



Brand Community Identification and Customer Participation in Enhancing Brand Advocacy through Customer-Brand Engagement among Local Brand Consumers

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Abstract. The rapid expansion of digital platforms has transformed how local brands and technology-enabled small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) establish relationships with consumers, making digital brand communities increasingly important for fostering participation, engagement, and advocacy. This study examines the effects of brand community identification and customer participation on brand advocacy through the mediating role of customer-brand engagement. A quantitative explanatory design was employed using data from 250 consumers who had purchased local-brand products and interacted with brands through social media, marketplaces, social commerce, or digital brand communities. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results demonstrate that brand community identification and customer participation positively influence customer-brand engagement, while customer-brand engagement has a significant positive effect on brand advocacy. Both identification and participation also directly influence advocacy, and customer-brand engagement partially mediates these relationships. Customer participation demonstrates a particularly important role in strengthening engagement and subsequent advocacy. These findings extend digital marketing and consumer behavior research by explaining how community-based interactions generate advocacy and provide practical guidance for local brands and SMEs seeking to shift from transaction-oriented digital marketing toward engagement-oriented community strategies.

Keywords: Brand Advocacy; Brand Community Identification; Customer-Brand Engagement; Customer Participation; Digital Brand Community.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has changed the way small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and local brands build relationships with consumers. The development of e-commerce, social commerce, and social media enables businesses not only to expand their markets but also to create more intensive, personal, and participatory interactions with customers. Sharabati et al. (2024) emphasize that digital marketing contributes to improving SME performance by strengthening market access, customer communication, and promotional effectiveness. In the Indonesian context, Arista et al. (2023) show that the adoption of social commerce by SMEs is an important part of the business adaptation process to the digital environment. These changes have also shifted the position of consumers from recipients of information to active actors who provide reviews, comments, recommendations, and brand-related content. Galib et al. (2023) find that user-generated content can strengthen customer engagement on social commerce platforms. Therefore, the ability of local brands to build participatory digital communities has become increasingly important for strengthening customer relationships while improving the competitiveness of SMEs in the digital economy.

The development of the literature indicates that digital brand communities are an important mechanism for building consumer engagement and loyalty. Confente & Kucharska, (2021) explain that brand community identification can increase consumers' psychological bonds because individuals who feel that they are part of a community tend to demonstrate stronger relationships with the brand. Furthermore, Bahri-Ammari et al. (2021) show that identification within virtual communities is associated with increased brand engagement, while Wang et al. (2023) emphasize that value co-creation experiences in online communities can sustain consumer engagement. In terms of participation, activities such as reviews, discussions, feedback, and user-generated content have also become increasingly important forms of engagement in digital marketing (Schröder et al., 2025). However, previous studies have tended to examine community identification, customer participation, engagement, or advocacy separately. Lazarte et al. (2025) show that research on virtual brand communities continues to develop, but the integration of brand community identification and customer participation as determinants of brand advocacy through customer-brand engagement, particularly among consumers of local brands and digitized SMEs, has still received limited empirical examination.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze the effects of brand community identification and customer participation on brand advocacy through customer-brand engagement among consumers of local brands who interact through digital platforms. Gupta et al. (2023) show that online brand communities can strengthen customer engagement and loyalty, while Huang et al. (2022) emphasize that community interaction characteristics influence consumer engagement on social media. Within this framework, this study addresses several main questions: whether consumers' identification with brand communities increases customer-brand engagement; whether customer participation in digital activities strengthens such engagement; whether customer-brand engagement drives brand advocacy; and whether customer-brand engagement mediates the relationships between community identification and customer participation and brand advocacy. These questions are important because advocacy represents a form of consumer behavior that has strategic value in digital marketing. Lara et al. (2022) show that consumer engagement can serve as a pathway toward brand advocacy, while Aljarah et al. (2024) demonstrate that customer engagement plays an important role in connecting digital content with online advocacy behavior.

