

Brand Community and Symbolic Interactionism: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper reviews and synthesizes existing literature on symbolic interactionism (SI) and on brand communities (BCs). On the one hand, we identified an interest on SI as a sociological perspective to address a wide range of topics affecting human behavior (e.g. Chen et al., 2020; Sumeraru et al., 2019; vom Lehn et al., 2021). On the other hand, advances on BC exist mostly in the fields of marketing and branding, although these communities operate according to social dynamics. The literature review identified that interaction is key for a BC to develop, as basic symbolic-interactionist tenets are reflected (explicitly nor not) in the BC literature. Thus, our review: (a) identifies several SI premises that help explaining BCs as social contexts of symbolic interaction, (b) identifies SI as a suitable approach to study the collective and symbolic dimension of consumption, and (c) offers an analysis of relationships between SI and BC, thus developing sociological research applied to marketing and brand management, by combining the three interactionist traditions to study BC. This review also suggests new venues of research, such as the study of self-enhancement and branding through the lens of SI.

Highlights

- Symbolic interactionism's underpinnings coincide with the sociological bases of brand communities, emerging as a relevant framework to explain the dynamics inside them.
- SI provides a suitable approach to study BCs as a marketing reality reflecting the collective and symbolic dimension of consumption.
- Interaction is key for a BC to develop. Three basic symbolic-interactionist tenets are reflected (explicitly nor not) in the BC literature.
- First, BCs represent interaction processes of high symbolic value between consumers. The core symbol is the brand, whose meanings are the center of interaction.
- Second, self and society influence and give shape to each other.
- And third, BCs are social entities that imbue the self with meaning. A sense of a collective self is developed through members interaction.

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Introduction

Brand communities (BCs) are specialized, non-geographically bound communities focused on a brand, and based on social relationships among admirers of the brand (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Classic examples of BCs are Apple, Harley Davidson, or Lego. In these groups, members feel connected to the brand and also to one another. This connection is formed around the intangible values of the brand (e.g. being different and marginality, freedom and brotherhood, creativity and imagination) which are taken as a way of understanding the world and, ultimately, a way of living — some have even been considered to have a religious component (Muniz and Schau, 2005; Schau and Muniz, 2006). More than simple fan clubs or social networks (Kilambi et al., 2013), BC members participate in the social construction of the brand through negotiation of meaning (Muniz and O’ Guinn, 2001). Indeed, BCs have interaction as a key feature: by way of illustration, Kapferer (2012) conceives BCs as a set of people interacting together, physically or virtually, connected by the pursuit of common goals or common ideals and linkings.

Traditionally, BCs have been conceived from marketing and branding. Existing research usually focuses on their implications for the brand, as well as on the structural or relational aspect of BCs. This paper aims to clarify one specific tenet

of BCs that can establish a framework for a new approach that might enhance the theoretical scope of the BC concept: the social-symbolic interaction process whereby BC members participate in the construction of a brand. In order to do so, we systematize and develop through a literature review the relationships between BCs and the psycho-sociological approach that offers a suitable framework to analyze the symbolic processes whereby brands are socially constructed: symbolic interactionism (SI), a social-psychological perspective concerned with the interaction between the individual and its social world. This interaction is based on the use of shared symbols and meanings, both determining the nature of the interaction and the construction of one’s self. By focusing on how the main concepts of SI relate to key dimensions of the BC phenomenon, this paper aims to bring to light a theoretical link that may be productive for future research on brand management, consumer cultures, and the crossroads between technology, consumption, and sociality.

In this sense, our paper aims to contribute to the literature by exploring the extent to which symbolic interactionism’s underpinnings coincide with the sociological bases of brand communities. By identifying these connections, this paper adds to the literature on SI and brand management by claiming that symbolic interactionism emerges as a relevant framework to explain the dynamics inside brand communities.

Thus, our research departs from the idea that if BCs are originally defined from sociological principles, and considering that the brand that allows them to emerge is a symbol, it is possible to analyze these collectives from a perspective that combines both principles. The perspective whose underpinnings coincide with these premises is symbolic interactionism.

In order to shed light on the sociological nature of BC and its symbolic dimension, we perform a systematic literature review that focuses on the precise relationships that can be drawn between BCs and SI. While some scholars identify — in many cases, indirectly — that SI and BCs have points in common, these relationships are however kept unexplored in a systematic and detailed fashion. This is the core of our paper's contribution: to shed light on conceptual connections that have not, in general, been explicitly expressed in literature (as we will explain later), and to explore more in depth the links between SI and BCs in order to open new avenues of research.

To that end, this paper is organized as follows. First, we provide the goals, approach and search strategy to this study (pg. 6). Then, a review of the key literature from both BCs (pg. 9) and SI (pg. 14) is carried out, in order to identify and structure the conceptual bases and core topics to each area. Specifically, SI literature is briefly explained—the ideas are condensed as this approach might be not well known in the field of communication. After that, literature connecting SI and BCs is reviewed (pg. 28). The main approaches are evaluated, and key ideas are structured with the objective to identify relations and gaps. Considering those, we identify new insights (pg. 35) connecting BC and SI based on existing literature, being these directed to make proposals that understand BC from a social-symbolic perspective. Finally, the conclusions section (pg. 41) evaluate the connections which have been found, and identify future lines of research.

Goals and Approach

The main aim of this paper is to make a review of the most relevant literature connecting BCs and SI. From that starting point, other specific objectives are: (1) to review the literature on brand communities; (2) to review the theoretical underpinnings of the three traditions of SI and relate them to specific BC theoretical tenets; (3) to synthesize existing literature on both SI and BCs, and find new common points

between them that may have not been explicitly mentioned in the literature, hence offering insights that have not been presented before; and (4) to suggest new research lines on the grounds of the SI-BC connection.

To that end, this paper develops a scholarly review to identify the most relevant sources (Hart, 2018), an approach which is also described as *integrative* literature review (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). We must also note that, unlike the BC literature, our literature review found the prolific interactionist tradition to be complicated to condense in a comprehensive review. For that reason, this paper focuses on the literature that conveys those SI principles that have a connection with BCs.

Search Strategy

This paper aims to shed light on the interconnections of BC and SI by reviewing existing literature on both areas. In order to do so, the search strategy was as follows. A pre-search was conducted on online databases like Emerald, Science Direct and Web of Science (covering research till July 2022) to estimate how extensive the literature on the topics is; and focusing only on literature from the areas of marketing, communication, sociology and social psychology. After that, a systematic, in-depth search was conducted using the Scopus database—this database by Elsevier was chosen on the grounds that is a established reference regarding high-impact academic journals, and it includes more journals than other databases, such as Web of Science. The last search was carried out on July, 2022. The searches combined specific keywords such as “brand communities”, “symbolic interactionism”, “symbolic interaction”, “symbolic interactionist” and “collectives of consumption” (e.g. “brand communities” AND “symbolic interaction”). The search also broadened the scope to keywords like “brand” AND “symbol”; or “branding” AND “communities”. Based on the reading of the abstracts, the criteria for retaining or discarding the references were: first, original literature defining key concepts (mainly, books in the case of SI; and papers in the case of BCs); second, relevant conceptual developments and classifications by eminent scholars; third, empirical research representing relevant advances; and finally, current approaches. The search strategy can be summarized in [Table 1](#).

