- 1) Perceived membership – the subjective recognition of being part of the brand's online collective.
- 2) Reciprocal influence – the belief that one's participation matters to the group and to the brand.
- 3) Fulfillment of social and symbolic needs – the perception that the community satisfies informational, emotional, and identity needs; and
- 4) Shared emotional connection – the affective bond developed through sustained digital interaction and brand meaning co-creation.

This structure mirrors SOC's core elements but adapts them to contemporary digital and branding realities. Unlike SOBC, which presumes stable, brand-centric membership, SOVBC acknowledges the fluid, cross-platform nature of modern engagement. It positions belonging as a dynamic psychological state that evolves with technological affordances and social influence. Although the psychological structure of SOVBC comprises four interrelated elements — perceived membership, reciprocal influence, fulfillment of social and symbolic needs, and shared emotional connection— these can be conceptually integrated into three overarching dimensions: membership perception, emotional connection, and interactive engagement (see figure 1).

While membership perception and interactive engagement are related, they operate at distinct psychological levels. Membership perception reflects a cognitive self-categorization process, the internal recognition of belonging to the brand community. Interactive engagement, by contrast, represents the behavioral enactment of that belonging through participation, contribution, and reciprocity. Emotional connection functions as the affective bridge between these dimensions, motivating engagement while reinforcing perceived membership. This delineation prevents conceptual redundancy by positioning engagement as an outcome of belonging rather than its definitional component. The consolidation of four SOC elements into three SOVBC dimensions reflects theoretical parsimony and empirical usability rather than conceptual reduction. Influence and fulfillment of needs are behaviorally expressed through

interactive engagement in digital environments, where reciprocity, visibility, and contribution jointly signal both agency and benefit. Retaining these elements as separate dimensions risks multicollinearity in future empirical testing, whereas their integration preserves theoretical meaning while improving measurement clarity.

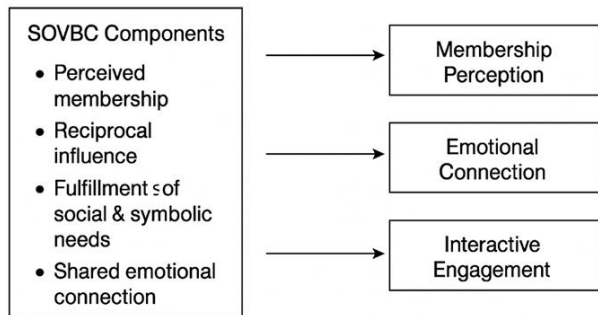


Figure 1. Mapping of the original four psychological components of SOVBC onto the three integrated dimensions used in the conceptual framework.

### 3.6 Theoretical Alignment and Differentiation

To further deepen theoretical comparison, it is important to explicitly distinguish SOVBC from its foundational constructs not only conceptually but functionally. Unlike SOC, which assumes stable, territorially bounded membership, SOVBC operates within fluid, digitally mediated environments where belonging is continuously negotiated. In contrast to SOVC, which emphasizes interpersonal bonds without symbolic brand anchoring, SOVBC embeds commercial meaning and identity work within community interaction. Finally, while SOBC captures psychological attachment to brand-centered collectives, it under-theorizes platform affordances, algorithmic mediation, and cross-community mobility that characterize contemporary digital ecosystems.

By integrating these dimensions, SOVBC advances beyond aggregation by specifying how belonging functions under conditions of digital multiplicity and mediated interaction. SOVBC extends prior theories in three critical ways:

- 1) From Spatial to Symbolic Belonging. Where SOC relied on physical proximity, and SOVC on virtual interaction, SOVBC centers on symbolic identification with the brand narrative and community values (Hollebeek & Belk, 2024). Belonging becomes an act of meaning-making through consumption.
- 2) From Community Membership to Relational Loyalty. SOVBC embeds loyalty as an emergent property of collective identification. It reframes loyalty not as a behavioral outcome but as a psychological commitment to remain part of the brand’s social world (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2022).
- 3) From Static to Dynamic Community Experience. Unlike prior constructs that imply fixed membership, SOVBC recognizes movement across digital spaces.

Consumers continuously reaffirm belonging through participation, recognition, and reciprocity—processes amplified by platform algorithms and influencer mediation (Li, 2025). Through these extensions, SOVBC connects community psychology, digital engagement theory, and relationship marketing into a unified lens for understanding how belonging translates into brand loyalty in contemporary ecosystems.

