



Online Brand Communities: Drivers and Barriers of Participation

Natalia Iudakova

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences

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Abstract

Author Natalia Iudakova
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<p>The online audience has become an important factor to be considered by different types of organizations. With the digitalization trend covering almost all spheres of human activities, there is a growing interest in the forces that define the digital audience's thoughts and movements. As many companies set their brand representatives online, it is important to understand better the phenomenon of online brand communities, explore the available knowledge considering the fast-changing nature of digital surroundings, and reveal drivers and barriers affecting active community participation.</p> <p>The objective of the thesis was to define the concept of the online brand community, summarize and collect the state-of-the-art knowledge on drivers and barriers to active participation through desk study and focus group interview methods and give practical recommendations for organizations to engage community members more effectively.</p> <p>The thesis starts with a thematic analysis of the desk study data set and proceeds with validation of the findings using the data obtained from an online focus group interview. The definitions and types of online brand communities are combined in the results. The main motivations to actively participate in online communities are divided into four groups: social motivations deriving from fundamental socio-psychological theories, brand-related factors of loyalty and commitment, interest in social activism and need for change, and other individualistic motives based on personal traits. The barriers to active participation were classified as negativity to a brand, environmental factors, and cultural differences.</p> <p>The topic of "lurkers" was additionally explored to better understand the behavior and reasons of the inactiveness of the lurking majority of online community participants. The analysis revealed several facilitation strategies that might be used to engage less active members in community participation. These strategies include developing technological and psychological environments, indicating the importance of the expected action, enhancing user-user interactions, covering privacy and safety concerns, and considering personal preferences of the target groups.</p> <p>The thesis approach is constructive research that studies existing theoretical concepts and case studies to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of online brand communities and the drivers and barriers of belonging and participating in them. The findings are validated through discussing them further in an online focus group interview.</p> <p>Summarized practical recommendations are given for organizations looking to engage community members in active participation.</p>
Keywords online communities, community participation, online brand communities

Table of contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Objectives	4
1.2 Research questions.....	5
2. Theoretical Framework.....	6
2.1 Definitions of online brand communities	6
2.2 Types of online brand communities	8
2.2.1 Owned by brand and self-organized communities.....	8
2.2.2 Pro-brand and opposing brand communities.....	9
2.2.3 Communities by types of activities	10
2.2.4 Communities of thematic interest and other types of online collectives	11
2.3 Motivations and drivers to participate in online brand communities	12
2.3.1 Socio-psychological motivations, relevant social theories	12
2.3.2 Individual motivations and characteristics	14
2.3.3 Brand loyalty and organizational commitment.....	16
2.3.4 Cause-related marketing and social online activism.....	17
2.3.5 Motivations of posters and lurkers.....	17
2.4 Barriers of effective online collaboration	18
2.4.1 Brand perceived negatively.....	18
2.4.2 Task complexity and unsafe surroundings	18
2.4.3 Cultural and ethnographic differences.....	19
3. Methodology.....	20
3.1 Research approach.....	21
3.2 Methods of data collection and analysis	22
3.2.1 Desk research.....	23
3.2.2 Focus group interview	42
4. Results	49
4.1 Online brand communities: definitions.....	51
4.2 Brand-owned, self-organized, and oppositional online communities.....	52
4.3 Decisive factors behind active participation in online communities:	54
4.3.1 Social psychology or we need groups.....	55
4.3.2 Brand or organization commitment	57
4.3.3 Social activism: need for change and action	59
4.3.4 The personality: people are different.....	60
4.4 Barriers to participation	62
4.4.1 Brand-related reasons of negativity.....	62

4.4.2	Human nature and cultural differences as reasons to stay inactive	63
4.4.3	Environmental barriers: content, security, usability.....	64
4.5	The significant lurkers: facilitation and activation strategies.....	65
5.	Discussion.....	71
5.1	Key outcomes	71
5.2	Suggestions for companies	74
5.3	Evaluation of the development task.....	77
5.4	Limitations and future research topics	78
5.5	Learning outcomes.....	78
References	80

1. Introduction

With the digitalization of different human activities, the way people communicate and build networks is also changing. A significant number of academic papers related to online social life appeared in recent decades aiming to explore this new digital space and the way people behave in these constantly changing surroundings. Businesses and brands that pioneered in understanding the enormous power of digitalization in informational post-industrial society and the growing importance of building communities became an object of interest for researchers. According to the traditional concept definition, brand communities are specific groups based on social connections among brand admirers with no geographical bounds (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Several motivations to join online brand communities have been identified, including social relations and interest in the brand itself (Zaglia, 2013).

At the same time, the story of social groups and crowds is as old as humanity. Accordingly, there is a fundamental knowledge in social sciences in place defining the main concepts and definitions of traditional social groups and formations developed by more recent practical sources. From the linkage between opinion and masses of people as discussed in Gabriel de Tarde's "The Public and the Crowd" (1910) to the specific recommendations for value-driven brands put forth by marketing experts Sarkar and Kotler (2020) willing to engage the audience through brand activism. We also see many empirical data collected while researching social groups of different types, from local community gardening with heartwarming family stories (Kingsley, Foenander and Bailey, 2019) with calming collective initiatives to #MeToo social movement that spread all over the world with an extremely high level of engagement in social media (Hong and Kim, 2021).

Through the existing knowledge and practical experience, we can see that online communities can drive both positive and negative social changes. Several studies examine the professional online communities and social movements: widely popular social commerce (Algharabat and Rana, 2021) on various digital networking platforms and social movements of gig workers standing for their rights (Wood *et al.*, 2019). In many such cases, a person alone would have a low chance of standing for their rights, but with the support of a community, changes are happening, and voices are often heard. The digital society is changing and growing, and it has become a driving and important social power that can play a significant role not only online but also offline.

There are challenges these days that cannot be ignored: environmental concerns, worker exploitation, wars, computational and content propaganda online and offline, democracy threats, societal polarization and extremism, pro-natal rhetoric, and gender rights. The responsible digital citizenship behavior could be the way to keep society balanced and sustainable. Online communities have proved their capability of taking real action and achieving real results.

But what are the motivations and hidden powers that unite people online and drive actions, and what are the barriers? As mentioned before, businesses often show outstanding results in building effective online brand communities, gathering people around their interests and actions. In research, the motivations of customers to engage in brand communities are analyzed through psychological and social theories and the knowledge is often incorporated into marketing campaigns. There are different approaches to understanding the motivations of online audiences to engage and participate in online communities. Proponents of social identity theory empirically present such motivations as similarities with other members and related to emotional involvement with a group (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005). Other studies regard cultural differences as being an important factor affecting the ways in which a person participates online (Park and McMillan, 2017). Speaking of social movements the theory of collective identity is often presented as appealing to human collective feelings, e.g. “workers”, “citizens of...” (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). These concepts refer mostly to “we” identification in comparison with “I” identification. At the same time the concept of Slacktivism is introduced and often discussed in relation to online activism (Rotman *et al.*, 2011), some researchers also referring to non-effective “sofa” clicktivism. There are also studies which empirically prove the link between online and offline activism (Smith, Krishna and Al-Sinan, 2019).

To help companies engage community members more effectively, there is a need to look into both motivations and drivers discussed in both traditional socio-psychological theories and in empirical online brand community research. Most of the existing research studies are focused on specific cases, purchasing intentions, and brand loyalty, not providing any structured analysis or classification of motives and barriers affecting active community participation.

There is a need to summarize both motivations coming from traditional socio-psychological theories and drivers collected from empirical online brand community research to a common system that could help companies engage community members more effectively. Most of the existing research studies are focused on specific cases and purchasing intentions and brand loyalty, not providing structured analysis and classification of motives and barriers to active community participation, to the best of the author's knowledge.

To better understand the phenomenon of brand communities, the thesis explores existing knowledge in research articles and books. A systematic desk research of peer-reviewed articles and case studies (29 high-quality and relevant research articles selected from an initial set of 229 research papers) related to online brand communities is conducted.

Additionally, an empirical qualitative study (focus group interview with relevant target group members) is carried out to discuss the key results of the desk research and to better understand some

of the socio-psychological stimuli that drive community members to engage and participate in long-term community activities.

This thesis is organized with a constructive approach, building on existing knowledge and summarizing socio-psychological and personal motivations together with common barriers regarding online community activities and participation. The structure of the thesis is organized around a set of research questions with the idea of summarizing existing knowledge and collecting valuable insights. The methods used are:

- A desk research with qualitative thematic analysis of existing relevant peer-reviewed literature with empirical case study data;
- a semi-structured focus group interview of 6 participants conducted online.

The first part of the thesis provides a brief overview of existing concepts of online brand communities, types, activities, and main motivations presented in the research papers. Based on the literature review, concept definitions are discussed. There is a separate part with valuable summarized recommendations for companies to build engaging brand communities, the specific proposals are coming from the existing literature set with practical empirical data collected and accordingly analyzed for business purposes.

Further on, the methodology is described in detail, including data collection and analysis methods, considering the qualitative nature of the thematic analysis carried out. The planning and implementation of an online focus group interview is also described with relevant theory background.

The main results are presented in the section Results answering the research questions one by one. The topic that was not initially set in the questions but raised based on the literature analysis concerns the so-called "lurking majority". Marketeers are familiar with the 90-9-1 concept, which states that 1 percent is creating content online, 9 percent is commenting or liking other's content, while 90 percent of the audience are consuming content and not actively participating in the community (Giermindl, 2018). Still, many of these people are watching and reading content daily. They even might discuss it with their friends and family or perform some other relevant and active steps, but we can only witness the steps of the community page where the content was initially posted. Researchers agree on the importance of this majority and try to identify their motivations and needs, aiming to find ways to activate their participation in the community (Mousavi, Roper and Keeling, 2017).

During the focus group interview key topics and findings of the desk research phase were discussed with the interview participants, including:

- their motivations to participate online, with specific real-life examples

- barriers and concerns stopping community members from engaging in discussions
- their own activeness and frequency of online participation (background question).

The Results section presents key findings and illustrative quotations from the focus group interview. The last part of the thesis provides critical reflections on the research process and results, ending with a reflection on learning outcomes and a conclusion.

This thesis was written as part of a larger seminar group and commissioned by Haaga-Helia UAS.

According to the supervisor's formulation:

“The commissioning party to this Master Thesis was an international consortium of 11 beneficiary organizations and 6 associated partner organizations engaged in the planning and creation of an EU-funded RDI project proposal during the academic year 2023-2024. The consortium members represented higher education institutions, business enterprises, social enterprises, vocational education and training providers, incubator service providers, and sectoral associations from altogether seven European countries (Finland, Portugal, Sweden, Czechia, Belgium, Türkiye, and Germany). The supervisor of the thesis worked as the lead coordinator and project manager of the EU project consortium. There were altogether three Master Thesis writers from Haaga-Helia UAS involved in carrying out background research supporting the preparation of the EU project proposal. The three thesis writers and the supervisor formed a seminar group that met up regularly during the entire research and report writing process.”

The topics studied by the seminar group of thesis writers were transformational and democratic leadership in companies, the roles of leadership and employees in corporate social activism, and the drivers and barriers of participation in online brand communities. The thesis author's role was to explore the online brand community topic, concentrating on motivations and barriers to long-term active participation of members in various types of community activities.

1.1 Objectives

Online brand communities are a part of digital business transformation. Using these digital groups of people businesses can communicate and understand better their customers and empower brand loyalty or societally important responsible citizenship behavior among community members. It is important to reveal the main motivations that drive community participants to be active together and to identify and analyse the barriers that stop people from engaging in communities. This knowledge can be useful for companies in their business activities but also when they engage in

cause-related marketing or want to encourage social activism and responsible citizenship through their online brand communities.

1.2 Research questions

The thesis aims to achieve the following outcomes:

- 1) Concept definitions and classifications of online brand communities
- 2) A summary of the main drivers and barriers of effective cooperation in online brand communities arising from theory, the desk study articles, and focus group interview
- 3) Practical recommendations to online brand community managers intending to involve participants in active engagement.

Online social movements are not analyzed in the thesis, being other types of online social formations. The thesis is concentrated on online brand communities as they are defined in the existing research on the subject.

Based on the objectives and expected outcomes above, the thesis aims to find answers to the following research questions:

Q1: How is the concept of online brand community defined? (selected desk study articles)

Q2: What types of brand communities are there? (selected desk study articles)

Q3: What drivers of participation in online brand communities can be identified? (theory + desk study articles + empirical primary data)

Q4: What barriers to active participation in online brand communities can be identified? (desk study articles + empirical primary data)

2. Theoretical Framework

The main themes discussed in the thesis are 1) the definition and classification of online brand communities, 2) possible drivers of active participation in such online communities, and 3) possible barriers that prevent members from becoming active community participants.

2.1 Definitions of online brand communities

The idea of brand community is initially presented in the existing literature as a community with its shared traditional rituals, consciousness, and sense of responsibility, being non-related to the geographic structure and based on the relations among admirers of a specific brand (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The online presence of such communities has been proven and several motivations to join online brand communities have been identified, including social relations and interest in the brand itself (Zaglia, 2013). Researchers have collected empirical data from different online brand communities of well-known companies e.g. Harley Davidson, Mercedes, Zara, Levi's, Pepsi and others in order to better understand the participation intentions (Kumar, 2022).

Brand communities, on one hand, are social groups based on relations among members. On the other hand, these groups show specific characteristics, due to the different nature of their initial formation around commercial brands and specific interests.

Another formulated definition of brand communities emphasizes the engagement, collective goals, and mutual feelings among admirers and consumers of a specific brand. The important characteristics of such communities are the developed social identity among members and the measured community integration level defined by the relationships between brands, customers, products and companies (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

As for their time of existence, brand communities are considered to be a long-term social formation in comparison with short-term brand tribes that form around a certain interest and disappear together with a disappearance of this short-term interest flash. At the same time, such brand tribes tend to have a high level of importance for their members in comparison with the commercial nature of brand communities. Brand tribes can emerge and disappear within short episodes, without strong social connections among members once the interest to a brand gets weaker (Ruane and Wallace, 2015). Thus, it is important to distinguish online brand communities from other non-organized social tribes to encourage social group practices within such communities.

With the digitalization of commercial activities and rising importance of social networks, research tends to be looking at brand communities and social networks at the same time, analysing their combined existence in the digital surroundings. It is noticeable that the existing literature

approaches the activeness of online brand community participants in terms of discussions about brand and sharing experience and knowledge. Belonging to a specific brand community increases the members' sense of social identity, thus pointing to the traditional social group theories. The research shows the link of online brand communities with traditional communities, and the existence of community markers, such as social identity and self-categorization among members in online brand communities. (Zaglia, 2013).

Even though communication among members in online brand communities is mostly organized through digital means, the sense of belonging to a community, social cooperation and resulting social identification are visible among participants.

“The more people participate, the greater the opportunities to interact and develop relationships: the consumers create the community through their participation” (Cova and White, 2010, p.259).

Further on in the thesis, online brand communities can be referred to as OBC (online brand communities), which is an abbreviation quite often used in the relevant research literature as well.

Looking back to the general social group concepts, some researchers investigate online specifics of traditional communities of interest. Despite their informal structure and non-specified codes of conduct online communities still show specific institutional characteristics leading to certain social identities (Dolata and Schrape, 2016). The digital transformation of social groups and social movements and their transition to online networks do not cancel the rules of classic social theories but expand them with the new technical characteristics of the newly formed online publics. Instead of technology alone, institutionalization, collective values, group identity are the decisive distinctive factors among non-organized and organized social collectives online, online brand communities representing organized social collectives.

Technology opens new ways of interaction both for community members and brand-owners, including sharing user-generated content, setting “likes” to brands or other community members, thus increasing the possibility to cooperate and actively engage online (Relling *et al.*, 2016). However, as mentioned before, the community is more a social structure than a technical creation: the fundamental characteristics of a community is the social connection between people.

2.2 Types of online brand communities

Online brand communities can be different, with different organizational structures, different common interests and intentions, and different activities organized. The classification is not always obvious as digital social formations are quite diverse in their activities and codes of conduct. In this chapter, several types of OBC are described based on the relevant literature.

2.2.1 Owned by brand and self-organized communities

Brand communities are usually organized by companies with the idea of promoting brand loyalty and encouraging customers' participation in company marketing activities, but there are also specific cases where self-organized communities were formed by brand admirers independently. Such communities are not exclusive and can exist in parallel and for long periods of time. There are well-known communities both company-run and self-organized, such as those related to Lego or Moto Guzzi (Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou, 2020).

Based on the desk research data there are differences in customers' perception of brand communities initiated and run by brand managers and self-organized brand communities. Members of brand-driven communities often see a profit-making purpose in most of the initiatives and can show a lower level of individual participation considering the self-preservation and privacy requirements of community members (Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou, 2020). Consumer-run brand communities are typically gathering around a need to share information about the brand and make social connections with other brand admirers. On the other side, these self-organized communities may result in some risks to companies due to their own manner of brand representation.

Due to the different structure and institutional characteristics of these two types of brand communities, they might be beneficial in accordingly different ways to the brand-owning companies. Speaking of firm-owned communities, we may think of direct financial results due to increased sales of products and services as a result of different marketing initiatives and brand loyalty increase within such groups of consumers. At the same time, the importance of consumer-run brand communities cannot and should not be underestimated. These groups often increase brand awareness, spread word of mouth, and improve overall customer trust and linkage to a brand due to the natural and unsupervised type of social connections within such OBC. Another benefit is the high potential of innovation based on customer insights and knowledge sharing among community members, who are often acting both as creators and testers of new ideas (Kucharska, 2019).

However, brands need to understand that self-organized brand communities can be a risky alter-ego type of brand online representation and perception by existing and potential customers. There are cases when as a result of online co-creation and active participation in brand activities

consumers see the brand as a shared cultural asset more than as an owned by a company's individual property. In the context of alter-communities and online competitiveness, a Warhammer fan community case in France presented a good example. The self-organized online community members doubted the brand ownership and even manufactured their own branded items and sold them online (Cova and White, 2010).

According to the desk research data set, self-organized brand communities often show higher levels of participation in community life and activities and increase a sense of commitment to the group. However, they can also constitute a risky and competing online power to the brand owners.

2.2.2 Pro-brand and opposing brand communities

In terms of community members' attitudes to a brand, there are pro-brand and opposing-brand online communities. The first ones are owned by a company representing the brand or self-organized by brand admirers. The latter type is exclusively initiated by brand consumers, quite often based on a negative experience or a desire to criticize the brand. Such anti-brand organized collectives can be involved in wide anti-brand movements and they often parody and criticize brand initiatives. The members are often motivated by their own negative experiences with the brand or want to express their disapproval of a brand's corporate actions (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2020).

The opposing brand communities demonstrate the traditional characteristic of gathering around a brand, while expressing a negative attitude towards the company owning the brand. Members of such consumer-initiated online brand communities often feel ownership for a brand and create competing marketing campaigns and even their own products directly opposing those of the companies (Cova and White, 2010). In addition to traditional communities initiated by companies in order to promote brand loyalty and marketing campaigns among brand consumers, there are also self-organized pro-brand online communities gathered around their favorite brand with a desire to share knowledge and experience and build social ties among community members. These communities typically show a higher level of connections and trust among members as they practice a lack of supervision and moderation by the brand owner.

Pro-brand and opposing-brand self-organized communities can initiate their own campaigns of various types. One example described in the desk research data is the so-called "buycott" and "boycott" purchasing behavior. One of such examples described in the research papers is the so-called "buycott" and "boycott" purchasing behavior. Buycotters usually reward companies for their responsible societal behavior by intentionally buying their products and services (Hutter, Hoffmann and Mai, 2016). For example, carrotmobs are subtypes of such pro-brand behavior organized by

community activists. The opposing boycotting activity, in turn, is a demonstration of consumers' disapproval of a brand's initiatives and actions exposed as an intentional non-buy or buy-from-a-competitor behavior. Through digital channels, such community-organized campaigns can spread widely and result in serious consequences for a brand.

