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The Fostering of Online Brand Com- munities– An Integrated Framework for Strategic Imple- mentation

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ABSTRACT

- Title:** The Fostering of Online Brand Communities – An Integrated Framework for Strategic Implementation
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- Authors:** Mathias Andersson, Per Holgård
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- Five keywords:** Online brand community (OBC), Social media marketing, Relationship marketing, Community engagement, Co-creation
- Purpose:** *The purpose of this thesis is to create an integrative understanding of how OBCs are fostered by developing a framework for strategic implementation.*
- Methodology:** The chosen method is of an explorative nature with an abductive approach. The authors will develop an integrated OBC framework by synthesising relevant brand community literature. This OBC framework will then be scrutinized by empirical studies of practitioners and OBC consumers. The empirical data from the practitioners will be gathered through a qualitative research method and the empirical data from the OBC consumers will be gathered through a quantitative research method.
- Theoretical perspectives:** The theoretical foundation of this study is based on literature concerning subcultures of consumption, brand communities, online brand communities, community engagement, consumer participation motives, co-creation and relationship marketing. This literature will be used in order to develop an integrated framework of the nature of OBCs.
- Empirical foundations:** The empirical data is based on qualitative expert interviews with marketing practitioners that have experience from OBCs and social media marketing. The OBC users' views of OBCs have been covered by a quantitative survey of their online behaviour. Data were collected in order to complement and add to the developed framework of how to foster OBCs.
- Conclusions:** This thesis' empirical findings provided a number of preparatory aspects and strategic guidelines for OBC-fostering. These aspects and guidelines have been integrated in a framework for strategic implementation, *The Online Brand Community Wheel*. Further, the empirical findings suggest that the importance of firm-focused OBC engagement/involvement has been underestimated in previous literature. It has also been found that the likeliness of succeeding when fostering OBCs is increased if the community is based around consumption activities rather than brands.

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1 INTRODUCTION

"It feels like it's still in its infancy. There are many firms that are more than willing to invest in social media but they don't have a clue of what it means or what it is. It's usually at that level."

– Leif Kajrup, Account Manager Digital at The Concept Factory

The quotation above describes one of the common problems within today's practice of social media marketing, namely a general lack of knowledge. Recent years' "hype" within social media marketing has made presence within social media channels to almost become a norm, channels in which firms principally have to be present. Nowadays, it would be difficult to find a firm that do not host a Twitter account or a Facebook page. This "hype", which is mainly pushed by "marketing gurus", is rushing firms to apply this new marketing practice as soon as possible. Unfortunately, many of these firms are tempted to do things that they often know very little about.

"Up until 2010, just being there with a website, Facebook page, and Twitter stream was enough. This year, it's the strategic use of online assets that will chart a course for the brands that will prevail by the time 2012 rolls around"

– Sean Duffy, founder of The Duffy Agency

Due to the lack of knowledge, social media marketing is more often applied with little or no strategic thought. Such marketing through social media channels does not necessary mean that it automatically becomes interactive marketing. However, one way of working strategically with social media marketing is by facilitating the fostering of Online Brand Communities (OBCs). By fostering OBCs firms can gain increased levels of customer interaction and customer engagement at the web. The main question here is how to create an environment and a venue where customer interaction and customer engagement can be stimulated and blossom into a well-functioning OBC. Therefore, this study's ambition is to develop a strategic framework of how firms can facilitate the fostering of OBCs. The authors have chosen to specialize in OBC because of its interactive and relationship-building characteristics. Brand community related literature also offers proven and documented influencing factors and outcomes. For instance, it has been established that the interaction that occurs within OBCs have positive effects on both sales as well as customer loyalty (Adjei et al., 2010; McAlexander et al., 2003), a fact that should make OBCs one of the most desirable outcomes of effective social media marketing.

1.1 Background

Since Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) published their famous article *Brand Community*, the concept of brand communities has attracted a considerable amount of interest among both practitioners and scholars. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, pp. 412) described a brand community as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand.” However, the definition of a brand community often varies within the academic literature. It is for instance possible to identify brand-specific communities that lack a clearly structured set of social relations. Many scholars are therefore often freely using the term brand community to describe a community where the consumption of a specific brand serves as the basis for interaction. Such a definition of the term is closely related to what Kozinets describes as virtual communities of consumption, i.e. “affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities” (Kozinets, 1999, pp. 254). The authors have chosen to use the term OBC, which is commonly used to describe brand communities that originate from and are based around an online venue. The use of the term OBC will in this thesis also be more in line with the concept of virtual communities of consumption. To clarify, structured sets of social relations can therefore be present within the community but is not considered to be a criterion.

The contemporary popularity and interest in Web 2.0 technologies and social media have clearly shifted both scholars and practitioners to focus on brand communities that originate from an online venue, i.e. OBCs. OBCs offer better opportunities for firms to grow and globalise their brand communities to involve members/customers from all over the globe (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). By hosting the community online, it also becomes more accessible for “visitors”, i.e. individuals who are not (yet) categorized as brand enthusiasts/admirers.

“I think the big social media trend in 2010 will be that online brand communities will come of age”

– Gaurav Mishra, CEO at 2020 Social (Mishra, 2009)

The technical development of Web 2.0 is fundamental for the concept of OBC and has facilitated simplified ways for two-way communication. With the rise of Web 2.0 in the beginning of the 2000’s, new web-based technologies transformed websites into interactive communication platforms. These web-based platforms act as the OBC’s core, a hub that serves to connect the consumers and offer them a venue for interaction (Adjei et al., 2010; Dholakia et al., 2004). In other words, if Web 2.0 technologies were not invented, OBCs would not exist. Due to OBCs’ need of consumer-generated content and the fact that OBCs are built around web-based interactive communication venues (the term venue will from now on refer to the website where OBCs operate), a close connection to the field of social media marketing is evident.

An OBC has the same characteristics as a content community (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) and should therefore be considered as a social media application suitable for marketing purposes. Social media as a communications channel has become a very popular tool among today's marketing practitioners. Various scholars have also discussed and predicted a radical shift in marketing communications where a new dominating structure is emerging due to social media's invasion on the web (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Meadows-Klue, 2008). According to Deloitte's (2009) report, *2009 Tribalization of Business Study*, 94% out of 400 surveyed firms planned to maintain or increase investments in social media and online communities. Deloitte's (2009) report clearly support the idea of a radical shift within marketing communications.

This shift could be classified as a movement from "command and control-oriented marketing" to an extreme version of pull-oriented marketing (Meadows-Klue, 2008). "Command and control-oriented marketing" will further be referred to as traditional marketing and can be described as the marketer's focus on communicating frequent and controlled messages to the customers through traditional communications channels such as television, radio and print. When marketers apply this method of marketing communications, marketers themselves decide the content of the brand's messages (Meadows-Klue, 2008). Mainly due to the web and social media channels, it has however become evident that firms do not have as much control of their brands as they thought they had. Nowadays, word-of-mouth is spreading rapidly through the web and firms can no longer benefit from information asymmetry between the brands' messages and their customers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a).

On the other hand, social media offer marketers new possibilities to influence customers through, what the authors would like to call, extreme pull-marketing. The concept of pull-marketing has obviously been around for quite a long period of time, but the kind of pull-marketing that we see in social media marketing is by many means different. The idea of social media marketing is basically to plant seeds on the web in order to stimulate customer interaction (Drury, 2008), with the further purpose of changing customers' purchase behaviour (Adjei et al., 2010). Such strategies are obviously heavily relying on the effects of word-of-mouth and the idea that word-of-mouth have great potential to positively affect customers' purchase behaviour and loyalty to the brand, an idea that is supported through a number of studies (Brown et al., 2007; Gruen et al., 2005; Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988). When working with social media marketing, marketers therefore more often act as background figures that facilitate and stimulate customer involvement and interaction (Drury, 2008).

In conclusion, one can identify a dilemma situation where firms do understand the value of OBCs and want to invest in the fostering of OBCs, but at the same time, they do not possess the proper knowledge of how to apply strategic social media marketing. Literature within this field of study

clearly highlights the value of OBCs and a number of separate studies have identified influencing factors that are considered to foster OBCs. However, very few studies offer a systemized way of how to strategically foster OBCs in a managerial perspective.

1.2 Problem formulation

In recent years, the concept of brand community has been widely discussed by both marketing practitioners and scholars. Many contemporary “marketing gurus” are also propagating the importance of implementing social media strategies and how significant these are for the fostering of OBCs. In the past ten years, several articles related to OBCs have been published in all sorts of marketing journals (Adjei et al., 2010; Madupu and Cooley, 2010; McAlexander et al., 2003; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010; etc.). Concurrently, both scholars and practitioners have come to realize that the fostering of OBCs is not restricted to the consumers; firms also have a very important role in the fostering of OBCs (McAlexander et al., 2002).

1.2.1 Practical problem

In recent years it has become more and more common that firms use OBCs as a social media channel for commercial purposes, where the mentality has been to host/establish a venue for the community in order for it to foster (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). Today’s marketing practitioners clearly see the value in OBCs (Ahn et al. 2010; Kozinets, 2002; Madupu and Cooley, 2010) but they seldom know how they should act within the community, where to begin when trying to foster them or how to stimulate participation.

Despite the obscurity of how to strategically work with social media marketing, the vast growing numbers of people getting involved in social media have started a social media trend among firms. Nowadays, firms can for instance reach over 500 million active users only through Facebook (Facebook, 2011a). Many marketers want to take part of this relatively new communications technique but few actually possess the proper knowledge of how to do it. According to a survey conducted by Marketing Sherpa (2009), “Lack of knowledgeable staff” is the most significant barrier (46%) for not adopting a major social media marketing strategy. At second place, the respondent firms answered “Instability of measuring ROI” (43%). Further, a survey conducted by Stelzner (2010) at Social Media Examiner reveals that a significant 65% of the surveyed marketers have only been involved with social media marketing for a few months. The lack of knowledge is therefore obviously connected to the newness of the marketing practice. These results indicate that firms do not consider themselves to be enough prepared to start using social media marketing to a wider extent and that social media marketing is considered as relatively risky due to the uncertainty of the return on investments (ROI). Many marketing prac-

tioners thereby seem to be groping in the dark, wanting to be present in social media channels, but lacking the knowledge to fully adopt a major social media marketing strategy.

Another issue concerning the adoption of strategic social media marketing- and OBC-strategies is the question of control. Many firms are afraid of losing control of their messages by using social media channels, which also could be one of the reasons why many marketing practitioners have a tendency to use social media in a traditional sense of marketing. The discussion about control varies among both scholars and practitioners. According to Wipperfurth (2005), marketers should let the brand and the brand's messages be "hijacked" by the consumers. In other words, marketers should let the consumers drive the brand's evolution without too much interference. This post modern view of marketing practice and control still has to be considered as quite unconventional as the majority of scholars and marketing practitioners agree that some level of control is necessary. Social media's wind of change has however gradually shifted the view of control. In order to foster an OBC, firms have to let go of some of the control and let the customers "breathe new life" to the brand. However, one has to remember that not everything that is written within OBCs has strict positive effects on the brand or are in line with what a specific brand wants to communicate. Firms therefore often find themselves in difficult situations where they have to balance permission to speak out with achieving certain marketing- and financial goals. Since the view of control within social media marketing still is quite scattered, this marketing practice is characterized by uncertainty.

One could easily stress that the control aspect together with a lack of knowledge and understanding adds to the uncertainty-level surrounding OBCs and social media marketing. This uncertainty is probably keeping many firms from fully adopting strategic social media marketing with the ambition to foster OBCs. According to Stelzner (2010), the question of social media marketing's best practices positioned itself at second place among the top questions that marketing practitioners wanted answered regarding social media marketing. The most important question concerned the measurement of social media ROI. Another important question that marketing practitioners wanted answered (sixth place), was how to implement social media tactics (Stelzner, 2010). As one can see, practitioners clearly seek a better understanding of how to reap the benefits of a clever social media strategy and how they should act in order to maintain such benefits.

As discussed earlier, marketers want to "jump on the social media bandwagon", but they lack the proper knowledge of how to do it successfully. The fostering of OBCs is a very good way of increasing customer interactivity at the web where both customer involvement and engagement to the brand is stimulated. A framework that describes how to reach such objectives would therefore be of great managerial contributions. An easily understandable and systemized strategic framework of how to facilitate the fostering of OBCs would reduce the uncertainty surround-

ing this marketing practice. Marketing practitioners can thereby also more easily understand the complex nature of OBCs as well as getting a broader picture of what kind of investments in time, money and effort it takes to foster an OBC. Strategic guidelines and key factors that have to be considered when developing an OBC-strategy would make this marketing practice more accessible and understandable. For instance, an integrated and strategic framework could contain customer-focused antecedents and motives for joining OBCs, resource and personnel issues, how to gather brand enthusiasts, guidelines of how to engage customers, guidelines of how to act within the OBC as well as where to locate your OBC venue. Today's marketing literature clearly does not offer such a framework that can support marketers in their fostering of OBCs.

1.2.2 Theoretical problem

Literature of brand community-related theory is very wide and extensive where many theories and concepts are explained separately. Some research provides an understanding of certain aspects of brand communities but the body of literature lacks an integrated and systematic approach of how OBCs function. The authors have found that the literature within the area of brand community and OBC could be described as a tree that branches out into two separate limbs; one that explains what types of outcomes, or benefits, communities generate (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; McAlexander et al., 2004; Schouten et al., 2007; etc.) and a second limb where a more exploratory approach is taken in order to comprehend the nature of a brand community and its influencing factors (Hanlon, 2006; Luedicke, 2006; Madupu and Cooley, 2010; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schau and Muniz, 2002; etc.). Besides, one can also identify a couple of smaller branches, important sidetracks to brand community theory that explain concepts such as netnographic studies, co-creation of value and electronic word-of-mouth (Gruen et al., 2005; Kozinets, 1999; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). The authors have however not been able to identify any research that integrates key aspects within this body of literature with the objective to support marketing practitioners to foster OBCs. In fact, most of the studies are based from a user perspective and emanate from when OBCs emerge among brand enthusiasts alone, without firms' involvement. Yet, many scholars imply that firms can and should be involved in the fostering of OBCs (Hanlon, 2006; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), but they seldom offer any concrete and systemized managerial guidelines of how, or to what extent, this involvement should be put into practice. The authors' main criticism to the existing literature is therefore that very few scholars, if any, have done integrative studies of how marketing practitioners can facilitate the fostering of OBCs. What would an OBC-strategy look like? What are the main aspects to consider from a managerial perspective when developing such a strategy? Studies that try to answer these questions should be of great interest. By integrating the brand community-related literature's branches into a meta-analytic framework, a deeper understanding of why OBCs emerge can be obtained. When such knowledge has been established, strategic guidelines of how to foster OBCs can be developed.

A couple of scholars have however contributed with a lot of valuable insights regarding the fostering of OBCs. For instance, Madupu and Cooley (2010) have developed a conceptual framework of the antecedents and consequences of OBC participation. They list five participation motives and describe how they affect OBC participation and the core components of brand communities developed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). They further link OBC participation to a couple of brand consequences, i.e. desirable outcomes of OBCs. Their framework provides a good understanding of consumers' participation motives and how they affect the core components of OBCs. Madupu and Cooley (2010) also suggest that firms should try to facilitate these motives when fostering OBCs. Their article's guidelines are clearly valuable and important but a more systematic and profound approach of how to foster OBC is definitely needed. Even though stimulating participation is a very important part of OBC-fostering, it is still only one aspect of the bigger picture.

Further, Fournier and Lee (2009) are discussing seven myths and realities in brand community building. These myths and realities are discussing the general assumptions of brand communities from a practitioner's point of view. They view a brand community as something greater than just a marketing strategy and are arguing that in order to fully succeed to foster a brand community; it should be viewed as a high-level business strategy that is supporting other business goals as well. Fournier and Lee (2009) further argue that it is important to view an OBC as a tool in a brand community strategy and not as a key strategy for itself. Even if Fournier and Lee (2009) are touching upon many interesting and important points about how to approach the fostering of OBCs, their arguments fall short due to a couple of reasons. For instance, their research is exclusively based upon specific cases and is not anchored in the existing and relevant brand community theory, neither have their assumptions been scrutinized by empirical findings. Further, their article does not provide a profound or systematic approach of how to facilitate the fostering of OBCs.

In another article, Schau et al. (2009) have synthesized previously published research of brand communities in order to develop a meta-analytic framework that describes how brand communities operate and function. However, their framework exclusively describes activities performed by the users of a community, i.e. the consumers. The framework gives the reader a good understanding of the nature of brand communities and how community members act and behave, but once again, Schau's et al. (2009) overall focus is not to support marketing practitioners with how to strategically approach the fostering of brand communities.

Despite the lack of studies that aim to support marketing practitioners of how to foster OBCs, some firms have still been able to foster more or less successful OBCs. Besides, there are a lot of examples out there where both advertising agencies and firms have created social media campaigns that successfully fostered customer interaction and customer engagement. Questions

concerning the possibilities to identify a pattern among such examples and if one can identify any key factors to consider when firms want to foster OBCs or customer interaction are still left unanswered. A study that can combine and complement relevant OBC theory with such empirical findings would be very contributing to this body of literature. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how OBCs are fostered from a managerial perspective, one must scrutinize relevant OBC theory through empirical studies.

As one can see, a practitioner-focused approach of how to foster OBCs is missing in today's academic literature and should be considered as a theoretical gap that needs to be filled. An integrated OBC framework that provides strategic guidelines and highlights the most important aspects of OBCs could help to deepen the knowledge within this field of study. With a deeper knowledge of this connection, scholars could for instance develop more industry-specific OBC-strategies that have been validated and scrutinized through empirical studies. If one could investigate how much time and resources it takes to foster and maintain OBCs, OBC theory could also progress to more accurately describe the scope of investments that needs to be done.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to create an integrative understanding of how OBCs are fostered and develop an OBC framework for strategic implementation.

1.4 Research issue

In order to fulfil the purpose of this thesis, the authors aim to answer the following questions:

- *What are the key influencing factors of OBC-fostering?*
- *What would a strategy for OBC-fostering have to contain?*

1.5 Delimitations

The authors have chosen to focus on the strategic fostering of OBCs from a managerial perspective; hence this study will not research the potential outcomes that OBCs generate. This choice has been made since potential beneficial outcomes already have been investigated and greatly discussed by numerous scholars. The authors thereby consider the outcomes as given and that they will be generated if the OBC is fostered successfully. The fact that OBCs generate beneficial outcomes is rather a prerequisite for this study.

The study is further limited to marketing practitioners operating in Sweden as well as consumers living in Sweden due to availability and time constraints, which implies that the study will be

country specific and the findings may therefore not be as applicable in other countries. Many of the interviewed marketing practitioners do however have international experience.

1.6 Key definitions

SUBCULTURE OF CONSUMPTION

“A distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity. Other characteristics of a subculture of consumption include an identifiable, hierarchical social structure; a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression.”

Schouten and McAlexander (1995), pp.43

BRAND COMMUNITY

The authors refer to brand community as a community where the consumption of a specific brand serves as the basis for interaction.

ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITY

The authors refer to OBC as a brand community that originates from and is structured around an online venue.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES OF CONSUMPTION

“...affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities.”

Kozinets (1999), pp. 254

OBC VENUE

The authors refer to OBC venue as the website where an OBC operates.

MARKETING PRACTITIONERS/PRACTITIONERS/MARKETING EXPERTS

In order to clarify the authors' discussion within the empirical/analytical chapter, the authors have chosen to separate practitioners into marketing practitioners, practitioners and marketing experts. Practitioners will refer to individuals who are working within B2C-oriented businesses. Marketing experts will refer to individuals who are working within marketing/advertising agen-

cies. Marketing practitioners refers to everyone within the marketing profession, i.e. both “practitioners” and “marketing experts”.

1.7 Outline

2 Methodology

The chosen methodical approaches and the mode of procedure will be presented and explained in this chapter. A clarification of how the empirical data have been gathered will also be presented. General critique against the chosen methods is accounted for and the trustworthiness, reliability and validity of the performed interviews and survey are discussed.

3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis will involve previous academic studies in the fields of consumer behaviour, brand community and relationship marketing. The previous research will then be synthesized into a meta-analytic framework of how OBCs function. This tentative framework will further lay the foundation for the more practically-oriented OBC framework for strategic implementation.

4 Empirical Findings/Analysis

Interviews with marketing experts and practitioners as well as the results from a consumer survey will make up the empirical findings of this thesis. Information from practitioners who are familiar with social media campaigns and OBCs will provide the reader with key aspects and strategic guidelines of today’s social media marketing- and OBC practice. The results of the conducted survey will represent the consumers’ thoughts about OBCs. A comparison of the theoretical framework and the empirical findings will be made in order to discover similarities and differences within theory and practice. The tentative framework constructed in chapter 3 will therefore be scrutinized by the empirical findings.

5 Conclusions

This chapter will summarize the empirical findings and provide a completed framework of how to foster OBCs according to both theory and practice. A conclusion of how the developed framework is intended to contribute to both theory and marketing practitioners will be provided. Within this chapter, the authors will thereby try to answer the research questions raised above. Finally, this chapter will provide researchers with directions in which the authors consider further research should be conducted.

2 METHODOLOGY

This chapter will present how this study has been conducted, the chosen methodical approach, the chosen research methods, how the data gathering has been conducted as well as how the empirical data have been analyzed. This chapter will also include a short presentation of the interviewed marketing practitioners. Finally, criticisms and argumentations for the chosen methods will also be discussed.

2.1 Methodical approach and mode of procedure

As the purpose with this thesis is to establish a deeper understanding of how OBCs are fostered, the chosen method will be of an explorative nature (Jacobsen, 2002). The authors' ambition is to clarify and further develop how OBCs function and how firms can take advantage of such knowledge in order to strategically foster OBCs around their brands. In order to do that, the most important factors of why OBCs are fostered need to be identified and put in relation to each other. Therefore, a profound explanatory approach is required (Jacobsen, 2002). This study will further be in line with an abductive approach where the authors will conduct empirical studies based on the knowledge of theoretical conceptions (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 1994). The findings of this study are intended to provide both theoretical contributions by extending theory within OBC literature, as well as managerial contributions by providing a practically-oriented and systemized framework of how to facilitate the fostering of OBCs.

2.1.1 Phase one – The theoretical foundation of the study

By using mode 1 (academically oriented) as the first method of this thesis' knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994), the authors will develop an integrated framework of how OBCs function by synthesizing previous research within relevant literature. This integrated framework will include what the authors consider to be the academic literature's main aspects and theories of OBCs and related concepts. By integrating interrelated theories from different bodies of literature such as consumer behaviour, brand community, relationship marketing and co-creation, the reader will be given a comprehensive and holistic perspective to the kind of environment where OBCs emerge. A meta-analytic framework of relational mediators, developed by Palmatier et al. (2006) within the field of relationship marketing, will be used as a source of inspiration for the construction of this framework. As OBCs basically comes down to establishing customer relationships, Palmatier's et al. (2006) framework becomes relevant as a frame of reference. Due to the similarities between fostering OBCs and fostering customer relationships, the framework will be used as a template where relevant OBC theory will be added and complemented. The de-

veloped framework will further lay the foundation of our study, the first step towards establishing a deeper understanding of how OBCs are fostered.

2.1.2 Phase two – The empirical dimension

The next phase of this thesis is to scrutinize the tentative framework through empirical studies where the knowledge production will follow an approach in line with Gibbons' et al. (1994) mode 2 (practically-oriented). Open-ended interviews with practitioners and marketing experts will be used as a primary source of empirical data. The ambition with this scrutinization is to validate whether the tentative framework's highlighted aspects are relevant within today's marketing practice as well as to find out if more important aspects of how OBCs are fostered need to be added. Furthermore, the scrutinization should lead to a development of an OBC framework that is more suitable for strategic implementation and thereby more practically-oriented. As the problem formulation in chapter 1 points out, there is a gap within brand community-related literature of how to strategically foster OBCs. The authors expect that the academically developed framework will need to be complemented with new practically-oriented insights. In order to make the knowledge production in phase two relevant, carefully considered interview objects will therefore have to be chosen.

However, in order to facilitate the fostering of OBCs one must also grasp the users'/consumers' incentives and motives of joining a community. Answers to questions such as; what are the perceived benefits of joining an OBC and what motivates an individual to join an OBC are obviously central when firms strategically foster OBCs. As parts of the tentative framework will include customer-focused antecedents and consumer participation motives, phase two's knowledge production will also have to include data gathered from consumers. In order to cover the customer-focused aspects, the authors will conduct a survey with the ambition to shed light to such questions.

2.2 Data gathering

As stated above, the gathering of empirical data will be crucial in order to find linkages between the academic literature and today's marketing practice. The data gathering for the theoretical framework is built upon previous literature within brand community-related theory. Research is gathered from international academic journal articles (collected from various journal databases), books and other articles from industry-specific journals. A number of Internet-based electronic sources have also been used. The primary data gathered for this study have been collected through semi-structured, open individual interviews as well as through an online survey. A qualitative method is the most suitable approach for explorative studies with explicit research questions (Jacobsen, 2002). According to Lundahl and Skärvad (1999), the purpose of gathering

qualitative data is to clarify and get a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon. As the purpose of this thesis is to establish a more nuanced perspective of how OBCs are fostered, qualitative data will thereby be this study's most influential source of empirical data.

Descriptive statistics of quantitative data will be used to cover the customer-focused aspects of OBCs. Quantitative research methods are usually applied for descriptive studies and are not suitable for profound explanatory studies (Jacobsen, 2002). Implicit research questions are often required due to the fact that one has to categorize the questions before gathering data. However, there have been a lot of research regarding these aspects and they are therefore not as explicit as the fostering of OBCs. Finding relevant questions for the survey with the help of previous research should therefore be possible. Since the ambition with the user-focused part of this study is to describe the users' motives and perceived benefits of joining an OBC, a quantitative research method and a descriptive approach is necessary (Jacobsen, 2002). A survey makes it possible to generalize about a group of peoples' perceptions, something that would not have been possible with a small amount of in-depth interviews (Jacobsen, 2002). Further, the results from the survey is intended to highlight the most important factors of why customer participate in OBCs and social media channels as well as to strengthen/question the practitioners' and the marketing experts' discussions about what they perceive to be important factors of consumer participation.

2.2.1 Criticism of the chosen research methods

The authors have tried to decrease or avoid the negative effects that can occur when using the chosen research methods. The criticism of the different research methods have been noticed and considered during the gathering and analysis of the empirical data. The chosen qualitative approach is based on people's subjective answers and interpretations; common criticism is therefore that there is a lack of objectivity and that researchers are unsystematically viewing the research material. Closeness to the research subjects can also be connected to the critique of objectivity (Bryman and Bell, 2007). It is also considered to be hard to replicate a study in comparing purposes because of the unstructured way it is conducted. The findings are further considered to be hard to generalize since a few cases cannot be representative of what is general to a population, the interviewed marketing practitioners should therefore rather be seen as general to theory than representing the marketing practitioners as a whole (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The lack of transparency is another problem mentioned by Bryman and Bell (2007), where it is considered to be difficult to follow the researchers work and how the conclusions are drawn.

The criticism of quantitative research revolves around the view that when studying the social world, a natural science model is unsuitable. The criticism mentioned by Bryman and Bell (2007) has been taken into consideration when constructing the survey and is solely used to capture the most important factors of consumers' thoughts about social media and OBCs.

The authors have considered this criticism and a number of choices have been made to decrease or avoid the effects of the mentioned critique. For instance, by using triangulation it is possible to avoid or decrease the disadvantages and enhance the benefits from both the qualitative and quantitative approaches.

2.2.2 Triangulating the research questions

Gathering data from three different sources will be done in order to triangulate the research questions. Triangulation decreases the risks of misinterpretations and increases the reliability of the study (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The authors have chosen to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data as well as a combination of different data sources; practitioners, marketing experts and consumers. This gives the authors the possibility to compare the data from different angles, questioning things that are contradictory and identifying similarities. Gathering data from all three groups of interest makes it possible to get an overview of the most important aspects for each category and thereby identify which aspects that should be included in the final OBC framework. In OBC contexts, triangulating becomes even more important as the authors have noticed that the process of fostering OBCs often follows a common pattern. Firstly, the advertising agencies are often contacted and given the responsibility to initiate the fostering process of OBCs. The results are then handed over to the firms who more often manage and operate the OBC on a day-to-day basis. Lastly, the consumers are obviously the users of the OBCs who make up the basis of the community.