This study argues that the success of SME digital transformation cannot be measured solely by the use of digital platforms or increased transactions, but also by the ability of brands to build relationships that encourage consumers to become active participants and voluntary advocates. Lee & Hsieh, (2022) show that engagement in social media-based brand communities can strengthen consumer relationships with brands, while Quaye et al. (2022) emphasize that the quality of customer relationships plays an important role in the formation of advocacy and loyalty. Based on this perspective, customer-brand engagement is positioned as a mechanism that translates a sense of belonging to the community and digital participation into recommendations, support, and positive communication about the brand. Theoretically, this study contributes to the digital marketing and consumer behavior literature by integrating brand community identification, customer participation, customer-brand engagement, and brand advocacy into a single empirical model focusing on local brands. Practically, the findings are expected to help SMEs develop community-based marketing strategies that support value creation, loyalty, and organic advocacy, in line with the needs of digital transformation and the improvement of business competitiveness in the digital economy (Tran et al., 2024).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Identity Theory and Digital Brand Communities

Social Identity Theory provides a strong foundation for explaining how consumers develop psychological connections with digital brand communities. The theory suggests that individuals partly define themselves through membership in social groups, including communities formed around brands. In digital environments, this identification emerges when consumers perceive shared values, interests, and meanings between themselves, the brand, and other community members. Farhat et al. (2021) show that social identity mechanisms are closely related to digital engagement, while Ammari et al. (2021) emphasize the role of identification in strengthening consumer involvement within virtual brand communities. Ha (2023) further demonstrates that brand and community identification influence participation in online communities. More recent evidence from Huertas et al. (2025) indicates that social identity can also encourage electronic word-of-mouth intentions. Therefore, digital brand communities should be viewed not merely as promotional channels, but as relational spaces where consumers develop belonging, attachment, and shared identity that can strengthen engagement and advocacy toward local brands.

Brand Community Identification and Customer-Brand Engagement

Brand community identification reflects the degree to which consumers perceive a sense of belonging, psychological attachment, and self-definition through their membership in a brand community. In digital contexts, identification is strengthened through shared experiences, interpersonal relationships, and repeated interaction with the brand and other community members. Confente & Kucharska, (2021) show that strong community identification contributes to more favorable consumer-brand relationships and loyalty. Similarly, Ammari et al. (2021) find that identification within virtual communities is positively associated with brand engagement. Ha (2023) further demonstrates that both brand identification and community identification encourage greater participation in online brand activities. Gupta et al. (2023) confirm that online brand communities can strengthen customer engagement and loyalty through relational interaction. These findings suggest that consumers who perceive a brand community as part of their social identity are more willing to invest cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources in brand-related activities. Therefore, this study proposes H1: Brand community identification positively influences customer-brand engagement.

Customer Participation in Digital Platforms

Customer participation refers to consumers' active involvement in brand-related activities such as reviews, comments, feedback, online discussions, content sharing, and other forms of user-generated content. Digital platforms have expanded opportunities for such participation by enabling continuous interaction between brands, consumers, and community members. Shen (2023) explains that social media creates interactive environments where customers become active contributors rather than passive recipients of marketing communication. Mousavi & Roper, (2023) similarly show that participation within online brand communities can strengthen consumer-brand relationships through repeated interaction. From a value co-creation perspective, customer participation allows consumers to contribute knowledge, ideas, experiences, and content that improve both brand and community outcomes. Bouchriha et al. (2024) find that co-creation behavior can strengthen satisfaction and brand image, while Paruthi et al. (2023) demonstrate that active participation in online communities contributes to positive brand-related outcomes. Accordingly, this study proposes H2: Customer participation positively influences customer-brand engagement.

Customer-Brand Engagement

Customer-brand engagement refers to consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in their interactions with a brand. Cognitively, engagement reflects attention and mental absorption; emotionally, it represents enthusiasm, attachment, and affective connection; behaviorally, it is expressed through activities such as commenting, sharing, recommending, or creating brand-related content. Ma et al. (2022) demonstrate these multidimensional engagement patterns in social media brand pages, while Kumar (2021) highlights the psychological mechanisms that strengthen engagement within brand communities. Farhat et al. (2021) broaden this view by emphasizing holistic digital engagement across multiple online touchpoints. Engagement also functions as a relational mechanism that connects digital interaction with broader behavioral outcomes. Gupta et al. (2023) show that online customer engagement contributes to brand loyalty, and Paruthi et al. (2023) indicate that engagement can lead to positive recommendations. Therefore, highly engaged consumers are more likely to actively support and promote brands. Accordingly, this study proposes H3: Customer-brand engagement positively influences brand advocacy.