### 3.7 Summary and Conceptual Transition

The evolution from SOC → SOVC → SOBC culminates in the integrative construct of SOVBC. It captures the psychological, social, and symbolic dimensions of belonging in digitally networked brand environments. The following section develops a conceptual framework and propositions that explicate how SOVBC mediates the path from participation to loyalty and how moderators such as authenticity and trust shape this process.

## 4. Conceptual Framework

### 4.1 Overview of the Framework

Building on the preceding discussion, this section develops a conceptual framework that positions Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC) as the mediating psychological mechanism linking virtual participation to brand loyalty. The framework integrates antecedents rooted in digital interaction and relational marketing with psychological constructs of belonging and authenticity (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek & Belk, 2024; Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2022). It argues that consumers’ perceptions of community quality, authenticity, and trust jointly foster SOVBC, which in turn drives attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (see figure 2).

### 4.2 Antecedents of SOVBC

#### 4.2.1 Perceived Community Interaction

Interaction quality—the extent to which exchanges are reciprocal, informative, and socially supportive—has long been linked to engagement (Casaló et al., 2008). In virtual environments, social presence substitutes for physical proximity; frequent, empathetic interaction fosters emotional warmth (Blanchard, 2008). When members feel heard and recognized, they experience membership and influence—the first two dimensions of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Proposition 1: Higher perceived quality of online community interaction positively influences Sense of Virtual Brand Community.

#### 4.2.2 Perceived Authenticity and Transparency

Authenticity—the perception that a brand and its community are genuine and value-driven—enhances belonging by reinforcing psychological safety and self-congruence (Iglesias et al., 2019; Hollebeek & Belk, 2024). Inauthentic or overly managed spaces suppress voluntary expression, weakening communal identification.

Proposition 2: Perceived authenticity of the brand community positively influences SOVBC.

#### 4.2.3 Shared Values and Identity

Shared values and identity capture the symbolic and psychological alignment between consumers and the brand community. When members perceive that the brand reflects their personal beliefs and lifestyle, they experience a stronger sense of belonging and purpose within the community (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Such alignment fosters mutual understanding, perceived authenticity, and emotional security—outcomes that earlier literature linked to trust. In the context of virtual brand communities, this sense of “shared self” acts as an identification mechanism: members internalize the brand as part of their social identity and are motivated to support, defend, and co-create with it (Hollebeek & Belk, 2024). Thus, shared values and identity serve as a symbolic foundation for the development of the Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC). They not only provide a cognitive basis for belonging but also reinforce emotional connection and interactive engagement, transforming the community from a transactional space into a meaningful social group.

Proposition 3: Perceived shared values and identity between consumers and the brand positively influence the Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC).

#### 4.3 SOVBC as a Mediating Mechanism

SOVBC is theorized as the psychological bridge between participation and loyalty. Engagement behaviors (posting, commenting, sharing) create opportunities for belonging, but loyalty emerges only when members internalize the community as part of their identity (Brodie et al., 2013).

- 1) Cognitive Path: Interaction → Identification → Belonging → Loyalty.
- 2) Affective Path: Emotional connection → Attachment → Commitment → Loyalty.

Thus, SOVBC operates as both cognitive-affective integrator and motivational driver, translating participation into advocacy and repurchase intentions. Importantly, these pathways are not tautological but conditional: participation alone does not produce loyalty unless belonging is internalized. This distinction clarifies why high engagement metrics may coexist with weak loyalty in digitally dense environments.

Proposition 4: SOVBC mediates the relationship between virtual community participation and brand loyalty.

#### 4.4 Loyalty, Advocacy, and Digital Engagement

##### 4.4.1 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty encompasses both attitudinal and behavioral components reflecting a consumer’s enduring

attachment and repeat-purchase intention toward the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). When consumers experience a strong Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC), they internalize the brand’s values as part of their social identity, leading to higher emotional commitment and supportive behaviors even in challenging contexts (Carlson et al., 2008). SOVBC thus fosters attitudinal loyalty—positive affect and commitment—and behavioral loyalty—actual repurchase and continued engagement with brand-related activities.

##### 4.4.2 Advocacy and Word of Mouth

Beyond loyalty, SOVBC stimulates voluntary advocacy and positive word of mouth. Members who perceive authentic, reciprocal relationships within the community often become informal brand ambassadors, sharing experiences and defending the brand in digital spaces (Dessart et al., 2015). This peer-driven advocacy strengthens brand credibility and extends its reach through consumer-generated communication, aligning with contemporary relational marketing perspectives (Gupta, 2023).