In addition to the papers collected, the literature on SI-BC includes a lot of books and book chapters, some of

Table 1. Search strategy: Papers on SI-BC

Keywords	Number of papers	Databases used	Main journals
“brand communities” AND “symbolic interactionism”/“symbolic interaction”/“symbolic interactionist” (fields: Abstract + Title + Keywords)	19	Scopus	<i>Journal of Marketing Analytics, Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management, Computers in Human Behavior, Sustainability (Switzerland), Recherche et Applications en Marketing</i>
“brand communities” AND “collectives” AND “consumption” (fields: Abstract + Title + Keywords)	38 (before filtering)	Scopus	<i>Journal of Brand Management, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Management, Marketing Theory, Consumption Markets and Culture, Journal of Business Strategy, Spanish Journal of Marketing – ESIC</i>
“brand communities” AND “symbol”/“symbolic”/AND “interaction”/“consumption”/ “co-creation” (fields: Abstract + Title + Keywords)	255 (before filtering)	Scopus	<i>Journal of Business Research, Journal of Product & Brand Management, Information Technology and People, Journal of Brand Management, Journal of Marketing, Business Process Management Journal, Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing, Journal of Marketing Management, Marketing Theory</i>
“brand communities” AND “consumer”/“consumption” AND “identity”/“self-presentation” (fields: Abstract + Title + Keywords)	234 (before filtering)	Scopus	<i>Journal of Consumer Behaviour, International Journal of Advertising, Journal of Brand Management, European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Product & Brand Management, Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Journal of Marketing Communications, Journal of Marketing, International Journal of Internet Marketing and Advertising</i>
“brand communities” AND “consumer”/AND “relation”/ “relations”/“relationships”/ “consumer-brand relationship”/ (fields: Abstract + Title + Keywords)	784 (before filtering)	Scopus	<i>Psychology and Marketing, Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing, Journal of Service Management, Journal of Business Research, International Journal of Consumer Studies, Journal of Product & Brand Management, International Journal of Information Management, Sustainability (Switzerland), European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Interactive Marketing</i>
“brand communities” AND “consumer experience”/ “consumer-brand relationship”/ “consumer community”/ “consumer-brand-consumer”/ “consumer participation” (fields: Abstract + Title + Keywords)	674 (before filtering)	Scopus	<i>Journal of Consumer Culture, International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Marketing Communications, International Journal of Advertising, Journal of Product & Brand Management, Journal of Service Management, Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing, Psychology and Marketing, European Journal of Marketing</i>
“cct” AND “brand” AND “community” (fields: Abstract + Title + Keywords)	11	Scopus	<i>Research in Consumer Behavior, European Journal of Marketing, International Journal of Consumer Studies, International Journal of Research in Marketing</i>
“brand community” (on-line) AND “SOCl” (fields: Abstract + Title + Keywords)	84 (before filtering)	Scopus	<i>International Journal of Web Based Communities, Internet Research, International Journal of Information Management, Journal of Business Research, Sustainability (Switzerland)</i>

which stem from the branding-related PhD thesis' bibliography of one of the authors, whereas the rest were found as a result of consulting the papers' reference lists, following a snowball method. Once the most relevant references were collected, the items were analyzed and evaluated through a complete reading of each piece of literature. This allowed us to analyze and synthesize ideas (Hart, 2018) and to identify relations, which in turn allowed to summarize existing literature on a new definition of BCs from SI principles.

Brand Communities: A Literature Review

The term *brand community* was presented and defined in Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), although the concept was previously presented in a conference paper (Muniz and O'Guinn, 1996). As we have already noted, the authors understand BC as a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. They conceive BCs as explicitly commercial social collectives centered around a brand, which participate in the brand's social construction. Nevertheless, the focus of the community is on the *link*, not the commercial aspect: the brand acts as a binding tie. BCs are defined by three markers: (1) consciousness of kind (the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community); (2) rituals and traditions (perpetuators of the history of the community, as well as its culture, shared consciousness, values and norms); and (3) moral responsibility (a felt sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to its individual members). Muniz and O'Guinn's is the most quoted definition in later works, but also other alternatives are found in the literature (e.g. Kapferer, 2012; Canniford and Shankar, 2011; Hatch and Schultz, 2008; Carlson et al., 2008; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002). Also pertaining to BC literature, this paper follows the original frame of the concept, hence taking a sociological approach to BC. For that reason, studies taking such perspective are given priority for this review, and other lines of research are discarded—such as BCs' social capital (e.g.

Li, Modi et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2019) positive psychology approach (Li, Wang et al., 2019); or customer perceived value (e.g. Wang et al., 2021).

Besides its definition, it must be noted that BCs pertain to the broader area of brand management or branding¹. From that discipline, BCs have been conceived as an approach to brand management (Heding et al., 2009); as part of the scope of brand management by which a brand can be enacted (Kapferer, 2012); from a customer-experiential perspective (McAlexander et al., 2002); or simply as literature representing a shift in the brand value co-creation process (Merz et al., 2009). Recent studies connect BCs to the cultural approach to branding (Atkin, 2004; Torelli et al., 2010; Collins and Murphy, 2014, 2016; Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2015; Fernández Gómez et al., 2019; Fernández Gómez and Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020), as well as to cultural marketing (Schau and Schau, 2020). Literature of this sort assumes that BCs are usually formed around a brand with high symbolic value (Stratton and Northcote, 2016) and stem from a contemporary need for a sense of connection or a need to belong (see e.g. Hawkins, 2020; Pronay and Hetesi, 2016; Fournier and Lee, 2009; Patterson and O'Malley, 2006; Atkin, 2004).

This review of BC must also include the development of the concept and current lines of research. From the original conception of BC, and partly because of its success, research focuses on theoretical and empirical development of the concept. We classify the main contributions in two groups: literature that improves the concept and description of BC, and literature that expands BC features.

As to the literature focusing on the concept, McAlexander et al. (2002) expand the model of the triad consumer-brand-consumer (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) to a customer-centric model. It represents a variation of the original model including the marketing context. Algesheimer et al.'s model (2005) explains the bases and consequences of BC's influence on consumers. Similarly, Bagozzi and Dholakia's model (2006) explores participation in small BCs. In both cases, a wide range of variables is included. In the first case, participation intention and behavior, engagement, or brand loyalty intentions; in the second, norms, social identity or behavioral control, among others.

¹ “Brand management” or “branding” involves the strategic and tactical process by which a brand is created, managed and communicated, appealing different audiences through corporate and commercial communication, as well as business management, in order to transmit brand values—both rational and emotional (Fernández Gomez, 2013).

Regarding research that enhances BC features, Carlson et al. (2008) present the concept of psychological sense of BC, which means that members feel connected to imagined others and perceive relational bonds with them. They acknowledge empirically that it is present in two kinds of BCs: social (members acknowledge membership and engage in any kind of interaction—face-to-face or online) vs. psychological (members in reality neither hold membership nor participate in interactions). They also reveal that psychological BCs do not present the three markers defined by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), as the group is sustained solely by the brand as a tie and the perception of the community. Additionally, Muniz and Schau (2005) explore the case of the Apple Newton BC and find that members create meaningful consumer-generated content, thus developing the experiential and productive aspect of BC members, while unfortunately not delving into the role of this material for the community. In this line, Kilambi et al. (2013) conclude that advertising is an essential element to build and shape the foundations of BC, as it transmits cultural meanings. This indeed opens the path to study the value of company vs. members-created commercial material. Marzocchi et al. (2013) explore if loyalty in BCs is greater towards the community or to the brand, and develop McAlexander et al.’s (2002) model, identifying a system of relationships among customer, brand, company and brand community. Identification with the community has the stronger effect on brand affect and trust, acting on an emotional dimension. These are all advances on the feature of consciousness of kind, as these phenomena contribute to strengthen and develop members’ sense of belonging. In addition, Fournier and Lee (2009) take a business management perspective, and contend that members are usually more interested in the social links than in the brand itself. The focus on the relational aspect of the community and the need for a sense of connection that make people join communities, makes this work an interesting contribution to the development of the consciousness of kind feature of BCs. From a corporate approach, Hatch and Schultz (2008) contribute to develop this feature by contending that brand symbolism derives into a sense of belonging to the brand, although no relevant advances in BC theory or practice are offered. From a relational approach, Veloutsou and Ruiz (2020) offer a useful background to understand the formation of BCs. They present a complete overview of the most influential

research into brands as relationship builders in the online environment—as a complement to Dessart et al. (2016). Nevertheless, Wickstrom et al.’s (2021) research calls the sense of belonging into question and study whether the need to *become* is stronger than the need to *belong* as a motive to join the community.

The most recent research on BC contributes to advance the role of interaction (consumer participation) and creation of meanings inside the community, as well as consumer-brand engagement and creation of value; which contributes to a better understanding of how BCs develop, survive and evolve. Regarding co-creation, Rialti et al. (2018) identify four principal types of co-created experiences in social-media BCs: individual usage of brands’ products; auto-celebrative individual; communal usage of brands’ products; and collective celebration experiences. Riley (2020) concludes that value creation and content co-creation enriches the experience of customers, nevertheless, social media-based BCs are addressed in general with no specific treatment of it, nor insights for future research. Kumar and Kumar (2020) admit that customers engage simultaneously with the brand and the BC. They contend that online BC experiences and relationships inside the community influence BC engagement positively, which leads to increased community commitment and brand loyalty (see also Hung, 2014). Haverila and Haverila (2020) identify that different audiences show different motives (social integration, self-discovery, entertainment and information) to join BC and thus different levels of engagement. Management implications are relevant, i.e., offering different engagement opportunities to consumers—especially, BCs targeted to specific audiences—would benefit the community. In this line, Carlson et al. (2020) focus on the particularities of Gen Y to engage them. By offering a precise picture of community engagement, they find that brand involvement is its main driver. Pedeliento et al. (2020) contribute to BC literature by empirically comparing participation in consumer-run vs. company-managed BC, and conclude that consumer-run brand community members feature higher participation and commitment compared to members of the company-managed brand community. Finally, Adamo and Dittmar (2019) add to the literature on offline BCs by identifying that these show particular features: they are smaller, geographically positioned, and have specific patterns of membership, identification and participation. The study presents empirical evidence to show that relation

with the brand is the first driver of identification and participation in offline BCs.