Brand Advocacy in the Digital Environment

Brand advocacy refers to consumers' voluntary willingness to recommend, support, defend, and communicate positively about a brand without direct transactional incentives. In digital environments, advocacy commonly appears through positive electronic word-of-mouth, social media recommendations, favorable reviews, and brand defense. Sun et al. (2021) show that electronic word-of-mouth can influence consumer perceptions and brand-related outcomes, while Huang et al. (2023) demonstrate that social media relationships can encourage advocacy behavior. Le et al. (2024) further emphasize the role of trust in strengthening positive electronic word-of-mouth, and Elalfy et al. (2025) show that favorable brand experiences can sustain positive recommendations through emotional attachment. Advocacy may also emerge directly from community identification and active participation because consumers who feel connected to a community are more willing to publicly support the brand. Huertas et al. (2025) reinforce this relationship through evidence linking community identification with e-WOM intention. Thus, this study proposes H4: Brand community identification positively influences brand advocacy and H5: Customer participation positively influences brand advocacy.

Mediating Role of Customer-Brand Engagement

Customer-brand engagement is positioned as a mediating mechanism because identification and participation may not automatically generate advocacy unless consumers develop a meaningful relationship with the brand. Community identification creates

psychological belonging, while customer participation provides opportunities for active interaction; engagement transforms both processes into sustained cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement. Ammari et al. (2021) show that community identification is closely associated with engagement in virtual brand communities, while Kumar (2021) explains how psychological mechanisms within communities deepen customer-brand relationships. Paruthi et al. (2023) demonstrate that stronger engagement can lead to positive recommendations and brand love, illustrating how interaction is converted into advocacy-oriented outcomes. Tjahjaningsih et al. (2025) further show that digital engagement attitudes contribute to brand advocacy. These findings support the role of engagement as a bridge between antecedent community behaviors and advocacy. Therefore, this study proposes H6: Customer-brand engagement mediates the relationship between brand community identification and brand advocacy, and H7: Customer-brand engagement mediates the relationship between customer participation and brand advocacy.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

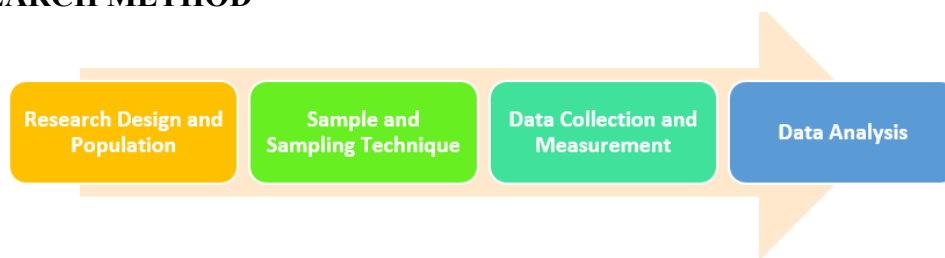


Figure 1. The structure of the research flow diagram.

Research Design and Population

This study adopts a quantitative explanatory research design to examine the relationships among brand community identification, customer participation, customer-brand engagement, and brand advocacy in the context of digital consumer behavior. The explanatory approach is appropriate because the study focuses on testing hypothesized causal relationships and assessing how community-based digital interactions contribute to advocacy toward local brands. The target population consists of consumers of local brands or technology-enabled small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who interact with brands through digital channels, including social media, online marketplaces, social commerce platforms, and digital brand communities. The population is specifically defined to capture consumers who have actual experience with both purchasing and digitally interacting with local brands. This context is relevant because digital platforms increasingly enable local brands and SMEs to establish interactive relationships with customers beyond conventional transactional exchanges.

