Enhancing brand relationship performance through customer participation and value creation in social media brand communities

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ABSTRACT

Extant research highlights novel opportunities in co-opting customers to co-create value through their participation in the brand experience. However, relatively little is known about how customer participation (CP) affects value creation and brand relationship performance outcomes in social media brand communities in the retailing sector. This study applies Service Dominant Logic and the consumption value theory to examine how retail customers derive value from CP in social media brand communities. Empirical results from 584 consumers confirm the CP influence on functional value, emotional value, relational value and entitativity value, which translate to brand relationship performance outcomes. The theoretical framework provides novel insights to marketing managers in understanding how CP can contribute to a retail brand's value creation efforts, and how these value creating efforts contribute to brand building for retailers.

1. Introduction

Customer participation (CP) in brand experiences is gaining increasing attention in both academic and managerial practice as evidence suggests that customers and firms can achieve greater levels of value through CP (Payne et al., 2008; Payne et al., 2009; Merz et al., 2018). Findings from prior CP literature illustrate that enabling higher levels of CP benefits customers through improved quality, customised brand experiences, which allows customers to have more control over their brand experiences and stronger relational bonds (Yim et al., 2012; Chan et al., 2010). This in turn contributes value to the brand by reducing marketing costs, providing easy access to customers, improving the processes involved in acquisition of new customers, and improving customer retention and profitability (Auh et al., 2007; Payne et al., 2008, 2009; Merz et al., 2009, 2018).

Digitalised platforms of engagement have since become integral for firms to facilitate CP to enable the co-creation of value with customers (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). In the retail consumer brand context, retailers globally continue to invest enormous resources in social media platforms to connect with customers through individual and communal processes that co-create value with customers (Carlson et al., 2017a). Studies examining participation in social media platforms confirm that engaged customers participate in idea generation and collaborative behaviours such as sharing knowledge and ideas to support the brand thus shaping their brand experiences (Alexander and Jaakkola, 2016; Carlson et al., 2018; Gong, 2018; Piyathasanan et al., 2017).

Critical to the successful management of such CP in social media platforms for retailers is an understanding of how CP in an interactive, socially networked environment contributes to the creation of psychological benefits (i.e. perceived value) for customers, and to what extent this translates to (retail) brand relationship performance. The service-dominant (SD) logic literature considers customers as proactive co-creators rather than passive receivers of value and proactively encourages brands to be joint facilitators of the value co-creation process through the exchange of resources with customers (Payne et al., 2008; Merz et al., 2018).

The notion of value co-creation in retail brand experiences is particularly salient among consumers of social media brand communities, as these communities are highly interactive and socially networked (Breidbach et al., 2014; De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). For example, customers participate by providing information to the brand, jointly making decisions on product development opportunities and brand experience improvements, as well as generate content with other consumers (Gensler et al., 2013).

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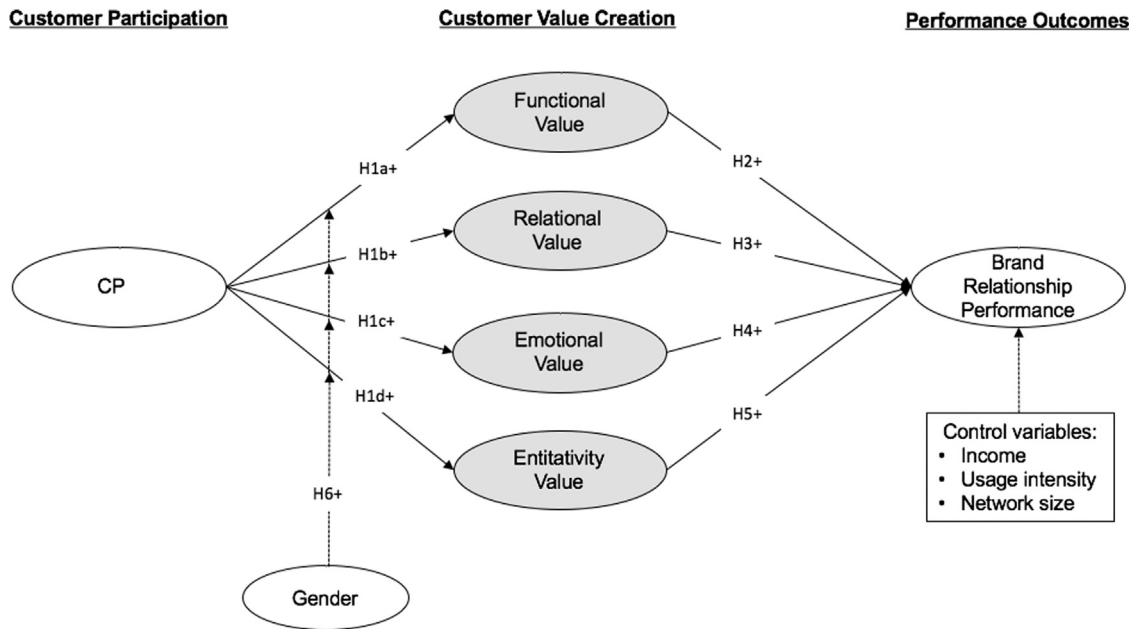
Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

Despite the opportunities afforded by social media technology for enabling CP, the topic of CP as a mechanism for value creation in the context of social media brand communities in retailing remains underexposed. Little empirical research has examined CP and its explicit and direct impact on the value creation process with brands in this context, and how such value translates to stronger customer-brand relationships for retailers. Furthermore, little is known about the moderating effects of gender that may influence the nature of the relationship between CP and value creation. This issue is an important topic managerially as customers may not react and perceive value in consumption experiences in the same way because they have different need structures (Leroi-Werelds et al., 2014). Emerging evidence in social media so far indicates gender differences in value assessments within social media interactions with brands (Shi et al., 2016). This being the case, the universality of value assessments in the social media retail context remains equivocal.

