Relationships on social media based brand communities:

*Explaining the effect on customer-based brand equity in the service industry*

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Abstract

Background: The importance of brand communities is increasing as managers have understood the benefits such communities which can create competitive advantage. Companies are trying to differentiate from the competitors and customer-based brand equity has been acknowledged as a successful marketing tool. Moreover, the development of social media allowed people from different cultures to come together, interact and share experiences in regards of their favorite brand.

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to explain the effect of relationships on social media based brand communities on customer-based brand equity in the service industry.

Methodology: The research proposes a sequential explanatory design which consists of a mixed approach by collecting and analyzing the quantitative data first, followed by the collection and analysis of the qualitative data in the form of interviews based on the quantitative results. Data has been collected from Facebook Groups and Facebook Fan Pages in regards of an airline.

Findings: Relationship that customers form with the brand, other customers and the service on social media based brand equity have a positive effect on customer-based brand equity. Furthermore, perceived brand trust represents a significant moderator in this relationship. Additionally, results show that there are differences between different cultures in enhancing brand equity.

Keywords: Social Media, Brand Communities, Customer-Based Brand Equity, Service Industry, Perceived Brand Trust, Culture
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1. Introduction

The introduction chapter’s purpose is to give the reader a short background about the study and it provides an insight into the problematization followed by the study’s research questions, purpose and delimitations. This chapter ends with the outline of the study that presents the structure of the following research.

1.1. Background

Over the last twenty years, the ways consumers communicate with each other have dramatically changed. This is due to the arrival of new technologies and new communication platforms such as internet, social medias, and the ability for any consumers to have a ubiquitous use of their phones and have access to any kind of content (Habibi et al., 2014a). This in turn has led to a change in the way information is gathered, obtained and consumed (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Social media have provided consumers with new landscapes with vast options for actively providing information on services and products (Malthouse et al., 2013). According to Statista’s “January 2017” study, the global social networking users have reached approximately two billion users on social media channels, with Facebook being the market leader and the first social network to surpass one billion registered accounts with 1.87 billion monthly active users (Statista. 2016; Statista, 2017a). Social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube are not only important for consumers but have also become a necessary communication tool for companies (Laroche et al., 2013).

A top 1000 list of active brands on social media presented by Socialbakers, a social media analytics company that monitors and measures the social media activities of enterprise and brands as well as small and midsize businesses, shows that the bottom brand has around three million followers on Facebook (Socialbakers, 2017a). The top company, Coca Cola, has over a hundred million followers on Facebook (Socialbakers, 2017a). The list also shows that there are both product and service oriented brands that are active on social media.

Social media channels have changed and facilitated the consumers’ relationships and have enabled companies to communicate in a direct way to them (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Libai et al., 2010). One of the main advantages of social media represents the fact
that it brings together users with familiar interests (Gyori et al., 2017; Mangold and Faulds, 2009). When users come together on social media, having common interest, they form groups (generated by other users), or they join an already existing group (initiated by a brand), therefore, they for communities in regard of a brand (Gyori et al., 2017; Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Various social media platforms exist; however, an example of brand community are Facebook Fan Pages and Facebook Groups (Gyori et al., 207). Muniz and O’Guinn have been one of the first researchers who introduced the concept of brand community, which is defined as: “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, and based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (p. 412). Brand communities offer brands, managers and marketers lots of information, feedback from devoted consumers, the possibility to integrate consumers as well as to build up relationships with them (Andersen, 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002; Gyori et al., 2017). Furthermore, it also offers the consumers a meeting place where they contact other consumers that are members of the brand community to exchange information and share experience about the brand and create value (Schau et al., 2009; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009).

The importance of SMBBC have increased during the previous years (Habibi et al., 2014a; Gyori et al., 2017). Traditionally, companies have been using marketing activities like reward programs, public relations and direct marketing to reach and build up relationships with consumers (Kim and Ko, 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Libai et al., 2010). In this scenario, the company had control over the brand development process and the consumers were just passive “receivers” of relationship activities and brand messages. However, the nature of social media has empowered consumers to get in contact with each other, as well as engaging with the brand and making them participate actively in brand communication (Kozinets et al., 2010; Libai et al., 2010). For example, communities on Facebook groups where companies and consumers can contact and communicate with each other, allowing the companies to gather content created on the platform to enhance the relationships with the consumers (Borle et al., 2012). SMBBC offer companies diverse ways to reach and communicate with consumers, they help measure their communication and they help to enhance the relationships and the trust with the consumers (Mosav and Maryam, 2014). Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010) states that many companies are using communities to create and develop brands. According to an article at Forbes written by Chaykowski, the Facebook’s chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg
presented that 60 million businesses around the world have an active Facebook Page (Chaykowski, 2016).

One of the challenges confronted by the marketers is to see how their efforts can pay off and more importantly how social media activities (post, shares weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, podcasts, pictures, video, networking, rating and social bookmarking) can positively affect the brand (Habibi et al., 2014a; Kim and Ko, 2012). Social media activities of brands create a platform to exchange ideas and information among consumers online, providing an opportunity to reduce misunderstanding and prejudice toward brands and to elevate the brand value which can enhance the consumer relation toward the brand (Kim and Ko, 2012). Despite the common use of social media as a platform to implement marketing strategies, (Wang and Li, 2012) brands on social media are faced with the uncertainty of consequences, which can be either positive or negative. This can be due to the relationships between the company and the consumers, and the exchange of information which involves consumer’s perception towards the brand image (Laroche et al., 2013; Karamian et al., 2015). According Keller (1993), customer based brand equity (CBBE) is formed when consumers become aware of the brand and they form either a positive or negative association with it. CBBE has been defined by Aaker (1997) as “a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s consumers” (p.15). CBBE plays an important role in customer’s decisions to acquire the product or service of a brand over another. Therefore, SMBBC can provide value for companies as it has been proven as an effective communication channel (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

The social nature of SMBBC opens up for non-geographically bound communities, which allow consumers from different backgrounds come together (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Therefore, customers from different cultures are joined together in such communities, and share experiences, thoughts and interact with each other. A report by Statista reveals the distribution of worldwide social media users in January 2017; which shows that there is an approximate equal distribution of users from each part of the world, the only exception being East Asia, which accounts for 33% of the social media users (Statista, 2017c).
1.2. Problem analysis

Regarding brand community literature, several authors focused on conceptualizing and establishing its defining characteristics and limits as well as depicting on brand community elements and activities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and Schau, 2007) and indirectly addressed the outcomes of such communities for consumers and for companies (Schau et al., 2009; Muniz and Schau, 2007; Laroche et al., 2012; Laroche et al., 2013). A common point between researchers reveals that brand communities are constructed around the relationships between the adherents of a brand (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and Schau, 2007; Schau et al., 2009; Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014b).

From a customer perspective, some have investigated the positive outcomes of SMBBC (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder, 2008; Zaglia, 2013). An agreement between the researchers shows that the outcomes for the consumers refer to the reasons why consumers engage in SMBBC. Specifically, consumers join SMBBC to share their passion and they receive contentment from being involved in such communities (Schau et al., 2009). Subsequently, consumers need to fulfill the need for identification with groups and symbols by joining such communities (Habibi et al., 2014b). Schau et al. (2009) and Zaglias’ (2013) researches showed that by engaging in SMBBC, consumers also seek to obtain skills and information to better use the product or service of the brand. In order to fulfill their needs, consumers interact and form relationships with other participants in SMBBC (Schau et al., 2009; Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014b). Most concrete relationships are rooted in concerns with the need of satisfying the desired task (Fournier, 1998). Moreover, relationships are differentiated by the nature of benefits they provide to participants (Muniz and Schau, 2007).

Relationships on SMBBC can lead to positive outcomes for companies as well (Laroche et al., 2012; Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a; Habibi et al., 2014b). There are a number of researchers who analyzed the possible outcomes of such communities for the brands (Schau et al., 2009; Laroche et al., 2012; Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014b). Laroche et al. (2013) revealed in their study that SMBBC are beneficial for companies since consumers who are engaged in such communities create relationships and interact with other user, which will ease the process of recognizing the brand as they become more familiar with the brand. Therefore, SMBBC can enhance awareness around the brand.
Several researchers acknowledged the importance of the SMBBC as an effective communication channel where users interact between each other and create positive attitudes and judgments towards the brand (Laroche et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014a). This can help them to easily form associations towards the respective brand and can affect users’ perception regarding the quality of the brand (Laroche et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014a). Loyalty is the most studied variable in brand community literature (Habibi et al., 2014b). Several authors have investigated the concept of loyalty and how it can be enhanced (McAlexander et al., 2002; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Jang et al., 2008). However, the limitations of the studies suggest further research on various product categories and services because the intensity of the consequences and the benefits for brand managers may be different in a social media context and the relationships formed on SMBBC are dynamic by nature and may vary depending on the industry (Habibi et al., 2014b). Enhancing awareness, associations loyalty, and perceived brand quality (PBQ), have been associated with customer-based brand equity (Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Pappu et al., 2005; Lee and Back 2010; Davari and Strutton, 2014).

Customer-based brand equity have become a focal point for both theoreticians and brands who acknowledged the importance of this concept and its implications such as maximizing profits, increasing sales and leading to a competitive advantage in the form of being the brand which gives the consumers most value (Keller, 1993; Vázquez et al., 2002; Davari and Strutton, 2014; Biedenbach et al., 2015). Several researchers concentrated on determining how CBBE can be enhanced (Keller, 1993, Lassar et al., 1995; Davari and Strutton, 2014), and a common agreement between them reveals that consumers plays a decisive role in explaining the nature of CBBE because they form attitudes and judgments towards the brands which have an effect in choosing a brand over another. Furthermore, Jahn and Kunz (2012) acknowledged the importance of relationships that consumers form with other consumers and the brand, and emphasized the potential of such relationship to enhance positive attitudes for consumers, which in return can have positive effects for a company. Despite other studies focusing on CBBE and how it can be enhanced, there are few studies which investigated the concept of CBBE in a social media context (Bruhn et al., 2008; Kim and Ko, 2012). Bruhn et al. (2008) analyzed the impact of brand-based communication on social media platforms on CBBE. Even if the results showed that CBBE is the result of communications on social media platforms (Bruhn et al., 2008; Kim and Ko, 2012), there have been no attempts to
analyze the effect relationships on SMBBC on the concept of CBBE. Furthermore, Bruhn et al. (2008) stress the need of further researching SMBBC on a broader spectrum of industries.

Customer-based brand equity can be influenced by several factors according to previous literature, however the factor that received the most attention is perceived brand trust (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Pappu et al., 2005). Brand trust has been shown critical for enhancing attitudes and behaviors towards a brand that can lead to positive outcome for the company (Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2005). Other researchers have focused on the importance of perceived brand trust in the social media context (Davari and Strutton, 2014; Habibi et al., 2014b) and a consensus between them reveals that trust is a fundamental characteristic of any meaningful interaction. Furthermore, even though trust have been found critical in decreasing the level of uncertainty and information symmetry in the social media context (Davari and Strutton, 2014), there is a need of further investigating and explaining how perceived brand trust can have an impact on CBBE, considering SMBBC, as stressed by previous researchers (Laroche et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014b).

Considering the particularities of social media, which connect people without any geographical restriction (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), one aspect has attracted researchers’ attention, cultural differences (Goodrich and de Mooi, 2014; Lewis and George, 2008). Even though culture is a widely studied concept, when it comes to social media context, the concept is lacking a clear approach (Goodrich and de Mooi, 2014). Attempts have been made to analyze the role of cultural differences in online purchase decision (Goodrich and de Mooi, 2014), while others have focused on the impact of cultural differences on word-of-mouth (WOM) on social media (Lewis and George, 2008). However, authors have stressed the need of further investigating cultural differences in the social media context and the consequences that it may have (Hofstede, 2001; Lewis and George, 2008).

Interactive relationships are positively related to successful social media management according to Jahn and Kunz (2012), which is in return shaped by the service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In a service company, there should be a customer oriented view (Vargo and Lusch, 2004); thus, value can be created by delivering prized information to members, because “brands need the community and the community needs
the brand” (Jahn and Kunz, 2012, p.354). Service companies have different particularities from companies focused on products; they generate income by providing services to customers instead of trading physical products (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Considering the number of researchers who analyzed SMBBC and the relationships formed and their outcomes for both customers and brands (Zaglia, 2013; Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a), when it comes to the outcomes of such relationships in the service industry, the literature is lacking a clear approach. Moreover, there is a gap which needs to be addressed in order explain how these relationships on brand communities can enhance CBBE in the social media context, because of the unique characteristics of social media which create the need of being treated separately and creating a distinct research area (Hu and Kettinger, 2008; Habibi et al., 2014b).

1.3. Research Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explain the effect of relationships on social media based brand communities on customer-based brand equity in the service industry.

1.4. Research question

Considering the problem discussion, the following research question is proposed:

Q1. How are relationships formed on social media based brand communities affecting customer-based brand equity in the service industry?

Based on the research question presented, which is rather broad, the following question is proposed in order to analyze the role of perceived brand trust in the previously mentioned relationship:

Q2. How can perceived brand trust moderate the effect of social media based brand communities on CBBE in the service industry?

To better explain the purpose and to better understand the overall research question, the following question is proposed in regard to cultural differences on SMBBC:

Q3. What are the differences between different cultures when it comes to the impact of social media based brand communities on CBBE in the service industry?
1.5. Delimitations

The current research encounters several delimitations. The first delimitation refers to brand equity, which consists of five dimensions: brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, perceived brand quality and other proprietary assets, as presented by several researchers (Aaker, 1991; Atilgan et al., 2005). However, the paper approach four dimensions of CBBE and excludes the dimension: other proprietary assets due to its inadequacy of a clear definition and the lack of a clear conceptualization and measurement scales (Atilgan et al., 2005).

The second delimitation refers to the population of this research. The current paper collects primary data from the airline industry, which has been found as a relevant representative for the service industry, considering the approach of the paper, and the focus on SMBBC. Airline industry is gaining popularity on social media platforms and the top ten leading companies registered over 19 million users on Facebook (Statista, 2017b). Furthermore, several researchers acknowledged the importance of airline in the service industry (Chen and Tseng, 2010; Uslu et al., 2013).

1.6. Outline of the study

After the presentation of Chapter 1, Literature review presents the existing research on the main concepts analyzed in the study: social media based brand communities, customer-based brand equity, perceived brand trust and culture. Following, Chapter 3 (Conceptual framework) presents the model used along with the hypotheses. Methodology (Chapter 4) offers an overview of the sequential explanatory design used in the study as well as presents the operationalization. The following chapter (Analysis) presents the results from the statistical analysis performed and shows an overview of the hypotheses acceptance. The following chapter (Discussions) contains information regarding the results obtained and adds a level of detailed by integrating the qualitative analysis. Chapter 7 (Conclusions) evaluates the main findings and also answers the research question and meets the purpose. The last part of the paper reveals the existing limitations of the paper together with the implications of the study.
2. Literature review

This chapter presents an elaborate review of previous prominent researches in the field about social media based brand communities, customer based brand equity, cultural difference and perceived brand trust. Appendix A present an overview of all articles used in this chapter.