Accordingly, the unit of analysis is the individual consumer who has experience purchasing local brand products and participating in brand-related activities within digital environments.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample is selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure that respondents possess relevant experience with local brands and digital brand interactions. Respondents are eligible to participate when they meet several criteria: they are consumers of local brand or SME products, have purchased such products at least once, and have interacted with the brand through social media, marketplaces, social commerce, or digital brand communities. Digital interaction may include following brand accounts, viewing or responding to brand content, providing reviews, participating in discussions, sharing information, or communicating with brands and other consumers. These criteria are applied to ensure that respondents can meaningfully evaluate the constructs examined in the research model, particularly brand community identification, customer participation, customer-brand engagement, and brand advocacy. Screening questions are included at the beginning of the questionnaire to verify respondent eligibility. Only questionnaires from respondents who meet all predetermined criteria and provide complete responses are retained for subsequent statistical analysis using PLS-SEM.

Data Collection and Measurement

Primary data are collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed to eligible consumers of local brands and technology-enabled SMEs. An online survey is selected because the research context focuses on consumers who actively use digital platforms and interact with brands through online environments. All research constructs are measured using multi-item statements on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Brand Community Identification (BCI) measures consumers' sense of belonging and psychological identification with a brand community, while Customer Participation (CP) captures active involvement through reviews, feedback, discussions, content sharing, and other brand-related digital activities. Customer-Brand Engagement (CBE) represents consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement with the brand. Brand Advocacy (BA) measures consumers' willingness to voluntarily recommend, support, communicate positively about, and defend the brand. Before statistical analysis, questionnaire responses are screened for completeness and suitability to ensure the quality and consistency of the empirical data.

Data Analysis

Data are analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to simultaneously evaluate the measurement model and structural relationships among the four constructs. The measurement model is first assessed through indicator outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity to establish indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and construct distinctiveness. After satisfactory measurement quality is established, the structural model is evaluated using path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance to determine the explanatory and predictive capability of the proposed model. Bootstrapping is subsequently employed to evaluate the statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships. Direct-effect analysis examines the relationships among BCI, CP, CBE, and BA, while indirect-effect analysis assesses the mediating role of CBE. Specifically, mediation testing determines whether customer-brand engagement transmits the effects of brand community identification and customer participation to brand advocacy, thereby providing empirical evidence for the proposed relational mechanism.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

A total of 250 valid responses were retained after data screening, representing consumers who had purchased local-brand products and interacted with local brands or technology-enabled SMEs through digital platforms. The respondents demonstrated substantial exposure to digital consumption and brand interaction, supporting their suitability for evaluating community-based consumer behavior. Social media represented the most frequently used platform for brand interaction (42.8%), followed by marketplaces (34.4%), social commerce (15.6%), and other digital brand communities (7.2%). Moreover, 68.4% of respondents reported purchasing local-brand products two to four times per month, while 61.2% interacted with local brands several times per week or more. As presented in Table 1, these characteristics indicate that the sample consisted predominantly of digitally active consumers rather than occasional users. This profile is important because the proposed model requires respondents to have sufficient experience with digital brand interaction to meaningfully evaluate brand community identification, customer participation, customer-brand engagement, and brand advocacy.

Table 1. Respondent and Digital Consumer Profile.

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Digital platform used	Social media	107	42.8
	Marketplace	86	34.4
	Social commerce	39	15.6
	Digital brand communities/others	18	7.2
Online purchase frequency	2–4 times per month	171	68.4
	Other frequencies	79	31.6
Brand interaction frequency	Several times per week or more	153	61.2
	Less frequently	97	38.8
Total respondents		250	100.0

Descriptive analysis further revealed relatively high perceptions across all research constructs. As shown in Table 2, Brand Advocacy recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.16$), followed by Customer-Brand Engagement ($M = 4.12$), Brand Community Identification ($M = 4.08$), and Customer Participation ($M = 3.94$). These results indicate that respondents generally demonstrated strong psychological and behavioral relationships with local brands in digital environments. Although Customer Participation produced the lowest mean among the four constructs, its score remained relatively high, suggesting that consumers were actively involved in reviews, discussions, feedback, content sharing, and other brand-related digital activities. The high Brand Advocacy score also indicates considerable willingness among respondents to recommend and communicate positively about local brands. Overall, the descriptive pattern provides preliminary evidence that identification, participation, engagement, and advocacy coexist among digitally active local-brand consumers.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Research Constructs.