Overall, in the digitalized e-commerce market the perception of a brand by society and consumer community becomes even more important and directly affects a company's sustainability and profitability. While company-organized pro-brand communities are controlled and moderated by a brand representative, another type of communities exist and live independently. These are online self-organized anti-brand communities. They need to be acknowledged by brand-owning companies, which need to understand the risks and possibilities of such online brand communities.

2.2.3 Communities by types of activities

Online brand communities can also be classified depending on the types of activities most common within a community. Different socialization techniques forming the basis of typical community activities are used to engage members. Three main groups are distinguished in the research papers as a result of grouping different types of socializing activities:

- members' education typically initialized by a firm
- interaction and support driven by peer members
- community participation feedback to encourage members to appreciate rules and values of a community (Liao, Huang and Xiao, 2017).

Another robust classification is done based on the main goals: functional and social. While functional intentions adopt such community participation goals as helping members to accomplish certain functions, the social benefits are related to building social ties and networking. (Roy Bhattacharjee, Pradhan and Swani, 2021). This distinction is similar to the empirically observed classification of online brand communities of automobile brands with division into four categories (Park and McMillan, 2017):

- business
- information
- communication
- social network orientation.

A specific type of online community activity widely discussed in the desk research data was the protest activity. In the academic literature, three types of collective online protests are distinguished: e-mobilizations where online tools are primarily used to drive offline protests, e-movements where the whole opposing process is organized and happening online, and e-tactics when

there is a combination of both online and offline actions take place (e.g. petitions signing) (Dolata and Schrape, 2016). Carrotmobs, boycotts, and buycotts are also subgroups of such online coordinated collective actions representing the consumer community demonstrating their approval or disapproval of brand actions. Sometimes the intention to join such a protesting community may come from personal experience, sometimes driven by a brand campaign or position not accepted by a consumer society. It is important to distinguish between short-term online social movements of individuals sharing the same intentions at the moment and long-term online communities with an existent structure, rules, and code of conduct.

Another widely spread and discussed type of online community is a production and co-creation-oriented online social formation, such as Wikipedia, Linux, or WordPress. Such communities typically have a well-organized structure, set codes of conduct, and a high level of social identity among members. These are usually long-term and stable communities with highly engaged members. There are many examples of such communities online, we may think of communities of coders, web designers, marketplace sellers, and cybersport gamers.

It is important to mention that in all kinds of activities of online communities, be it review posting, files sharing, social networks (Facebook) or engaging in online protests (Anonymous), there is a constant new feature: technology that not only simplifies the connection among members but also sets specific rules for each tech platform (Dolata and Schrape, 2016). This permanent digital component allows the voice and activities of any community spread fast and on a global scale.

2.2.4 Communities of thematic interest and other types of online collectives

Speaking of types of digital social formations observed online, they can be divided into 1) non-organized collectives (e.g. digital masses and crowds) that show collective decision-making capacity and typically an aggregated individualistic action and 2) collective actors (e.g. online communities) that make collective decisions via voting or negotiation and take strategic collective actions (Dolata and Schrape, 2016). The phenomenon of non-organized general collectives was initially discussed in Collective Behavior theory by H. Blumer (1939). Even if this topic is not addressed in this thesis, Blumer's theory is fundamental for studying the socio-psychological aspects of collective behavior theories, together with Collective Reflexology by Bekhterev (1921) and *L'opinion et la Foule* by Gabriel de Tarde (1910).

On the opposite side are the collective actors, such as online brand and other communities, showing an institutional structure, set of rules, shared common practices, and a high level of social identity among community members. Some research papers in the desk research data set showed that the sense of connection is stronger within the community itself than in relation to the admired

brand. A significant part of the academic papers studied explored the so-called “communities of interest”. They were classified as several types of online groups (Dolata and Schrape, 2016):

- Communities of professionals in certain domains sharing their competence
- Communities of practice where people deal with similar professional challenges
- Brand communities of specifically brand admirers
- Subversive communities who use tech in unlawful ways.

To sum up, those research papers that divided online brand communities into company-initiated and self-organized communities pointed out that online brand communities are not only traditional spaces online representative of the brand, but they may also take the form of self-organized brand opposers or fan clubs (see Chapter 2.2.1 and 2.2.2). Further, online brand communities can consist of a community of professionals (WordPress web designers), communities of practice (Amazon sellers, Uber gig workers), and even subversive types of communities with unlawful intentions.

2.3 Motivations and drivers to participate in online brand communities

There is a significant body of research related to motivations that encourage community members to actively participate in the community and especially to react to brand marketing initiatives and express brand loyalty. In this chapter, we will go through the main motivating factors.

2.3.1 Socio-psychological motivations, relevant social theories

Several theories coming from traditional social psychology science are often discussed in the research literature regarding the motivations of online brand community members to participate in such groups. The social theories the most often mentioned are:

- Social identity theory (SIT)
- Collective identity theory
- Congruity (balance) theory
- Uses and gratification theory
- Social exchange theory
- Social presence theory.

Social identity theory is about the social needs of people. The notion of building one’s social identity is key to explaining common human motivations to become part of a community. People tend to evaluate themselves through their sense of belonging to a certain social group, thus forming the concept of “we” in addition to the existent “I”, self-identifying themselves through the selected social groups and forming the relevant attitude to the other “they” groups. For example, this process was discussed in a study related to brand tribalism of a self-expressive fashion brand in Ireland

that analyzed the way in which brand consumers view their own social identity and belonging to a certain group through participating in brand tribes (Ruane and Wallace, 2015, p.342):

“We suggest that consumers, who express their values and identity through fashion brands, make brand choices to fit in rather than to stand out.”

In the context of brand communities, social identity is seen as a multidimensional paradigm. It includes self-awareness of participation in a certain brand community, commitment to a brand, and importance of being a member of the group directly influencing the behavior towards the brand (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). The main driving power of such communities are the social intentions of community members, their desires and needs. It is important to note that several studies argued that not only active members of online brand communities obtain their social identities through active participation and posting online, but also the less active community members, so-called “lurkers” or “silent readers” also feel themselves as a valuable part of a community with a recognized social identity (Mousavi, Roper and Keeling, 2017). The topic of the lurking majority will be discussed more deeply in Chapter 4.5 of the thesis.

One of the important drivers to actively participate in online activities is explained by the so-called collective identity theory, which underlines the idea that people’s understanding of who they are should correlate with the online community to enable active engagement. Collective identities as such are defined as a human cognitive and emotional link with a broader community (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). In the context of organized online communities, such collective identities have multiple purposes, including reflecting common group ideology, motivating community participants, consolidating a collective action, and exposing the group values externally (Dolata and Schrape, 2016). Again, the decisive and forming factor in the emergence of collective identities in online communities is not purely the technology or specific network, but the fundamental social nature of human interactions and people identifying themselves with a certain group through a formed collective identity.

The congruity theory, in turn, explains the balanced relations between online brand community members and the brands (Islam, Rahman and Hollebeek, 2018). The balance that customers try to maintain while interacting with brands with whom they have had a positive experience affects their brand community perception and vice versa. The expanded theory view uses a triad of the source of communication (S), object or concept of communication (O), and predicted perception (P). Several studies show the importance of values-congruity of consumers and brands to encourage stronger linkage and better cooperation between companies and their customers. As communities build their collective identities through the similarity of values it is crucial to maintain the balance

between brand and customer's values, where values are seen as a belief that a certain mode of conduct is more socially preferred than the others. (Kumar, 2021).

Uses and gratification theory is often used to explain the mass communication strategies both offline and online. According to this theory people select certain media messages based on their goals and possible benefits (Roy Bhattacharjee, Pradhan and Swani, 2021):

- Cognitive benefits related to getting knowledge
- Social benefits obtained through interaction with other community members
- Personal benefits (e.g. self-enhancement, self-expression)
- Hedonic benefits (e.g. pleasure, entertainment).

Accordingly, the decision to participate in an online brand community can be taken based on an individual's evaluation if this specific community helps to reach some of the above-mentioned goals.

Finally, the social exchange theory focuses on the series of interactions among community members and brands that generate in the end certain social obligations (Johnson, Bauer and Carlson, 2022). These interactions are not necessarily direct and short-term, but they may also be of a long-term and societally important nature. Participants constantly evaluate the potential expenses and gains related to interactions with other community members or brands and accordingly decide on the level of their personal level of activeness within a community.

Another important aspect is related to the social capital that an individual collects during his life. Due to international or social movements (e.g. those involving students or immigrants), individuals may find the social bridges they seek in online communities that help people keep their social capital active and growing (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007).

Social presence theory and the need for self-expression are also considered important motivations to participate in online brand communities. One desk research article states that a digital audience can be converted to a loyal brand community by covering the human need for social presence and self-expression. One of the examples can be the popular posting format of so-called "selfies" (Kucharska, 2019).

2.3.2 Individual motivations and characteristics

In addition to the motivations explained through the paradigm of fundamental socio-psychological theories, there are other individual characteristics and motivations observed and identified by researchers through the empirical data collection and exploration of online brand communities. There

are several different personal traits that are seen to affect active community participation (Gazit, 2018):

- Extroversion and desire to draw attention
- Active life position online and offline
- Openness to experience and creativity
- Readiness to share opinions with others
- Perception of the world as a safe place, sense of control
- Desire to influence and a belief this is possible
- Self-efficacy, belief in the importance of own opinion
- Need for reward and reactions
- Relevance of the topic and content to this individual.

A study of motorcycle brand communities in Italy indicated a higher level of participation in and commitment to a consumer-run brand community as compared to a company-run community (Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou, 2020). Several studies showed the importance of the possibility to benefit in self-esteem by being a member of a specific online brand community (Kumar and Kumar, 2020). The exposing nature of online social networks content visible to everyone often resulted in an increase in the personal self-expressive and self-esteem motivation that drives people to become members of specific brand communities and to share their experience by self-expressive posting. In terms of collaboration motivations, there are well-known cases of effective online communities that are driven by co-creation with other members. Such collaboration can result in a structured self-organized community with specific rules and even brands, one key example being Wikipedia.

While some motivations can be considered more of a practical nature, some are driven by human positive emotions of being a part of something societally important or just being a part of some interesting entertaining movement. The case describing carrotmobs revealed situations where some of the flashmob participants did it for fun instead of having any decisive beliefs in the reasons behind the carrotmobs (Hutter, Hoffmann and Mai, 2016).

It is a widely observed phenomenon that negative content, reviews, and discussions are shared online more widely and faster than positive or neutral ones. This situation is also occasionally discussed in the research papers studied. Based on significant empirical data, one study identified 11 motivations to engage in online brand communities (Baldus, Voorhees and Calantone, 2015):

“brand influence, brand passion, connecting, helping, like-minded discussion, rewards (hedonic), rewards (utilitarian), seeking assistance, self-expression, up-to-date information, and validation.”

The study also provided a regression analysis of independent variables (these 11 motivations) with calculated correlations and the ability to predict online brand community participation for these motivations. 8 of the mentioned 11 parameters showed a significant impact on participation intentions in OBC, except for Brand passion, Validation, and Utilitarian rewards.

Such individualistic motivations as self-expressing online, seeking solutions to a specific issue, obtaining a feeling of control through reading the latest news, and having fun appeared to be important drivers of active participation in online brand communities. Some of the mentioned motivations can be explained by socio-psychological theories, some are related to brand loyalty, while others still are more of a personal choice of specific individuals making decisions on their engagement in online brand communities.

2.3.3 Brand loyalty and organizational commitment

Brand loyalty factors are considered to be one of the most important motivations for online brand community members to actively participate in brand initiatives and community life. Several of the research papers studied explored the effects of brand loyalty subtypes on OBC engagement.

Consumer-brand relations have a direct effect on consumers' participation intentions in online brand communities. Many factors build brand loyalty. We may think of positive personal experience, good reputation, trust, local brands' support by in-country consumers, psychological brand ownership due to strong bonds and co-creation activities, and many others. Such characteristics of brand authenticity as trust and credibility, integrity and moral values of a brand, and continuity (a certain level of history of a brand) show a positive effect on relations between brands and customers, resulting in higher level of community engagement and participation (Kumar, 2022).

Brand loyalty is also the main driving factor of consumer activism and can encourage customers to search for more information about a case discussed and even neglect the effect of task difficulty when an action is required (Johnson, Bauer and Carlson, 2022). When value-congruity is in place between brand and consumer values, the consumer community can function as brand advocates, support brand societal initiatives, and spread positive word-of-mouth. One non-obvious fact described in the literature studied was that members of anti-brand communities also participate in pro-brand groups. Despite their brand negativity, they are still interested in recent news about the company and the possibility to share their experience and thoughts (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2020).

Research of active brand participation shows the importance of self-identification of an online brand community member in social networks as the driving factor. A combination of personal branding, brand community self-identification, and brand loyalty were shown to co-exist in a

symbiotic way in one study based on both theoretical research and empirical data based on 712+38 young respondents in Facebook (Confente and Kucharska, 2021). The nature and outcomes of self-identification with a brand community are profoundly investigated in different academic papers and marketing studies. At the same time, some researchers underline the importance of brand loyalty in comparison with the social needs and intentions of consumers.

2.3.4 Cause-related marketing and social online activism

One of the described motivations in the selected literature set is the need to change the existing situation. The Facebook group Indignant Citizens in Greece was started by a student and obtained over 100,000 followers on the first day. The core uniting power was dissatisfaction with the way the economic crisis was addressed by existing organizational powers. People felt a collective spirit, valuable social connections, satisfaction of belonging, and the ability to act together and to search for solutions together. (Yannopoulou *et al.*, 2019).

We see a growing number of social motivations to engage online, including environmental, political, discrimination, gender and other discussions moving constantly to online surroundings, and causing widely spread massive social movements. The traditional social institutionalization of such collective actions as voting, petition signing, and political campaign mobilization is now empowered with the tech capabilities, resulting in the new nature of the socio-technical process of collective actions (Dolata and Schrape, 2016).

At the same time, cause-related marketing campaign is not always going as expected. One of the examples described in the article presents a detailed analysis of the digital public reaction to the Finnish chocolate company's efforts. The article analyzes the triggers of customer's anti-brand actions as a reaction to social brand activism. In 2018 the company launched a marketing campaign with an intention to identify and mitigate hate speech messages in social networks. The analysis found that about 63% of messages were criticizing the campaign. These messages were analyzed in the the research (Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022).

2.3.5 Motivations of posters and lurkers

For a long period, the active members of a community were considered the only important and desired part of a brand or other community. The academic research was focused on motivations and methods to engage community participants more actively. When going through the more recent studies, it is noticeable that the less active members' behavior and motivations to be part of a community are also analyzed. Researchers state that although the so-called lurkers do not actively participate in a specific community they still feel that they belong to a group and reinforce their social identity (Mousavi, Roper and Keeling, 2017). Studies persist that the less active community

members are also important: they demonstrate brand community group identity, brand loyalty, and they have their own valuable for them motivations (Dessart and Veloutsou, 2021).

As lurkers represent a significant part of any online community, this topic is explored further during the focus group interview phase.

2.4 Barriers of effective online collaboration

Barriers of active participation in online brand communities are not so widely presented in the analyzed literature set. One of the reasons is probably a lack of information about the non-participating people. Still, some of the barriers were identified in the desk research data set. The potential barriers were also discussed in the focus group interview.

2.4.1 Brand perceived negatively

When we talked about the Congruity (Balance) Theory, we discussed the way people try to balance the message they receive with their opinion about the source of the message. The same probably applies to negative brand perceptions that in the end result in negative reactions to the brand messages and social initiatives.

Different groups of digital audiences have different reasons to demonstrate brand negativity online via different social networks and different ways, including boycotting campaigns or trolling. Such activities do not only harm the brand reputation but may prevent potential online brand community members from actively participating in brand initiatives.

2.4.2 Task complexity and unsafe surroundings

While exploring reasons of non-participating and lurking, the topic of the technical environment is raised in some of the research articles. Different factors can prevent community members from engaging in active online participation, e.g. too complicated a task that needs to be performed (a complicated registration), not a well-organized user interface (colors, button position, liking functionality), community first impression (code of conduct, negative comments), etc.

Studies show that consumers do not actively participate in community activities when a specific task is multi-layered and too complicated. In contrast, they show higher levels of participation in cases demonstrating low complexity (Johnson, Bauer and Carlson, 2022).

Other topics mentioned in the research papers include the feeling of safety within a specific social network or a community as well as anonymity. This was seen as a complicated case: on one hand

participants expressed themselves more easily in an anonymous mode but on the other hand other community members might show less trust to such anonymous discussions (Gazit, 2018).

All in all, the research literature suggests that a certain level of facilitation in an online environment is required for the online community participants to become more active. Facilitation is seen as supporting the participants' feeling of safety, their ability to express themselves, and the feeling of having an understandable user interface, etc.

2.4.3 Cultural and ethnographic differences

Even though brand communities are potentially not linked to geographics, there are cultural differences and various motivations in place. As was shown in one study within automobile online brand communities for Korean and American brands, different strategies should be used for online brand communities in collectivistic and individualistic types of cultures (Park and McMillan, 2017).

Different countries have different traditions and cultures that need to be considered while planning an online brand community. Consumers from collectivistic cultures have more social goals in comparison with community members from individualistic cultures. These differences affect both the offline and online activities of a community. In addition to cultural differences, the multi-language and multiculturalism approach should be probably considered for global brands with the global population migration trend.

3. Methodology

In terms of methods, the thesis proceeds from the thematic analysis of the selected set of peer-reviewed articles to empirical data collection through an online focus group interview of 6 people. The aim of the focus group was to validate and further discuss the desk study findings.

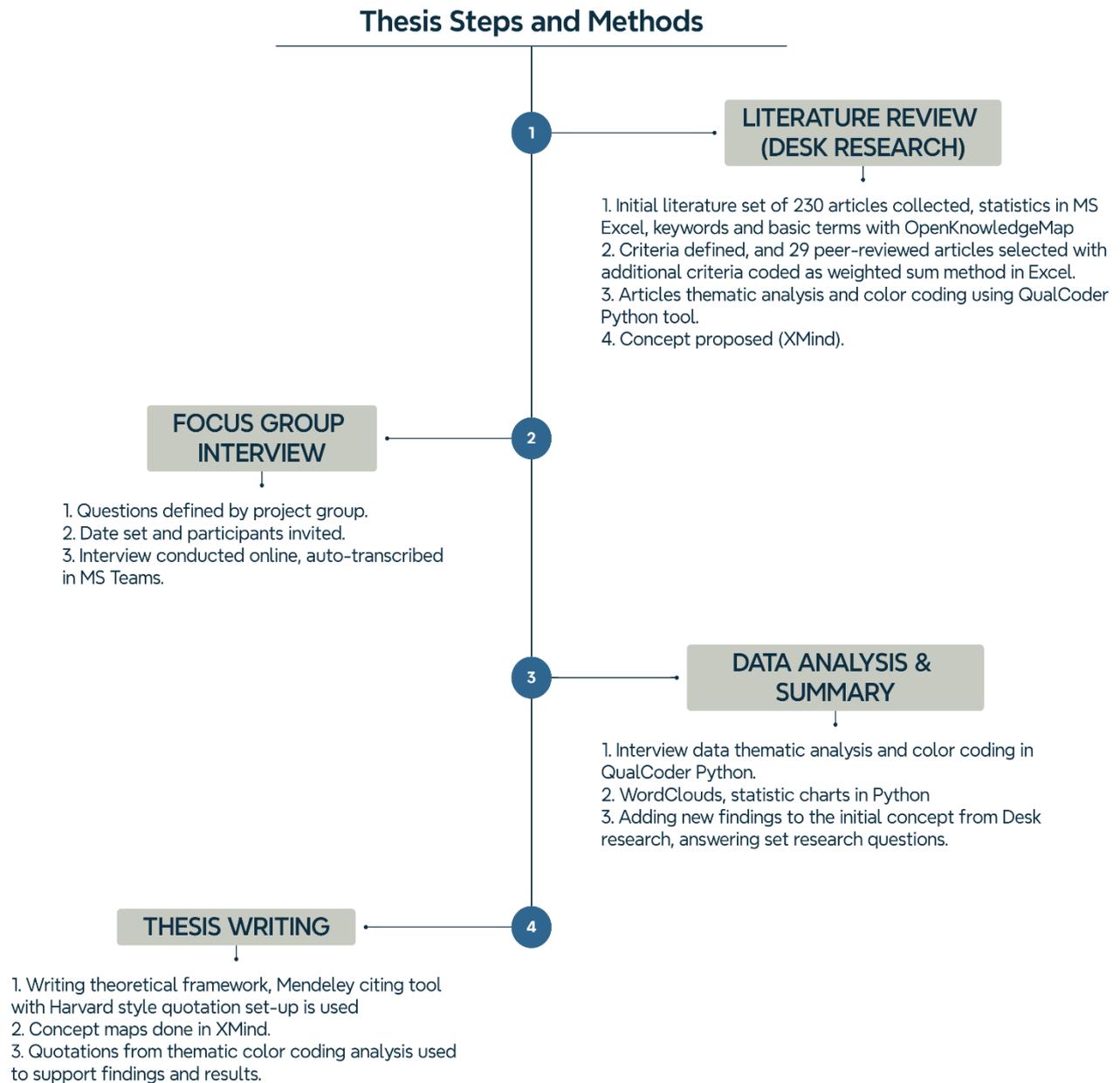


Figure 1. Thesis flow

3.1 Research approach

This thesis applies a qualitative thematic analysis to the desk research and focus group interview data. A qualitative approach was selected as there is a need to understand motivations and feelings of brand community participants.