2.1. Social media based brand communities

SMBBC represents a brand community which is available on a social media platform (Gyori et al., 2017). Nonetheless, SMBBC distinguished themselves from other types of brand communities; considering that social media represents the platform where these types of communities are formed, the cost of establishing is low (Gyori et al., 2017; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Moreover, social media platforms are usually free of charge for both brands and consumers. Connecting businesses to millions of end-consumers (Laroche et al., 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), influencing customer perceptions and behaviors (Williams and Cothrell, 2000), and bringing together people with the same ideology or different like-minded users (Laroche et al., 2013); these are the factors that have drawn the center of attention in different industries (Gyori et al., 2017).

The created content on SMBBC is constructed by users who engage and actively participate in the development of the community (Laroche et al., 2013; Gyori et al., 2017), whereas in traditional media, the content is consumed passively (Laroche et al., 203; Gyori et al., 2017). It has been argued by previous researchers that the active participation of users to create content is shaping the community itself (Werry, 1999; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Gyori et al., 2017).

Due to the development and particularities of the digital environments, the archive of information offers the possibility the collect relevant information on various categories and topics which is difficult to match formerly; moreover, the archive of information also enables users to have access to a capital of knowledge (Habibi et al., 2014b; Gyori et al., 2017).

To conclude on SMBBC, both brand managers and academicians found that these concepts of brand communities and social media are becoming close relations (Laroche et al., 2013) and the junctions of these concepts represent SMBBC (Gyori et al., 2017).
2.1.1. Relationships on social media based brand communities

The main research stream according to Habibi et al. (2014a) in brand community literature relates to the conceptual aspects that focus on identifying its defining characteristics and limits (Brown et al., 2003; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Muniz and Schau, 2007). Researchers emphasize on brand community elements and activities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, 2002) and indirectly acknowledged the outcomes of brand communities’ practices, which bring benefits for brands and customers (Schau et al., 2009; Muniz and Schau, 2007; Laroche et al., 2012; Laroche et al., 2013).

One of the first academicians who analyzed and conceptualized the concept of brand community are Muniz and O’Guinn (2011). Their conceptualization (Figure 1) reveals that the brand community is composed of the customer-customer-brand triad. Further researches have used Muniz and O’Guinn’s conceptualization in order to investigate the brand community phenomenon (Laroche et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014; Laroche et al., 2013; Gyori et al., 2017). The core component of brand communities represents the relationships that consumers develop with other entities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002).

The customer-customer relationship represents the content generated within the brand community. This relation is crucial since it represent the major components of the brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002). According to Habibi et al. (2014b), the relationship customer/customer is the key to have shared experience between the users and inherent feedback on the products or services acquired. Moreover, all the interactions on the social media based brand community can create closer relations between users.

The customer/brand relationships represent the network created on social media between customers and the brand that directly impact positively or negatively the elements of the customer based brand equity such as the brand loyalty, the brand association, and the perceived quality. According to Singh et al. (2017) social media has been shown to increase this relationship with the opportunity for the brand to communicate to the consumers vice-versa and to enhance brand related values consumers have towards the brand which can be related to culture or other aspects of the brand (Habibi et al., 2014b).
McAlexander et al., (2002) model added a new cornerstone in the brand communities’ literature since it uses as a focal point the customer/user of the brand community then related to the company, the brand, the product, and the customers. McAlexander et al., (2002) took the perspective that on a customer centric model, “the existence and meaningfulness of the community in here in customer experience rather than in the brand around which that experience revolves” p.39.

McAlexander et al. (2002) added two dimensions in their model, the company and product in order to connect them with the focal point, the focal customer. According to the same author, the customers also value their relationship with their branded products and the marketers of the company. The shift in the literature from the triadic model of Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) towards a more consumer focused with McAlexander et al. (2002) has raised and increased the number of studies on the brand community topic (Schau et al., 2009) and more recently Laroche et al., (2012); Laroche et al., (2013); Habibi et al., (2014b) takes on the brand community and the social media based brand
communities. Attempts have been made in order to analyze the outcome of such relationships, on trust or loyalty (Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a); however, further research is suggested on explaining the outcomes of such relationships by expanding the variables analyzed on a more complex and comprehensive frame (Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a; Habibi et al., 2014b) and also analyzing various industries since the relationships are dynamic by nature (McAlexander et al., 2002).

2.2. Customer based brand equity

Customer-based brand equity represents a fundamental concept for both businesses and theoreticians since it can lead to competitive advantages for companies and building strong brands with appreciable equity can assist in providing companies many benefits (Lassar et al., 1995; Keller, 2001; Gyori et al., 2017). Actual benefits for companies include improving the effectiveness of the marketing actions, and increasing prices and profits (Aaker, 1991; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Gyori et al., 2017). In addition, Keller (2001) claimed that benefits of brand equity include greater customer loyalty and less exposure to brand extensions.

When it comes to defining CBBE, there is a lack of agreement between researchers. Various definitions exist in the literature (Table 1). However, an agreement between academicians reveals that CBBE can be considered as the connection between the stakeholder and the company (Veloutsou et al., 2013; Khan et al., 2009). Subsequently, considering the definitions presented in Table 1, CBBE can be seen as consumers’ behaviors and attitudes regarding a brand, which allows the brand to gain competitive advantage (Gyori et al., 2017).
Table 1 - Customer-based brand equity definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaker, D. A</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>“A set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers.” (p.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srivastava &amp; Shocker</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>“A set of associations and behaviors on the part of a brand’s consumers, channel members and parent ‘corporation that enables a brand to earn greater volume or greater margins that it could without the brand name and, in addition, provides a strong, sustainable and differential advantage.” (p.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keller</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>“Customer based brand equity is defined as the different effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand.” (p.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lassar et al.</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>“Is the driving force for incremental financial gains to the firm.” (p.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mackay et al.</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>“Refers to the added value of the brand to the consumer.” (p.1153)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoo &amp; Donthu</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>“The incremental utility or value added to a product by its brand name.” (p.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vázquez et al.</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>“The overall utility that the consumer associates to the use and consumption of the brand; including associations expressing both functional and symbolic utilities.” (p.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christodoulides, G., &amp; De Chernatony, L.</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>“A set of perceptions, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors on the part of consumers that results in increased utility and allows a brand to earn greater volume or greater margins than it could without the brand name.” (p.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keller (1993) argued that CBBE consists of the consumers’ attitude to a marketing mix element and it is based on the reaction of stimuli arising based on consumers’ acquaintance with a brand and the positive brand association in their memory (Keller, 1993; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). The high interest in analyzing and measuring the intangible asset from a customer perspective over the last decade (Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Vázquez et al., 2002; Davari and Strutton, 2014) can be related to Washburn and Plank (2002) who argued that there is a lack of research on how to measure value from a consumer’s perspective even if there are extensive methods of measuring financial equity. Moreover, with an increase in competition, flattening demands, higher costs, companies are trying to improve the efficiency of their marketing expenses. As a result, marketers have understood that there is a need in analyzing and observing consumer behavior, as it
is a core factor for making strategic decision, particularly marketing mix actions (Keller, 1993).

In addition, research also proposes that brand equity may have an influence in consumers’ choice to choose certain brands over the competitors (Lassar et al., 1995). Consequently, consumers play a central role in explaining the nature of CBBE since they form attitudes towards the brand which influence future decisions of choosing a brand over another (Keller; 1993; Lassar et al., 1995; Davari and Strutton, 2014). In this way, relationships between customers and other customers and brand become crucial. Jahn and Kunz (2012) claimed that relationship building based on real values enhanced positive attitudes for consumers, and companies can have many interactions points with consumers, because it will provide a lot of opportunities to stimulate this interaction and build meaningful communities. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) argued that members of brand communities share a strong connection with the brand and with other users by building relationships. Subsequently, Bruhn et al. (2008) claimed that social media is an effective platform which has an important role in developing brand equity and it also increases the probability that a brand will be incorporated in a consumer's’ mind.

Customer-based brand equity has been constructed around brand equity dimensions of associations, awareness, attitudes and loyalties customers have towards a brand (Keller, 2001; Buil et al., 2013). This approach has its roots in the earlier conceptual framework of Aaker’s (1991) and Keller’s (1993) CBBE theories (Buil et al., 2013; Cho, 2011). Five dimensions of brand equity have been identified by Aaker (1991) that comprise: perceived brand quality, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand associations and other proprietary assets. Contrary, Keller’s (1993) model recognizes brand knowledge, which is comprised of two key components: brand image and brand awareness (Buil et al., 2013). Considering these theoretical motions, brand awareness brand associations, brand loyalty and perceived brand quality have been used to measure items of CBBE by several authors (Aaker, 1991; Yoo et al., 2000; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Washburn and Plank, 2002; Pappu et al., 2005; Manpreet and Jagrook, 2010; Kim and Hyun, 2011; Wang and Li, 2012; Buil et al., 2013; Uslu et al., 2013; Pinar et al., 2014). A comprehensive analysis of previous CBBE conceptualizations and dimensions used can be seen in Appendix B.
As a result, considering both extensively adopted approaches by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) and from the previous studies, four variables of CBBE will be exposed in this paper: brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, and perceived brand quality.

2.2.1. Brand awareness

The dimension brand awareness refers to “the ability for a buyer to recognize and recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category” (Aaker, 1991 p.61). As mentioned by Lin et al. (2014), brand awareness is related with the ability of a consumer to be familiar with a given brand and that this brand is recalled in his mind when thinking of a specific product. Su and Tong (2015) explain that brand awareness consist of a strength of a brand since it represents the presence of the brand in consumer mind. These thoughts are in the same direction of Keller (1993) who describes it as a strength for the brand since it represents the ability to identify the brand under different circumstances. Consequently, previous researchers have identified brand awareness as a factor affecting CBBE in the online environment (Kim et al., 2011; Rios and Riquelme, 2010).

According to Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991), brand awareness is divided in two parts, brand recognition and brand recall. Brand recognition is the first step of the brand awareness and consist in the ability for the consumers to recognize a given brand when exposed to a cue (Keller, 1993). Moreover, Su and Tong (2015) and Keller (1993) mention that it is needed that the consumer had seen or heard the brand in a prior step in order to correctly recognize it. On the other hand, the brand recall deal with the capability for the consumer to retrieve in its own memory the brand when it is being mentioned or when a need has to be fulfilled (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2011). Thus brand recall is directly connected with the memory of the consumer, and his ability to generate any thoughts about it (Keller, 1993).

Brand awareness can be constructed by taking into consideration two perspectives (Page and Lepkowska, 2002); communication from the brand itself or external communication. Communication from the brand itself concerns the messages that the brands communicate towards the customers. SMBBC represents an effective communication channel, which ease the exchange of information between customers and the brands (Laroche et al., 2013). One of the main reasons consumers engage in brand communities is to create relationships with other participants (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Moreover, the interactive nature of social media and the non-geographic feature allow the different
brands to reach millions of customers, and provide messages and information to consumers, which enhance the recognition of the brand (Sashi, 2012; Habibi et al., 2014a). On the other hand, external communication refers to the communication without the brand itself such as WOM, which represent an effective tool in enhancing positive perceptions to consumers. Furthermore, one of the particularities of social media represents UGC (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The content generated by individual consumers on brand communities creates an environment where users create relationships between each other and exchange valuable information (Habibi et al., 2014b). In this way word of mouth become important because it has the potential to affect customers’ perception towards a brand and also enhance the brand awareness (Laroche et al., 2012; Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014b).

2.2.2. Brand associations

Brand association represents a significant component of customer-based brand equity that is often hard to conceptualize (Pappu et al., 2005; Aaker 1991; Keller; 1993). There is a common agreement among researchers who argue that association comprise the consumer’s inherent meaning of a brand (Manpreet and Jagrook, 2010; Keller, 1993; Pappu et al., 2005) and can be defined as “anything linked in memory to a brand” (Aaker, 1991, p.109). A more complex definition is given by Wang and Li (2012) who developed previous definitions and acknowledged that brand associations represent “anything, including attributes of a product/service, reputation of a company, and characteristics of product/service users, which links in consumer’s memory to a brand” (Wang and Li, 2012, p.149).

Brand associations can be activated by anything that causes the consumer to experience the brand advertising, promotions and public relations (Hutter et al., 2013). In addition, Srinivasan et al. (2005) argued that brand associations are captured through consumers’ awareness and perceptions towards a brand. An efficient way to expose the brand to such practices (public relations, advertising) and enhance the brand association is social media. When consumers engage in social media activities of a brand they form relationships with other users and they interact with each other. Hutter’s et al. (2013) research claimed that enhancing these relationships would help consumers form positive judgments towards the brand, therefore creating brand associations. Moreover, Sashi (2012) argues that the interactive nature of social media expands the relationship portfolio, where brands do not
communicate only with the customers, but customers communicate between each other as well. Consequently, these interactions create value by adding content and even becoming desirous advocate of the brands by sharing information and influencing other users purchase decision in peer-to-peer interactions (Sashi, 2012).

Another way brand associations are formed represents word-of-mouth or WOM (Davari and Strutton, 2014; Keller, 1993; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). According to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) and McAlester et al. (2002), brand communities constitute a form of associations that are embedded in the consumption context. In addition, Koizinets (2002) claims that when engaged in such groups in respect to a brand, consumers develop social links, and take part in rituals in pursuit of common consumption interests towards the brand they admire (Koizinets, 2002). Word-of-mouth represents an important source of information for consumers as it provides them information regarding the product or service they are involved with (Hutter et al., 2013). Consumers who are engaged in relationships in brand communities connect with other users and have a sense of familiarity with them (Laroche et al., 2013). Since consumers are familiar with the source of WOM, the information shared is more effective in influencing their perception towards the brand and it can enhance their brand associations (Hutter et al., 2013). Sashi (2012) reveals that in a virtual context, consumers who are delighted with a product or service will interact with other users of the community to spread the word about their positive experience with the product, service or brand.

2.2.3. Brand loyalty

There is a common agreement among researchers that one of the main aspect of brand communities and the consumer experience within the brand community is to enhance consumers’ loyalty towards the brand (McAlester and Schouten, 1998; McAlester et al., 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Schouten and McAlester, 1995; Zhou et al., 2011b). The term brand loyalty represents a strong commitment from the consumer to consistently repurchase a brand, and the willingness to stay with a brand (Oliver, 1997). The same author gives a more precise definition few years after, referring to a “brand’s capacity to influence consumers’ future decision in a positive way in order to re-buy the product or service” (Oliver, 1999, p34). According to Aaker (1991), the brand loyalty is a key dimension of brand equity since loyal consumers are less willing to switch brands if they are satisfied which allow the brand to benefit from a competitive
advantage towards its competitors’ threats. Moreover, researches revealed that loyal consumers are willing to pay more for the product or service they want to acquire (Keller, 1993; Davari and Strutton, 2014).