Construct	Code	Mean	Interpretation
Brand Community Identification	BCI	4.08	High
Customer Participation	CP	3.94	High
Customer-Brand Engagement	CBE	4.12	High
Brand Advocacy	BA	4.16	High

Before testing the hypotheses, the measurement model was evaluated for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Table 3 shows that outer loadings ranged from .718 to .891. Cronbach's alpha values ranged between .812 and .884, while composite reliability values ranged from .869 to .916, indicating satisfactory internal consistency across all constructs. Furthermore, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged between .624 and .731, demonstrating adequate convergent validity. Discriminant validity assessment also indicated sufficient empirical distinction among BCI, CP, CBE, and BA. Collectively, these results demonstrate that the measurement model possesses satisfactory reliability and construct validity, allowing subsequent evaluation of the structural relationships. The satisfactory measurement properties are particularly important because they indicate that the observed indicators consistently represent their respective latent

constructs and that the structural model can therefore be evaluated without substantial concerns regarding measurement quality.

Table 3. Measurement Model Assessment.

Construct	Outer Loading Range	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability	AVE	Assessment
BCI	.742–.891	.884	.916	.731	Acceptable
CP	.718–.856	.812	.869	.624	Acceptable
CBE	.736–.882	.861	.902	.697	Acceptable
BA	.754–.887	.873	.909	.714	Acceptable

The structural model results presented in Table 4 support all five direct-effect hypotheses. Brand Community Identification positively influenced Customer-Brand Engagement ($\beta = .347$, $t = 5.624$, $p < .001$), supporting H1, while Customer Participation exerted a stronger positive influence on CBE ($\beta = .421$, $t = 6.817$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. Customer-Brand Engagement produced the strongest direct effect on Brand Advocacy ($\beta = .438$, $t = 7.216$, $p < .001$), supporting H3. BCI also directly influenced BA ($\beta = .196$, $t = 2.968$, $p = .003$), supporting H4, while CP positively influenced BA ($\beta = .214$, $t = 3.291$, $p = .001$), supporting H5. Figure 2 highlights the relative magnitude of these standardized coefficients, demonstrating that engagement represents the strongest immediate predictor of advocacy.

Table 4. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing.

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t	p	Decision
H1	BCI $\rightarrow$ CBE	.347	5.624	< .001	Supported
H2	CP $\rightarrow$ CBE	.421	6.817	< .001	Supported
H3	CBE $\rightarrow$ BA	.438	7.216	< .001	Supported
H4	BCI $\rightarrow$ BA	.196	2.968	.003	Supported
H5	CP $\rightarrow$ BA	.214	3.291	.001	Supported

The standardized path coefficients can be represented as follows:

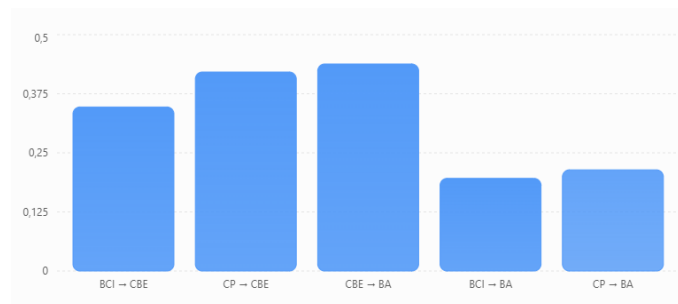


Figure 2. Standardized Path Coefficients of the Structural Model.

The pattern demonstrates that CBE $\rightarrow$ BA represents the strongest structural relationship, followed closely by CP $\rightarrow$ CBE. In comparison, the direct effects of BCI and CP on BA are smaller, indicating that engagement may constitute an important mechanism through which community-based consumer behavior develops into advocacy.

