

## BRAND CULT: EXTENDING THE NOTION OF BRAND COMMUNITIES

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*In this research we propose that Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) brand communities may be taken a step further, to what we refer to as brand cult. We define brand cult as an individual's perceived sense of identity to a group of persons, with an identifiable brand in common that fosters a strong bond to the brand due to the strong group bond. This research explores the evolution of brand communities, recognizes the need for the next step and initiates the conversation of making a transition from brand community to brand cult. To test our conceptual hypothesis we develop three individual scales: brand following, connectedness, and consumer conformity to form the overall brand cult scale. Upon analysis, using a student sample drawn from 22 states, we explore the impact that each of these scales has upon the others and the ultimate brand cult scale. Our results validate the reliability of each individual scale and the brand cult scale making a case for the existence of the brand cult construct. Through an understanding of a brand cult, we believe marketers can manage better relationships with customers centered on an already existing brand.*

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### INTRODUCTION

From the evolution of a brand arose the notion of a brand community, defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand." In a brand community individual users are united around a brand.

Brands have since grown into a mentality or way of life for its consumer following (see Schau, Muniz and Arnould 2009; Diamond et al. 2009). A brand is often perceived as an extension of one's own self, a reflection of who one is as a person (Belk and Sherry 2007; Gobe 2001). A brand has come to unite individual users who may share nothing more in common than the use of the same brand (Mathwick, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008). For example, Facebook recently (February, 2009) tried to change its "terms of use" agreement for its site. This created outrage among members resulting in 43,000 users joining Facebook groups to protest the change. Facebook eventually had to

back down from its intended changes. Here, one observes how a group around a brand begins to take control away from the owners of the brand; however, these actions cannot be labeled typical of a brand community.

We believe that brand communities may be taken a step further. From a brand community, individuals begin to develop a strong bond through the identity initiated by a common brand, exhibiting a cult-like mentality. A brand is seen as the focal point for its brand community followers (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) the same way a strong group identity serves as the focal point for a cult. Individuals revolve their lives and shape who they are around a single cult, becoming loyal followers bound to the group, just as some consumers do so in a brand community. We believe this cult-like mentality, created by a strong brand, may be adapted to the way consumers behave within this next step in brand community—*brand cult*.

The purpose of this research is to conceptually explore how a brand community transitions into a brand cult and to empirically determine if a brand cult exists among brand users. In the following sections, first, we further discuss brand communities and explore the possibilities

of how brand communities take on cult-like characteristics in order to introduce the notion of a brand cult. Next, we develop and test a model for the transition into brand cults. Finally, we discuss the implications of these results for researchers and marketers.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The word cult stirs up a lot of emotions, usually having a negative or sometimes religious connotation. There are those who would disagree with the use of this term, advising that it should be severely limited in scholarly and other writing, especially about religious groups due to its popular negative usage (Richardson 1993, p.355). We recognize the controversy behind the term cult; however, we want to use the strength and impact behind this word to really illustrate the fact that what we are referring to is not a repetition of brand community. The main focus for this research, however, shall not look at what a cult really is or how it is formed. Instead, the term cult is being borrowed in order to stress the importance of group relations and commitment, and then apply it within the context of branding.

#### From Brand Community to Brand Cult

Cults, themselves, are obscure; there exists little agreement to the origin, development, and demise of cults (Campbell 1977). Therefore, it is difficult to provide a model for the ideal cult. Based on Howard Becker's definition a cult is "a kind of quasi-group embodying an individualistic search for ecstatic experience" (Campbell 1977, p. 376). In other words, a cult consists of individuals looking to gain some sort of fulfillment from their group experience, just as consumers are looking to gain some sort of fulfillment from their group experience initiated by consuming a brand.

According to Campbell (1977, p. 375) there are two elements to cultic systems of beliefs: (1) internal coherence and (2) implication of a social organization. In other words, a cult must have some unifying factor (in our case, a brand)

and must have some sort of group-like structure (we suggest the brand community). Applying Campbell's logic to branding, we find the conceptual foundation to go from brand community to a brand cult.