2.3 Interviews with practitioners and marketing experts

When considering the purpose of this thesis, semi-structured open interviews were identified as the most efficient way of how to gather the qualitative data for this study. According to Jacobsen (2002), the central aspect in an intensive approach is to obtain a more nuanced perspective of a phenomenon. However, this approach generates great amounts of data. Due to the time constraint and the amount of data, the authors limited the interviewees to seven marketing practitioners, three practitioners from firms that currently are operating OBCs and four marketing experts with experience from working with OBCs/social media marketing. The interviews were concluded to small N-studies (Jacobsen, 2002), where every interview was treated as a separate case. The authors chose to conduct the interviews as semi-structured, open interviews, which is a preferable method when examining a relatively small amount of units (Jacobsen, 2002). The choice of keeping the interviews semi-structured and semi-standardised was done in order to limit the interview to certain questions of interest. This method also makes it easier to compare discussions from different interviewees (Jacobsen, 2002; Lundahl and Skärvad, 1999). Due to this structure, the authors were able to keep the focus around how to facilitate the fostering of OBCs. All of the interviews followed the same script: questions based around the tentative

framework. Besides, questions concerning social media strategies in general were also asked in order to find out how such strategies relate to strategies of how to foster OBCs. The interviewees were all informed about the study in advance as they received an interview guide to prepare themselves for the interviews and for what kind of question that were going to be asked. However, the framework was never shown or explained to the interviewees in order to keep their answers as open as possible.

2.3.1 Criteria and selection of interviewees

A criterion when choosing the practitioners was that they had to be employees within firms that are currently operating an OBC. The practitioners also had to hold positions where they were involved and had responsibility for the firm's managing of the OBC. When it comes to the marketing experts, the chosen expert had to be either specialized in social media marketing or very well experienced from working with OBCs/social media marketing. The selected firms, both advertising agencies and firms with OBCs, are located in southern Sweden, however many of them have international experience.

Based on the criteria, the following practitioners were interviewed (see Appendix 1 for more details concerning the practitioners):

- Christian Braendshöi, Project Manager and Business Developer of new and digital Media, IKEA Sweden – Place of interview: IKEA Sweden's headquarters in Helsingborg, Sweden; date: April 4th 2011; length of interview: 1h 24m 35s
- Monika Larsson, Internet Business Manager, Panduro Hobby – Location of interview: Panduro Hobby's headquarters in Malmö, Sweden; date: March 1st 2011; length of interview: 54m 7s
- Helene Adler, Copywriter/Blog editor, Panduro Hobby – Location of interview: Panduro Hobby's headquarters in Malmö, Sweden; date: March 1st 2011; length of interview: 54m 7s

Larsson and Adler were interviewed together at the same occasion. As an Internet Business Manager, Larsson was responsible for strategically managing the OBC while Adler was responsible for managing the OBC on a daily basis. One single occasion was chosen in order to create a discussion between the both interviewees as well as to obtain a more nuanced picture of how Panduro Hobby's OBC was managed (See Appendix 2 for more information about Panduro Hobby's and IKEA Sweden's OBC venues).

Based on the criteria, the following marketing experts were interviewed (see Appendix 1 for more details concerning the marketing experts):

- Leif Kajrup, Account Manager Digital, The Concept Factory – Location of interview: The Concept Factory in Malmö, Sweden; date: March 2nd 2011; length of interview: 1h 25m 56s
- Sean Duffy, Founder and Speaker/Marketing Consultant, The Duffy Agency - Location of interview: The Duffy Agency in Malmö, Sweden; date: March 21st 2011; length of interview: 1h 28m 52s
- Ulla-Karin Barrett, CEO, The Fan Club – Location of interview: The Fan Club in Malmö, Sweden; date: March 4th 2011; length of interview: 1h 46m 3s
- Ulrika Rudqvist, Marketing and Information Manager, Springplanet – Location of interview: The Fan Club in Malmö, Sweden; date: March 4th 2011; length of interview: 1h 46m 3s

Barrett and Rudqvist were both interviewed at the same occasion, adding one dimension to that interview's discussion.

2.3.2 Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, the analysis of the data has been performed in accordance with Wallendorf and Belk (1989). Enhanced credibility has been established by triangulating across the sources. The authors have strengthened the credibility of their interpretations by interviewing the different firms and agencies with theoretical conceptions in mind (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Detailed transcriptions as well as recordings have further contributed to the credibility of the authors' interpretation. All interviews have been recorded and transcribed to ensure that the information is reproduced in a proper way, all of the interviewees were also aware of the fact that the interviews were recorded. Recording the interviews might have negative effects since it might make the interviewees defensive and control their answers due to confidential information. This risk was however minimized by giving all the marketing participants a chance to control and confirm their statements as well as making sure that everything has been correctly reproduced (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989); an aspect that also strengthens the validity of the interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The interviews, with the exception of the interview with Sean Duffy, have been conducted in Swedish and translated by the authors. This might lead to mistranslations and misinterpretations but as mentioned above, the interviewees were allowed to review the translations afterwards, making sure that no transla-

tional errors were made. Furthermore, triangulation establishes confirmability, where compared field notes among the authors and listening to audio recordings provided a clearer picture of what actually took place when the interviews were conducted (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). The interviewees were also asked questions regarding social media and relationship marketing, two adjacent research areas, and the fact that all interviews were transcribed strengthens the transferability of the conducted interviews (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Lastly, in order to assess and increase the integrity of the research, the authors tried to build cooperation situations. Since both the authors and the interviewees are interested in this study's findings, a sense of familiarity and intimacy was established (Waldorf and Belk, 1989). Triangulation is also considered to be a means of assessing integrity. Furthermore, the interviewees were given the opportunity to check their contributions and if necessary, anonymity was an option. All of these above mentioned aspects lead to an increased trustworthiness (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989) and ensures the reliability and validity of the analysis of the interviews within this thesis (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

2.4 Surveying the consumers

Community users/members are vital for the OBC to foster and can therefore provide important insights of what actually motivates them to participate. The defined population is thereby individuals that have some sort of experience from OBC venues. The number of research units in this population is very high, which makes a full investigation impossible for the authors to conduct. A random sample has therefore been chosen to represent this group (Lundahl and Skärvad, 1999). Due to time constraints and limited resources, a non-probability sample, or a convenience sample, has been chosen (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The convenience sample was gathered from mailing lists within Lund University as well as from Facebook. Common criticism to this type of sample is that it is impossible to generalize the results (Bryman and Bell, 2007). These types of convenience samples are however considered acceptable to use when making connections to existing results, or as a springboard to continuing research. The authors are well aware of this and further clarifies that the results are to be seen as trend-indicators rather than generalizations. The results are intended to discover connections to previous research and to the qualitative interviews.

In order to obtain information about consumers' involvement in OBCs, the authors conducted a survey where the consumers were asked a number of standardised questions of their behaviour within OBCs and social media. The results of the survey are intended to strengthen the customer-focused parts of the final OBC framework as well as to complement the marketing practitioners' discussions. The questions were formed after Jacobsen's (2002) standards: important concepts and key words were analysed and frames were set before designing the questions. An online pilot study was first conducted on the 11th March 2011 in order to find out if the ques-

tions were understandable and easily interpretable. The test survey was sent out to approximately ten respondents and resulted in a few minor changes and clarifications. This pilot study therefore decreased the data gathering errors (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

The final survey took place online between the 22nd of March 2011 and the 9th of April 2011 (see Appendix 3 for the design of the survey). An invitation was sent by e-mail and through Facebook to a total of 450 persons, all from Sweden. 170 responses were registered (55% men, 45% women), which means that 38% of the respondents completed the survey. The low percentage of participants will however not affect the survey results since it has been established that this is a convenience sample where the respondents are not representing the population. Indications of trends can thereby still be interpreted from the respondents' results; hence the low amount of respondents is argued to be of minor significance (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The majority of the respondents (81%) were in the target group of 20-29 years old. The authors chose to target people within the age of 20-29 due to the fact that they are within the group of people who are the most active Internet users as well as social media users (Nordicom, 2009). By targeting people within the age of 20-29, the probability of surveying individuals with experience from OBCs or similar online venues was massively increased. It was important that the respondents were familiar with social media and had been in contact with OBCs or related communities. The respondents were for instance asked questions concerning their online behaviour; whether they used the Internet as a source for purchase decisions, where they found such information and what kind of functions they perceived as important for a well-functioning OBC (see Appendix 4 for the full results of the survey). All of the questions were based around the developed tentative framework in order to keep the results as relevant as possible. The answers were also predetermined, where the respondents were allowed to answer through checkboxes. This ensures that the questions were perceived in the same way (Lundahl and Skärvad, 1999). An alternative in many questions was however "other" where the respondents could fill in their own answers.

2.4.1 Reliability and validity

The ambition with the survey was to capture the consumers' present general use of social media and one has to be aware that these behaviours might change over time due to the newness and the continuing development of social media. The results in the pilot study were compared to the results in the final study and a high similarity was achieved. If the survey were to be reproduced in the nearest future it is therefore very likely that the responses would be similar, hence strengthening the reliability (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The survey consisted of structured questions with predetermined response alternatives, which decreased the subjectivity and the risk for random errors in the survey and further strengthens the reliability (Lundahl and Skärvad, 1999). Furthermore, the survey's questions were all touching upon OBC and social media behaviour, which means that different indicators are measuring trends regarding the same variables.

The respondents to the plot survey were also asked questions regarding how they interpreted the questions in order to see if the questions were measuring the desired variables. A favourable result was indicated from these respondents, which strengthen the validity of the survey (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

2.5 Analysis of the empirical data

The use of hermeneutics has laid the foundation for the analysis of all of the conducted interviews. This method has been chosen due to its adaptability to interpret interviews and to interpret the action of others, e.g. practitioners' field of work, different degrees of complexity, individuals' actions and group activities (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 1994). According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (1994) the hermeneutic approach is also considered to be a good way of analyzing data from a holistic perspective, thus identifying important aspects or elements in the overall picture. A hermeneutic approach is therefore highly suitable when researching the different aspects needed to form an OBC strategy. The hermeneutic approach is used to increase the understanding of a phenomenon and not to find an absolute truth (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 1994). Since the purpose with this thesis is to increase the understanding of how OBCs are fostered, the hermeneutic approach is found highly relevant for this type of study. The hermeneutic circle helps the authors to analyse and understand the parts in relation to the whole. Understanding the theoretical conceptions is crucial in order to extract important information from the interviews' generated data (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 1994), which is why the authors have chosen an abductive approach. The theoretical framework thereby functions as a historical background of theoretical conceptions, but also as a frame of reference for the data generated by the interviews. In total, the conducted interviews generated 118 pages of transcribed material. Every interview's data were then divided into parts where interrelated findings were aggregated. By doing so, it became easier to find similar patterns within the different interviews and thereby identify key aspects. This has further lead to an analysis of the interviewees' and the survey's contributions as whole where new parts have been found by comparing the results with each other and the theoretical framework.

The survey has been analysed as descriptive statistics, where the respondents' answers have been used to indicate certain trends among consumers' use of social media and OBCs. The data was gathered through an online programme provided by Google. The programme also compiled the results, presenting them in tables and in graphics. Thereby, the authors only needed to control that the respondents had filled in the questions before analysing the answers (Lundahl and Skäravad, 1999). The gathered data have after a thorough control been analysed univariate, which means that the authors have analysed one variable at the time (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The online programme provided by Google further presented the data in frequency tables with the number of respondents that answered each question as well as the percentage of answers to

each question. Based on the questions' structure, the programme also chose appropriate charts for presenting the data. This is in line with Bryman's and Bell's (2007) thoughts about presenting the data. (For a summary of the responses presented in frequency tables and charts, see Appendix 4). The survey results have further been analysed as descriptive statistics, where the different answers have been used to identify indications of trends in consumers' online behaviour. The most common answers in each question have therefore been interpreted as an indication of a certain trend.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will provide theories within brand community-related literature and relationship marketing literature. The theoretical framework will begin by introducing Schouten's and McAlexander's (1995) concept of subcultures of consumption. Further, the theoretical framework will progress to introduce Muniz's and O'Guinn's (2001) concept of brand community and its core components. These theories have been chosen due to the fact that the work of Schouten and McAlexander (1995) and Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) is frequently used and cited by many of the renowned scholars within this field of research. They provide an essential description of the basics of brand communities. Their theories are very fundamental to this body of literature and are therefore also necessary to include in an integrative framework. Further, the concept of OBC will be presented in order to emphasize its similarities and differences to the concept of brand community.

The next part of the theoretical framework will mainly consider Kozinets' (1999) theories of virtual communities of consumption and community engagement. These theories were chosen due to their relevance for OBCs and due to the fact that Kozinets provides an interesting discussion of how customer engagement within communities evolves through time. A deep understanding of community engagement will show to be of utter importance for the fostering of OBCs. Moreover, different community stereotypes will also be presented in order to describe how different types of community members behave within a community.

Kozinets' theories of community engagement naturally lead us to the theories of co-creation. Theories of co-creation have exclusively been gathered from Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a; 2004b) who argues that the consumers should be a natural part of a firm's value creation and that unique value is extracted from co-creation experiences. Due to the nature of OBCs where user-generated content is essential, theories of co-creation become highly relevant. When fostering OBCs, the central objective should be to facilitate a co-creation environment where the consumers can interact with each other, thus creating extra value to the firms' offerings. Co-creation will therefore also be central in the authors' developed OBC framework. This part will also include Prahalad's and Ramaswamy's (2004b) DART-model that describes the building blocks of how to construct a co-creation environment. In order to embed the theories of co-creation in OBC contexts, they will be integrated with Gruen's et al. (2005) theories of electronic word-of-mouth as well as McAlexander's et al. (2004) theories of how loyalty evolves through brand community experiences. Finally, Schau's et al. (2009) theories of how brand community practises create unique value will be presented in order to demonstrate how co-creation take form within brand communities and OBCs.

By this point, a clear understanding of the nature of OBCs should have been established. Therefore, the authors will then start to present theory considering the key factors of OBC-fostering. In order to structure and organize all of these key factors, the authors have borrowed a framework of relational mediators developed by Palmatier et al. (2006). This framework is found suitable as a template for the intended OBC framework because of two reasons. Firstly, the identified antecedents, mediators, moderators and outcomes within this framework are very similar to the ones of OBCs. Secondly, OBCs basically comes down to building customer-brand relationships. However, some of Palmatier's et al. (2006) theories also do complement OBC-related literature. This framework of relational mediators will then be adapted by complementing it with OBC-related theory in order to culminate into an integrated OBC framework. Many separate and specific theoretical contributions will be used to cover the most important influencing factors of OBCs. For instance, theories from Adjei et al. (2010) and Madupu and Cooley (2010) have been chosen due to their specific and profound studies of customer benefits contra consumer participation motives. The last section of the theoretical framework will present an integrative OBC framework that explains how its components relate to each other.

3.1 Subcultures of consumption – A paradigmatic shift

The concept of brand communities started to emerge in the mid 1990's within the field of consumer behaviour. Even though Schouten and McAlexander (1995) studied subcultures of consumption and never mention the term brand community, their studies represent a paradigmatic shift within marketing research. Their findings from studying Harley Davidson motorcycle owners and their consumer behaviour had great influence in several marketing fields such as consumer behaviour, relationship marketing and brand management. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) discovered that certain Harley Davidson consumers had developed a complex sub-culture around the brand with established "social authorities" in a structured hierarchy. The Harley Davidson brand had become something more than just a manufacturer of motorcycles; it had actually become a very important element in many of these consumers' social identities. Within this sub-culture, the Harley Davidson consumption served as the basis for the group's interaction and social cohesion. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) further argue that each sub-culture has a set of core values that function as an identifiable ethos. These core values are often expressed through certain brands and products, which basically mean that they attach deeper meaning to their consumption practices. For instance, this particular group of individuals considered their usage of Harley Davidson motorcycles as an expression for personal freedom. When a brand is incorporated in the core values of such a sub-culture or lifestyle, it will encompass extreme levels of consumer loyalty and commitment. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) further suggest that it is possible for a marketer who understands the structure and ethos of a subculture to establish long-lasting relationships with its members. Already in Schouten's and

McAlexander's (1995) article, they are arguing that marketers should socialize new members and cultivate the commitment of current ones.

3.2 Introducing brand communities

Contemporary with Schouten's and McAlexander's (1995) studies, Muniz and O'Guinn (1995) introduced the term Brand Community. But the concept of brand community would not be widely recognized until the year of 2001, when Muniz and O'Guinn published their article, *Brand Community*. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, pp. 412) a brand community is defined by: "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand." A brand community contains what Gruen and Ferguson (1994) call active loyalists, which means users of a brand who are committed, conscientious and passionate about their brand. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) further argue that the sub-culture among Harley Davidson consumers, described by Schouten and McAlexander (1995), is something considerably more unusual than the brand communities they describe. In contrast to a subculture of consumption, a brand community is more flexible and dynamic where the brand meaning is socially negotiated among the members. It is also centred around one specific brand and not a cluster of various brands. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) used previous studies of general communities in order to empirically test whether or not their proposed brand communities existed. A general community is built around three core components, consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions and sense of moral responsibility (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Their findings suggested that their proposed brand communities included all of a community's core components and should therefore also be considered as communities. Hanlon (2006) further developed these core components with his seven pieces of primal code. He is of the belief that firms can and should facilitate the fostering of brand communities and that it is a powerful strategy for differentiation. According to Hanlon (2006), a community start to foster when a clearly articulated belief system has been developed that attracts individuals with similar beliefs. The belief system is centred around seven pieces of primal code, namely: the creation story, the creed, the icons, the sacred words, the rituals, the nonbelievers and the leaders. Hanlon (2006) further argues that all of the seven pieces of primal code have to be combined in order to create a constellation that attracts a community.

3.2.1 The core components of a brand community

According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), consciousness of kind, a concept developed by Gusfiel (1978), is the most important component for a brand community. Consciousness of kind could be defined as the community members' sense of belonging, the shared beliefs which make them different from others outside the community. Such consciousness of kind is often imagined since most of the community members never have met each other; still they consider that they sort of

know the other members at some level. Many community members have a fixed thought of what other members in the community are like and what they are not (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The two pieces of Hanlon's (2006) primal code, the creed and the nonbelievers, are very similar to consciousness of kind. The creed should answer the question: Why are we here? He implies that the brands' identities or slogans should clearly provide this answer to the community members, just like Apple's proposal to "Think differently". The shared visions and values, or as Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) would call it: the shared consciousness of kind, act as the spine of the community. The nonbelievers obviously deal with who the community members are and who they are not. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) exemplify consciousness of kind with the answer of one of their interviewees who is a passionate Saab driver; he says that if he meets another Saab driver on the road he always beeps or flashes his lights as a confirmation of their sense of belonging without really knowing the other Saab driver or if he truly admire the Saab brand.

The Saab community member's gesture is an example of the second core component, the shared rituals and traditions. It is through the shared rituals and traditions that the community's meaning is reproduced and transmitted; it is what keeps the culture of the community maintained (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Examples of these rituals and traditions are the greetings, the sharing of brand stories, the use of symbols or badges and the creation of myths. Hanlon's (2006) seven pieces of primal code clearly focus on the communities' shared rituals and traditions. The creation story, the icons, the sacred words, the rituals and the leader would all be classified by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) as shared rituals and traditions. However, Hanlon (2006) is describing them in more of a managerial perspective. He is more or less putting his seven pieces of primal code in relation to theory of brand identity and brand building (Kapferer, 2008; Urde, 2003). The creation story and the leader are describing the brand's origin and vision, whether it is based on facts or myths. For instance, every fan of Facebook knows the story of how Mark Zuckerberg created the social network in his dorm room and every Apple enthusiast respect the words and ideas of Steve Jobs. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) also emphasized the importance of a creation story, for instance they discovered how important the origin of Saab was to the Saab community members. Further, Hanlon's (2006) the icons, the sacred words and the rituals are all different kinds of symbols and identifications that are used in order to reinforce the sense of belonging and the communal bond.

The third core component of a brand community is the shared moral responsibility (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). It is defined as the sense of duty to the community as a whole as well as to individual members. This moral responsibility is what keeps the community together and keeps it from fading out. Every community have a code of what is right and what is wrong, a code that can take forms as either formal rules or informal guidelines. Formal rules are rarely the case in brand communities, but the members still have a sense that some sort of social consciousness exist. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) argue that integrating and retaining members and assisting in

the use of the brand are important elements in order to enhance the sense of duty within a brand community. Many members feel that it is their duty to help other people who are interested in the brand. Brand communities actually act as information sources for consumers where they can discuss and evaluate new products together and help other individuals. Another example of moral responsibility is the loyalty to the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

3.3 Introducing online brand communities

As new communications channels were born with Web 2.0, brand communities started to go online. Firms and especially community members saw the opportunity to manage brand communities at a global level, unhindered from geographical limitations. These communities are referred to as Online Brand Communities (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). The authors have also noticed that when scholars refer to OBCs, they often describe brand communities that originate from and are structured around an online venue. OBCs have certainly caught peoples' attention: as many as 84% of Internet-users have to some extent used a virtual community (Horrigan, 2001) and the trend is expected to grow. Firms are clearly aiming their attention to the growing popularity of online communities and their possibilities to effectively build new relationships with customers (McWilliam, 2000). McWilliam (2000) also mentions that the understanding of dialogue basics is crucial for the process of building strong relationships with a firm's consumers. OBCs have given consumers the opportunity to interact freely with each other, where marketers can tap in to get valuable information and strengthen relationships. The information gained within OBCs is overcoming the limitations that traditional one-way research methods have (McWilliam, 2000). The consumers can for instance contribute with new creative research areas and marketers are able to spot unarticulated needs within the users' conversations.

Are then all products suitable for OBCs? Customer involvement and opinion forming is of course not equally high in all products, which creates a problem for products with low complexity such as paper handkerchiefs or household cleaners (McWilliam, 2000). Finding an interesting discussion issue around these products are more difficult than with complex products. According to McWilliam (2000), many successful OBCs are therefore created around a specific issue or trend and not just the brand. For instance, Bosh, a manufacturer of power tools, has created an OBC where handymen and do-it-yourself aficionados are able to discuss their work as well as which tools to use. OBCs provide their members with a forum for discussing common interests, a sense of place where members have rules and norms to follow, where stimulating dialogues can take place, where relationships are built and trust is established as well as where active participation by everyone is encouraged. The key is to find an issue that affects people, something that encourages them to be enthusiastic and share their opinions in the matter (McWilliam, 2000).

3.4 Different levels of community engagement

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of how brand communities are fostered, one has to take a closer look at the different levels of community engagement and the characteristics of the community members. While performing ethnographic studies, later called netnography (Kozinets, 2002), within virtual communities of consumption, Kozinets (1999) identified four different stereotypes of community members. Virtual communities of consumption are defined as “affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities” (Kozinets, 1999, pp. 254). Due to the extreme similarities between brand communities and virtual communities of consumption, his theories should also be applicable to members of OBCs.

Through studies of computer-mediated communications, Walther (1995) found that Internet users progress from a stage of asocial information gathering (or browsing and “lurking”) to increasingly become involved in online social activities. Kozinets (1999) argues that an individual’s relationship developments within a virtual community follow a certain pattern. The more time an individual spend browsing and “lurking” community websites, the more consumption knowledge he/she will learn. Consumption knowledge also refers to the knowledge of the culture within the community, i.e. the rituals and traditions as well as the social structures of the community. Since Kozinets (1999) argue that consumption knowledge develops in concert with social relations, total community engagement is determined by the two factors consumption knowledge and social community relationships. In return, both consumption knowledge and social community relationships are determined by the coefficient of time spent within online communities.

Further, Kozinets (1999) also argues that the formation of lasting identification as a member of a virtual consumption community depends largely on two non-independent factors: the relations with the consumption activity and the social relations with the virtual community. The two factors are often interrelated, but also separate enough to classify four different stereotypes of community members: tourists, minglers, devotees and insiders. Other scholars have also made similar classifications of community members. For instance, Burnett (2000) classified them as either interactive or non-interactive and Schlosser (2005) classified them as either lurkers or posters.

3.4.1 Non-interactive community members

The non-interactive members are the ones that only browse the community for information gathering among other peoples’ postings and conversations, without participating in any discussion themselves (Burnett, 2000; Kozinets, 1999; Schlosser, 2005). They do not have any strong social ties within the community and have a moderate interest in the consumption activity, i.e.

activities bound to a specific brand in a brand community (Kozinets, 1999). These non-interactive members are further representing up to 90% of a community's members (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). Madupu and Cooley (2010) argue that since the non-interactive members represent such a large part of OBCs, it is important to understand their behaviour and identify motivational factors in order to increase their engagement. The issue of non-interactive members is also highlighted by Beenen et al. (2004) whom argue that under-contribution is a major problem in relation to the success of OBCs. However, the non-active members do still contribute to beneficial effects for a firm. For instance, the so-called "lurkers" provide word-of-mouth by taking information from communities and passing it along via other channels.

3.4.2 Interactive community members

The opposite of non-interactive community members are classified as interactive community members. Kozinets (1999) refer to them as insiders, members whom are both very interested in the consumption activity as well as social networking. He further argues that they have a lot of strong social relations within the community and that they often participate in conversations and discussions. Schlosser (2005) classified active members as posters, the important members that give life to the community by sharing a lot of experiences and information, answering others' questions as well as participating in discussions. With their broad range of social relations within the community, they also encourage and inspire other members to participate in discussions and share experiences (Kozinets, 1999). According to Madupu and Cooley (2010), it is crucial to create a forum that enables and encourages active membership since interactive members are the ones that keep the OBC functioning.

3.4.3 The minglers and the devotees

Kozinets' (1999) minglers are people that use the community mostly as a source for social activity and interaction with other people, regardless of the consumption activities. They are only moderately interested in the central consumption activity, but very fond of social networking. The opposite of minglers are devotees, they are instead very interested in the consumption activities and possess a lot of knowledge of the community's rituals and traditions but are not that fond of social networking.

3.4.4 Community engagement in a strategic perspective

Kozinets (1999) also discusses how these classifications of stereotypes could be used in a marketing strategy perspective where the devotees and the insiders represent the most important targets for marketing. According to Kozinets (1999), these community members are the most dedicated and loyal consumers. He also argues that when such loyal consumers get Internet access, they tend to join or form virtual communities of consumption. Kozinets (1999) implies that

these members' devotion and engagement to the consumption activity and/or the specific brand propagates the whole community's development of loyalty by culturally and socially reinforcing consumption practices. By that, Kozinets (1999) also suggests that tourists and minglers can be "upgraded" to devotees and insiders through the process of community socialization.

3.5 Co-creation of value

Through his findings from studying virtual communities, Kozinets (1999) came to the conclusion that marketers should stop focusing on one-to-one marketing and instead apply one-to-many or many-to-many marketing. The forums in virtual communities offer a lot of potential word-of-mouth benefits for firms. By applying a many-to-many marketing practice, the community's influential members (the devotees and insiders) are "employed" to reinforce these positive word-of-mouth benefits. Kozinets (1999) also argues that the marketers must provide the community members with the "raw materials" (rituals and traditions) that they need in order to develop a virtual community. Kozinets' (1999) usage of words implies that it is possible for firms to co-create value together with community members. Other scholars have taken this idea even further and claim that co-creation of value together with consumers is the future's practice of value creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a; 2004b). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004b) argue that due to today's online environment, customers have progressed from being isolated, unaware and passive to being connected, informed and active. They also argue that "consumer networking inverts the traditional top-down pattern of marketing communications" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b, pp. 4). The power of the emerging consumer communities has dramatically changed the conditions for marketers where word-of-mouth has evolved to become a much more powerful force than ever before. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004b) are further of the belief that firms no longer can act autonomously in their value creating activities, without interference from consumers. Due to the consumers' new active roles, they have a wider interest in interacting with the firms' value creation. Consumers want to co-create value and it is through the co-creation experiences that consumers perceive unique value. However, firms will have to "efficiently innovate 'experience environments' that enables a diversity of co-creation experiences" in order to facilitate such co-creation activities (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b, pp. 6).