##### 4.4.3 Sustained Digital Engagement

SOVBC also contributes to long-term digital engagement. Sustained engagement refers to consumers’ continuous, interactive participation—such as commenting, co-creating, and content sharing—that maintains community vitality (Hollebeek & Belk, 2024). This outcome represents the behavioral manifestation of belonging in online brand ecosystems, ensuring that emotional and cognitive ties translate into enduring digital involvement and brand co-creation.

Proposition 5: SOVBC positively influences brand loyalty, advocacy/word of mouth, and sustained digital engagement.

#### 4.5 Moderating Factors

Although the relationships proposed in this framework are theoretically positive and direct, their strength is expected to vary across contextual conditions. Three moderators—Cultural Orientation, Platform Type, and AI-Mediated Interaction Quality—influence how consumers experience and express the Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC).

##### 4.5.1 Cultural Orientation

Cultural orientation shapes how community members perceive belonging, interaction, and brand relationships. In collectivist cultures, where social harmony and group cohesion are valued, SOVBC may exert a stronger influence on loyalty and advocacy behaviors. Conversely, in individualist contexts, the effects may depend more on personal relevance and self-expression (Hofstede, 2001; Chu & Choi, 2011). Thus, culture moderates the extent to which shared identity and emotional connection translate into community-driven outcomes.

#### 4.5.2 Platform Type

The technological and social affordances of different digital platforms can amplify or constrain community dynamics. Platforms emphasizing conversation and co-creation (e.g., Reddit, Discord) may strengthen the link between interactive engagement and advocacy, whereas algorithmic or visually-driven platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) might reinforce emotional connection but limit reciprocity (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Therefore, platform type moderates the pathways through which SOVBC fosters engagement and loyalty

#### 4.5.3 AI-Mediated Interaction Quality

As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded in digital communities—through chatbots, recommendation systems, and virtual agents, the perceived quality of AI-mediated interaction can affect members' trust and relational satisfaction (Grewal et al., 2024). High-quality, human-like AI interactions may enhance members' sense of inclusion and continuity, whereas poor or mechanical AI engagement could weaken emotional connection. Accordingly, AI-mediated interaction quality moderates the overall strength of SOVBC's impact on brand loyalty, advocacy, and sustained engagement.

Proposition 6: The relationships between SOVBC and its outcomes are moderated by cultural orientation, platform type, and AI-mediated interaction quality.

#### 4.6 Conceptual Model Narrative

Synthesizing these relationships, the proposed conceptual model can be narratively represented as follows: Interaction Quality, Brand Authenticity, and Shared Values and Identity jointly foster the Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC). SOVBC, in turn, functions as a mediating psychological mechanism linking virtual participation with the key behavioral outcomes of Brand Loyalty, Advocacy/Word of Mouth, and Sustained Digital Engagement. This process is further influenced by contextual moderators, including Cultural Orientation, Platform Type, and AI-Mediated Interaction Quality, which together shape how members experience and express their sense of belonging in digital brand ecosystems. The model portrays SOVBC as a dynamic bridge between community interaction and enduring brand relationships. It integrates principles of community psychology (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and brand relationship theory (Hollebeek & Belk, 2024; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) to explain loyalty formation and advocacy in contemporary digital spaces.

Interaction Quality, Brand Authenticity, and Shared Values & Identity influence SOVBC (Membership Perception, Emotional Connection, Interactive Engagement), which in turn affects Brand Loyalty, Advocacy/Word of Mouth, and Sustained Digital Engagement. These relationships are moderated by Cultural Orientation, Platform Type, and AI-Mediated Interaction Quality. The relationships described above are

synthesized in Figure 2, which illustrates the proposed conceptual framework of the Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC). The figure highlights the antecedents, mediating dimensions, outcomes, and contextual moderators that together define the psychological and behavioral structure of virtual brand belonging.

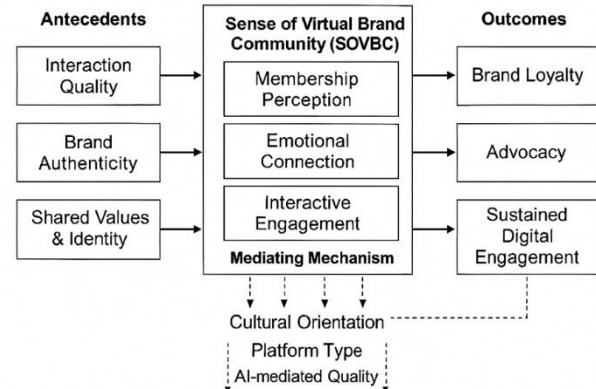


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of the Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC).