After understanding the power and impact behind the word cult, it is necessary to examine this move forward into something more than a brand community and incorporate the term cult. Brand community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) sets the stage for the concept of a group focused around a brand. In a brand community there is evidence of brand loyalty based on the connection an individual has with the group. But nowadays individual customers are taking the next step. They are not satisfied by those rare occasions in which they may have a connection with other users of a brand, they are looking to incorporate this group into who they are as a person. The group begins to serve as an outlet for personal fulfillment. It begins to become an integrated part of one's everyday life. The group connects a brand user to something greater. It is this deep underlying connection to the group and how it serves as part of who the individual truly is, which renders the use of the term cult appropriate.

An important distinction between brand cult and the popular notion of a cult brand needs to be made. There have been studies in the past that have proposed the notion of cult brands, (Munro 2006; Ragas and Bueno 2002) and the culting of brands. It is important to distinguish that cult brands and brand cults should not be identified as one and the same. The term cult brand has a negative connotation leading one to believe that an individual becomes unwillingly bound to and blinded by the product; whereas, the term brand cult is meant to describe a strong connection with a group cognitively initiated by individuals. Munro (2006, p. 22) argues that cult brands are something that require a little searching and do not have a marketing plan. They are almost like a fad; however, this does not make sense from a sound marketing perspective. Identity to a brand cult should be something that is well-known and well-admired. Businesses would not want to support

a following for their brands that may be insignificant or inconsistent. Therefore, the term cult brands should be disregarded for the purpose of this research and not confused with what we term as brand cult.

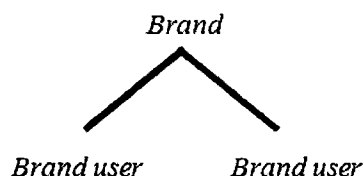
### Brand Following

According to Hanlon (2006, p. 16) companies have only two choices in terms of how they do business: (1) they can be low-cost providers or (2) they can create a "sustained differentiation" around themselves with a community of "enthusiasts who flock to the brand and stick to it no matter what." The latter makes the most sense for this study. Consumers gravitate to brands like Nike, Starbucks, and Apple as a means to fit in and become part of something much greater than themselves (Hanlon 2006, p. 16). These brand communities become so influential that they resonate outward and become a bigger part of the culture surrounding them (Hanlon 2006, p. 16). From this perspective on what a brand has to offer, individuals gravitate together around a common brand, searching for something more in their lives through a formed following around a brand.

Based on the preceding discussion with the composite of past research we begin examining this behavior of individual users coming together around a brand. For the purpose of this research, we refer to this as *brand following*. We define brand following as individual users united around a common brand due to a strong affiliation to the brand. Figure 1 illustrates the

Figure 1

### Brand Following



relationship created by a brand following as a brand is the initial unifying force between brand users.

### Connectedness

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) identify three markers of a community exhibited by a brand community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. All three of these markers make sense when forming a strong bond within a group centered on a brand. Shared consciousness or consciousness of kind most effectively looks at how brand communities' social interactions among users may be pushed a step further. Shared consciousness is "the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another" (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 413). It is this connection that goes beyond just a simple interaction with a brand. It may not even be on a regular basis between users but a deeper underlying connection and sense of identity with others in a group. There is this sense where members feel connected to some degree even if they have never met, based simply on a shared consumption experience with a brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). The focus now shifts from just the brand to the relationship between brand users.

McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) examine how brand communities are built, looking to expand on Muniz and O'Guinn's concept of brand community. The existence of a brand community, along with the meanings ascribed to it is a function of the consumption experience of the customer rather than simply the brand (McAlexander et al. 2002). A transition is made away from the idea that brand communities occur by coincidental interaction between common users, but instead are rooted in this connection and affinity with others that the customer gains. The relationships formed between members of a group centered on a brand often results in an increase in the personal investment of time, money and effort in a customer's consumption of the product and brand (McAlexander et al. 2002). A strong affinity among members of the

group becomes the driving force behind an individual's behavior. For the purpose of this research, we refer to this as *connectedness*: a strong affiliation individual users have with other users sharing a common brand.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship created by connectedness, as brand users display an affinity towards one another. In connectedness we step away from our focus on the brand and instead examine the relationship between users.