The overall approach is constructive research that studies existing theoretical concepts and case studies to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of online brand communities and the drivers and barriers of belonging and participating in them. A constructive research approach is suitable for adding a new layer to the existing knowledge. The literature review of the desk study followed a systematic process of thematic analysis. The desk study articles were selected with the help of pre-agreed criteria. The process of literature review is described in detail below.

The findings from the desk research phase were validated through an online focus group interview with 6 participants. Overall, the process of analyzing all the qualitative data obtained was organized and categorized by using both theory-driven and data-driven thematic analysis of topics relevant to the research questions and objectives.

The thesis aimed to answer the set research questions:

Q1: How is the concept of online brand community defined? (selected articles' desk study)

Q2: What types of brand communities exist? (selected articles' desk study)

Q3: What drivers of participation in online brand communities can be identified? (theory review + desk study articles + empirical primary data)

Q4: What barriers to active participation in online brand communities can be identified? (desk study articles + empirical primary data)

This thesis was completed within the scope of a larger initiative aimed at developing an EU project proposal. The project group was formed by a supervisor with three master students. The concepts of transformational and democratic leadership in companies, roles of leadership and employees in corporate social activism, and motivations of active participation in online brand communities were analyzed.

The thesis author's role was to explore the online brand community topic, seeking to better understand the motivations and barriers of long-term community engagement. To share information, to ensure that the research process was in line with common goals, and to schedule future activities,

weekly seminar group meetings were organized online. During these valuable meetings, we discussed our key findings and exchanged interesting and useful tips of literature sources and methodological tools. The desk research phase was carried out separately by each student, while the focus group interview was organized jointly as a discussion on connected topics of participative leadership, corporate social activism, and community building. The analysis of the obtained focus group data was carried out separately by each seminar group member.

3.2 Methods of data collection and analysis

In this master's thesis, there were two data collection methods: desk research and focus group interview. Desk research was carried out as a systematic review and thematic analysis by the researcher, thus generating additional specific knowledge on the topic (Przyrodniczo-Humanistyczny *et al.*, no date). The topic of online brand communities is constantly changing with the fast changing nature of the digital world. The tactics used in 2010s by brands to engage customers in communities might not be effective any more with the rising digital audience diversity. Some want to express themselves, others try to catch best offers or quizzes, and the rest are driving massive social movements online with a consumer activism background. In these circumstances the knowledge on the effective cooperation between companies and massive digital public needs to be regularly reviewed and updated. The articles of the desk research were selected according to the following criteria: 1) peer-reviewed, 2) as recent as possible, 3) including empirical case study data.

The focus group interview was used to validate and further discuss some of the findings. This method is especially effective if there is a need to let participants feel comfortable and to let them feel they have much in common in order to encourage people openly talk on the set topic (Krueger and Casey, 2000, p.9). In our case, the participants were master students from the same university. This was communicated in advance to make the participants feel more comfortable during the interview and to express their different opinions. The goal was not only to confirm findings from the theory but also to hear something new. The focus group was organized online. When doing empirical data collection through online focus groups, there are some specifics in place. Often an additional facilitation through probing questions and follow-up answers is required from interview organizers in order to keep the discussion live and effective (Santhosh, Rojas and Lyons, 2021). For these purposes, a facilitator (the author of the present thesis) was assigned and a list of probing questions was prepared in advance.

The qualitative data analysis process involved the following steps:

Step 1) organizing the data in accordance with the main themes (T) arising from the research questions (T1 online brand community definition; T2 brand community types; T3 motivations and drivers for belonging / participating; T4 barriers of effective collaboration).

Step 2) coding relevant thematic content (tagging and colouring text according to each theme) and categorizing the content into main and sub-themes using QualCoder Python-driven tool.

Step 3) interpreting and reporting key findings and illustrating key themes with visualizations and direct quotes from the dataset.

The focus group data was gathered through a semi-structured focus group interview and analysed according to the same qualitative thematic analysis steps as the desk study articles. Recommendations to improve community participation and collaboration were formulated based on theory, the desk study analysis, and focus group participants' views and expectations.

3.2.1 Desk research

The systematic desk research of peer-reviewed articles and case studies (29 high-quality and relevant research articles selected from the initial 229 articles) related to online brand communities was organized to understand the main concepts and summarize findings based on existing knowledge. The process of choosing relevant articles for further thematic analysis through a desk research method is described in detail in Figure 5.

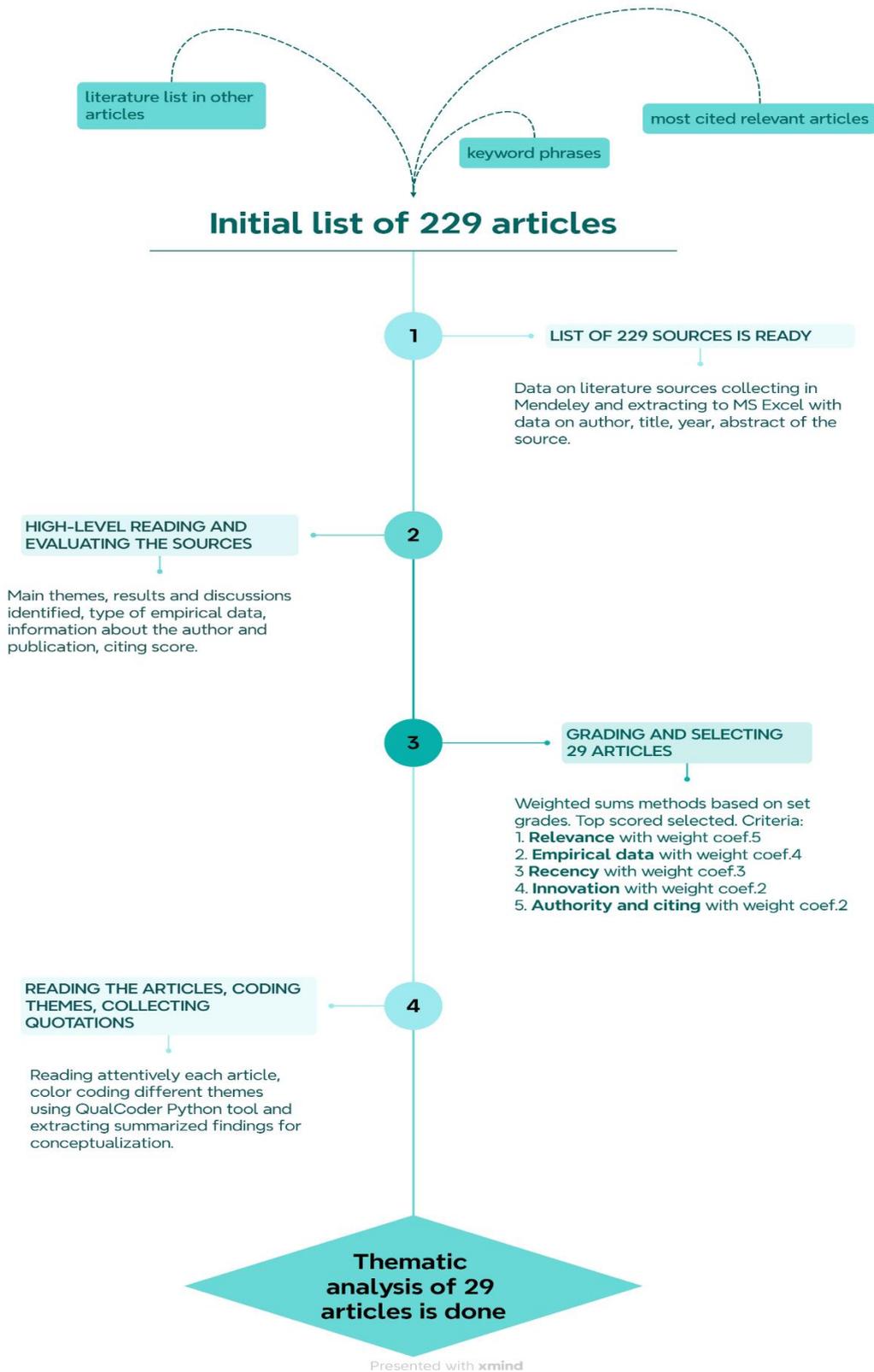


Figure 2 Desk Research. Process flow.

Initially, different keywords were defined for the topic exploration and broad searching for applicable articles. Selected search keywords for the topic:

online brand communities, online communities, brand communities, social identity, community psychology, online activism, student activism, community engagement, community participation, social movements, social activism, community psychology.

Additionally, Boolean logic and synonyms were used during the first phase of the literature review. Most influential papers were collected using different online tools, research databases, and citation scores of articles.

To effectively handle the initial set of articles, the Mendeley tool was used, applying both desktop and browser extension versions. When a potentially valuable article was identified, it was added to the summary database, using the Mendeley tool for citing. Only peer-reviewed sources were added. The summary list of 229 articles was extracted with automatically added details on the articles, including authors, year, title, publication journal, DOI unique number etc. (Figure 6). The extracted file in .bib file format was later on converted to .csv format that is readable by MS Excel (Figure 7).

As a result of the first step of data collection, a set of 229 peer-reviewed articles was identified for the next step of iterative selection. A general reading through of the articles was done to understand the relevance and importance of each in view of the thesis objectives. The list of articles was handled in MS Excel, indexing, structuring, and coding the available data and thematic context of each of the sources in the list (phase 2 on the scheme above).

The process of desk research data collection might seem complicated and tech-driven in comparison with manual data listing in a table format, but the thesis author opted for cross-platform data integrity from the very beginning, understanding that adding some extra tech effort at the beginning of the data collection simplifies the next thesis steps. With using Mendeley tool as the main database for keeping the selected research papers, it is possible to keep the same data integrity later on while:

- adding a new source to the selected list while browsing online
- adding notes and comments in pdf directly in the tool
- extracting the data to MS Excel or professional thematic analysis tools for color coding or even team of researchers thematic analysis
- citing in required formats while writing in MS Word
- generating automatically References list in MS Word.

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281 @article{Papista2019,
282   abstract = {Purpose: The study aims to develop and test a relationship-building
283   author = {Erifili Papista and Sergios Dimitriadis},
284   doi = {10.1108/JPBM-09-2016-1316},
285   issn = {1061-0421},
286   issue = {2},
287   journal = {The journal of product & brand management},
288   keywords = {Brand loyalty,Brand relationships,Green branding,Green marketing,
289   month = {3},
290   pages = {166-187},
291   publisher = {Emerald Group Holdings Ltd.},
292   title = {Consumer green brand relationships: revisiting benefits, relationships
293   volume = {28},
294   url = {https://www.proquest.com/docview/2194193914?parentSessionId=YJThd1idG7M
295   year = {2019},
296 }
297 @article{Baldus2015,
298   abstract = {In a quest for connecting with customers, the world's largest brand
299   author = {Brian J. Baldus and Clay Voorhees and Roger Calantone},
300   doi = {10.1016/j.jbusres.2014.09.035},
301   issn = {0148-2963},
302   issue = {5},
303   journal = {Journal of business research},
304   keywords = {Brand community,Branding,Consumer motivation,Online brand community
305   month = {5},
306   pages = {978-985},
307   publisher = {Elsevier Inc.},
308   title = {Online brand community engagement: Scale development and validation},
309   volume = {68},
310   url = {https://www.sciencedirect.com.ezproxy.haaga-helia.fi/science/article/pii/S0148296314000355},
311   year = {2015},

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Figure 3 Extract of literature sources from Mendeley tool

Authors	Title	Journal	Year	Pages	Volume	Issue	Publisher	Date Published	ISSN	URLs	DOI	PMID	Abstract
Pedeliento G, Andreini D	Brand community integration, participation and commitment: A conceptual framework	Journal of Business Research	2020	119	481-494		Elsevier	10/2020	0148-2963	https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/journal-of-business-research	10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.10.014		In the past two decades there has been a significant increase in the number of brand communities, which are defined as virtual or physical communities of consumers who share a common interest in a particular brand or product.
Yannopoulou N, Liu MJ, Bi X	Exploring social change through social media: The case of the fashion industry	International Journal of Consumer Research	2019	43	348-357		Blackwell	7/2019	1470-6483	https://openurl.ebsco.com/doi/10.1111/ijcr.12345	10.1111/ijcr.12345		This study examines the role of social media in driving social change within the fashion industry. It explores how social media platforms have influenced consumer behavior and brand perception.
Baldus BJ, Voorhees C, Calantone R	Online brand community engagement: Scale development and validation	Journal of Business Research	2015	68	978-985		Elsevier	5/2015	0148-2963	https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/journal-of-business-research	10.1016/j.jbusres.2014.09.035		In a quest for connecting with customers, the world's largest brands are turning to online brand communities. This study develops and validates a scale for measuring online brand community engagement.
Kumar V	Enhancing participation intentions in online brand communities	Marketing Letters	2022	40	898-913		Emerald	9/2022	0263-4269	https://www.emerald.com/insight/fulltext.aspx?doi=10.1108/MIP-02-2022-0012	10.1108/MIP-02-2022-0012		Purpose: This study conceptualizes and empirically tests a model of factors that influence participation intentions in online brand communities.
Zaglia ME	Brand communities embedded in social networks	Journal of Business Research	2013	66	216-223		Elsevier	2/2013	0148-2963	http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2012.07.007	10.1016/j.jbusres.2012.07.007		Brand communities represent a new form of social organization that is embedded in social networks.
Dessart L, Veloutsou C	Augmenting brand community identification for inactive users	Journal of Business Research	2021	15	361-385		Emerald	2021	0263-4269	https://www.emerald.com/insight/fulltext.aspx?doi=10.1108/JRIM-11-2020-0012	10.1108/JRIM-11-2020-0012		Purpose: In an era where companies are increasingly relying on brand communities for marketing and sales, it is important to identify and engage with inactive users.
Pöyry E, Laaksonen SM	Opposing brand activism: triggers and strategies of consumers' brand activism	European Journal of Marketing	2022	56	261-284		Emerald	2022	0309-0526	https://www.emerald.com/insight/fulltext.aspx?doi=10.1108/EJM-02-2022-0012	10.1108/EJM-02-2022-0012		Purpose: Brands, Cause marketing, Consumer activism, Consumer brand activism.

Figure 4 Final list of articles in MS Excel

Some statistics on the collected 229 articles were created to understand recent trends and interests in the topic of online brand communities. The growing interest in the topic of online brand communities can be observed from the growing yearly amount of published research articles, with a peak in 2020 (Figure 8). During the pandemic, the quantity of articles was quite significant which might be due to the delayed time of publication effect as there was additional time required for evaluation and analyzing data collected in the previous periods.

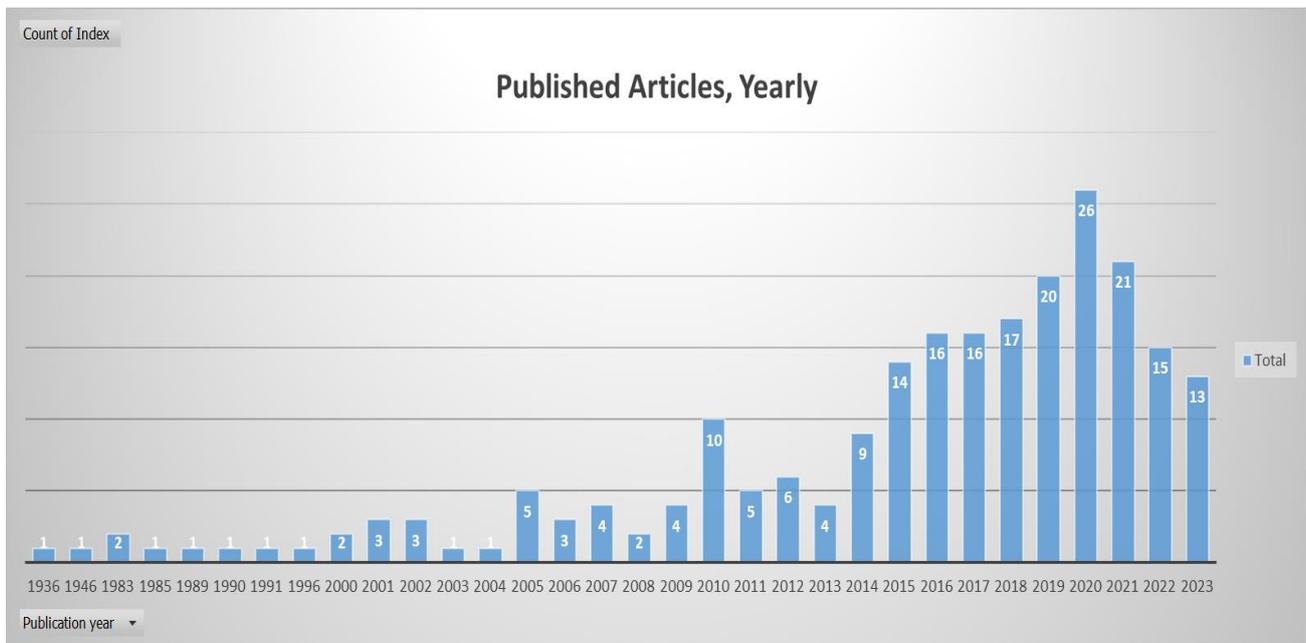


Figure 5 Articles by the publication year: initial set of 229 articles

The journals publishing articles related to online brand communities are usually focused on business and marketing. The journals that published research articles about online brand communities or similar relevant topics more than twice are presented in the Figure 9.

- The most often publishing journals observed in the selected 229 articles were:
- “Journal of Business Research”
- “PLOS One” (the journal publishes influential open access journals from different areas of science),
- “The Journal of Product & Brand Management”, “Internet Research”,
- “European Journal of Marketing”.

The most often met digital publishers of the articles are:

- “Emerald Group” with 33 articles,
- “Elsevier” with 19 articles,
- “Public Library of Science” with 7 articles,
- “Routledge” with 13 articles

- "SAGE Publications" with 23 articles.



Figure 6 Publication journals of articles close to the online brand communities topic (amount of publications > 2)

The initial literature analysis started with a linguistic approach and revealed several most common terms discussed in the research studies. As the authors aim to name the research articles with relevant and explanatory word combinations the word cloud was built with Python coding to obtain the mind map of initial set of literature and the most frequently met in the article titles. The results are represented in Figure 10. The word cloud showcases the frequency of terms used with a font size depending on the number of times the given word appears in the titles of the initial set of 229 articles.