3.5.1 The DART-Model - The building blocks of co-creation

In order to build "experience environments" for co-creation of value, firms need to understand the basics of interaction between the firm and its consumers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a) have therefore developed the DART-model, which highlights the following four basics for interaction: dialogue, access, risk assessment and transparency. Interactivity, engagement and a willingness to act are very important elements in order to create an open dialogue between firms and consumers. Just listening to your customers is not

enough. Instead, dialogue should focus on shared learning and communication between two equal problem solvers. The ideas of dialogue should not be constrained to only include firm-consumer interaction; consumers should also be encouraged to interact with other consumers. Access refers to how well a firm provide information and tools to their consumers that are useful for the co-creation of value. Firms have to facilitate opportunities for the consumers to co-create experiences in efficient and innovative ways. In order to create an open dialogue between firms and consumers there has to be a high level of transparency. Honesty and transparency is fundamental for building successful customer relationships and if firms are trying to hide unpleasant information, it will backlash. Finally, a good combination of dialogue, access and transparency provide the consumers with good opportunities to assess the risk-benefits of their actions and decisions. Consumers should have access to tools and supportive structures that guide them to make the right decisions (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). Appendix 5 provides an example of how Nike has embraced the building blocks of co-creation in their OBC Nike+ (An excerpt from *Co-creating value from consumers' experiences: the Nike case* by Ramaswamy, 2008)

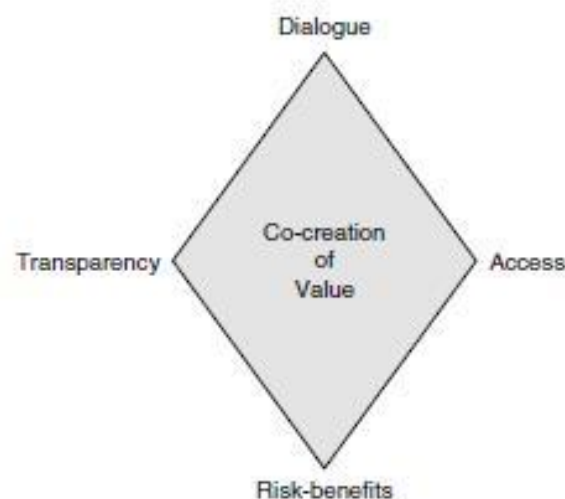


Figure 1 – The DART-Model (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a, pp.4)

3.5.2 Co-creation in OBC contexts

If the consumers have an interest in co-creating value together with firms, they should be considered as great assets to firms' social media marketing strategies; hence the ideas of co-creation become very relevant to OBC contexts. These people could be seen as “employees” that foster interactivity and engagement. Gruen et al. (2005) suggest that C2C exchanges should be viewed as an additional source for unique value creation, which in itself has great impact on customer loyalty. Further, loyalty creation is by McAlexander et al. (2003) described as an “evolutionary

process driven by experiences” (pp. 7). They argue that experiences or “the accumulation of consumption experiences” is of even greater importance for customer loyalty than customer satisfaction. What makes this interesting is that consumers obtain such experiences through brand community integration. Their findings suggest that less experienced consumers are more likely to increase their loyalty to the brand when they start to participate in brand communities. As OBCs are based around virtual C2C exchanges, Gruen’s et al. (2005) theories overlap with McAlexander’s et al. (2003) theories of brand community experiences. McAlexander’s et al. (2003) studies also provided evidence that active and highly integrated brand communities generate high levels of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. In conclusion, Gruen’s et al. (2005) and McAlexander’s et al. (2003) findings indicate that the exchanges within brand communities, i.e. experiences, function as collective unique value creators that stimulate increased levels of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

3.5.3 Brand community practices that create unique value

According to Schau et al. (2009), collective value creation within brand communities is generated through a common set of value-creating practices. They argue that these practices have “an ‘anatomy’ consisting of (1) general procedural understandings and rules (explicit, discursive knowledge); (2) skills, abilities, and culturally appropriate consumption projects (tacit, embedded knowledge or how-to); and (3) emotional commitments expressed through actions and representations” (Schau et al., 2009, pp.30). By closely studying nine various brand communities, they identified 12 common practices of value creation. These 12 common practices were then organized into the four thematic aggregates; social networking, impression management, community engagement and brand use. The value that is created within brand communities is perceived to be different from the value created or anticipated by firms. Schau et al. (2009) argue that the practices create value for both consumers and firms because they foster consumption opportunities. Fundamental to the value-creation is that these practices are embedded in the rituals, traditions and pieces of primal code described by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) and Hanlon (2006).

Social networking concerns the practices that focus on the integration of new members and the sense of belonging within the community (Schau et al., 2009). Welcoming, empathizing and governing were identified as being social networking practices. These practices reinforce the social and moral bonds within the community. Secondly, impression management practices have an external focus on creating favourable impressions of the brand, beyond the specific brand community. Impression management includes the practices evangelizing and justifying. Through such practices, community members almost act as salespeople who actively try to recruit new members. Third, community engagement practices focus on encouragement and motivation. These practices are believed to increase the members’ engagement within the community. Stak-

ing, milestone, badging and documenting were identified as community engagement practices. Through these practices, members can articulate their passion for their brand, but they also function as certificates of social status. The practices often take competitive forms where some members constantly try to enhance themselves as more passionate than others. Finally, brand use practices concerns improved or enhanced ways of using the specific brand's products or services. Grooming, customizing and commoditizing are all practices that refer to how the brand should be used or not be used. For example, brand communities often provide tips and advices of how to optimize the experience from using a specific brand's products and/or services (Schau et al., 2009).

3.6 A meta-analytic framework of customer relationships

As discussed above, OBCs are effective channels for increased customer interaction and engagement as well as powerful tools to build strong customer relationships, both customer-to-customer and seller-to-customer relationships. Essentially, the fostering of OBCs comes down to building strong customer relationships where the emotional bond between the brand and the consumer is central. This field of study is therefore naturally tied to theories of relationship marketing (RM). Within the field of RM, Palmatier et al. (2006) have developed a meta-analytic framework of relational mediators with the ambition to provide a holistic perspective of customer relationships. By synthesizing previous empirical research, Palmatier et al. (2006) managed to develop a framework intended to support practitioners in improving the effectiveness of their RM efforts. The integrated framework gives the reader a deeper understanding of how the different antecedents, mediators and outcomes of customer relationships are linked to each other. By using this framework, practitioners can more easily identify key factors as well as measure the performance/effectiveness of their RM strategies (Palmatier et al., 2006).

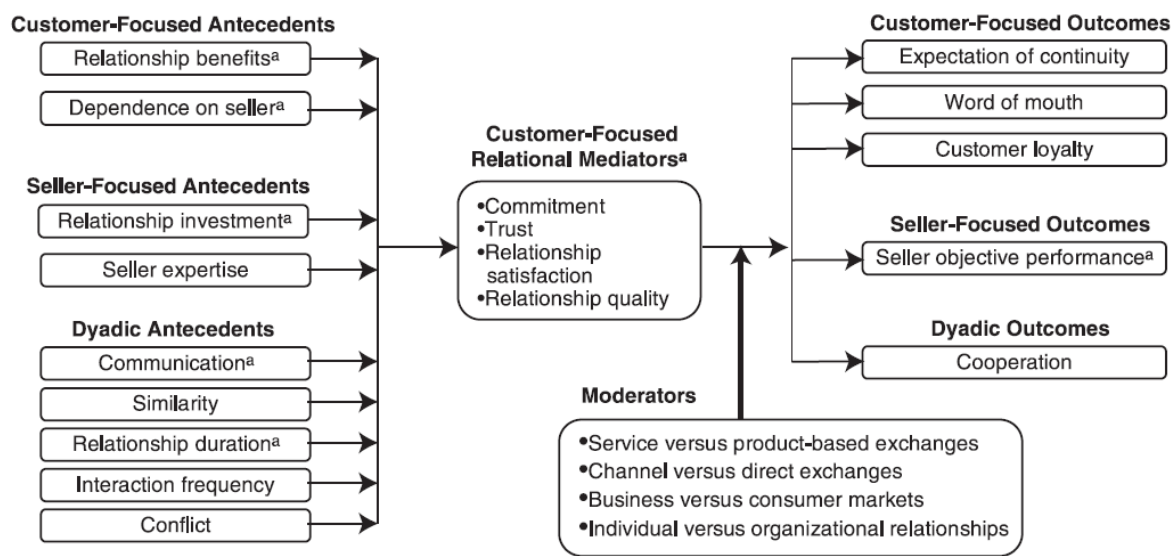


Figure 2 - Relational Mediator Meta-analytic Framework (Palmatier et al., 2006, pp.137)

When taking a closer look at the framework one notices that many of the antecedents, mediators, moderators and outcomes of customer relationships are very similar to the ones of OBCs. By using this framework as a source of inspiration, a similar aggregation of empirical research within brand community-related theory would be feasible. Instead of supporting practitioners in improving the effectiveness of RM strategies, such a framework could support practitioners in improving the effectiveness of their OBC-strategies. Such an OBC framework would also give the reader a better understanding of the factors that foster customer interaction and engagement. With a few modifications of this framework, the authors are able to compile previous research of the influencing factors, moderators and outcomes of OBCs and brand communities into an integrated meta-analytic OBC framework. In the following sections of this theoretical framework, the authors will use Palmatier's et al. (2006) framework as a template where interesting OBC theory will be added and complemented.

3.7 OBC antecedents

Palmatier et al. (2006) emphasize a number of customer relationship antecedents, which are divided into customer-focused, seller-focused and dyadic antecedents. Furthermore, they are arguing that both firms and customers have incitements to interact with each other and benefits to gain from this interaction. Since the framework's antecedents are based on seller-customer relationships and do not include customer-to-customer relationships, several adaptations are necessary in order to better correspond to the more complex nature of OBCs.

3.7.1 Customer-focused antecedents

Since the users' contributions are essential to the content of OBC venues, the community members' perceived benefits of visiting/participating in OBCs are of great importance to consider. The benefits of joining an OBC are very similar to Palmatier's et al. (2006) proposed benefits of forming a relationship with a firm/brand, namely time saving, convenience, companionship and improved decision making. It is also important to take the switching costs, or the dependence on the seller, into consideration (Palmatier et al., 2006). For instance, there is a certain degree of dependence on the seller if a firm hosts a community venue. The community members' accessibility to participate in that community greatly depends on the seller's ability to provide a venue that is maintained and designed well enough. Furthermore, the established social status and friendships that a member has gained in a community could be viewed as a potential switching cost when considering leaving a community for another.

Adjei et al. (2010) argue that one of the main customer benefits of OBCs is reduced uncertainty levels. OBC venues are namely often used as sources of information about particular brands (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). Interaction among consumers and the spread of word-of-mouth offer customers a lot of valuable objective information about brands and their products and services. By taking part of such information, customers gain better opportunities for improved purchase decision-making and time saving (Adjei et al., 2010). Other important benefits of an OBC are its contributions to the community members' social identity (Woisetschläger et al., 2008; Dholakia et al., 2004). As discussed above, brand communities provide their members with a sense of belonging and an identifiable ethos (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). An OBC's contribution to the members' social identity is therefore also an important benefit to consider when adapting Palmatier's et al. (2006) framework to OBC contexts. The possibility to share stories, experiences and advices could also be perceived as member benefits of OBCs. As discussed above, inspiration and information concerning other uses of specific brands' products and services as well as grooming advices are considered to generate value within OBCs (Schau et al., 2009).

3.7.2 Consumer participation antecedents

When adapting Palmatier's et al. (2006) framework to OBC contexts, one need to emphasize the community members' contributions. As OBCs are social media applications where user-generated content is fundamental to the performance and development, the community members' investments of time and effort are of utter importance. Scholars have highlighted the consumers' participation as the most important factor of well-functioning OBCs (Madupu and Cooley, 2010; Dholakia et al., 2004).

Madupu and Cooley (2010) have developed a framework of consumer-participation antecedents where they mention a number of important influencing factors for consumer participation. Their framework consists of five different participation motives: information motive, social integration motive, social enhancement motive, self-discovering motive and entertainment motive. As discussed above, the possibility to obtain information is considered to be one of the main reasons of why consumers participate in OBCs (Dholakia et al., 2004) and the information need should therefore be seen as an important factor for consumer participation. When it comes to the information motive, consumers do both contribute with and gain information by participating in the OBC (Madupu and Cooley, 2010).

The social integration motive concerns the possibility to gain social support and new friends, which are considered to be important factors for consumer participation. Since all activities within a community emerge from a sense of trust and respect, the friendliness of other members is assumed to have positive effects on consumer participation (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). If no trust among the community members exists, the relationships will wither and the interest of participating will most likely be lost (Preece, 2000). The trust between the community owners and community members are of equal importance and is also believed to increase over time (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). Dholakia et al. (2004) even state that the beneficial social outcomes from participating in an OBC, such as social support, keeping contact with other people, friendship, etc., are the main reason for why many individuals join and participate in OBCs. Social integration could also strengthen the commitment to a brand, leaving the consumer more dependent on the OBC since this is where much of his/her social interaction takes place.

The social enhancement motive deals with the consumers' strive for acceptance and approval of others (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). Such social enhancement can be achieved by gaining acknowledgement from forum posts that have been perceived as helpful, wise, beneficial etc. by other members. Acknowledgements often provide the community members with status and recognition in the community and act as a confidence-booster (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). This participation motive is grounded in the desire of fame and recognition and is even considered to create value for some consumers (Hars and Ou, 2002). Dholakia et al. (2004) argue that an instrumental value is derived from accomplishing something in OBCs such as answering a question, solving a problem or influencing others. By making the community members feel that they are unique and contributing with important information, firms are able to increase the willingness to participate (Beenen et al., 2004).

Madupu and Cooley (2010) continue with the self-discovery motive, which highlights the fact that members of OBCs are able to find reinforcement for their values and beliefs, form new preferences and identify themselves with others in the community. This argument is also confirmed by Dholakia et al. (2004) who argue that self-discovery is a value-creator for consumers partici-

pating in OBCs. This egocentric view is also discussed in Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) who argue that psychological benefits such as feeling a sense of belonging affect the community members. Using OBCs in order to learn new things and improve one's skills within a certain area is also considered to be an antecedent for why customers visit OBCs (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). As discussed above, consumers can also use specific brands as a way of expressing themselves, stating their interests and values and making brands a central part of their social identity (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

The last motive mentioned by Madupu and Cooley (2010) is the entertainment motive. This motive refers to the pleasure and enjoyable activities that community members can participate in when visiting an OBC. This could be in the form of activities, contest or events that are hosted via the OBC. Entertainment is also discussed by Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) where hedonic benefits are mentioned as a factor for participation. They argue that members join communities not only for information seeking but also for their own enjoyment and entertainment purposes.

Research by Beenen et al. (2004) also found that a community could increase participation through specific goal setting together with the community members. Non-specific goals such as "do your best" generates lower participation rates than specified goals. This means that firms can increase the participation among its community members by setting specific and challenging goals for them to achieve. However, it is important to keep the goals at an achievable level, or it will have the opposite effect (Beenen et al., 2004).

3.7.3 Seller-focused antecedents

Just as Palmatier et al. (2006) describe, sellers need to invest in the relationships with their customers. All investments focused on building and strengthening the relationship between the firm and the customers, such as time, effort and other resources, should be taken into account before fostering an OBC. The input-factors that firms invest in when building relationships with customers is therefore considered to be highly important in OBC contexts as well where more or less the same factors presented by Palmatier et al. (2006) are applicable to the investments needed for OBCs. However, a distinct difference is that the firms also will have to invest in relationships among the customers, and more specifically, in the OBC venue and its elements e.g. functions and designs.

The seller expertise mentioned by Palmatier et al. (2006) can be linked to the firms' activities in the community, answering questions and showing their presence among the community members. However, expertise answers about a certain brand can also be derived from community members, or so-called devotees and insiders (Kozinets, 1999). In this way, community members help the firm to co-create value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b), which in turn leads to stronger customer relationships (McAlexander et al., 2003). As mentioned above, this is also dis-

cussed by Gruen et al. (2005) who argue that customer-to-customer expertise have positive effects on consumers' perception of the value in a firm's offering. Adjei et al. (2010) argue that respondents that are considered to be knowledgeable in the subject are reducing more uncertainty than other respondents. It could therefore be beneficial to promote the community members expertise so that everyone can grade the community members' answers. This could be done through a "helpfulness" rating so that information seekers are able to grade the responses of other members and also to see what grades they have gotten from others (Adjei et al., 2010).

3.7.4 Dyadic antecedents

Even though the motivational factors mentioned above do increase participation rates it is important to emphasize the quality of the information generated within OBCs. As discussed above, the generated information within OBCs is, by many information seekers, perceived to be uncertainty-reducing. According to Adjei et al. (2010), the online communication quality should therefore be seen as one of the most important factors of reducing customers' uncertainty. In order to decrease the uncertainty in an OBC, several factors such as relevance, timeliness, frequency and duration have to be considered. All of these can be linked to Palmatier's et al. (2006) dyadic antecedents where they mention communications, relationship duration, similarity, interaction and frequency as important to the communication.

In order for a relationship to evolve it needs communication (Palmatier et al., 2006). But it is not just important to make people contribute by writing in a community, the answers need to contain relevant and meaningful information in terms of being useful to other consumers' decision making (Adjei et al., 2010). This is similar to the communication factor mentioned by Palmatier et al. (2006) where information quality, amount and frequency are pointed out as antecedents for building relationships.

Furthermore, Adjei et al. (2010) claim that the timeliness of information exchanges also is an important factor, where the time between a posted question and a posted reply is crucial. If a quick reply is posted, the uncertainty of the information seeker decreases and the beliefs of the firm are compressed to a more resolved opinion. Next to relevance and timeliness is the frequency of information. The frequency of information can be explained by the number of responses or posts the information seeker gets. The more replies, the greater uncertainty reduction (Adjei et al., 2010). The last factor mentioned by Adjei et al. (2010) is the duration of the interaction. They argue that uncertainty is reduced more over time and it will thereby be beneficial to encourage longer encounters in order to decrease uncertainty. By considering these factors of uncertainty reduction firms can actively work for the uncertainty reduction of their brands' products/services and thereby increase profits in terms of instant purchase intentions (Adjei et al., 2010).

3.8 Customer-focused relational mediators in OBC contexts

The customer-focused relational mediators mentioned in Palmatier et al. (2006) are practically the same mediators that affect OBCs. In order for an OBC to function properly and create desirable outcomes there has to be a certain level of trust, relationship satisfaction, relationship quality and commitment from all parts involved. However, the levels of engagement and involvement should also be considered as important relational mediators in OBC contexts.

3.9 Moderators in OBC contexts

The moderators mentioned by Palmatier et al. (2006) become somewhat irrelevant in OBC contexts. The importance of the relationship always is considered to be high and therefore should be seen as a relational exchange rather than transactional. Nevertheless, one can find similarities to OBCs when looking at individual versus organizational relationships. Palmatier et al. (2006) argue that the beneficial outcomes will be greater if customers are in contact with individuals within the firm rather than the organization itself. This indicates that firms should be representing themselves with the names of individuals instead of participating under the name of the organization. Furthermore, the DART-model should be considered as an important moderator for OBCs due to its importance for co-creation environments.

3.10 OBC outcomes

In order to get a deeper understanding of the complex nature of OBCs, one also has to grasp what kind of outcomes they generate. Even though this thesis' ambition is to provide a framework of how to facilitate the fostering of OBCs, a brief explanation of the OBC outcomes is necessary in order to complete an integrative perspective. In Palmatier's et al. (2006) framework they mention five types of outcomes divided into customer-focused, seller-focused and dyadic. A similar separation can also be done in OBC contexts as they basically generate the same kind of outcomes.

3.10.1 Customer-focused outcomes

As discussed above, the customer interaction within OBCs is believed to increase the expectation of continuity and loyalty among customers (Gruen et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2003). Since the OBCs mostly include members whom Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) call "active loyalists", most of the interaction within the OBC is considered as positive word-of-mouth. For instance, the discussions within OBCs often relate to positive experiences with the brand and must therefore also be treated as an environment where positive word-of-mouth is generated (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

3.10.2 Seller-focused outcomes

As for firms, there is one main outcome discussed by Palmatier et al. (2006): the seller objective performance. This should be considered as a desirable outcome for OBCs as well since more loyal customers generate increased sales as well as an increased share of wallet for the firm. An aspect not mentioned in Palmatier's et al. (2006) framework is however, the data generated in the OBC. By using ethnographic research methods, i.e. netnography, as a complement to market analysis and focus groups, a firm can gain a better understanding of their customers' needs and their online behaviour.

3.10.3 Dyadic outcomes

The dyadic outcomes of an OBC can also be seen as co-operation and Füller et al. (2008) suggest that if a firm can capture the consumers idea-generating abilities they are able to gain considerable OBC outcomes. Palmatier et al. (2006) cites the work of Anderson and Naurus (1990) as well as Morgan and Hunt (1994), which proves that trust and commitment are essential for co-operation to take place.

3.11 An integrated OBC framework

As shown below, the authors have synthesized the above discussed theories into an integrated OBC framework. Several adjustments have been made to Palmatier's et al. (2006) framework in order for it to become relevant for OBC contexts. The tentative framework is still in line with a black box model where certain inputs lead to beneficial outcomes. The authors have chosen to place *Co-creation of value* in the centre of the framework. This is supposed to emphasize the important co-creation environment as the centre of well-functioning OBCs. Building the right environment and providing the right tools for co-creation is what the fostering of OBCs is all about. As one can see, co-creation of value is based around Schau's et al. (2009) brand community practices that create value, i.e. the kind of activity that firms would want to stimulate within the OBC. The environment where value is co-created is further influenced by four key factors: *Core components of OBCs*, *Community engagement*, *Moderators* and *Relational mediators*.

The core components of OBCs concern the OBC's level of consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions as well as shared moral responsibility. As discussed above, these core components must be present within the OBC in order for it to be maintained (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Community engagement concerns the characteristics of the individuals within the community and the level of their engagement. The amounts of individuals who are willing to participate within the community highly affect the level of co-created value (Kozinets, 1999). It is important to understand their behaviour in order to strategically target the right groups for the right purposes in order to increase participation. Moderators are factors that affect the co-

creation environment. As discussed above, the level of dialogue, access, risk assessment and transparency are the building blocks of “experience environments” (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a; 2004b). OBCs are interactive venues and the tone of the interaction clearly affects the co-creation environment. An individual contra an organizational approach (Palmatier et al., 2006) should also be seen as a moderator that affects the co-creation environment. Relational mediators concern how the customers’ perceive their relationship to the brand and the brand’s credibility. The levels of the relationships’ commitment, involvement, trust, satisfaction and quality will have to be high in order to stimulate a co-creation environment. All of these four aspects are interrelated and will have to be considered when trying to foster a co-creation environment and a well-functioning OBC.

There are a number of key antecedents that determine the four key factors discussed above. First of all, the *Customer-focused antecedents* of joining or visiting an OBC are obviously very essential. If the OBC does not offer any customer benefits, no one would visit the venue. Understanding why your customer are interested in the OBC is therefore of utter importance. As discussed above, an OBC is also highly dependent on its members’ level of participation, whereas *Consumer participation antecedents* have been added. A customer needs some kind of incentives to be willing to participate and contribute other than the benefits mentioned in the customer-focused antecedents. The *Seller-focused antecedents* concern the firms’ investments of time, money and effort in the OBC. Finally, *Dyadic antecedents* concern the quality of content within the OBC. The information will have to be relevant and of good quality in order to make customers interested.

If a well-functioning co-creation environment can be reached, a number of beneficial OBC outcomes will be gained, namely: *Customer-focused outcomes*, *Seller-focused outcomes* and *Dyadic outcomes*. In order for the OBC to be successful, the co-creation processes should generate the proposed outputs. The outcomes have just been briefly explained in this thesis but they are of course the overall objectives when fostering OBCs.

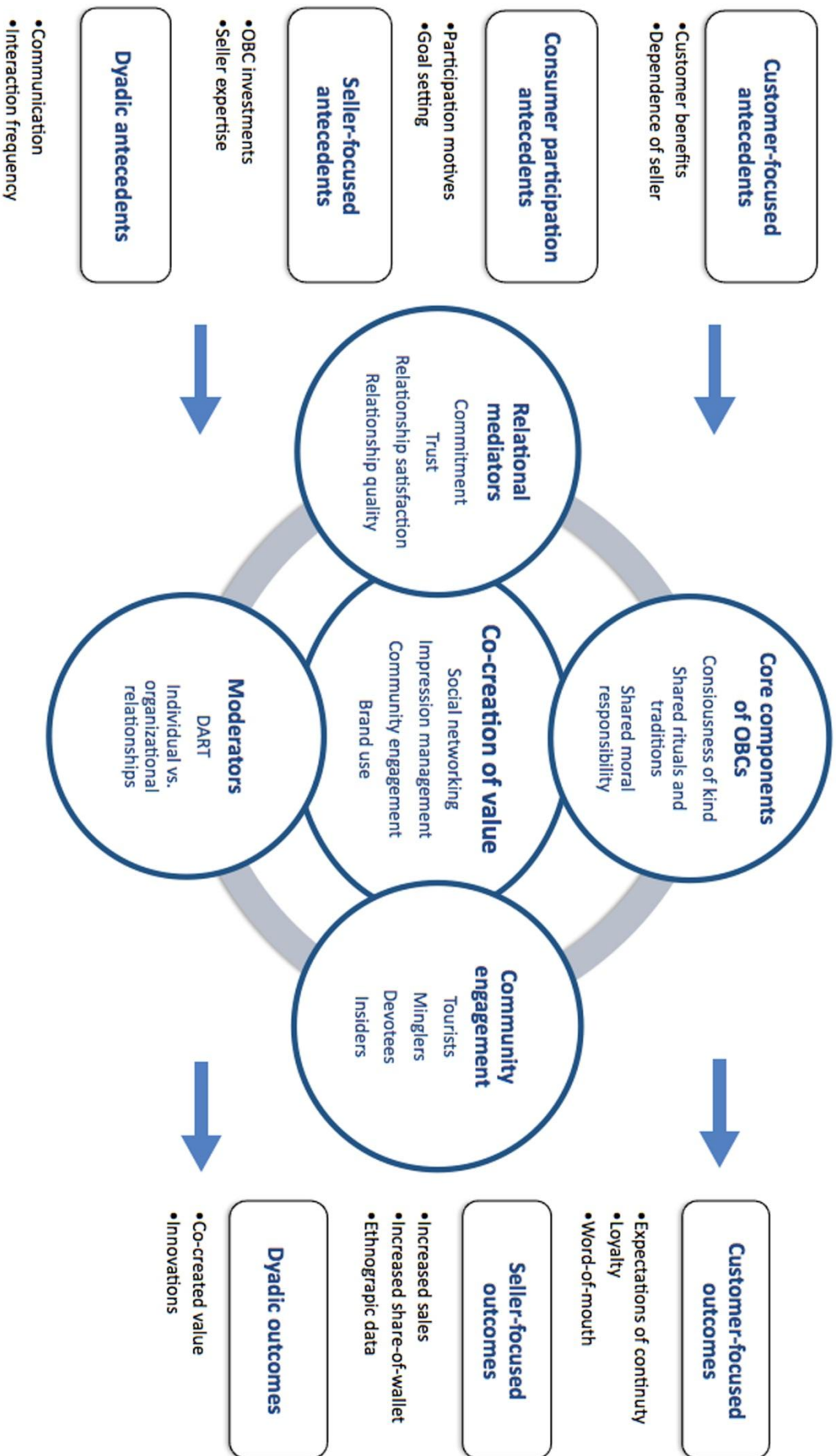


Figure 3 – An integrated OBC framework

4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS/ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the authors will present the empirical findings and the analysis of these findings. By synthesizing relevant literature, the theoretical framework resulted in an integrated OBC framework. The tentative framework provides an integrated perspective of the most fundamental aspects of OBCs and gives the reader a good understanding of what kind of environmental factors that facilitate the fostering of OBCs. However, the tentative framework offers few insights of how this knowledge could be used in a managerial perspective. A major problem with today's brand community-related literature is that very few practically-oriented theories have been put under pressure or tested through empirical studies. The tentative framework therefore needs to be scrutinized by empirical studies in order to find out whether it needs to be further adapted and complemented, or if certain aspects are more relevant than others. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, the authors have chosen to carry out this scrutinization in a triangulated way. This will be done by covering the practitioners', the marketing experts' and the consumers' views and experiences from OBCs. All of the conducted interviews are based on questions concerning the theoretical framework and the tentative OBC framework. The survey's questions are exclusively based on the customer-focused parts of OBCs such as the customer-focused antecedents and the consumer participation antecedents.

4.1 Gaining insights about your consumer' online behaviour

Barrett, The Fan Club:

"Insights are of major importance if you're going to do anything emotional. Understanding how your consumers act and behave. Gain a deep understanding of how this fan-base is affected and how they behave. Learn from these insights and take their 'fanship' to the next level. Such behaviour is different from brand to brand."

A deep understanding of your consumers and their needs, online behaviour, participation motives, interests and how they are affected seems to be of absolute importance when fostering OBCs. What can be learned from insights about the consumers and how can this knowledge be used in order to increase their engagement to the brand? A good knowledge of what benefits the consumers seek when visiting OBCs and what motivates them to participate helps a firm to build a strategy for attracting consumers as well as keeping them active. The following two sections will therefore further investigate the customer-focused antecedents and the consumer participation antecedents by analyzing the empirical findings.

4.1.1 Consumer benefits

According to the authors' conducted survey, 54% of the respondents answered that they *Often* use Internet as a source for purchase decision-making. 46% of the respondents answered *Sometimes* and none of the respondents answered *Never*. The main source for purchase decision-making was *Information at the manufacturers'/brands' websites/homepages* (76%). The second and third most influential sources were *Price comparison websites* (75%) and *Other individuals' opinions of the product/service within discussion forums* (61%). One of the marketing experts, Kajrup, is in line with these findings and argues that today's word-of-mouth environment has progressed into a Web 2.0 era where the web has become a valuable source for information and recommendations, i.e. electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM). This new environment has therefore changed the ways of how customers are making their purchase decisions. He further discusses that since this new E-WOM environment has been around for a couple of years, people are getting used to browsing the Internet for this kind of information:

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

"That's the way of doing it today. If you are going to purchase something that is perceived as something new or something that you aren't used to, for instance a new type of product. Then, this kind of consumer-generated recommendations is what you'll be looking for."