Symbolic Interactionism: A Brief Review of Principles and Traditions²

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) conceives human beings from a social perspective: individuals cannot be understood in isolation, but only from the relationships they maintain with others through meaningful interaction. This basic assumption has been reflected in the literature: SI is a perspective on human nature (McCall, 2013), human behavior and social life (Meltzer et al., 2015) pertaining to social psychology. In contrast to deterministic explanations of human conduct—e.g. biological—it is not an explanatory theory that specifies variables and predicts outcomes (Charmaz et al., 2019). SI examines the processes of communicative interaction operating in natural (non-experimental) social settings (Dennis and Smith, 2015)—actually, the topic of communication as social interaction from a SI perspective has been addressed in the literature (Sharlamanov and Tomicic, 2018), as well as a definition of public relations from the SI perspective (Brown, 2014).

Also key to SI is the idea of the self, especially, its social dimension (see Reynolds, 1994, 2003; and McCall, 2013 for a review). This key idea is clarified in Herman and Reynolds' (1994) outlining of SI's main principles: human beings live in a symbolic world of learned meanings; symbols and meanings arise from social interaction, and have motivational significance, that is, they allow individuals to develop action. Epistemologically, the mind is regarded as functional and volitional. Constructivism is another important SI principle: the self is a social construct, and society itself is a linguistic or symbolic construct that arises from social processes. Methodologically, sympathetic introspection is a mandatory form of investigation. More recent literature (e.g. DeLamater and Ward, 2013; Meltzer et al., 2015) still consider those principles.

In addition to SI's core principles, different branches of this approach emerged in parallel during the 20th century. There are three traditions (Table 2), each of them offering different perspectives on the self and the nature of social

interaction: processual, structural and dramaturgical (e.g. McCall, 2013; Stryker and Vryan, 2006; Petras and Meltzer, 1994). The main principles sustaining each tradition are synthesized in Table 2.

As to the *processual* school, SI arises at the University of Chicago, and one of its conceptual basis is non-determinism (McCall, 2013; Musolf, 2003). The most influential Chicago interactionist is Herbert Blumer (Carter and Fuller, 2015; McCall, 2013; Stryker and Vryan, 2006; Musolf, 2003). Blumer (1937) coined the expression “symbolic interaction”. He understands human relations from a processual perspective; his aim is not to predict human behavior but to describe it. Contrary to behaviorism, he contends that individuals respond to environmental facts by interpreting what do these mean to them. Blumer's proposal (1937, 1966, 1969, 1978) outlines the symbolic character of human interaction, interpretation processes directed to the elaboration of actions, and the active role of the individual.

The second SI tradition, the *structural approach* (also known as the Iowa and Indiana Schools), is represented by authors like Kuhn and Stryker. This trend adds three premises to Blumer's proposal: (1) human experience is socially organized, a network of relationships, groups, communities or institutions gives shape to it; (2) social structure defines certain limits for interaction, such as with whom one interacts or what resources are used; and (3) the social structure influences the probability that people develop one type of self or another (McCall, 2013). Contrary to Blumer, for this approach social structure determines social behavior and the formation of the self by providing the context of interaction, i.e., languages and meanings that enable interaction. Social structure might represent construction and change, but also stability and conformity. Key to structural interactionism is the concept of role, that is, behavior expectations that mark interaction. For instance, Mead's concept of “role” allows Stryker (2008) to develop the structural view of interaction, and then his identity theory.

Also drawing on Mead's ideas (the conception of human behavior as consensus), the *dramaturgical approach* focuses on meanings emerging from social acts. Goffman (1956) is the leading exponent of this approach. There is a debate on considering Goffman part of the process tradition (e.g. Stryker

² For further information on SI, excellent works are Reynolds and Herman-Kinney (2003), DeLamater and Ward (2013), Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds (2015), and Carter and Fuller (2016).

Table 2. *Symbolic interactionism: Key principles of the three main traditions*

Topics	Processual	Structural	Dramaturgical
Self and society		A product of social interaction	
Individual		Active, creative	
Key concepts	Agency, group, association, stimulus-interaction-response	Positions, roles, behavioral expectations, identity, identity salience, identity commitment	Interaction, performance, routine, social role, audience, front, backstage
Human behavior	There is an impulsive and spontaneous component	Determined by roles (positions in social structure)	Self-presentation for impression management
The self	A process: constantly constructed in social interactions through meaning negotiation.	Organized set of attitudes of others and of oneself. It is based on roles.	Composed of meanings. Expressive, independent, active, part of it existing in the minds of other's with whom one interacts.
Interaction	Negotiated: new. Process by which meanings are defined. Symbols have an influence on (not determine) members interaction. Members come to individual interpretations, all of them from a common basis.	Structured: repetition of patterns. Meanings are defined by, and define, social interaction. Social structure defines certain limits for interaction.	Performance: self-presentation for meaning management. Negotiation of meanings to reach a consensus on the definition of the situation.
Social structure	Interpretations and definitions of the situations are constantly reformulated.	Relatively stable patterns of social interaction determine the definition of the situation by actors.	Social establishments: fixed barriers, social frame establishes limits for impression management.

and Vryan, 2006; Petras and Meltzer, 1994; Martindale, 1994) or as intermediate between the process and the structural tradition (e.g. McCall, 2013). Our research identifies this approach as independent, since it offers a different way to understand social interaction and the most active conception of the self, due to the focus on impression management. In this approach, meaning is not acquired from culture or socialization; it is not established at a macrolevel process (structural approach) but in social interaction through expressive resources—i.e., language and communication—(Edgley, 2003). This school adds the manipulative nature of humans to interactionism (Petras and Meltzer, 1994). Goffman presents the concept of impression management, a technique applied in social interaction (sometimes deliberate, others unintentional) whereby an individual intends to present his self to others in a favorable way and strives to manage the impressions of other people about him. Thus, self-presentation constitutes the most direct, obvious and proactive way that the self participates in social life. Additionally, our review indicates that Goffman's proposal combines principles

from the other two SI schools: on the one hand, impression management fits the Chicago principles, since it focuses on the definition of the situation in the course of interaction and on the use of symbols and common meanings to reach consensus; on the other, by conceiving social structure from a broader perspective—including cultural, political or relational elements—and the self as a product of interaction, Goffman is closer to structuralist premises.

Empirical research has drawn on SI principles, and operationalized its main assumptions, applied to contemporary concerns like social media (Chen et al., 2020), politics (Altheide, 2020), or gender and/or sex (Sumerau et al., 2019; Groggel et al. 2020), among others. In a different vein, in Langley and Tsoukas' (2016) edited volume, the process approach of SI is applied to management, outlining the value of this perspective for other areas out of Sociology. However, and besides its influential concepts, traditions, and applications, SI has also been criticized in the literature. The main lines of criticism include SI's core assumptions; a lack of a strong, unique theoretical proposal; and being methodologically inconsistent

(see Meltzer, et al., 2015 for a review). To this must be added the infighting among different SI traditions, like the claims against Blumer's interactionism posed by the structural tradition (Low and Thompson, 2021). At the same time, contemporary researchers developing interactionist theories and methodology respond to criticisms, focusing on topics like emotions (e.g. Esala and Del Rosso 2019; Bergman Blix, 2021); theoretical advances—like increasing the cross-recognition of advances across the different approaches to SI (Francis and Adams, 2018); see e.g. Julien, 2018; Low and Hyslop-Margison, 2021—; or methodological advances (e.g. Töpfer and Behrmann, 2021). In fact, current perspectives argue that SI has acquired a prominent place in sociology: it continues to be a highly recognized subfield in sociology and to serve as a conceptual frame to develop several areas of inquiry, such as cultural studies, postmodernism, gender, status, or power, among others (Carter and Fuller, 2015, 2016). In fact, retrieving SI might help advance the appreciation of the intersection of culture and social relations (Fine and Tavory, 2019). In this line, vom Lehn et al. (2021) offer an updated approach to traditional SI theories. The authors engage with new areas of research like social media and discuss the state of the field of current SI research, also approaching a wide range of concepts from self and society to collective behavior, ethnic relations, community or urban life, among many others. As a result of the rapidly changing contemporary field of SI, the authors expand the interactionist canon by exploring theoretical innovations in, for instance, transgender studies, mental health or organizations and institutions; as well as offering new development in methods like the use of video in the study of SI. The original definition of SI is expanded to current issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, oppression and inequities affecting people's lives. vom Lehn et al.'s (2021) approach thus contributes to shed light on the place of SI in the 21st century, coming to successfully explain today's global, social-cultural changes.