A significant portion of the research emphasized the following key terms: *brand, community, online, social, media, digital, virtual, customer, engagement, brand loyalty, consumer movement, behavior, activism, participation.*

The terms above are quite understandable and traditional for marketing and business studies. But we can also see a surprisingly high number of semantic elements related to social activism.

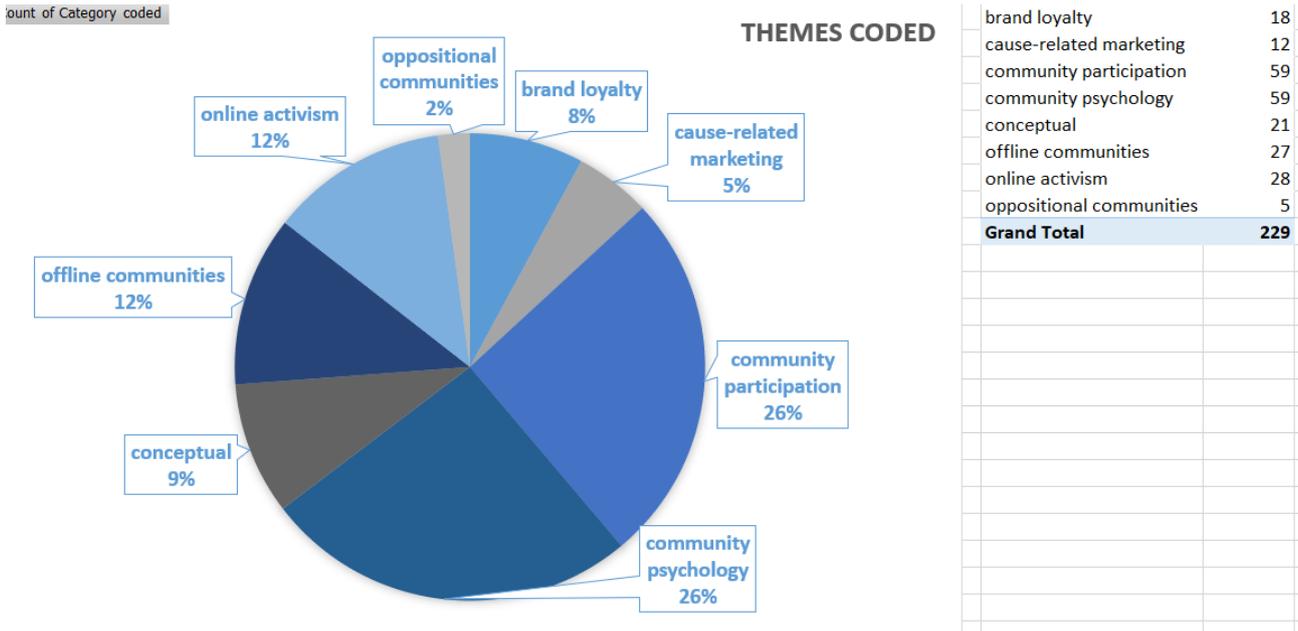


Figure 8 Initial set of 229 articles, theme-coded split.

A general review of 229 peer-reviewed works related to online brand communities was conducted by reading the results and discussion chapters of the sources, getting more information on authors, sources, citing scores, etc. In the end, the thesis author identified 29 high-quality information sources for the desk research and further thematic analysis. How were these articles selected?

To make the final decisions and selections, the initial set of literature analysis was organized with:

1. Weighted sums methodology
2. Thematic coding and clusterization

The weighted sum method is typically used for decision making in multi-criteria situation, as we have in our case of articles selecting based on multiple important parameters. The method is sometimes criticized as the weights (importance) of each parameter is defined by a decision maker (a researcher in our case), but this is still an effective method widely used in different areas.

We approximate the preference function of choosing the most relevant articles with a mathematically described utility function. When we do it with the weighted sums method, we get a linear approximation, which is the most basic way to do it (Marler *et al.*, 2010).

To choose the final set of 29 articles, each article was graded by 5 types of measurements: recency, relevance, empirical data, innovation, how often the author is cited. After setting the grades

the weighted sums final grade was calculated. Based on this final grade the set of 29 articles considered to be the most relevant to the research goal was selected.

The set weights for the criteria for article selection were:

1. Relevance of the theme to set objectives $w=5$;
2. Empirical data quality $w=4$;
3. Authority (how often the author, article is cited) $w=2$;
4. Recency of the research work $w=3$;
5. Innovative content to ensure diverse examples $w=2$.

By calculating summary article score, 29 articles from the set of 229 were selected as the most relevant for the thesis objectives and set research questions (Table 1). Each article was also coded in accordance with the research questions of the thesis, resulting in summary clusterization by main themes and related sub-themes.

Table 1 Selected for desk research set of 29 articles.

Theme gist-coded	Authors	Title	Publication year
types, activities, motives	Pedeliento G, Andreini D, Veloutsou C	Brand community integration, participation and commitment: A comparison between consumer-run and company-managed communities (Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou, 2020)	2020
drivers to act: shared intention to change own life	Yannopoulou N, Liu MJ, Bian X, Heath T	Exploring social change through social media: The case of the Facebook group Indignant Citizens (Yannopoulou <i>et al.</i> , 2019)	2019
drivers to engage community: psychology	Baldus BJ, Voorhees C, Calantone R	Online brand community engagement: Scale development and validation (Baldus, Voorhees and Calantone, 2015)	2015
drivers to engage community: brand loyalty	Kumar V	Enhancing participation intentions in online brand communities (Kumar, 2022)	2022
types, activities, motives	Zaglia ME	Brand communities embedded in social networks (Zaglia, 2013)	2013
inactive members also feel committed	Dessart L, Veloutsou C	Augmenting brand community identification for inactive users: a uses and gratification perspective (Dessart and Veloutsou, 2021)	2021
barriers: brand-human	Pöyry E, Laaksonen SM	Opposing brand activism: triggers and strategies of consumers' antibrand actions (Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022)	2022
driver to act: brand loyalty	Johnson CD, Bauer BC, Carlson BD	Constituency building: Determining consumers' willingness to participate in corporate political activities (Johnson, Bauer and Carlson, 2022)	2022
drivers to engage community: psychology	Ellison NB, Steinfield C, Lampe C	The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007)	2007
brand community definition	Muniz AM, O'Guinn TC	Brand Community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001)	2001

drivers to engage community: psychology	Islam JU,Rahman Z,Hollebeek LD	Consumer engagement in online brand communities: a solicitation of congruity theory (Islam, Rahman and Hollebeek, 2018)	2018
inactive members also feel committed	Mousavi S,Roper S,Keeling KA	Interpreting Social Identity in Online Brand Communities: Considering Posters and Lurkers (Mousavi, Roper and Keeling, 2017)	2017
types, activities, motives	Dolata U,Schrape JF	Masses, Crowds, Communities, Movements: Collective Action in the Internet Age (Dolata and Schrape, 2016)	2016
types, activities, motives	Relling, Marleen ; Schnittka, Oliver ; Sattler, Henrik ; Johnen, Marius	Each can help or hurt: Negative and positive word of mouth in social network brand communities (Relling <i>et al.</i> , 2016)	2016
drivers to engage community: psychology	Pagani M,Hofacker CF,Goldsmith RE	The influence of personality on active and passive use of social networking sites (Pagani, Hofacker and Goldsmith, 2011)	2011
drivers to engage: offline and online	Stokburger-Sauer N	Brand community: Drivers and outcomes (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010)	2010
conceptual	Bhattacharjee DR,Pradhan D,Swani K	Brand communities: A literature review and future research agendas using TCCM approach (Roy Bhattacharjee, Pradhan and Swani, 2021)	2021
participant roles	Veloutsou C,Black I	Creating and managing participative brand communities: The roles members perform (Veloutsou and Black, 2020)	2020
drivers to engage community: psychology	Kucharska W	Online brand communities' contribution to digital business models: Social drivers and mediators (Kucharska, 2019)	2019
types, activities, motives	Cova B,White T	Counter-brand and alter-brand communities: the impact of Web 2.0 on tribal marketing approaches (Cova and White, 2010)	2010
anti-brand communities	Dessart L,Veloutsou C,Morgan-Thomas A	Brand negativity: a relational perspective on anti-brand community participation (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2020)	2020
drivers to engage community: psychology	Kumar J,Kumar V	Drivers of brand community engagement (Kumar and Kumar, 2020)	2020
drivers to engage community: tribalism and self-expression	Ruane L,Wallace E	Brand tribalism and self-expressive brands: social influences and brand outcomes (Ruane and Wallace, 2015)	2015
drivers to engage community: cultural differences and useful info	Park JH,McMillan SJ	Cultural Differences in Online Community Motivations: Exploring Korean Automobile Online Brand Communities (KAOBCs) and American Automobile Online Brand Communities (AAOBCs) (Park and McMillan, 2017)	2017
drivers to engage community: psychology	Simon C,Brexendorf TO,Fassnacht M	The impact of external social and internal personal forces on consumers' brand community engagement on Facebook (Simon, Brexendorf and Fassnacht, 2016)	2016
drivers to engage community: psychology	Polletta F,Jasper JM	Collective Identity and Social Movements (Polletta and Jasper, 2001)	2001
types, activities, motives	Liao J,Huang M,Xiao B	Promoting continual member participation in firm-hosted online brand communities: An organizational socialization approach (Liao, Huang and Xiao, 2017)	2017

types, activities, motives	Hutter K,Hoffmann S,Mai R	Carrotmob: A Win–Win–Win Approach to Creating Benefits for Consumers, Business, and Society at Large (Hutter, Hoffmann and Mai, 2016)	2016
drivers to engage community: psychology	Kumar J	Understanding customer brand engagement in brand communities: an application of psychological ownership theory and congruity theory (Kumar, 2021)	2021

For the qualitative analysis of the research papers, a color-coding methodology was used with a specialized python-driven software QualCoder. Articles were read one by one, and relevant quotations were highlighted with different coded colors. The codes were split by main research questions and the color palette was chosen accordingly. This process resulted in a color code tree (Figure 9) and the automated reports, including codes frequency (Figure 10), pdf extracts with highlighted quotations for each topic request. Summary extracted thematic analysis charts and reports, quotation lists helped to conceptualize the theme.

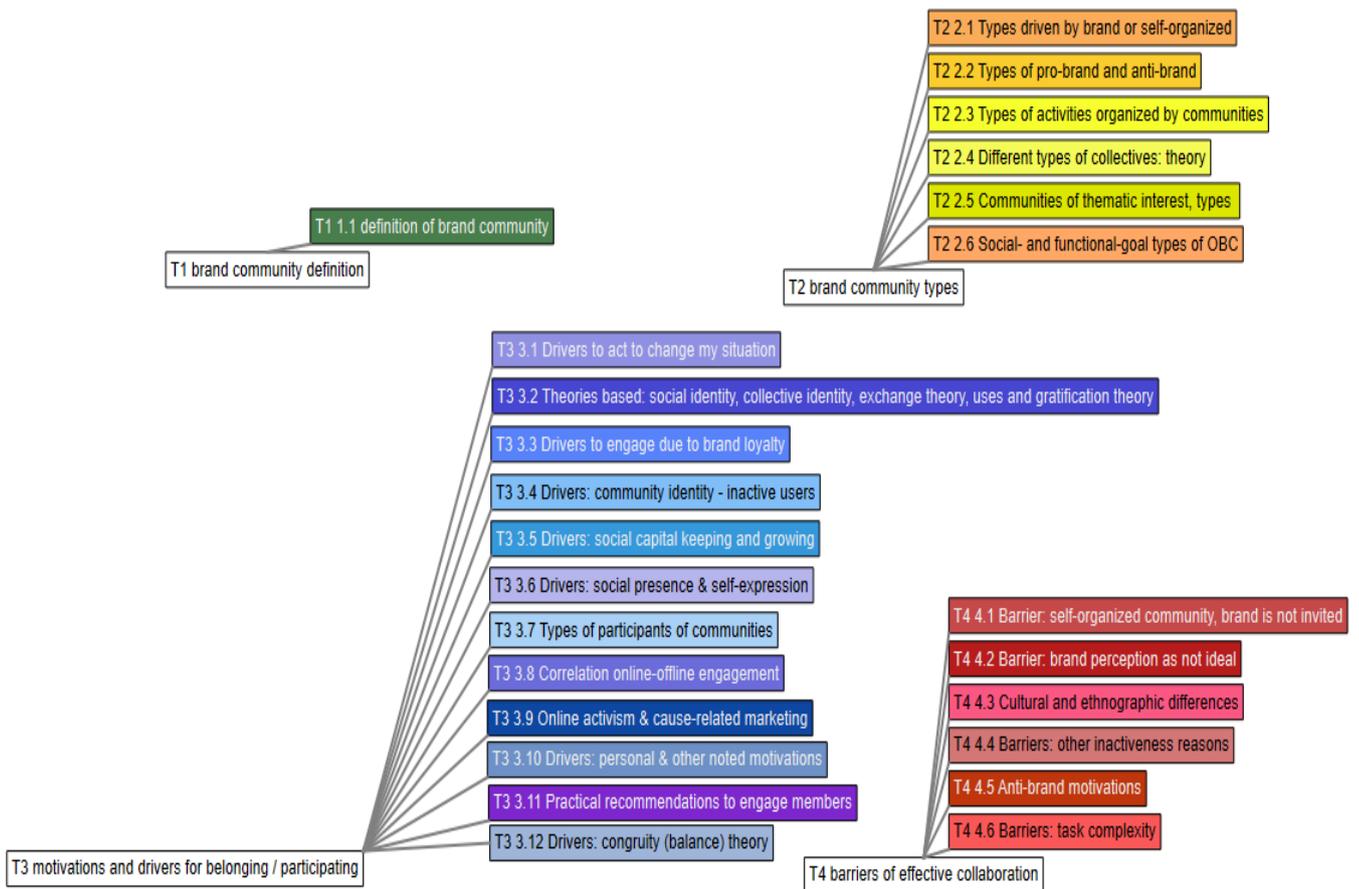


Figure 9 Color coding: tree of sub-themes in the articles

To summarize the themes raised and discussed in the selected literature, Table 2 represents the set of sub-themes mentioned more than 7 times in the selected literature of peer-reviewed 29 articles. The sub-themes are grouped by the initial research questions of the thesis. The right-hand column indicates how often a specific sub-theme was mentioned in the articles reviewed.

Table 2 Identified sub-themes in the selected literature set

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code Frequency
T1 Brand community definition		28
	T1 1.1 Definition of brand community	28
T2 Brand community types		36
	T2 2.1 Types: driven by brand or self-organized	8
	T2 2.3 Types of activities organized by communities	15
	T2 2.4 Different types of collectives: theory	13
T3 Motivations and drivers for belonging / participating		146
	T3 3.10 Drivers: personal & other noted motivations	32
	T3 3.11 Practical recommendations to engage members	39
	T3 3.12 Drivers: congruity theory	8
	T3 3.2 Theories based: social identity, uses and gratification theory, collective identity, social exchange theory	20
	T3 3.3 Drivers to engage: brand loyalty	10
	T3 3.6 Drivers: social presence & self-expression	11
	T3 3.7 Types of participants of communities	11
	T3 3.9 Online activism & cause-related marketing	15
T4 Barriers of effective collaboration		7
	T4 4.5 Anti-brand motivations	7
Future research suggestions		36

To sum up, the main grouped motivations to participate in online brand communities are:

- Social psychology driven motives
- Brand loyalty
- Personal motivations
- Social activism and cause-related marketing.

There is also a number of important sub-themes rarely discussed in the selected literature set that might potentially be beneficial to investigate in future research. Table 3 represents the topics mentioned rarely in the selected set of articles.

Table 3 Themes and Sub-Themes – Additional Topics Found

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code Frequency
T2 Brand community types		14
	T2 2.2 Types: pro-brand and anti-brand	5
	T2 2.5 Community types based on thematic interest	7
	T2 2.6 Social- and functional-goal types of brand communities	2
T3 Motivations and drivers for belonging/participating		19
	T3 3.1 Drivers to act: need for change	4
	T3 3.4 Drivers: community identity - inactive users	3
	T3 3.5 Drivers: social capital keeping and growing	5
	T3 3.8 Correlation online-offline engagement	7
T4 Barriers of effective collaboration		11
	T4 4.1 Barrier: self-organized community, brand is not invited	2
	T4 4.2 Barrier: brand perception as not ideal	1
	T4 4.3 Cultural and ethnographic differences	3
	T4 4.4 Barriers: other inactiveness reasons	4
	T4 4.6 Barriers: engagement task complexity	1

In addition to the topic of active and inactive users, these themes were raised in the articles:

- Correlation between online and offline engagement in community activities
- Cultural and ethnographic factors affect community participants' behavior.

The topic “need for change” can be considered as a part of the social activism factors mentioned in the general list of sub-themes. Social capital aspects can be considered part of social theories' block of themes following the concept of Social Capital theory. One of the inactiveness reasons mentioned in the literature was the source and complexity of published content, which makes it an interesting topic for research.

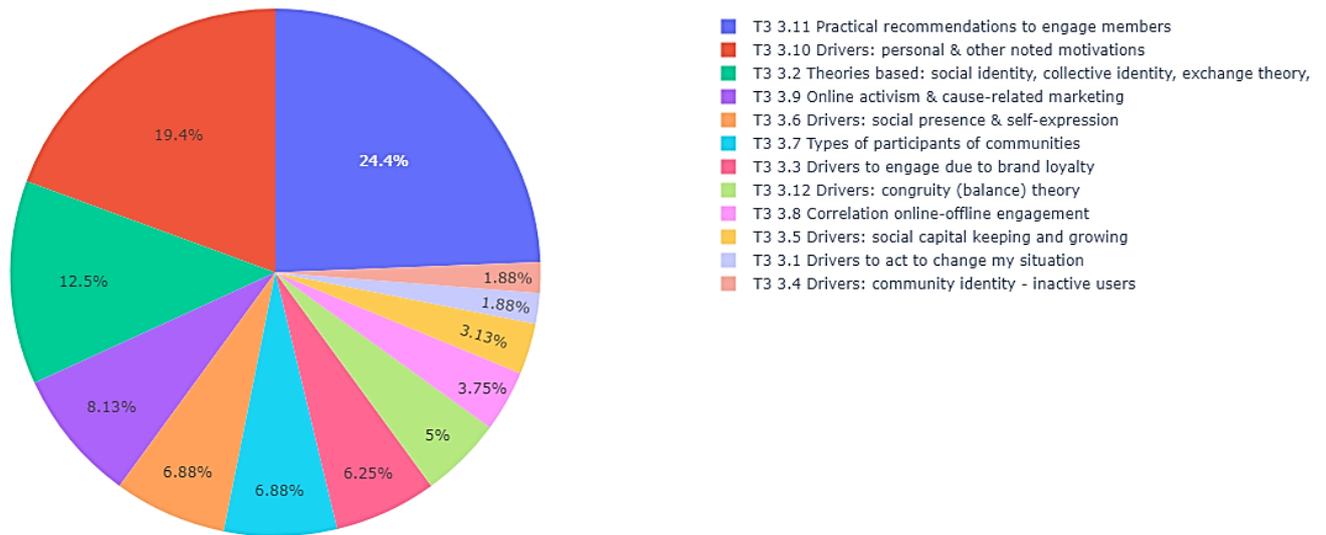


Figure 10 Code frequency report on Motivations to participate in OBC (extract from QualCoder)

As the detailed reading and analysis of the selected 29 articles set proceeded several motivations to participate in online brand communities were identified as the most frequently discussed in the literature set. It is worth mentioning that the research studies selected for detailed review in this thesis contained a significant amount of empirical data collected both from surveys conducted among online brand community members and from netnographic analysis of existing data collected within online social networks. The data collected was obtained from respondents in areas of the EU (Italy, Germany, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Scotland), India, and the US, and several studies had students as respondents (Figure 11). Among the motives to actively participate in online brand communities are those related to social theories driving human behavior, brand loyalty, and other observed motivations (Figure 12):

- Social identity theory
- Congruity theory
- Social exchange theory
- Uses and gratification theory
- Brand loyalty
- Cause-related marketing activities
- Self-expression and social presence
- Other factors, including content type, complexity of tasks, and utilitarian purposes.