Kajrup is arguing that taking part of consumer-generated recommendations through the web is nowadays considered to be a natural way of how to make purchase decisions. Since none of the surveyed consumers said that they *Never* use Internet as a source for purchase decision-making, there is no doubt that E-WOM is of great influence. These findings are in line with Adjei's et al. (2010) theories of reducing uncertainty levels. In other words, one can easily stress that there is a need for OBCs that contain information about the brand and its products/services as well as information generated by users.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of why an individual decide to become a community member or a "fan" of a brand, the authors decided to ask questions about if and why the respondents were "fans" of a specific brand's Facebook page. Questions concerning brand-specific Facebook pages were used due to the fact that, at the moment, these are the most common forms of OBCs. Websites/microsites that are completely run by firms or members will still have to be considered as relatively rare phenomena and questions concerning such websites would be too unfamiliar to most of the surveyed respondents. Then the findings from the survey would be far from capturing peoples' opinions about fan-based websites. Questions concerning Facebook fan-pages will therefore be used as indicators of why individuals join fan-based websites. As many as 53% of the surveyed respondents answered that they were "fans" of a brand-specific Facebook page. On the question why they chose to become "fans" of such Facebook pages, most of them

answered *Because I want to take part of information that concerns the brand and its products/services* (50%). The second and third most answered reasons were *Because I identify myself with the brand* (29%) and *In order to show other people what kind of person I am* (27%). The authors do believe that members of OBCs have the same perceptions of their fan-ship and that many similarities can be drawn between why members join a brand-specific Facebook fan-page and an OBC.

Barrett, The Fan Club:

“When you ask people why they become fans at Facebook pages, many people answer because they want to get special offers from the particular brand. But just as many answer that being a fan to this brand says something about me, so it’s not just about getting special offers. It’s a bit like ‘I define myself by stating that I am a fan of this brand’ and that’s exactly what we’re trying to reach.”

As one can see, Barrett’s discussion is in line with the second and third most answered reasons of why the surveyed respondents become fans of brand-specific Facebook fan-pages. Barrett highlights the fact that fan clubs and OBCs are ways of defining one’s social identity and that it is one of the major benefits of being involved in such communities. These are benefits that also have been widely discussed within the brand community-related literature (Dholakia et al., 2004; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Woisetschläger et al., 2008). The tentative framework is thereby in line with the empirical findings within this specific area.

Taking part of information that concerns the brand and its products/services seem to be the most important benefit of Facebook fan-pages. Further, the surveyed consumers also indicated that extended information about the brands’ products and services would make an OBC venue more attractive (61%). The information motive was emphasized by Madupu and Cooley (2010). The marketing practitioners did also discuss this aspect:

Adler, Panduro Hobby:

“We try to offer them something more from times to times. Like today, when I posted information on the blog regarding our new cupcake products. That’s information that no one else know of.”

Exclusive information and a VIP-feeling could thereby be one way of making the OBC more attractive. However, Duffy argues that relevant information that concerns the targeted customers’ needs are of most importance when firms are involved in social media, otherwise the information will not be considered as valuable. Duffy develops his discussion when he talks about facilitating the customers’ peripheral needs:

Duffy, The Duffy Agency:

“Content should facilitate a need. But if you’re trying to create content in a very competitive category then you’re probably going to have a tough time trying to find something new to say. Take running shoes: Nike makes a product that protects your feet while you run. So they could facilitate customers by providing content around how their soles absorb shock or how to make sure your running shoe fits right or perhaps how to find a retailer. Those are the needs most directly associated with the shoe. But they looked at the peripheral needs that runners have and saw which ones were directly associated to the Nike brand. The result is Nike+. It facilitates needs that are peripheral to the shoe but spot-on for the brand like the need to compete, to maintain motivation, to see improvement, etc. For runners that’s real value. And its relevant value: Highly relevant to the target. Highly relevant to the brand.”

Duffy encourages firms to think one step further and indentify the customers’ peripheral needs, why are the customers really buying your products and what do they associate to the brand? Duffy’s thoughts are thereby similar to means-end chain (MEC) theory which concerns the motivations that drives the consumers’ buying behaviour (Gutman, 1982). MEC can be described as a hierarchical cognitive structure in which “...the motivations to consume derive from cognitive linkages between the attributes of the product, the consequences of consumption and the corresponding instrumentality of achieving an individual’s values” (Mort and Rose, 2006, pp.221). Such abstract outcomes are different from the mere functional or problem-solving ability of the specific product/service and are therefore similar to what Duffy refers to as peripheral needs. Online platforms such as OBCs are excellent ways of facilitating such peripheral needs that go beyond the direct functionality of the offered products/services. Community members and customers log in to OBCs because they want to take part of such information regarding the brand and the use of the brand (Adjei et al., 2010; Schau et al., 2009). It is therefore important that this information is facilitating their needs by being of good quality, relevant and useful. Firms must therefore have a deep understanding of how to generate such information, an aspect that should be emphasized in the final framework of how to foster OBCs. By saying “highly relevant to the brand”, Duffy also implies that OBCs could be used as a brand-building tool to further reflect the brand’s identity and core values (Kapferer, 2008).

On the question of what a good firm-based website or a brand-specific community should offer in order to become more attractive, the surveyed respondents answered *Possibilities to take part of other customers’ opinions* (68%) and *Inspiration and suggestion of how to use the brand’s products/services* (68%) as the most valuable functions. These are benefits that were emphasized by both Braendshöi at IKEA Sweden and Adler at Panduro Hobby.

Adler, Panduro Hobby:

"It's because of the extra value it provides to our customers. Then, obviously, we want to sell our products, but with an extra value. And the generated inspiration is a major part of this extra value."

The interviewed practitioners are of the opinion that OBCs and similar platforms provide extra value to their offerings. IKEA's and Panduro Hobby's OBCs offer extra value mainly through inspiration and are therefore in line with what the surveyed consumers answered. Further, Schau et al. (2009) discusses brand use practices as a way for the community members to create extra value, the interviewees however indicate that such value-creating practices also can be conducted by the firm. Seller-focused engagement/participation is therefore of great importance and will be discussed in depth later in this chapter. Other aspects/functions that the surveyed consumers considered as attractive for an OBC venue was *Support (chat, forums and support information)* (65%), *Contests/activities* (39%), *Forums* (38%) and *Possibilities for more personal contact with the firm's employees* (36%).

Panduro Hobby is further of the belief that friendship and a sense of belonging are important to their OBC. As mentioned above, friendship and a sense of belonging are considered as two very important elements of brand communities (Dholakia et al., 2004; Madupu and Cooley, 2010; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) Adler and Larsson develop their thoughts as they talk about Panduro Hobby's community environment:

Adler, Panduro Hobby:

"It's a very friendly environment. It's the kind of environment where they encourage and appreciate each other. Somebody might say 'Oh, that's nicely done' or something like that."

Larsson, Panduro Hobby:

"It feels like they are like a small family, that they kind of belong together."

Appreciation encourages individuals to contribute and the sense of belongings becomes stronger. These environmental factors can certainly affect the user-generated contributions.

To conclude, all of the above mentioned benefits should be considered by the firms as attractive for their consumers. Understanding the customers' perceived benefits of visiting an OBC could increase the visiting rates and thereby also increase the level of engagement over time (Kozinets, 1999). The firm's ability to actually influence the content is something that seldom is discussed within today's brand community-related literature. This is however an important aspect of how

to strategically fostering OBCs and should be added to this thesis' final OBC framework. Otherwise, the empirical findings further validated the tentative framework.

4.1.2 Participation motives

Making people visit a community can be seen as a first step of how to foster an OBC. The next step is to generate participation. Gaining community members and trigger them to contribute are fundamental aspects of OBC-fostering. It is therefore important to understand what motivates the consumers to interact in these types of venues. The five participation motives mentioned by Madupu and Cooley (2010) are believed to trigger consumer participation. Can they however be validated by the empirical findings? The information motive has already been discussed above and is therefore already considered as validated.

The surveyed consumers were asked what motives that trigger them to participate in brand-specific/brand-sponsored websites and communities. The most answered motive was *Being able to influence the brand and its products/services* (59%). The will to influence could be described as a combination of Madupu's and Cooley's (2010) social enhancement- and the self-discovery motive. Firstly, the consumer is able to gain acknowledgements from others by contributing with good ideas and interesting thoughts. Secondly, the consumer is able to find reinforcement for his/her values and ideas by sharing his/her opinions. Woisetschläger's et al. (2008) findings from studying consumer participation antecedents also validated that the degree of influence is an important motive for participation. As many as 73% of the surveyed respondents claim that they are willing to contribute with ideas and feedback if they knew that it could influence their favourite brand's future product developments. In other words, the consumers are most likely willing to contribute if the firms are willing to listen to them. Kajrup also believes that being able to influence triggers participation, which further strengthen this motive:

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

"I think it's probably because of narcissism, I really think so. In many cases I think it's about being seen and getting the opportunity to influence. Sometimes it might not be because of narcissism itself, to be seen during 15 seconds of fame, but rather getting the opportunity to actually influence. To be able to actually say something that means something."

The second most answered motive was *Being able to get a reward (prices, discounts etc.)* (54%). Rewards and contests will be discussed later in this chapter under 4.4.6 *Stimulating participation*. This motive is supported by the marketing practitioners, but they also claim that the rewards do not necessarily have to be of a monetary nature. When Barrett was asked why she thinks individuals join OBCs, she argues that even though monetary rewards are perceived as valuable, the self-discovering motive (Madupu and Cooley, 2010) is of equal importance:

Barrett, *The Fan Club*:

“Firstly, I think it’s because of the opportunity to get special offers. To be able to get information or discounts, etc. Then I think defining your social identity is equally important. To be able to state that I’m the kind of individual that belongs here. The geekiness that we see today might have emerged from this. Being a member of this community says something about me and I don’t think that you should forget that. I think that these are probably the major triggers. And then, obviously, to locate similar people, a fellowship.”

Other frequently mentioned motives among the surveyed respondents were *Being able to help other consumers that might have problems regarding the brand’s products/services* (51%) and *Being able make my voice heard concerning a specific question/issue* (50%). Being able to help others clearly has a close connection to the core component of moral responsibility, discussed by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001). It also concerns Madupu’s and Cooley’s (2010) social enhancement- and social integration motive, where recognition, gaining a greater status and friendship within the community is discussed. Kajrup briefly discussed the importance of being able to make your voice heard above and the next quote by Braendshöi further explain its importance when he was asked to describe his thoughts of why people join IKEA’s OBC Livet Hemma:

Braendshöi, *IKEA*:

“I believe it’s because of their genuine interest for IKEA actually... and home furnishing of course. I also think appreciation is one of the main reasons why people use and contribute to social media channels. They want to be seen, heard and appreciated for what they’ve done and written. To be able to build and reinforce their image, as well as being able to meet and interact with other similar people. This is also some of the essentials of Livet Hemma.”

Making your voice heard often originates from a desire to be seen and appreciated and this is absolutely in line with the social enhancement motive (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). Braendshöi’s usage of words further implies that this is a motive that is of major importance for consumers’ participation. His quote also indicates that IKEA is well aware of many of the participation motives, knowledge that probably has contributed to the success of Livet Hemma.

The social outcomes from participating in OBCs such as getting to know new friends have previously been widely believed to be one of the main reasons for why individuals join OBCs (Dholakia et al., 2004). However, the authors’ findings show that only 9% of the surveyed respondents answered *Being able to meet new individuals similar to myself* when being asked about participation motives. This finding is quite surprising since many scholars are emphasizing the social integration motive when it comes to brand communities (Kozinets, 1999; Madupu and Cooley, 2010; Schau et al., 2009). Even though the survey results are not generalizable, these in-

dications are very interesting. Adler was asked if she thought that Panduro Hobby's community members valued social networking and getting opportunities to find new likeminded individuals:

Adler, Panduro Hobby:

"Due to the fact that they seldom comment, I don't think so. Therefore, I don't think that they visit our website to socialize with other people. I guess they are visiting the website because they want to publish stuff that they've done and to take a look at what other people have done."

Adler's quote seems to be in line with the survey's findings, further emphasizing that their community members are more interested in gaining inspiration and to be seen and appreciated. But on the other hand, Duffy is of a different belief about social networking within OBCs:

Duffy, The Duffy Agency:

"I think that it's hardwired into us as human beings. I think we're really social animals and we like to interact with likeminded people. That's what the Internet is leveraging and magnifying: human nature. Just scatter a bunch of people in the middle of nowhere in little huts. What are they going to do? They are all going to find their way to the middle and sit around a campfire together. It's just what we do. Except, like everything else with the Internet, we can amplify the effect: Not only can I go out and mingle with people, I can mingle with a very, very well defined group of people, like, say, skydivers in Sweden who like jazz. And that's cool: I can learn things, I feel good about myself because I interact with other people that share my common interest, all those kinds of things..."

Duffy points out the social integration motive as highly important. The differences in the empirical findings are difficult to explain and the social integration motive might not be as important as previously thought. Instead, the social enhancement motive seems to be of greater importance when it comes to triggering participation. However, since Madupu and Cooley (2010) claim that only 10% of community members can be described as interactive members this is where we might find our answer. The interactive members are probably the ones that also value social networking since they are the ones that are most active. This survey's results indicate a similar finding, that approximately 10% could be described as interactive members. Social networking therefore gets important since it triggers the important 10% of interactive members to participate. Since these "insiders" positively affect other members' participation levels within the community (Kozinets, 1999) firms should consider social networking and the social integration motive as important aspects of OBC-fostering.

4.2 Understanding the scope of OBC-related investments

Palmatier et al. (2006) discuss seller-focused investments where the amount of time, effort, spending and resources aimed at building stronger customer relationships is in focus. Such investments are also important in OBC contexts but they are seldom described in brand community-related literature. This section will therefore emphasize the importance of understanding the scope of OBC-related investments.

4.2.1 Firm-focused engagement/involvement

The firms' contributions to the OBC's content could be viewed as seller-focused investments within OBCs. Theories of community engagement and brand community practices that create value provided by Kozinets (1999) and Schau et al. (2009) seem to either ignore or underestimate the importance of seller-focused involvement in OBCs. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a; 2004b) discuss co-creation and that firms need to provide the right tools for developing co-creation environments. They further argue that in order to build "experience environments" there has to be a certain level of interaction between the firm and the consumers (DART), but they are not discussing the firm's part in the co-creation process itself. If firms are left out of the co-creation process, it is no longer a co-creation environment since the consumers create all the value by themselves. The empirical findings above suggest that firms can, and definitely should, create value by contributing with valuable and relevant content, something that has not been discussed within the brand community-related literature. OBCs do not only need to be managed and maintained, they also seem to demand a lot of engagement from the firm. When interviewing Larsson and Adler, it was obvious that Panduro Hobby's engagement was of great importance in order to keep their OBC active.

Larsson, Panduro Hobby:

"Engagement is absolutely the most important aspect. Just like Helene said earlier, our engagement is of utter importance. We can offer them much because we possess a lot of knowledge and information. At the same time, we gain a lot of knowledge from the customers as well and customers can learn from each other. It's always going to come down to building relationships and that's important."

Adler, Panduro Hobby:

"I have seen examples of firms that started these kinds of things where they weren't producing any content by themselves and then it doesn't really take off. And it's getting more interesting if we can act too which, of course, also attracts more people."

Even though one of the main objectives is to foster customer involvement, few OBCs stay active without content provided by the firm and its personnel. Literature of OBC seldom discusses the firm's contributions even though they clearly are of great importance. Braendshöi is, for instance, discussing the learnings from the predecessor "IKEA TV" community and the new "blogcommunity" Livet Hemma:

Braendshöi, IKEA:

"Communities started by consumers are often driven by their high level of engagement and interest. In the best of worlds a completely user-generated brand community would be fantastic, from both a brand building as well as resource consuming perspective. However, for us we have learnt from both practice and research that our customers want more of IKEA from IKEA. Only user-generated content is not interesting enough. This has given us the possibility to create a community where we set and steer the tone, subject and level, thus securing our brand development in this channel."

When interviewing Larsson, Adler and Braendshöi it became apparent that firms are putting a lot of effort into publishing valuable and interesting content. This was one of the most essential formulas for the success of both IKEA's and Panduro Hobby's OBCs. To create an OBC only from user-generated content is hard to make successful for a commercial actor on the market. Kajrup also shares Braendshöi's thoughts about firm-focused engagement. He stresses that the content must be relevant and well thought about in order to become valuable for the consumers.

Kajrup, The Concept Factory

"I think that the firm should be active in the community in some way, as long as it's relevant. It's important that it doesn't feel like it's constrained, where people feel that this is only written because they were expected to write something. You have to contribute with quality. In the start-up phase of a community you definitely should participate as a company and work hard to engage members in discussions and to attract new members. Sometimes you have to throw some wood into the fire and give them some fuel and sometimes you need to put out the sparks that pops up outside the main fire."

The firm behind the OBC have to steer its OBC members, motivating them to participate by providing interesting topics that people can have an opinion about and discuss. High levels of user-generated content are seldom achieved if firms take on passive roles in the OBC and active participation demands engagement and involvement from the firm and its personnel. Kozinets (1999) argues that the more consumption knowledge an individual learn, the more engaged he/she will become within the community. Firms should therefore make sure that OBCs include relevant content where the consumers can learn more about the brand, thus fostering customer

engagement and involvement. By contributing with content, firms could also try to embed brand stories within the information that reinforce the seven pieces of code discussed by Hanlon (2006).

To conclude, the firms' roles within OBCs seem to have been underestimated within the brand community-related literature. This is therefore also where one of the major gaps has been identified. The empirical findings clearly suggest that firms also should be involved in the OBC's value creation. As pointed out above, firm-focused engagement and commitment to the OBC is therefore necessary. In order to fully understand the scope of OBC-related investments, insights about the value of firm-focused contributions must be gained. Hence, this aspect needs to be integrated in the tentative framework.

4.2.2 Resources/OBC personnel

The frequently used argument that social media provides “advertising at very low costs” is by all means misleading. It actually seems to take a lot of resources to foster well-functioning OBCs.

Barrett, The Fan Club:

“I believe that companies are struggling with the personnel question. You probably need a few employees to handle all this, as well as managers that find this interesting. You need resources to succeed with this because it's not free. You can't think that you can do this very cheap on the Internet and it will be great. You need a person on your payroll who works with this and if we, as an agency, were to take this assignment it would be very expensive.”

The statement above clearly shows that both personnel- and other resource issues often are underestimated when it comes to OBCs and social media marketing. OBCs are up and running 24/7 and thereby require a lot of resources and personnel, a fact that firms will have to be prepared for:

Braendshöi, IKEA:

“This is something new that requires completely new ways of working and much more resources. Normal marketing projects or advertising campaigns have a starting and an ending point, but when working with social media channels like Livet Hemma you have no end, instead working around the clock with content production, moderating, surveillance etc. And that's the difficult part, finding the resources and the effective ways of working with this new channel. [...] I believe brand communities in general require more resources than most people realize. And to be credible and successful you need persons within your own organization, knowing the business well. Since this phenomenon is quite new I believe many companies lack these specific roles

and persons, creating a need for agencies and content providers to fill in supporting this channel as well.”

Barrett agrees to Braendshöi’s discussion about the fact that firms cannot work in campaign periods anymore and further implies that fostering an OBC demands engagement at all times. The interviewed practitioners agree that fostering a community demand specific roles and positions to fully function and both Panduro Hobby and IKEA have dedicated certain positions for their OBC operations. This is however yet another aspect that barely has been discussed within the brand community-related literature.

Assigning specific positions to your OBC operations are further considered as highly important by the interviewed marketing experts. Duffy suggests that firms should have a position dedicated for so-called content editors in order to keep the information relevant and of high quality:

Duffy, The Duffy Agency:

“I don’t know exactly how marketing departments will need to change to adapt to all of this. But I suspect they will need to hire content editors. I don’t see them needing an army of writers. Just like a lot of newspaper and magazines operate today: they have editors on staff and then the bulk of the stories are freelanced out.”

The content editor, a person who can come up with interesting stories, making them relevant and publish them within the OBC is a specific role that firms need to consider when fostering OBCs. This role can be linked to Palmatier’s et al. (2006) antecedents of seller expertise, where the content editor must possess great brand- and consumption knowledge as well as instil authority in order to become credible. Duffy and Kajrup are also describing other OBC-related positions:

Duffy, The Duffy Agency:

“I think that the social media maven and the community manager are going to be two important positions. A maven is someone that can go out on Twitter or Facebook etc. and they know the etiquette: how to behave in the different platforms. They know what other people respond to and they know how to push the right buttons to get the right people to follow them, or like them, or react. It’s not as easy as it sounds actually. If you find someone who can do it well they can really ramp-up followership quickly given the right direction concerning the brand and its marketing objectives. That’s a maven. Then you need one more thing. You need someone who can actually be looking at the content strategy, making sure that the mavens are keeping on script. In other words, making sure that they are not writing about stuff that is off brand, basically. And that’s a community manager.”

Kajrup, The Concept Factory

“Someone has to be present at all times, monitoring. Firms that want to foster OBCs need some sort of moderator and someone that can document the forum events. What we can see now is that new roles are constantly being formed to be able to handle social media and this is partially because we as companies haven’t yet found the best practices of how to use this media. A role that have started to pop up more frequently is the curator who has the purpose of monitoring conversations and find where people are talking about your brand, products, services etc.”

Duffy mentions the community maven as an important new role within OBCs and social media marketing. The maven can be compared with Kozinets’ (1999) insiders: individuals with much knowledge about the brand and qualities for social networking and relationship building. A maven needs to become a social authority and firms should therefore consider employing insiders if possible. Similarities can also be drawn to the curator mentioned by Kajrup, whose task is to find and monitor conversations about the firm/brand. The main difference is that a maven interacts with these persons and tries to transfer the conversations to the OBC. Duffy also mentions a community manager whose main task is to make sure that the employees follow the strategy behind the community; a position that Barrett also found highly important.

These findings suggest that assigning positions where individuals are working specifically with OBCs is highly important in order to succeed. Furthermore, the marketing practitioners’ discussions clearly prove that fostering OBCs demand more resources, personnel and changes in the marketing department than most firms expect. This is an aspect that seldom has been discussed within the brand community-related literature and has thereby neither been included in the author’s tentative framework. These aspects should however clearly be added to the final OBC framework since the importance of hiring the right personnel and devote the right amount of time and resources clearly seem to be more important than what previous theory shows.

4.3 Developing a content strategy

As discussed in 3.7.4 *Dyadic antecedents*, dyadic antecedents concern the quality of content. According to Palmatier et al. (2006), the level of the quality of information exchanged between the firm and the customer is of great importance when building customer relationships. The quality of the content is also directly connected to the earlier discussed customer benefits of reduced uncertainty and extended information (Adjei et al., 2010; Madupu and Cooley, 2010). Duffy’s idea about facilitating needs/peripheral needs also heavily relies on qualitative and relevant content. Further, one of the objectives with OBCs is to build “experience environments” (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b) where the accumulation of consumption experiences is believed to create loyalty to the brand (McAlexander et al., 2004). In other words, OBCs must contain content that facilitates such interactive experiences and that is what content strategies are all about.

It is therefore in both the firms' and the customers' interest to keep the information within OBCs as relevant as possible in order for it to become valuable. Since this study is focusing on a managerial perspective of OBCs, this section will try to describe how firms should act in order to increase the quality of their OBC's content, i.e. developing a content strategy.

A content strategy could further be viewed as a prerequisite for interaction. OBCs need to contain content that is interesting enough to talk about before a dialogue can occur. As one will notice, the quality of content and the communication approach discussed in 4.4.4 *How to act within OBCs* are therefore highly interrelated. Hence, the communication approach concerns the DART-model developed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a) and thereby how to interact and maintain a good dialogue with the consumers. Moreover, relevant content is highly important in order to build credibility. High levels of credibility are established by communicating relevant information and having an open and honest dialogue with the community members. As one can see, the DART-model and content strategy are highly interrelated and must be in symbiosis with each other.

When developing a content strategy for OBCs, firms must consider how this high quality content should be generated. A thorough analysis will provide the firm with insights about what kind of content their consumers identify themselves with. By doing so, firms can stress their similarities to their consumers by providing content that they recognize and can relate to, thus strengthening customer relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006). Furthermore, Duffy argues that firms will have to change the traditional ways of working in order to develop successful content strategies. In contrast to traditional advertising, brand-specific information will be perceived as valuable if it touches the customers' needs and interests and if it gives them useful information.

Duffy, The Duffy Agency:

"From 2011 on it's going to be about content strategy. I think you're going to hear a lot more about that in the coming months. Content strategy is going to be everything with regard to websites. And that's hard for ad agencies and their clients to get used to because they aren't set up for this kind of business, which is actually publishing. Inbound marketing means web sites are evolving into more dynamic media. More like a dynamic magazine than a static brochure. That makes us publishers. And that's a new skill that everyone's scrambling to learn. Information on websites has to become more relevant to the user. It's a hard thing, even in our company. That means talking about what the user is interested in, not necessarily what you are interested in telling them. Traditional media has always competed on the basis of the relevance of content to a specific target readership. Today it is also becoming one of the most powerful things a brand has to compete with online. On a tactical level, I think providing content consistently that is both relevant and on-brand is the next challenge in our industry."

Duffy is thereby suggesting that firms must start to act as publishers within social media, providing content that is highly relevant and interesting to the readers. Firms are not used to provide quality content with a journalistic approach, but it will be necessary when adopting a content strategy. Braendshöi further explains the importance of relevant and interesting content within IKEA's OBC Livet Hemma:

Braendshöi, IKEA:

“Through experience and research we know that our customers and fans want to know more about home furnishing in general and IKEA in particular. Our challenge is therefore to create content and communicate this in a way we think and know will find its way to the consumer mind. We don't have a roadmap for this, instead it is a continuously sometime crooked process of creating as relevant content and communication as possible.”

Braendshöi's quote supports Duffy's discussion about the challenge of providing relevant content. As discussed above in 4.2.2 *Resources/OBC personnel*, Duffy suggests that firms should consider employing so-called content editors in order to better correspond to the publishing profession. However, since firms' have a commercial interest, the information within a firm-hosted OBC can be difficult for consumers to trust. Braendshöi is discussing how to balance a commercial agenda contra being credible:

Braendshöi, IKEA:

“We can't communicate commercial messages in this channel. Then we would instantly lose all credibility. We have chosen to separate commercial communication from Livet Hemma. It has its own life and is supposed to communicate in its own way, building and adding to our brand through that way of communicating. But of course, there is still a commercial agenda in the background, since we are a commercial actor on the market. For instance, if we launch a couch campaign we will talk about couches on Livet Hemma as well, but in a way adapted to the Livet Hemma channel. In addition and in between we communicate messages tailor-made for Livet Hemma, making the total impression relevant and credible for the consumer.”

Braendshöi's statement indicates that the firm must show the consumers that the brand and the people behind the brand are authorities within the specific area of subject, someone they can trust. Separating commercial communication from the OBC is therefore going to be necessary in order to build credibility. As mentioned in the problem formulation, social media marketing is all about pull-marketing and not “command and control-“/push-marketing. Steer the OBC's agenda in a clever way and try to avoid content with a commercial tone. This is a major aspect of to generate high quality content, where the information provided by the firm is considered as more trustworthy if few commercial messages are provided. Kajrup argue that in order to provide the

customer benefits of improved purchase decision-making, the information within OBCs has to be credible, which are in line with Adjei's et al. (2010) theories:

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

"It all builds credibility. If I say something in a community and don't get an honest answer, then why should I buy something from them? Building credibility is crucial for a community, especially if you see to the buying process, because we often base our purchase decisions on what our friends tell us. Recommendations are crucial and communities can definitely create that."

Quality of content is a dyadic antecedent since both firms and consumers contribute with content within OBCs. The firms' contributions are obviously controllable but what about when it comes to the consumers' contributions? Should the quality of their contributions be controlled as well? An issue emerges of how to reasonably control the quality of the consumers' contributions without losing credibility. Since the importance of high quality content already has been established, it is of the firms' interest to try to steer their consumers to contribute with such content. The consumers' contributions are needed in order to create durable relations, frequent interaction and co-creation (Palmatier et al., 2006; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b). Thus, a conflict of being in control or delegating value-creation to the consumers emerges. Varying customer-generated content within the OBC is noticed by Adler who considers the quality of the performed pottering itself as unimportant:

Adler, Panduro Hobby:

"The quality of the posts within the blog is very varied. Some are extremely good, very advanced and some are sharing much more simple creations. If the contributions are too advanced we don't get any new members because it takes too long to become that good, the beginners don't want to be compared with them. It's the mix that is interesting since it creates an added value."

Adler does not consider varying customer-generated content as a problem but is rather emphasizing that Panduro Hobby's OBC is a venue for everyone who is interested in pottering, regardless of their level of expertise. Adler's statement further implies that varying quality of the pottering does not necessary mean a lower quality of content. To have a balanced level of complexity is therefore an important aspect to consider, anyone should be able to participate within the OBC. This can however be very difficult to balance. Extremely dedicated brand enthusiasts might find it hard to accept that certain individuals, who they do not want to identify themselves with, are members of the community. Since firms generally want to encourage anyone that is interested in the brand to become a member, they should try to define the consciousness of kind (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) already from the start and thereby establishing a suitable level for the community.

Kajrup argues that firms should have a certain level of control and try to steer the consumers' conversations in order to keep the communications at a good level. However, editing consumers' comments or posts without any specific reason would be extremely harmful for the OBC's credibility. He shares his thoughts about how to reasonably control the information within an OBC.

