What happens when a consumer clicks the “like” button for a brand, causing that brand to appear on their Facebook page, identifying the consumer to her friends as someone who – literally – likes that brand? Given the amount of effort and funds many brand managers devote to acquiring such likes, we might expect that the simple action of “liking” leads to changes in subsequent behavior – from spreading positive word of mouth to buying more of that brand’s offerings. Indeed, marketers spend billions (and counting!) each year on building brand communities in this manner.

At the same time as marketers are investing heavily in brand communities, some are increasingly asking: “What are we getting for our dollars?” (Michael Sprague, VP Marketing, KIA). Polls indicate that marketers have become dissatisfied with the currently available metrics for evaluating their social media investments (eMarketer, 2012). One such metric is the size of a brand community – in Facebook lingo, the number of “likes” that a brand’s Facebook page has garnered.

Marketers have come to expect positive outcomes from generating “likes.” For some, generating “likes” is an end; these are the marketers that rush to hire consulting firms to up their “like count.” For its part, Facebook caters to this mentality, using the tagline “get more likes” to promote advertisements. This perspective assumes that inducing consumers to join brand communities has direct benefits – that “liking” causes consumers to say, view a brand more favorably. On the other hand, people who “like” a brand on Facebook may simply be expressing their existing preference for that brand, such that one small click of a mouse is unlikely to change their behavior going forward. Indeed, given the promiscuous and indiscriminate manner in which consumers “like” brands – with many Facebook users “liking” hundreds of brands, musicians, television shows, and so on – expecting a single “like” to change attitudes and behavior may be unrealistic.

In a series of well-powered field and lab experiments (N>5,000), we test whether there are direct benefits of inducing consumers to join brand communities. Previous research has attempted to answer this question by comparing the attitudes and purchasing behaviors of brand community members to those of non-members (e.g. Srinivasan, Anderson, & Ponnavolu, 2002; Manchanda, Packard, & Pattabhiramaiah, 2013). Although this research generally concludes that members are more valuable customers than non-members, it does not provide insight into the causal effect of brand communities on marketing outcomes, because consumers self-select into joining.

In our experiments, participants were randomly assigned to either check a box to indicate if they liked a brand (control), or to click on a “like” button for a brand. The “like” button was connected to Facebook: upon clicking the button, a Facebook page automatically opened in another browser window, informing the participant that they had joined the Fanpage for the given brand. We measured a variety of attitudinal (e.g. brand liking) and behavioral (e.g. purchasing behavior, coupon redemption) outcomes. In each experiment, we crossed the primary manipulation (described above) with a secondary manipulation, to test whether “liking” might be beneficial: a) for new brands; b) when people are given a choice of which of two brands to like; c) in conjunction with positive versus negative information about the brand; and d) when given an incentive to join the Facebook page.

Across both attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, and across short and longer time spans, our results converge on two basic conclusions. First, consumers respond enthusiastically to invitations to “like” brands – popular or unpopular, new or established – on Facebook; such indiscriminate “liking” suggests that expressing a “like” may not reflect deep preferences. Second, “liking” a brand has no impact on subsequent consumer attitudes or behavior, including advertisement choice and actual purchase. Importantly, we show that such metrics are influenced by other marketing actions – such as receiving positive and negative information about brands – offering a benchmark against which to compare the relative ineffectiveness of “likes.”

The current results suggest that marketers may be over-investing in social media relative to more traditional marketing efforts. In ongoing field experiments however (data collection scheduled to be completed by end of February 2014), we are testing for possible second-order benefits of becoming a fan – whether friends of people who have (been randomized to be induced to) become fans subsequently exhibit increased preference for that brand.