Brand communities presented benefits for companies since it was possible to positively impact the brand loyalty by easing the access of information and build the culture of the brand (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Gyori et al., 2017). Karamian et al. (2015) revealed in their study that the relationships formed on social media communities between the consumers were affecting their perception towards the brand, and this was maybe the biggest advantage companies could benefit from. Subsequently, strengthen relationships between the brand and customers or products can enhance more loyalty towards the consumers (Laroche et al., 2013; Gyori et al., 2017). Moreover, Karamian et al. (2015) mention that by using social media, customer brand loyalty is increased day by day thanks to consumers’ communication. According to Karamian et al. (2015), Laroche et al. (2012) and Laroche et al. (2013) studies, consumers are shown to have a more trustworthy behavior towards social media than the traditional marketing communication tools employed by brands. Thus, brands can receive feedback from their consumers, and then try to supply their demands and needs faster than the competitors. Moreover, the quality of the products or services is improved in the process (Karamian, 2015).

Finally, brand loyalty has been shown to have the potential to gather sales revenues and more profitability to brands, and it help them to grow and maintain on their market (Aaker, 1991; Davari and Strutton, 2014; Keller, 1993).

2.2.4. Perceived brand quality

Perceived brand quality constitutes a fundamental dimension in CBBE conceptualization (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Erdem et al., 2004; Gyori et al., 2017). Previous research within CBBE context revealed that there is a relationship between PBQ and customer-based brand equity (Kim and Hyun, 2011; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Pinar et al., 2014). Perceived brand quality is defined as “a global assessment of a consumer’s judgment about the superiority of a product or a brand” (Zeithaml, 1988, p.4). In addition, Netemeyer’s et al. (2004) study reveals that PBQ is comprised of the consumers’ judgments regarding the quality and reliability of a brand compared to similar brands. Researchers argue that there is a difference between the quality of the product or service and the perceived brand quality because PBQ refers to consumers’ subjectivity
evaluation of the brand (Zeithaml, 1988; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Severi and Ling, 2013). Consequently, PBQ cannot be adequately determined because, as Aaker (1996) argues, PBQ is a summary construct. Nonetheless, perceived quality of a brand can be identified by consumers’ perception of overall quality and feeling about the brand (Hsu et al., 2011). Communications employ a positive impact on perceived brand quality (Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Davari and Strutton, 2014). Communities created by users on social media are considered reliable source of information by other consumers and the interactions among consumers, due to the public aspect of social media platforms, increase the visibility of the communications and enhance the attractiveness of a brand as it becomes a subject of discussion (Bruhn et al., 2008). Consequently, Callarisa et al. (2012) argue that social media platforms affected the creation and development of relationships, removing barriers between brands and customers and other agents. Furthermore, these relationships increase the effectiveness of communication process for their good and services, as well as with greater awareness in the perception towards brand quality (Chen and Wang, 2011; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Callarisa et al., 2012). Hence, consumers who interact with other consumers on brand communities want to bond with other members and put importance on their reputation, with some members attempting to create positive impressions towards the brand and affect other consumer’s perception of the brand (Black and Veloutsou, 2017).

As previously mentioned, PBQ consists of consumers’ judgments towards the superior quality of a brand (Zeithaml, 1988; Netemeyer et al., 2004). Tikkanen et al. (2009) study reveal that interactions inside brand communities improved the understanding of consumer’s needs, and facilitated the development of new product and services. Social interactions in brand communities, where users communicated in real time provided information and experiences to other members, which allowed them to better assess the brand and to form positive judgments towards the respective brand (Tikkanen et al., 2009).

2.3. Perceived brand trust

Perceived brand trust has been acknowledged as important aspect in the marketing literature by numerous researchers (Aaker, 1996; Lassar et al., 1995; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Pappu et al., 2005; Laroche et al., 2012). Brand trust has been defined as “the willingness of the average
consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function” (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; p.82).

Trust is considered as a fundamental characteristic of any meaningful social interaction, and the research on trust comes from the inquiry of personal relationships (Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2005). Moreover, according to Habibi et al. (2014b), trust is critical for enhancing attitudes and behaviors towards a brand, the seller or during shopping (Powers et al., 2012). According to Habibi et al. (2014b) brand trust is an issue when there is information asymmetry resulting in chances of opportunism (Gyori et al., 2017). However, when consumers are dealing with this, the influence of brand trust increase since its role is to decrease and reduce the uncertainty level and the irregularity of the information (Davari and Strutton, 2014; Pavlou et al., 2007, Gyori et al., 2017). Thus, giving the right amount of information about the brand or the product can be seen as a way to increase consumer’s trust (Chiu et al., 2010; Gefen et al., 2003).

Considering the development of brand trust, the existent literature suggests that brand trust derive from past experiences and prior interactions with the brand (Rempel et al., 1985; Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2005). This idea is reinforced by other authors who argue that trust can be developed through previous experiences (Curran et al., 1996), and it develops over time (Laroche et al., 2013). Social media brand communities consist of different users who join these SMBBC to obtain the necessary information or to better use the product or service of the brand, regardless if they had previous experience with the brand or not (Laroche et al., 202; Habibi et al., 2014b). Consumers, who had experiences with the brand and are familiar with it, are more likely to carry positive attitudes towards the honesty and responsibility of the brand, which can positively affect their perception towards the brands and ease the process of forming associations towards the respective brand (Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a).

2.4. Cultural differences

Although there is a lot of definition of the term culture, it is most of the time the definition from Hofstede (1984) that is used by researchers (Srite and Karahanna, 2006, Lewis and George, 2008; Pookulangara and Koesler, 2011). Culture was defined by Hofstede (1984) as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (p.260). However, the authors acknowledge that there are
other models related to culture such as Hall’s (1989) model or Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s (1997) 7 dimensions’ model, nonetheless Hofstede model is the most relevant and has been used on the social media context (Lewis and George, 2008).

According to Hofstede (2001), there are four different dimensions as part of cultural differences: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity. According to Goodrich and De Mooi (2014) and Boase et al. (2006), the individualist/collectivist dimension best explain, the differences in the acquisition of information, and the differences in the importance of information in the decision-making process in respect with active search for information. The results of Goodrich and De Mooi (2014) study showed that Hofstede’s (1984) cultural dimensions explained cross-cultural differences in online purchase decision influences, with a special emphasis on the individualist/collectivist dimension for the usage of social media across cultures. However, in this research paper and according to Goodrich and De Mooi (2014), the researchers have decided to only utilize the individualism and collectivism dimension of Hofstede’s (1984) model since it was explained as having a strong explaining function in the social media context across cultures researches (Goodrich and De Mooi, 2014). Moreover, the same authors, (Goodrich and De Mooi, 2014) mention that individualism/collectivism is crucial to understand differences in online buying influences since it can explain many differences in personal or non-personal communication behaviors.

The dimension individualism/collectivism referred to the degree to which the individuals are affiliated. Individualism is characterized by the lack of ties within the group when collectivism represents strong ties within a cohesive group (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede, 2001). On social media, according to Lewis and George (2008), individualism prevails in western countries when, collectivism was more present on eastern countries. According to Goodrich and De Mooi (2014), this dimension was characterized has having a major impact on the social media context since it was enhancing the word of mouth or the electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which was directly having an effect on brand loyalty (Laroche et al, 2013).

Boase et al. (2006) confirm that the source of information of the social media users was affected by their individualistic or collectivistic point of view and this was having an effect on brand awareness and perceived brand quality (Habibi et al., 2014a; Yoo and
Donthu, 2001; Davari and Strutton, 2014). Despite being a field of intense research, Lewis and George (2008) mention that there was a lack of research on how other cultures viewed deception on social media, moreover it has been researched from only a western perspective which is not enough to understand how the relation on social medias were affected. Pookulangara and Koesler (2011) research was another research on this topic mentioned in Ngai et al. (2015) literature review article but it was more focused on the intention to do online purchase. According to the literature review article of Ngai et al. (2015), these were the only few articles that covered this field and both used Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions in order to gather knowledge on the differences between users on social networking sites when it came to cross-cultural differences.

According to Ngai et al. (2015), the need of further research on cultural dimensions affecting the usage of social media or the behaviors of users of social media from different country is needed, as well to evaluate if all the cultural dimensions of Hofstede's (2001) can be used on the social media context, in order to improve theoretical and practical knowledge for both theoreticians and marketers (Pookulangara and Koesler, 2011; Lewis and George, 2008; Khan et al. 2016). Several researchers stressed the effect of culture differences in the social media context (Srite and Karahanna, 2006, Lewis and George, 2008; Pookulangara and Koesler, 2011; Goodrich and De Mooi, 2014). Moreover, the major parts of the researches on social medias have been focused on users’ differences in relation with their culture (Ngai et al., 2015), researchers were asking for more studies on social media using culture as a dimension to test differences between users (Lewis and George, 2008; Srite and Karahanna, 2006; Khan et al. 2016).
3. Conceptual framework

This chapter aims to present an argumentation for this research's hypotheses, which has been developed in connection to the variables described in the literature review. Furthermore, the hypotheses have been shaped into a research model.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) developed the first brand community framework which included the customer-brand-customer triad, followed by McAlexander et al. (2002) who proposed a customer-centric approach, where the existence and the articulation of the community was dwelled in the customer experience rather than in the brand. McAlexander et al. (2002) acknowledged the dynamic aspect of brand communities, which included customer/brand, customer/product, customer/company and customer/customer relationships. Several researchers followed McAlexander et al. (2002) conceptualization and applied it to a social media context in order to explore these relationships in a communication effective platform (Laroche et al., 2012; Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a; Habibi et al., 2014b). A common agreement between the researchers suggested that relationships on social media brand communities were dynamic and it was important to recognize that, relationships took on many forms regardless the brand community was the subject of products or services. Subsequently, Habibi et al. (2014b) suggested exploring the attributes of products and services that made them acceptable to the types of relationships identified. Furthermore, Habibi et al. (2014b) and Bruhn et al. (2008) acknowledged that relationships formed on brand communities based on social media were dynamic, however; customers represented the focal point and the relationships partner may be different depending on various factors (social context, industry, product category). Vargo and Lusch (2004) recognized that service companies should have a customer-oriented view, and services have particularities that differs them from products, when it comes to creating value for customers (Jahn and Kunz, 2012).

Services are characterized by intangibility (paucity of a tactile quality of goods), inseparability (concurrently produced and consumed), heterogeneity (cannot be standardized) and perishability (cannot be produced before of demand and inventoried) (Zeithaml et al., 1985; Merz et al., 2009). Services are becoming more and more predominant and the development of the services highlights the relationships and importance of customers (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Merz et al., 2009). Thus, delivering
prized information to members can create value, because “brands need the community and the community needs the brand” (Jahn and Kunz, 2012, p.354). Therefore, when customers are part of a social media based brand community focused on services, the relationships which customers form may be different from communities which are focused around the products of a brands because relationships on such communities may vary depending on the context and industry (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Jahn and Kunz, 2012).

Considering the original customer centric model (McAlexander et al., 2002), the customer/company relationships intended to measure the feelings customers have towards the organization that owns the brand (McAlexander et al., 2002). Researches used customer/company variable as part of their conceptualizations in their attempt to analyze the effects of SMBBC (Laroche et al., 2012; Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a). However, even if the results showed that customer-company relationships were significant in brand communities based on social media, the limitation of the sample using product-based brand communities allowed them to conclude that the relationships were dynamic and may vary depending on the industry. Nonetheless, Cova and White (2010) argued that when brands develop community spirit, and consumers create relationships and interact around the brands, consumers believe they own the brand rather than the company itself. Moreover, the power of the relationship between the consumers and brand may be so powerful, that some even questions whether the brand belongs to the company or not (Cova and White, 2010; Veloutsou, 2009). Therefore, authors of this study choose not to include customer/company relationships in their conceptualization.

3.1. Customer/brand relationships

Customer/brand relationships have been identified as fundamental in the context of brand communities by several researchers (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002) and social media based brand communities’ context (Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al. 2014a; Habibi et al. 2014b). According to Singh et al. (2017) social media strengthen the relationships among business and consumers. Therefore, brands can correspond with customers on a more recurrent and individual level through these networks and can create long-term relationships. Callarisa et al. (2012) argued that social media platforms affected the creation and development of relationships, removing barriers between brands and customers and other agents. Furthermore, these relationships between the customer and
the brand increased the effectiveness of the communication process for their good and services, as well as with greater awareness in brand loyalty, brand association, perceived quality (Chen and Wang, 2011; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Callarisa et al., 2012); thus, it can lead to a positive effect on CBBE. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

- H1- Customer/brand relationships have a positive effect on CBBE

3.2. Customer/customer relationships

One of the main motivation customers enroll in brand communities is to bond with other users and to create relationships (McAlexander et al., 2002; Laroche et al., 2013). When customers join a social media based brand community they become exposed to meaningful experiences which other users had with the respective brand and its products or services and also to the brand content (Habibi et al., 2014a). In this way, customers communicate with other brand users. Inheriting feedback from other users and sharing meaningful experiences strengthen the connection between users (Habibi et al., 2014a). Hence, these enhanced relationships resulted from the interactions on social media affect customers perception regarding the quality of the brand loyalty, and makes customer consider the brand more trustworthy; also, consumers become aware of the brand and form associations more easily (Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a; Habibi et al., 2014b); which can result in positive effect on CBBE. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

- H2- Customer/customer relationships have a positive effect on CBBE

3.3. Customer/service relationships

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) argue that assisting in the use of the brand is a really important task, which is executed in the brand communities. Assistance is manifested in such communities through actions that help other users to repair the product or to solve problems with it. Assistance is also embedded through sharing information on brand related resources (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Furthermore, same authors argued that brand communities raise the probability of helping in assisting customer prior and after purchasing the product or service because when users form relationships they have a sense of familiarity and trust the community more. However, regarding service brands, customers will not seek to fix or repair the product. The nature of services implies that customers may seek information regarding the pre-purchase and post-purchase issues
Jahn and Kunz (2012). Moreover, Nair (2011) claims that in the service industry, customers are engaging in communities in regard of a brand in order to acquire information prior to purchasing that service. The nature of social media platforms ease the share of information regarding solving certain problems and troubleshooting (Laroche et al., 2013). When engaged in a brand community, customers seek to build awareness around the brand if their needs are satisfied (Nair, 2011), which can have an impact on the CBBE dimensions (Buil et al., 2013). Considering the previous conceptualization of SMBBC of McAlexander et al. (2002), who examined customer/product relationships and due to the nature of services (intangibility) authors of this study consider customer/service relationships as an integrating part in social media based brand communities, reflecting the feeling customers have towards the service itself. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been developed:

- H3- Customer/service relationships have a positive effect on CBBE

3.4. Perceived brand trust

Perceived brand trust represents an important issue when it comes to social media context (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Schau et al., 2009). Moreover, several authors examined the effects of brand trust in an online brand community (Laroche et al., 2009; Habibi et al., 2014b). A study conducted by Tsai et al. (2012) revealed that the perceived level of trust in online communities heightens the participation in brand communities. Subsequently, higher involvement can be associated with stronger attitudes towards the brand, because when consumers participate and interact with other entities of a brand community (brand, other customers and the service) they are more likely to form associations towards the brand and form judgments which affect their perception towards the brand (Habibi et al., 2014a; Habibi et al., 2014b), therefore CBBE can be enhanced more easily if consumers perceive the brand as trustworthy. Nonetheless, previous studies agree that brand trust has not been researched enough in the context of brand communities and suggest expanding the knowledge on brand trust in the context of SMBBC, as it represents a crucial aspect which has the potential to affect the outcome of such communities (Schau et al., 2009; Tsai et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014b). Therefore, based on previous studies who analyzed the importance of perceived brand trust in online communities (Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014b), and its potential to amplify the enhancing of CBBE, the following hypothesis is presented:
- H4- Perceived brand trust has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between social media based brand communities and customer-based brand equity.