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

"You have to try to direct the consumers' conversations. Then you have to be clear and do it in the right way so you don't step on anyone's toes. Clear policies will help you control the communication within your OBC."

Kajrup indicated that it is up to the firm to make sure that the discussions are maintained at a reasonable and desirable level, thus defining the OBC's "code" which is an important part of the third core component; shared moral responsibility (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). It would therefore be wise to have certain rules and policies within the OBC so that the discussions do not go totally out of control and become offensive, racist etc.

To conclude, there are many aspects to consider when developing a content strategy for an OBC. Contributing with relevant and interesting content as well as steering the customers' discussions are of most importance for generating high quality content. Relevance and quality will build credibility and give the impression that the persons behind the brand are social authorities that can be trusted within a certain area of expertise. In order for customers to participate in, or even visit, an OBC, credible and relevant content must be provided. These findings are mostly in line with the tentative model, but the need for a more profound content strategy where firms act more like credible publishers need to be further emphasized in the final framework.

4.4 OBC-strategy

In the light of the empirical findings and the tentative framework, the authors will make an attempt to identify key aspects of an OBC-strategy. Given the described conditions above, a firm should be in a preferable position to foster an OBC. This preferable position is reached when a firm has:

- Gained insights about the consumers' online behaviour, interests, perceived benefits and participation motives
- Gained an understanding of the scope of OBC-related investments
- Developed a content strategy of how to generate relevant quality content

The next step is to define the scope of the community. Should it be brand-focused like the brand communities that Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) describe or should it be focused around an interest, an issue or consumption activities, which is more in line with what McWilliam (2000) and Kozi-

nets (1999) describe. The firm should also consider whether they should cooperate and co-brand with other firms in order to better cover the scope of their OBC. The next issue is where to locate the OBC venue and how to design it. Additionally, the firms must have an understanding of how to act within the OBC, thus creating a good dialogue with the consumers. Further, the firm should consider aspects of how to populate the OBC venue. The firm should also be prepared for how to stimulate and motivate the customers to participate. Finally, the firm should plan whom to target within the OBC and if it is possible to “employ” the insiders and the devotees as Kozinets (1999) indicated. The aspects mentioned above will be further explained within this section, thus establishing guidelines of how to foster OBCs.

To begin with, Duffy had a very interesting discussion about four general key words of social media strategies. It is however of the authors’ belief that these key words easily can be transferred to an OBC-strategy. Duffy said that The Duffy Agency always tries to embed the following aspects within their social media campaigns:

Duffy, The Duffy Agency:

*“When creating a web asset, we work with four key words: **facilitate**, **cooperate**, **delegate** and **propagate**. The first, probably the most important word is **facilitate**. Help your target with something related to your brand. Facilitation can be in your core area, and that’s where a lot of people go right away. Nike sells shoes so they might be expected to facilitate you by telling you about shoes. The problem with that is that all the other shoe companies are there too. It’s hard to differentiate your brand if you are facilitating the same need. I think there is a huge opportunity now to look into peripheral needs to facilitate. The next word is **delegation**, and that’s really using the power of the Internet. Find a way to delegate the heavy lifting back to the users in terms of adding value to the site. Today it’s crazy not to try to do this. Like YouTube. It’s a very simple program but we, the users, put all the value into it. If you can get the delegation part to work it’s huge. That leads to **propagation**. You want to make sure that site followers multiply themselves. You need to build it in from the start, to make sure that spreading content, awareness and subscriptions is easy and incentivised. Propagation is really delegation in another sense, so you don’t have to go around knocking on doors to get people to join your site. Find a way to make visitors want to spread the news about your site that means they need to get something out of the transaction. The last one is **cooperation**. In the past companies were like little islands, they didn’t like to cooperate with others and certainly not with other competitors. Nowadays, the name of the game is to find partners and cooperate. Don’t try to do everything by yourself and you’ll get a lot further. Mercedes + Swatch = Smart. LG + Prada = Prada Phone. Nike + iPod = Nike+. In each case competition was certainly an option to cooperation. Nike could have created their own MP3 player easily, but didn’t. They gained more from the co-*

operation with Apple. Cooperation goes against the grain of traditional business thinking but that's exactly what makes it such an effective tactic now."

Duffy was then asked if cooperation also should consider the customers:

"I don't think most companies think in terms of "cooperating" with customers. In the traditional way of marketing it was more about manipulation than cooperation. But yes, today that's where it is at: cooperating with your customers. How do you cooperate with them then? Become a better listener and give them better solutions to their needs than your competitor provides. Give the customer a real voice inside your organization. That means maintaining a dialogue with them one way or another."

This quote by Duffy does to a wide extent summarize many of the key aspects of an OBC-strategy. The importance of facilitating, delegating, propagating and cooperating has, in various ways, been brought up for discussion in almost every conducted interview. As discussed above, OBCs basically comes down to facilitating needs whether it is to inspire others, gain recognition, influence the brand, define one's social identity or socialize among like-minded individuals. Facilitation could also be in the form of contributing with relevant information and interesting topics that the community members can discuss and have an opinion about. The delegation part is what keeps the OBC running, i.e. the co-creation environment (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b) where consumers can share brand-stories, information, experiences and inspiration (Hanlon, 2006; McAlexander et al., 2003; Schau et al., 2009). The propagation part also concerns delegation but in another perspective. Propagating and populating the OBC will have to be done in innovative and clever ways. Making the consumers propagate the community themselves is probably the most preferable way of doing it, especially in the start-up phase where quickly populating the OBC is of great importance. Then it all comes down to cooperation, foremost with the customers by establishing good customer relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006). As discussed above, the OBC should be built around functions and content that the consumers desire, otherwise they might as well develop an own OBC. Cooperation is also essential in order to create a dialogue and a co-creation environment (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b). Finally, cooperating with other brands can be a way of expanding the scope of the community and making it more interesting. The combination of these four key words makes up a balanced scorecard of OBC performance. Other than following the described guidelines below, firms should therefore constantly review and conduct follow-ups of their OBC progress with these four key words in mind.

4.4.1 Brand-focus vs. need-focus

One aspect that is important to bear in mind when developing an OBC-strategy is the scope of the community. Should it focus on the brand or the consumers' peripheral needs and interests as discussed by Duffy and McWilliam (2000)? Should you try to limit the community to only include

one specific brand? The customary assumption within brand community-related literature is that a brand community should focus on one specific brand (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). However, many of the interviewees claim that it is very difficult to foster an OBC around only a brand, especially for smaller firms that either do not possess as powerful brands or offer enough complex products/services. Many of the commonly used examples within the literature concern powerful brands such as Harley Davidson, Saab and Nike that either has very complex products/services or very well articulated brand values. So, what about firms with less powerful brands or less complex products/services? Kajrup is sharing his thoughts about brand-focused vs. need-focused OBCs:

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

“Either you create a brand community where the brand is in focus, which demands a very strong brand, or you create a community that focus on something else. The latter is probably the way to go for smaller firms that aren’t market leaders. It won’t be a brand community in that sense but it will be a community where the brand is somehow present. Generally, I think that you should start looking at the product you offer, the kind of product. I usually use bread as an example. For instance, if I’m a baker that produces bread, well then this community should be about bread. Because that’s what my business is all about. And if I happen to own the brand Pågen, then the brand comes in second place. Talk about bread in general in order to naturally come down to ‘well, we at Pågen have bread that looks like this and that’ and then you can segregate the community based on different kinds of bread and create a more clear connection to the brand. I think that’s the easiest way of doing it if you’re not one of the big famous brands.”

Kajrup implies that firms should focus on fostering OBCs where the firm act as more of a sponsor of the community. Duffy has a similar view:

Duffy, The Duffy Agency:

“Communities will not be created around brands, they will be created around needs and common interests and other things that communities are built around. They can be sponsored by brands for sure, but I don’t look at them as brand communities. I look at them as communities built around consumer needs. Look at the Nike+ community. It’s about running, competing and motivation. They have been kind enough to provide that for me. And all they ask in return is that I see their logo all the time while I’m on their website. I don’t even have to buy their shoes. That’s value. I’d gladly pay for what Nike+ gives me for free. Perhaps that’s the test of a good website: your target should be willing to pay for the content you provide even if you never charge them.”

IKEA and Panduro Hobby seem to have followed a need-focus rather than a brand-focus, which is in line with what Kajrup and Duffy discussed above. Braendshøi was asked to give his thoughts about the scope of IKEA's website Livet Hemma:

Braendshøi, IKEA:

"Our focus is naturally on IKEA but we can't only talk about IKEA to become credible. And if we're not credible, we won't be able to attract enough people who are interested in home furnishing because there is more than just IKEA out there. But it is an issue of copyrights and laws. If you're an independent journalist for a newspaper you can describe the world much less restrictive than if you're a commercial company like us. The community members however don't have similar limitations even though we steer them through the content and messages we are communicating."

The representatives from Panduro Hobby were also asked how to define the scope of an OBC and if they consider it important that their community is limited to Panduro Hobby's products:

Adler, Panduro Hobby:

"Talking about pottering is absolutely the best. Pottering in general, absolutely. Then again, we're here to sell products and that's obviously what we want to do but we are absolutely not... we've got a very high level of tolerance. They are welcome to talk about any idea where they have done something with products that they have bought somewhere else. We probably offer similar or corresponding products so that's just beneficial for us as some of the readers probably are going to get inspired and buy those products from us. You got to find something that becomes the common denominator, in our case it's about pottering and crafting. Something that you're able to socialize around."

To find a common interest that consumers are able to socialize around seems to be highly important for the marketing practitioners. However, this common denominator may not exclusively concern just a specific brand. It might therefore be wise to focus on a specific consumption activity (Kozinets, 1999) or a general interest like pottering or home furnishing (McWilliam, 2000). These empirical findings suggest that most firms cannot just be focusing on their brands in order to become credible, interesting and relevant. Instead, firms should focus on interests such as home furnishing or pottering, where the users have more to socialize around than just the brand. Try to open up the community and be tolerant, otherwise the community will not be able to fully cover the consumers' peripheral needs. In fact, brand communities might not even be a suitable name to describe such communities, brand sponsored communities or Kozinets' (1999) virtual communities of consumption, could be more appropriate terms. Need-focus is an aspect that has not been emphasized enough within today's brand community-related literature.

Stronger brands with complex products are more likely to be able to generate sufficient interest in the brand itself (McWilliam, 2000), thus creating opportunities for brand-focused OBCs. But when considering this section's findings it becomes obvious that in most cases, a need-focus is more appropriate. Guidelines for an OBC-strategy and the final framework should thereby emphasize the benefits of fostering need-focused OBCs as well.

4.4.2 Cooperation

Cooperating with other actors was discussed by Duffy above and has proven to be very efficient in certain cases (Nike and Apple, etc.). Overall, the interviewees are positive towards cooperating with other actors, especially in areas that firms do not cover themselves. The scope of the OBC could by cooperation be extended to better correspond to the consumers' peripheral needs. Cooperation in this sense has barely been discussed within brand community literature, but the empirical findings suggest that it could be beneficial.

Braendshöi, IKEA:

"We are covering most parts of home furnishing ourselves and don't have the need for cooperation with other competitors. We are however cooperating with another company for our 'buy and sell' service. We also have a close contact with home furnishing bloggers among others, and let them contribute on Livet Hemma from time to time in certain topics."

IKEA is a well-known brand on the Swedish market that covers most parts of home furnishing by themselves. However, they have chosen to cooperate with another firm for Livet Hemma's "buy and sell" service. In order to make the content more interesting and relevant, bloggers specialized in home furnishing have been invited to contribute on Livet Hemma. These are also examples of how to cooperate within OBCs. Even if the firm is able to cover most of the consumers' needs by themselves, there could still be other ways of cooperating with outside firms/specialists in order to make the venue more interesting and valuable.

Barrett, The Fan Club:

"I believe that it's very wise to cooperate with other firms as long as it fills a function that covers the customers' needs. It's however very difficult for people at a lower level to create these collaborations and this makes it really hard to implement. But I believe that we're going to see more of this in the future."

The statement above indicates that cooperation can be beneficial as long as the other firm adds a dimension and extra value to the community. Kajrup is further emphasizing the importance of choosing the right partner:

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

“The trick is to find the right partner to cooperate with. I mean, it would have been weird to have an electric car brand cooperating with Statoil. If two firms wants to co-brand it is good if the brands are somewhat equivalent so that just one brand doesn’t take off.”

To conclude, co-branding or cooperating with outside firms/specialists should thereby be considered when fostering OBCs, especially if the communities are need-focused. Co-branding could also bring an extra dimension to the brand’s identity. For instance, Nike could probably easily have developed the technical devices for their Nike+ community by themselves. But by cooperating with Apple, it gave them a more “high-tech” and trendy approach. Besides, the community thereby attracted Apple consumers as well. To conclude, cooperating with other firms can generate benefits for both the firms and the consumers. If the partner is relevant, consumers can gain more information, offers, etc. in their area of interest. The firms, on the other hand, gain increased activity since the scope of the OBC is extended to cover a wider area, which also can attract new consumers. This is yet another strategic guideline that seldom is discussed within today’s brand community-related literature.

4.4.3 Design and location of venue

Another aspect that is barely discussed within the brand community-related literature is the design and location of the OBC venue. Whether to host the OBC venue on a proprietary website/microsite or using an existing social media channel such as Facebook is an important strategic decision when fostering OBCs. In order to investigate whether there are any functions or designs that are important to include in an OBC, both the marketing practitioners and the consumers were asked questions regarding the design of the OBC venue. Within the empirical findings, the interviewees discussed interesting OBC venue-designs as well as where to locate your OBC. Questions considering the location of the venue, such as the different locations’ positive and negative characteristics, were also discussed. To start with, Braendshöi discusses what he perceives as important OBC functions:

Braendshöi, IKEA:

“It has to be open, simple and transparent. Then there are the usual parts, you should be able to ‘like’, share, comment other posts and have an own profile. How much information you want in the profiles depends on the purpose of the community but you should be able to have the possibility to write something about yourself.”

The “like” function is considered as an easy way to start involving consumers and make them contribute. It is a rather easy and effortless contribution for a consumer but can be perceived as very meaningful for the one who published the information. “Liking” becomes a gesture of ap-

preciation, thus stimulating the social enhancement motive (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). This is thereby a tactic of making the non-interactive members, at least slightly, involved in the OBC. Just by clicking a “like”-button the consumers are able to participate in the OBC and demonstrate their community engagement. As for Barrett, the spread through other media and a good technical platform were the most important functionalities:

Barrett, The Fan Club:

“A good technical platform and possibilities for sharing is extremely important. When I comment in a community I also want a possibility to spread it in other channels. You have to be prepared to invest in that kind of functions. Then you need to have transparency and self-censorship so that you don’t try to control it. The next generation of communities probably have to be available in phones. That’s the kind of platform that needs to be created since people want to be active anytime, anywhere. We are going to be more connected through our phones and that’s where you’ll have to be.”

Functions that make it possible to share your OBC-posts through other popular social media channels are ways of letting the users propagate the OBC. Auto-posting should therefore be integrated in the community in order to create an interest around the venue. If users feel proud of something they have done or posted, they probably want to share these efforts in other social media channels in order for the information to reach as many of their friends as possible. With an auto-post function the firms can facilitate that need. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a) mentioned access as one of the building blocks for co-creation. Both Barrett and Kajrup also mentioned access and availability as important functions. Due to today’s emergence of smart phones, being accessible through phones seems to be a highly important functionality. An individual might be in a situation where he/she does not have access to a computer but still want to take part of an OBC’s recommendations.

Creating a fan-page on Facebook is the most common way of fostering OBCs. The main differences from hosting OBC venues at Facebook contra a proprietary website/microsite was discussed by the marketing practitioners:

Braendshöi, IKEA:

“Well, Facebook has practically taken the whole market and you have to take that into account. It’s so huge that you have to be there, but Facebook has its limitations and we wanted to shape the venue in our way. We try to keep connections between the other social media tools such as Facebook open. For instance, you can log on to our community via Facebook, write something and get it posted on your Facebook page. I don’t think that Facebook hinders you from having your own community as long as you can create something that is interesting and relevant.”

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

“Right now, the biggest campfire is Facebook, and it is really starting to look like a gigantic bon-fire that is gathering everything and everyone. I believe that we’re going to be gathering ourselves in smaller groups again, where we have campfires and can have more niched discussions. I don’t believe that Facebook will grow much more and I believe that there’s a risk that Facebook won’t be this dominant in the future. There are definitely room for others and there will be movements.”

Hosting the OBC venue at Facebook clearly has its limitations and risks. The possibilities to personally design the OBC become drastically compromised when hosting the venue at Facebook. Besides, Braendshöi did mention that Facebook has certain restrictions when firms use their platform for arranging contests etc. When further reading Facebook’s promotion guidelines one notices that there indeed are a lot of rules and policies that need to be followed (Facebook, 2011b). Further, Kajrup thinks that it is important to be active on Facebook but he also hints that it could be a risk as your OBC becomes too dependent on Facebook’s future popularity, investing too much in a Facebook venue could therefore be considered as risky. However, the simplicity and the fact that people already are naturally logged in at major social networking sites such as Facebook, makes these venues very attractive to use.

In summary, determining where to locate your OBC venue should be very well thought about before fostering an OBC. A decision of whether to host the OBC in a proprietary website/microsite or in other social media channels such as Facebook should be based on the firm’s amount of resources. Facebook can be seen as a low-cost alternative with limited functionality. Worth noting is that only 4% of the surveyed respondents (the least influential source) answered *Information from brand-specific Facebook pages* when they were asked about their most commonly used Internet sources for making improved purchase decisions. This can be compared to the 61% of the surveyed consumers who indicated that they use other peoples’ opinions in forums as a source for such information. This clearly shows that forums, which are more similar to OBCs, are a more commonly used source of information than Facebook. Hence, a proprietary venue can be considered to generate more value compared to a Facebook page. Creating an OBC that makes auto-posting possible and is easy to access are however the most important functions for an OBC venue. The access aspect can, as previously mentioned, be connected to the building blocks (DART) of co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). But otherwise, these are aspects that need to be complemented in the tentative framework.

4.4.4 How to act within OBCs

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a) argue that in order to build “experience environments” firms need to understand the basics of interaction between the firm and its consumers. Thus the build-

ing blocks of interaction are of great importance for co-creation of value. In order to find out how important these aspects are when fostering OBCs, the marketing practitioners were asked questions concerning how to act within OBCs.

As discussed earlier in *1.2.1 Practical problem*, control is a complex issue for firms involved in OBCs and social media marketing. The OBC users are however only able to co-create value if the firm is willing to provide the necessary information and tools (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). Below, Barrett shares her thoughts about this issue:

Barrett, The Fan Club

“That’s the dilemma, firms want to control the information and we live in a world where that’s impossible. You have to deal with this very transparent and open and answer the comments instead of trying to control them by erasing them.”

Barrett is thereby supporting the theories of co-creation, arguing that being open and transparent is necessary. A firm should answer questions and critique in a transparent and honest way in order to create possibilities for an open dialogue within the OBC. But how should the firm act and present themselves? Rudqvist draws parallels to how you act privately:

Rudqvist, Springplanet:

“I always say this ‘what have your mother taught you?’ You should be honest, you shouldn’t lie, you shouldn’t act as someone you aren’t and you shouldn’t try to present yourself as someone you aren’t. It’s actually that simple. I have talked to companies that have asked me whether they should write about how good their products are in forums and give reviews as anonymous persons just to boost sales. But no one would stand outside a toy store pretending to be a customer with a new toy and talking about how great it is. When you are on the Internet those barriers sometimes seem to disappear.”

Rudqvist thereby indicates that it is easy to look through devious behaviour. An open and honest environment thereby strengthens the firms’ credibility so that relationships and trust can be built. Another aspect that is related to Rudqvist’s discussion concerns personality. Being personal within your OBC and to emphasize the individuals behind the brand was an aspect that all of the interviewees perceived as highly important. It was also shown in the survey that 36% of the respondents wanted the possibility to establish a more personal contact with the firm’s employees. In IKEA’s case, being more personal was actually one of the main objectives with Livet Hemma:

Braendshöi, IKEA:

“IKEA is well-known with well-known values and a very good reputation etc. Still research has shown us that we sometimes score lower in some human values as “personal”, “warm” etc. In general not surprising to a retailer in a “low-price-costume” with focus on mechanical information and mechanical selling. To offer a more personal and human approach towards our customers was therefore one of the major objectives when starting Livet Hemma.”

Personality is considered to be of major importance when building customer relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006). It is however difficult for firms to add a personal dimension if they conduct a lot of mechanical selling or sell their products through retailers or the Internet. By fostering an OBC, firms get the opportunity to become more personal and strengthening their customer relationships. According to Adler, a personal atmosphere brings yet another dimension to the OBC:

Adler, Panduro Hobby:

“Our involvement in the community is very personal. I wouldn’t say that I know much about our members but as an example, when I was ill they wrote ‘get well’ and comments like that. It’s more personal and it creates a more familiar, intimate feeling around the brand. We want to create that feeling, that we are close to the customers and I think that our target group really appreciate that.”

Highlighting the persons behind the brand has helped Panduro Hobby to create a more familiar atmosphere, which also can strengthen the OBC’s sense of belonging (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Rudqvist was also discussing the personality aspect, to have a human presence and the difficulties of creating good customer relationships with unknown senders:

Rudqvist, Springplanet:

“With a more personal approach you can build relations with your customers. You build relations with people and many firms struggle with this. Many don’t even present the person that’s behind the company-blog and it becomes extremely difficult to create a personal bond when the sender is unknown. If you just would dare to take the step to be a bit more personal you have very much to gain.”

By emphasizing the individuals behind the brand, consumers get the chance of forming a relationship with them, hence strengthening the relationship with the brand as well. Duffy also recognizes the importance of personality and he is using an employee at Intel whose got a lot of followers and is commonly known as “Intel-Eric” as an example:

Duffy, The Duffy Agency:

“At the end of the day, people don’t want to hear from brands or companies, they want to hear from peers. That doesn’t mean companies or brands are out of the conversation. What are companies and brands? People. And many of these people are, in fact, peers to the customer. Intel-Eric is a good example. He was a programmer near the bottom of the Intel food chain. But he had a very dedicated following online. He worked on a really small part of the Intel computer chip. For people who understand and are interested in that really small part of the chip (the OEMs who buy them) Intel-Eric is the guy you want to hear from, know and discuss things with. It’s always about peer-to-peer, not about company to buyer.”

Duffy’s statement suggests that the peers answering questions not only should be presented as persons, they need to be relevant persons as well. Hence, the firm must ensure that the right persons with proper knowledge are addressing questions and discussions within their expertise; hence parallels can once again be drawn to Palmatier’s et al. (2006) discussion about seller expertise. Furthermore, the interviewees indicate that the consumers want to know more about the firms from the inside, how things work. Being personal is therefore also a lot about opening up and inviting the customers to the environment and culture within the firm.

Adler, Panduro Hobby:

“I write about the company as well, showing them the office and how we work. It’s of course about branding and we show them how we work, how it looks around here. I really think they enjoy it and it also creates curiosity and makes them visit the OBC more frequently.”

Taking the customers behind the scenes and introducing them to the employees and the workplace is not only beneficial for the personality aspect, it also provides an extra value to the customers which give them incitements to visit the OBC more often.

In conclusion, the empirical findings suggest that participating and having an open, transparent dialogue with one’s consumers are of great importance for the interaction within the OBC. It is also argued that firms should act more personal and introduce the individuals behind the brand where a person with relevant expertise should deal with discussions within his/her area. In the theoretical framework, openness and transparency were emphasized in the DART-model (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a) while personality (individuals vs. organizational relationships) was emphasized in the meta-analytic framework of relational mediators (Palmatier et al., 2006). These aspects are thereby already included in the tentative framework as moderators for co-creation. The DART-model was therefore validated by the empirical findings but it is of the authors’ belief that the personality aspect should be further emphasized when fostering OBCs. The

interviewees' discussions have provided some insights and tactics of how to present the firm within OBCs, aspects that should be highlighted in the final OBC framework.

4.4.5 Populating the OBC

Duffy, The Duffy Agency:

"It's like having a party with four people inside. Others will wander by, look through the window and say 'there's no people' and just walk. Even if the music is good and the beer is good, they'll still walk. You need the time to build critical mass in these programmes organically to have them succeed."

Another important aspect of an OBC-strategy is how to populate the community with people. It does not matter how great the OBC is or how interesting content it provides if it is not populated with people. A deserted OBC will not generate any valuable outcomes for the firm. Enticing members will have to be done quickly and there must be a developed strategy for this purpose.

Barrett, The Fan Club:

"It's important to quickly disseminate, making sure that the website is populated. You have to make sure that the website contains activity directly. You're going to have to gather enough people so that it doesn't look deserted. At this stage you're also going to have to be pretty active yourself, publishing information. Providing content that is interesting, something that the visitors can take part of and comment. Being able to get the discussions going very quickly and directing traffic from your other media channels such as a well-attended homepage or a store. You might also arrange a contest."

Enticing members to your OBC is clearly perceived as a difficult task among the marketing experts. Duffy has already shared his view of how to propagate the venue cleverly (by describing the key word propagation) but Kajrup gives some other advices of how to do it:

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

"The first thing that I normally say in that case is: Listen and locate where your current customers are today. They might already have created a group or a fan-page at Facebook. Well, fine. Join that group because then you don't need to create an own community. If you locate a bunch of smaller groups, minor campfires here and there, then you create a larger campfire in order to attract the smaller ones. Participate more in the existing group, take on a greater role. You can also develop a parallel venue where you get the opportunity to add something more. Just tell the existing group that 'well, now we have been participating here and listening to you. But guess what, we have started a new thing over here. While we were listening, you said that

you wanted this and that. That's exactly what we have done now. We have started a new website where we have added all of those things you've wished for'. Or something like that. Then you smoothly transfer those people into your own community through that channel. But then you really need to offer an extra value at that venue"

Populating the OBC is clearly of such great importance that it should be complemented to the final OBC framework. Establishing a member-base requires patience and clever tactics. Just as Duffy and Barrett discuss, numbers is what counts within OBCs. Directing traffic from other channels must be done in a clever and suitable way. Firms have to make sure that the venue provides value to the users from the start, which also means that the firm themselves, once again, also must provide valuable content. Listen to the customers and identify what they wish for in order to provide better arguments for why they should join your OBC.

4.4.6 Stimulating participation

The consumer participation motives have already been discussed in the beginning of this chapter. But how should a firm act in order to trigger these participation motives? Are there certain buttons to push, something that is generally applicable? Madupu and Cooley (2010) offer theories about participation motives, but how should firms act in order to stimulate these motives? Tactics of how to stimulate participation are missing in the brand community-related literature and this is an aspect that needs to be added. Since consumer participation is fundamental to the OBC, the interviewees were asked questions concerning how to stimulate and motivate participation. Braendshöi is first out to share his experiences from Livet Hemma:

Braendshöi, IKEA:

"In order to trigger things... other than publishing content that is interesting enough to comment, 'like' etc. But to trigger the customers to contribute themselves we continuously arrange contests. That is an effective way of triggering activity."

Alder also mentioned that arranging contests is a way of increasing participation and attracting new bloggers. Contests thereby seem to be a common way of motivating consumers to participate within OBCs. The conducted survey also indicated that the possibility to get a reward is considered as a major motivator (54%). Contests can be a good, fun and easy way of stimulating participation, but they must be arranged in a clever way. When considering Gruen et al. (2005) and McAlexander et al. (2003) studies of the effects of C2C exchanges and consumption experiences, a contest should be arranged in a way where the consumers are encouraged to write about their own experiences with the brand. In order to win, they should at least be encouraged to share information that could be beneficial to others. Value is thereby created in two ways: Firstly, because the participant him/herself gains a greater social status within the community,

thus stimulating both the social integration- and the social enhancement motive (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). Secondly, because the same individual also provides other members with valuable objective information for improved decision-making (Adjei et al., 2010), thus stimulating the information motive as well. Kajrup and Barrett are however emphasizing that firms also can use other tactics than contests in order to stimulate their community members' need for rewards. They argue that rewards do not have to be physical or monetary; they can also be of an emotional nature. Kajrup's discussion is in line with Madupu's and Cooley's (2010) social enhancement motive and the community members' strive for acknowledgement:

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

"It's as easy as that, we want a reward for something that we've done. But it doesn't really have to be anything special. In many cases, when you're looking at this type of media, people think it's enough that their names are visible. To be able to answer the question 'what do you think?' in a way where the customer can be seen with their names and show that 'I have an opinion about something in a context that I think is worth something' is a sufficient reward. The most important aspect concerning rewards is that the reward has to be provided quickly. The whole gaming industry is build around getting rewards quickly, something that triggers you even more. Those tendencies are a trend that is getting more and more common within marketing and social media."

Barrett also adds that a sense of belonging (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2010) could be perceived as a sufficient reward for some individuals. Dholakia et al. (2004) even state that the social integration motive is the main reason for why people join and participate within OBCs. It could therefore be wise to enhance the sense of belonging by, for instance, using certain symbols or rituals that are exclusive for the community members.