In this study, we integrate extant work on CP to advance the following research question: How effective is CP in directly creating value and affecting (retail) brand relationship performance in social media brand communities? For this investigation, we follow prior CP work (Auh et al., 2007; Chan et al., 2010) where CP is a behavioural construct involving past behaviours that take place within a social media brand community of a retailer.

CP in social media enables retail consumer brands with an interactive engagement platform to serve and co-create customised brand experiences through the integration of resources with customers (i.e. cognitive effort, creativity, skill) to suit their needs and derive benefits that are valued. CP also offers greater value creation opportunities due to high hedonic qualities, high degree of communication and interdependence between customers, social networks and the retail brand for co-creating favourable outcomes (De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Gensler et al., 2013). Therefore, our study focuses on retail consumer brands in social media brand communities as an appropriate contextual condition in which to assess the desirability of CP as a potential source of value creation, satisfaction and brand relationship development for the retailing sector.

Our contribution to the existing literature is threefold. First, following Chan et al. (2010), we empirically test in a unified framework how CP drives the creation of functional value, emotional value, relational value and entitativity value as perceived by retail customers. This

in turn, influences brand performance outcomes (i.e. customer satisfaction, brand loyalty behaviours) in a social media platform of a retail brand.

Second, our study extends entitativity value theorising in social psychology and consumer behaviour in social media interactions (e.g. Carlson et al., 2018; Vock et al., 2013) to the CP domain in retailing. Past social media research has suggested the existence of a genuine community being bonded together in a coherent unit (Vock et al., 2013), but explicit research of CP within a retail context has not been undertaken. As such, we theorise that entitativity value may serve as a value assessment complementary to functional value, hedonic value and relational value derived from CP in a social media (retail) brand community. The consideration of consumers' entitativity benefits seems critical when studying CP in social media brand communities, given the extent of shared consumption experiences by retail consumers that are found on social media platforms.

Third, we account for customer heterogeneity by examining gender effects in the CP to value creation link and contribute to understanding how gender affects the way in which retail consumers perceive value in social media brand communities associated with effective CP. To achieve these contributions, this article is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical background and research hypotheses, followed by a description of the empirical study. The next section discusses the study findings and implications for theory and practice. Finally, directions for future research are presented.

2. Conceptual development

Our theoretical model illustrated in Fig. 1 depicts how CP in social media brand communities enable customers to (co)create functional value, emotional value, relational value and entitativity value, which then affects their brand relationship performance. The extent of co-creation of value is further conditional on gender differences. The model is founded on the SD logic and related perspectives (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Payne et al., 2008, 2009; Merz et al., 2018), which advocates that the integration of customer and firm resources enables value to be derived by both actors is mutually beneficial. It complements the SD Logic with the consumption values theory, which argues that consumer behaviour is a function of multiple cognitive and hedonic evaluations arising from a consumption experience (Sheth et al.,

1991; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). It also draws theoretical support from social role theory where males and females differ across two aspects: instrumentality and emotion (Melnyk et al., 2009), to justify the examination of gender roles in the CP value creation relationship.

2.1. Conceptualising CP in social media brand communities

Definitions of CP vary, taking the perspective from either a firm production to a joint production and/or customer production (Chan et al., 2010). Since the objective of this study is to understand the value creation process when customers participate and interact with the retail brand and other customers/non-customers in a social media brand community, we do not consider retailer and customer production perspectives (e.g. self-service technologies). Following prior CP work (Auh et al., 2007; Chan et al., 2010), and the SDL-related work of Payne et al. (2009) and Merz et al. (2009, 2018) where the brand becomes the experience, we define CP in our study context (i.e. retail brand communities in social media) as a behavioural construct. Such that CP measures the extent to which customers actively 1) provide/share/disclose personal information, 2) make suggestions and provide feedback to the brand, and 3) become involved in decision making to acquire knowledge and enhance the relationship during the social media brand community experience with the retailer.

2.2. Impact of CP: customers as co-creators of value from brand experiences

The SD logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008), as well as research supporting the notion of value co-creation, argues that value resides not in the object of consumption but in the experience of consumption (Payne et al., 2008; Merz et al., 2018) and that value creation is embedded in personalized experiences (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Through resource integration in activities such as relationship building, communication and customer knowledge improvement, value creation is enabled (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006). Furthermore, retail and service marketing literature also calls for greater understanding on the nature of value by considering value within the context of the customers' 'lifeworld'. Thereby considering how consumers embed service in their processes (i.e. customer's everyday lives and activities) to form value rather than how firms provide service to customers to create value (Carlson et al., 2017a; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015; Helkkula et al., 2012). In this sense, customers and other stakeholders must be able to bring their own personal contexts and points of view to a consumption experience, and shape their personal consumption experiences accordingly (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016).

