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FOR MOD'S SAKE! THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED BRAND IMAGE, BRAND IDENTIFICATION, AND ONLINE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTS IN BUILDING BRAND LOVE

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Abstract

Manuscript type: *Research Article*

Research Aims: *This research aims to analyze online community environments, perceived brand image, brand identification, and their effect to brand love in the context of video game modification online communities.*

Design/methodology/approach: *This is quantitative research with three independent variables (Perceived Brand Image, Brand Identification, Online Community Environments) and one dependent variable (Brand Love). One hundred respondents are selected from Steam Workshop. Multiple regression is used to analyze the conceptual framework.*

Research Findings: *The result shows that all three independent variables (Perceived Brand Image, Brand Identification, and Online Community Environments) are statistically significant in influencing brand love.*

Theoretical Contribution/Originality: *Factors influencing brand love are still rigorously studied, and this research contributes to identifying new antecedents of brand love.*

Practitioner/Policy Implication: *By analyzing brand love and its antecedents, the video game industry can understand how to develop brand love, especially in a video game modification online community where mods can add value to a video game.*

Research limitation/Implications: *Relatively low number of respondents, preventing broader generalization. No differentiation among the different genres of a video game, where some video games provide different experiences, flexibility, and role-play and, thus, more opportunity to modify.*

Keywords: Brand Community, Brand Identification, Brand Image, Brand Love, Online Community Environment.

INTRODUCTION

The internet is growing at an unprecedented rate, changing not only our life but also companies and corporations to adapt to using it to market and communicate their products. The internet provides new means and challenges for companies to nurture, including how to interact, one-way and two-way, with their customers. However, not only internet is a medium for companies to communicate with their customers but also a place for customers to interact with each other and, from a business perspective, participate in the development and innovation of companies' products (Balaji & Roy, 2017; Berrada, 2017; Rowley et al., 2007). Customers who interact with each other can often form a brand community.

Several studies on brand communities focused a lot on investigating behaviors among community members, for instance, brand relationship and brand identity in the motorsport community (Felix, 2012) and the phenomenon of Coca-Cola's Spanish virtual community (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). The communities, which develop in society, are dominated by one product and other types of products, such as cars, computers, film series, motorbikes, and so forth.

The community in the video game industry, in particular, has been rapidly growing along with internet development. Video game communities are generally online communities where the members are not in the exact physical location but connect (Faraj et al., 2011; Plant, 2004). Players can participate in developing video game content in the video game industry. They act as fourth-party developers, in which the video game developer does not pay them, but they can develop mods, increasing the value of the video games they modify (Bostan & Kaplancali, 2010; Dey et al., 2016; Small, 2018).

There are many websites dedicated to video game modification. Among the largest are Steam Workshop, Mod DB, and Nexus Mod. However, only a few users can modify video games since making mods requires the person who modifies (modders) to possess specific skills. In Nexus Mod alone, there are 131.259 modders, with 321.606 mods uploaded to that website. The number of downloads on Nexus Mod is a staggering 4.923.109.928, with 2.178.006.808 unique downloads (*NexusMods Statistics*, 2020). That means the ratio between the number of modders and individual downloads is 0,006%. Using the number of mods for

unique downloads increases this value to 0,01%. The popularity of mods also plays a vital role in the video games industry. For example, one of the most influential first-person shooters game in history, Counter-Strike, released in 2000, is a mod for Half-Life, a video game released by Valve in 1998 (Wirtz, 2021). Thus, mods are often a deciding factor in the popularity or longevity of certain video games. And with a tiny pool of human resources in the world of modding, maintaining a healthy modding community becomes a real challenge.