Further, Adler was asked whether Panduro Hobby offered any other sources of inspiration in order to increase the participation levels within their OBC:

Adler, Panduro Hobby:

"It's the inspiration leaflets that I was talking about that we are offering frequently through our stores and company website. We think that's a good way for beginners to learn more about a hobby. Like for instance concreting, a thing that we've been writing a lot about. You should be able to get guidance even though you've never tired it before."

Providing content that makes it easy to start being a part of the community could also help to increase the participation levels. Sometimes the firms might have to be a part of the social networking practices described by Schau et al. (2009) by introducing the customers to the community and its activities. This is an excellent way for the firm to contribute with relevant quality

content that could be used by the customers for self-discovering (Madupu and Cooley, 2010) and to gradually learn more about the consumption activity, thus increasing their community engagement (Kozinets, 1999).

As discussed above, being able to influence the brand and its products/services was the most commonly answered motive (59%) to participate among the surveyed consumers. Further, as many as 73% of the respondents claim that they are willing to contribute with ideas and feedback if they knew that it could influence their favourite brand's future product developments. Kajrup is of the belief that this motive is of great importance and should be stimulated:

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

"You should try to make the visitors feel that they are influencing something, that they for instance can influence the product range or CSR and environmental issues. But especially to make them think and feel that they are important and that there is a possibility to influence. Because then there is suddenly a reason for them to share their opinions about something, it actually matters. In that case, I don't have an opinion about anything just for my own sake. I share my opinions because I know that it actually can result in something better."

Kajrup's thoughts are in line with Beenen's et al. (2004) theory that when the community members feel unique and that they are contributing with important information, their willingness to participate is increased. Cooperating with the community members and making them feel that they are influencing the brand is therefore very important.

Badging is further believed to be a community practice that creates value (Schau et al., 2009) by stimulating the social enhancement motive (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). When being asked about triggering participation, Duffy discussed badges and how badging affects an individual:

Duffy, The Duffy Agency:

"I think badging is huge, we try incorporate badging into everything. It's such a powerful motivator. We don't know why businesses aren't using it more. Research shows that in many cases people will actually work for that stupid little badge harder than they will for money. It's weird. Native Americans with all those feathers in their headdress. The different feathers meant something. Same with boy scouts and girl scouts with all those little merit badges. The military with all those medals... it's all badging. Visualizing accomplishment has always been a powerful way to motivate people to do things they might not otherwise do. And if the military knows one thing really well it's how to motivate people to do things they don't want to do, like die for instance."

Duffy was then asked whether badges could act as a way of increasing one's status within the community, i.e. for social enchantment:

“Yes, I mean I am assuming that if you're on my parachuting website, for example, then you're there because you're into the subject matter and you also think that I'm an authority to some degree. Therefore, if I give you a badge there's a meaning to it. And there is status with it — IF certain laws are obeyed, like the law of scarcity. If these badges are given out too easily, it means nothing. The badge actually has to be hard to get and you actually have to do something very concrete to get it. And there must be a public platform for it to be openly displayed. Otherwise it doesn't mean anything, like with any badge. So that's something that you have to bear in mind when considering a badging program.”

Badging has a lot of connections to Beenen's et al. (2004) theories of goal-setting within communities, something that has been proven to increase the level of participation. Specified goals at an achievable level were also found to be more effective than unspecified goals (Beenen et al., 2004). Just as Duffy says, there has to be very concretely defined rules of how to get a badge. But it is not just important to have goals at achievable levels, it should not be too easy to get a badge either. If it is too easy to obtain a badge it will not affect the members' social status within the community, thus not stimulating the social enchantment motive (Madupu and Cooley, 2010).

Barrett also had some interesting points about how to trigger participation within an OBC. She is using Nikon as an example of a firm that successfully triggered their customers to share their experiences with the brand:

Barrett, The Fan Club:

“They even let photo nerds who discuss pixels and similar get cameras to test without propagating how good they are. They just send them out and ask them to test the prototype and after that they trust that this is going to be commented and that they will write about it. And what you notice is also that if Nikon send a camera to you, you're probably not going to be super, super negative. You're going to have to review it pretty honestly and you're already sympathetic to the brand.”

Sending out products and prototypes to OBC members in order to get them to write about them in the community could be a good way of getting discussions started. It is however important to do proper target marketing and identify the interactive members of the community in order for this to work out well.

This section's empirical findings shed some light to the issue of how to stimulate participation. The discussed guidelines are all very generalizable and could be applied in various OBC- and social media strategies. Tactics of how to stimulate participation are important in order to achieve

well-functioning co-creation environments. How to stimulate participation motives therefore makes up an important aspect of OBC-fostering.

4.4.7 Targeting members

The different community stereotypes discussed within the theoretical framework raises the question whether or not to target certain individuals when fostering OBCs in order to stimulate participation. This issue has already been touched upon in the previous section but needs to be further investigated. During the interviews, questions regarding whether or not one should segment and target different stereotypes within OBCs were asked. Kajrup suggested that firms should pay special attention to the so called insiders:

Kajrup, The Concept Factory:

“It’s best to find those who are affecting others most. That is, those who have a strong voice that many are listening to, those who get many comments and that have many friends. A firm should focus on these individuals, at least in the beginning, and have a dialogue with them, a personal contact. Perhaps you can ask them if they want to collaborate in one way or another and then get them to influence others. The risk is of course, and you have to be very careful here, that it feels false and bought. It has to be in an open and natural way.”

The quote above states that the firm benefits from segmenting the OBC members in order to increase the participation rates. The interactive members are also often interested in the consumption activities, making them perfect ambassadors for the brand (Kozinets, 1999). It is argued that these members have strong social connections within the OBC and that they often participate in conversations. By identifying them in an early stage and start collaborating with them, the firms can influence the interactivity within the OBC. Barrett has a similar view and considers segmentation as both necessary and natural:

Barrett, The Fan Club:

“Of course, if you want a good start then you should try to encourage people to be more active, but you shouldn’t forget the ones that are just reading. Not everyone wants to get involved but they have still made an active choice to visit your community and they still have a lot of power. They can build awareness around your brand. Nevertheless, if you want to give gifts as bait for customers to participate, it’s better to send your products to the ones you know is most active. Then you can be certain that something is going to be written about.”

As discussed above, offering the interactive members free test products is one way of encouraging them to share their stories and start discussions, which in turn leads to further encouragement and inspiration for other members (Kozinets, 1999). The non-interactive members should

however not be neglected since they are contributing by spreading positive word-of-mouth (Beenen et al., 2004) in other ways. But firms should definitely focus on the interactive members when it comes to trying to increase activity and participation in the OBC. The interactive members are in a way collaborating with the firm as they are accounted for the majority of the value creation as well as encouraging other members to participate. The empirical findings thereby validate Kozinets' (1999) discussion about community engagement and should be further emphasized in the final OBC framework.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This last chapter will start by presenting a summary of the empirical findings. In the light of these findings, the tentative framework will be revised in order to become more practically-oriented. The authors will then try to answer the raised research questions and thereby also provide an answer to whether or not the purpose of this thesis has been fulfilled. Furthermore, this study's contributions will be presented and discussed, both from a theoretical and a managerial perspective. The contributions are then followed by some suggestions for further research.

5.1 Summary of findings

The empirical findings have clearly provided many interesting insights of how OBCs are fostered. In order to clarify and summarize the most important findings, the authors have chosen to separate them into two phases of OBC-fostering. The first phase emphasizes how to prepare for OBC-fostering and the second phase emphasizes important aspects of OBC-strategies. Phase one thereby concerns the OBC antecedents discussed in the theoretical framework while the second phase concerns more tactical guidelines of how to establish co-creation environments that generate desirable outcomes. This summary will therefore start by defining three critical steps that firms will have to make in order to successfully foster OBCs. With these three steps in mind, the firm is ready to start the process of developing a suitable strategy for OBC-fostering.

5.1.1 Phase 1 – Critical preparations for OBC-fostering

The problem formulation of this thesis stated that there is a general lack of knowledge when it comes to strategic social media marketing and OBC-fostering. A deeper understanding of what actually is required when firms want to foster OBCs has to be established. Where does the process begin and what is most important to consider? The authors have identified three critical steps that firms will have to systematically go through before they are ready to foster OBCs. First of all, the firm will have to gain a deep understanding of their consumers' needs, online behaviour, participation motives and interests. As pointed out in the previous chapter, firms must identify what consumers perceive as valuable OBC benefits. What kind of extra value is the OBC intended to offer its members? Firms will also have to understand their consumers' motives for participating. The empirical findings presented a couple of general benefits and motives that are applicable to many OBCs, but the individual firm will have to conduct more profound research in order to fully gain insights of their consumers.

Secondly, firms must understand the scope of OBC-related investments. The firms' engagement/involvement has shown to be of much more importance than previously thought. Fostering an OBC is, as any other marketing activity, a process that requires resources, specific personnel and systematic ways of working. Fostering OBCs is certainly not about just creating a buzz and hope for the best, it requires planning and tactics. When brand enthusiasts themselves foster OBCs, they do it with very high levels of engagement to the brand and the community. The same levels of engagement and involvement will have to be present when firms foster OBCs. Firms are required to publish a lot of content by themselves in order to get the OBC going and keep it active. Therefore, specific OBC personnel such as community managers, mavens, curators and content editors should be appointed.

The last step is to develop a content strategy. When the fostering process is initiated, firms must have a plan of what kind of content they will be publishing within the OBC. It is therefore important to make sure that the two previous steps have been carried out properly in order to know what to base the content around and have an idea of what kind of resources that are accessible. Firms should also have a plan of how to steer the community members' discussions and how to maintain a reasonable level of quality within the conversations. Content in OBCs is all about quality and relevance, publishing content that is valuable and thereby facilitates the customers' needs. Firms will therefore have to be prepared to act as journalistic publishers who generate relevant, credible and interesting content.

Below, figure 4 illustrate phase one's systematic process as well as the most important preparatory guidelines for OBC-fostering:



Figure 4 – Preparatory guidelines for OBC-fostering

5.1.2 Phase 2 – Developing an OBC-strategy

An understanding of the three critical steps is required in order to develop and implement a successful OBC-strategy. When the firm has progressed through the three critical steps, they are therefore ready to develop an OBC-strategy. The previous chapter analysed and discussed a number of strategic guidelines concerning how to foster OBCs. In order to summarize and clarify, the authors have categorized the most important guidelines into a process of five steps. This

process is intended to support firms when they develop OBC-strategies by highlighting the most important aspects of OBC-fostering.

To begin with, the firm must define the scope of the OBC. In contrast to brand community-related literature, the empirical findings suggested that OBC-content often should focus on needs/peripheral needs rather than brands. This might sound a bit confusing due to the usage of the term online brand community. Need-focused OBCs do however stress that firms should emphasize an interest/a need as the common denominator instead of their brands. The firm's brand is obviously still very central to the community but in order to become interesting and build credibility, the content of the community often need to cover more than just a specific brand. Otherwise, firms will find it difficult to stimulate enough interesting discussions, especially if they have less powerful brands or offer less complex products/services. For instance, IKEA's OBC, Livet Hemma, focus on home furnishing rather than just the brand IKEA. Just talking about IKEA as a brand is not considered interesting enough, the OBC has to facilitate the needs of individuals who are interested in home furnishing in general, which attracts more people than the IKEA brand itself. Many firms should also consider cooperating with outside firms/specialists in order to better cover these needs. Cooperation could also improve and enhance the OBC in other ways, adding dimensions that are outside the firm's regular business.

The next step is to locate and design the OBC venue. When it comes to locating the OBC venue, there are two major choices. Firms can either locate the venue at an established social networking site such as Facebook or at a proprietary website/microsite. The different locations do however have their advantages and disadvantages. The empirical findings suggest that if it is possible and if the firm has the capacity, it is better to locate the OBC venue at a proprietary website/microsite. By doing so, the firm can personally design the venue and is not dependant on the social networking site's future popularity or their rules and restrictions. If firms do choose to locate the venue at a proprietary website/microsite they must make sure that the venue is easily accessible. It would also be wise to make the OBC and its functions accessible through smart phones, preferably by developing an "app".

Step three concerns how to propagate and populate the OBC. It is important that the OBC venue is populated quickly. In the start-up phases, it is therefore of extra importance that the firms themselves contribute with a lot of interesting content that can initiate discussions. The cleverest way of populating the OBC is by letting the members themselves propagate the venue. By adding auto-post functions to other popular social media channels, the firm gives their members opportunities to share what they have done and simultaneously promote the OBC.

Since the objective with OBCs is to reach a co-creation environment, the firm must understand how to interact within the OBC and how to create a good dialogue with the members. The brand community-related literature as well as the interviewed marketing practitioners argue that a

good dialogue is created by being open, transparent and personal. Firms will have to be prepared to loosen up on their control and invite the consumers to participate and “breathe new life” into the brand. Further, co-creation requires strong customer relationships. By being personal and introducing the individuals behind the brand, the firms will find it easier to build relationships. Because building relationships is very difficult if the sender is unknown.

The final step is to stimulate participation. The empirical findings provided three generally applicable ways of how to stimulate the previously discussed participation motives; arranging contests, working with rewards and letting the members influence. Further, many of the interviewees argued that rewards do not necessarily have to be of a physical or monetary nature, they could also be emotional. Rewards such as badges could be handed out at special occasions in order to encourage the members to share information, inspiration and brand stories. Firms should further target the most interactive members (insiders) when trying to stimulate participation. By sending out a free sample/product to the interactive members and letting them evaluate it in the OBC, firms encourage them to share information within the OBC in a clever way. Further, this is information that can become useful and valuable to other members/visitors.

Below, figure 5 illustrate a summary of the most important guidelines within an OBC-strategy in a systematic process:

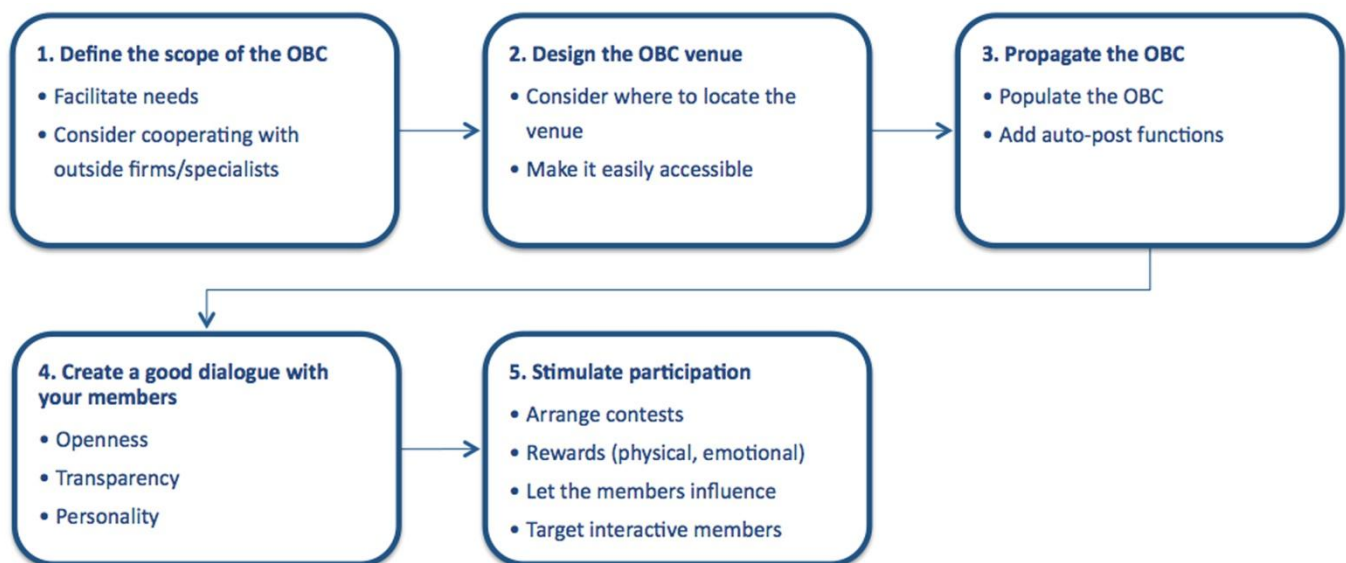


Figure 5 – The five phases of an OBC-strategy

5.2 Revising the framework – The Online Brand Community Wheel

The purpose of this thesis' tentative framework, developed in chapter 3, was to provide an integrative understanding of how OBCs function. It was also intended to lay the foundation of a more systemized and practically-oriented framework of how to foster OBCs. In order to fully fulfil the purpose with this thesis, *to create an integrative understanding of how OBCs are fostered and develop a framework for strategic implementation*, the tentative framework has been revised. The final OBC framework for strategic implementation is more systemized and managerially-oriented. In order to clarify, the tentative framework's purpose was to introduce the reader to the nature of OBCs and why they emerge while the final OBC framework originates from a practical perspective and describe how OBCs strategically should be fostered. In the light of the empirical findings, a more suitable framework has therefore been developed (see Figure 6 – *The Online Brand Community Wheel* below). As one can see, the framework is very similar to the *The Brand Wheel* which is commonly used as a framework for defining the brand's identity and building brand equity. The term *The Online Brand Community Wheel* therefore felt appropriate as a name for this framework since it is intended to support marketing practitioners' OBC-fostering.

In comparison to the tentative framework, *co-creation of value* is still considered as the central objective of OBC-fostering. Instead of describing the four key factors for co-creation of value, the final OBC framework is more process-oriented and explains how to reach a co-creation environment. This process is illustrated as a wheel that contains *the five phases of an OBC-strategy* discussed in the previous section. The four key factors presented in the tentative framework provided a more descriptive view of OBCs and have therefore been replaced in order to make the framework more explanatory, hence suitable for strategic implementation. The tentative framework's four key factors for co-creation of value are however embedded within these five phases. For instance, the relational mediators are stimulated by establishing a good dialogue with the community members and community engagement is stimulated by stimulating participation within the OBC. Since this framework is intended to support firms' OBC-fostering, these adaptations were necessary. The final framework gets easier for marketing practitioners to follow since it contains a systematic process, i.e. the "wheel". The antecedents have further been replaced by *the three critical steps of OBC-fostering* that was described above. These adaptations were made since the three critical steps better explain the OBC antecedents in a practically-oriented perspective. These critical steps are however based around the OBC antecedents and concern how the firm should prepare for OBC-fostering. Finally, the final framework also contains the OBC outcomes that were briefly discussed in the theoretical framework in order to complete the integrative approach.

In order to fulfil this thesis' purpose, the following research questions were raised:

- *What are the key influencing factors of OBC-fostering?*
- *What will a strategy for OBC-fostering have to contain?*

The key aspects of OBC-fostering were identified and presented by scrutinizing the tentative framework through empirical studies. In the light of these key aspects, the authors were able to develop a generalised strategy for OBC-fostering. The OBC-strategy was then illustrated as a process in a framework for strategic implementation. The final OBC framework thereby provides an integrative understanding of how OBCs are fostered, thus fulfilling the purpose of this thesis.

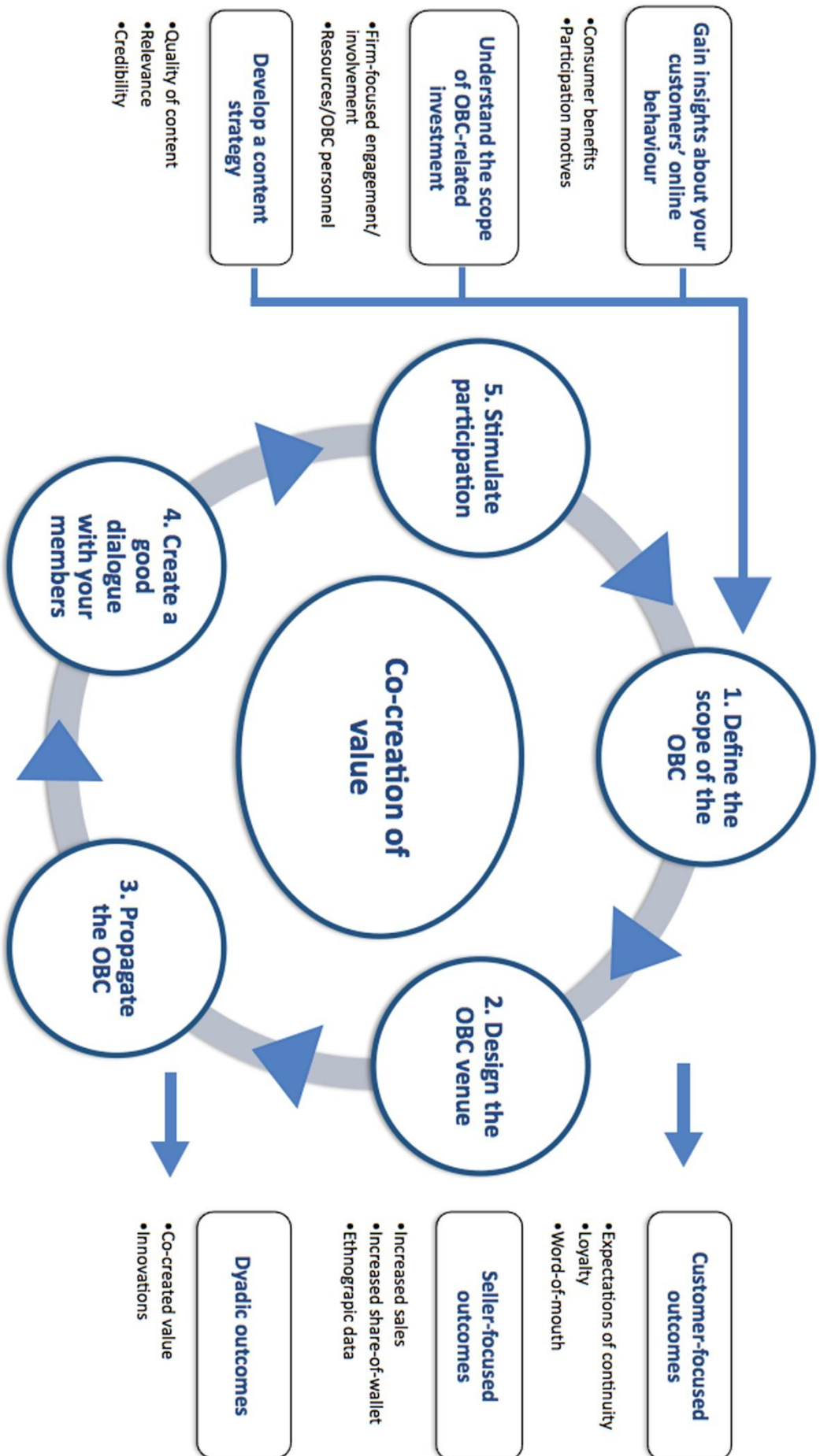


Figure 6 – The Online Brand Community Wheel

5.3 Contributions

5.3.1 Theoretical contributions

In contrast to many other brand community-related studies, this thesis focused on how to strategically foster OBCs from a managerial perspective. By providing a deeper understanding of how OBCs are fostered and strategic guidelines of how to do it, this framework fills this gap within the brand community-related literature. This thesis' findings are in line with Fournier's and Lee's (2009) argument that it is possible for firms to foster OBCs and that there are certain "best practices" of how to do it. As discussed in the problem formulation, Fournier and Lee (2009) do provide a couple of interesting points of how to approach OBC-fostering in a managerial perspective but they have not combined their guidelines into an integrated framework. Instead, they uncover OBC myths and thereby provide a couple of unrelated preparatory aspects that need to be considered before fostering OBCs. This thesis does however offer a more systemized process-oriented tool of how to foster OBCs, a framework that can support marketing practitioners' in their OBC-fostering. The authors do believe that OBC theory needs to evolve to become more practically-oriented and the provided framework is a step forward for such a progress.

This thesis' findings further validated Madupu's and Cooley's (2010) theories of OBC participation as well as strengthened Woisetschläger's et al. (2008) results that community identification and the degree of influence are important motives for brand community participation. Additionally, this study has identified the social enhancement motive as more important than previously thought. This study's findings even suggest that the social enhancement is more important than the social integration motive, which often is considered to be the most important motive for consumer participation within OBCs (Dholakia et al., 2004). Furthermore, the authors have extensively supplemented Madupu's and Cooley's (2010) conceptual framework of OBC participation by integrating several new key aspects of OBCs. In comparison to the authors' OBC framework, Madupu's and Cooley's (2010) framework only covered consumer participation antecedents, core components of OBCs and OBC outcomes. Thus, this thesis' framework provides more integrated understanding of how OBCs function and thereby also of how to strategically foster them.

Schau et al. (2009) provided a meta-analytic framework of how brand community practices creates value. However, these practices only explain how OBC-members' create value. This thesis supplements Schau's et al. (2009) theories by explaining how firms create value within brand communities. One of the major findings of this thesis is that the firms' engagement and involvement within OBCs have been widely underestimated. Firm-focused engagement/involvement has proven to be of much greater importance than previously thought since all of the interviewees emphasized the importance of firm-generated content. The fact that firms also can create

value within OBCs adds a whole new dimension to OBC-theory since it requires totally new ways of working. Furthermore, this thesis has provided a deeper understanding of the scope of investments that are required when fostering OBCs. With a better understanding of the scope of investments, it becomes easier to measure the success of an OBC. In the light of this thesis's findings, future OBC-theory could thereby also progress to more accurately describe the ROI of OBC-strategies.

The empirical findings further validate McWilliam's (2000) theories that the likeliness of succeeding when fostering OBC is increased by focusing on consumers' needs and interests rather than the brand itself. According to the interviewed marketing practitioners, OBCs that focus on needs and interests are the most attractive communities to foster, especially for firms with less powerful brands or less complex products/services. Since many firms today are building communities around needs and interests rather than brands, the definition of the term OBCs has been found to be inappropriate to describe these types of communities. Kozinets' (1999) term virtual communities of consumption might therefore be a more appropriate term. Virtual communities of consumption have, within this thesis, been found to cover a wider area of interest, thus reaching a larger amount of consumers that can contribute to a co-creation environment. Such communities should also try to facilitate peripheral needs, which make Gutman's (1982) means-end chain theory very relevant to OBC contexts and vice versa.

This thesis' findings also contribute to other bodies of literature. OBC-fostering should be considered as an integral part of social media marketing and the presented strategic guidelines could also be used in other social media channels for the same purposes. For instance, the provided framework offer a lot of valuable insights and guidelines such as the importance of developing a content strategy and acting as a publisher, how to stimulate participation and interaction as well as how to foster customer engagement and involvement at the web. These insights and guidelines are generalizable and could be used within interactive-, viral- and social media marketing as well. As discussed above, hosting an OBC is also a way of forming sustainable customer relationships where well-functioning OBCs have shown to positively affect firm-customer relationships. Guidelines such as how to maintain a good dialogue and how to be more personal at the web could therefore also be used for other relationship-building purposes. Finally, the fostering of OBCs should also be viewed as a powerful way of strengthening the brand image and building brand awareness. If they are properly operated, OBCs certainly affect brand equity positively. In other words, the Online Brand Community Wheel could also be considered as a tool for brand building purposes.

5.3.2 Managerial contributions

This thesis main managerial contribution is of course the developed *Online Brand Community Wheel* that is intended to support firms to strategically foster OBCs. OBCs offer a lot of positive

outcomes and it is of the authors' belief that an OBC provide new and innovative ways of creating and maintaining customer relationships. There are many firms out there that do not get the opportunity to physically meet their consumers, for instance firms that sell their products/services through retailers or through the Internet. These firms need to come up with new and innovative ways of how to interact with their consumers and build customer relationships; this is where social media and OBCs offer great opportunities. It has however been proven that a lack of proper knowledge and a fear of losing control are causing concern among firms and in many cases preventing proper investments. This thesis' managerial contributions will hopefully clarify this area of practice and decrease the uncertainty surrounding OBCs and strategic social media marketing. By providing a framework of how to strategically foster OBCs in a systemized and comprehensive way, firms can find support in their adoption of strategic social media marketing. The framework also makes it easier to grasp the scope of investments that OBC-fostering requires, hence providing a better basis for decisions and reducing uncertainty. A deeper understanding of the scope of investments might also lead to improved ROI-calculations. By using this framework, firms will be in better positions to build co-creation environments that generate extra value to their offerings. Furthermore, by following the steps in the developed framework, firms will increase their chances of fostering such well-functioning OBCs.

This thesis also provides a deeper understanding of the concept of OBCs and of how to reap and maintain the benefits of strategic social media marketing. With an increased integrative knowledge of how OBCs function and how its influencing factors are interrelated to each other, firms can more easily identify the factors that need to be improved in order to develop a more desirable co-creation environment. Hence, this framework can be used as a balanced scorecard for firms that already have fostered OBCs. For instance, if a firm find it difficult to stimulate participation within the OBC, they might have to reconsider their content strategy etc.