An analysis of the CP literature indicates that the dominant focus on co-creation of extrinsic values in the CP literature is analogous to adopting the information processing perspective to explain consumer behaviour. For instance, Chan et al.'s (2010) study of CP in the professional financial service context, focused on the co-creation of extrinsic values of an economic and relational nature that are largely utilitarian benefits. However, CP can also be intrinsically appealing to customers who can derive enjoyment simply from their experience of participation. For example, Yim et al. (2012) confirmed a link between CP with extrinsic values of economic and relational values as well as the intrinsic value of enjoyment.

Based on the above discussion, in our framework, functional value refers to the benefit of higher quality perceptions of the social media brand community arising from CP. Emotional value refers to the benefit of fun and enjoyment derived by CP, whereas relational value entails the benefit of a meaningful relationship arising from CP. Finally, entitativity value refers to the sense of belonging to a social media brand community arising from CP. In sum, the co-creation of extrinsic and intrinsic value with customers appears to be vital outcomes in research on CP and value co-creation.

As discussed earlier, entitativity describes to what extent aggregates of people can represent a single meaningful and ongoing entity and

being bonded together in a coherent unit (Lickel et al., 2000). The degree of entitativity differentiates perceptions of collections of individuals, such as people waiting at a bus stop (Igarashi and Kashima, 2011) from unified groups that are perceived as meaningful, unified entities (supporters of a sports team) or members of a social network service (Vock et al., 2013). Social media provides significant opportunities for social interactions amongst other users of a brand where consumers can interact with one another and seek 'linking value' based on peer-to-peer bonds, which acts as a motivation for customer-to-customer interactions to take place (de Vries and Carlson, 2014; Gensler et al., 2013). In a social media brand community, the social context comprises participating customers of the host brand, the degree of interactivity among customers and the importance assigned to the group by customers, can induce what we argue as powerful entitativity perceptions (Carlson et al., 2018).

3. Hypotheses development

3.1. Effect of CP on functional value

In broad terms, customers may create utilitarian value through their participation in three ways: better quality of experience, customised service, and increased control (Auh et al., 2007; Chan et al., 2010; Schneider and Bowen, 1995). As such, customers' active involvement can help enhance quality evaluations and increase the likelihood of success and goal achievement in the satisfaction of needs. In the social media brand community context, findings show that consumers are motivated to participate in a social media brand community to derive utilitarian benefits such as to 1) solve problems, (2) send specific inquiries, (3) search for brand-related information to enhance learning, (4) evaluate an offering before purchasing, and (5) to gain access to a brand's special deals and giveaways (Davis et al., 2014).

Consumers can also interact with a particular brand about brand attributes, benefits and associations that can have a profound impact on consumers' experience (i.e. favourable/unfavourable experience) towards the brand (Ho and Wang, 2015) that may then offer opportunities to enhance their learning (Hamilton et al., 2016), and maximize utility of the brand in consumption (Zhang et al., 2015). As such, customers' active involvement and participation allows direct input of their resources to shape the brand consumption experience they are seeking and create higher levels of customisation resulting in greater opportunities to derive higher levels of functional value. This being the case, we expect that:

H1a. A higher level of customer participation leads to greater functional value perceptions

3.2. Effect of CP on emotional value

Past CP studies in the service context indicate that customers may experience delight and enjoyment when participating in service consumption experiences because participation leads to a greater sense of control over the service process and the final outcome (Dabholkar, 1990; Schneider and Bowen, 1995; Yim et al., 2012). As such, CP is instrumental for customers to derive emotional value, as they are able to contribute their own resources to shape their ownbrand experiences and heighten the enjoyment and fun delivered to them. In the social media brand community domain, the enjoyment construct has been extensively studied whereby consumers derive fun, entertainment, and enjoyment from interacting with a brand's socialmedia presence involving brand and social interactions (De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Carlson et al., 2017a). As such, it is conceptualised that as a consumer participates more in social media retail brand communities, they derive greater emotional value from the retail consumption experience. This reasoning leads to the following hypothesis:

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H1b. A higher level of customer participation leads to greater emotional value perceptions

3.3. Effect of CP on relational value

Relational consumption between the consumer and the brand are based on interactions (Davis et al., 2014; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). Social media allows for customer interactivity with brands, regardless of temporal and geographical boundaries, that enables the consumer's brand knowledge to be enhanced, and provides opportunities to transform brand experiences into a relationship through customised communication and co-creation (Davis et al., 2014; de Vries and Carlson, 2014). In doing so, every interaction between customers and the retail brand, as is the case in this study, through the interactive service processes in the social media brand community represents an opportunity to co-create relational values for all parties. Findings in a retail context from Davis et al. (2014) show that personalized brand communications and the possibility of being engaged in the brands daily activities are two important elements of the relational aspect of retail related consumption in a social media brand community. Their study revealed that personalized communications and relationship with the brand and engaging in brand-related activities constitute important forms of relating with the brand. Such interactions with the retail brand align with the view that the consumption experience is enhanced when consumers feel that the brand has individualized their interactions (Merz et al., 2018; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016). This being the case, we posit the following:

H1c. A higher level of customer participation is positively related to greater relational value perceptions

3.4. Effect of CP on entitativity value

As discussed previously, entitativity refers to situations and circumstances where people can be described as a single meaningful and ongoing entity, being bonded together in a coherent

unit (Lickel et al., 2000; Vock et al., 2013). Based on the level of perceived entitativity, scholars have categorized groups along a continuum ranging from high to low levels of entitativity built upon interactions among members (Igarashi and Kashima, 2011) including social networking environments (Vock et al., 2013). In the specific contextual condition of retail brand communities in social media, Davis et al. (2014) also highlighted the social aspect of consumers' participation in a social media brand community where the specific nature of interactions include: (1) experience exchange, (2) community attachment, (3) building links, and (4) social interaction. In this sense, consumers use social media to share their personal brand experiences with others, and they are willing to broadcast their consumption activities and experiences not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of others. These findings underline the importance of considering the concept of entitativity arising from CP in social media consumption environments in retailing. Therefore, we posit:

H1d. A higher level of customer participation is positively related to greater entitativity value perceptions

3.5. The effect of value creation on brand relationship performance outcomes

Our conceptualization considers four critical value creation experiences that provide utility and benefit for the customer including 1) functional value, 2) emotional value, 3) relational value, and 4) entitativity value, which when heightened, act as drivers to achieve critical brand relationship performance outcomes for retailers. This reasoning is supported by prior consumption experience theorizing that customers

participate in certain behaviours in consideration of multiple utilitarian and hedonic values that they perceive as providing benefit to them evoked by brand-related stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). It has also been well-established in literature across consumption contexts that customer value perceptions are a key predictor of subsequent behaviours such as loyalty, satisfaction, intention to recommend and re-purchase (Carlson et al., 2015; Williams and Soutar, 2009).

According to consumption value theory, the functional aspect of value refers to the rational and economic evaluations made by individuals that reflects the quality of using a product or service (Sheth et al., 1991; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). In the context of a social media brand community, this evaluation includes a customer evaluation of access to helpful, useful, and practical brand related content (Jahn and Kunz, 2012; de Vries and Carlson, 2014). For instance, a customer using a brand's social media brand community platform may seek more information about how the product or service works, what benefits are involved and other information about the brand that maximises brand utility (de Vries and Carlson, 2014; Shi et al., 2016). Consumers can also access, generate and share information with others and the brand directly, in real-time that may be led by the customer, other community members or the brand itself. Such brand-centric interactions enhance the functional value of the consumption experience. On this basis, this study conceptualizes that greater perceptions of functional utility derived by retail customer's in the social media brand community will lead to higher perceptions of satisfaction and brand loyalty that represent critical brand relationship performance outcomes arising from CP. This reasoning leads to the following:

H2. Functional value will positively impact brand relationship performance

Empirical studies have confirmed that when customers experience fun and entertainment from participating and interacting with a social media brand community, they exhibit greater customer-brand relationship performance outcomes of eWoM, brand commitment and loyalty to the brand (de Vries and Carlson, 2014; Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Shi et al., 2016). In addition, Kim et al. (2013) suggested that users who experience pleasure and fun when engaging with social media brand communities are intrinsically motivated to have a higher level of continuance intention. On this basis, we argue that greater levels of enjoyment and fun derived by the customer from the social media brand community which embodies a brand experience, will lead to greater brand relationship performance outcomes for the retailer. Thus:

H3. Emotional value will positively impact brand relationship performance

Recent value research indicates that customers highly value consumption experiences that enable them to fulfil relational goals (Epp et al., 2014; Carlson et al., 2015). Prior CP research suggests that consumers participate directly in-service creation through utilization of the features and functionalities of websites and consequently co-create their own consumption experiences (Mohd-Any et al., 2015; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). This view is also supported by S-D logic and related perspectives (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Payne et al., 2009; Merz et al., 2009, 2018), where customers play an active role in managing and shaping the consumption experience with brands through the exchange of resources to create benefit.

In the social media brand community context, CP may increase communication and relationship building opportunities between and among customers, and the retailer. For instance, customers seek interactions with the brand to develop and build an on-going relationship. These relationships can then be enhanced through relevant, personalized, real-time interactions such as brand relationship development activities (e.g. competitions, discounts, and give-aways), product support or service failure resolution (Carlson et al., 2017a). In doing so, every interaction between customers and the retail brand through

interactive service processes embedded in the social media brand community represents an opportunity to co-create relational value for all parties. This reasoning leads to the following:

H4. Relational value will positively impact brand relationship performance

Prior research indicates that groups perceived as high in entitativity owing to high degrees of interaction, common goals and outcomes, should derive higher degree of friendship, bonds and intimacy than less entitative groups (Vock et al., 2013; Yzerbyt et al., 2000). Prior work across consumption contexts has further demonstrated community groups, which are representative of high levels of entitativity can have a favourable impact on business performance outcomes, which were attributed partly to high levels of loyalty, helpfulness and openness within the group (Grayson, 2007). The effect has also been confirmed in social media studies which showed that entitativity positively impacts behaviours such as customers' willingness to pay subscription fees to a social networking service (Vock et al., 2013), and willingness to contribute to collaboration activities with the brand and other customers (Carlson et al., 2018). Furthermore, socialisation benefits have been shown to influence continued use intentions of social media brand pages (Zhang et al., 2015). Based on the above discussion, it is expected that high consumer entitativity perceptions arising from the consumption experience of the social media brand community, will influence customers' satisfaction and brand loyalty behaviours toward the retailer. Thus, we posit:

H5. Entitativity value will positively impact brand relationship performance

3.6. The moderating role of gender on the CP to value creation relationship

Social role theory (Eagly et al., 2000) suggests that males and females generally differ in two dimensions: instrumentality and emotionality. Prior information systems research on Internet-based technology shows that males are more task-oriented and motivated by achievement needs (Venkatesh and Morris, 2000). They are also more willing than females to spend time online engaging in task-focused activities (i.e. obtaining new information) and achieving benefits (Muscanell and Guadagno, 2012), and are more affected by instrumentality than females where males focus on functional benefits (Melnyk et al., 2009). Studies in social media corroborate these findings showing that men are more utilitarian focused than women who are more emotionally and socially oriented (Shi et al., 2016). Since prior literature indicates that males are more achievement-motivated than females, they are expected to be more likely to continue to interact if they can get high-quality information, access product knowledge, and receive economic benefits from a brand page. Thus, we posit:

H6a. The relationship between CP and functional value is stronger for males than for females

Drawing on gender role expectations research, females are more focused on participating in social relationships to achieve support, consensus, and rapport whereas males are more task-focused in their participation (Muscanell and Guadagno, 2012). Conversely, men have been found to be less likely to participate in relation-focused behaviours in social virtual environments (Zhou et al., 2014). In this sense, females are more social-experiential oriented and identity-involved than males, and are more easily affected by social-related factors during experiences of technology use than men (Noble et al., 2006). These effects have shown some support in the social media context. For example, in the brand page context, Shi et al. (2016) found that male's derived utilitarian based values more than women and that emotional and collaboration benefits are stronger for women than for males. This being the case, building and extending upon these studies in technology adoption and social media, a logical extension of these findings to the social

media brand community context leads to the following hypotheses:

H6b. The relationship between CP and emotional value is stronger for females than for males

H6c. The relationship between CP and relational value is stronger for females than for males

H6d. The relationship between CP and entitativity value is stronger for females than for males

3.7. Control variables

To further provide a more robust test of the theoretical framework, this study used usage intensity, income and social network size to control for user heterogeneity and ensure that the empirical results are not due to covariance with other variables.

4. Methodology

4.1. Sample

Our theoretical framework is embedded within the world's largest economy of social media users, the U.S. Data was collected via Qualtrics an online market research firm. To qualify to participate, respondents answered screening questions to a selection criterion to ensure that they had purchased their favourite retail brand within the past six months and were a follower of the same brand's Facebook brand page. In doing so, respondents were asked to answer three questions: (1) Do you follow a brand community on the Facebook platform? (2) What is the name of the brand you follow on Facebook? (3) Have you purchased this brand within past 12 months? Each respondent was asked to provide the name of the brand community that s/he followed and had purchased from in the past 12 months, and answer the questions with regard to this brand. An email invitation, with a link to a survey and brief introduction to the study was sent to eligible participants by Qualtrics.

4.2. Measures

Measures were adapted from prior literature to suit the social media retail brand community context and are illustrated in Table 1. Measures for CP were adapted from Chan et al. (2010) and Hamilton et al. (2016) for the social media context for use in this study to reflect past participatory social media brand community behaviours of sharing feedback to improve the brand, collaborate with others and disclose personal information about customer needs. In terms of the perceived value constructs, functional value and emotional value were drawn from Voss et al. (2003), relational value from Carlson et al. (2017a), and entitativity value from Vock et al. (2013). Measures for brand performance outcomes were adapted from Jahn and Kunz (2012) and further included customer satisfaction to reflect a composite construct. All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale from (1) "strongly disagree" to (7) "strongly agree".

4.3. Sample profile

In total, 584 responses were received with the following characteristics: 50.3% male and 49.7% female, average age 39 years, average income US$ $80,001-$100,000 per year; average number of years using the social media brand community was 3.4 years, with an average consumer of the brand 13.53 years. Product categories identified by respondents included fashion apparel (38.5%), technology (21.9%) and manufacturing retail brands (e.g. cosmetics, skin care) (19.3%) with media and entertainment, retail stores and service brands accounting for the remaining 20.3%. Male respondents were highest in the fashion apparel (64%) and technology (60%) categories. Whereas, females were highest in manufacturing retail brands (70%), retail stores

Table 1
Measurement model results.