Like any other brand communities, these video game modification communities are built from shared consciousness of mind and their love for the respective video game (Jansz & Theodorsen, 2009). This love is often called brand love in marketing (Batra et al., 2012). While brand love is a relatively new concept in marketing, there has been a list of studies on this particular matter. Among the first studies on brand love exploring the relationship between an object and consumer, triangular love theory is adapted to interpersonal relationships (Shimp & Madden, 1988). The first brand love-related empirical research explores materialism and its effect on personal well-being (Ahuvia & Wong, 1995). In the next

following years, brand love is starting to gain traction, with a study that includes love as a critical element in a consumer-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998), exploration of antecedents of brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), WOM and its effect on building strong brand love (Rageh Ismail & Spinelli, 2012), a study of anthropomorphism and brand love (Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014), study about brand love in a brand community (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010), and research about the meaning of brand love and its effect on loyalty (Mahlke et al., 2020).

While it looks like there is ample research on brand love, antecedents of brand love are still rigorously studied. Research in the brand community context still needs to be conducted, especially in video game modding communities. When video game developers can maintain modders in their community, they become assets for the company. A dedicated modder can constantly contribute positively to developers and the related community (Arakji & Lang, 2007; Poor, 2014). In the end, the developers and the video game user base are beneficial. The developers can extend the expired date of video games through mods, while the userbase can benefit from various mods developed by the

modders. Brand identification and brand image (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Hendrasto, 2017; Rageh Ismail & Spinelli, 2012) are most proven to be reliable antecedents to brand love. Studies in the context of brand communities find that brand love is affected by the community environment (Hendrasto & Astuti, 2015; Sultan et al., 2003). Therefore, this research aims to explore brand love in an online community; we are interested in studying the effect of the online community environment, perceived brand image, and identification in building brand love.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The online community environment is a characteristic within and around the online community, which can affect members' assessment of their community (Small, 2018). In the video games category, the dominant characteristics include community features, navigation and presentation, absence of errors, and advice. Community members or modders will trust and love their community if the community features can facilitate interactions among the members. This interaction encourages the exchange of information and knowledge sharing. It also creates a comfortable and supportive environment for the members (Sultan et al.,

2003). Community members or modders, who assess their communities as a relaxed and supportive environment, tend to trust and love the community more (Belanger et al., 2002; Hendrasto & Astuti, 2015; Hoffman & Novak, 1996).

Brand image is how a brand differentiates itself from similar brands (Aaker, 1996, 2004, 2014). Brand image is also associated with brand association (Koubaa, 2008). When a customer perceives a brand, and this perception fits with the information received by the customer, this brand is then categorised in the customer's mind; this trigger affectionate feelings from within the customer's self and the brand itself (Hendrasto, 2017; Rageh Ismail & Spinelli, 2012). Brand identification refers to how fit an image of a particular brand with the image of oneself. The more appropriate brand identification, the warmer the relationship between the brand and customer (Kressmann et al., 2006). When a customer perceives a brand as an extension of himself, it will trigger affectionate feelings toward that brand, developing brand love (Ahuvia, 2005, 2015; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). In our research, customer refers to modders, those who develop modifications (mods) of a particular video game.

And thus, we propose four hypotheses:

H1: Perceived brand image has significant effects on brand love

H2: Brand identification has significant effects on brand love

H3: Online community environments have significant effects on brand love

H4: Perceived brand image, brand identification, and online community environments significantly and simultaneously affect brand love.

Based on the four hypotheses above, a conceptual framework is developed, as seen in Figure 1 below:

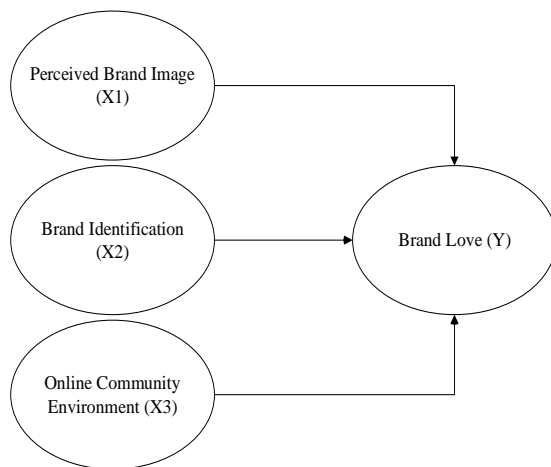


Figure 1. Research Model

RESEARCH METHOD

This is quantitative research with three independent variables and one dependent variable. In this study, perceived brand image

is defined as the image of a video game title perceived by its modders. The perceived brand image was measured using five indicators (Hendrasto, 2017; Severi & Ling, 2013):