Figure 2

### Connectedness



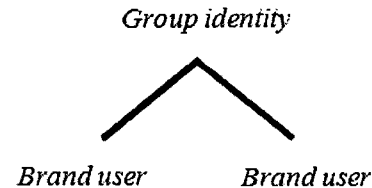
### Consumer Conformity

The move from individual behavior to group behavior lies in social identity theory. According to Tajfel and Turner (1985), people categorize themselves and others into groups to make sense of the world. Social identity theory explores this connection between an individual and the formation of a strong bond with a group. "The basic idea is that a social category into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category" (Hogg et al. 1995, p. 259). Group identity is found to influence how individuals in the group think, feel, and behave (Hogg et al. 1995). The group begins to define who one is as a person. It is this sense of belonging or *categorization* to the group and the personal fulfillment or *self-enhancement* that energizes the group and makes it stronger (Hogg et al. 1995). Hogg et al. point out that over a period of time individuals transform into group members and individuality transforms into group behavior.

Social identity is a strong motivating factor in establishing a deep connection in maintaining group stability. According to Van Vught et al. (2004), social identity acts as a social glue providing stability to groups. Weak ties between members of a group lead to unstable structures within a group, while groups with strong ties form a stable single entity with infrastructures that are very difficult to destroy. In terms of our research based on consumption, we refer to this as *consumer conformity* and view it as individual affiliation towards a group, due to group identity. Figure 3 displays the relationship created by consumer conformity, as group identity is the unifying factor between brand users.

Figure 3

### Consumer Conformity



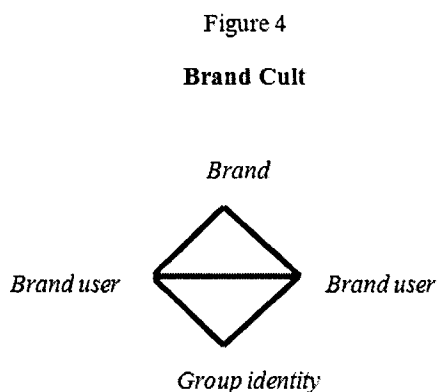
### Brand Cult

Based on this notion of a strong identity or relation to a group, one may begin to observe how a group extends beyond a social interaction among people. There is an emphasis on the identification of an individual that fosters a strong cohesive group. In terms of a brand community, the interaction centered on a brand is no longer sufficient. Individual users may be drawn to a common brand, creating brand following, yet it is that affinity between individual users that really drives the group and sustains it, causing them to ultimately conform to the group. This group identity overcomes the individual and is incorporated into their everyday life and way of thinking. They

become dependent on the group as it fulfills them, defining who they are and giving them purpose. Hence, in this application of social identity to a brand community, the group may evolve into something much stronger and much more powerful. A brand community may thus transition into a *brand cult*. We define brand cult as an individual's perceived sense of identity to a group of persons, with an identifiable brand in common that fosters a strong bond to the brand due to the strong group bond.

This notion of a perceived sense of identity is important. Brand cults move away from strict social interactions around a brand. It is enough for individuals to maintain the perception that they are part of a larger group even if they have not met or interacted with the members before. The notion of identity is important as well. This is where we believe we make our biggest contribution. Never before has the concept of social identity been explicitly applied to brand communities. A recent article in this year's *Journal of Marketing* entitled, "Social Identity and the Service Profit Chain" by Christian Homburg, Jan Wieseke and Wayne D. Hoyer (2009) applies social identity to service profit chains. While this article does not directly relate to our work, its application of social identity shows that social identity theory is heartening to us.

Figure 4 displays how brand following, connectedness and consumer conformity come together to unite users.



Individual brand users are united by a common brand in a brand following. This union between brand users comes from the connectedness they experience towards one another. Brand users conform to these communities centered around a brand based on the perceived group identity. Together, brand following, connectedness and consumer conformity create a brand cult. The brand is the unifying factor much like in a brand community but it is this introduction of the dimension of group identity which sustains and maintains the group that differentiates brand community from brand cult.

Based on our three brand cult dimensions: brand following, connectedness and consumer conformity, the following hypotheses may be proposed.