5.4 Further research

Hopefully, this thesis will evoke an interest among other scholars to further supplement *The Online Brand Community Wheel* with new important strategic guidelines of how to foster OBCs. Scholars could thereby test and benchmark different OBC-strategies in order to investigate what kind of strategies that proves to be more successful in different contexts. For instance, more extensive studies and testing of the framework in a global surrounding can broaden the scope of the framework and validate its applicability as a tool for OBC-fostering. Such a study could also be done in order to find more important general guidelines that were not identified within this thesis, thus further stress the feasibility and reliability of the constructed framework. More profound in-depth studies concerning each aspect such as where to locate an OBC and if there are any differences in outcomes between communities centred around a consumption activity or a particular brand are also of great importance for future knowledge within this area. Future re-

search should also conduct more profound studies of the consumers' views of OBCs in order to further validate the perceived consumer benefits and the participation motives.

Another important issue for future consideration is that further knowledge of seller-focused investments can lead to a greater understanding of the costs, leading to a more accurate measure of return on investments (ROI) of social media marketing and OBC-strategies. Cross-functional studies where brand building within OBCs is properly researched will also contribute to a greater understanding of brand building impacts in social media marketing. The many directions for further research can hopefully generate a wide amount of studies within social media strategy and further assist many marketing practitioners to make strategic use of their online assets.

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6.3 Interviews

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Kajrup, L., Account Manager Digital, The Concept Factory, Malmö, Sweden, 2nd March 2011

Larsson, M., Internet Business Manager, Panduro Hobby, Malmö, Sweden, 1st March 2011

Rudqvist, U., Marketing and Information Manager, Springplanet, Malmö, Sweden, 4th March 2011

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Interviewees

Practitioners

Christian Braendshöi – IKEA

Project manager and business developer of new and digital media at IKEA Sweden's headquarters in Helsingborg. Braendshöi is a marketer that has been working with advertising and marketing through most media channels for 15 years.

Heléne Adler – Panduro Hobby

Adler is working as a copywriter and blog editor at Panduro Hobby in Malmö. Adler is responsible for Panduro Hobby's blog-community and other social media channels. Panduro Hobby is Scandinavia's leading distributor of hobby materials and offers products and inspiration for peoples' creative activities throughout Scandinavia. The community is built around creativity and inspiration and Adler is working actively to increase participation and to provide the members extra value.

Monica Larsson – Panduro Hobby

Internet Business Manager at Panduro Hobby. Has previous experience from working as webmaster/project assistant at GDFlow, webmaster/marketing assistant at Thomée etc. and is currently responsible for Panduro Hobby's Internet activities.

Marketing experts

Leif Kajrup – The Concept Factory

Project manager with focus on digital media at The Concept Factory, a communications agency that provides their clients with a competitive advantage based on powerful marketing strategies and superior creativity. The Concept Factory specializes in marketing, advertising, social media and web development and is situated in Malmö and Helsingborg, Sweden. Kajrup is also owner of Kajrup communication AB and has a large focus on web and Internet as a channel in the marketing mix. Offers strategic counselling and lectures about the new era of marketing (advertising 2.0) and is specialised in social media.

Sean Duffy – The Duffy Agency

The founder of The Duffy Agency and Duffy Consult, Sean is focused on helping CEOs to understand the marketing implications of a Web 2.0 world and to put that knowledge in use when building their brands. He has 25 years' experience working with advertising and brand strategy in Boston, San Francisco, Stockholm and Copenhagen. The Duffy Agency is an international advertising agency currently located in Boston, USA and Malmö, Sweden and is focused on social media marketing. Sean has experience from working with dozens of global brands including IKEA, Saab, Volvo, PepsiCo, Absolut, Sony Ericsson, InWear/Matinique, Q-Med, Gambro, Pfizer and GSK.

Ulla-Karin Barrett – The Fan Club

The CEO of The Fan Club, a successful communications agency currently located in Malmö, Sweden, working with communication solutions that breaks through the clutter. They work by the question of how to recruit fans to brands and the agency is the most rewarded agency in southern Sweden for their creativity. Ulla-Karin Barrett has also a wide knowledge and experience from working within firms such as IKEA and Fleur de Santé where she has been communications manager (IKEA) and Brand manager (FdS).

Ulrika Rudqvist – Springplanet

Head of marketing and communications at Springplanet in Malmö. Springplanet is an advertising agency that specializes in web-development, social media, advertising and communications. Rudqvist also consult within the company regarding digital marketing, digital communication and social medias. Rudqvist's focus is increasing traffic, revenues as well as conversion rate. She has experience from working with digital marketing and communication channels such as communities, micro blogs, blogs, newsletters, affiliates, adwords, search engines and price comparison sites. Rudqvist is also a e-commerce expert in the magazine Internetworld.

Appendix 2 – Description of IKEA Sweden’s and Panduro Hobby’s communities

IKEA – Livet Hemma

“With Livet Hemma we want to share our passion for homes and home furnishing with you! We upload stories, tips and trends in image and film. We want that Livet Hemma should be a gathering point for everyone interested in home furnishing, design and life at home. An open forum for discussions and an inspiring blog to browse in. “

This quote is translated from Livet Hemma and captures the essence of the community in a good way.

Livet Hemma is an OBC built around home furnishing where consumers are encouraged to inspire and be inspired, discuss with others and post images and movies of their homes and their home furnishing. It has been created to become a venue for individuals who are interested in home furnishing, design, and life at home. Inspiration is also an important concept that is visible throughout the community. IKEA has recently launched the community in Sweden and it was created in order to get a more personal connection and a different interaction with the consumers as well as to strengthen the personality of the IKEA brand. It also helps IKEA to show their furniture in a home environment and give the customers the opportunity to do the same.

Livet Hemma is available at the following address: <http://livethemma.ikea.se/> (2011-04-19)

Panduro Hobby

Panduro Hobby’s community consists of blogs, where both users and employees have their own blogs. The OBC is built around inspiration and has a very personal approach. Consumers can share photos and write about their creations and comment on other members’ blog posts. Helene Adler is the blog editor and often shows what happens behind the scenes, showing everything from birthday cards made for an employee to the new concept store. The community is very open and anyone can read and comment the blogs without becoming a member, but to post images etc. a membership is needed. By blogging about pottering other members can get inspiration to try themselves and inspiration of new ideas to potter.

Panduro Hobby’s blog community is available on the following address:

<http://www.pandurohobby.se/pan/lboxServlet?p=BLG100R&m=1> (2011-04-19)

Appendix 3 – Survey

Frågor om onlinebeteende

Här följer några frågor som rör ditt onlinebeteende och din syn på varumärkessponsrade webbplatser.

* Required

1. Kön

- Man
- Kvinna

2. Ålder

- 15-19
- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40+

3. Använder du Internet som hjälpmedel för att ta dina köpbeslut? *

- Ofta
- Ibland
- Aldrig

4. Om du svarade ofta eller ibland på föregående fråga, var hämtar du information ifrån?

Obs! Du kan kryssa i mer än en ruta

- Prisjämförelsesajter (pricerunner.se, prisjakt.se)
- Rekommendationssajter (Rejta.se)
- Läser om andra personers åsikter i diskussionsforum
- Hämtar information ifrån tillverkarens/varumärkets hemsida
- Besöker relevanta bloggar
- Hämtar information ifrån företagets Facebooksida
- Other:

5. Hur pass trovärdig anser du att användargenererad information är på företags Facebooksida/hemsida/blogg? *

D.v.s. den information som kunder själva bidrar med i kommentarsfält, forum etc.

	1	2	3	4	5
Inte alls trovärdig					Mycket trovärdig

6. Rangordna följande alternativ utefter hur pass aktiv du är i dem. *

(d.v.s. de social media kanaler du besöker mest)

	Inte alls aktiv	Sällan aktiv	Aktiv	Ofta aktiv
Sociala nätverkssajter (Facebook, Myspace)				
Bloggar (Twitter, Bloggportalen.se, specifika bloggar)				
Stora omfattande forum (Forum som handlar om allt möjligt såsom Flashback)				
Små specifika forum (Forum som handlar om specifika ämnen eller varumärken såsom Svenskafans.com, Fotosidan.se, Stylesearch.se)				
Virtuella världar (Second life, Habbo hotel)				
Sajter som bygger på användargenererat material (Wikipedia)				

7. "Gillar" du någon varumärkessida på Facebook? *

- Ja
- Nej

8. Om du svarade ja på föregående fråga, varför?

Obs! Du kan kryssa i mer än en ruta

- Jag identifierar mig med varumärket
- Jag tycker mycket om varumärkets produkter och/eller tjänster
- Därför att andra människor ska få en bild om vilken slags person jag är
- Jag vill ta del av information som rör varumärket och dess produkter och/eller tjänster
- Jag vill få inspiration till vad man kan göra med varumärkets produkter/tjänster
- Varumärket erbjuder en underhållande tjänst eller "app" på sin Facebooksida
- Jag gillar att prata och socialisera med människor på den sidan
- Jag vill få hjälp med frågor som rör varumärkets produkter och/eller tjänster
- Other:

9. Vad tycker du att en bra företagshemsida eller varumärkescommunity bör innehålla för att du oftare ska besöka sidan? *

Obs! Du kan kryssa i mer än en ruta

- Forum
- Möjlighet att ta del av andra kunders åsikter
- Chat
- Möjlighet till mer personlig kontakt med anställda på företaget
- Support (chat, forum, supportinformation)
- Bloggar (med vem som helst även folk utanför företaget)
- Tävlingar/aktiviteter
- Underhållning (spel, videoklipp, apps, etc.)
- Inspiration och förslag för hur jag kan använda deras produkter/tjänster
- Möjlighet att skapa och dela med mig utav något eget
- Utökad information om varumärkets produkter och/eller tjänster
- Other:

10. Hade du velat bidra med idéer och feedback om det hade haft en möjlighet att påverka ditt favoritvarumärkes framtida produktutveckling? *

- Ja
- Nej

11. Vad skulle få dig att skriva och kommentera inne på varumärkessponsrade hemsidor (företagets hemsida, varumärkets Facebooksida, communities relaterade till varumärket, etc.)? *

Obs! Du kan kryssa i mer än en ruta

- Att få möjlighet att hjälpa andra som har problem med produkten/tjänsten
- Att få möjlighet att ta del av en belöning (priser, rabatter etc.)
- Att få möjlighet att visa vad jag tycker angående en specifik sak/fråga
- Att få möjlighet att påverka företaget eller dess produkter/tjänster
- Att få möjlighet att lära känna nya likasinnade människor
- Att få möjlighet att inspirera andra i användandet av företagets produkter/tjänster
- Other:

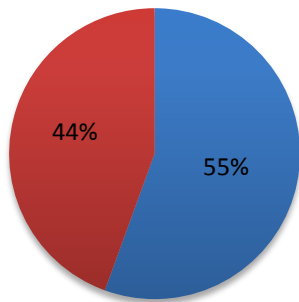
12a. Är du medlem eller aktiv i ett varumärkescommunity? (Exempel på populära communities: IKEA, Metallica, SAAB, Apple, Star Trek etc.) *

- Ja
- Nej

12b. Om ja, Skriv gärna vilket community samt din e-post nedan då vi gärna hade velat komma i kontakt med dig och ställa några ytterligare frågor. Sådan information är väldigt värdefull för vårt examensarbete.

Appendix 4 – Summary of responses

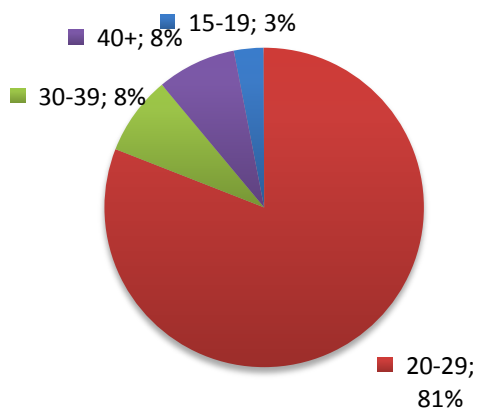
1. Sex



■ Male
■ Female

Male	94	55%
Female	75	44%

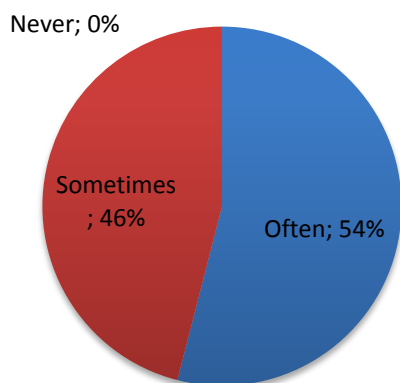
2. Age



■ 15-19
■ 20-29
■ 30-39
■ 40+

15-19	5	3%
20-29	138	81%
30-39	13	8%
40+	13	8%

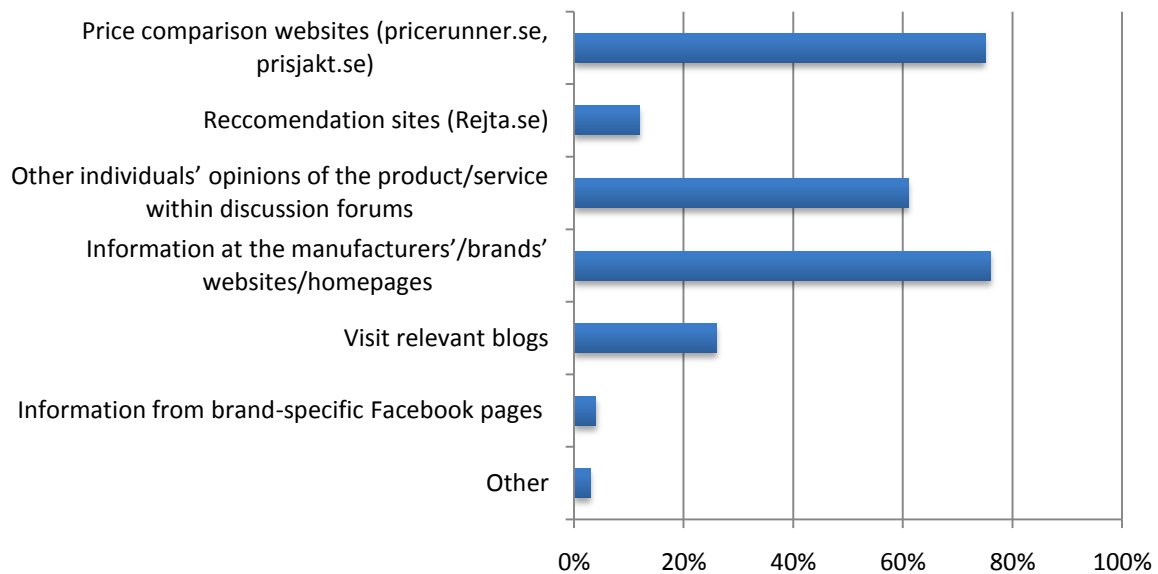
3. Do you use Internet as a tool for making purchase decisions?



■ Often
■ Sometimes
■ Never

Often	92	54%
Sometimes	78	46%
Never	0	0%

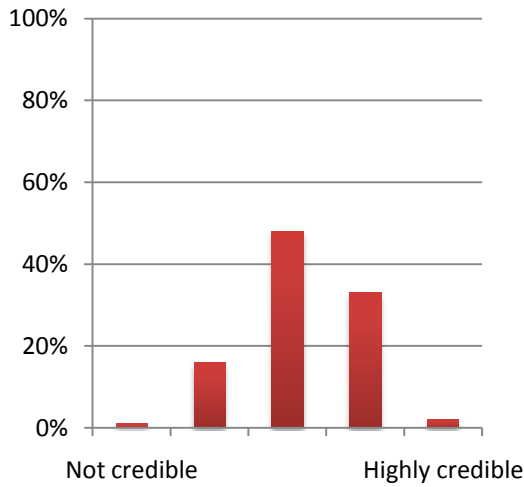
4. If you answered often or sometimes in the previous question, where do you find your information?



Price comparison websites (pricerunner.se, prisjakt.se)	126	75%
Reccomendation sites (Rejta.se)	20	12%
Other individuals' opinions of the product/service within discussion forums	102	61%
Information at the manufacturers'/brands' websites/homepages	127	76%
Visit relevant blogs	44	26%
Information from brand-specific Facebook pages	6	4%
Other	5	3%

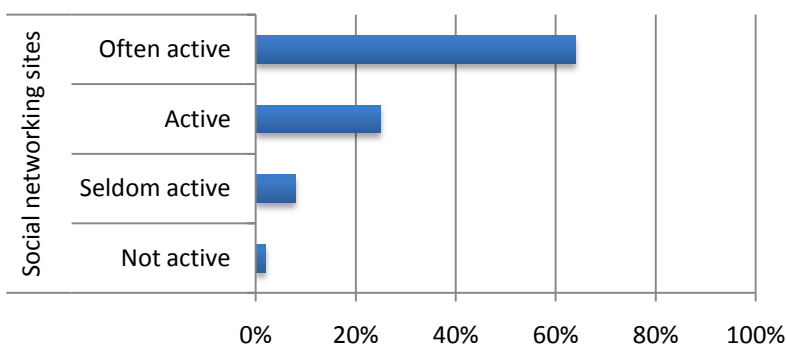
People may select more than one checkbox, so percentages may add up to more than 100%.

5. How credible do you think the user-generated information is in the company's Facebook page/website/blog?



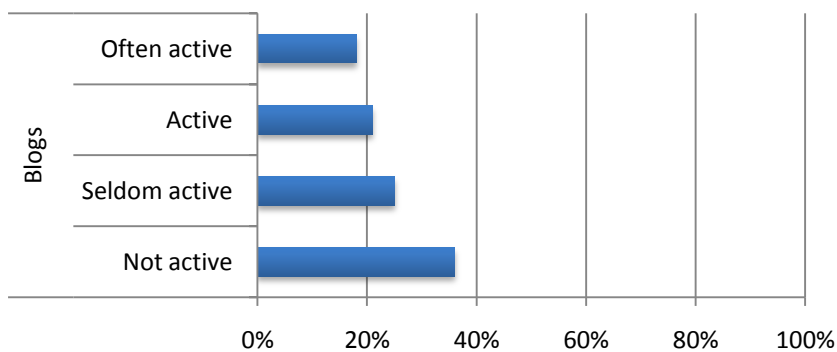
1 - Not credible	1	1%
2	28	16%
3	82	48%
4	56	33%
5 - Highly credible	3	2%

6. Rank the following options in how active you are in them. – Social networking sites (Facebook, Myspace)



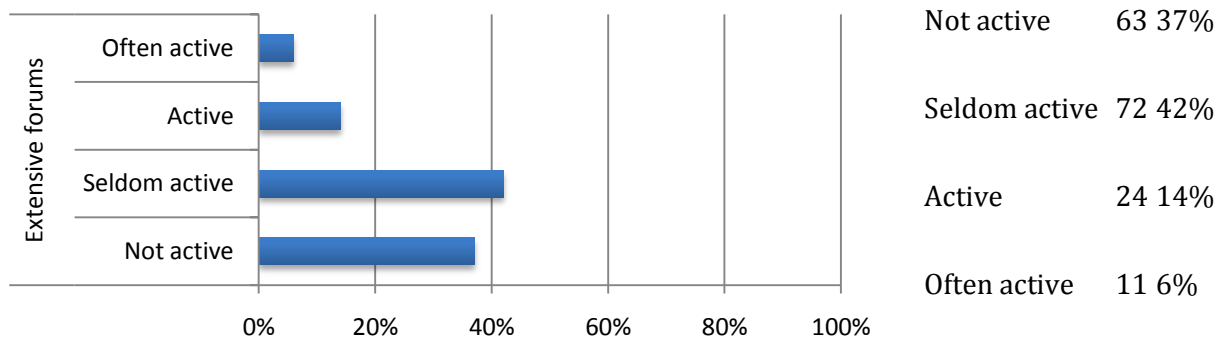
Not active	4	2%
Seldom active	14	8%
Active	43	25%
Often active	109	64%

6. Rank the following options in how active you are in them. - Blogs (Twitter, Bloggpornalen.se, specific blogs)

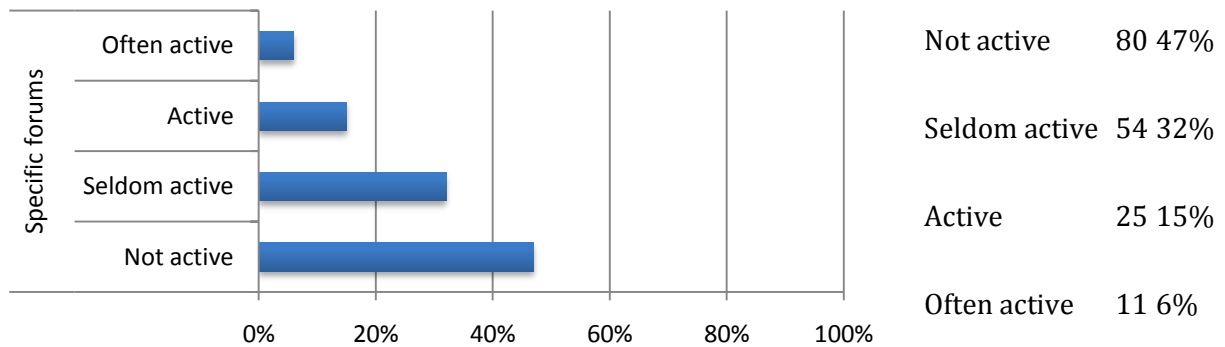


Not active	62	36%
Seldom active	42	25%
Active	36	21%
Often active	30	18%

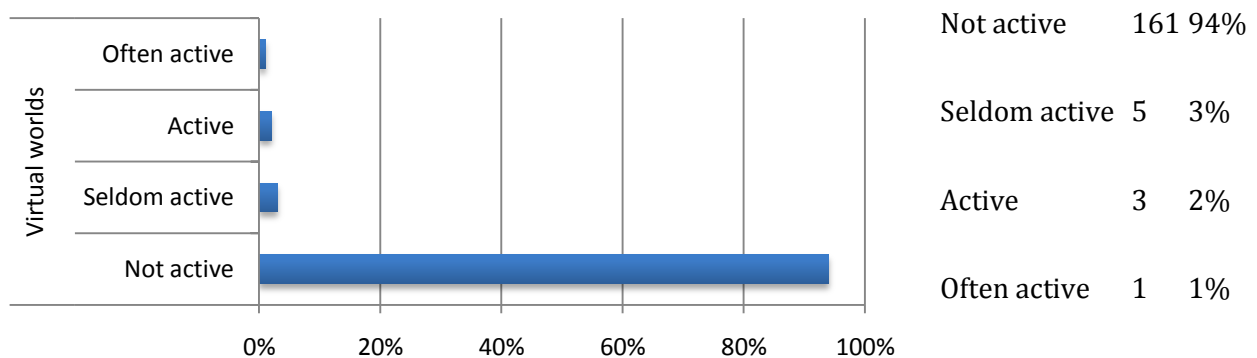
6. Rank the following options in how active you are in them. – Extensive forums (Forums that cover a wide range of subjects e.g. Flashback)



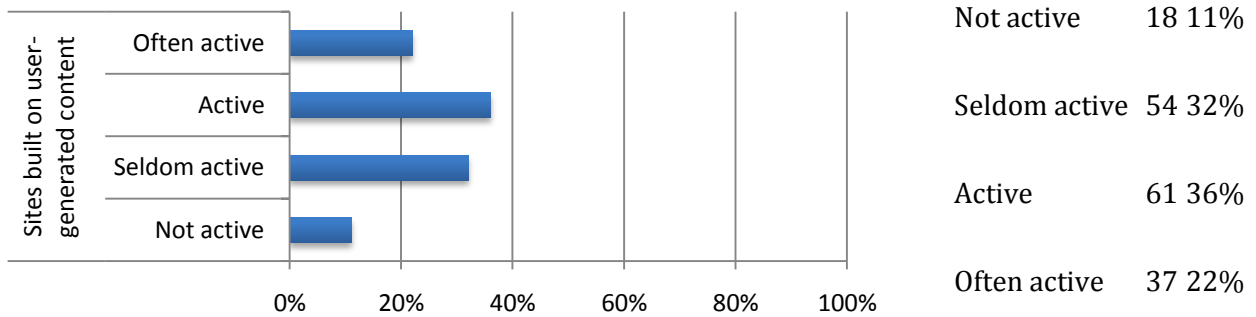
6. Rank the following options in how active you are in them. - Specific forums (Forums that cover specific subjects or brands e.g. Svenskafans.com, Fotosidan.se, stylesearch.se)



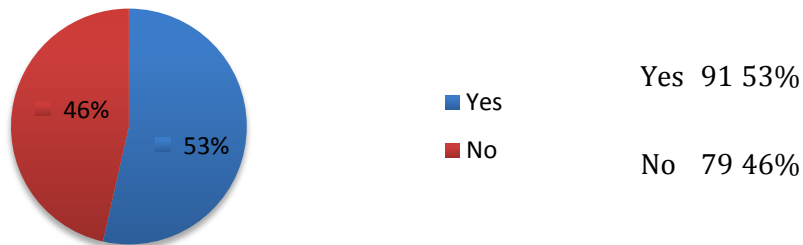
6. Rank the following options in how active you are in them. – Virtual worlds (Second life, Habbo hotel)



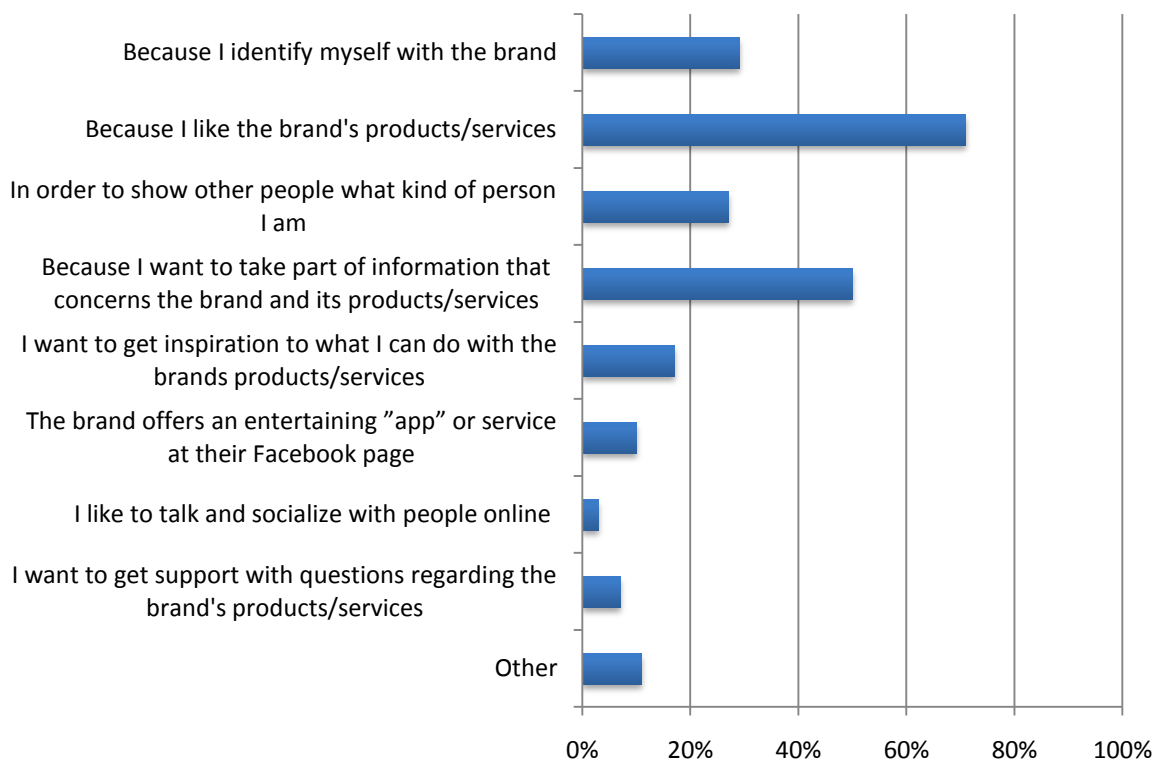
6. Rank the following options in how active you are in them. – Sites that are built on user-generated content (Wikipedia)