1. This video game is different from others
2. I trust the developer and publisher of this video game
3. I am familiar with this video game
4. I have many reasons to pick this particular video game as opposed to others
5. This video game has unique characteristics

Brand identification in this study is defined as the fit of association between a video game title and the self-image of modders. Brand identification was measured using five indicators (Hendrasto, 2017; So et al., 2013):

1. I am offended when others negatively criticize this video game
2. I am interested in knowing what others think about this particular video game
3. When I am talking about this video game, I refer to it as "we/us" rather than "it/they"
4. The success of this video game is my success, too
5. When people praise this video game, it feels like I am, too, being praised

The online community environment is

defined as characteristics within the online community that can affect members' assessment of their community. This variable was measured through the perception or evaluation of members of the community's environmental characteristics, consisting of community features, absence of errors, navigation, and presentation, as well as advice (Lin & Lee, 2012; Sultan et al., 2003). To measure the perception of community members toward the online community environment, this study adopted four indicators below (Hendrasto & Astuti, 2015; Sultan et al., 2003):

1. As a modder, I find it easy to interact with other modders who frequently access Steam Workshop.
2. All features and means of Steam Workshop can be accessed easily without requiring too much personal information
3. Steam Workshop is easy to navigate.
4. Steam Workshop and its members provide information that supports me as a modder in modifying video game

Brand love in this study is defined as a desire and emotional feelings that arise from satisfied feelings within the modders of a particular video game. Brand love in this study adopted five indicators (Bagozzi et al., 2017; Rageh Ismail & Spinelli, 2012):

1. This video game is cool

2. Playing this video game entertains me
3. I love this video game
4. I have an emotional attachment to this video game
5. Playing this video game is a fun thing to do

The population of this study was modders registered at Steam Workshop, an online community for video game modification. For the sample in multiple regression analysis, the minimum ratio between samples and independent variables is 5:1, with a recommended ratio between 15 to 20 samples for each independent variable (Jr et al., 2018). Since this study utilizes three independent variables, the recommended sample is between 60 to 80 respondents. For this study, we decided to deploy our questionnaire to 100 respondents. The sample criteria were that their name was listed in the mod creator list. Data was collected using an online questionnaire made in Google Form and distributed by direct message, a feature in Steam Workshop. All states in the questionnaire were scored on 5 points Likert Scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Respondents were selected with the purposive sampling method. Whereas the analysis was conducted with multiple regression analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data was collected using an online questionnaire to 100 respondents. Based on the preliminary question in the questionnaire, it was known that 97% of the respondents were male, while the rest was female. This showed that males are still the dominant target market for video game companies in the world of modding. Since multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the data, the first step was to test the instrument by validity and reliability tests. Table 1 below shows the result of the Perceived Brand Image (X1) validity test using Pearson's r Product Moment value.

Table 1. Perceived Brand Image (X1)
Validity Test

	X1.1	X1.2	X1.3	X1.4	X1.5
Pearson Correlation	.863**	.828**	.867**	-.008	-.005
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.937	.962
N	100	100	100	100	100

As seen from Table 1, our validity test shows that 2 out of 5 indicators used to measure perceived brand image were not valid, which are X1.4 and X1.5 since the sig. value > 0.05. Therefore, X1.4 and X1.5 were excluded from further analysis.

Table 2 below shows the result of the Brand Identification (X2) validity test using Pearson's r Product Moment value:

Table 2. Brand Identification (X2) Validity
Test

	X2.1	X2.2	X2.3	X2.4	X2.5
Pearson Correlation	.882*	.872*	.847*	-.004	-.035
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.969	.733
N	100	100	100	100	100

As seen in Table 2, X2.4 and X2.5 were tested as invalid since the sig. value > 0,05. And thus, these two indicators were excluded from further analysis. Table 3 below shows the result of the Online Community Environment (X3) validity test:

Table 3: Online Community Environment
(X3) Validity Test

	X3.1	X3.2	X3.3	X3.4
Pearson Correlation	.809**	.857**	.857**	.776**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	100	100	100	100

From Table 3, all four indicators used in this research were tested valid, so no indicators were excluded from further analysis. And finally, Table 4 below shows the fourth validity test result for Brand Love (Y):

Table 4. Brand Love (Y) Validity Test

	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Pearson	.782*	.635	.785	.803	.200
Correlation	*	**	**	**	*
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.046
N	100	100	100	100	100

From Table 4, all five indicators were tested valid, and none were excluded from further analysis. The next step is reliability analysis. Table 5 below shows the compilation of Cronbach's Alpha from the X1, X2, and X3 reliability tests:

Table 5. X1, X2, and X3 Reliability Test

	X1	X2	X3
Cronbach's Alpha	0.810	0.834	0.843
N of Items	3	3	4

Table 5 proved that all independent variables were reliable, with Cronbach's Alpha value of more than 0.7. for the final instrument analysis, Table 6 below shows the result of the Brand Love (Y) reliability test.

Table 6. Brand Love (Y) Reliability Test

	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Y1	.298		
Y2	.316		
Y3	.298	.382	5
Y4	.283		
Y5	.734		

From Table 6, the initial Cronbach's Alpha value of Brand Love was 0.382, far below the recommended value of 0.7. However, upon closer examination, it was Y5 that caused trouble for the reliability test; when Y5 was excluded from the reliability test, Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.734, which is more than 0.7. And thus, indicator Y5 was no longer included in further analysis.

Our instrument test showed that from all four variables. The first and second independent variables, Perceived Brand Image (X1) and Brand Identification (X2), must exclude two out of five indicators due to invalidity. The third independent variable, Online Community Environment (X3), retained all of its indicators. And finally, the dependent variable, Brand Love (Y), kept four out of five indicators. Since only four indicators were excluded from 19 indicators, we decided to carry on our analysis with 15 indicators from all variables included.

The next step of our analysis is the normality test, multicollinearity test, and heteroscedasticity test. The summary of the normality test and multicollinearity test results can be seen in Table 7 and Table 8 below:

Table 7. Normality Test

		Unstandardized Residual
N		100
Normal Parameters ^b	Mean	.0000000
	Std. Deviation	.56162622
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.100
	Positive	.100
	Negative	-.051
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.004
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.266

Table 8. Multicollinearity Test

Model	Collinearity Statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)		
Perceived Brand Image (X1)	.510	1.961
Brand Identification (X2)	.528	1.893
Online Community Environment (X3)	.945	1.059

Table 7 shows that our data were distributed normally as the sig. value 0.266 more than the Alpha value of 0.05. Table 8 shows that among our independent variables, there was no correlation since all the Tolerance values were more than 0.1 and VIF less than 10.

Next, we conducted a heteroscedasticity test by using the Glejser test; the result can be seen in Table 9 below:

Table 9. Glejser Test

Model	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	1.041	.300
Perceived Brand Image (X1)	1.163	.248
Brand Identification (X2)	-.793	.430
Online Community Environment (X3)	-.208	.836

All sig. value was observed to be more than the alpha value of 0.05. In this case, it followed the rule of the heteroscedasticity test. Since all classical assumption test was proven to be good, we progressed to move to multiple analysis regression (Jr et al., 2018). For our main hypotheses test, we utilized a t-test and F-test. The summary of the test can be seen in Table 10 below:

Table 10. Summary of t-test and F-test

Model	t	Sig.
1 (Constant)	.086	.932
Perceived Brand Image (X1)	2.376	.019
Brand Identification (X2)	3.091	.003
Online Community Environment (X3)	2.290	.024

Environment (X3)			
	Model	F	Sig.
1	Regression	19.096	.000 ^b
	Residual		
	Total		
			Std. The error in the Estimate
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	
.611 ^a	.374	.354	.57033

Using the information presented in Table 10, we will now analyze the four hypotheses formulated earlier. The first hypothesis states that perceived brand image significantly affects brand love, the sig. value of the t-test showed 0,019, which is less than the alpha value of 0,05. Therefore, it can be concluded that the first hypothesis is accepted. The respondent felt that the video game they play is unique and has specific characteristics that differentiate them from other video games. They also thought that they had more than enough reason to choose this particular video game and trust the publisher which owns this video game, and they also felt that the video game they played had become part of their life. In other words, when consumers associate themselves with a particular brand, it will trigger affectionate feelings and make them love the brand more (Hendrasto, 2017; Rageh Ismail & Spinelli, 2012).