Brand Community and Symbolic Interactionism: A review

General Framework: Symbolic Interactionism, Branding, and Symbolic Consumption

The core of this paper is the review of the literature that bridges SI and BC. However, SI has been applied to branding

and symbolic consumption from wider perspectives. In general, research on the symbolic aspect of consumption (see e.g. Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2015; Oswald, 2012; Franzen and Moriarty, 2009; Batey, 2008; McCracken, 1988) assumes two key ideas: (1) the value of objects and brands as symbolic entities; and (2) the self as fundamental in consumer actions—see Reed, 2002; and Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2012, for a review. This lays the ground for SI as a suitable framework from which to explain consumer behavior in a social context. Previous research like Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) also addressed the topic. They present symbolic self-completion theory, which assumes that individuals intend to complete the self (goal of self-completion) through the use of symbols. These are aimed at showing to others certain elements related to some of their identities (i.e., parts of the self). Although representing a conceptual advance for connecting the self and the symbolic aspect of objects, the theory lacks the consideration of the social context. Self-verification theory by Swann (1983) covers this gap and allows a better application to consumption, since she assumes that individuals are interested in maintaining a certain congruence between the concept they have of themselves and that held by others. For that purpose, people seek to interact with others whose evaluations confirm their conceptions of the self. In such interaction, consumer goods like cars are used. Further research by Ledgerwood et al. (2007) complete this theory and recognize that people use material symbols to construct both personal and social identities. Existing studies also address the impact of the self on purchasing decisions. Specifically, by addressing the connection between symbolism and consumption (see Table 3).

These papers have the following assumptions in common: (1) objects and brands are symbols which determine purchasing decisions and brand choice; (2) the self as a central element determining consumption; (3) consuming before others—by using symbols—contributes to or reaffirm the self in its individual or group dimensions. These assumptions reflect SI principles such as (1) the importance of symbols for human behavior; (2) the self as a central element of the human being; (3) the understanding of human behavior in terms of interaction with other persons as determinants of both behavior and construction of the self. However, these approaches present three main limitations. First, they are based only on the structural branch of interactionism, and focus on various dimensions of the self and not on the self as a total entity. Second, consumption is

Table 3. *Main Research lines connecting SI assumptions to consumer behavior*

Research lines	Key literature	Main advances
Seminal research connecting self and symbolism of consumption	Grubb & Grathwohl (1967)	Consumption can build and define the self according to others' responses and validation. Others' validation allows self-enhancement.
Symbolism of objects and products	Solomon (1983) Belk (1988, 2000) Richins (1994a, 1994b)	Product symbolism determines purchasing decisions. Possessions are part of our extended self. Product symbolism is associated to certain groups and attaches to one's and others' selves. Meanings are the source of value of objects and possessions.
Brand symbolism	Grubb & Hupp (1968) Dolich (1969) Grubb & Stern (1971) Ross (1971) Schewe (1973) Schenk & Holman (1980) Lee (1990) Ligas & Cotte (1999) Escalas (2004) Escalas & Bettman (2003, 2005) Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012)	Consumers seek congruence between the brand (brand personality) and their selves. People develop self-brand connections on the basis of meanings. Reference groups determine consumption. People define themselves and others on the basis of group consumption.
CCT (Consumer Culture Theory) & consumption communities	Swaminathan, Page & Rhan-Canli (2007) Gould (2010) Canniford (2011) Healey & McDonagh (2013) Papaoikonomou, Cascon-Pereira & Ryan (2016) Palusuk, Koles & Hasan (2019) Hungara & Nobre (2021)	Addresses consumer-brand relations, consumer's identity construction and self-presentation processes, or consumer's sociality. BC members' role, identification and engagement; BC membership. Consumption communities are places of cultural creation and transformation, as well as dynamic and self-administered phenomena. Symbolic aspects, influence the creation of a consumption community.

understood always before others, but the focus is placed in most cases on the individual consumer. Third, there are no references to meaning management, which is key to understand the symbolic aspect of consumption. Regarding brand symbolism, for instance, Schenk and Holman (1980) connect SI to brand choice, but they only consider the situational self-image to develop their model of brand choice for products which may be expressive of the self in different situations. Lee (1990) completes the model by considering the influence of social organization and roles in the choice of products as symbols linked to the self. For him, a brand is as a vehicle for the expression of meanings in the social environment and he outlines the importance of a social agreement on those meanings in the interpretive community. Ligas and Cotte (1990) apply SI to the study of the negotiation of brand meanings and contend that

understanding how symbolic meaning is negotiated in a group, and adopted by the individual, sheds light on how group meaning transfers to, and potentially alters the concept of the self.

Stemming from those advances, there is a current interest on applying SI to brands in the social media realm. Ross and Lee (2019) identified that theoretical applications of SI are currently lacking, while necessary, in branding contexts. They explain that users integrate branded symbols into their social media presence to construct and portray their identities to others online. With this process, consumers not only manage their own identity, they also participate in constructing the brand's identity. Chen et al. (2020) argue that the symbolic meaning of social media are shaped by both the technical features of the media and the social relationships among users, which represents a relevant contribution

expanding the interactionist approach. Other lines of research, like Choi et al. (2019), apply the SI frame to study brand-related self-expression. The applied outcomes of the study are valuable (e.g. consumers' brand-related self-expression motivation positively affects brand public engagement), nevertheless, a real conceptual advance that connects SI to brands cannot be observed. Kim and Lee (2017) develop consumer involvement and brand loyalty in the case of brand symbols and intangible features of service offerings, an area that keeps unexplored today. Similarly, Kang and Shin (2016) examine BC loyalty through interaction in the case of virtual communities. Others, like Andriucci and Michel (2021), study consumer-brand interaction in the context of social media. The authors assume the symbolic aspect of brands, nevertheless, the focus is more on the relational (brand-consumer dyad) than on community (consumer-brand-consumer triad) approaches to branding.

When reviewing the relations between consumers and social meaning, there is another line of scholarship that has to be addressed: Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). This tradition focuses on the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings, and stresses the relations between culture and social resources, and symbolic resources in the context of the market (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). This conception has been updated (Arnould and Thompson, 2015) to consider the new, more complex reality of the market. The literature also addresses topics which admit SI as a theoretical lens, such as consumer-brand relations, consumer's identity construction and self-presentation processes, or consumer's sociality (Swaminathan, Page and Rhan-Canli, 2007; Palusuk, Koles and Hasan, 2019; Gould, 2010; Papaioikonomou, Cascon-Pereira and Ryan, 2016).

For Askegaard and Linnet (2011), CCT should understand the complexity of social bonds and stress the specificity of the social to consider that, although experiences are individualized, the conditions under which these experiences unfold should be considered as well. There are four lines of CCT research: (1) consumer identity projects; (2) marketplace cultures; (3) the sociohistoric patterning of consumption; and (4) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). In this context, CCT and brand consumption have been connected in the literature, as papers by Jaakkola, Helkkula and Aarikka-Stenroos (2015), Bajde (2013), and Nairn et al. (2008), indicate. Moreover, Canniford (2011)

departs from CCT to conceptualize consumption communities and examine the differences and similarities between them, and Healey and McDonagh (2013) use a CCT perspective to explore the role of fans in virtual communities. Brandão and Popoli (2022) explore anti-brand community consumer behavior through the lens of CCT, specifically, the co-destruction process of brand identities. Hungara and Nobre (2021) synthesize the existing literature on consumption communities under the shed of CCT, and consider that these communities are places of cultural creation and transformation, as well as dynamic and self-administered phenomena.

SI and BC: A Review of Conceptual Interconnections

Before addressing the specific tenets whereby SI and BCs are related, it must be noted that BCs are not the only type of consumer collective that can be related to social-symbolic dimensions. Actually, consumer collectives can be related to the abovementioned framework of CCT, and, more specifically, to research on marketplace cultures, which addresses the ways in which consumers forge feelings of solidarity, and create cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Consumer collectives, like consumer subcultures and brand communities, can be counted among them.