## 5. Theoretical and Managerial Implications

### 5.1 Theoretical Implications

The proposed Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC) framework advances marketing and communication scholarships in several fundamental ways. It provides an integrative explanation of how psychological belonging functions as the core mechanism through which virtual participation translates into loyalty, expanding existing theory on engagement and community.

#### 5.1.1 Integration of Fragmented Constructs

The SOVBC model unifies previously disconnected literatures on sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), sense of virtual community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002), and sense of brand community (Carlson et al., 2008) under a single psychological paradigm. Earlier research treated these as parallel lines of inquiry—psychological, technological, and marketing perspectives operating independently. SOVBC provides the theoretical bridge that links them by showing that the underlying psychological architecture of belonging persists across contexts, even as the social environment becomes mediated by digital technology (Hollebeek & Belk, 2024). This integration clarifies a long-standing ambiguity in marketing communication: whether community engagement is fundamentally behavioral (interaction) or psychological (identification). The SOVBC construct demonstrates that it is both, operating through a feedback loop—engagement behaviors create belonging, and belonging reinforces further engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2016).

#### 5.1.2 Re-conceptualization of Loyalty Formation

Traditional relationship-marketing models conceptualize loyalty as the outcome of satisfaction and trust

(Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The SOVBC framework reframes loyalty as an emergent psychological state rooted in community belonging. In digital ecosystems, where consumers continuously evaluate multiple options, loyalty is sustained not by switching costs but by affective commitment and self-definition within the brand community (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2022). This reconceptualization aligns with the growing recognition that loyalty is relational rather than transactional, sustained by social identity and emotional reciprocity (Nguyen et al., 2023).

### 5.1.3 A Dual-Path Model of Engagement

By identifying both cognitive and affective pathways to belonging, SOVBC advances engagement theory (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Cognitive identification reflects rational self-categorization within the community, whereas affective attachment reflects emotional intimacy. These two dimensions operate simultaneously: the cognitive path ensures stability, and the affective path generates vitality. The framework thus enriches our understanding of why some communities produce advocacy and enduring loyalty while others fail despite high activity levels.

### 5.1.4 Extension of Social Identity Theory

SOVBC extends Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) by demonstrating how identity processes unfold in algorithmically mediated spaces. Online environments amplify visibility and comparison, reinforcing social categorization around shared brand meanings. However, the digital setting also allows hybrid identities—users can belong to multiple brand communities simultaneously, creating layered loyalties. Recognizing this complexity helps explain fluid patterns of affiliation and disaffiliation in digital markets (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

### 5.1.5 Contribution to Digital Belonging

From a psychological standpoint, SOVBC introduces belonging as a measurable construction in digital consumption. This opens avenues for interdisciplinary collaboration between consumer psychology and media studies. It complements effective-science perspectives that view connection and recognition as human needs central to well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The construction therefore holds potential for explaining not only brand loyalty but also broader phenomena such as digital well-being and identity construction.

## 5.2 Managerial Implications

While the SOVBC framework is theoretical, its insights have concrete implications for marketing practice. In an era where digital communities often determine brand visibility, managers must design strategies that nurture belonging rather than simply attract traffic. While many engagement practices are already familiar to practitioners, SOVBC contributes by explaining why certain practices succeed—specifically when they cultivate psychological belonging rather than surface-level interaction.

### 5.2.1 Designing for Belonging

Managers should treat online brand communities as psychological spaces rather than content repositories. Design features that strengthen perceived membership—such as user recognition, personalization, and symbolic markers (badges, tiers)—can reinforce identification (Blanchard, 2008). Equally important is establishing a tone of mutual respect and authenticity in communication, since belonging deteriorates when members feel manipulated (Iglesias et al., 2019).

### 5.2.2 Managing Authenticity and Transparency

Authenticity emerged as a crucial antecedent of SOVBC. Brands should communicate transparently about their values, governance, and partnerships. Communities that allow user feedback and incorporate co-creation tend to be perceived as more authentic (Hollebeek & Belk, 2024). Conversely, over-moderation or excessive commercial messaging reduces trust. The managerial challenge lies in maintaining coherence between brand identity and community identity.