The second hypothesis stated that brand identification has significant effects on brand love. The sig. value of the t-test showed 0,003, which is less than the alpha value of 0,05. And thus, the second hypothesis is accepted. This result indicated that modders felt that the video game they played was an extension of themselves. They also felt that when other people praised that video game, they would feel the praise was directed to them. Our respondents also felt happy if the video game they played and mod became a hit since they contributed to that success (Hendrasto, 2017). Brand identification is how congruent a brand and a customer are. When the customer feels that a particular brand is an extension of oneself, this will trigger emotional feelings and make them love the brand (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Kressmann et al., 2006).

The third hypothesis was that online community environments significantly affect brand love. The sig. value of the t-test showed 0,024, which is less than the alpha value of 0,05. Therefore, it can be concluded that the third hypothesis is accepted. This showed that excellent online communities could trigger affection toward a brand (Lin & Lee, 2012; Sultan et al., 2003). When respondents perceived an excellent online community

environment, they would have a strong emotional bonding with the community. Community sites that offered attractive user interfaces, ease of access, interaction with each other, and lots of helpful information made them enjoy the community more and, thus, love the video game more (Hendrasto & Astuti, 2015).

The fourth hypothesis was that perceived brand image, brand identification, and online community environments significantly and simultaneously affect brand love. The sig. value of the F-test showed 0,000, which is less than the alpha value of 0,05. And thus, the fourth hypothesis is accepted. This result proved that the online community environment, perceived brand image, and brand identification are important antecedents in building brand love. A love affair between a brand and its customer can be triggered by nurturing and ensuring that the perceived brand image is congruent with the intended brand image formulated by the company (Mahlke et al., 2020). Customers who perceive a brand as representing themselves will love it more.

While this research was conducted with a strict research methodology to the best of the researcher's ability, we know that some

limitations are unavoidable. The first limitation of this research is the relatively low number of samples, preventing broader generalization of the result. The second limitation of this study is that we needed to differentiate the video game genre. Some video game provides greater flexibility and role-plays to its user than other video game. While mods are present in all kinds of video game genres, it would be interesting to explore if different video game genres yielded the same result. Other factors other than variables examined in this study can also be included in future research to enrich our knowledge about the video game modification community.

CONCLUSION

All antecedents hypothesized in this study show that they are essential factors in building brand love. The theoretical implication of this study is that a positive and helpful online community will provide information and trigger good feelings within modders. A congruent brand image and brand identification also help amplify brand love through self-association with certain video games. When they feel that they "clicked" with a video game, they will play and mod the game to a certain extent (Postigo, 2007; Scacchi, 2010). This is the manifestation of brand love in video game modification.

Video game companies must ensure they gain enough support from modders since well-developed mods can breathe new life into a video game (Poor, 2014). And it is common for users to purchase a video game interested in certain mods instead of the video game itself. And thus, systematic efforts must be made to ensure modders' happiness and love toward the brand. This study proves that a well-nurtured online community is an essential step for modders to keep modding. And for policymakers in the video games industry, the implication is to make sure that every video game developed is uniquely characterised, not only to reuse or recycle past features. Secondly, the gaming community must be well managed. For instance, appointing a proper moderator and company representative goes a long way to ensure a hospitable environment in the gaming community. Thus, users will be more likely to put effort into making modifications. Other ways to appreciate modders, for instance, by organizing mods competitions with some categories (most popular mods, most innovative mods, etc.), where the winner will get appreciation in the form of

rewards, could be implemented. By organizing competitions and providing tips, video game companies can retain community enthusiasm for modifying video games.

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