First-order constructs	Measurement items	Factor loading	t-Value
Customer Participation CR 0.94; α 0.92; AVE 0.62	I spend a lot of time sharing information about my needs and brand preferences in the brand community	0.83	48.29*
	I put a lot of effort into expressing my personal needs in the brand community	0.82	51.19*
	I provide information about myself to the brand community	0.60	13.76*
	I have a high level of participation with others in the brand community	0.76	27.47*
	I always share my ideas with other community members	0.77	32.55*
	I help other community members on the brand page	0.80	40.84*
	I always provide feedback about the brand in the brand community	0.79	36.78*
	I always provide suggestions in the brand community to improve the brand experience and its offerings	0.84	54.02*
	I provide constructive suggestions to the brand via the brand community on how to improve it	0.86	59.09*
Functional Value CR 0.77; α 0.60; AVE 0.58	This brand community is helpful for me	0.90	9.31*
	This brand community is useful for me	0.90	13.48*
	This brand community is functional for me	0.80	2.95*
Emotional Value CR 0.90; α 0.83; AVE 0.75	The brand community is fun	0.83	41.73*
	The brand community is exciting	0.86	58.57*
	The brand community is entertaining	0.89	10.92*
Relational Value CR 0.89; α 0.82; AVE 0.74	My participation helps me build a better relationship with the brand community	0.91	10.24*
	My participation enables me to build a greater connection with the brand community	0.86	6.48*
	My participation helps me maintain a long term relationship with the brand community	0.80	7.31*
Entitativity Value CR 0.94; α 0.90; AVE 0.83	I feel like members of the brand community form an entity	0.92	10.50*
	I feel a bond with the brand community	0.92	9.07*
	I feel members of the brand community have many goals in common	0.90	7.22*
Brand Relationship Performance CR 0.89; α 0.85; AVE 0.62	I am satisfied with the brand community	0.84	51.78*
	I will continue purchasing this brand in the future	0.78	26.30*
	It will be difficult for me to leave this brand community	0.71	32.06*
	I will continue supporting the brand if its price increases slightly	0.80	32.66*

Note: α = Cronbach's alpha, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted, * = meets or exceeds criterion of t > 1.96, p 0.05 (2-tailed).

(74%) and media and entertainment (72%). We tested for common method bias because we collected data from single source, and found one factor explained 46% variance out of the total variance (100%). This is lower than half of all variance explained indicating that common method bias was not present.

4.4. Estimation procedure

To analyse the proposed model, a two-step approach via standard partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 3.2.4 (Ringle et al., 2015) was followed. The study first evaluated the reflective measurement models for reliability and validity of the sample. Second, the structural models of the hypothesized paths were examined. PLS-SEM is advantageous when the goal is to further advance theoretical arguments and when the focus of analysis concerns prediction (Hair et al., 2012); both of these aspects characterize this study.

5. Analysis and results

5.1. Evaluation of measurement scales

The evaluation of the measurement model follows established guidelines (Hair et al., 2018) and refers to the individual item reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity. Individual item reliability is measured by means of the (standardized) outer loadings. As indicated in Table 1, all items' outer loadings exceeded 0.70 indicating adequate item reliability. Internal consistency of the measurement scales is assessed by to the Cronbach's alpha values, which all exceeded the 0.70 benchmark except functional value which meets the lower 0.60 benchmark. Furthermore, convergent validity and average variance extracted (AVE) was assessed. In Table 1, all average AVE values exceed the threshold of 0.50 and thus support the presence of adequate convergent validity.

To test the discriminant validity, we checked for cross-loading, Fornell-Larker criterion and heterotrait-monotrait ratio correlations. For our study, we found that all item loadings of the corresponding

constructs are higher than the cross-loading values of the other latent variables in our model. Discriminant validity is also verified by the square root of each measure's AVE exceeding the correlations with any other constructs in a model. Our results show that all AVE values exceed the corresponding squared correlations among the latent constructs. Finally, assessment of the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations revealed that no correlation exceeds the threshold value of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015) meeting the criterion of discriminant validity for our study.

5.2. Assessment of structural model

To test the structural model, we analysed the significance of all the standardized path co-efficient using the PLS procedure (5000 bootstrap re-sampling approach) for our sample. Table 2 displays the results of

Table 2
Structural model results.

Hypothesis	Path	Path	t-statistic	R²	Supported
H1a	CP - > Functional Value	0.65	20.22*	0.42	Yes
H1a	CP - > Emotional Value	0.72	23.03*	0.52	Yes
H1b	CP- > Relational Value	0.69	24.25*	0.49	Yes
H1d	CP - > Entitativity Value	0.80	32.41*	0.65	Yes
H2	Functional Value - > BRP	0.28	4.92*		Yes
H3	Emotional Value - > BRP	0.17	2.55*		Yes
H4	Relational Value - > BRP	0.11	2.48*		Yes
H5	Entitativity Value - > BRP	0.31	4.87*	0.60	Yes
Control variables					
	Income - > BRP	0.10	0.34		
	Social network size - > BRP	− 0.03	2.68*		
	Usage intensity - > BRP	0.12	3.52*		

Note: CP: Customer Participation; BRP: Brand Relationship Performance. Results based on bootstrapping with 5000 samples, *= meets or exceeds t > 1.96, p < 0.05 (2-tailed); +: meets or exceeds R² > 0.10.

the hypothesized structural model test, including the overall explanatory power indicated by the coefficient of determination (R^2 value), assessed significance of path coefficients and loadings (with displaying significant paths and loadings indicated by asterisks and associated t-values of the paths/loadings).