- H<sub>1</sub>. Product category has an impact on:
  - a. brand following,
  - b. connectedness,
  - c. consumer conformity, and
  - d. brand cult.
- H<sub>2</sub>. The degree of conformity, irrespective of the industry type or product category, has an impact on:
  - a. brand following, and
  - b. connectedness.
- H<sub>3</sub>. The degree of connectedness, irrespective of industry type or product category, has an impact on the level of brand following.
- H<sub>4</sub>. Brand following, connectedness, and consumer conformity, irrespective of the industry type or product category, have a bearing upon integration into brand cult.
- H<sub>5</sub>. Brand user characteristics, irrespective of the industry type or product category, have an impact on integration into brand cult.

Marketers need to understand the characteristics of a brand cult to establish a strong consumer following based on identity to

the group. We now proceed to describe the empirical examination of our constructs of brand following, connectedness and consumer conformity and their relationship with each other.

### METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to (1) explore the transition of brand communities into brand cults, (2) investigate the existence of brand cults and (3) examine the characteristics of brand cults. Empirical data is obtained from a convenience based random sample survey of college student populations. The initial context of student participants to test the construct of brand cults was chosen for several reasons. First and foremost, one of the authors of this research is a student and can personally attest to the great influence certain brands have on the chosen subjects, college students. Secondly, the college student population represents a substantially large consumer market that firms try to appeal to with their products on a daily basis. As a result, not only will the subjects chosen provide quality research results, these results may then be used to appeal to these students, an already large consumer base.

A web-based survey was used to collect data from college students. Using a web-based survey allowed for easier access to a large college student population in order to better represent the real-world college student population. The survey instrument was posted online via a commercial web surveying company. Any duplicate IP addresses were eliminated to avoid multiple submissions from a single respondent. A pretest was run to evaluate how the survey flowed; modifications were made in regards to the logic and wording of items.

Once the survey went live, subjects were recruited from college social networks, such as those supported by Facebook.com in an attempt to achieve this convenience based sample. Respondents were contacted through email accounts, both student and personal. Using a web link collector, a uniform email request with

a link to the survey was sent to each potential respondent through one of the authors' own personal email client. This method was chosen in order to prevent situations in which respondents' email service providers were blocking the email invitation as spam. This email included a request for respondents to forward the link to anyone else that they deemed willing and able to respond to this survey. Therefore, besides a convenience based sample, a sample with a "snowballing" effect of respondents theoretically existed as well. As a result, this sample ended up not only reflecting college student populations but a general consumer population as well. Of approximately 3,500 invited subjects 533 responded to the survey rendering a response rate of 15.2 percent, which compares favorably with past studies using an on-line data collection methodology. The effective sample size used for this study is five-hundred and thirty-three.

### Sample Description

Of the five-hundred and thirty-three people surveyed, almost half (42 percent) were between the ages of 18 and 20. The remaining 58 percent were 21 or above. Our sample was split about 69 percent to 31 percent in favor of females. Some respondents did not specify their gender when responding. This gender imbalance is difficult to explain. There is a current propensity for more women to attend college than men; however, consideration should be given to the effect that this imbalance may slightly skew our data.

In response to our survey, we did have a representative sample in regards to race. Forty-eight respondents identified themselves as minorities. We had respondents that classified themselves as one of the categories we provided: Caucasian; African American; Asian American; Hispanic, Latino or Other; Native America; Other. The majority of our samples reported being Caucasian (76.5 percent). This may be representative of the fact that a majority of respondents came from schools with limited diversity. This majority of Caucasians in our

sample corresponds with the general demographic of people in the nation.

About 25 percent of respondents were seniors in college, with 5 percent being graduate students and the rest underclassmen. We had an even dispersion in regards to representation for different majors: Humanities; Science; Social Sciences; and Business. This sample was slightly heavy with business majors.

The majority of respondents (68 percent) identified themselves as having a GPA of 3.1 to 4.0. Very few classified themselves as having a 1-2.0 GPA. The upper echelon is overwhelming; certain respondents may have been misleading when completing this item.