What is more, the idea that people form groups around communal forms of consumption has already been presented (see e.g. Boorstin, 1973; Gainer and Fischer, 1994), hence literature on consumption collectives can be found (Hawkins, 2018). Since the 1990s consumer research has been showing a growing interest in collective behaviors, as noted by Patterson and O'Malley (2006) and Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2015). Both works highlight the extensive literature in this area, and offer a list of concepts: *consumer subcultures* by Schouten and McAlexander (1995) and Kozinets (1997); *club cultures* by Thornton (1995); *class subcultures* by Goulding et al. (2009); *brand communities* by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) and McAlexander, et al. (2002); *tribes* by Cova (1997), Cova and Cova (2001, 2002) and Goulding et al. (2002, 2009, 2013); *life mode communities* by Firat and Dholakia (1998); *social collectives* by Greenwood (1994); or *brand cults* by Belk and Tumbat (2005). Recent examples of *country branding* (Muzanenhamo and Arnott, 2016) can be found in this regard. To this may be added

Arvidsson and Caliandro's (2016) concept of *brand public*, which can be defined as an organized media space kept together by practices of mediation, which result from an aggregation of isolated expressions that have a common focus. However, research accurately addressing the differences and similarities between these consumer collectives has not been found to date. There are nevertheless some relevant papers, positively contributing to the debate (de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007; Bazaki and Veloutsou, 2010) and systematic reviews (Hungara and Nobre, 2021) identifying research topics. Regarding SI in particular, Schouten (2019) has explicitly linked consumer subcultures with symbolic interactionism, from a viewpoint whereby subcultures are understood as performances

of collective identity for audiences, hence the subculture becomes a pillar of personal identity and an important set of symbolic resources (see also Schiele and Venkatesh, 2016).

Despite the number of collectives of consumption, our review indicates that most literature delves into the concepts of subcultures of consumption, consumer tribes and brand communities (Table 4). Besides the key papers already mentioned, more recent literature focus on different aspects of these collectives.

Among these main consumer collectives, we focus on BCs, since an in-depth literature review shows that the BC concept is the perfect ground for the application of SI; and, *vice versa*, that SI provides an optimal framework for studying

Table 4. *Main collectives of consumption*

Subcultures of Consumption	Original Conception	A distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995)
	Key Features	Stable, based on sociological categories, subversive, clear hierarchical structure, shared symbols and meanings, around one single product/brand/activity, ethos (shared values) and transformation of the self (possible self), rituals; symbolic expression.
	Key Documents	Schembri (2009), Canniford and Shankar (2011); Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2015)
Consumer Tribes	Original Conception	The word "tribe" refers to the re-emergence of quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism etc., the common denominator of which is the community dimension. These neo-tribes are inherently unstable, small-scale, affectual and not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society; instead they can be held together through shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs and consumption practices (Cova and Cova, 2001; although first expressed by Cova, 1997)
	Key Features	Not around a single product/brand/activity; linking value for members; consumer at the core center; desire to stand out from social limits; shared emotions; rituals; no commitment to the group (indeed, a clear group does not exist); members hijack brand meanings and alter them; no behavioral patterns.
	Key Documents	Cova and Cova (2002); Cova et al. (2007); Goulding, et al. (2002, 2009, 2013); Richardson (2013); Guercini and Cova (2015); Mamali et al. (2018); Biraghi et al. (2018).
Brand Communities	Original Conception	A specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service. Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001)
	Key Features	The brand at the core center; clear hierarchy, interpersonal connections between peers; sense of belonging (consciousness of kind, shared identity); the brand as an object to social interaction; sociological basis (social community adapted to marketing context); no geographical boundaries.
	Key Documents	McAlexander et al. (2002); Muniz and Schau (2005); Algesheimer, et al. (2005); Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006); Carlson et al. (2008); Fournier and Lee (2009); Hatch and Schultz (2008); Marzocchi et al. (2013); Kilambi et al., (2013); Stratton and Northcote (2016)

BCs. In this regard, while other theories on consumption collectives emphasize the *sociological* dimension of interaction—for instance, Cova’s concept of “linking value” regarding consumer tribes—the BC approach emphasizes the *brand management* dimension of interaction, and highlights the role of the brand in the communication process. Hence, if consumer collectives are related to brands’ social symbolism, BCs are the type of collective that chimes naturally with the branding approach.

Our review of the links between BCs and SI must start with the foundational work on the BC concept: Muniz and O’Guinn’s. As mentioned before, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) highlighted the active role members have in the social construction of brand meaning, and thus the brand, which involves accommodation, negotiation or interpretation of symbols and meanings. On that basis, the original conception of interaction occurring inside BCs is close to SI as an approach to understand human social behavior. When they first presented the concept of BC, Muniz and O’Guinn (1996) identified that the sociology of brands had been relatively ignored. Later, they developed the social model of brands (O’Guinn and Muniz, 2009, 2010), in which BCs are inserted. The authors (2009, 2010) consider BCs as a type of group, which is just one more part of the wide network of transmission and negotiation of brand meanings, and assume that people, through their interaction, contribute to the social construction of the brand. On the grounds of SI principles, they contend that meaning does not exist without its social consideration, and justify the direct application of this sociological approach to the brand—particularly, reflecting Blumer’s SI approach. The brand is built through a series of processes—accommodation, negotiation, mediated cultivation, government, rumor and disruption—which can be regarded as forms of social interaction and social structures, hence reflecting the processual and structural theoretical branches of SI.

Based on the existing literature, our review identified three BC core ideas which coincide with three main principles in which SI is grounded: (1) creation and negotiation of meaning in social interaction (i.e. people ascribe meaning to objects, events and people—even their own selves—through interaction); (2) brand symbolism and symbolic interaction; and (3) sense of belonging (which relates to the self as a social and cultural product). The following paragraphs detail the way these SI’s basic principles are reflected—explicitly or not—in the BC literature.

Creation and negotiation of meaning in social interaction

BCs work as a context for symbolic interaction as a process of meaning exchange. Hence, a community may be understood in terms of its center of interaction: the brand. This is the feature that best expresses the SI principles, as well as a defining aspect that we have identified in previous literature, but which has not been addressed in depth.

The relevance of interaction in branding may be related to the already mentioned structural approach to SI. From the 1980s, the New Iowa School extended Kuhn’s approach (Katovich, 2017; Katovich, et al., 2003), and its most important follower is Stryker. From Stryker’s (1973, 1980) conceptual frame, the following core ideas will be later connected to BCs: (1) behavior expectations arise from social interaction; (2) people apply these expectations to themselves, which become part of the self; (3) through interaction, people define situations, which may mark future interaction; (4) interaction may lead to changes in roles and thus in the larger social structure. As stated in a previous section, Stryker presents the idea of symbolic boundaries, which is needed to complete Blumer’s processual approach and understand interaction inside BC. He contends that the social structure does not determine the interaction, but it does impose conditions, i.e., limits for the interpretive processes. He also admits that behavior is not completely determined by these definitions, since people decide how to redefine the interaction—which in turn fits the SI processual approach, since new definitions are allowed for social objects. This allows to understand BCs as contexts of ongoing interaction that redefine its meanings, while doing so inside previously defined boundaries. In this regard, the BC literature has reflected the relevance of interaction. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) already outlined that, by constantly interacting with other brand users, both the community and the meaning of the brand are reproduced; an idea which basically describes symbolic interaction. Similarly, a key paper by Schau et al. (2009) indicates that BC value manifests in the collective enactment of practices, which should change the focus of brand management to networks rather than firm-consumer dyads. Modern brands need to be experimented and lived, interaction allows consumers to live and share brand values (Kapferer, 2012); thus interaction is a key element in BC (Álvarez del Blanco, 2008)—pertaining to social bonds beneath consumption, links may also be established between the CCT approach and BCs, as noted earlier;

since, as Askegaard and Linnet (2011, p. 397) point out, the best of the work produced by CCT scholars is an analysis of consumer lifeworlds which takes into account the influences of social forces beyond personal factors. In this context, the active role of consumers is a relevant feature of the kind of interaction that takes place: SI focuses on the active role of consumers as meaning-makers, hence consumers are considered the core center of community management, thus adding to research on consumer branding (Fernández Gómez, 2013).