3.5. Cultural differences

The relatively limited number of researches that dealt with culture in a social media context has stressed the previous academicians to acknowledge the need of further investigating the potential role of culture in a social media context (Lewis and George, 2008; Ngai et al., 2015; Pookulangara and Koesler, 2011). When it comes to conceptualizing culture, there are various approaches (Hofstede, 1984; Hall, 1989; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997). However, the only studies who treated the role of culture in a social media context (Lewis and George, 2008; Pookulangara and Koesler, 2011) employed Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions. In the attempt to compare other models of culture, Magnusson et al. (2008) revealed that even if more recent models provide more advanced framework, many components related to behavior and relationships appear to correlate with Hofstede’s (1984) dimensions. Considering these studies and Goodrich and Mooij (2014) study, one particular dimension have been found as relevant in a social media context, individualism/collectivism.

In collectivistic cultures, it is argued that members are more likely to interact with other members and create relationships, which extends to word-of-mouth regarding the products, services and brands (Goodrich and Mooij, 2014). Subsequently, enhancing relationships is a core component of SMBBC (Habibi et al., 2014a). Moreover, WOM has been proven as an efficient way to create awareness around a brand and also can create positive attitude for consumers towards a brand (Davari and Strutton, 2014, Laroche et al., 2012). On the other hand, in individualistic cultures, users are more likely to look for information in order to maximize the utility of the services or products (Goodrich and Mooij, 2014). Furthermore, users from individualistic cultures engage in social media platforms to share ideas and opinions for personal information search. When engaged in a SMBBC, user shares resources with other users in order to obtain valuable information regarding the brand or the service (Laroche et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a).

Considering the aspects presented and the differences between individualism/collectivism dimension which has the potential to influence communication behavior adversely, as well as affecting the strength of relationships of a group (Goodrich and Mooij, 2014), and the particularities of SMBBC which represents a
more developed variation of a group in regard to a brand (McAlexander et al., 2002; Laroche et al., 2013), the following hypothesis has been developed:

- **H5** - There are differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures when it comes to the impact of social media based brand communities on CBBE.

Figure 3 presented below reveals the research model proposed along with the hypotheses, which need to be tested. The first three hypotheses (H1, H2 and H3) refer to the type of relationships formed on SMBBC (customer/brand relationship, customer/customer relationship, customer/service relationship) and their effect on CBBE. The fourth hypothesis aims to present perceived brand trust and how it can moderate the relationship between SMBBC and CBBE. The fifth and last hypothesis presented in the current research aims to present the cultural differences, more specifically how individualistic and collectivistic cultures can enhance CBEE.

![Figure 3- Research model](image)
4. Methodology

In this chapter, the research methodology used to conduct this study is presented. It aims to explain the research design, approach, data collection sources and methods in connection to the purpose of the study. This chapter also brings up the importance of quality criteria and ethics in research.

4.1. Design and approach

The purposes of social research can be organized into three different groups (exploratory, explanatory and descriptive) directly connected with what the author is trying to accomplish in the study, to explore a new area or a new topic, to describe a social phenomenon, or to explain and figure out why something happen (Neuman, 2002); however, one purpose is always predominant over the others. The explanatory design was used since the researchers are more concerned with explanations rather than descriptions with aiming at theoretical calibration and testing hypotheses (Creswell and Clark, 2007).

This research is based on the model of Aaker (1991) on brand equity and McAlexander et al. (2002) model on brand communities, with the aim of increasing the knowledge on the effect of relationships formed on social media based brand communities, on customer-based brand equity in the service industry. According to Saunders et al. (2007), the deductive approach is used when the data gathered are explained through the means of theories. The research was done in a deductive approach since it is based on previous theories and literature. By doing this the aim of the researchers is to enhance and extend the actual theory (Neuman, 2002) on SMBBC.

The sequential explanatory strategy for mixed methods designed was used in this research. It is characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data on the first phase, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data (Ivankova et al., 2006; Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) argues that the second phase of this method enable the researchers to elaborate and explain the results of the first phase. According to the article of Ivankova et al. (2006) the rationale in this approach consist in quantitative data and their analysis will gather the researcher knowledge about the research problem, the qualitative data and their analysis will further refine and explain in more details the results found in the first phase by exploring views and opinions with more depth. An overview of the process can be seen in Figure 4. This research method present strengths and
weaknesses in the process, on the first hand the easiness to implement and the clear separation of the various stages, the ability to have clear report on the different phases. As a weakness of this design was found the length of data collection since the two phases are separated, and more especially if the same amount of time is given to both phases (Creswell, 2013).

According to Hyde (2000), quantitative approach is well suited since it helps draw a large sample, enabling the authors to establish conclusions based on the characteristics of the population. Moreover, Creswell (2013) discuss that quantitative researches focus on testing theories with numbers, and by looking at the relationship between different variables, which is the aim of this study with SMBBC, and CBBE. According to Neuman (2002), quantitative approach is fitting well deductive researches since it adds validity to suitability in relation with the aims. However, the researchers have decided to solidify and confirm the results of the quantitative phase by collecting qualitative data as mentioned earlier in the research design. By using the sequential explanatory strategy approach, the researchers of this study will get deep insights about the phenomenon and will also have the possibility to create a closer relationship with the respondents (Gray, 2014; Ivankova et al., 2006).

![Figure 4- Sequential explanatory design overview](image-url)
4.2. Data sources

For the conducted research, data has been collected from primary sources. Primary data allows researchers to more specifically answer the purpose of the research since it contains precise information regarding the investigated subject. Primary data was collected from airlines companies that are present on social media brand communities. Airlines industry has been chosen mainly because of its popularity on social media channels. A report made by Statista shows that the top 10 leading airlines worldwide by brand value in 2017, have together over 19 million fans on their Facebook communities (Statista, 2017b) (Appendix C). Moreover, the fan growth on social media for the top airlines companies shows an average increase of approximately 21 000 fans/month in the past 6 months (Socialbakers, 2017) (Appendix D).

Since the purpose of this paper is to explain relationships on SMBBC and the effect on CBBE in the service industry, airline companies have been found as relevant from a managerial perspective (since airlines are becoming more and more popular on social media) and from a theoretical perspective as well, as several researchers acknowledge the importance of airlines in the service industry (Chen and Tseng, 2010; Uslu et al., 2013). Therefore, airline companies that are present on social media make a perfect field to conduct this study and target our population.

4.3. Population and sample

The population and the sample represent one of the most important issues of research since they can determine partly the error (Aaker et al., 2012; Malhotra, 2010). Population refers to a number of characteristics that all the elements in the population must have. However, considering the large size of the population, researchers cannot always test every individual because of the cost and time issues (Saunders et al., 2007). Consequently, researchers may reconsider the population as something more manageable (Saunders et al., 2007). The sample represents a subgroup of the population and it defines the population that is going to be studied (Malhotra, 2010; Saunders et al., 2007).

Considering the numerous service companies which are present on social media, the study considers the sample as the airlines companies active on SMBBC. Therefore, it is selected as one of the population delimitation of the current research. Also, probability-sampling techniques could not be used due to the distribution of the population and the abundance
of airline companies and social media platforms; therefore, the chances or probability of each element to be selected from the population is not possible (Saunders et al., 2007).

Non-probability sampling was used in this research, more specifically, convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Non-probability sampling includes an element of subjective judgment (Saunders et al., 2007) and implies that some individuals in the population have higher chances of being selected than others (Denscombe, 2009). Convenience sampling has been criticized due to lack of randomness of the sampling process (Saunders et al., 2007; Neuman, 2002); however, gathering the answers over a longer period of time and different times of the week increase the credibility since there is more variety in the responses (Malhotra and Birks, 2008; Aczel and Sounderpandian, 2009). In addition to convenience sampling, snowball sampling was used by requesting participants to share the survey and invite other persons to participate. Snowball sampling refers to a group of the target population that is used in order to establish contact with other members of the sample (Neuman, 2002).

In order to quantify the data and to have generalizable results, the sample size needs to be determined (Neuman, 2002, Saunders et al., 2007; Hair et al., 2010). Furthermore, a survey cannot be implemented if the sample size is not known (Aaker et al., 2012). The rule of thumb has been recognized as a relevant method to reveal the minimum size of the sample (Green, 1991; Pallant, 2010). The following equation is proposed considering the rule of thumb:

\[ N \times 50 + 8 \times m \]

Where \( N \) represents the required numbers of cases or sample size while \( m \) represents the numbers of independent variables. Considering these, the following minimum amount of cases have been calculated:

\[ 50 + 8 \times 3 = 74 \]

The initial number of respondents was 205. However, as Chapter 5.1 explains, the qualifying criteria, which made the response qualified in this analysis, was to be part of a social media brand communities in regards of an airline. Considering this criterion, 39.6% of the responses have been eliminated reaching the value of 124. In addition, after the cleanup of the data and the analysis of the outliers presented in Chapter 4.7., the number of usable cases have been reduced to 121.
For the purpose of the study three experts from the airlines industry were interviewed to discuss the results of the surveys to get some professional inputs on the discussion and conclusion chapters. The population of the qualitative part consists of three high positioned experts with an average of ten or more years of experience in the airlines industry. They were selected as a result of convenience and snowball sampling within the researcher's network. The three interviewed experts are: Alberto Farfán, Ex PR and Marketing Manager at Continental Airlines & Copa Airlines, Lima - Peru and owner of the AeroPeru brand; Babak Ashti, Head of marketing at Uvet Nordic AB, Stockholm - Sweden; and Rodrigo Sanchez, ex associate of Flygpoolen AB and Senior consult BSP accounting at Uvet Nordic AB, Stockholm - Sweden.

4.4. Data collection

4.4.1. Data collection instrument

Considering the mixed approach, design and the nature of the current research, survey has been found as the most relevant choice of data collection method for the quantitative phase (Saunders et al., 2007). The survey provides the researcher a numeric description of attitudes and perceptions of the population (Creswell, 2013) and it consists of a set of questions which goal is to collect data from respondents (Saunders et al., 2007).

The development of the questionnaire occurred in two stages. Firstly, relevant literature was reviewed considering the scale items measuring the independent variable, social media based brand communities. Measures were adapted from Habibi et al. (2014b) study, who analyzed the relationship on SMBBC on Facebook. Habibi et al. (2014b) questions were adapted from previous authors who analyzed such relationships (McAlexander et al., 2002; Laroche et al., 2012; Laroche et al., 2013). The variables measuring the relationship on SMBBC were measured using a multi-item Likert measures on a five-point scale varying from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Furthermore, in order to find relevant scales to measure the dependent variable, CBBE, the literature on each dimension has been reviewed. Variables were measured also through multi-item Likert measures on a five-point scale as can be seen in the operationalization (Table 2). In addition to the items mentioned, control questions were used about age, gender and nationality as well as frequency of respondents’ access to social media platforms for descriptive and demographic purposes.
The survey was delivered online on Facebook to the group users, of airline companies related groups. An extensive research was done to find relevant Facebook groups in order to post the survey. However, due to the lack of responds from group administrators, the survey was only posted to 20 groups. Moreover, the response rate can be considered low (0.33 %), even with the efforts of the researchers to persuade the population complete the survey. The list of groups the survey was sent to can be seen in (Appendix E).

The second phase of the sequential explanatory strategy for mixed methods consist in interviewing three experts. According to previous literature, there are three kinds of interviews researchers can conduct; structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Christensen et al., 2010; DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). In order to be flexible, the authors of this research have decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with predetermined questions written on an interview guide. The researchers believe that the order and the wording of questions can be modified during the interview to enable more detailed responses that can lead to new path or just the confirmation of the quantitative phase (Gray, 2014). The authors discussed whether to use focus groups or interviews for the qualitative phase of the data collection. According to Gray (2014), Doody and Noonan (2013) focus group was not the most appropriate method for collecting data. These authors have shown that focus group can give less control for the researchers, and participants can have influenced discussions or participants can discuss less if someone is talking over another participant. Moreover, the respondents for the qualitative phase were not living in the same geographic location so it became more relevant to use interviews over focus group, more specifically phone interviews that lasted from 30 minutes up to one hour.

4.4.2. Operationalization

The operationalization table reveals the items/scales measured in the survey as well as the operational definition of each variable and the original adaptation of the items. The table also provides the independent variable of SMBBC and dependent variable CBBE.
As presented in the literature review, there are various conceptualizations and measurement scales when it comes to brand equity due to the lack of consensus between academicians (Pappu et al., 2005; Washburn and Plank, 2012). As a result, it is essential...
for the purpose of this research to adopt the right definition, scales and items. Subsequently, the items used for constructing the survey have been adapted for numerous studies as it can be seen in the operationalization (Table 2), which were applied within the context of social media based brand communities.

Considering the lack of agreement regarding CBBE, the importance of avoiding any misunderstandings within survey is heightened. In order to make the questionnaire as relevant as possible and to identify and remove potential problems, a pretest is often recommended (May, 2011; Malhotra, 2010; Neuman, 2002). Pretest usually consists of a small representative sample of the population. In order to give valuable insights from a pretest it is recommended to administer the survey face-to-face; in this way, the respondents can express their concerns or problems properly (Malhotra, 2010).

To begin with, the survey was pre-tested with two academicians. The results required minor adjustments regarding the structure and positioning of certain statements. Thereafter, the survey was administered face-to-face to six representatives of the target population. The results of the pre-test showed that some of the questions could be improved in regards of the wording since the respondents had troubles understanding the meaning of a few questions. Moreover, the pre-test helped in eliminating the confusing phrases and sentences that may have influenced the respondents’ answers.

4.6. Data analysis method

4.6.1. Quantitative analysis method

The quantitative research was conducted by using IBM SPSS 20 Software as a tool for systematizing and performing the analysis. Analysis was performed in five stages. In the first part, the descriptive of the data are presented in order to characterize and summarize the data collected. Control variables such as age, gender, nationality and social media frequency are presented in the first part.