### 5.2.3 Fostering Trust through Community

Consistent and fair governance mechanisms—clear rules, visible moderation, and equitable treatment—build trust and reduce perceived risk. Brands that empower community leaders or ambassadors to manage peer interactions benefit from decentralized trust networks (Li, 2025). Trust should be evaluated not only at the brand–consumer level but also among members, as peer-to-peer trust amplifies loyalty through social proof.

### 5.2.4 Balancing Social and Brand Identity

An important managerial insight from SOVBC is the need to balance social identity (connections among members) and brand identity (connection to the organization). Over-emphasis on peer interaction without brand anchoring may lead to off-topic drift, while excessive brand control suppresses natural community energy. The optimal equilibrium encourages members to express themselves while keeping brand meaning as the unifying narrative (Casaló et al., 2008).

### 5.2.5 Measuring SOVBC in Practice

Marketers can operate SOVBC using behavioral and attitudinal indicators. Quantitative metrics might include comment reciprocity, repeat participation, and longevity of membership; qualitative indicators include expressions of pride, moral responsibility, and advocacy in user content (Schau et al., 2009). Monitoring these variables allows practitioners to evaluate psychological community health, complementing traditional performance metrics like click-through rates or conversions.

### 5.2.6 Managing Cross-Platform Brand Communities

Consumers inhabit multiple digital spaces simultaneously (Instagram, Discord, brand apps). Managers must create interoperable belonging—consistent narratives

and recognition mechanisms that travel across platforms. This approach prevents fragmentation and reinforces continuity in brand identity (Nguyen et al., 2023). A unified cross-platform community strategy can sustain SOVBC even when members switch to technological environments.

### 5.2.7 Leveraging Influencers

Influencers act as cultural mediators between the brand and its audience. When selected for value congruence and authenticity, they enhance perceived belonging by humanizing the brand. However, instrumental or overly commercial collaborations can undermine SOVBC by eroding perceived genuineness (Hollebeek & Belk, 2024). Managers should therefore prioritize long-term partnerships with community-oriented influencers rather than short-term promotional endorsements.

### 5.2.8 Encouraging Co-creation

Empowering members to contribute ideas, moderate discussions, or design sub-communities fosters ownership and engagement (Habibi et al., 2016). Such participatory practices activate the “influence” and “shared emotional connection” dimensions of community. When consumers perceive themselves as co-creators of brand meaning, loyalty shifts from passive preference to active stewardship.

### 5.2.9 Monitoring and Ethical Considerations

Brands that leverage community data must adhere to ethical principles of transparency and consent. Exploiting user information without disclosure violates trust and undermines belonging. Ethical stewardship strengthens SOVBC by aligning brand actions with community values (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Marketers should also consider the psychological well-being of members, ensuring that engagement mechanisms do not foster dependency or social pressure.

## 5.3 Strategic Summary

The managerial implications of SOVBC can be summarized along three strategic pillars as shown in table 1 below:

| Pillar              | Objective   | Key Actions  |
|---------------------|---|--|
| <b>Belonging</b>    | Foster identification and emotional safety            | Recognize members; personalize interactions; encourage rituals             |
| <b>Authenticity</b> | Maintain coherence between brand and community values | Promote transparency; facilitate co-creation; avoid over commercialization |
| <b>Trust</b>        | Strengthen relational security                        | Implement fair moderation; empower community leaders; ensure data ethics   |

Table 1. Summary of the three strategic pillars of the managerial implications of SOVBC

Together, these pillars offer a framework for cultivating enduring loyalty through psychological belonging rather than transactional incentives.

## 5.4 Contribution to Practice and Policy

SOVBC’s implications extend beyond marketing strategy to broader domains of organizational communication and digital policy. For non-profit organizations, educational institutions, and public campaigns, understanding virtual belonging can enhance participation and collective identity. In governmental or civic contexts, applying SOVBC principles may strengthen trust and engagement within digital citizen communities (Amoah, 2022). Future policy frameworks for digital governance could incorporate measures of community authenticity and transparency to safeguard psychological well-being.

## 5.5 Summary

The SOVBC framework reconceptualizes digital marketing not as a competition for attention but as the cultivation of psychological belonging. For scholars, it provides a theoretical anchor linking engagement, trust, and loyalty through the mechanism of community identification. For practitioners, it offers a roadmap for designing brand ecosystems that are socially cohesive, ethically governed, and emotionally resonant. As digital spaces evolve toward immersive and AI-mediated environments, SOVBC provides a durable theoretical foundation for understanding loyalty in a hyperconnected world.