Moreover, early contributions by Schouten and McAlexander (1995) and Schembri (2009) focus on brand symbolism and symbolic interaction inside the community. Schembri (2009) recognizes some of the interactionist principles, such as the construction of the self inside a group marked by the handling of symbols, although SI as an approach is not directly mentioned. Harley Davidson is defined as a symbolic brand and the group as a context for the construction of the self, i.e., the self is symbolically constructed through the Harley-Davidson experience and co-constructed within a community in action (Schembri, 2009). Regarding mechanisms of symbolic construction, Stratton and Northcote (2016) reveal that there is only one characteristic that distinguishes BCs from other types of communities—the commitment to a brand as the pre-eminent basis for association—and conclude that BCs are socially constructed. Kucharska (2019) considers the expected self-expression benefit of brand meaning usage to foster interactions with other customers of such brand and, ultimately, lead to relationships, which is a relevant point of departure to explain the emergence of BCs. In another line of research, Adamo and Dittmar (2019) found that the consumer enters a community by identification, accepting a role and a code of conduct—which is a structural-interactionist principle—and that members actively live the community by participation—which relates to interaction but lacks a reference to meanings or symbols. To cover this gap, Ardley et al. (2020) address the creation of meaning through interaction in the consumer-created Facebook fan pages for the LEGO brand. They find three key elements that sustain practices in BCs and allow value creation: procedures (conversational knowledge and alignment between members), understandings (adequate knowledge and skills to participate in the BC) and engagements (emotional connection). It must be noted that this study represents an advance, as it applies SI concepts like interaction, value

co-creation and impression management, while unfortunately not drawing on specific interactionist literature. In a similar vein, Ozuem et al. (2021) address symbolic motivations of members in online BCs, but in this case the main contributions are connected to customer brand loyalty, and no relevant implications to BCs are offered. Nevertheless, an interesting contribution by Tsen et al. (2017) exploring the symbolic motivations of individuals to join BCs, concludes that companies should foster the community's culture, ritual, and history through existing members' interactions, which can help developing members' commitment with the community. Connected to that, O'Sullivan et al. (2011) study the ritual aspect of consumer experience in the community.

The interaction-related dramaturgical concept of validation can be added to the meaning-making SI-BC link. As noted before, Goffman understands interaction and social life as a theater. In their daily lives, people develop “performances” by means of which they represent “routines” in a “setting” before an “audience”; these “performances” occur in a “front region” in which expressive resources are put into practice—there is also a “backstage” where the routine is prepared. As a result, the “audience” attributes to the actor a certain type of self, which is the product of the expressive and instrumental elements the actor uses—the audience, far from having a passive role, also tries to manage the impressions perceived by the actor (Goffman, 1956). As a result, the actor expects to perceive that the meanings that are being presented, are accepted and validated by the audience. In this context, our literature review identifies validation as key to maintain BC membership (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

As to BCs as a framework for interaction and meaning creation, Gordillo-Rodríguez's PhD thesis (2017) is relevant in terms of the SI-BC connection because its definition of BC as a context of symbolic interaction is conceived from the combination of the three major SI approaches that we have mentioned previously. Starting from procedural interactionism, the author understands that social interaction continuously defines the meanings of the community and that these are constantly negotiated on a common cultural basis. This is complemented by the structural approach, which posits the existence of a socially constructed symbolic framework (by the community itself) that determines future interaction; thus individuals within these limits will develop a similar sense of self, since this is constructed on a common symbolic basis. Member behavior is approached

from the dramaturgical approach, since people develop symbolic acts of self-presentation inside BC before others seeking other members' validation. If this occurs, the meanings used in that presentation will be integrated into the self. Also related to the SI dramaturgical approach, self-presentation is the way that the self participates in social life, as well a key mechanism explaining behavior inside BCs (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Black and Veloutsou, 2017; von Wallpach et al., 2017): members strive to present themselves in such a way that fits the behavior expectations as a member of a particular community—i.e. managing the accepted symbols and meanings.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the abovementioned focus on ongoing negotiation (O'Guinn and Muniz, 2005) is not exempt from shortcomings, since it could represent a limitation for empirical research on BCs—as we mentioned before, scholars often criticize SI for being methodologically inconsistent (Meltzer et al., 2015).

Brand symbolism and symbolic interaction

The processual approach to SI is useful to understand BCs since, as described earlier, it considers that social environment is symbolic, thus interaction is symbolic-mediated: people interact according to what things mean to them (including brands and their meanings). This SI idea is related to branding, since symbolic brands are the building assets of some communities: a brand with high symbolic value is able to gather groups of people around, and represent collective identity values.

The literature indicates that the symbolic brand acquires a leading role in the formation of the community. Consumer Culture Theory has already offered a framework for community-symbolism links: “symbolic aspects, under the lens of CCT, influence the creation of a consumption community” (Hungara and Nobre, 2021, p. 15). More specifically, BCs differ from other non-commercial communities because it is the symbol that motivates people to join. Research addressing this feature includes Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Stratton and Northcote (2016), Cohen (1985)—who contends that sociological communities are defined by symbolic boundaries for expression and interaction—Atkin (2004), Holt (2004), and Batey (2008). In this same vein, the literature has noted that both symbolism and interaction are essential in BCs (Fernández and Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2020), which relates to the SI frame in that it accentuates how individuals

create and recreate their social worlds through the use of symbols in a joint interaction with co-social actors in a dynamic and infinite fashion (Quist-Adade, 2019). Indeed, relevant research addresses the dynamic and evolving nature of BCs (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and Antorini, 2009; Kilambi et al., 2013).

Regarding symbolism, some authors have pointed out clear SI-BC connections. On the one hand, Pronay and Hetesi's already mentioned paper (2016) explicitly relates BC and SI, and admits core interactionist principles, such as the formation of communities around symbols—rather than symbols forming around communities—since individuals search for communities where they can identify with shared values. On the other hand, Gordillo-Rodríguez's work (2017) is one step forward regarding the conceptual SI-BC link, since it applies SI principles to explain the relationship between self and society on the BC scale. Gordillo-Rodríguez understands BCs, not as a structure of relationships, but as a symbolic entity. BC is considered to be a social group defined as a context of meaning exchange, thus symbolic interactionism, following this paper's argument, appears as the most suitable theoretical framework to explain the processes that occur inside it. In BCs, the brand-symbol provides the basic meanings for interaction and for self-definition; meanings that individuals consider relevant because they perceive that they can express and build their self through them. Such a symbolic development of the self is interesting because, according to Blumer, people use shared meanings to adjust their behavior to fit group behavior. As a consequence, interacting with others increases the possibility of an individual to transform both his behavior and self. This leads us to the following feature that connects SI and BCs, which provides a basis to study the development of a common self inside the community.

Sense of belonging: the self as a social and cultural product

According to SI principles, one's self is formed in a social context, but also participates on it through the active management of meanings that can be redefined and created, thus a new self arises (e.g. Meltzer et al., 2015; McCall, 2013, Stryker and Vryan, 2006; Herman and Reynolds, 1994). This relevant tenet of SI relates to identity and sense of belonging; that is, psycho-sociological concepts that are used by brands in contexts such as brand communities.

Connected to the assumption on human sociality is the social dimension of the self, a key concept in BC literature because it allows to understand members interaction. In this context, brands work as a link between individuals who seek a context for self-definition; active members decide to approach the community, attracted by identity values offered by the brand. Consequently, brands offer symbolic resources for the construction of the self, serves as a link between individuals with a similar sense of self, and generate a feeling of belonging to a group (Atkin, 2004; Pronay and Hetesi, 2016; Black and Veloutsou, 2017; von Wallpach et al., 2017; Bagozzi et al., 2021).

The key concept here is that the members' selves can be understood as symbolic entities that share meanings. Blumer outlines the active character of individuals and the non-predictable character of group interaction, although accepting the existence of cultural contexts that provide an agreement on common meanings to certain objects, people or situations. In the case of BC, this common basis is composed by brand meanings, which allows members to make similar interpretation on social objects, including their selves. Nevertheless, this approach needs a conceptual complement to better understand BCs, one that includes more specific symbolic limits as a base for meaning making inside the group—BCs are social, but also marketing-related—as well as a specific process whereby the self is conceived in relation to others. In this regard, BCs are interaction contexts where shared meanings are negotiated from symbolic experiences; brand meanings are defined by companies—it is necessary to set symbolic limits for the community (following Kuhn and Stryker's structural SI principles)—but it is the members who consolidate, develop or redefine them through symbolic consumption both within and outside the community. In this way, meanings are defined for the brand, but also for the self, thus supporting the sense of belonging; interaction defines meanings for the community, the brand, and the self of the members. Literature supporting this feature includes Torelli et al. (2010), Atkin (2004), Muniz & O'Guinn (2001), Fournier and Lee (2009), Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006), McAlexander et al. (2002), Kapferer (2012), Schouten and McAlexander (1995), Pronay and Hetesi (2016), Cohen (1985), Kozinets (1997), O'Guinn and Muniz (2010). More recently, Bagozzi et al. (2021) recognize the symbolic nature of the brand and the development of a group self in BCs, although this is defined as the development of a social identity with group linking value—which is closer to the collective known as “consumer tribe”.