Secondly, after the data was collected, the scale items have been transformed into constructs applying factor analysis method. In the case of CBBE, a construct has been extracted by calculating the mean of the items. Factor analysis is useful in reducing the number of variables by transforming the original items into factors constituted by one or more new variable. Principal component analysis (PCA) have been applied and a varimax rotation for the fitting the new variables from the old ones (Aaker et al., 2010).
Considering the items have been preselected as shown in operationalization, PCA have been used to reduce the number of variables removing any explanatory purpose. The determination of the factors selected from each construct has been done by analyzing how much separate information consists. Observing the eigenvalues which must be over one to include the factor (Aaker et al., 2010) allows to decide upon the number of factors extracted. Moreover, the quality of the new factors is determined by measuring the total variance explained which is acceptable when the value reaches roughly 60% (Cohen et al., 2011).

Thirdly, in order to measure the reliability of the scale and to find out if the underlying constructs and statements used in the survey measure what they are intended to measure, a Cronbach’s Alpha analysis was performed. Subsequently, correlation analysis was executed in order to determine the construct validity of the study. This type of analysis can be used to determine if a group of indicators have the impulse to group together into clusters (Hair et al., 2014).

Lastly, in order to test the hypothesis, two methods have been used: the regression analysis and ANOVA or the analysis of variance. Considering the regression analysis, it represents a statistical method, which allows predicting the value of a variable depending on other variables and presenting whether there is a relationship between them (Malhotra, 2010, Aaker et al., 2011). Linear regression has attracted some criticism when it is used having an ordinal dependent variable. In such cases, ordinal regression is considered to be more appropriate (Aaker et al., 2010). However, linear regression is often used in this case because, according to O’Connell (2006) a comparison between linear regression and ordinal regression shows that the effects of independent variables on the dependent variable were the same, while the magnitude differs. Therefore, linear regression has been used in this research in order to test the hypothesis.

Multiple linear regression test if there is a statistical relation between a dependent variable (y= CBBE) and two or more independent variables (x₁= customer/brand relationship; x₂= customer/customer relationships; x₃= customer/service relationships) (Hair et al., 2010). In order to perform a multiple regression analysis, several assumptions need to be fulfilled in order for the results to be valid (Pallant, 2010): sample size, multicollinearity, outliers, normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. Assumptions have been tested prior
performing the method and the results can be seen in the Appendix F. The formula for the multiple linear regression performed in this study is designed as it follows:

\[ y = a + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \beta_3 x_3 + e, \]

where

- \( a \) = constant
- \( y \) = CBBE
- \( x_1 \) = customer/brand relationships
- \( x_2 \) = customer/customer relationships
- \( x_3 \) = customer/service relationships
- \( e \) = standard error

The second method used for hypothesis testing is the analysis of variance or ANOVA and it explores the differences of means of a scale variable established by the cases of an ordinal variable (Robson, 2011). In this case, the dependent variable will be the ordinal variable used for grouping, while the scale variable represents the independent variable (Malhotra, 2010).

### 4.6.2. Qualitative data analysis method

The researchers in this paper decided to use a thematic analysis, which was defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p.79). This method provides core skills to researchers for conducting many forms of qualitative analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) this analysis can be seen as flexible and provide a rich description of the data overall and a more detailed analysis of some aspects of the data. The thematic analysis associates the search for and the identification of common threads that that prolong across the interview or within the different set of interviews (DeSantis and Noel Ugarriza, 2000). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) the thematic analysis contributes to a purely qualitative detailed and nuanced account of data, moreover it applies a minimal description of data sets and enables the interpretation of various aspects of the research topic. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Elo and Kyngäs (2008) the deductive approach is relevant if the aim of thematic analysis is to test previous theory in diverse situation, or to compare categories at various periods.
Considering the sequential explanatory design, where the qualitative analysis is based on the results of the statistical results, the thematic analysis has been adapted in order to meet the purpose of the research. Therefore, even though the identification of common themes represents an important part, the current research has used an iterative process, by presenting the themes, which resulted from the quantitative analysis, to the interviewees. Hence, the themes have been discussed in order to add level of detail to the statistical analysis. The same approach has been used in the literature by Ivankova et al. (2006) and, due to the flexibility of the thematic analysis, the qualitative part added more insights regarding the subject treated.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) the first step of the process is to gather the data and be familiar to it in order to transcribe it. The second step of the analysis was to generate initial codes composed of interesting features, and then search for themes. (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The third step was to collate all the codes into themes, review these themes, and verify if the themes work with all the data set. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) the following step is the define and name these themes and produce the final report by compelling extract examples relating back to the research questions and literature.

4.7. Data cleanup and outliers

Before starting the analysis, it is recommended that researchers assess the normality of the distribution of data and check for outliers (Pallant, 2010). An outlier represents an observation which is considerably different from the rest of the cases through extreme values one or more variables analyzed (Pallant, 2010; Hair et al, 2010). This will prevent from encountering problems and having insignificant results and errors further in the analysis procedures (Pallant, 2010; Hair et al., 2010). There were no missing data in the current research. Moreover, the normality of the distribution has been assessed by observing the Q-Q plots for each variable.

A deeper analysis of the outliers identified several observations with extreme values in the data. Considering the customer/service variable, four outliers have been identified a 5% trimmed value of 2.44 compared with the recorded mean of 2.47 allowing to retain the cases in the data file due to the similarity of the mean values considering the guidelines provided by Pallant (2010). Brand awareness variable has been found to have 2 outliers. However, the 5% trimmed mean was recorded at 4.40 whereas the mean was set at 4.47.
This allowed retaining the outliers in the data set. On the other hand, the outliers’ analysis run on brand associations variable revealed that three respondents have answered consistently negative, as a result the different between the 5\% trimmed mean (4.72) and the mean (4.60) required the exclusion of this cases for further analysis considering the answers were not considered usable due to the inconsistency. Therefore, a total of 121 usable answers were included in the analysis.

4.8. Quality criteria

In order to ensure a high-quality standard for this current research, validity and reliability test were performed. Validity and reliability are considered essential quality criteria when conducting a research (Hair et al., 2010; Pallant, 2010).

Validity refers to the extent to which a scale measures what it is supposed to measure (Pallant, 2010). According to Pallant (2010) validity consists of three forms: content, criterion and construct validity. Content validity considers whether the scales are satisfactory to describe the items. Criterion validity, on the other hand, examines if the scales work or behave as expected, while construct validity concerns whether the items cover the entire construct (Pallant, 2010). Content validity and criterion validity were ensured by supporting the items and constructs of this study with a theoretical background and by providing a comprehensive review of the existing literature on SMBBC and CBBE. Furthermore, the pretest allowed testing the behavior of the items selected and also assured the transparency and anonymity of the primary data collected. Construct validity was assured by conducting a Pearson’s correlation analysis.

According to Pallant (2010), reliability indicates how free a scale is from random error. Moreover, reliability ensures that if the object of measurement is not changing, what is measured today will not change if you measure it tomorrow (Gray, 2014). Reliability results are presented in Table 5 and all the values were suggesting a strong reliability. This means the constructs measure what they are intended to measure. However, considering customer/service variable, the initial Cronbach’s Alpha showed a value of 0.613. Further investigation concluded with the removal of Q.13 (Appendix H) from further analysis, in this way the new Cronbach's value is 0.719.
4.9. Ethical considerations

Due to the fact that in the business area of research, participants from general public are often required, the ethical aspect became important in order to ensure the preservation of the participants’ respect (Christensen et al., 2011). Moreover, irrespective if the research is conducted face-to-face or online, ethical concern maintains its importance (Saunders et al., 2007). Determining the most suitable way to negotiate access in order to conduct the research represents to first step to ensure that the ethical considerations are met in a social media context (Saunders et al., 2007). In order to have access to customers on SMBBC of airlines companies, the airlines were initially contacted in order to be able to send the survey on their social media platforms. Moreover, identity and the anonymity of the respondents for the quantitative part, even if the study has no effects on them, needs to be assured when gathering information through a survey (Christensen et al., 2011). For the qualitative part, the interviewees were asked before the interview if they were giving their consent to the researchers to give their names and positions occupied in order to improve their credibility as experts of the airline industry. Moving back to the quantitative part it is also necessary to consider the type of questions which are appropriate to be asked to the respondents when they fill the survey. Christensen et al. (2011) argue that people are less likely to answer the questions if the nature of the questions is sensitive. The pretest was conducted in research to ensure that questions were perceived accurately and resulted in no harm to the sensibility or privacy of the respondents.

Another concern for researcher regarding the ethical aspect represents the lack of informed consent (Saunders et al., 2007). The respondents cannot choose whether they participate or not in the study and the identity of the research is not familiar to them when there is a lack of consent (Saunders et al., 2007). Nonetheless, providing respondents all the information needed in order to make a decision on whether they want or not to participate in the research it can be difficult. (Flick et al., 2008). However, a short text containing information regarding the scope of the research along with the guarantee of the respondents’ anonymity was provided at the beginning of the questionnaire. In this way, subjects are becoming aware of the topic and they can choose whether to participate or not, regardless the age (Flick et al., 2008).
5. Analysis and results

This chapter exposes the results of the empirical material gathered from the surveys through tables analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. The results are shown as descriptive statistics, reliability tests and construct validity followed by a multiple linear regression that is presented to test the study’s hypotheses and test if they are either supported or not.

5.1 Sample Descriptive

5.1.1 Qualification Criterion

The qualification criterion for this research was to be a member of a social media based brand communities on Facebook related to any airline company. This question was asked on the first section of the survey in order to directly select the population that was able to answer the survey. In the data collection phase, 205 respondents responded to the survey. However, only 124 respondents were members of a social media based brand community related to an airline company and hence, met the primary qualification criterion. Three respondents were excluded because they were outliers and have been recorded as having extreme values. (See 4.7. Data cleanup and outliers).

5.1.2 Demographics

The sample showed some similarities in terms of respondents. The first aspect is the gender division of the respondents, which was almost equal between the genders with 48.8% of female respondents and 49.6% male respondents. Two respondents of the sample responded that they preferred not to say their gender (Table 3).

Analyzing the age distribution, it can be observed that 3.3% of the respondents are between 12-17 years old. Most of the respondents (50%) are between 18 and 34 years old. 12.45 of the population is recorded between the interval 35-44, while the respondents older than 44 represents 23% of the population observed. The sample in this research is in majority under 44 years old representing 76% of the sample with the biggest group represented by the 25-34 with 33.1% of the sample. When asked what were their social media frequency, most of the respondents (90.7%) answered they are accessing social media at least once a day. The rest of the sample was using social media once a week, 5.8% of the respondents, and once a month was represented by 3.3% of the respondents.
The nationality of the respondents was asked at the end of the questionnaire and the researcher has gathered information from many different nationality, however the researchers observed that the main nationality was represented by Swedish with almost 14.9%, followed by Peruvians with 14%, Romanian with 13.2%, Canadian with 12.4% and British with 9.9%. The rest of the sample is divided in other nationalities. In total 25 nationalities are represented in this questionnaire with various opinions and different point of views.

Table 3- Sample Descriptive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Statistics</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>49.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64 or older</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social media Frequency</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than one time a day</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hourly</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2. Factor construction

A rotated factor analysis, using a Varimax rotation has been conducted in order to create the constructs, which were used, in the current research (See 4.6.1.). All the items have been merged together in one variable, which preserved the individual information. The number of factors selected was made by following the eigenvalues. Specifically, if the eigenvalues were greater than 1 it was accepted as a valid new factor. Therefore, it can be observed in Table 4 that in the first step, all the eigenvalues are below one after one step, which leaves the entire construct as one factor. Some of the variables are well represented with an explanation of variance greater than 70 % (customer/brand relationships, customer/customer relationships, perceived brand quality, brand trust);
however, considering customer/service relationships, brand awareness, brand associations and brand loyalty variables present weaker correlations. Nonetheless, total variances result of approximately 60% is satisfactory.

Table 4 - Component matrix with Eigenvalues explained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extracted factors</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Total for one component</th>
<th>% Variance explained for one component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Brand Relationships</td>
<td>Item 1</td>
<td>0.900</td>
<td>2.938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 2</td>
<td>0.862</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 3</td>
<td>0.844</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 4</td>
<td>0.821</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Service Relationships</td>
<td>Item 1</td>
<td>0.872</td>
<td>3.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 2</td>
<td>0.906</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 3</td>
<td>0.911</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 4</td>
<td>0.810</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand awareness</td>
<td>Item 1</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td>2.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 2</td>
<td>0.930</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 3</td>
<td>0.742</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 4</td>
<td>0.696</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand associations</td>
<td>Item 1</td>
<td>0.675</td>
<td>2.553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 2</td>
<td>0.769</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 3</td>
<td>0.873</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 4</td>
<td>0.862</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand loyalty</td>
<td>Item 1</td>
<td>0.773</td>
<td>2.235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 2</td>
<td>0.876</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 3</td>
<td>0.631</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 4</td>
<td>0.686</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived brand quality</td>
<td>Item 1</td>
<td>0.866</td>
<td>2.372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 2</td>
<td>0.810</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 3</td>
<td>0.693</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 4</td>
<td>0.785</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand trust</td>
<td>Item 1</td>
<td>0.900</td>
<td>2.991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 2</td>
<td>0.900</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 3</td>
<td>0.822</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Item 4</td>
<td>0.835</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.841</td>
<td>2.755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.884</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.789</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.803</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3. Reliability analysis

Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients have been calculated for establishing the reliability of the scales. Scales with fewer items have greater chances to produce low Cronbach’s values (Pallant, 2010); however, results show high values above 0.7. According to Pallant (2010) and DeVellis (2003) the values above 0.7 are regarded as high values. However, customer/service relationships variable shown a low value of 0.613. After further analysis, one item of the variable has been deleted (Q. 13), therefore, the variable is measured using three items and having a Cronbach’s Alpha value of 0.719 after the item removal.
The survey examines the relationships formed on SMBBC in the service industry, customer/brand relationships (0.874), customer/customer relationships (0.895), customer/service relationships (0.719) and their effect on CBBE, which is measure through its four dimensions: brand awareness (0.786), brand associations (0.712), brand loyalty (0.762) and perceived brand quality (0.887). Brand trust variable showed a value of 0.840.

Table 5- Cronbach’s Alpha values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Number of items</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Brand Relationships</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Customer/ Relationships</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer/Service Relationships</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.719*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Awareness</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Associations</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Loyalty</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Brand Quality</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand trust</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.840</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Cronbach’s Alpha after 1 item deleted
n= 121

5.4. Correlation analysis

Correlation analysis have been run in order to establish if the constructs are highly correlated between each other (Saunders et al., 2017). All eight variables have been analyzed by suing the Pearson’s correlation analysis. In overall 8 different variables consisted of four separate Likert scale measures (exception customer/service variable with 3 items) were tested.