The results indicate that all the paths/loadings are statistically significant at the 0.05 significance level ($t > 1.96$) across of the path model relationships. All R^2 values across our study were clearly in strength of the average to substantial benchmark (Chin, 1998). The variance explained by the model (R^2) is a key criterion for evaluating the structural model's quality in PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2018). Overall, the model accounted for between 42% and 65% of the variance of each value construct, and 60% of the variance in brand relationship performance construct. In sum, all the results satisfy the critical values suggested (see Table 2) and substantiate the conceptualised model by indicating that the fitting level of the hypothesis model and the data was approximately acceptable.

To test H6, we conducted multi-group analysis in Smart PLS to assess the moderating role of gender in the conceptual framework. We report the results of the subgroup-specific PLS analysis and the significance of the differences between the two subgroups' paths in Table 3.

Results for H6a indicate the CP exerted a stronger impact on functional value ($\beta = 0.70$, $p < 0.05$) in males (Subgroup 1) than for females (Subgroup 2) ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.05$). However, results did not confirm H6b-d. Although CP was found to exert a stronger impact on entitativity value ($\beta = 0.86$, $p < 0.05$) in males (Subgroup 1) than for females (Subgroup 2) ($\beta = 0.75$, $p < 0.05$), this was an unexpected finding and points to an area for future research. In sum, the results confirm H6a but do not support H6b-d.

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical implications

This study set out to examine the role of social media brand communities as an online service for retail brands to develop customer relationships through CP. Specifically, the study broadens our understanding of the effect CP has on value creation across multiple forms of utility (i.e., functional, emotional, relational and entitativity values) and brand relationship performance outcomes in social media within this retail context. The study further examined the gender effects on the CP to value creation system of relationships. Overall, our results confirm most of our hypotheses. In doing so, this study provides empirical evidence in support of the premise that value creation is a prerequisite for the success of a retail brand's strategic efforts in social media brand communities to improve brand relationship performance outcomes by encouraging CP. From this attempt to enrich the CP retail literature and provide clarification about the effects of CP in a social media brand community context, several key findings emerge for further discussion.

First, the effect of CP on value creation outcomes is more complex than previously stated and is noteworthy. The findings confirm the extant assertion that CP influences extrinsic evaluations of functional value and relational value. We also identify a direct link between CP and intrinsic evaluations of emotional value and entitativity value.

Notably, entitativity value was found to be the strongest predictor on brand relationship performance outcomes. Consequently, this study aims to complement extant research in the traditional settings (e.g. Chan et al., 2010) and social media context (e.g. De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Shi et al., 2016; Vock et al., 2013) by better understanding the effectiveness of CP on value creation from the customer perspective. It applies the SD logic and consumption values theorising to underpin the framework so as to guide the development of hypotheses for empirical testing. In doing so, this study contributes to both the CP and value creation retail literature streams, and the social media brand community field in particular.

Second, the results are the first to indicate gender differences between the CP to value creation relationship. For instance, males derived greater utilitarian value from CP in a social media brand community consumption experience than females, which are consistent with prior work by Shi et al. (2016). This is an important finding as functional value was the second strongest predictor of brand relationship performance outcomes. The results also, unexpectedly, indicate that males derive greater entitativity value than females. This is a noteworthy finding as entitativity value was the strongest predictor on brand relationship performance outcomes. This effect may be explained by product category effects (e.g. nature of brand content and interactivity) in social media, whereby males may derive greater functional value (i.e. fulfilling task-oriented needs) where they simultaneously derive greater entitativity value (i.e. bonding) by participating in interactions with other brand community members.

It should also be noted that although the CP to entitativity value relationship was statistically stronger for males, it was also found to be strong for females. Furthermore, a significant difference could not be detected for the CP to emotional value and relational value relationships. In sum, the investigation of gender effects on the CP to value creation relationship is instrumental for identifying strategies to enhance the benefits of CP for retailers is discussed next.

6.2. Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, the theoretical framework advanced in this study enables retail consumer brands using social media to enhance the customer relationship by facilitating and optimising value creating activities with their customers in a brand community. By recognizing the vital role that CP plays in social media brand communities involving a network of actors (i.e. customer, retail brand, other community members), retail (channel) managers must harness the benefits of value co-creation and circumvent the drawbacks of CP which is of significant importance. This being the case, the findings have various practical implications for retail brands that have engaged their customers in value (co)creation in social media brand communities.

In order to enable effective value co-creation processes in social media, retail brands need to motivate customers to participate and become co-creators within consumption experiences. The study findings indicate that creating a positive social media brand experience through participation is especially important because it affects consequential brand relationship performance outcomes. However, relying on the co-creation of utilitarian values alone, whilst still important, is

Table 3
Multi-group analysis result: gender.