A majority of respondents were from four year institutions (61 percent). We have some representation from 2 year school (1 percent) and a good representation of graduate schools (23 percent) as well. Of those respondents who are no longer students, 6.2 percent of them have post-graduate degrees. Approximately 65 percent of respondents reported having a monthly income of \$5,000 or under, as one would expect from a student sample. There were 63 percent of respondents from New York, the home state of the research institution. However, there were 37 percent of respondents from outside of New York State. We had a good representation of the nation as a whole with 22 states represented in this sample.

### Scale Creation

We developed a six-item scale to measure the brand following construct and the connectedness scale is a five-item measurement scale. We developed a ten-item scale, based on Riketta's (2008) affiliation motive scale, to measure the conformity construct. The twenty-one-item scale to measure the brand cult construct is an integration of these individual scales. With the exception of the items used for identification in regards to the respondents and the brand being considered, each survey measure item was based on an adapted semantic differential scale with Likert type

scaling with a seven-point ("strongly disagree — strongly agree") response scale. This scale was adapted from the seven-point scale, anchored by "not at all" and "very much" with "moderately" in the middle, used by Bergami and Bagozzi (2000). Based on previous work, this study employed the familiar Churchill (1979) paradigm for developing a measure of brand cult (Carlson 2007).

### Survey Validity

A table of brands separated into categories, apparel, electronics, food/beverage, web, automobiles, and television, was provided at the beginning of the survey. Respondents were asked to keep one brand in consideration when completing the survey. The use of categories and limiting each respondent to one brand was based on an effort to collect data for multiple brands from multiple categories so that this research did not apply to just one brand. This category of brands appeared once at the beginning of the survey and then again in the middle of the survey in order to remind respondents of what brand they were thinking about in order to try and ensure that respondents kept one brand in mind the entire time they completed the survey. Later in the survey respondents indicated only which product category they had kept in mind when completing the survey as opposed to indicating which specific brand they had kept in mind. Again, this was all in an attempt to keep this study applicable to many brands.

It was important to not include the phrases 'brand community' or 'brand cults' within the survey. There were two reasons why we did not include these phrases in our survey (1) to eliminate bias and (2) maintain the validity of our study. The term cult would have created a negative connotation in many respondents' minds and misled them in their responses to the items in our survey related to the term cult.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We checked the reliability and validity of the brand following scale using the inter-item

reliability tests. The six-item brand following scale performed very well and exhibited good psychometric properties (Cronbach's Alpha 0.873). The five-item connectedness scale also performed very well and exhibited good psychometric properties (Cronbach's Alpha 0.821). The ten-item conformity scale resulted in a three-factor solution in an exploratory factor analysis. We achieved the three-factor solution through a principal component analysis, with a varimax rotation with a 0.60 factor loading cut off. Three items did not significantly load on any factor and were not included in the final ten-item scale and eliminated from further analysis.

The three factors obtained could be clearly labeled by descriptors created for this research as 1. Conventionalists, 2. Egotists, and 3. Independents. The descriptors were created based on the behavior reflective of each group. Next, we checked the reliability and validity of the three-dimensional conformity scale using the Cronbach's Alpha. The Conventionalists Scale was a four-item scale that performed very well and exhibited good psychometrics properties (Alpha 0.678). The Egotists Scale was a three-item scale that performed very well and exhibited good psychometrics properties (Alpha 0.705). The Independents Scale was a two-item scale that performed well and exhibited good psychometric properties (Alpha 0.650).

Originally, the Independents Scale was a three-item scale that was not performing as well as the other two conformity factors. We decided to eliminate the item "I like to be autonomous" from the Independents Scale, reducing it from a three-item solution scale to the two-item solution scale. By eliminating this item, we witnessed an increase from .581 to .650 of our alpha. It is a possibility based on conversations, that the term "autonomous" was not well understood by respondents. This may have affected our responses and hence our alpha. Therefore, this item was eliminated from our analysis.

The Brand Cult Scale was a twenty-item scale that performed very well and exhibited good psychometric properties (Alpha 0.822). The item "I dislike standing out in a group" had to be reversed-coded so that it conformed to the general direction of the scale. Recoding this item provided a good way to check for validity of responses. If someone were to check responses without reading the survey, this item should catch them off-guard because it is negatively loaded.