The mediation analysis provides additional support for this mechanism. As presented in Table 5, the indirect effect of BCI on BA through CBE was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .152$, $t = 4.627$, $p < .001$), supporting H6. Similarly, CP demonstrated a significant indirect effect on BA through CBE ($\beta = .184$, $t = 5.391$, $p < .001$), supporting H7. The indirect effect originating from Customer Participation was greater than that originating from Brand Community Identification. Importantly, the direct effects of BCI and CP on BA remained significant after the mediating variable was considered. Therefore, CBE demonstrates partial rather than full mediation in both relationships. Figure 3 compares the direct and indirect coefficients and indicates that participation generates particularly meaningful advocacy effects both independently and through stronger customer-brand engagement.

Table 5. Mediation Analysis.

Hypothesis	Indirect Relationship	Indirect β	t	p	Mediation	Decision
H6	BCI $\rightarrow$ CBE $\rightarrow$ BA	.152	4.627	< .001	Partial	Supported
H7	CP $\rightarrow$ CBE $\rightarrow$ BA	.184	5.391	< .001	Partial	Supported
Hypothesis	Indirect Relationship	Indirect β	t	p	Mediation	Decision

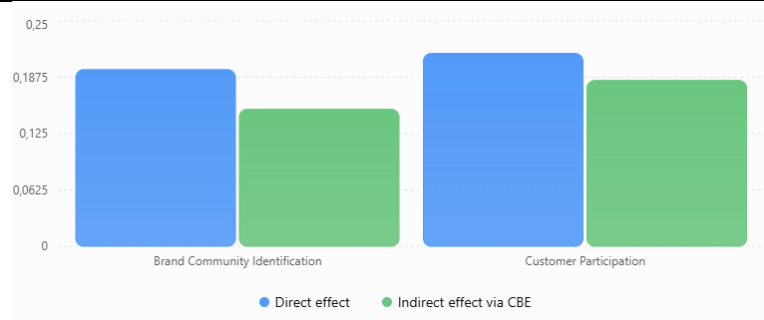


Figure 3. Comparison of Direct and Indirect Effects on Brand Advocacy.

Figure 3 demonstrates that Customer Participation generated both a stronger direct effect ($\beta = .214$) and a stronger indirect effect through Customer-Brand Engagement ($\beta = .184$) than Brand Community Identification. This result emphasizes the importance of active digital participation in developing advocacy among local-brand consumers.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that digital brand communities can function as strategic relationship-building environments for local brands and technology-enabled SMEs. The significant effect of Brand Community Identification on Customer-Brand Engagement indicates that consumers who perceive themselves as members of a brand community are more willing to invest cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources in their relationships with the brand. This result supports Ammari et al. (2021), who associate identification within virtual communities with stronger brand engagement, and Confente & Kucharska, (2021), who

emphasize the relational benefits of brand community identification. The findings are also consistent with Gupta et al. (2023), who demonstrate that online brand communities strengthen customer engagement and loyalty. From a Social Identity Theory perspective, digital communities therefore provide more than promotional exposure; they create social environments in which shared identity and belonging strengthen consumer-brand relationships. For local brands, building community identification can consequently become an important relational capability in increasingly competitive digital markets.

Customer Participation produced a stronger effect on engagement than Brand Community Identification, demonstrating the strategic importance of transforming consumers from passive audiences into active contributors. Activities such as reviews, comments, feedback, discussions, and user-generated content provide opportunities for customers to contribute knowledge and experiences while simultaneously strengthening their relationships with brands. This interpretation is consistent with Paruthi et al. (2023), who demonstrate that engagement within online brand communities can produce stronger emotional relationships and positive recommendations. Bouchriha et al. (2024) similarly emphasize that customer engagement and value co-creation contribute to favorable brand outcomes. More importantly, the strong CBE → BA relationship and significant mediation effects indicate that digital interactions become advocacy when they develop into meaningful customer-brand engagement. This finding aligns with Tjahjaningsih et al. (2025), who highlight the importance of digital engagement attitudes in brand advocacy. Positive e-WOM and consumer-created content can subsequently extend local-brand visibility through credible peer communication (Sun et al., 2021).