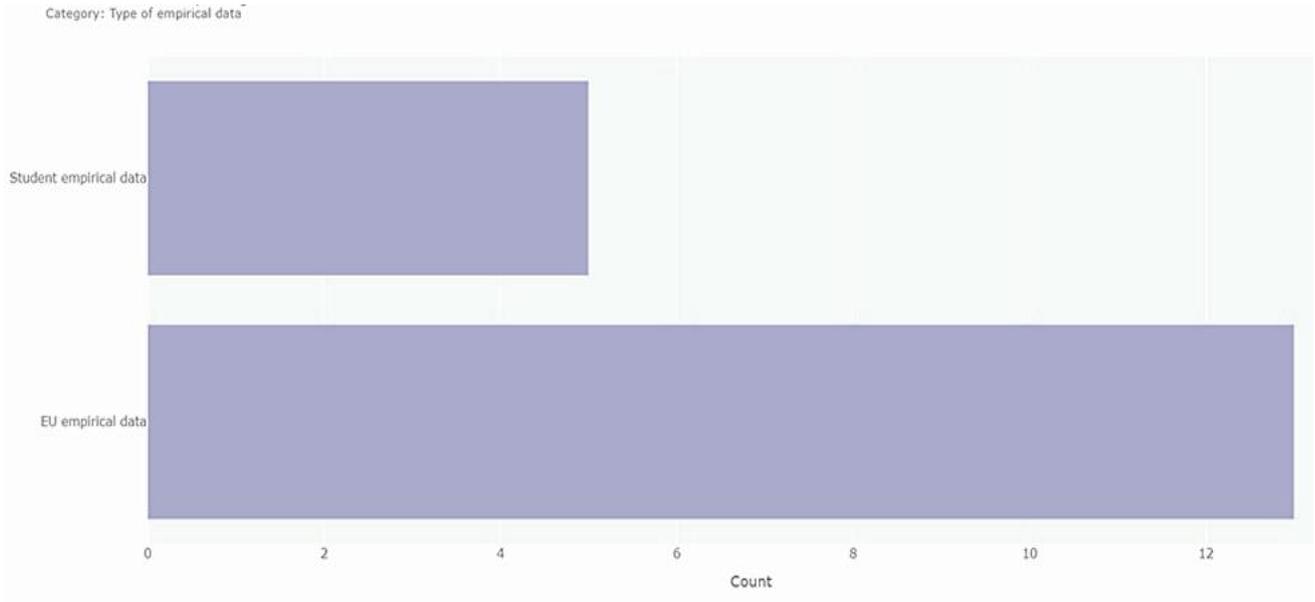


Figure 11 Empirical data in the articles (QualCoder ver.3.4)

Code count - text, images and Audio/Video
 Category: T3 motivations and drivers for belonging / participating

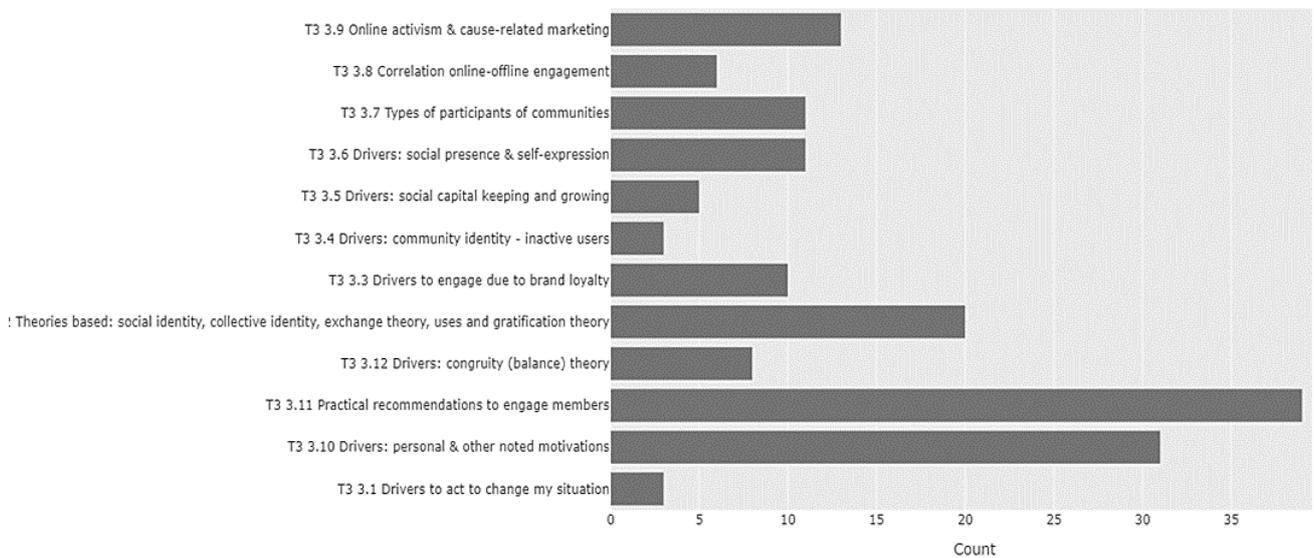


Figure 12 Participation motives grouped by occurrences (QualCoder ver.3.4)

Another important topic quite often expressed concerned the brand-negativity phenomenon often manifest online as anti-brand actions or self-organized opposing brand communities in online social networks. Several motivations can be identified as the driving factors to join such communities

or to perform specific anti-brand actions both online and offline. The most often discussed in the selected literature set are:

- Negative previous practical experience with a brand
- Oppositional loyalty
- Social recommendations
- Negative ethical brand perception
- Brand intervention in non-brand-related online discussions.

At the same time, the question of specific recommendations for brands in situations with negativity met online is often raised but not often answered in the selected articles. The importance of proper brand strategy is regularly highlighted as a possible topic for future research.

The topic of barriers to effective collaboration between brands and communities was not as widely discussed as the topic of brand loyalty or strategies to engage online brand community participants. Some of the barriers are presented in Figure 13.

Code count - text, images and Audio/Video
Category: T4 barriers of effective collaboration

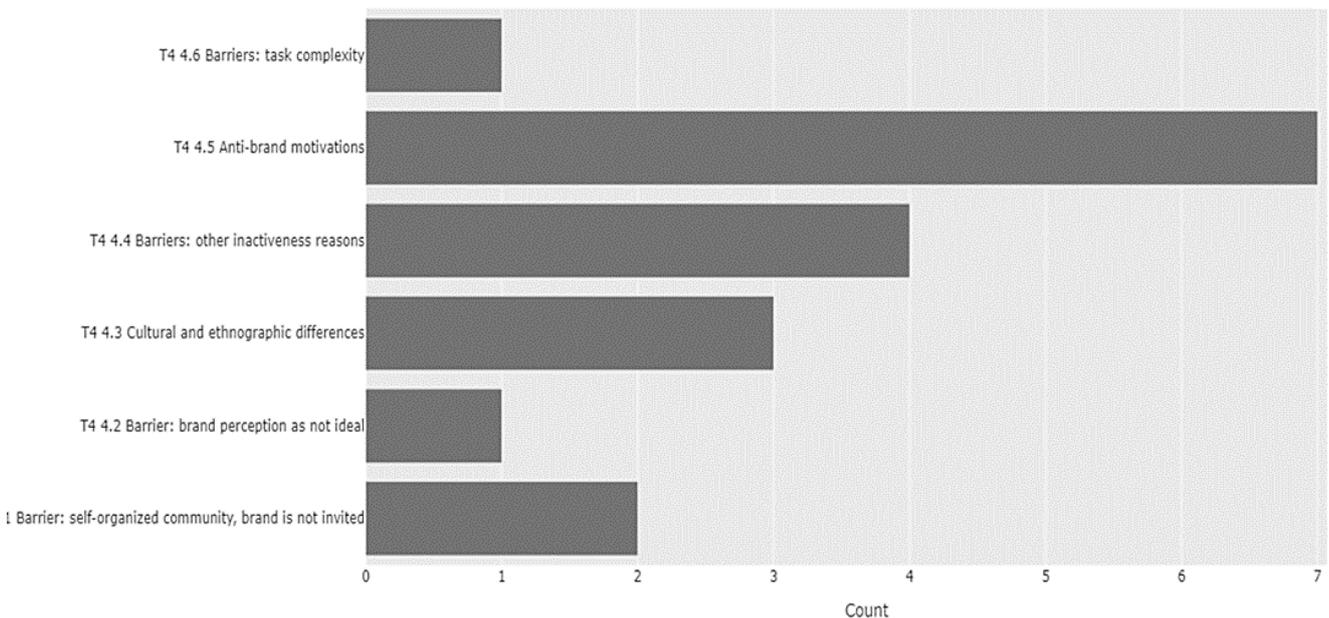


Figure 13 Barriers to collaboration, chart produced with QualCoder ver.3.4

For the definition and types of online brand communities, a general concept of brand community is widely accepted and presented in the literature with specifics of online communities considered as a new technological factor, not probably significantly changing the concept of a brand

community itself. While there is no visible fluctuations within the online brand community definition, the topic of types of online brand communities is presented in the selected articles with different approaches (Figure 14). Some researchers distinguish these social formations depending on their owners: self-organized and company-managed communities. Other articles classify the groups by the types of activities they perform. Amongst others are noted activities related to education, support, and feedback. Another interesting type of online community is a collaborative community around specific type of activity with a specific realistic goal, these might be communities of professionals, industry experts, or online communities of practice that are also sometimes uniting and self-organizing around a technological brand.

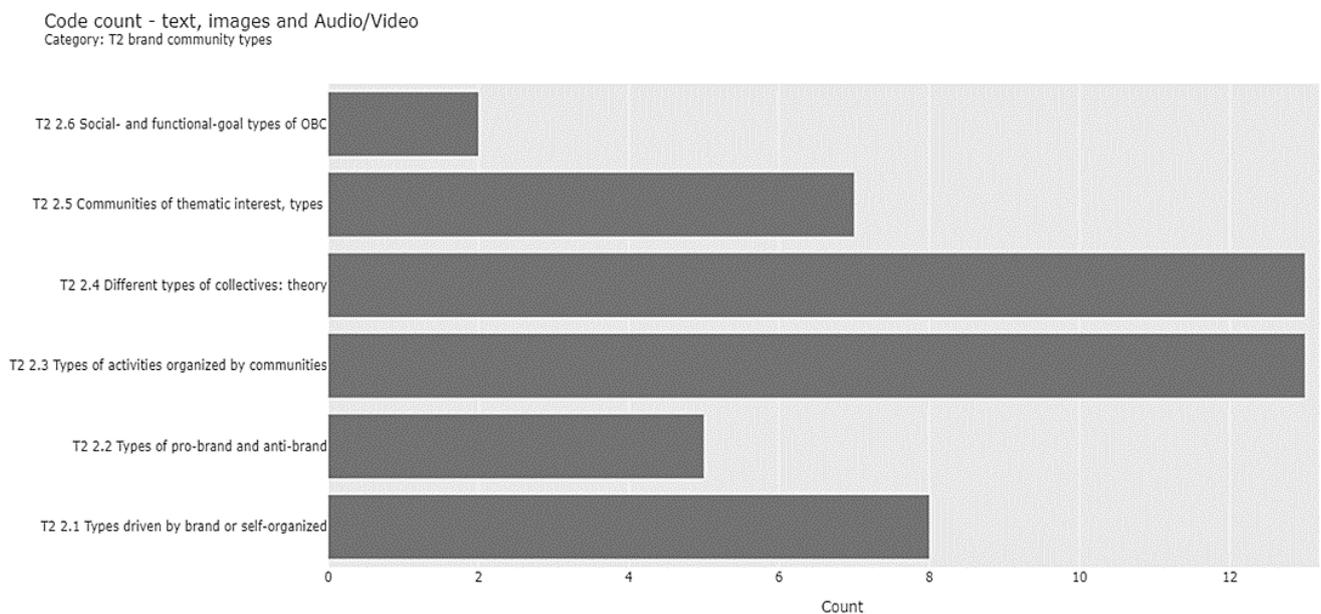


Figure 14 Types of online brand communities, chart produced with QualCoder ver.3.4

After the thematic analysis of the articles, some categorizations were made. The first two schemes were generated as a level-one overview with a use of AI-tool “Open Knowledge Maps” (Open Knowledge Maps), analyzing data from the existing research database (Figure 15, 16). While using AI tools usually several iterations are required, which was done also for the purposes of initial topic overview.

Finally, the third scheme was done manually with the usage of a graphical tool XMind (Xmind - Mind Mapping) after analyzing the selected articles (Figure 17).

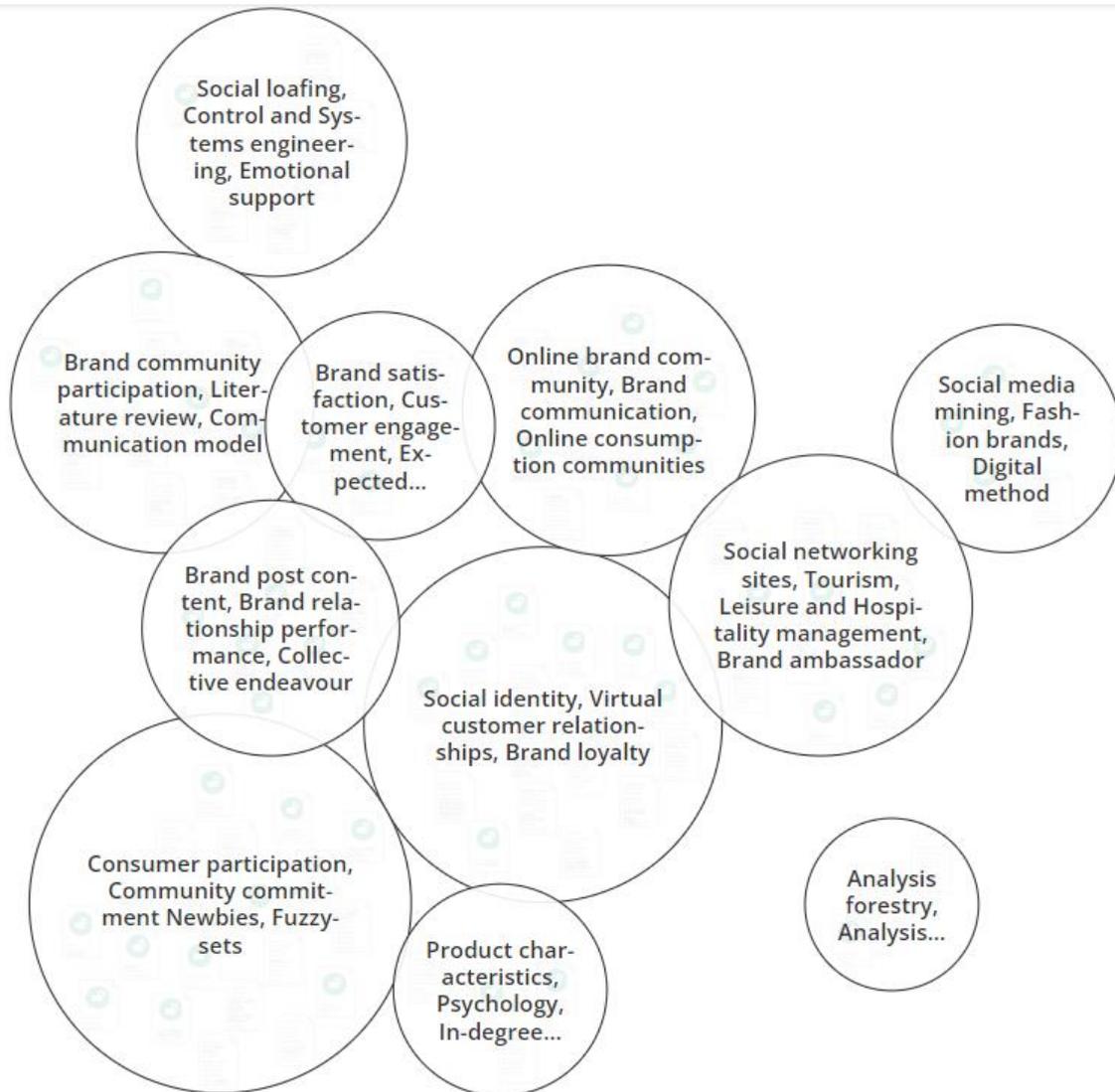


Figure 15 Concept map. Open Knowledge Maps (2024). Knowledge Map for research on brand community participation. Retrieved from <https://openknowledgemaps.org/map/1f2e3c4d7fcf8db6c52610dde6f66903>.

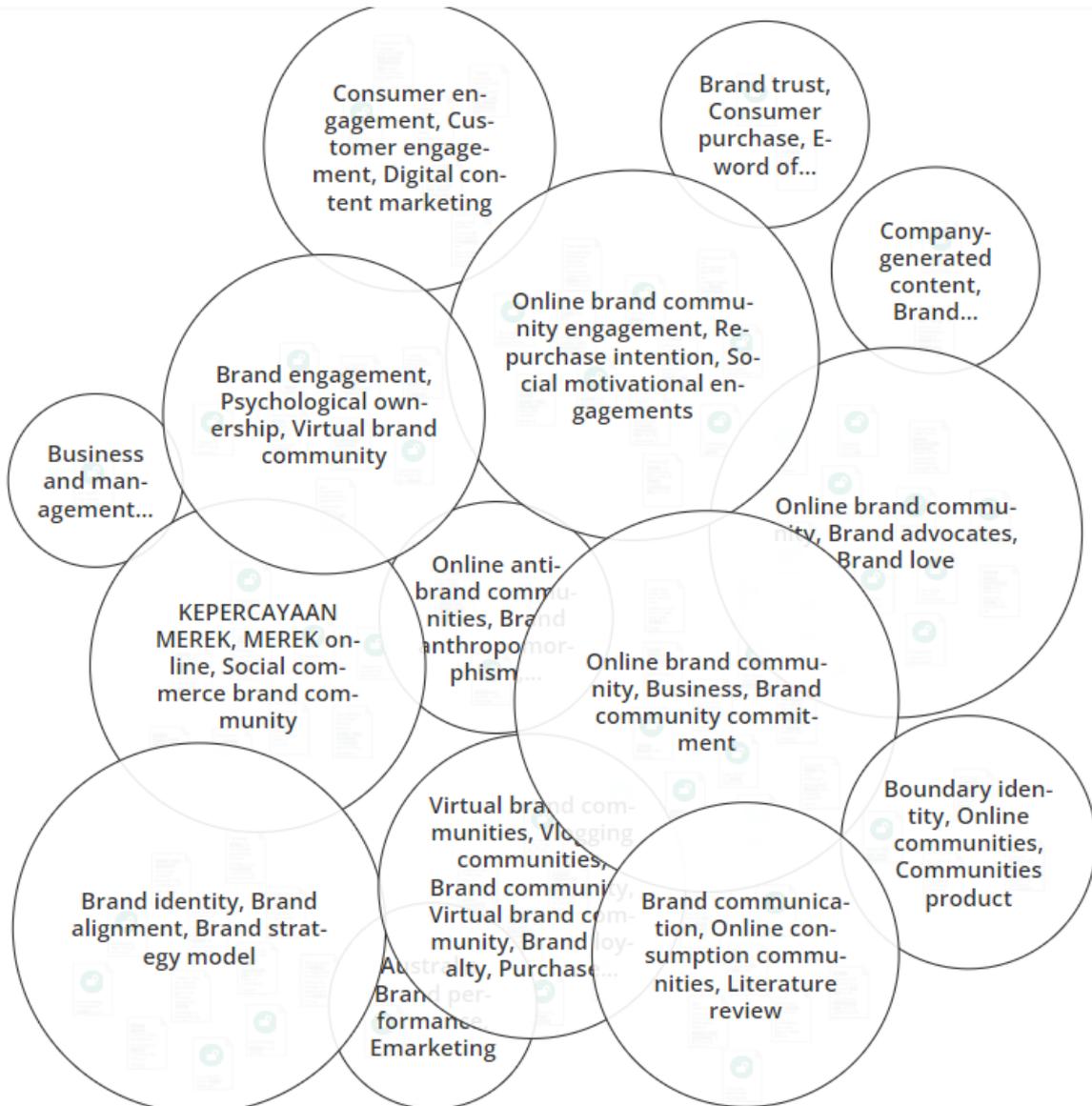


Figure 16 Concept map. Open Knowledge Maps (2024). Knowledge Map for research on online brand communities. Retrieved from <https://openknowledgemaps.org/map/f42d8608caadb19630621109f48df44d>.