It should be noted that all of the scales in this research are first-time scales that we developed for this study. Therefore, we deem their corresponding Cronbach's Alphas as all performing well.

### Impact of Product Category

We next ran descriptive statistics for items that related to the product category that respondents kept in mind over the course of the survey. Each product category held a favorable response rate with only 11 percent of respondents choosing not to identify themselves with a particular product category. Results indicate that Apparel held the highest response rate with 23 percent of respondents choosing this category. Electronics, food/beverage, and web all held significant response rates as well. These response rates could lead one to believe that apparel, electronics, food/beverage and web all have strong brand consumption in our sample.

We first looked to determine whether consumer brand following changes depending on the product category. Using ANOVA we were able to test this hypothesis (H1.a.). Results indicated that product category does have an impact on a brand following ( $F=3.413$  p: 0.005). Our results show that both electronics and television product categories demonstrate a strong and significant brand following.

We next looked to examine whether consumer connectedness changes depending on the product category. Results indicated that (as stated in H2.b) product category does have an

impact on connectedness ( $F=11.151$   $p: 0.0001$ ). Our results show that electronics, web, and television product categories demonstrate a strong and significant consumer connectedness. Electronics, web and television are both significant product categories in regards to brand following and connectedness in this study.

We then examined  $H_{1,c}$ , whether each factor of consumer conformity changes depending on the product category. Results indicate that product category does have an impact on conventionalists ( $F=2.895$   $p: 0.014$ ) and egotists ( $F=2.797$   $p: 0.017$ ) but independents ( $F=0.767$   $p: 0.574$ ) do not exhibit significant influence based on product category.

Our results show that apparel and television product categories demonstrate a strong and significant impact on conventionalists. This makes sense. Conventionalists would be the ones most likely to follow the latest fashion trends or the hottest new show on television. They are followers looking for the next big thing. Our results also show that automobiles and electronics product categories demonstrate a strong and significant impact on egotists. This makes sense because egotists are the ones who are typically flashy and love to show off. These would be the types of people who have to have the really nice car or the expensive stereo system.

Our results indicate that despite the lack of impact product category has on independents, web product category does have a high impact on them. This lack of impact product category has on independents could be explained by the types of people in this category who like to make their own paths and not follow the trends. Web product category also makes sense for independents because the web is always changing and cutting edge so independents may not feel as though they are staying in the mainstream.

Finally, we looked to examine whether a brand cult changes depending on the product category, hypothesis 1.d. Results indicate that

product category does have an impact on integration into brand cult ( $F=4.220$   $p: 0.001$ ). Our results show that electronics, web and television product categories demonstrate a strong and significant brand cult. This result is consistent with brand following, connectedness, and the three elements of conformity.

### **Impact of Brand Following, Connectedness and Consumer Conformity**

We proceeded by running simple linear regressions. We first used brand following as the dependent variable and conformity as the independent. The data indicated an excellent fit between brand following and the three dimensions of consumer conformity ( $F=21.187$   $p: 0.00001$ ). In addition all three dimensions loaded positively and significantly at the 0.10 level. Results indicate that, as hypothesized, the degree of conformity has a bearing upon the level of brand following irrespective of the industry type or product category ( $H_{2,a}$ ).

We next used connectedness as the dependent variable and consumer conformity as the independent. The data indicate an excellent fit between connectedness and consumer conformity ( $F=25.517$   $p: 0.00001$ ). In addition all coefficients were statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Again, results indicate that the degree of conformity has a bearing upon the level of connectedness irrespective of the industry type or product category ( $H_{2,b}$ ).

We then used brand following as the dependent variable and connectedness as the independent. The data indicated an excellent fit between brand following and connectedness ( $F=138.269$   $p: 0.00001$ ). In addition all coefficients were statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance. Results indicate that the degree of connectedness has a bearing upon the level of brand following irrespective of the industry type or product category ( $H_3$ ).

Finally, we examined the full model using brand cult as the dependent variable and brand following, connectedness and consumer conformity as the independent. The data

indicated excellent fits between brand cult and brand following ( $F=446.693$   $p: 0.0001$ ), connectedness ( $F=1090.222$   $p: 0.00001$ ) and conformity ( $F=92.533$   $p: 0.0001$ ). All of the corresponding coefficients were significant at the 0.05 level. Results indicate that all three dimensions have a bearing upon the level of brand cult irrespective of the industry type or product category ( $H_4$ ).