Additionally, research from the structural branch of interactionism offers some insights on the SI-BC connection pertaining to the self. For instance, the “reference group”—one of the three key concepts from Kuhn's structural SI theory (1964a; 1964b; Kuhn and McPartland, 1954)—is one with which a person feels psychologically identified, as opposed to one with which he is merely socially associated. Thus, people decide within which groups to define themselves according to the level of identification they feel, which explains the reason why people decide to engage in BCs in terms of self-identification. In addition to work linking identity cultivation and brand preferences (Ewing and Allen, 2017), the notion of identification and identity can be found in BC literature: Black and Veloutsou (2017) explore identity co-creation inside BC for a political brand and suggest that when consumers interact with brands, they co-create brand production and identity; Liao et al. (2020) apply identity theory to study oppositional brand loyalty and consumer-brand identification; and Veloutsou and Black (2020) contend that BC is a social structure and apply role theory to study consumer roles inside BC. However, these approaches leave out the importance of meaning in BCs and the symbolic character of interaction, even though the creation and negotiation of meaning is addressed as a core topic in BC literature. In this line, pioneer work by McAlexander et al (2002) revealed that several things may or not be shared within any given community—such as food and drink, useful information, and moral support—but the creation and negotiation of meaning always seems to be shared; and O'Guinn and Muniz (2005) observe active and meaningful negotiation of the brand between consumer collectives and market institutions. Thus, the literature offers examples of the bridging of the creation of meaning and identity creation in a BC context. In this regard, some CCT research lines, like consumer identity projects and marketplace cultures (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), as previously reported, can be related to our study on SI-BC, since BC members are conceived as identity seekers and makers, but also as culture producers that create cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests—what is more, the “consumer identity project” CCT line implies that the marketplace has become a preeminent source of symbolic resources through which people construct narratives of identity.

Not by coincidence, the relevance of the concept of identity stems from all this. Identity theory (Francis and Adams, 2018) is the development of Stryker's brand of structural

interactionism (see e.g. Stryker et al., 2005; Carter and Fuller, 2015; Turner, 2013; Stets and Burke, 2014, 2003; see Carter and Fuller, 2016 for an extensive review; see Serpe et al., 2020 for an updated review). As stated previously, Stryker (1980) defines the self from the concepts of role and identity (see Stryker, 1980; Stets and Burke, 2003, 2014; Carter and Fuller, 2015); in particular, the concept of role is key to BC theory (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Healey and McDonagh, 2013; Veloutsou and Black, 2020). Stryker defines “role” as behavioral expectations associated to social positions—which are symbols for the kinds of persons it is possible to be in society (e.g. rich man, thief, teacher). A role is a symbolic category that guides behavior which might vary, as people decide which role they will represent or even modify. When people interact and internalize these expectations, different identities emerge. Hence identities are different parts of the self. This idea is connected to BC as follows (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Black and Veloutsou, 2017; Hungara and Nobre, 2021): when a member interact with others, individuals show only a part of their selves when behaving inside the symbolic limits of the community. These meanings, when shared and redefined in interaction, are internalized and become part of an identity, and therefore of the self.

Tenets from other SI traditions may complement the theory of how the self is socially created in BCs. From the dramaturgical viewpoint, as described above, Goffman contends that the self is basically made up of meanings; its construction is completed when the individual perceives others’ validation, that is, the meanings shown in the presentation of the self become integrated into it when others show acceptance of these meanings. Thus, a part of the self does not reside in the individual himself, but in the minds of others. In BC, the self will only exist if other people recognize it, since members try to build their self through behaviors that coincide with others’ expectations. This idea has been conveyed by Shouten and McAlexander (1995), Algesheimer et al. (2005), and von Wallpach et al. (2017).

Regarding the concept of “sense of belonging” as a cornerstone of the community, as defined before, it is a sense of connection that individuals in the community maintain with each other, that goes beyond a sense of collectivity. Departing from that conception, structural-SI concepts, like “we-feeling” (the sense of belonging to a group, which allows the definition of the self) and “orientational other” (the others to whom the individual is most fully committed),

are the basis on which the sense of belonging to a BC can be sustained, as they both explain the extent to which members develop a sense of connection to others in the community, on the basis of a common identity. The sense of belonging is based on the recognition that there are other similar selves, which are considered as such because it is assumed that they are defined according to the same meanings—meanings which are contained in the brand. This sense of connection maintains the community and guarantees its perpetuation. The sense of belonging feature has three markers, also identified in the literature: (1) the imagined nature of the community (Anderson, 1983; Kuhn, 1964a, 1964b; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Carlson et al., 2008; Tajfel and Turner, 1985; Escalas and Bettman, 2005); (2) a sense of difference from others not in the community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Atkin, 2004; Hatch and Schultz, 2008; McAlexander et al., 2002, Muniz and Hamer, 2001); and (3) moral responsibility (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002).

To sum up, the literature recognizes several contact points between BCs and SI. First, the creation and negotiation of meaning in social interaction, where BCs work as a context for symbolic interaction and meaning exchange. The assumption that the community is conceived in terms of its center of interaction (i.e., the brand) is the feature that best expresses SI principles. Second, brand symbolism is the center of interaction inside the community. Researchers assume that brands with high symbolic value are able to gather groups of people around, represent collective identity values, and serve as resources for self-definition, thus acquiring a leading role in the formation of the community. Third, the self arises as a social and cultural product inside BCs. Members’ selves may be understood as symbolic entities that share meanings and resources, specifically, brand meanings with identity value. The sense of belonging to the community thus becomes strengthened as members’ selves are built on the same symbolic basis.

Brand Community and Symbolic Interactionism: New Insights and Future Avenues of Research

Beyond the in-depth analysis of the SI-BC interconnections as indicated by the literature, this paper also presents new

SI-inspired insights focusing on the construction of brand meaning inside communities of consumers, which may work as future lines of research. New avenues of research emerge on the grounds of the relationships between symbolic interactionism and brand communities: the digital realm and social networking sites as a context of brand communities' symbolic interaction, the relationship between self-enhancement and branding, and the connection between symbolic interactionism, brand communities, and the wider framework of consumer culture theory.

The first of these avenues of research is the relationship between technology, sociality and BCs. Authors like Goulding et al. (2002) take a postmodern view on the emergence of communities, and argue that the postmodern consumer is defined by a search for identity and a loss of the social in the traditional sense; thus individuals seek to engage in collective experiences and form temporary communities. The question here, however, is how technology interacts with this sociality-BC connection. As a general framework, it must be noted that Carter and Fuller (2016) have outlined some interesting future areas of inquiry concerning SI in modern societies. One of them explores the relationships among the individual, technology and society: the advancements in communication technology (i.e. social media, smartphones, and obviously the Internet) provide opportunities for symbolic interactions and shared meanings to happen, thus face-to-face interactions become sidelined. This represents a line of research that connects SI with current online BCs, in order to understand the extent to which virtual interactions among members allow the development of a common identity or a common sense of self, but also a common purpose (see e.g. Svenson, 2018) or a collective vision where the product represents the same set of values and a unique identity for a group of consumers (Koetz and Tankersley, 2016). On the other hand, in their seminal paper, Muñiz and O'Guinn already indicated "new communication technologies' ability to unite geographically dispersed individuals with a commonality of purpose and identity" (2001, p. 413). Thus, the role of technology is outlined since the concept of BC was first presented. From the beginning, many scholars have studied the way in which BCs develop in the online context (see e.g. Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Blanchard and Markus, 2002; Koh and Kim, 2003; Andersen, 2005; Casaló, Flavián and Guinaliú, 2008; Kozinets et al., 2010; Wu, Chen and Chung, 2010). Recent literature on online BC focuses on specific topics

like repurchase intention (Časas, Palaima and Mironizde, 2016), engagement (Kang, Shin, Gong, 2016; Wang et al., 2019; Pan, 2020; Bahri-Ammari, Rather and Kallal, 2021; Martínez-López et al., 2021, Sohail, 2022), participation (Kamboj and Sarmah, 2018; Kamboj and Rahman, 2018, Zhao, et al., 2019); social media (see Santos et al., 2022 for a review); specific social networks like Facebook (Lyu and Lim, 2018) or Twitter (López, Sicilia and Moyeda-Carabaza, 2017); or concepts such as brand e-loyalty (Kurniawan et al., 2021).