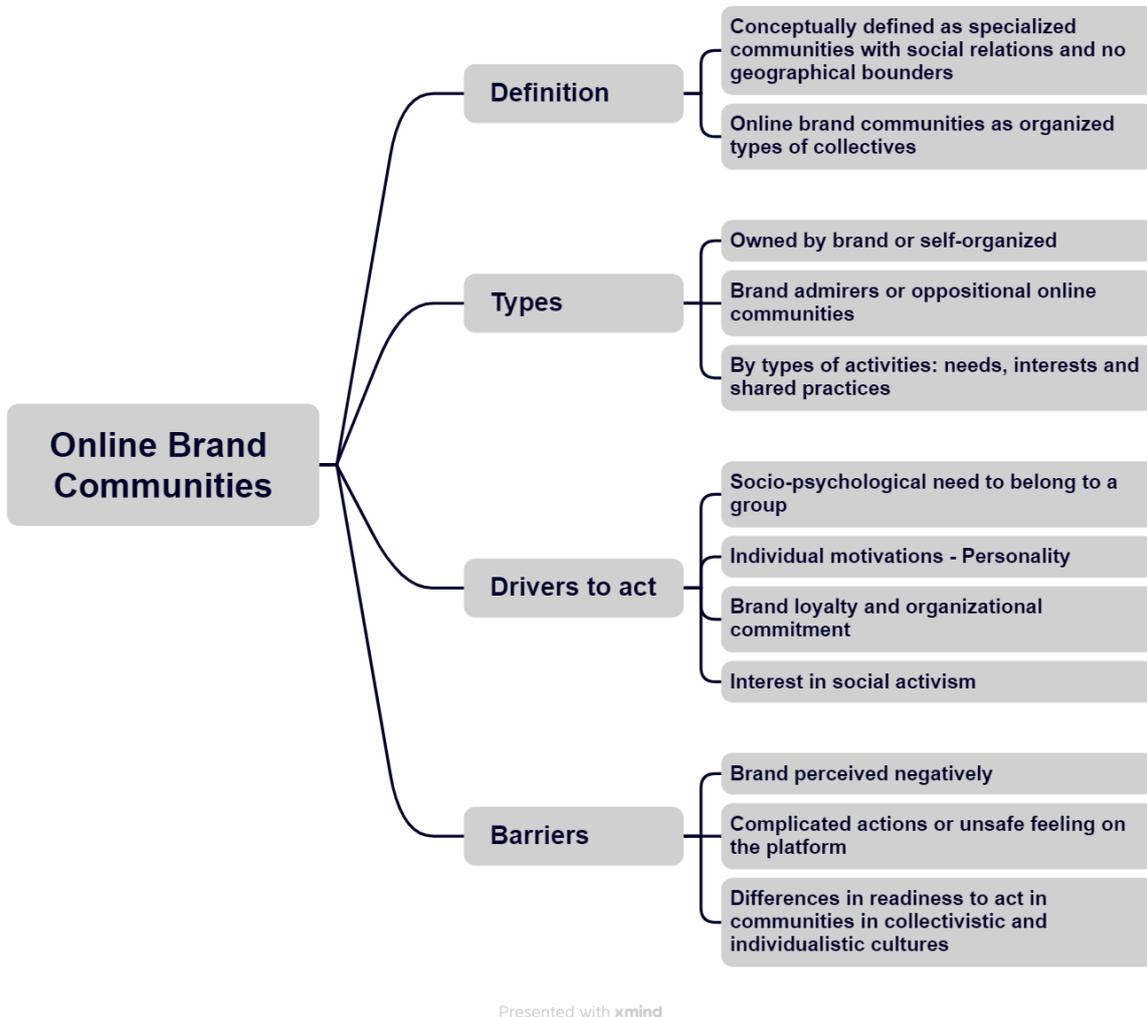


Figure 17 Concept map based on literature review.

Further exploration of the thesis topic is done based on the concept, derived from the literature review presented on Figure 17. After performing the desk study, the questionnaire for empirical data collection was developed for primary data to be collected during the focus group interview and thematically analyzed.

3.2.2 Focus group interview

The method of the empirical research is focus group interview with six master students of Haaga-Helia UAS. As stated before, a facilitation strategy should be in place to conduct effective online focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are group interviews with several group members and even several interviewers sometimes. The benefit of such methodology is the dynamic type of the discussion and its ability to probe and bring up deeper topics, opinions, feelings, and experiences. The themes are pre-defined, and the group members are selected according to specific

criteria (Moilanen, 2022). The assumption behind selecting masters students as focus group participants was that if participants are selected from the same target group as the facilitators they may feel more comfortable and be able to answer the interview questions openly.

The focus group discussion was carried out to validate the key results of the desk research and to better understand the motivations that drive community members to engage and participate in community activities together with catching the possible barriers. The interview was organized as a shared initiative of three master seminar group members and the supervisor. The list of interview questions was agreed together and designed to cover each thesis writer's needs. The agreed interview timeframe for the discussion was 1-1,5 hours. The joint interview questions were as follows:

Q1: How do you feel about your own role in your organization's decision-making when it comes to matters of sustainability and making a broader societal impact?

Q2: If you had more power to engage and participate in your organization's decision-making, how would you use that power to drive societal issues?

Q3: What experiences do you have of organizations and CEOs taking a political stance on controversial socio-political issues? How do such experiences affect your attitude and relationship with an employer?

Q4: What kind of activities (if any) of CEO-employee collaboration would you be willing to engage in to drive pressing and potentially controversial socio-political issues?

Q5: What motivates you, or could motivate you, to actively participate in long-term online community discussions or activities?

Q6: What risks and challenges can affect your long-term participation in online discussions or activities? What could help you to overcome these challenges?

Q7: What do you take away from our focus group discussions of leadership-employee collaboration, participatory decision-making, and community building in the context of societal impact and sustainability? Please share your 1-3 key takeaways via the chat.

Questions number 5 and 6 were designed specifically for the present thesis. To collect relevant background information from participants, a Google Form questionnaire was created (Figure 18) by the thesis author with other project member's input and supervisor support. The appropriate data handling practices as required by Haaga-Helia UAS were implemented:

- Each participant obtained in a separate communication thread his unique participant code, that was further on used for data collection and results publication to avoid using real names
- Consent form for data collection, recording, transcription and Research announcement as per university guidelines were distributed initially for getting acquainted in the pre-requisite collection form, and later on in the very beginning of the interview for consent collection. No additional questions were raised from participants on this point.
- The transcription and other data obtained from the interview were kept on confidential drives restricted access, no personal data was stored on private devices.

Focus Group Background Info

Your data will be handled confidentially and reported anonymously. Thank you in advance, appreciate your input to the project 🍷

Please input your participant coded name (provided to you in e-mail). e.g. "Participant 15" *

Short answer text

Please review the consent form and research announcement in advance, in the beginning of the interview you will be asked to give your consent. *

[Consent Form](#)
[Research Announcement](#)



I have read, no questions
 I have questions, please contact me

What is your current position in the company? *

Expert
 Middle manager
 Top manager
 Other...

Do you see yourself as a leader in the company? *

Yes
 No
 Somewhat

How active are you online? (likes, private chats are excluded). *



I post every week or more often
 I post approximately once per month
 I rarely/never post, but read content in social networks daily
 I rarely/never post or read content in social networks

Figure 18 Focus group pre-requisites collection form (*Google Forms)

The most challenging part of the pre-interview phase was finding the people willing to participate in the focus group. In the end, we managed to get 6 participants and 1 additional informant who filled in the background information form, but did not participate in the online focus group interview. Figures 19 and 20 represent some of the obtained data on the participants' backgrounds.

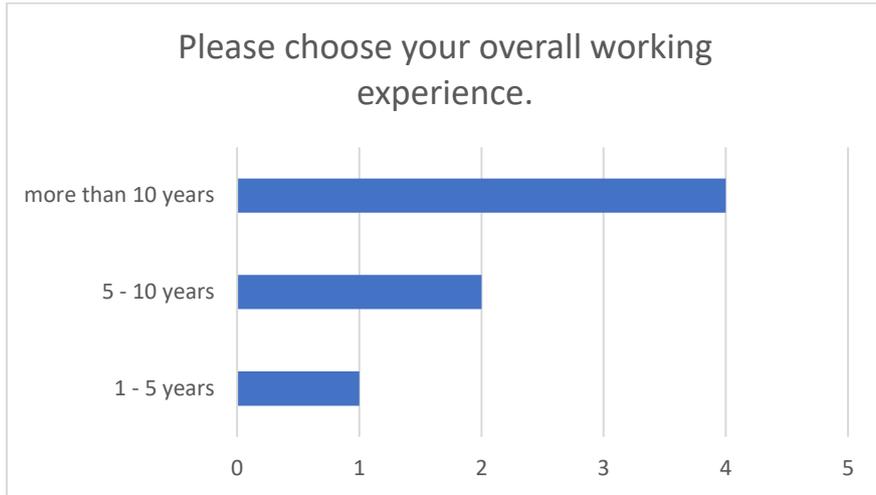


Figure 19 Participants background: employment

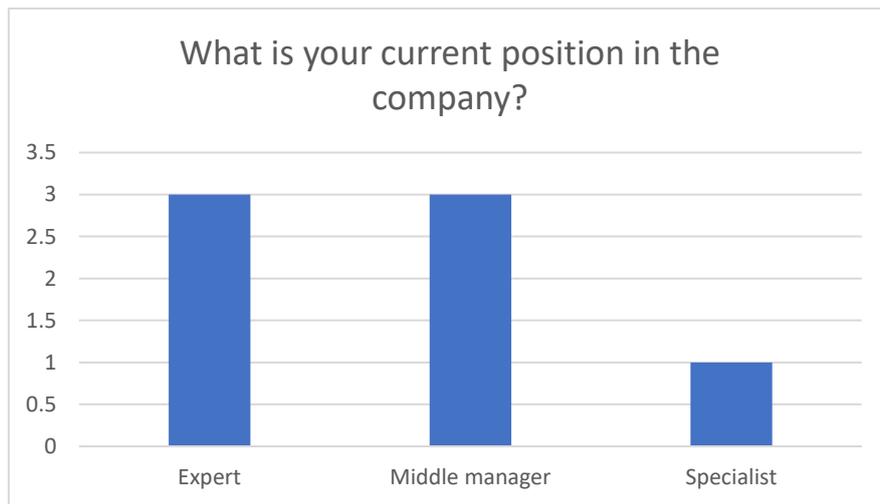


Figure 20 Participants' background: position

The thesis author was particularly interested in the participants' behavior in online communities, the frequency of posting and commenting, to understand the specifics of motivations and barriers of different sub-types of community members: posters and lurkers. The results of this question were in line with the assumption that the majority of community participants is either lurking or posting rarely online (Figure 21).

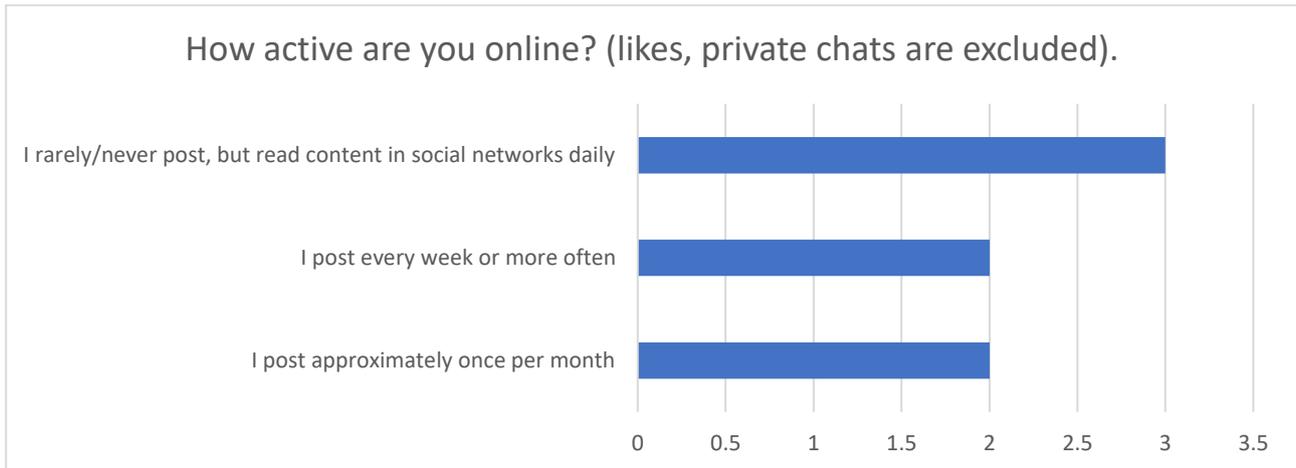


Figure 21 Participants' activeness online

The focus group interview was organized online using Microsoft Teams as the platform because MS Teams:

- 1) is used by the university where the interview participants have their registered account
- 2) provides an auto-transcribe functionality that significantly simplifies the data analysis.

The role of the main facilitator was taken by the thesis author. Each thesis writer also prepared in advance some probing questions that were to help them avoid getting to general-level answers.

The thesis author prepared these probing questions:

- 1) Please recall some recent situations where you actively participated online and reflect on your feelings. What type of content/event triggered your active participation?
- 2) If you do not often post but often read content online (posts in social networks, etc), please explain why you prefer to stay a silent reader.

In addition to the transcription and recording, the following data was exported and downloaded after the focus group interview phase for further analysis:

- Online chat extract (some of the participants preferred to write their answers in the chat instead of speaking)
- Whiteboard Google docs anonymized file so that participants can add their thoughts and reflections after the interview itself (this method was not very popular, only 2 participants added their comments in this file)

All the data (transcript, chat record, whiteboard, background information) was subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis. The data was color-coded according to its relevance to the thesis objectives. The thesis author used the QualCoder python tool. As it is seen in the Figures 22 and 23, the participants preferred to discuss the drivers to actively participate via talking, while barriers were more often discussed in written form in the chat.

sunburst chart of counts of codes and categories
File: Focus-group-transcript_anonimized.docx

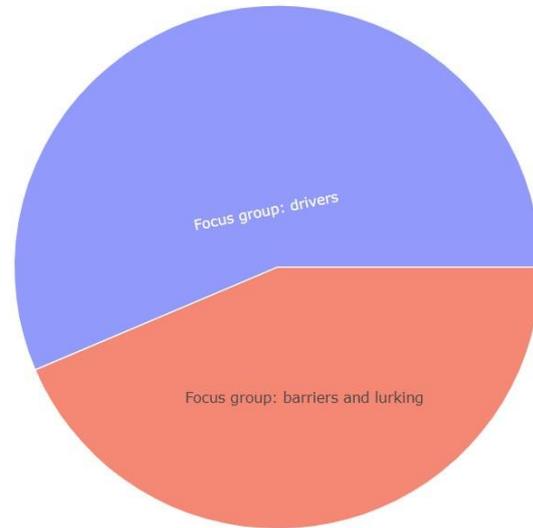


Figure 22 Drivers and barriers in the interview transcript: frequency

sunburst chart of counts of codes and categories
File: __Chat from focus group_anonymized.docx

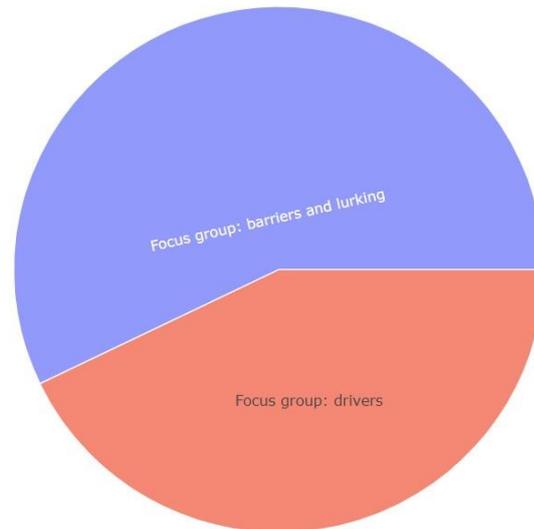


Figure 23 Drivers and barriers in the interview chat extract: frequency

Based on the thematic analysis of the data obtained from the interview, the following insights were drawn:

- Benchmarking with others when deciding to act or not (not shown in the analyzed literature)
- Low belief sometimes that activeness can change anything (**resonated with the literature**)

- Have other priorities, start-up or business growth (not shown in the literature)
- Keeping neutrality is more safe, many negativity online (**resonated with the literature**)
- Making statements only if 100% sure on importance and correctness of the statement itself (not shown in the literature)
- Different cultures have their affect (**resonated with the literature**)
- Willing to have better and more interaction with other people (socialization need, **resonates with the literature**)
- Need for change in terms of diversity, desire to be heard (**resonated with the literature**)
- Desire to express opinion and to openly discuss societally important issues (**resonated with the literature**)
- A feeling of participating in something important, including company decision making or driving societally important issues, emotional delight (**resonated with the literature**)
- When a good example of effectiveness of an action is in place, it motivates a lot for next activities (**resonated with the literature**)
- Motivation, when people around feel the same, similar, or may be local (**resonated with the literature**)
- Motivation to grow personally, to become better, to act (**resonated with the literature**)
- Being active online may be useful to build professional and other social connection (**resonated with the literature**, social capital)
- Motivation to exchange information, to learn something new (**resonated with the literature**, social exchange)
- Participation if the topic is emotionally resonating (**resonated with the literature**)

It is noticeable again that the topic of motivations is quite well explored in the desk research data set, and the interview results resonate quite often with the motivations mentioned in literature. By contrast, the focus group data related to the barriers to becoming an active participant and the thoughts and feelings of less active community members is not often found in literature. As a conclusion, we should remember the rule of thumb that applies to the behavior online publics: 90-9-1 (90% are lurking, 9% commenting, 1% is producing content). As the lurkers represent such a great majority, the topic of lurking and the barriers to active participation in general should be explored in more detail.

4. Results

The thesis aims to get a structured view of the phenomenon of online brand communities, focusing especially on the motivations of community members to be active and the barriers that stop them from active long-term participation. This information is beneficial for companies managing online brand communities and looking to encourage their members not only in terms of purchasing behavior but also when running societally important campaigns, organizing cause-related marketing initiatives, and in general improving the collaboration between companies and consumers or employees.

The expected thesis outcomes were:

- 1) Concept definition and classification of online brand communities
- 2) A summary of the main drivers and barriers of effective cooperation between brands and communities arising from theory, the desk study articles, and focus group interview
- 3) Practical recommendations to online brand community managers intending to involve participants in active engagement.

This chapter presents the key findings of both desk research and focus group data, seeking to answer the research questions of the thesis one by one. An extra theme that was not initially set as a research question but is considered relevant is the theme of the lurking majority of online community participants. This topic is linked with research question 3 (motivations) and with research question 4 (barriers).

The topic was revealed through the desk research and it inspired several insights:

- Silent readers are a majority (90-9-1 rule)
- The lurkers still feel as part of a community in terms of their social identity
- The silent readers feel comfortable in this role and might be sharing their thoughts elsewhere
- With some extra facilitation strategies, the lurkers may occasionally become active.