### Impact of User Characteristics

We finally looked to examine whether consumer integration in brand cult changes depending on user characteristics, irrespective of the industry type or product category. ANOVA results indicated that certain user characteristics do have an impact on membership in a consumer brand cult ( $H_5$ ). Results indicate age of the respondent has an impact on brand cult ( $F=16.322$   $p: 0.0001$ ). Our results indicate that both 18-20 and 26-30 age groups demonstrate a strong and significant integration in brand cult. Results indicate year in school does have an impact on brand cult ( $F=5.134$   $p: 0.0001$ ). Our results indicate that sophomores demonstrate a strong and significant integration in brand cult. Results indicate that highest degree earned does have an impact on brand cult ( $F=3.756$   $p: 0.024$ ). Our results indicate that individuals with a four-year degree demonstrate a strong and significant propensity to participate in brand cult. Results indicate income per month does have an impact on brand cult ( $F=5.049$   $p: 0.00001$ ). Our results show that the \$20-30,000 income group demonstrates a strong and significant integration in brand cult.

These results are important to marketers looking to target brand users within a brand cult. These results specifically assist marketers in targeting college students, the intended target sample for this survey, as they allow marketing managers to create preliminary target profiles for their brands.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study contributes to marketing literature by examining theoretical constructs in an empirical study. The brand following, connectedness, conformity, and brand cult sales developed for this study all exhibit good psychometric properties for a pilot study. These scales can certainly be refined and utilized for future studies examining brand cults. The initial results from this study provide encouraging results regarding the theoretical constructs of brand cult.

The strong ties of a customer with the brand are further strengthened by providing a group around a brand whose users are connected with one another with a strong group identity. By fostering a brand cult companies could build stronger existing brands. Through an understanding of brand cults, strengthening an already established brand will prove to be less expensive, less of a risk, and far more strategically rewarding than trying to build a new brand. This is an attractive strategic alternative available to companies looking to maximize their brand potential and returns during lean economic times.

Our overall models contribute to managerial thinking in practical ways. For instance, the independents tend to conform to the group at a lower level than the egotists do, but even so, they do indicate a desire to conform at a statistically significant level. This is good news for marketing managers that would like to create stronger brands by further enhancing group conformity among their customers. As expected, the conformists were the most enthusiastic about the possibility of identifying with the brand and had a strong desire to bond with the group of followers. Another finding that allows for a strategic initiative that leverages the natural inclination of this market segment based on a classification schema derived from our theoretical scales. A brand strategy that devotes varying degrees of resources, such as promotional efforts, to these three distinct segments will be an efficient and cost-effective strategy.

In a recent study by Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009), an examination of several brand communities suggests value creation through participation and engagement in brand communities. Schau et al. posit that value creation in brand communities is a function of network driven marketing initiatives rather than the traditional dyadic buyer-seller view of value exchange. Their conclusions lend credibility to our findings which stress the importance of relationships between brand community members in addition to the dyadic brand-consumer relationship.

As with any research that relies on a limited student sample, the findings should be viewed with prudence. However, this research was actually enriched by a sample that showed distinct brand cults with the product categories that were researched. This research opens avenues of research unexplored thus far. This research is the preliminary step in our application of a cult mentality in branding, future studies should focus on extending the preliminary findings of this research. Questions such as measuring the brand cult among different product categories with specific brands would be of interest to brand managers. Thompson and Sinha (2008) explore the influence of oppositional loyalty within brand communities. They argue that affinity to certain brand communities may create oppositional loyalty towards competing brands. If oppositional loyalty applies to brand communities then it may also apply to brand cults. Our research does not address this theory of oppositional loyalty. It may be looked at in future studies of brand cults. This research focuses on complex brands such as Disney and Microsoft, but it would be interesting to look at brand cults for consumer packaged goods. Additionally, one could seek to extend this study to enhance its generalizability on non-student samples, in international markets, and across cultural typologies.

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