7. Do you "like" any company website on Facebook?

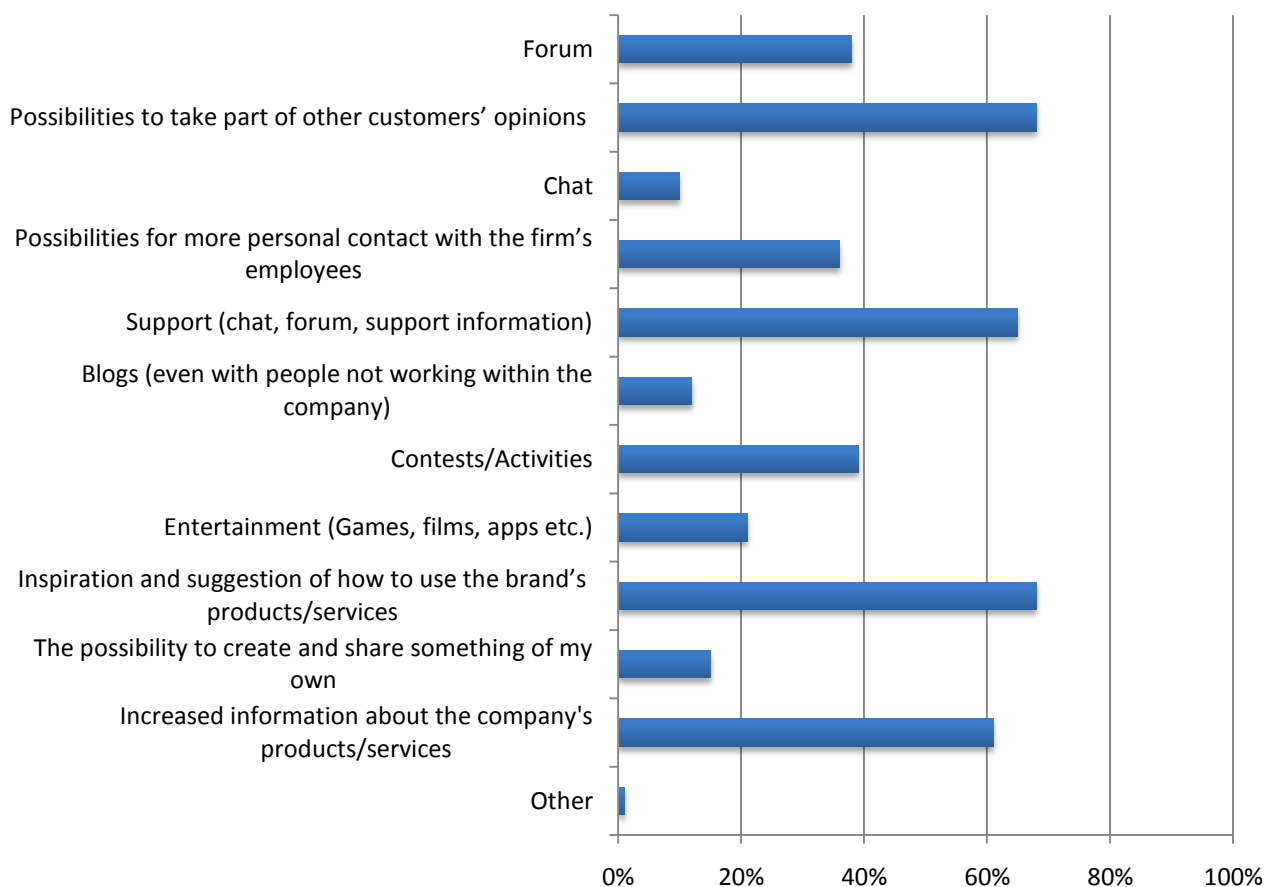


8. If you answered Yes on the previous question, why?



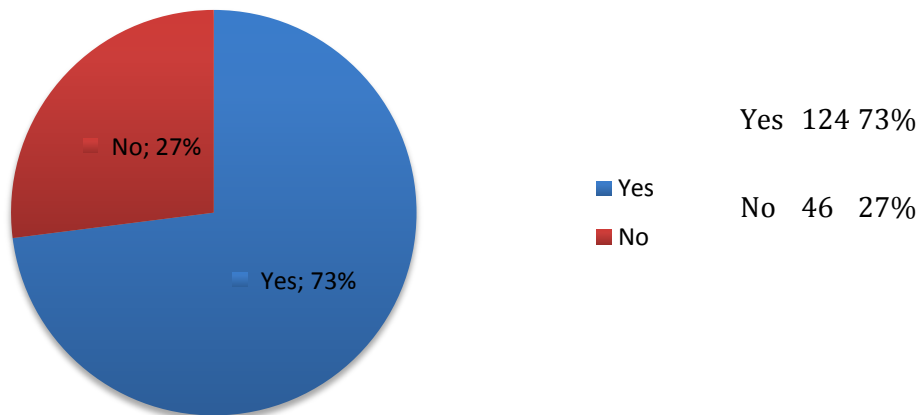
Because I identify myself with the brand	26 29%
Because I like the brand's products/services	64 71%
In order to show other people what kind of person I am	24 27%
Because I want to take part of information that concerns the brand and its products/services	45 50%
I want to get inspiration to what I can do with the brands products/services	15 17%
The brand offers an entertaining "app" or service at their Facebook page	9 10%
I like to talk and socialize with people online	3 3%
I want to get support with questions regarding the brand's products/services	6 7%
Other	10 11%

9. What do you think a good business website or brand community should provide in order for you to visit more often?

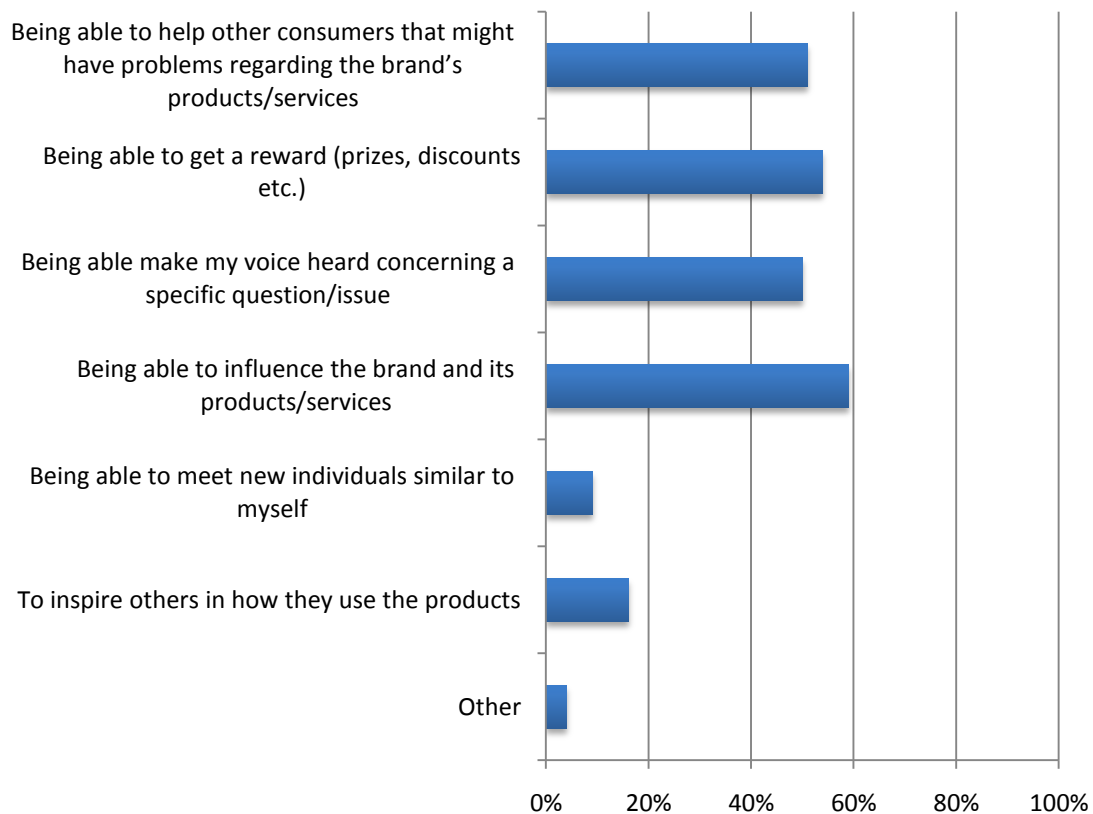


Forum	65	38%
Possibilities to take part of other customers' opinions	115	68%
Chat	17	10%
Possibilities for more personal contact with the firm's employees	62	36%
Support (chat, forum, support information)	111	65%
Blogs (even with people not working within the company)	21	12%
Contests/Activities	66	39%
Entertainment (Games, films, apps etc.)	36	21%
Inspiration and suggestion of how to use the brand's products/services	116	68%
The possibility to create and share something of my own	25	15%
Increased information about the company's products/services	103	61%
Other	2	1%

10. Do you think you would contribute with ideas and feedback if you knew that you had the possibility to affect your brand's future product development?

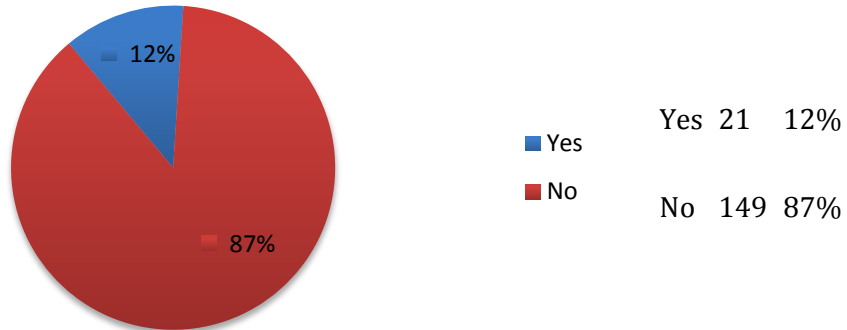


11. What would motivate you to write and comment on brand sponsored websites (company websites, the brand's Facebook page, online communities related to the brand, etc.)?



Being able to help other consumers that might have problems regarding the brand's products/services	87	51%
Being able to get a reward (prizes, discounts etc.)	92	54%
Being able make my voice heard concerning a specific question/issue	85	50%
Being able to influence the brand and its products/services	101	59%
Being able to meet new individuals similar to myself	16	9%
To inspire others in how they use the products	28	16%
Other	6	4%

12a. Are you currently a member in a brand community? (examples of popular communities: IKEA, Metallica, SAAB, Apple, Star Trek etc.)



Appendix 5 – The DART-Model Nike+

The figure below is an excerpt from *Co-creating value from consumers' experiences: the Nike case* by Ramaswamy, 2008.

<p style="text-align: center;">DIALOGUE</p> <p>New rich dialogues between the runner and Nike, between the runner/listener and Apple, among runners, and between runners and running experts.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">ACCESS</p> <p>Nike provides access to its customers through the iPodNano/Sport Kit device and the Nike+ web site.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">TRANSPARENCY</p> <p>For runners, Nike+ makes transparent a huge range of information about running, including routes, training knowledge, and how a runner's progress compares. Nike learns a lot about individual runners that was previously opaque to the firm.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">RISK-RETURN</p> <p>For runners, Nike+ reduces the likelihood of getting hurt by giving them information about proper training methods. For the company, the risk of losing customers is lowered because runners are interacting with Nike+ frequently.</p>

Appendix 6 – Article

The article presented below is intended for the Swedish magazine Tendens Special. Tendens Special is a practically-oriented magazine for marketers published by Svergies Marknadsförbund.

En integrerad modell för OBC fostrande – The Online Brand Community Wheel

Online Brand Communities (OBCs) och dess likheter med sociala medier har genererat ett stort intresse bland marknadsförare de senaste åren. OBCs möjligheter att bygga kundrelationer, erbjuda extra värde och stärka varumärken har gjort utvecklandet av OBCs extremt eftertraktat. Det finns en mängd akademisk litteratur som beskriver hur OBCs fungerar och i vilken miljö de uppstår. Dessa studier utgår oftast ifrån att OBCs endast utvecklas av varumärkesentusiaster, utan företagens inblandning. Få studier är gjorda ur ett praktiskt perspektiv som fokuserar på hur företag själva kan utveckla sådana communities. *The Online Brand Community Wheel* är tänkt att vägleda och förklara hur marknadsförare bör arbeta med utvecklandet av OBCs.

Under de senaste åren har sociala medier och OBCs vunnit allt mer mark inom marknadsföring. Att vara närvarande i sociala medier har utvecklats till en norm bland många företag, någonting som man helt enkelt måste medverka i. Dagens "hype" kring sociala medier har därmed frestat många företag att vara aktiva i kanaler där de besitter väldigt lite kunskap. En rad studier och undersökningar pekar på att det finns en generell okunskap bland företag när det kommer till marknadsföring inom sociala medier. Sådan marknadsföring utförs därför väldigt ofta utan några strategiska riktlinjer eller mål där det finns en allmän osäkerhet om vad det egentligen är man vill uppnå med sin närvaro i sociala medier.

Samtidigt har den akademiska litteraturen alltmer börjat uppmärksamma OBCs. OBCs bygger, i likhet med sociala medier, på Web 2.0 teknologi och är baserade på användargenererat material. Vidare kan dessa communities beskrivas som internetbaserade plattformar där konsumenter kan träffas och diskutera sin konsumtion och sitt intresse för ett specifikt varumärke. Ett exempel på ett uppmärksammat OBC är Nike och Apples samarbete, "Nike+", som är en webbsida där konsumenter kan träffas och diskutera,

inspirera och socialisera med varandra kring olika former av personlig träning. Dessa communities är anses generera en mängd eftertraktade fördelar för företag såsom ökad kundlojalitet och ökad spridning av positiv word-of-mouth. Det finns dessutom en mängd studier som pekar på att OBCs ökar kundernas engagemang till varumärket.

Den generella uppfattningen är dock att OBCs är någonting som konsumenter själva skapar på grund av deras entusiasm för ett specifikt varumärke och att detta är en grundförutsättning för dessa typer av communities. På senare tid har dock en mängd forskare uppmärksammat att det även är möjligt för företag att utveckla OBCs. Med andra ord kan alltså företag försöka främja ett sådant kundengagemang genom att vara aktiva inom sociala medier. Utvecklandet av OBCs är därmed beroende av ett strategiskt och välplanerat arbete ifrån företagets sida.

På grund av att OBC-teori utgör en relativt ny del i marknadsföringslitteraturen har föregående studier mestadels fokuserat på varför OBCs uppstår och hur de fungerar, snarare än att försöka förklara hur företag kan utveckla dessa. Denna studie har dock lyckats framställa en verktygslåda med en övergripande

strategi för hur företag bör utveckla OBCs. Modellen fick namnet *The Online Brand Community Wheel* och är tänkt att fungera som ett verktyg för marknadsförare som vill skapa ett OBC. Modellen skapades genom att sammankoppla tidigare akademisk litteratur till ett integrerat ramverk för hur OBCs fungerar. I ljus av detta ramverk genomfördes sedan empiriska studier för att utsätta dessa teorier för stress. De empiriska studierna utgjordes av ett flertal expertintervjuer där personer med erfarenhet ifrån utvecklade av OBCs eller marknadsföring inom sociala medier medverkade. Det genomfördes dessutom en mindre undersökning bland konsumenter för att undersöka deras internetbeteende.

Resultaten ifrån dessa studier låg till grund för modellen nedan (se *The Online Brand Community Wheel*). Det huvudsakliga målet när företag utvecklar OBCs är att nå en så kallad co-creation miljö där konsumenter bidrar med extra värde till företagets erbjudanden. För att uppnå en sådan miljö måste dock ett företag genomgå ett antal steg. Först och främst måste företag genomgå en förberedelsefas som innehåller tre kritiska aspekter. När ett företag genomgått denna förberedelsefas är de redo att börja utveckla en OBC-strategi med målet att skapa en co-creation miljö. För att uppnå en djupare förståelse för vad som krävs för att lyckas utveckla ett OBC och därmed förbereda sig för att driva ett OBC måste

de tre kritiska aspekterna övervägas systematiskt.

Få insikt i dina kunders onlinebeteende

Den första aspekten handlar om att företag måste lära känna sina kunder och deras internetbeteende på djupet. Marknadsförare måste inneha en god förståelse för vad deras kunder får ut av att besöka eller delta i communityt. Vad är det för extra värde som är tänkt att skapas i ditt OBC? Studien identifierade ett antal generella kundfokuserade fördelar som skapar värde, såsom minskad osäkerhet vid köpbeslut, utökad information om varumärket, möjligheter att forma sin identitet, inspiration för användande av varumärkets produkter och tjänster etc. Vidare måste marknadsförare undersöka vad som motiverar deras konsumenter att delta i ett OBC. En mängd underliggande psykologiska faktorer bidrar till att individer deltar i OBCs, såsom självupptäckt och en strävan efter erkännande. Men även andra mindre komplexa motiv såsom, en vilja att influera ett varumärke, möjligheter att träffa nya vänner och möjligheten att få en belöning ligger till grund för deltagande. Att känna till dessa fördelar och motiv är grundläggande för att kunna utveckla ett OBC. Om konsumenterna inte får ut ett extra värde av att delta i ditt community kommer de inte heller att vilja bli medlemmar.



Förberedelsefasen och dess tre aspekter

Förstå innebörden av OBC-relaterade investeringar

Nästa aspekt rör företagets egna roll i communityt och de investeringar som är nödvändiga vid utvecklandet av ett OBC. Tidigare OBC-relaterade studier underskattar ofta företagets engagemang och involvering i OBCs. Under expertintervjuerna framgick det att OBCs kräver väldigt mycket engagemang ifrån företag, speciellt i inledningsfasen. Även om sociala medier innebär användargenererat material kommer företagsgenererat material visa sig vara en nödvändighet för att communityt ska hållas aktivt och överleva. Dessutom verkar det finnas en generell uppfattning att sociala medier erbjuder ”marknadskommunikation till låga kostnader”, ett påstående som är väldigt missvisande. Det krävs en hel del resurser för att hålla OBCs vid liv. För ett företag som vill utveckla ett välfungerande OBC krävs det att personer anställs som enbart arbetar med communityt. Positioner som nämndes under expertintervjuerna var content editors, community mavens, curators och community managers. Content editors är kreativa personer som kan generera relevant och intressant material att publicera i communityt. Community mavens och curators är personer som kan lokalisera och medverka i konsumenters diskussioner, personer som medlemmarna ser upp till och som har en viss status inom communityt. Sist men inte minst, community managern som ser till att den överhängande strategin följs och att innehållet i communityt är i linje med vad varumärket vill kommunicera.

Utveckla en content strategy

När de två ovanstående aspekterna har övervägts är det dags för företaget att utveckla en content strategy. Det som då bör övervägas är communityts innehåll vad avser kvalitet, relevans och trovärdighet.

Precis som föregående aspekt tog upp, krävs det en hel del engagemang och företagsgenererat innehåll för att bibehålla aktivitet i communityt. Det bör därför också finnas en tydlig content strategy där företaget har planerat vad för slags innehåll som ska publiceras i communityt. För att innehållet ska hålla så hög kvalitet som möjligt måste företagen mer eller mindre börja agera som journalister där relevant och intressant material genereras (content editors). Det är också viktigt att företaget delvis styr konsumenternas bidrag och diskussioner för att nå en så bra kvalitet på innehållet som möjligt. Det kan till exempel vara lämpligt att uppföra vissa regler och policys för communityt så att diskussionerna inte går överstyr och blir stötande, rasistiska etc.

När företag har tagit sig igenom förberedelsefasen blir nästa steg att utforma en strategi för utvecklandet av sitt OBC. Modellen går därmed vidare till att beröra strategiska riktlinjer för hur företag bäst ska kunna skapa en miljö där ett OBC och värdeskapande co-creation kan utvecklas.

Definiera omfattningen av ditt OBC

Det första steget går ut på att definiera communityts omfattning. Ska företagen enbart fokusera på sina varumärken eller ska kundernas behov vara i centrum? I denna fråga var experterna helt eniga, för många företag kan bli svårt att basera ett OBC kring ett varumärke då detta oftast kräver väldigt starka varumärken eller komplexa produkter/tjänster. Att fokusera på kundernas behov och perifera behov sågs istället som ett attraktivare val då innehållet kan anpassas utefter konsumenternas intressen och därmed locka en större målgrupp. IKEA valde till exempel att fokusera deras community, ”Livet Hemma”, kring inredning och design snarare än själva varumärket IKEA. För Panduro Hobbys del var det inspiration och kreativitet som stod i centrum,

där allt slags pysslande var välkommet, oavsett var produkterna var inhandlade. Att främja konsumenternas behov och skapa ett community kring detta ska därför nog övervägas. Däremot kan det vara svårt att täcka hela behovet själv, vilket betyder att diskussionerna kan bli lidande. Företag måste här se över om samarbete med andra företag/expertter kan generera ett mer komplett erbjudande till medlemmarna. IKEA har valt att vid vissa tillfällen ta in inredningsexpertter som fått dela med sig av sina tips samt att samarbeta med ett annat företag för Livet Hemmas "köp och sälj"-avdelning. Sådana samarbeten kan vara otroligt viktiga för att bredda omfattningen av communityt och därmed göra det mer värdefullt för konsumenten.

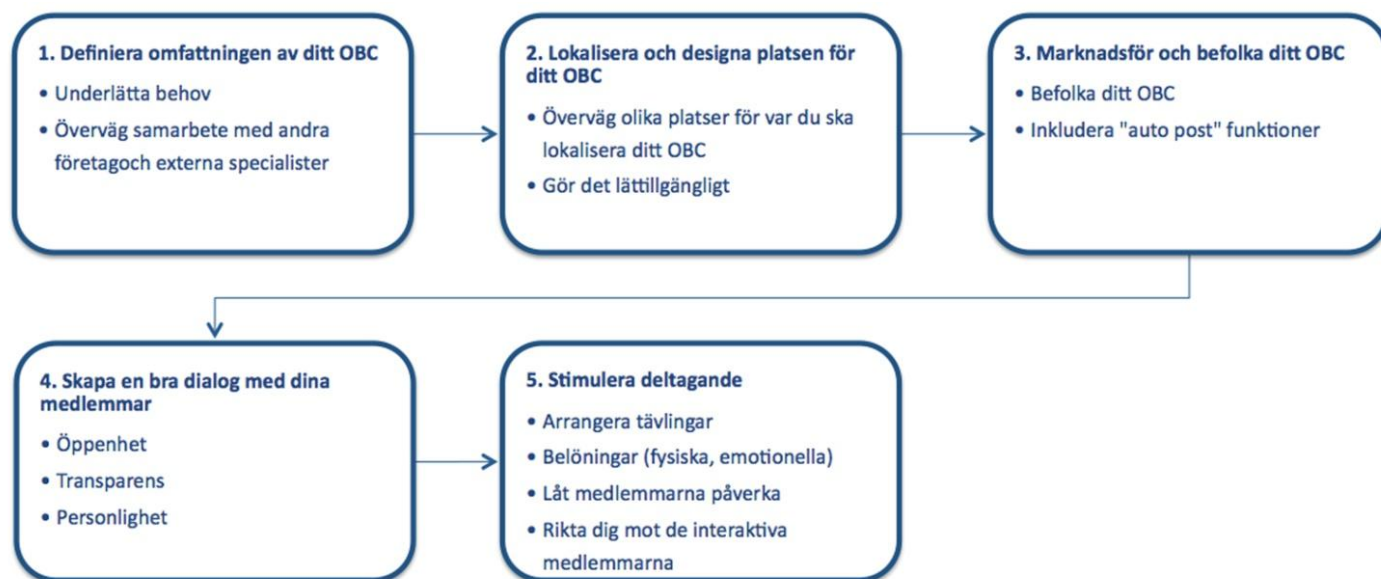
Lokalisera och designa platsen för ditt OBC

Steg två är att välja och designa själva platsen där communityt ska figurera. Företag har egentligen två val när det kommer till att lokalisera en plats för sitt community. Antingen lokaliseras communityt på en egen webbsida eller så skapas communityt på en befintlig social nätverkssajt såsom Facebook. Idag figurerar många företag på just Facebook då det är

den vanligaste och enklaste lösningen. Några intervjuade experter varnade dock för att lansera OBCs på Facebook då sådana sidor ofta kan vara väldigt begränsande. Genom att skapa sin egen webbsida skaffar sig företaget större friheter att utforma communityt efter konsumenternas behov. Detta kan dock vara betydligt dyrare än att skapa communityt via Facebook där design och funktionalitet redan är färdigutvecklade. Viktigast av allt är dock att göra communityt lättillgängligt för konsumenterna och medlemmarna. Att skapa en "smartphone" applikation där deltagande ifrån mobilen blir möjligt är därför att föredra.

Marknadsför och befolka ditt OBC

Det tredje steget går ut på att marknadsföra och befolka communityt. Det har visat sig vara väldigt viktigt att snabbt befolka communityt för att initiera aktivitet bland konsumenterna. I början är det därför extremt viktigt att företagen bidrar med intressanta diskussioner som lockar folk till att delta. Vidare är så kallade "auto-post" funktioner väldigt lämpliga för att överlåta själva marknadsförandet av communityt till användarna. Genom att länka "auto-



De fem stegen för en OBC strategi

posts” till andra populära medier kan medlemmarna propagera communityt och locka fler besökare.

Skapa en bra dialog med dina medlemmar

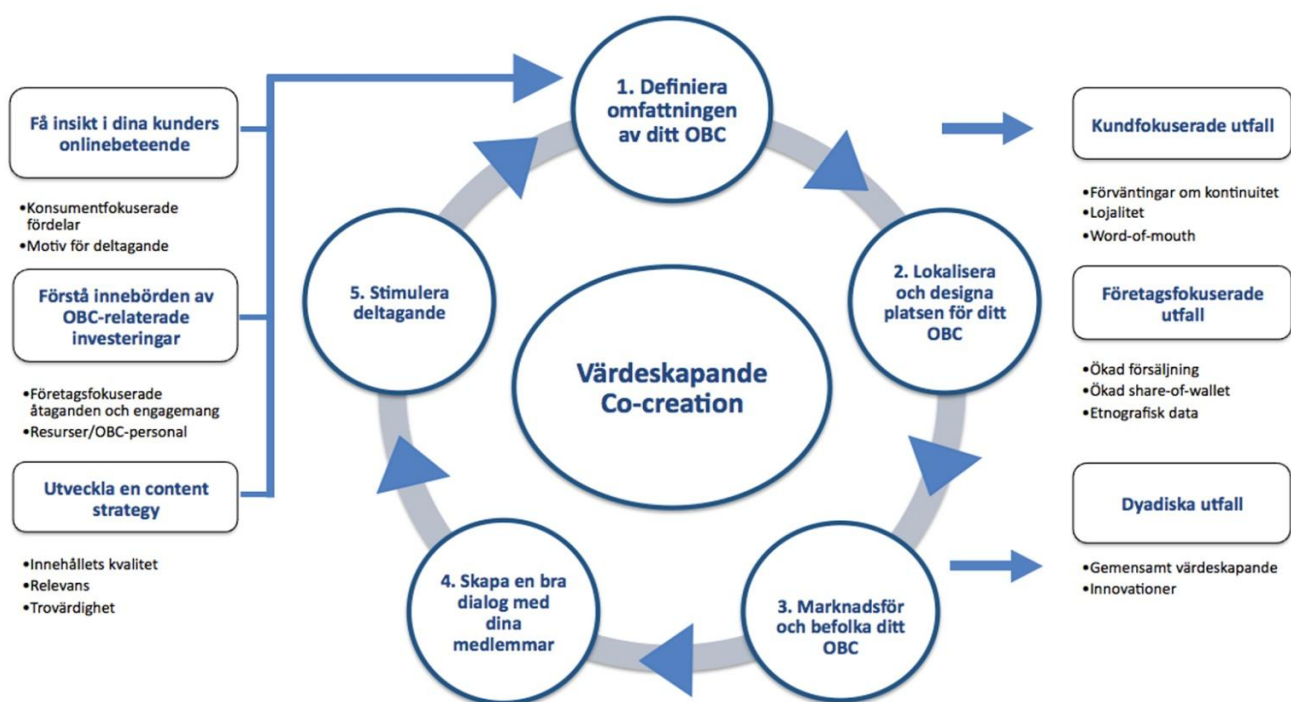
Steg fyra handlar om att skapa en bra dialog med medlemmarna, där öppenhet, transparens och personlighet är ledorden. Företag måste våga släppa lite på kontrollen och låta medlemmarna ge nytt liv åt varumärket. Det framkom också i studien att företag borde presentera personerna bakom varumärket, dvs. personalen. Det är dock viktigt att visa att dessa personer är representanter för varumärket, vilket lättast kan göras med att använda varumärkets logotyp i bakgrunden. Att bygga en relation till en okänd avsändare är väldigt svårt. Genom att visa personerna bakom kan konsumenterna bilda sig en uppfattning om vem de talar med och på så sätt utveckla en mer personlig relation med företaget.

Stimulera deltagande

Det sista steget i processen berör hur företag kan stimulera ett ökat deltagande. Detta visade sig vara lättast genom att arrangera tävlingar, ge belöningar

och låta medlemmarna få en känsla av att de faktiskt kan påverka genom att visa att deras åsikter tas på allvar. Det ska dock tydliggöras att belöningar inte nödvändigtvis behöver vara av fysisk eller monetär natur, de kan likaväl vara emotionella. ”Badging” kan därför vara ett fullgott exempel på belöningar. Genom att dela ut ”badges” när medlemmarna gjort något speciellt eller vid speciella tillfällen skapas incitament till att delta. Detta blir ett kostnadseffektivt sätt att dela ut belöningar som skapar status inom communityt och ger medlemmarna någonting att sträva efter. Vidare bör företag rikta sig till de mest aktiva medlemmarna i deras försök att stimulera deltagande. Detta kan till exempel göras genom att skicka testprodukter till de mest aktiva användarna och låta dem utvärdera dessa i communityt. Sådana aktiviteter leder till ökad aktivitet från medlemmarna samtidigt som informationen som genereras blir användbar för andra konsumenter.

Slutligen bör alltså dessa fem steg leda till en co-creation miljö som i sin tur genererar en rad positiva utfall såsom ökad lojalitet, större spridning av positiv word-of-mouth och därmed ökad försäljning.



The Online Brand Community Wheel