The key results of the overall thesis research on online brand communities are presented on Figure 24.

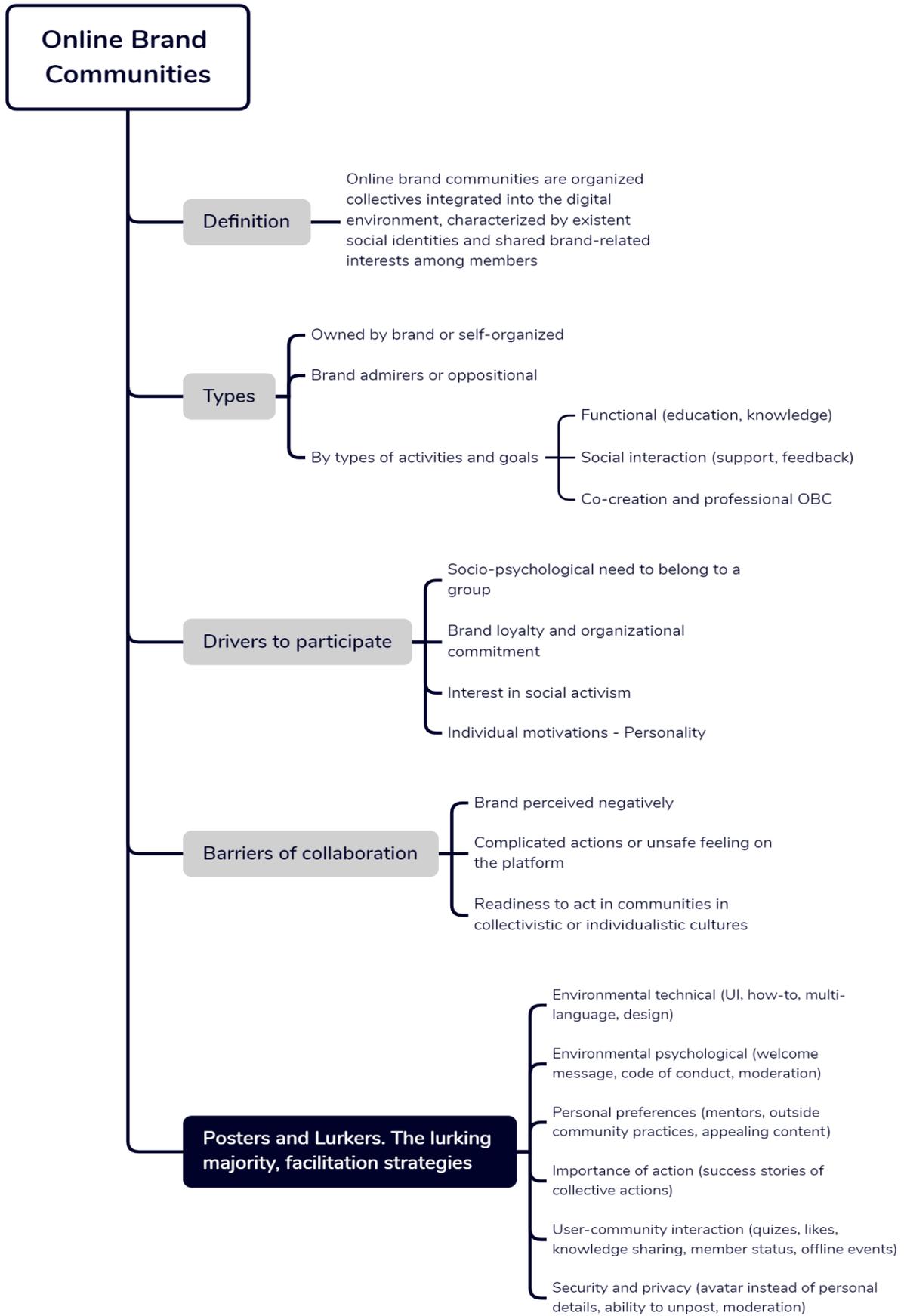


Figure 24 Online brand communities key results (created in XMind)

4.1 Online brand communities: definitions

The online brand communities may be seen as a brand community with relevant attributes of social connections, interest and some level of affect (positive or even negative) to a specific brand. An online brand community cannot exist without relations among people. In addition, there is an important new actor in place: the technology that facilitates connections among community members and also has a certain level of control over the types of human interaction.

Despite the existence of brand communities before the 2000s (we may think of biker or specific brand automobile communities, for example) conceptually the brand community was defined in 2001 in the most influential and often cited research article (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, 1) as follows:

“A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand.”

This is how a brand community can generally be defined without any reference to online specifics:

Social relations as a basis + non-geographical linkage between members + brand affection

An online brand community cannot exist without the technical surroundings that often dictate the set rules of conduct and preferred actions peculiar to given social network platforms (Facebook, X and others). In a way, technology becomes a participating component in an online brand community. The technology does not change the common rules that drive social connections among people, as widely described in fundamental socio-psychological theories, but contributes to the ways in which communities are formed these days. As stated by Dolata and Schrape (2016, 9):

“Accordingly, the institutionalization of the collective can today no longer be represented as a purely social but only as a socio-technical process, understood as the systematic interweaving of social and technical organization and structuring services, the interplay of which, however, varies”.

Against this idea, the cornerstones of an online brand community are as follows:

Social identity + non-geographical + brand affection + technology

Another important part of the definition of online brand communities is the position of this type of social group within other types of formations consisting of digital audiences. Online brand communities are organized collectives, and they differ from non-organized collectives, such as

spontaneous digital masses and crowds gathering around an influential topic and disappearing with the melting interest to the theme. The main characteristics of organized collectives are:

- Set codes of conduct
- Institutional characteristics, including values and knowledge structure
- Ability for common coordinated action
- Linkage of members to the group, their feeling of social identity
- Social connections among members.

Thus, the final list of OBC key characteristics are:

Social identity + non-geographical + brand affection + technology + organized collective

To sum up, online brand communities are organized collectives integrated into the digital environment, characterized by existent social identities and shared brand-related interests among members. This definition incorporates various observed OBC characteristics and includes the different sub-types discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

4.2 Brand-owned, self-organized, and oppositional online communities

Different online brand communities can have different characteristics and accordingly belong to different groups or be part of several sub-types at once. Still, some commonly distinguished types of online brand communities can be observed.

First of all, there are OBCs initiated and moderated by companies owning a brand, which is obvious, but there are also communities initiated by brand admirers and they are called self-organized brand communities. Passion towards a brand and common interests unite people in these types of communities and drive their active participation. At the same time, there are some threats to the brand and the company arising from the feeling of brand ownership that is often observed in such self-organized brand communities. In some cases, brand admirers may even compete with the original brand by running alternative marketing campaigns and even presenting their own products to the market. Due to the viral nature of digital marketing, such performances can significantly affect the original brand-owning company's profit and reputation. One of the examples described in the desk study articles showcase the situation with Warhammer game brand communities in France (Cova and White 2010, 262):

“Bey is a role-playing-game enthusiast, and has been interested in figurines for a long time. He worked at Games Workshop for six years before creating Confrontation with Guitón, a fellow figurine fan. Bey sought an original environment that would be less complicated and onerous than that of Warhammer. Confrontation was the result. The

game was immediately successful, and a community of ex-Warhammer fans sprang up around the game.”

Of course, there are also examples of effective cooperation between brand-driven and self-organized OBS where both types share their passion for the brand, innovate, and co-create jointly. Online brand communities can also either favor the brand or share a common negativity to a brand and the owning company. These types of communities exist online and are a sub-type of self-organized communities. The example above represents a case of an oppositional OBC.

Online brand communities can be classified according to their typical activities and practices. It is, however, important to note that many communities can organize different types of activities, so it is not always possible to classify them precisely. The basis of any community is the social nature of relations among community members. Several socialization initiatives form and strengthen communities, which allows us to classify OBCs into three groups depending on their primary driving activity (Relling *et al.*, 2016):

- Knowledge, business, and education (functional goals of members are covered)
- Social interaction, support, and feedback (social goals of members are covered)
- Co-creation and professional community (both functional and social goals covered).

Co-creation and professional communities are widely present online, being an interesting mix-goal community covering both the functional and social goals of community members. As described in one of the desk study articles, such communities demonstrate organizational main structures (Dolata and Schrape 2016, 13):

“Third, distinctive although easily recognizable organizational interrelations and core structures develop that guide, coordinate, and in part also control the activities of online oriented social movements or communities. In the case of well-established communities in the web (e.g. open source communities in the Linux realm), these interrelations and structures are often held together through independently operated technology platforms on which the bulk of the communication, opinion-forming, and the actual work take place.”

The co-creative and professional online communities often exist around the professional platform or tool used by the digital audience, where people commonly share experiences, best practices, work, and socialize all in one. As examples, we may think of online communities of WordPress web designers, online platform sellers around marketplaces, gamers, or Python developers (Figure 25). Many companies try to support and encourage online community activities.

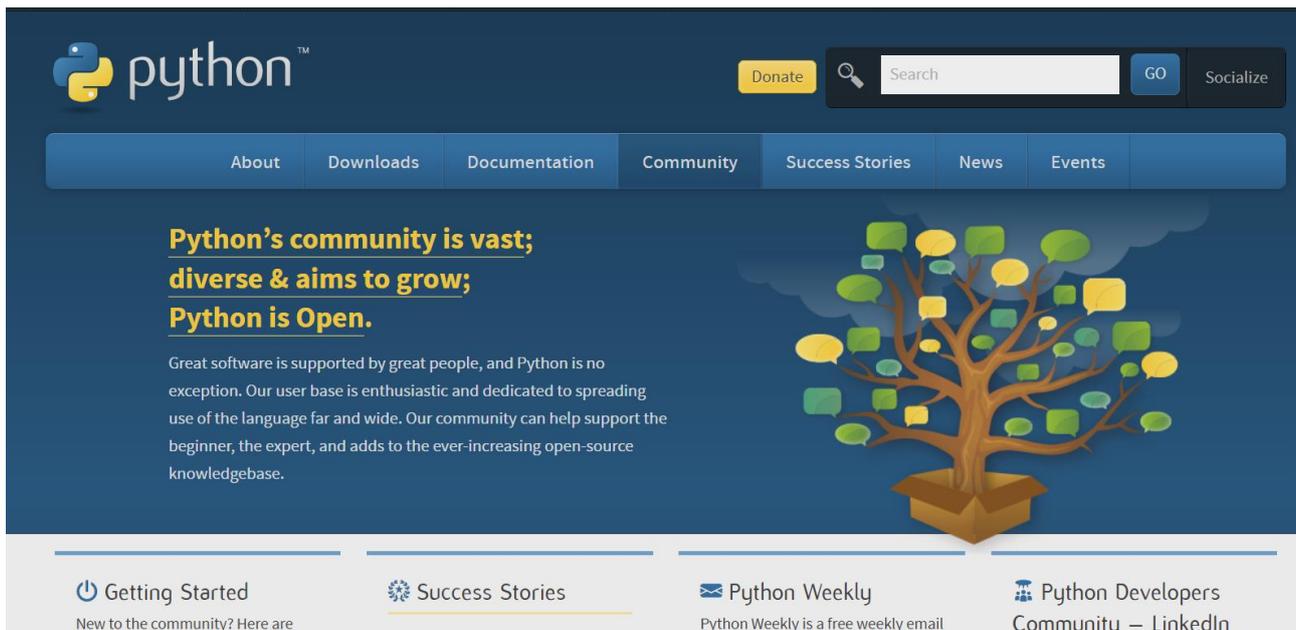


Figure 25 Python community page (Our Community | Python.org)

4.3 Decisive factors behind active participation in online communities:

The desk study analysis revealed several approaches to defining the main drivers and barriers of participation in online brand communities. The first group of researchers aims to analyze online audience behavior from the socio-psychological point of view referring to different social theories, (e.g. social identity and social capital theories developed since the nineteenth century and traditionally used for analyzing offline social groups). The second group of studies collects empirical data regarding the main motivations of online brand community members, summarizing them and presenting specific recommendations to the managers responsible for maintaining the brand related groups online.

At the same time, two interesting findings are noted:

- quite a significant part of the literature appeals to the terms from social theories and psychology, such as social identity, collective psychology, social theory, ownership, personality, self-expression, co-creation, social capital and social ties;
- many articles emphasize in their titles the terms of social movements and activism, such as: citizenship behavior, activism, civic matter, slacktivism, anti-brand, political, pro-environmental, trust, sustainable, consumer movement, online activism, cause marketing, corporate, and activist behavior.

It is worth mentioning that the nature of these findings is not a result of a limited and biased selection of articles by specific keywords associated with social psychology or social activism, but a naturally occurring pathway leading from an idea to understand the main motivations of online brand communities' members to become ones or to actively participate in the community events and actions.

Through exploring motivations to engage in online brand communities one can identify four main groups of decisive factors. Three of them are related to social factors and only one to business factors:

- socio-psychological motivations to participate in social groups
- brand-related motivations to engage in online brand communities
- citizenship, pro-environmental, and political motivations to become active online
- personal factors of an individual.

Several examples of these groups of motivations were found both in the desk study data set and in the focus group interview data, as discussed in more detail in the following sub-chapters.

4.3.1 Social psychology or we need groups

To a large extent, motivations behind becoming an online brand community participant can be explained by fundamental theories from socio-psychological sciences. An online community is still a group of people, thus the main drivers valid for offline social formations can be observed online as well. People build their social identity through participating and acknowledging themselves as a part of a certain group. The need to belong to a group and to identify themselves accordingly is a fundamental need of an individual. Being a member of an online brand community, participating in it, setting certain relations with other communities, and having social connections with other members helps people to obtain their understanding of “we” in addition to the existent “I”.

The phenomenon of expressing opinions and thoughts using “we” can be often noticed in communities. One example of this was described in the study related to a Facebook community in Greece (Yannopoulou et al. 2019, 14):

“We had enough. [...] we decided that it is about time we do something about it. We all felt like that, but since we are not trusting political parties or trade unions anymore,

we had no way of organizing ourselves. Indignant Citizens' Facebook page solved that" (Nora)."

In the interview data it can be seen that when people start talking about the community they participate in online, they prefer to use "we" instead of "I", thus expressing their social identification with this specific group. Some members identified themselves with a specific group based on a profession, some based on the origin country, and yet some others based on a residential local area, which is in line with the social identity theory. We can identify ourselves through different roles, locations, favorite brands, and so on. One can be a professional singer, mom of twins, a specific clothes brand lover, and a certain hockey team fan. All these identities exist together and drive people's intentions to join and participate in OBC. It is important to note that inactive community members also build their social identities in online communities and they do so in the roles that they choose for themselves.

Another important factor behind community participation is the value congruence that defines the nature of relations between brands and consumers. The related congruity theory proposes that it is in human nature to balance and achieve congruity between messages and sources that communicate these messages. Accordingly, when a brand communicates values that are congruent with those of consumers, the communication resonates with them and is more likely to build connection. An empirical study of 833 participants showed the significant importance of value congruity when talking about customer engagement in brand communities (Kumar 2021, 988):

"Management can also enhance customer brand engagement by increasing the congruity between brand values and customer values. To do so, management needs to assess the human-values of the target members in the community."

There are also other motivations to participate in online brand communities that derive from socio-psychological theories. For example, the uses and gratifications theory highlights the ways people make decisions about choosing an information source or participating in a community through the evaluation of possible benefits for them. The benefits might be knowledge acquisition or self-expression, entertainment, or social connections, etc. Another important theory, that of social exchange, explains the obligations that appear as a result of different people's interactions. There is an ongoing process of exchanging different types of intangible assets that happens through communication, which in the end results in the decision to become active and participate in, for example, an online brand community.

To sum up, there are all well-known social and psychological motivations that existed long before the appearance of the internet. These include a need for social relationships among community

members, a need to identify oneself with a certain group and to oppose other groups, and a desire to exchange knowledge and thoughts with other individuals. Online brand communities are first of all groups that unite people, and thus the common drivers making people interact with other human beings are also valid in the online environment.

4.3.2 Brand or organization commitment

Consumer-brand relations are an important motivation when deciding to participate in an online brand community. The brand is the central interest that gathers OBC members, no matter what the nature of this interest is. People may want to discuss their favorite brand with other admirers, they may want to hear recent company news, share their own practical experience with brand products and services, or even participate in societally important activities driven and inspired by the brand and promoted within the community. Brand loyalty often becomes a driver for consumer activism. A relevant case from one of desk study research articles shows how restaurant loyalty can affect active participation (Johnson, Bauer and Carlson 2022, 45):

”I was definitely on board because I wouldn’t sign anything that I wasn’t with. But, um, knowing [the brand] and the culture that they are, I was probably 110% in agreement. Which I’m like, oh yeah, sure, of course I’m going to sign this. If not this, then another one going around about the same thing. Or, you know, writing a letter myself to my representative... (F, 49, Cosmopolitan)”.

At the same time, brand loyalty is achieved through different types of positive experiences from interactions with a brand. Some of the decisive factors are: good personal experience, positive reputation of the brand, trust and responsible attitude to societally important issues, and psychological ownership that appears after co-creation and especially strong bonds with the brand. For some people locality of a brand or its history might be important, for others it may be the diversity management, for example. When a high level of consumer-brand identification is achieved customers become advocates of the brand and support different types of brand-initiated activities, including the societally important ones.

The topic of brand loyalty is often mentioned in the desk study research articles representing the marketing studies and specifically consumers’ purchasing intentions. Many of the findings are also valid for the participation intentions of consumers in online brand communities. Brand authenticity is seen as a complex phenomenon, including the brand’s history and heritage, trust and credibility, as well as integrity. Through building strong ties with customers, brands can engage their audience more effectively compared to classical advertising techniques. By appealing to feelings many

global companies succeed in building strong bonds with their consumers as presented in this desk study article (Kumar 2022, 908).

“For instance, through its various marketing campaigns, brands like Nike reflect their ability to provide best-in-class footwear and try to develop trust among consumers through credible personalities (e.g. world-class athletes). [...] For instance, during the Maggi fiasco in India, Nestle came up with an advertisement campaign showing the rich heritage of Nestle brand and how it had served the people of the country for decades.”

It is important to note that not all strong feelings uniting people with brands. As shown in many case studies, brand communities do not necessarily express a positive attitude toward a brand. There might be self-organized opposing brand communities that gather around their negative perception of a brand-owning company and can cause serious issues. They may even organize their marketing campaigns and produce their goods competing with the original brand. But speaking of positive types of OBC engagement, a positive brand attitude and brand loyalty affect the activeness of community members significantly.

In addition to brand loyalty, organizational commitment of, for example, employees can also drive active participation. When management supports employees in expressing their thoughts instead of dominating, people may participate and express themselves more actively. This was also mentioned by some of the focus group interview participants of the present study:

“So I can definitely open up, as the discussions at the company are quite open. The leadership is quite open and I feel that I can participate.” (Participant 4)

“I think it depends a lot on the organizational cultures. So, in Finland it's flat and at least in Finland I feel that I can give my opinion and the CEO would listen to me. But back in {other country}, it was not like that. It was quite hierarchical. The director was telling everybody what to do.” (Participant 4)

The attitude towards a company is important when we speak of active community participation. In addition to the brand loyalty of consumers widely discussed in marketing literature, an organization's commitment to its employees and an open and encouraging work environment are important to engage people in various types of brand-related activity.

4.3.3 Social activism: need for change and action

One of the factors that makes people become active is the need to change set rules and practices that are not congruent with the person's values. When more than one individual is sharing the same feelings, we can see different types of social initiatives online these days. It is important to make a distinction between short-term e-movements around a highly influential viral topic that disappears when the interest shrinks and organized collective online movements that may exist for a long time and are capable of societally important collective actions. In the context of online brand communities with set collective identities and social ties, the shared need for change may become a real collective action.