The rationale behind this line is that, since BCs are only possible if built around a symbolic brand, and most BCs today are online-based, the result is that BCs should be best understood in the era of *social* media. In this regard, the literature shows a growing interest on online BC and digital self-presentation: thanks to communication technologies and mass media, members develop a sense of vast unmet fellow members and imagine them (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). As a more general context, it is worth mentioning that contemporary research on social networks often draws to Goffman's dramaturgical strain of SI to explain online users behavior (see e.g. Gordillo-Rodríguez and Bellido-Perez, 2021; Hollenbaugh, 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Deeb-Swihart, et al., 2017; Rettberg, 2018; Selva Ruiz and Caro Castaño, 2017; Caldeira, 2016; Belk, 2013). In a similar vein, vom Lehn et al. (2021) cover online interaction and new media from an interactionist perspective—including online identity—which further connects contemporary SI perspectives to today's online BCs. More specifically, several studies explore the particularities of online BCs, and consumer behavior inside them are found (for a review, see e.g. Brodie et al., 2011). In this sense, Martínez López et al. (2016), Baldus et al. (2015), and Madupu and Cooley (2010) offer excellent conceptual frameworks and empirical evidence to understand the particularities of online BCs. Some studies even show conceptual misunderstanding, like Cheng et al. (2020), Kaur et al. (2020), or Liu et al. (2019), who confuse research on online BCs with research on virtual social networks. As an exception, Adamo and Dittmar (2019) empirically investigate offline BC and offer insightful managerial implications, such as fostering face-to-face events or identifying opinion leaders as a benefit for the community. To sum up, the relationships between sociality and technology stand out as a relevant line of inquiry; future research could address the impact of the symbolic aspect of the brand on the development of online communities, as well as the extent to which members would

benefit from symbolic outcomes such as self-expression or self-definition, thus expanding the SI-BC-technology link. In this regard, the brand-sociality-technology connection also implies that some brand-related phenomena go against the communitarian BC mechanism: it is the case of the above-mentioned concept of “brand publics” (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016), which focus on brand-related sociality on social media, and which is different from BC for various reasons, the most important being that BC members develop shared meanings that they identify with, while in brand publics no coherent collective identity is articulated around the brand—indeed, the concept of “brand public” derives from the noncommunitarian nature of social media, where consumer bonds are more ephemeral. Thus, the contrast of collective-driven BCs and brand-related community dissolution arises as an enticing research line.

Additionally, self-enhancement (Schlenker, 1980; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Goffman, 1956; Grubb and Stern, 1971; Escalas and Bettman, 2003), as a symbolic outcome of community membership, is also an unexplored area of research connecting SI and BCs. The literature reveals that a sense of shared self is developed inside the community thanks to symbolic interaction. In the realm of branding, meanings generated by the brand-symbol allow self-enhancement processes (Gordillo-Rodríguez, 2017). Thus, symbolic interaction in BC allows the construction of the self. This interaction also enables the development of a shared self, a common self defined collectively through meaningful interactions with others, with the brand, and with the community; when handling the same symbolic resources, therefore, members build a similar self. Clearly, this phenomenon could be addressed by other disciplines as well, such as psychology. In addition, we hope future research will explore the connection between the development of a sense of shared self, and resulting self-enhancement.

Our review on brands and symbolism offers a further avenue of research: the development of interconnections between SI, BC, and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). For a start, explaining BC from the viewpoint of SI help linking CCT research lines such as the construction of consumers’ identity projects, or the collective context of market-related symbols; hence SI provides conceptual bases to understand identity construction and consumer-brand (consumer-symbol) interaction. Another reason is that CCT itself has been used as frame to study BC. For instance, de Almeida, de Almeida and de Faveri (2015) depart from CCT as a

theoretical frame to explore BC members’ identification and engagement, and its influence on their membership continuance intention, as well as on their perception of brand equity. Dominici, Basile and Palumbo (2013) also connect CCT and BC from a relational focus: they study consumer-brand relationships (either individual consumers or consumers as part of a group) through Viable Systems Approach. And Waqas, Hamzah and Salleh (2020) apply CCT to study consumer (Volvo Truck BC members) experience with branded content. What is more, since—as we have seen—CCT scholars like Askegaard and Linnet (2011) emphasize the need for researching consumption as a social institution beyond individual identity projects, and at the same time brand management points to collective symbolic consumption, we can conclude that the *Symbolic Interactionism-Brand Communities-Consumer Culture Theory* connection must be highlighted as a promising research line.

Conclusions

The main aim of this paper was to review the most relevant literature on brand communities and symbolic interactionism, as well as on specific applications of SI to branding, in order to identify and synthesize the main ideas of both SI and BCs, and, what is more important, to find relations between them. In this regard, the main conclusion of this paper is that, since BC arises as a new marketing reality reflecting the collective and symbolic dimension of consumption, it requires a specific approach that SI can provide. However, few researchers have explicitly identified the SI-BCs connections: interactionist principles are sometimes mentioned, but SI is not applied systematically as a conceptual frame. Our paper has tried to bring to light such connections, hence making clear some key insights and showing how contributions to BC mesh with SI theories.

As expressed throughout this paper, the literature review indicates that interaction is key for a brand community to develop. Three basic symbolic-interactionist tenets are reflected (explicitly nor not) in the brand community literature; consequently, the connection between BCs and SI is expressed through them. This paper identifies three BC core ideas — (1) creation and negotiation of meaning in social interaction; (2) brand symbolism and symbolic interaction; and (3) sense of belonging— in which SI is grounded. First, brand communities represent interaction processes of

high symbolic value between consumers in which the core symbol is the brand, whose meanings are configured as a center of interaction. Second, self and society influence and give shape to each other. Third, brand communities are conceived as social entities that imbue the self with meaning and a sense of a collective self is thus developed through members interaction.

These links have been summarized and developed, thus covering the research gap defined at the beginning of the paper. Our analysis of the literature revealed that BCs can be described in terms of symbolic exchange derived from members interaction around the core brand. In this regard, the literature review indicates that there is a fundamental process of symbolic interaction in BC whereby community meanings are negotiated, defined, redefined or consolidated (on Blumer's and Goffman's basis). In the broader theoretical context of consumer collectives, BCs represent interaction processes of high symbolic value between consumers where the core symbol is the brand—as the generating element of the community—whose meanings are configured as the center of interaction, and they are reformulated as a result of community interaction. Thus, SI explains how social interactions work inside BCs. In this regard, the review offers a base to further develop what SI can do to analyze consumer sociality. Among the three SI intellectual traditions, the original definition of BC relates to the structural branch of SI (i.e. structured relationships), while some cues to the other schools are present, like the rituals and traditions, closer to the processual and dramaturgical approaches—actually, the processual approach appears as the most suitable to study BC as a context of interaction.

Moreover, the review indicates that, on the grounds of the SI-BC interconnections that can be brought to light, SI can be regarded as a theoretical turning point as far as BC research is concerned—a turning point which was already

present in Muniz and O'Guinn's seminal work. Thus, our paper expands symbolic-interactionist research by conceiving the dynamics occurring inside BCs as meaningful interactions and identifies a new line of theoretical research by suggesting that the BC concept optimally connects SI to marketing in general, and branding in particular. Hence research on BC would benefit from an update with an emphasis on the symbolic nature of the community, as well as all the processes (i.e. interaction) that occur inside, rather than its implications for brand management. In this respect, new methodological issues should be taken into account; among them, BC research must be more systematically grounded in ethnography, and use fieldwork to describe the symbolic communication and meaning construction that take place around a brand.

Ultimately, this paper aimed to contribute to existing research on BC. Conceiving brand communities from the viewpoint of symbolic interactionism has other important theoretical implications. It means the application of a sociological perspective to a phenomenon defined mainly from psychology, branding and marketing. Moreover the combination of the three interactionist traditions—processual, structural and dramaturgical—represents new and expanding paths of inquiry to conceive brand communities in their sociological rather than commercial dimension. In this line, and besides identifying an underexplored area of research, our paper has suggested future avenues of research to explore symbolism in groups of consumers. The literature review found that SI premises emerge as significant insights to explain BCs as new realities in the current online marketing context. The relationships between SI, BC, and the digital realm thus arise as an enticing avenue of research, as well as the relationships between self-enhancement and branding, and the SI-BC connection with Consumer Culture Theory.

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