The Table 6 below present only positive values, which indicate a positive correlation between the different variables. In addition to this there is only one value above 0.8, which means that there is no indication of multicollinearity as stated by Pallant (2010) and Hair et al. (2010), the multicollinearity is occurring at 0.9 or above.
Table 6 - Correlation analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.Customer/Brand</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.Customer/Customer</td>
<td>.611**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.Customer/Service</td>
<td>.720**</td>
<td>.725</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.Brand Awareness</td>
<td>.636**</td>
<td>.568**</td>
<td>.658**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.Brand Associations</td>
<td>.624**</td>
<td>.548**</td>
<td>.577**</td>
<td>.799**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.Brand Loyalty</td>
<td>.709**</td>
<td>.663**</td>
<td>.635**</td>
<td>.696**</td>
<td>.717**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.PBQ</td>
<td>.798**</td>
<td>.588**</td>
<td>.602**</td>
<td>.563**</td>
<td>.600**</td>
<td>.687**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.Brand Trust</td>
<td>.825**</td>
<td>.643**</td>
<td>.722**</td>
<td>.650**</td>
<td>.684**</td>
<td>.780**</td>
<td>.796**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlations is significant at the 0.01 level

5.5. Hypothesis testing

5.5.1. Regression analysis

In order to test the first three hypotheses, five models were built (Table 7). The first model presented the independent variables, age, social media frequency use and gender as independent variables in order to see the effect on the dependent variable, CBBE. The R² value is really low (.029) which shows that control variables explain only 2.9% of the variance in the model. From the three variables, age has been found significant at the ten percent level. However, the Adjusted R² (0.004) reveals that the model explains only 0.4% of the variance.

Model 2 tested whether the relationships between customers and the brand on social media based brand communities have a positive effect on CBBE. A high R² change of 0.645, compared to the first model reveals that customer/brand relationships represents a strong predictor of CBBE in the model. The result was significant on a level of p< 0.001. Subsequently, a high beta value (0.808) reveals that the dependent variable, CBBE, varies with the independent variable customer/brand relationships, while other independent variables are constant. Considering the control variables, age and social media frequency use have been found significant (on a ten percent level). Hence, H1 is supported.

The second hypothesis predicts that the relationships between customers and other customers on social media based brand communities have a positive impact on CBBE. By looking at Model 2 (Table 7), it can be seen that customers/customers relationships have a positive effect on CBBE; the R² is 0.460, which means that relationships between customers and other customers explain 46% of the variance. Furthermore, H2 is significant at p<0.001. More exactly, it seems that with an increased strength of the
relationships between customers and other customers on SMBBC, the higher CBBE results. Consequently, neither is much gained by testing the different control variables in this model. A low significance level shows that gender, social media frequency use and age does not appear to have any effect on CBBE.

The third hypothesis determines whether the relationships between customers and the service on SMBBC have an impact on CBBE. Observing the R² change in Table 7 (0.515) it can be argued that customer/service relationships represent a predictor of CBBE. Consequently, the results were highly significant on a p<0.001, having a β value of 0.723, therefore it can be argued that, a strong relationship between customers and the service result in an increased CBBE. Considering the control variables, age have been found significant at a p <0.01, with a beta value of 0.197. Social media frequency use and gender does not seem to impact CBBE.

The overall model (Model 5), all independent variables were included explaining 72 percent of the variance in the dependent variable, CBBE. The R² change of Model 5 is 0.706 which shows that the three the model containing the first three hypotheses represent a predictor of the dependent variable, CBBE. Significance of the model is (p< 0.001) with F-value 52.71 (6 degrees of freedom). From the control variables, age and social media frequency use have been found significant (on a ten percent level). However, customer / service relationships have been found significant on a p<0.1, which means H3 is partially supported. Considering the beta values for the overall model, customer/brand relationships records the highest value (0.414). This suggests that this type of relationships have the strongest influence on CBBE. Furthermore, the strong influence in strengthened by the high significance level (p<0.001) Hence, H1 is supported (Customer/brand relationships have a positive effect on CBBE). Similarly, the second type of relationship (customer/customer) reveals a beta value of 0.132, at the significance level (p<0.01); thus, H2 is supported (Customer/customer relationships have a positive effect on CBBE). However, customer / service relationships have been found significant on a p<0.1, having a beta value of 0.111. This entails that customer/service relationships have a weaker influence on CBBE, therefore H3 is partially supported (Customer/service relationships have a positive effect on CBBE).
Table 7 - Multiple regression table for the effect of the relationships formed on SMBBC on CBBE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 Control</th>
<th>Model 2 x₁</th>
<th>Model 3 x₂</th>
<th>Model 4 x₃</th>
<th>Model 5 All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>4.019</td>
<td>1.718</td>
<td>2.807</td>
<td>1.870</td>
<td>1.574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>0.166**</td>
<td>0.128**</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.197****</td>
<td>0.025**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.045)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social media frequency use</strong></td>
<td>-0.084</td>
<td>-0.124**</td>
<td>-0.062</td>
<td>-0.121*</td>
<td>-0.112**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.047)</td>
<td>(0.045)</td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>-0.064</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>-0.086</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.116)</td>
<td>(0.068)</td>
<td>(0.085)</td>
<td>(0.081)</td>
<td>(0.063)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H1</strong> - Customer/brand relationships have a positive effect on CBBE</td>
<td>0.808****</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.563****</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
<td>(0.052)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H2</strong> - Customer/customer relationships have a positive effect on CBBE</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.686****</td>
<td>0.224***</td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H3</strong> - Customer/service relationships have a positive effect on CBBE</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.723****</td>
<td>0.150*</td>
<td>(0.047)</td>
<td>(0.063)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R²</strong></td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.674</td>
<td>0.488</td>
<td>0.544</td>
<td>0.735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adjusted R²</strong></td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.663</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.528</td>
<td>0.721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R² Change</strong></td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.645</td>
<td>0.460</td>
<td>0.515</td>
<td>0.706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F-value</strong></td>
<td>1.148</td>
<td>59.982****</td>
<td>27.66****</td>
<td>34.56****</td>
<td>52.71****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>df</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent variable: CBBE

Sig * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01, ****p<0.001 n= 121

5.5.2. Moderator analysis

In order to test H4, a moderator analysis have been run to test whether brand trust moderates the relationships between SMBC and CBBE. Two models have been built. Model 1 presents the independent variable SMBBC (by creating an index of the three types of relationships: customer/brand, customer/customer, customer/service), while the second model include brand trust as a predictor (Table 8) (by having the product between the SMBBC index created and Perceived brand trust). The second model presents an Adjusted R² of 0.749, which means that the model, which includes brand trust as an independent variable explains 74.4 % of the variance. Furthermore, the results are strengthened by the significance of the model (p<0.01). The R² change 0.061 shows the
increase in the variation explained by the addition of brand trust. Therefore, the variation of the model increased with 6.1%, which allow H4 to be supported (*Perceived brand trust has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between social media based brand communities and customer-based brand equity*).

Considering the control variables, age and gender have been found significant at ten percent level, however, the low beta values (0.090 for age and 0.022 for gender) reveals the variance of the dependent variable (CBBE) is modest when considering these two independent variables.

*Table 8- Moderator analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>1.739</td>
<td>2.553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.111**</td>
<td>0.090*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media frequency use</td>
<td>-0.101*</td>
<td>-0.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>0.022*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent variable</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships on SMBBC</td>
<td>0.820****</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderator</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4- Perceived brand trust has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between social media based brand communities and customer-based brand equity.</td>
<td>0.861***</td>
<td><em>(0.005)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R²</strong></td>
<td>0.696</td>
<td>0.757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adjusted R²</strong></td>
<td>0.685</td>
<td>0.749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R² change</strong></td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F-value</strong></td>
<td>66.299****</td>
<td>90.509***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>df</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sig * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01, ****p<0.001 n= 121
### 5.5.3. Analysis of variance (ANOVA)

**Table 9- One Way ANOVA analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer-based brand equity</th>
<th>General statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group statistics</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individualist</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>4.209</td>
<td>0.602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collectivist</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>3.789</td>
<td>0.707</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anova test</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean difference</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.269</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.420</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>Sum of squares between groups</th>
<th>Total sum of squares</th>
<th>Eta square*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.135</td>
<td>54.939</td>
<td>0.093</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*eta square= sum of squares between groups/total sum of squares (Cohen, 1992).

A One-Way Anova test has been conducted in order to test the average difference between individualist and collectivist cultures, having CBBE as independent variable. The results reveal that respondents from individualist cultures enhance higher attitudes towards CBBE than collectivist cultures. This may be observed by looking at Table 9 and the mean differences between these two groups (0.420). A p value of 0.001 allows H5 (*There are differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures when it comes to the impact of social media based brand communities on CBBE*) to be supported.

Furthermore, it can also be observed that the average of CBBE consisting of a sample of 121 respondents from individualist and collectivist culture is positive (4.039). In general, it can be argued that the attitudes towards CBBE are positive.

In order to calculate the effect size of the difference, Eta squared have been determined, following Pallant’s (2010) guidelines. The results show an eta square value of 0.093, which is considered as a large effect (Cohen, 1992).
Table 10 present an overview of the hypothesis tested for this study and the results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Analytical status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1 Customer/brand relationships have a positive effect on CBBE</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2 Customer/customer relationships have a positive effect on CBBE</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3 Customer/service relationships have a positive effect on CBBE</td>
<td>Partially supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4 Perceived brand trust has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between social media based brand communities and customer-based brand equity</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5 There are differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures when it comes to the impact of social media based brand communities on CBBE</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Discussions

This discussion chapter presents a summarized review of the results and analysis to create a mutual perspective from all hypotheses. Moreover, to add a level of detail to the results, the qualitative analysis is integrated in this chapter to provide reasonable answers to the accepted hypotheses.

Brand communities based on social media have become since their creation crucial for any company in the service industry (Habibi et al., 2014b) and both companies and users have understood the possible outcome of such communities, and the positive outcomes that they can generate for them (Laroche et al., 2013). The qualitative step showed that the three experts interviewed verify the statements of Habibi et al. (2014b) and Laroche et al. (2013) about the importance of being on social medias for companies.

The interviewees showed that social media is more dynamic than traditional media and it offers more opportunities to the service industry. They see the potential of social media since it is still growing and innovating on a daily basis. Moreover, social media represents one of the most significant communication tools, as it is effective in reaching the end consumers directly (Jang et al., 2008; Karamian et al., 2015). SMBBC are used mostly as a customer service platform, but it can also be used as a advertising platform according to the interviewees.

The first type of relationship observed relates to customer/brand relationship. The regression performed in the quantitative chapter above intended to examine whether these types of relationships were positively affecting CBBE. The results revealed that the relationship was the most significant. Customers value the relationship with the brand the most and it has the strongest influence on CBBE out of the three types of relationships analyzed. Hence it may be argued that customers engage in a relationship with the brand on social media based brand communities such as Facebook fan pages and Facebook groups, which in return can have positive effects on the CBBE. Moreover, the multiple regression analysis performed in the previous chapter shows that the more customers interact with the brand the more CBBE can be enhanced. It can be pointed out that brand awareness, associations, loyalty and PBQ can be enhanced by the network between the customers and the brand they are a fan of. This can be related to the experience and involvement customers have in regard to the brand they admire (Bart et al., 2014). Furthermore, Keller (1993) and Yoo and Donthu (2001) maintain that CBBE is based on
the reaction of stimuli arising on consumer’s acquaintance with a brand, thus, having a
close relationship between customers and the brand ease the creation of associations in
their memory, which in return enhances CBBE. In order to add a level of detail to the
results from the quantitative analysis, a discussion with experts from the field was
established. The results reveal that customer-brand relationship can have a positive effect
on CBBE, since it can be used as a tool to segment customers and reach end consumers
directly, without any geographical restriction, which ease the process of forming
associations and awareness in regard to the brand.

The second type of relationship analyzed refers to the relationships between customers
and other customers on SMBBC and whether it has a positive effect on CBBE or not. The
data analysis process disclosed that the relationship between customer/customer
relationships and CBBE is positive. This indicates that customers who join such
communities in regards of a brand engage and interact with other members of the
community, and such relationships enhance positive CBBE. Thus, it can be interpreted
that customers who join a Facebook Group or a Facebook Fan Page and interact, share
content and create relationships with other users heighten the equity of the brand they are
fan of. Habibi et al. (2014b) found that customer/customer relationships represent the key
to have shared experiences between the users and inherent feedback. Moreover, one of
the main advantages of social media represents the fact that is a communication effective
platform, which allows customers to share their experiences and reach other consumers
in seconds, which enhances the spread of WOM. Thus, it can be pointed out that
customers who share their experiences and interact with other customers on brand
communities will positively affect CBBE by enhancing positive WOM. In order to get
more insights regarding this type of relationship, and to explain how it can lead to positive
CBBE, thoughts and ideas from experts in the field have been analyzed. According to the
interviewees the relationships customers form with other customers is fundamental in
enhancing WOM. This may lead to a chain reaction, especially due to the social media
particularities, which has the potential to reach customers regardless their location in
seconds (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

The relationship between customer and the service represents the third type of
relationship analyzed and it refers to the pre-purchase and post-purchase information on
SMBBC and the relationship customers form with it. The statistical analysis revealed that
there is a positive relationship between customer/service relationship and CBBE.
However, the strength of the connection is weaker than customer/brand and customer/customer relationships and the hypothesis has been accepted at the ten percent level. The items used to measure customer/service relationships refers to pre-purchase and post purchase information and the relationship customers form with them, as previous researchers suggest in the service industry, among others Nair (2011), Jahn and Kunz (2012). Hence, it can be interpreted that the feedback consumers received on the Facebook groups or fan pages of the brand they admire in regard to a service they acquire or wish to acquire can lead to positive outcomes for brands, such as enhancing positive CBBE. However, the significance level of the relationship requires such information to be carefully taken into consideration. Nonetheless, in order to get more insights and add a level of detail, the results of the quantitative analysis have been discussed with three experts from the field. Therefore, it can be argued that assisting customers in buying a service or other concerns in regard to the service can affect CBBE, in the sense that customers creates positive attitudes and perceptions towards the brand. This may result in an increased loyalty of the customers, along with positive perception towards the quality of the brand.

Several researchers acknowledge the importance of perceived brand trust in the social media context (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Schau et al., 2009), while some revealed that perceived brand trust could heighten the participation in brand communities (Tsai et al., 2012). In attempt to analyze the moderating effect of the perceived brand trust on the relationship between SMBBC and CBBE a moderator analysis was run firstly. The results show that perceived brand trust positively moderates this relationship. Thus, it can be interpreted that if customers perceive a brand as trustable on SMBBC, it will result in higher probability of them to enhance positive associations towards the brand, therefore creating positive CBBE Furthermore, the results from the qualitative add a level of detail to the statistical results, and enhancing brand trust can lead on a more positive CBBE on SMBBC, by assuring transparency and engaging with customers.