The findings have important implications for digital marketing strategies among local brands and SMEs. Rather than treating social media, marketplaces, and social commerce exclusively as transactional channels, firms should develop these platforms as relationship-building ecosystems that facilitate interaction, participation, and community development. Local SMEs can encourage customer reviews, user-generated content, community discussions, interactive campaigns, feedback mechanisms, and customer-to-customer communication to create continuous opportunities for engagement. Mousavi & Roper, (2023) show that different participation patterns within online brand communities contribute to consumer-brand relationships, suggesting that even varying levels of customer activity can create relational value. The significant mediation findings further indicate that generating participation alone is insufficient; firms must convert digital activity into meaningful cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. Therefore, local brands should progressively shift from transaction-

oriented digital marketing toward engagement-oriented community marketing, where customers function not merely as buyers but as participants, co-creators, and voluntary brand advocates capable of strengthening brand credibility, organic reach, and long-term competitiveness.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that brand community identification and customer participation are important determinants of customer-brand engagement among consumers of local brands in digital environments. Brand community identification positively strengthens engagement by creating a sense of belonging and psychological connection between consumers, communities, and brands. Customer participation also demonstrates a positive and relatively stronger effect on engagement, indicating that active involvement through reviews, discussions, feedback, content sharing, and other digital activities plays an important role in strengthening consumer-brand relationships. Furthermore, customer-brand engagement has a substantial positive effect on brand advocacy, demonstrating that consumers who develop stronger cognitive, emotional, and behavioral connections with local brands are more likely to recommend, support, and communicate positively about those brands. These findings confirm that digital brand communities can function beyond promotional channels by becoming relational environments that facilitate interaction, participation, and stronger consumer-brand relationships.

Customer-brand engagement also partially mediates the relationships between brand community identification and brand advocacy and between customer participation and brand advocacy. This finding indicates that identification and participation can directly encourage advocacy, while their effects become stronger when they generate meaningful engagement with the brand. The study therefore contributes to digital marketing and consumer behavior literature by integrating brand community identification, customer participation, customer-brand engagement, and brand advocacy within a unified relational framework. It also extends the relevance of digital brand community research to local brands and technology-enabled SMEs, where community relationships may provide strategic advantages despite relatively limited marketing resources. Overall, the findings demonstrate that successful digital marketing should not be evaluated solely through transactions or promotional reach but also through its ability to transform digitally connected consumers into engaged participants, co-creators, and voluntary advocates who contribute to brand visibility, credibility, and long-term competitiveness.

Local brands and SMEs should develop digital platforms as interactive community ecosystems rather than using social media, marketplaces, and social commerce exclusively for product promotion and sales transactions. Managers should provide meaningful opportunities for customers to participate through product reviews, feedback, online discussions, interactive campaigns, user-generated content, and consumer-to-consumer communication. Such activities should be designed to create a stronger sense of community while encouraging sustained cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement with the brand. Digital marketing strategies should consequently prioritize engagement quality rather than focusing exclusively on follower counts, impressions, or short-term conversions. By facilitating meaningful interactions and recognizing customer contributions, local brands can encourage organic recommendations, positive electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and voluntary advocacy. Community-based marketing should also be integrated into broader SME digital transformation strategies so that digital technology supports not only operational and transactional efficiency but also sustainable customer relationships and long-term brand competitiveness.

Future research should extend the proposed model by incorporating additional variables that reflect the continuing development of digital consumer environments. Social media engagement, brand authenticity, digital customer experience, user-generated content, and social commerce adoption may provide additional explanations for how consumers develop relationships with local brands. Future studies could also examine AI-enabled customer interactions, including conversational agents, personalized recommendations, and AI-supported digital communication, to determine whether technology strengthens or weakens consumers' perceptions of authenticity, engagement, and advocacy. Comparative studies across different categories of local brands, SME sectors, digital platforms, or geographic markets would further improve the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal research could also investigate how community identification, participation, engagement, and advocacy evolve over time. Finally, integrating behavioral digital data with survey-based measures may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how community-based digital marketing translates online interaction into sustainable advocacy and competitive advantages for local brands and SMEs.

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