	Global model	S1 Male	S2 Female	Path coefficients diff (S1-S2)	Supported
H6a: CP - > Functional Value	0.65*	0.70*	0.61*	**0.09***	Yes
H6b: CP - > Emotional Value	0.72*	0.70*	0.73*	0.03	No
H6c: CP- > Relational Value	0.69*	0.71*	0.70*	0.01	No
H6d: CP - > Entitativity Value	0.80*	0.86*	0.75*	**0.11***	No

Diff. = Significance of the path difference for the multi-group comparison. * = $p < 0.05$.

unlikely to work satisfactorily (e.g. Yim et al., 2012). Instead, brand managers must adopt a holistic perspective of value creation through CP and explore opportunities for creating experiential, hedonic and psycho-social values and ascertain the relative importance of various value judgements that contribute to brand relationship performance as a result of their participation. To this end, customers need to learn their co-creation roles in order to participate successfully in terms of rules, policies and expectations.

From the firm perspective, employees who have social media brand community management responsibility may require support systems such as subscripts for facilitating socialisation and dealing with social obstacles, community moderation training, greater understanding of their responsibilities and incentives that reward employees to help customers in the co-creation effort. Employees also must recognize the business value of CP and the importance of leveraging CP for value creation and the benefits derived for the retail brand.

In taking a holistic approach to customer value management, the findings indicate entitativity value was a particularly strong outcome of CP which in turn, was the strongest driver on brand relationship performance. Further, unexpectedly, this effect was found to be greater for males than for females. Consequently, managers need to place emphasis on helping customers cultivate a social bonding experience from their participation, particularly for males for entitativity to emerge. For instance, facilitating synchronous real time interaction that draws brand community members together in social media to provide opportunities to virtually meet, discuss and interact with like-minded others is a priority. Communications that encourage retail brand usage stories, advice for greater brand utility and encourage feedback enable the brand insights into aspects of the brand experience that customers prefer as well as giving consumers the opportunity to bond and create shared meaning with each other.

Whilst entitativity value was the strongest relationship with CP, this effect was still found to be strong for functional, emotional and relational value. As such, designing content strategies which enhance utilitarian benefits (e.g. brand learning, convenient access to brand information), affective experience states (fun, enjoyment, entertainment) and the cultivation of relationships through customer nurturing activities via social media is strategically important.

By tailoring a social media messaging strategy that focuses on eliciting an emotional reaction which is synchronised with the core message of the brand, social media managers can enforce brand values by connecting content and emotion. In terms of relational value, social media represents the new front line for relationship development activities to provide closer connection for the customer to the brand. Furthermore, direct, interactive communication channels to enable customer service enquiries, complaint resolution and idiosyncratic customer information seeking are important relationship building opportunities that possess an advantage over other communication channels. By opening such direct one-to-one contact for customers to connect and interact with the retail brand via social media messaging functionality, practitioners can foster a relationship where the brand is positioned as being reliable, informative and responsive to the individual needs of the customer.

In sum, while facilitating consumption experiences that are valued by consumers is well known, the novelty in this study lies in the idea that retail brands should understand the specific forms of value to cocreate, and their relative influence, that matters to consumers. As such, retail brands utilising social media to build brand communities need to develop and deploy sophisticated content management strategies that harness CP around the value creation components examined in this study and facilitate their delivery to achieve beneficial brand relationship outcomes.

6.3. Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the

results and designing further research. First, the research model is validated based on the data collected from U.S. consumers of retail consumer-oriented brands using an online panel from a market research firm on the Facebook social media platform. Thus, limiting generalizability of the findings to a specific country context and a single social media platform. Future studies could overcome this limitation by exploring the system of relationships studied here across a variety of country contexts and social media platforms. Specifically, further research should explore social media platforms with different technologically driven features such as Youtube (video), Instagram and Pinterest (image) and Twitter (microblogging) and platforms in eastern contexts such as Weibo and WeChat in China. Systematic differences would offer an opportunity to identify boundary conditions of our proposed framework.

Second, since the sample contained data collected from an online panel with respondents to recall a previous consumption experience of a preferred retail brand, the results may be influenced by a self-confirmation bias and consumers who exhibit lower brand involvement and social media usage behaviours might have different experiences. Consequently, the results should be interpreted as only explaining the effect CP has on value creation and brand relationship performance outcomes of active platform, highly involved consumers. Future studies should expand upon this approach to capture perceptions of consumers across different brand communities that they actively participate in. Longitudinal data could also be collected to assess consumer perceptions of brand community participation over time.

Third, the sample of this study comprised social media brand community experiences from many different retail consumer brand categories. However, no analysis of specific retail brand categories was conducted in this study to elucidate further insights into the interactions between CP, value creation and gender. Consequently, further investigation in larger studies involving fashion, technology, media and entertainment, tourism services etc. could be undertaken in order to determine context-specific insights and greater detection of gender differences in these system of relationships.

Fourth, more academic research is needed on understanding drivers of CP across different social media platforms owing to the unique technological features in which they embody and the impact on communication styles. As such, understanding areas around motivation, customer engagement perceptions and flow/immersive experiences (c.f. Carlson et al., 2017b) offer fruitful avenues for examination.

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