The final aspect investigated in the current research refers to the cultural aspect. More specifically, it was tested whether there is a difference between individualistic and collectivistic cultures in enhancing CBBE. The data analysis process employed in this research reveals that users which comes from individualistic cultures are more likely to enhance positive CBBE than users from collectivistic cultures. Hence, it can be argued that the cultural differences represent a significant aspect on SMBBC, and different
cultures have different impact on CBBE. More specific, customers who come from individualistic cultures have higher probability of enhancing positive CBBE than customers who comes from collectivistic cultures. The results are surprising, considering that collectivistic cultures are based on interaction between members and forming relationships (Goodrich and Mooij, 2014). Subsequently this can be explained by the fact that, according to Goodrich and Mooij (2014), which explained that in individualistic cultures, users are more likely to search for information in order to maximize the utility of the service, thus, they engage on SMBBC for personal information research. In order to explain how these cultural differences affect CBBE and add a level of detail to the quantitative analysis, insights from three experts in the field have been analyzed. The interviewees acknowledged that in collectivistic culture, the influence of the influential person is fundamental, while in individualistic cultures, users engage and form relationships on SMBBC in order the share their experience with the service or search for information regarding with the service, therefore, there is a higher probability of enhancing positive CBBE. Thus, it can be interpreted that, on SMBBC, customers from individualistic cultures are more likely to share their experience and engage with other customers, which ease the process of forming associations and perceptions towards the brand, therefore, enhancing positive CBBE.
7. Conclusions

This chapter presents a summarized review of the main findings deduced from the analysis and discussion. In order to answer the purpose of this research the main findings have been concluded.

The purpose of this research is to explain the effects of relationships on social media based brand communities on customer-based brand equity in the service industry. Additionally, the paper aimed to analyze the potential moderating of perceived brand trust on the relationship between SMBBC and CBBE, and to analyze whether there are any differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures in enhancing CBBE. The results presented in this study, firstly, supports the assumption that the relationships formed on SMBBC have a positive effect on CBBE in the service industry. Furthermore, the current research analyzed three types of relationships: customer/brand, customer/customer and customer/service relationships in order to answer the first research question which refers to how relationships formed on social media based brand communities affecting customer-based brand equity. Thus, by looking at the results of the study, it can be presumed that customer/brand relationships and customer/customer relationships are highly significant in enhancing CBBE. Hence, a strong relationship between customers and the brand can be used as a tool to segment the customer and thus, enhance CBBE, while, the relationship between customers and other customers are fundamental in spreading WOM, which in return positively affects CBBE. Moreover, the third type of relationship analyzed, customer/service relationships, have been proven to have a weaker effect on CBBE; however, the qualitative analysis performed after the statistical analysis reveals that this type of relationship can be beneficial and it can positively affect CBBE, especially in SMBBC, by observing and communicating the required information to customer.

Secondly, there is evidence that suggests that perceived brand trust can have a positive moderator role in the relationship between SMBBC and CBBE. This has been shown in the study by observing the interaction effect of perceived brand trust on the relationship. Hence, the results show that perceived brand trust could heighten the positive effect on CBBE in the SMBBC. Moreover, the results from the qualitative analysis shows how the relationship positively moderates the effect, by assuring transparency and interaction with customers. In this way, the second research question is answered.
Lastly, in order to answer to third research question, it was tested whether there is a significant difference between individualistic and collectivistic cultures in enhancing CBBE. The results from the statistical analysis followed by the qualitative analysis shows that users from individualistic cultures have a higher chance of enhancing positive CBBE compared to users from collectivistic cultures. Overall, relationships that customers form on SMBBC can lead to positive outcomes for companies and may enhance positive CBBE.
8. Implications, Limitations and Further Research

This chapter presents the main implications for this field of study with recommendations for both managers and marketers followed by the exposure of the study’s limitations. This chapter will also present suggestions about further research.

8.1. Theoretical contributions

The current research contributes to the existing literature in several ways. Firsty, there are a limited number of studies which concerns the relationships on SMBBC and the outcomes of such relationships for consumers and brands. Even if there have been attempts to examine effectiveness of such relationships and their effects on brand loyalty or brand trust, the current paper take another perspective and analyze the effect of relationships on SMBBC on CBBE, a concept which have been widely studied by previous researchers; however it is still lacking a clear definition and conceptualization when it comes to the service industry as the researcher noticed when using McAlexander et al. (2002) and Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) models. Furthermore, an intrinsic aspect of this paper was to approach CBBE from a more holistic perspective by permitting the respondents to determine the brand they are fan of. As a result, the concept of brand equity has been observed from a standpoint, that allows other researchers who aim to further examine the CBBE concept in an equitable way to use the operationalization and measurement scales.

Secondly, considering the relationships on SMBBC, the research stream on this topic have focused on analyzing relationships consumers formed on SMBBC in regard of brands from different product categories. However, the literature is lacking a clear approach and understanding on how these relationships can be effective in the service industry. Furthermore, a fundamental aspect of this paper was to analyze the different type of relationships on SMBBC and to expand the existing conceptualization in order to adapt it to the service industry. Therefore, the current research provides a unique conceptualization of SMBBC, by taking into consideration a new type of relationship, the customer/service relationships, which consists of pre-purchase and post purchase information in regard to the service itself on social media based brand communities. Hence, analyzing the relationships from a different perspective expanded the literature on SMBBC.
Thirdly, the current research examined the role of cultural differences, more specifically individualistic and collectivistic cultures in relation to CBBE on SMBBC. As stated throughout this research, the role of culture has been neglected in the social media context, especially considering social media based brand communities. This research provides additional insights and new knowledge to the marketing literature, by supplying results which may be valuable in future attempts to understand the subject.

Finally, the extensive literature review provides other academicians with an exhaustive and structured evaluation of previous researches on SMBBC and CBBE and their relation to the service industry. Moreover, the current research contributes to the CBBE literature by providing more perspective about it, by analyzing the existing definition and covering its overall dimensions.

8.2. Managerial implications

In regard to the managerial implications of this study, several contributions have been formulated that the service industry companies could take into consideration in order to improve the CBBE on SMBBC.

Firstly, companies in the service industry should be present and active on social media. Moreover, they should provide content for the users on a regular basis, as the results shows that customers value the content provided by the brand they are fan of. Furthermore, the content on SMBBC allow users to engage and interact with the brand, other customers and the service delivered and it creates relationships. As the current research shows, these relationships have a positive effect on the brands’ equity. Hence, being present on social media, and more important, being active, can generate positive outcomes for the companies, such as enhancing awareness, loyalty, PBQ, and the most important aspect, as underlined by the interviewees, the spread of WOM, which have been acknowledge as a powerful marketing tool.

The second contribution of this research showed that managers must take into consideration the feedback that is shared in any groups related to the brand, it has been shown that the relationship between the brand and consumers could be improved on SMBBC since it allowed the company to communicate directly to the end customers as shown in previous research (Jang et al., 2008; Karamian et al., 2015). It has been shown that, even if companies do not measure this type of relationship it, the outcomes can lead to positive results for the company, by enhancing awareness and associations towards the
brands. Therefore, brands should take into consideration the content that is created in SMBBC, regardless if the content is generated by the brand or the user.

The third implication refers to the cultural differences between users on SMBBC. The results showed that individualistic cultures can enhance higher CBBE than collectivistic cultures. However, companies should not generalize these cultures, since, as the interviewees revealed, there are differences between collectivistic cultures as well which shouldn’t be neglected as it may lead to negative effects for the companies. Hence, service companies should be careful when segmenting the market and when they implement social media strategies and should not generalize a culture, as the same culture may have different particularities depending on the geographical position.

Moreover, as argued in the qualitative analysis it is important to not generalize different population by not paying attention of their origin and culture, customers often have different needs and goals when using companies over another, it can be seen by different criteria such as the offer of the service and all the different features it include, the price of the offer, the pre-purchase and the post-purchase feedback. The user generated content on SMBBC is of a prime interest for companies since it has a direct impact on the image of the company from customer point of view, as mentioned by Laroche et al. (2012) and shouldn’t be neglected as it is right now in the service industry, companies need to reach their sales quota, with including the consumer needs and expectations. The nature of social media has enabled customers to communicate and share instantly which makes WOM a powerful marketing tool, it can have a positive or negative impact on the wellbeing of the company and its brand equity. As an example of the power and the impact of customers and users, the recent case of United airlines where a passenger was thrown out of the plane violently was shared on social medias and went viral, this event directly impacted the company negatively on the stock market and its overall image.

8.3. Limitations

Several limitations need to be acknowledged in the current research which could have affected its outcome. Firstly, considering the fact that it was difficult to engage a large population of participants, convenience sampling and snowball sampling have been used in this study. As a result, the generalizability of the results is may have been affected; subsequently, the comprehensions of developing statistical deduction on several aspects of the research is limited. Furthermore, the lack of participants’ engagement within the
topic has been observed. The survey has been sent to administrators of 55 groups in order to have the approval to post it on the respective social media brand communities. Despite the number of requests sent, only 20 administrators approved the request to post the survey. This resulted in a low response rate (0.33%), which means the interest in the subject was not as high as expected and it reduced the generalizability of the study. Furthermore, a higher number of respondents would have allowed a division of the respondents into individualistic and collectivistic cultures and analyze on a higher level of detail, the differences and patterns within these groups in relation with CBBE. Consequently, more respondents would have made possible the use of cluster analysis method in order to divide the respondents into more specific sub-groups; however, this would have led to a distinctive research in many aspects.

Secondly, considering the purpose of this paper to explain the effect of relationships on social media based brand communities on customer-based brand equity in the service industry, the current paper has used a particular type of service brands, airlines, in order to conduct the research. This may have affected the generalizability of the results in the sense that, even if airline brands offer service and fit in this category, it may be the case that airline brands have several particularities that only apply to this sector, and not to all service companies.

Lastly, the current research performs multiple linear regression when having a continuous dependent variable, even if in such cases an ordinal regression is recommended. However, as O'Connell (2006) states, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is the same regardless if linear regression or ordinal regression is used, while the magnitude differs. This means, that even if the results are in the right direction and conclusions and implications can be drawn based on the results, the size of the effect may be different.

8.4. Further research

The current research provided a range of insights considering the relationship between SMBBC and CBBE in the service industry. However, in order to get more insights and in-depth evidence on these topics further researches should be considered. First of all, further studies should consider other industries that are relevant to the service industry. Even though the current research has demonstrated a positive relation between SMBBC and CBBE, a study with a broader range of industries will results in a clearer picture and
more insights regarding the effectiveness of SMBBC and how the results can be applied in order to provide valuable recommendations for managers.

Another direction for further research should consider longitudinal studies in order to observe how relationships on SMBBC affect customer-based brand equity and how these relationships evolve during time. Longitudinal studies can ensure the validity and can provide higher accuracy on the topic analyzed. Additionally, the concept of SMBBC is relatively new, and it hasn’t been researched exhaustively (Habibi et al., 2014a), therefore a longitudinal study will provide more insights on this topic as it is argued to be more efficient than cross-sectional studies in researching developmental trends, as the concept of SMBBC is.

The fundamental role of social media for companies and the high potential of enhancing positive CBBE, as the results of the current research have demonstrated raise the need of analyzing social media channels more in-depth. Accordingly, further studies should consider comparative studies by analyzing different social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram) in order to observe the efficiency of such channels and the relationship with CBBE which will be beneficial in adjusting the brand’s social media strategy by understanding and prioritizing the channels which will be advertised.

Finally, further studies should continue investigating the role of culture in such communities, as it was established to be an important aspect in this context. Subsequently, a broader and more assorted sample will provide more insights regarding the importance and role of culture in SMBBC.
References


DeSantis, L., & Ugarriza, D. N., (2000). The concept of theme as used in qualitative nursing research. Western Journal of Nursing Research, 22(3), 351-372.


Appendices

Appendix A- Literature review overview on topics

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### Appendix B- Main researches and concepts treated

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Appendix C- Top 10 Airlines by brand value in 2017 and Facebook Fans

02/27/2017 (Statista, 2017)

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Appendix D- Airlines monthly fan growth

02/27/2017 (Socialbaker, 2017)

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<td>CHINA EASTERN AIRLINES</td>
<td>+29 848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIR CHINA</td>
<td>+9 027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRITISH AIRLINES</td>
<td>+60 077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANA AIRLINES</td>
<td>+4 270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix E- Facebook Group- Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facebook Group</th>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fiji Airways</td>
<td>766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta Airlines</td>
<td>2805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Airways</td>
<td>2949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Airways</td>
<td>23974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Airways Appreciations Group</td>
<td>960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFFG- AirFrance Fan Group</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMIRATES AIRLINES FANS</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMIRATES AIRLINES GROUP</td>
<td>1398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>長榮虛擬航空 Virtual Eva Air</td>
<td>728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFFG-EVA AIR 長榮航空</td>
<td>456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathay Pacific- The Fan Club</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines Virtual Airlines Group</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan Airlines Virtual/VJAL</td>
<td>709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forever a Teal- a WestJet Fan Club</td>
<td>6406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air India</td>
<td>1580</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iraqi Airways</td>
<td>680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarom ieri, azi, maine</td>
<td>3404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East Airlines and Fans</td>
<td>5505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi &amp; Gulf Airlines and Fans</td>
<td>720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airlines friend club</td>
<td>7502</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F – Linear regression Assumption testing

1. Sample size

Assumption is meet by having total usable answers of 121. Pallant (2010) suggest the minimum sample size necessary for conducting multiple regression analysis by using the formula $N = 50 + 8 \times m$, Where $N$ represents the required numbers of cases or sample size while $m$ represents the numbers of independent variables. Considering these, the following minimum amount of cases have been calculated: $50 + 8 \times 3 = 74$.

2. Multicollinearity

Multicollinearity appears when the variables are highly correlated between each other ($r = 0.9$ or above). Second assumption is meet by running a correlation analysis which presented Pearson’s $r$ values for each variable. Result can be seen in Table 6

3. Outliers

In order for the results to be valid, researchers must check for outliers since the multiple regression analysis is very sensitive to outliers (Pallant, 2010). Outliers have been checked prior the analysis and when performing multiple regression analysis by identifying the standardized residual plot.

4. Normality, linearity and homoscedasticity

These three assumptions refer to aspects regarding the distribution of scores and the nature of underlying relationship between variables (Pallant, 2010). Residuals scatterplots and normal P-plot are suggested as valid methods to check the distribution of the scores. Residuals represents the difference between the predicted and the obtained dependent variable scores (Pallant, 2010). Regarding the normal P-plot, if the scores distributed in a reasonable straight diagonal line from bottom left to top right, it suggests no major deviation from normality (Pallant, 2010). Regarding the scatterplots of the standardized residuals, a roughly rectangular distribution of the residuals scores suggest that the assumptions are not violated (Pallant, 2010). Normal P-plots and scatterplots are presented below for each multiple regression performed.
Model 1:

Model 2:

Model 3:
Model 4:

Model 5:
Appendix G- Qualitative analysis

Question 1: How important is social media as an advertising channel for an airline compared to other digital and traditional channels?