## 6. Future Research and Conclusion

### 6.1 Future Research Directions

Because the present work is conceptual, subsequent scholarship must empirically examine, refine, and validate the Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC) framework. The following research directions are proposed.

#### 6.1.1 Scale Development

Future researchers should operationalize SOVBC by constructing a multi-item measurement scale grounded in the four core dimensions identified earlier—membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Item generation may adapt established SOC and SOBC scales (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Carlson et al., 2008) while incorporating indicators specific to digital contexts such as perceived algorithmic visibility, platform reciprocity, and symbolic recognition. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (EFA/CFA) can assess dimensionality, followed by structural-equation modeling (SEM) to test nomological validity with related constructs (trust, authenticity, engagement). Researchers should also anticipate potential measurement challenges, particularly multicollinearity among SOVBC dimensions due to

their psychological interdependence. Variance inflation diagnostics and higher-order factor modeling may be required to ensure distinctiveness construct while preserving theoretical coherence.

### 6.1.2 Cross-Cultural and Cross-Platform Validation

Because belonging is culturally and contextually contingent, future studies should compare SOVBC across collectivist and individualist cultures and across different platform ecologies (e.g., brand-managed forums vs. social-media groups). Such research will clarify whether cognitive, affective, and normative components hold universal salience or vary by socio-cultural orientation (Amoah, 2022). Multi-group SEM and latent-means analysis could test structural invariance across cultural samples.

### 6.1.3 Longitudinal and Experimental Designs

Loyalty and belonging evolve over time; therefore, longitudinal panel studies can trace how SOVBC develops through exposure, interaction, and trust formation. Controlled experiments might manipulate authenticity cues or moderation styles to examine their causal impact on belonging. Temporal modeling can reveal whether community participation precedes SOVBC or vice versa, addressing potential reciprocal causality.

### 6.1.4 Moderators and Boundary Conditions

Future studies should explore moderators that may strengthen or weaken the SOVBC → loyalty relationship. Potential moderators include brand authenticity, individual self-construal, product involvement, and AI-mediated interaction quality (Hollebeek & Belk, 2024). Boundary conditions such as community size, anonymity, and platform design may also shape the psychological experience of belonging.

### 6.1.5 Integration with Emerging Technologies

With the rise of AI agents, immersive environments, and metaverse experiences, new research should examine whether users can experience belonging toward non-human brand representatives. Does interaction with AI chatbots or virtual influencers evoke comparable SOVBC effects? Methodologies integrating biometric measures or digital ethnography could illuminate the emotional dynamics of AI-mediated communities (Li, 2025).

### 6.1.6 Managerial and Policy Applications

Empirical work should translate SOVBC into actionable metrics for organizations. Case studies of brand-led or user-led communities (e.g., open-source projects, fandom networks, corporate CSR platforms) can evaluate how governance mechanisms influence trust and authenticity. Researchers might also assess SOVBC's relevance for public communication, including health,

education, and civic participation (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Findings could inform ethical guidelines for data transparency and digital-well-being policies.

## 6.2 Conclusion

This paper developed a conceptual framework of Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC) to explain how psychological belonging transforms digital participation into brand loyalty. Drawing upon foundational theories of community psychology (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), the model positions SOVBC as the missing link between behavioral engagement and enduring commitment.

The framework integrates the emotional depth of Sense of Community and the symbolic focus of Sense of Brand Community within today's virtual ecosystems. It conceptualizes loyalty as an emergent, socially constructed state of belonging that evolves through interaction quality, authenticity, and trust. The model's dual-path logic—cognitive identification and affective attachment—offers a nuanced explanation of why digital communities succeed or fail in sustaining loyalty.

For scholars, SOVBC advances theory by unifying fragmented literature into a cohesive psychological paradigm for digital branding. It invites interdisciplinary collaboration between marketing, communication, and psychology to measure and validate digital belonging empirically. For practitioners, it emphasizes that cultivating community is not about amplifying reach but about designing for belonging—embedding authenticity, transparency, and mutual recognition into every interaction. As digital platforms move toward immersive, AI-assisted environments, belonging will remain the central currency of human connection. By understanding and nurturing SOVBC, organizations can build relationships that endure beyond algorithms and interfaces—anchored instead in the enduring human need to belong.

## Author's Contribution

The author conceived, designed, and wrote the paper in full. He developed the conceptual framework, reviewed the relevant literature, and integrated theoretical perspectives to propose the Sense of Virtual Brand Community (SOVBC) model. All sections of the manuscript, including abstract, discussion, and references, were prepared solely by the author.

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