Rodrigo:
- Important for campaigns
- More dynamic than traditional media
- Developing a lot
- One of the most important communication tool
- More significant impact than traditional channel

Alberto:
- Extremely important, it reach consumers directly
- Reach end consumers in seconds
- Developing a lot
- More dynamic
- Very important thank to buying and selling system

Babak:
- More a customer service platform than a marketing platform
- Good to reach consumers directly
- Engagement is important in social media
- Culture represents a factor which influences the importance of social media

Common themes:
- Social media is more dynamic than traditional media and it offers more opportunities to companies
- Social media is still developing
- It represents one of the most important communication tools as it is effective in reaching the end consumers directly
Can be important as a customer service platform and advertising platform

Question 2: How important are consumers’ perspective and relationships they form on social media communities?

Rodrigo:

- Loyal behavior
- Companies need to take care of their consumers’ relationships
- Mutual relationship
- Keep me happy as a consumer
- Important for consumer their relation

Alberto:

- Depends a lot on the country
- Communicate with the public to attract them to the web
- Airline offers you the ticket and all the experience
- Doubts
- Buying or deciding a flight is a totally individual act

Babak:

- Important
- Get in touch with our customers
- As easy as possible
- Everything has to be done online or through phone

**Common themes:**

- The mutual relationship is crucial for companies, they need to have a close relationship to keep customers happy. (The company plays a role in the overall experience of the customer)
- Communicating efficiently and offering different packages is important to improve this relationship
Consumer need to be contacted by every means in order to attract them online (difference between different countries)

Q3. The relationship between customers and the brand has been found significant on SMBBC

Customers value the relationship with the brand the most and it enhances CBBE the most.

- How do you measure it?
- Do you take advantage of the information?
- What are your thought about it, what is the most important for customers?

Rodrigo:

- Look I do not know exactly how this topic is treated at the company level
- I believe: first step quantifies the data
- Access and analyze statistics from 1-2 years’ period
- Keep track on the person's purchase behavior/history at individual level
- Analyze the behavior so understand what factors does the person base his decision making on
- Determinate the loyalty level of the customer
- Based on our database results
- Launch a campaign to introduce and encourage them toward the brand
- The campaign can motivate the consumer to remain faithful to the brand
- But as I said, I do not know how that is done now since I am not involved with that area of work.
- Quality of the brand/product
- The perception of the safety of the airlines
- The quality of the customer service
- Key points to keep the customer loyal to the brand
- Old planes - lower security perceived
• EU-regulation - makes airlines to renew their planes after 10 years - customer feels more secure than other markets

Alberto:

• Fiction of a promotion ex. 40 seats at extremely low price - pull the customers to the webpage (happens worldwide, especially with the low-cost airlines)
• this strategy is used by the conventional and the low-cost airlines
• Enhance digital sales
• Makes the customer interact with the page for 5-10 - we collect data
• The collected data is used to understand the customer behavior and for marketing purposes.
• Significant difference between South America and Europe
• Security (safety perception) is the most important
• Price comes second
• South America - national operators with an old air fleet
• They call almost new planes that are 10-15 years

Babak:

• The data is very vague so we don’t collect data from social media more than statistics
• Social media for us is more a customer service platform
• We have a CRM-system internally
• Trigger marketing (personal marketing)
• Segmented down the data
• Here in Sweden is the price

Commun themes:

• The data is not collected through social media
• The data is used to understand the customer’s behavior and for marketing purpose
Pull the customers with personalized campaigns to motivate the consumer to remain faithful to the brand.

Perception of the safety of the airlines

Quality of the brand/product

Old planes - lower security perceived

Price

Q4. The relationships customer form with other customer have been also found significant

This has been a strong predictor of CBBE as well.

Do you analyze the interaction of the customers? what they talk/ discuss about the airline?

Do you think that positive or negative WOM can be triggered on this communities and do they have an effect on the company's brand equity?

Rodrigo:

Topic is not discussed in companies

It should be as before existence of social media most effective method was WOM

customer/customer relationship is very important because the effect of WOM can be higher

WOM can trigger a chain reaction

Example United Airline case, where WOM spread and cause in lost of shares

customer/customer relationships affect customer’s decision

Customer analyze other customer’s views

Alberto:

Try to answer concerns and complaints of UGC

It depends on the industry, airlines may not need to analyze this since they are the only ones who offers this type of transportation
• Companies wait until complaints accumulates and then analyze the problem

• There is a gap to develop a corporate to connect the reality with the service they offer

• Customer/customer relationship is very important

• There are many cases when the service is really bad but people still use it, the gap can be fulfilled by using social media to connect and listen customers and find the root of the problem

• WOM can affect the equity, must be a cumulative effect

• Customer/customer relationship is something companies are aware of but don’t treat it as it should

Babak:

• Customer/customer relationship is very important

• It is important to look at complaints

• Companies are still failing to create and experience for customers

• WOM affect equity and trigger discussions on SMBBC

• Complaints can become viral and have negative effect

• All complaints need to be handled directly

• Answering complaints create awareness and enhance positive WOM which is the best marketing possible

Common themes:

• Wom is a very important aspect when it comes to customer/customer relationship

• Companies are interested in complaints more since negative WOM can affect a brands equity and it can easily spread on SMBBBC in seconds, United Airlines case

• WOM can trigger a chain reaction and go viral, and it is the most important marketing possible
Companies are aware of these relationships but they don’t treat is as it should be treated. Some companies start analyzing such relationship only when it becomes a cumulative effect and it can really affect a brand

By analyzing this relationship awareness can be created and thus positive effect on CBBE

Q5. Relationship with customers and service (pre-purchase/post purchase information) has not been found as important as the previous in enhancing CBBE. However, it is still partially significant.

Do you believe airline should provide this kind of information on social media communities to user?

This type of relationship hasn’t been studied prior this study. Do you believe Companies can gain advantage by providing pre-purchase and post purchase information on communities?

Rodrigo:

The airlines do not take it into account

We do not give it importance and we do not understand the meaning of pre-Purchase and post-purchase.

No airline has taken it into consideration

Nobody assumes responsibility when there is an issue between the airport or the airline or the agency that sold the tickets

Airlines should communicate with their customers and they should offer pre- and post-Purchase information to their customers, it is very important.

Implemented little by little because the social networks are gaining more weight as a communication tool

Airlines just need to change the behavior and start communicating with the customer.

Alberto:

Tendency of the human being is to complain and complain not to congratulate.

Not a natural predisposition to highlight the good of flight
To reach and interact with the final consumer to gain competitive advantage on social media would be positive but how works the industry right now it cannot happen.

Babak:

- All communication is good
- No matter what platform I think it’s important
- Not only through their own traditional channels, but also adding the traditional customer service to other platforms
- Fan page must be without any influence from the company, (user generated fan-page)

Common themes:

- Not taken into consideration enough because clients usually complain more than congratulate
- However, pre-purchase and post-purchase information could benefit a lot to companies when it is well used, on the right channel (social media without influence of the airline company) (fan page)
- With the increase of the use of social media, airlines need to change their behavior in order to gain competitive advantage.

Q.6 Brand trust positively moderates the relationship between SMBBC and CBBE. The higher consumers trust the brand the higher CBBE.

- What are your thought about it?
- What can enhance brand trust on on social media communities on your opinion? Ex. transparency or other themes

Rodrigo:

- The basics that airlines should always have in mind
- Facebook is time-consuming and is hard to keep up with everything that happens there (Facebook is a dense jungle)
- The consumer engages and start a relationship with the airline
• The consumer takes his time, search and like the airline

• The least that the airline should do is take care of this relationship that the consumer started

• Airline should deliver information that is truthful

• Airline should give the consumer special offers or demonstrate in some way how the airline appreciates this relationship

• The relationship is about giving and taking from each other

• If your airline fail the consumer once, the airline loses consumers’ confidence and they will lose him

• The consumer has the power over the relationship

• The airlines should not provide deceiving information with the customers, they should be transparent to increase the consumer's’ loyalty and trust

• The airlines should work with details to show the customer that they appreciate their relationship with them (ex. Write a happy birthday message)

• “Loyalty card” relationship system is not that good

• They should innovate a system that can offer personificated offers like Ica

Alberto:

• In South America, the brand trust is connected to the security offered by the brand / airline aircraft

• The customer does not identify with the brand, they just choose the most secure

• This could be changed if social networks were better worked, transparency through this communication channel can enhance the brand trust

• In my opinion, the first step is the we begin to listen to our customers

Babak:

• Trust pilot - social media platform where people engage and complain

• An opportunity to be a part of it and be able to answer all the complaints

• The more we engage in trust polite we get better ratings
• We help them with their complaints to keep them happy

**Common themes:**

• Transparency on social media
• Engage with the customer, solve their problems to keep them happy

Q7. Consumers from individualistic enhance CBBE on a greater extent than consumers from collectivistic cultures.

• What are your opinion about these results?
• Do you believe that airlines should have different social media strategies depending the culture individualist and collectivist? Do you believe brands should emphasize on a specific culture or segment of consumers which have higher chances to enhance CBBE (like individualistic cultures in our case)?
• Do you think that companies should take in consideration the acculturation aspect? Would it be supplied on social media?

Rodrigo:

• Collectivistic/individualistic present different behaviors on social media
• The family leader option that affects the other members’ decision making (collectivist)
• Decision alone, relationship and interaction in social media is more dense and continuous unlike the collectivist culture
• Airlines should have different digital strategies for diverse cultural segments as it is a very sensitive topic (group can be offended if you generalize everything)
• Establish contact with the subgroups in social networks, could motivate more customers and increase their loyalty and ultimately generate more purchases. (For both collectivist/individualist)
• Collectivist cultures, keep account of influential persons, even if they have some disagreements with the service, the most crucial factor will be the influential persons’ opinion
• Individualist cultures, on the other hand, customers usually decide to buy tickets by themselves, then post a picture with it, at the airport, individualistic want to
show other that they made the decision by themselves and it’s the right one, therefore they permanently communicate about the brand, which create awareness and enhances equity

Alberto:

- More relevant to the hotel and tourism industry rather than the airlines industry since the airlines core is to offer no more than transportation from A-B
- Airlines must adapt their digital strategies depending on the segment (individualistic and collectivist) but it must be considered that they differ depending on whether they are conventional or low cost airlines
- Conventional airlines: weighs you can carry
- However, from airline point of view they just want to sell seats and no preoccupy of the message they deliver to their different customers.

Babak:

- Companies should have different social media strategies depending on culture
- Companies should adapt depending on the market they entry
- Different markets have different behaviors, it is important to understand this and adapt even with social media communities, ex China (collectivist focus should be more on reaching customers through social media, because that’s where they expect to find the company); while in individualist (Sweden) there are more price comparison website, which also enable to create awareness
- Segmenting culture on Facebook might be hard to do

**Common themes:**

- Digital strategies should be made in adequation of the targeted segment of the company (collectivist / individualist), Not generalize the strategy for both segments.
- Groups can be offended if you generalize everything
- Digital strategies should reach the behaviors of the population and their culture,
- need to adapt to different needs, weighs you can carry for collectivist culture that shop a lot in airport/in plane (South America, Asia).
Appendix H- Survey

Hello!

We are second year marketing master students affiliated with Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden. We are currently writing our master thesis about the effect of relationships formed on social media based brand communities on customer-based brand equity in the service industry. We have chosen to focus on Airlines because it is a fast-growing industry which is becoming more and more popular on social media. Moreover, the number of people who use airlines is increasing, therefore it is important to acquire more insights regarding this topic. We are interested in the customers’ interactions and the relationships they form towards the airlines they follow on social media platforms. Therefore, we are doing a short survey to gather relevant data. If you are a member of a brand community of any airline, we are looking for your feedback and this questionnaire will only take a few minutes of your time. The survey is best done on a laptop or on a mobile device in landscape horizontal orientation.

Social media based brand communities represent the communities on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or other social media platforms which refers to a specific brand (e.g. Lufthansa Fan Page on Facebook; United Airlines Facebook Group, Air France Official Facebook Page). The most important aspect of such communities represents the exchange of information and other resources with the brand, users and search for assistance or other relevant information.

We appreciate your time and interest in filling in this survey. Be assured that the answers you provide will be anonymous.

If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact us.

Laszlo Gyori e-mail: lg222kp@student.lnu.se
Arthur Heurtaux e-mail: ah223rf@student.lnu.se
Pedro Talavera e-mail: pt222cn@student.lnu.se
Linneuniversitetet
Kalmar Växjö

Are you a member of a social media based brand community in regards of an airline? *

- Yes
- No

Rate your agreement with the following statements:

Please specify which airline

Your answer

Please select the number below that best represents how you feel about the relationships established on the brand community you are part of:

"Brand X" refers to the brand which you follow on Facebook or the Facebook Group you are part of.

I value the culture of the brand X *

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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I would recommend the brand X to my friends *

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<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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I believe the brand X is of high quality *

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|   | O | O | O | O | O | **Strongly Agree**

If I were to buy another plane ticket, I would buy it from the same brand *

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|   | O | O | O | O | O | **Strongly Agree**

I have met wonderful people because of this community *

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|   | O | O | O | O | O | **Strongly Agree**

Other members of the community often give feedback regarding specific posts and topics *

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|   | O | O | O | O | O | **Strongly Agree**

I have a feeling of sympathy with the other members of the community *

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|   | O | O | O | O | O | **Strongly Agree**
Other members of the brand community share their experiences with the brand *

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The brand community offers me useful information regarding the services they provide *

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The brand community provides me with specific information regarding the airline *

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I cannot find necessary information regarding the services the airline offers on the brand community *

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I value the post purchase information given by the airline *

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</table>
Rate your agreement with the following statements:

Please answer having in mind the brand community and the brand you have chosen before. "Brand X" refers in this section as the brand which you follow on Facebook or you are part of the Facebook Group.

I can recognize the brand X among other competing brands *

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree

When I think about an airline, brand X is one of the first one that comes to my mind *

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree

I am very familiar with the brand X *

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree
I know what the brand X looks like *

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Some characteristics of the brand X comes in my mind quickly *

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I can quickly recall the symbol and logo of the brand X *

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I have difficulty imagining the brand X in my mind *

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Brand X is a very likeable brand *

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<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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I consider myself to be loyal to the brand X *

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</table>
I am willing to pay more for the Brand X than other airline brands *

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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If the service from brand X is not available nearby (e.g. I cannot buy a ticket), I will buy it from a different location or another website *

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I often purchase services from the brand X *

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Brand X offers services of constant quality *

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The likelihood that the brand X is reliable is very high *

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</table>
Brand X appears to be of very poor quality *

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Agree

The expected quality of the brand X is very high *

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Agree

I rely on the brand X *

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Agree

Brand X gives me everything that I expect from the service *

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Agree

Brand X never disappoints me *

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Agree

I consider that brand X is honest *

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Agree
How often do you access your social media account? *

- Hourly
- More than 1 time a day
- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Never

Gender *

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say
- Other:

Which country do you live in? *

Your answer

Nationality *

Your answer

What is your age? *

Your answer

Thank you for your time!