The focus group interview revealed interesting practical cases where the interviewees had been participants or observers of collective actions initially pushed by employees or online communities related to the company. The quotations below indicate an encouraging feeling of common participation in something societally important. In these quotations, people are using the pronoun “we” and expressing their collective identity.

“I think that is a good thing because we have to be responsible [and make sure] that we don't support, for example, countries that are in war.” (Participant 8)

“As employees we forced the leadership team. I mean, we participated in the decision-making process.” (Participant 2)

“I was working in the digital marketing team and we were also doing social listening and we had results from Twitter that our company is not sharing anything regarding the issue. We were sharing these reports to the leadership team, saying that we have this request from our clients [who noted] that we did not take a stance.” (Participant 2)

“I think if it is something clear that you can take a stance for and something you can influence to make a difference in the society. Of course, we have to be responsible human beings, we have to take action and have influence. The best way to do that is cooperation.” (Participant 6)

“If I personally feel it is something I need and I can also expect to achieve change ... if I initiated it or if I support something that is making a change, it gives me a good feeling and it motivates me to do more for society because we are responsible for the environment and also for other human beings.” (Participant 6)

When speaking of social activism motivations, participants of the focus group interview expressed a special interest and started a more active discussion in comparison with discussing their more traditional personal or brand-related motivations. The same was phenomenon was identified in the desk research phase of the thesis. When the desk study articles were related to social activism motivations and case studies, there were interesting and inspired examples of specific occasions when people had become active within communities for their joint purpose. One case described in desk study the articles highlights the quintessential power of social issues that need to be changed and how it affects the community's collective identity feeling (Yannopoulou et al. 2019, 14):

“When given the chance each week to stand up in front of my fellow citizens and share my personal opinions, views, aspirations as well as concerns and fears about anything and everything, I feel being true to myself. I cannot think of any other occasion where this has been possible to date. Most importantly, having a sincere dialogue with the gathered audience both offline and online, even debating issues of common interest with people that have no hidden agendas offers a spiritual challenge (Maria).”

To sum up, emotions and feelings that drive people in social activism, supercharged with social identities of a community, lead to more intensive and expressive cases and actions in comparison with traditional brand loyalty or attention-capture triggers. The key point is to maintain trust, transparency, and sincerity within such societally active communities.

4.3.4 The personality: people are different

In addition to the three main groups of motivations, other personal factors and types of personalities can trigger the active participation of a certain individual in communities. These factors are probably harder to classify, predict and control but they still need to be considered and acknowledged.

As people are different, different levels of online presence might be desired by individuals. Some prefer to stay silent readers, while others need to self-express themselves online or grow their social capital by obtaining as many social connections and digital “friends” as possible. Self-expression is often discussed and indeed can be a strong motivation to be active for some individuals. It is important to understand that not everyone has this need, as the desire to self-express is quite a personal characteristic. Many online brand community participants prefer to stay inactive, still building their social identity in the community and feeling themselves to be an important part of the group by consuming and reading the content provided.

Personal traits affect levels of contribution. As stated in the article exploring the influence of personality on activeness or passiveness within online social networks (Pagani, Hofacker and Goldsmith 2011, 451):

“As levels of innovativeness for social networks increased, passive and active use increased, suggesting that innovative users are more likely to use and contribute to these sites. Likewise, it appears that as users’ motivation to express their self or social identities increases, contributions also increase. On the other hand, a nonsignificant relationship was found between expressiveness (both self-identity and social identity) and passive use.”

It might be beneficial for communities to encourage self-expressive community members to show up and to produce user-generated content that is highly welcomed by other community members.

Social capital and how it can be generated through online groups was discussed in one of the desk study articles focused on the participation of students in online communities (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007, 1162):

“Our findings suggest that certain kinds of Facebook use (articulated by our Facebook intensity items) can help students accumulate and maintain bridging social capital. This form of social capital—which is closely linked to the notion of “weak ties”—seems well-suited to social software applications, as suggested by Donath and boyd (2004), because it enables users to maintain such ties cheaply and easily.”

According to the focus group interview data, many community participants use online communities to build their professional network and to achieve professional growth and support. This factor motivates professionals and drives them to be active in online communities. The quotations below exemplify the importance of this motivation.

“So, what motivates me? It is personal growth. I am looking for personal growth and actually, it is quite effective to be part of a [professional] community. These communities help you to keep focused on the goals you want to achieve. So I have done it before and it has been very encouraging. You feel motivated and when you can contact people and then you feel that there is somebody there who thinks more or less similarly than you and they can give you some boost.” (Participant 4)

“Personal growth and networking would be another motivation. At least for work, I tried to engage with professionals online and it has been quite beneficial to be networking and building relationships.” (Participant 4)

“I have a couple of communities here in Finland, including LinkedIn groups. I can learn through them and also get help.” (Participant 2)

This chapter highlighted three main groups of motivations behind actively participating in online brand communities: 1) social psychology and the need to be part of a group, 2) brand loyalty and organizational commitment, and 3) social activism and the need for change. Additionally, some other more situational and individualistic drivers were discussed, e.g. self-expression, social capital growth, and professional growth. In the next chapter, the barriers that stop people from actively participating in a community will be discussed.

4.4 Barriers to participation

What stops people from being active in their online communities? Can these barriers be identified and categorized? For starters, the topic is not as widely discussed as the participation motivations. Probably there is a good reason behind this: when people do not participate it is hard to interact with them. Even so, some findings were identified through the desk research and the focus group interview. The question of barriers was emphasized during the online conversation of the focus group and the interviewees shared some opinions. But similarly to the desk research, much more information was given on the drivers and motivations of participation than on the barriers.

4.4.1 Brand-related reasons of negativity

When there is non-congruity between a message and the source of the message, negativity can arise in the audience. For example, when a company communicates to the consumers a societally important campaign but the perception of the company by consumers is not in line with the communicated statement, the digital audience reacts negatively. This happens, for example, when companies are accused of greenwashing. The importance of trust and transparency is critical if a company decides to take a step towards activism and especially if they invite their online brand community to become part of it.

As an example, one can refer to a case study related to an online social campaign that was run by a Finnish company. The example demonstrates how even good initiatives of a brand can drive negative brand-related discussions online that spread quite fast. The online discussions consisted of 1615 messages of 655 unique users. Out of these, 1021 were from Twitter. A qualitative analysis of these messages was performed to identify triggers and strategies of antibrand reactions and actions. The results indicated that about 63% of the messages were criticizing the campaign (Pöyry and Laaksonen, 2022).

According to the above-mentioned study by Pöyry and Laaksonen (Pöyry and Laaksonen 2022, 276):

“Three top-level categories of triggers were identified: field infringement, political accusations and questions regarding the impact of the campaign. The first trigger shows how consumers evaluate the legitimacy of the brand to take upon the cause and regard the adopted role of a political actor as noncompatible with the brand image.”

Brands stepping into activism are under detailed review by the sensitive digital audience. Any action in the past perceived negatively by even a part of the active online consumer society can cause a burst of social movement against the brand. At the same time, the company is a live organism with its history, specific past actions and current circumstances, management, and employees. Building trust with the consumers' online brand communities, both initiated by the company and self-organized, is important when calling participants to action or organizing cause-related marketing campaigns.

4.4.2 Human nature and cultural differences as reasons to stay inactive

The topic of cultural differences is getting more important with the growing globalization and population migration trends. If offline brand communities linked to physical locations suffer from differences in members' intercultural communication preferences, online brand communities are likely to suffer even more. Cultures are divided into more individualistic and more collectivistic types, and in online brand communities, we meet a mixture of diverse digital audiences with different communication expectations and etiquettes. While it might be easier to engage customers from collectivistic cultures in joint action and active community participation, it is especially challenging to involve members from individualistic cultures who often prefer using communities exclusively for functional goals instead of social ones. One desk study article related to cultural differences in the context of online community motivations illustrated the differences as follows (Park and McMillan 2017, 647):

“The other Korean respondent even mentioned, “I met other community members because we had the same interests about KORANDO. We talked about only our cars over night when we met the first time in offline, but we had started to talk about more personal issues in offline meetings since the first meeting and by getting know each other better. Thus, I feel like we are all brothers.” Those Korean respondents expressed the importance of close personal interactions and communication among other people in the online communities through their offline meetings. On the other

hand, American respondents rarely mentioned social motivation and have limited relationships with few community members.”

Once the prevalent communication patterns in a community are recognized, the engagement efforts can be adjusted accordingly. For example, providing useful information and benefits could be a motivating factor for members from individualistic cultures. And intensifying socialization and communication between members could be a driving factor for community members from collectivistic cultures. Offline events are also often appreciated by participants who join a community with social goals.

4.4.3 Environmental barriers: content, security, usability

Another barrier to active participation is related to the environment, including both the technical interface and psychological comfort. From the viewpoint of technical environment, several important factors might prevent participants from being active:

- unclear user interface
- lack of privacy and anonymity
- and complicated actions with several required steps.

From the viewpoint of psychological comfort, community participants might stay inactive due to:

- unfriendly discussion patterns in the community
- fear of negativity and trolling resulting from expressing one’s own opinion
- fear of giving a bad piece of advice to the community
- not interesting, not appealing to emotions content and messages
- benchmarking activeness with other participants (staying inactive if the majority of a community is inactive)
- not finding any proof that one’s action can change the current situation.

Some of these factors were also revealed and discussed during the focus group interview. The quotations below illustrate some reasons why people might decide not to step in:

“But in fact it was all about filling in forms of different types and they never resulted in any action taken from those. So, I have seen that in the past.” (Participant 5)

“I’m not a political person, so I try to keep my opinion to myself.” (Participant 6)

“I personally try to prevent engaging in those conversations on social media. So, for example, if you take a side and if we post something, maybe some people will be happy and some people might get offended.” (Participant 6)

“I think if you say the wrong thing on social media, you could be a victim of online harassment. I have seen a lot of people get harassed or victimized posting wrong things without thinking twice. That worries me and it also probably worries others...” (Participant 6)

“Bots are a big issue, along with evil people and haters. Also feeling ashamed for sharing your ideas sometimes, as they may look odd to some people” (Participant 5)

“But I have to really think twice before I give any advice or comments, because I'm afraid that I could give a wrong piece of advice and I think that would be very bad for me and for the other party.” (Participant 8)

As we can see, becoming a victim of online social harassment worries many interview participants. An interesting finding is also the fear of giving the wrong kind of advice or facts that were not properly checked to other community members. These factors need to be considered when organizing and managing an online brand community to make participants feel comfortable and encourage active participation.

To sum up, in both the desk research and the focus group interview, the barriers of participation were not discussed as much as the drivers of participation, probably because the lurkers are less visible and harder to interact with (and this applies to research purposes as well). The main reasons for not being active online can be grouped in three sub-categories: brand-related negativity, cultural differences among community members, and environment both in terms of technical surroundings and psychological atmosphere. In the next chapter, the so-called lurkers will be explored. Lurkers are silent readers within online brand communities, representing a majority.

4.5 The significant lurkers: facilitation and activation strategies

In this thesis, I will argue that the so-called lurkers, despite being less active as participants, are a very important and valuable group of members. According to the well-known marketing rule 90-9-1, 1% of the digital audience are producing content, 9% are commenting, and 90% are silent readers of content or “lurkers”.

In addition, the analysis showed that there are several types of community participants and their behavior within social online groups depends on these personal sub-types. Various studies show that active participants form a community minority. In contrast, many community members are visually inactive yet at the same time feeling part of a community, belonging to it, and building their social identity within these online communities. It is worth investigating what are the invisible activities of such members. Do they share information via word-of-mouth? Do they discuss topics raised

in the online community with their family or colleagues offline, thus advocating the community to outsiders? Studies show that inactive members are also an important and massive part of a community and their social identity and activities outside the community are worth exploring. Based on the results, it is possible to develop facilitation methods and ways to activate these members.

The topic of lurkers was not originally part of the research questions, but it was brought up by the desk research and found relevant in view of the research objectives. As a result, extra research articles were added to the desk research data set to get a better understanding of why people feel themselves part of a community but stay silent readers and what strategies could be used to engage these members in community activities. This chapter summarizes the main findings concerning the lurkers.

First of all, who are these lurkers and how are they defined and classified considering their activity online? In the desk study research articles, the main focus was on active online community members, leaving the major group of passive members in the shadow. But as companies try to engage as many OBC members as possible, we can see a growing interest in the lurkers. There is a shift from seeing them as a non-valuable and negative part of the community towards understanding that their behavior is normal and such community members can also be seen as a positive and valuable asset. Still, there is much less literature on the lurkers than on the active users.

In general, the lurkers are defined as either never posting online or posting less than once per month. Giermindl (2018, 101) divides online users into five groups as seen in Figure 26.

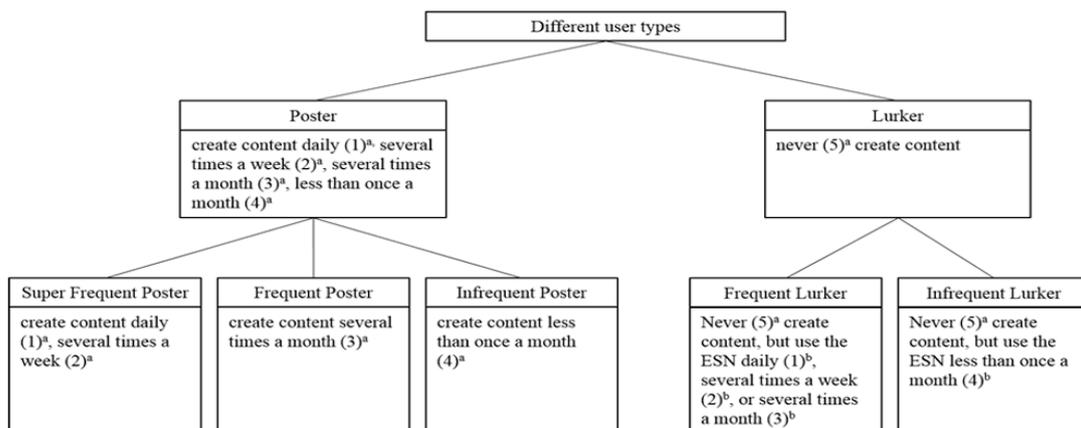


Figure 26 Types of online users. (Giermindl 2018, 101)

There are different types of online users depending on how often people produce content and how often they read / consume it. The group of Frequent Lurkers, for example, never posts but often reads content, and the group of Infrequent Posters posts rarely (less than once a month) but is still

creating some content. Of course such classifications are not fixed, but they can nevertheless be used when analyzing community members behavior.

When planning the focus group interview, the question of online participation intensity was included in the background information questionnaire sent to the focus group interview participants. As shown in Figure 27, the majority of the focus group participants were not active posters, which means that they can be classified either as Frequent Lurkers or as Infrequent Posters. This is in line with the 90-9-1 rule and the analyzed desk study literature.

How active are you online? (likes, private chats are excluded).
I post approximately once per month test answer
I post every week or more often
I rarely/never post, but read content in social networks daily
I post approximately once per month
I rarely/never post, but read content in social networks daily
I post approximately once per month
I rarely/never post, but read content in social networks daily
I post every week or more often

Figure 27 Focus group interview participants: posters and lurkers.

The quotations below illustrate the feelings of the lurkers or infrequent posters, categorized as not active participants (highlighted in yellow in Figure 27). They listed these reasons for staying inactive online.

Reasons to stay inactive online:

“I think if you say the wrong thing on social media, you could be a victim of online harassment.” (Participant 6)

“So I think it makes sense to be neutral in a political arena.” (Participant 1)

“I have to really think twice before I give any advice or comments because I'm afraid that I could give them a wrong piece of advice.” (Participant 8)

“You know they have used social media platforms to influence because I think they have tried to talk to them and try to push them, but it didn't work. So they have gone to the next level and you know, wasting on social media.” (Participant 6)

The interviewees gave these reasons to be active online:

“If I personally feel it is something I need and I can also expect to achieve change ... if I initiated it or if I support something that is making a change, it gives me a good feeling and it motivates me to do more for society because we are responsible for the environment and also for other human beings..” (Participant 6)

“As employees we forced the leadership team. I mean, we participated in the decision-making process.” (Participant 2)

“It is so interesting to have a discussion on things that affect your life really closely. Like if somebody does a graffiti on a wall or something like this. So it has to be something really touching your life.” (Participant 1)

To sum up, common barriers that stop less active community members from being more active participants are:

- fear of online harassment
- sense of useless posting with no change
- fear of giving bad advice
- decision to stay neutral in politics
- decision to keep one's own thoughts and emotions to oneself.

However, these drivers can motivate even less active members to participate more actively:

- ability to make change and participate in decision-making
- good examples of effective contribution to the community
- interest and fun
- a highly important and touching topic.

The reasons for lurking can be divided into the following groups according to the research article by Sun, Rau and Ma (2014, 114):

- environmental influence of the online community (e.g. usability, UI),
- personal traits (e.g. being shy),
- user-community relations,
- security concerns (e.g. privacy).

According to our focus group interview, one could also add to this list community participants' doubt that their contribution will not lead to any change.

What strategies could there be to promote drivers that make people active and to mitigate barriers that stop lurkers from being active? First of all, the lurkers are not people that need to be convinced on the importance and value of the community. They know it, they feel themselves a real part of this community, and they have characteristics of social identity and community loyalty similar to posters. They just prefer to stay silent online and are absolutely fine with just browsing the provided content. They read, watch, and analyze the information provided by the online brand community, they may even advocate and promote offline or via other communication channels that are not tracked. Thus, the facilitation strategies may or may not work for lurkers, but they could be beneficial for those who are one step closer to acting and need only some additional assurance.

Potential facilitation strategies derive from the reasons behind lurking. One desk study article analyzed the motivations of inactive users, the most popular being "just reading is enough" and "I will not add something new." The researchers also proposed de-lurking (Preece, Nonnecke and Andrews, 2004) as summarized in Table 4.

Overall found strategies are summarized in the Table 4 divided by the common feelings that prevent community members from actively participating in online brand communities.

Table 4 De-lurking strategies

Reasons of Lurking	Facilitation strategies
Environmental technical	Clear user interface Instructions for new users Simple action (no multi-layers to act) Translation integrated tools Make browsing and reading comfortable for lurkers as this is their main type of interaction Promote the most upvoted and liked comments so that the discussion thread is easier to read An appealing and encouraging group design, code of conduct
Environmental psychological	Welcome message for new community members encouraging to participate and explaining community rules. Ensure moderation and avoid of hater speech, online harassment and trolling of other community members Active posters can have their profile open if they want to, so that lurkers can see who are the people posting here Emotionally appealing content, regularly posted

Personal preferences	<p>Highlight that the issue is important, and every voice matters</p> <p>To avoid feeling of shy, assign mentors for new-comers</p> <p>Answering new members, not leaving their posts ignored</p> <p>Promote advocating outside the community</p>
Importance of action	<p>Examples of specific community joint actions that led to desired changes</p> <p>Posters and influencers sharing their experience</p>
User-community interaction	<p>Encourage member-to-member interaction through quizzes, likes, sharing experiences, raising interesting discussion topics</p> <p>Implement participation scores and karma for community members (e.g. Reddit community uses upvotes and downvotes)</p> <p>Promote user-generated content in the community</p> <p>Offline meetings and events</p>
Security	<p>Ability to delete own post or comment</p> <p>Ability to keep personal life anonymous by creating avatars that can be used within the community</p> <p>Moderation of aggressive comments</p> <p>Hidden phone numbers and e-mail, ability to adjust own content visibility, to keep privacy of communication</p>

5. Discussion

The objective of this thesis was to conceptualize the phenomenon of online brand communities, to find the main motivations that drive community participants to be active together, and also to explore the barriers that stop people from participating. The aim was also to find practical recommendations for online community managers intending to involve participants more and foster active engagement.

The thesis aimed to answer the following four research questions:

Q1: How is the concept of online brand community defined?

Q2: What types of brand communities are there?

Q3: What drivers of participation in online brand communities can be identified?

Q4: What barriers to active participation in online brand communities can be identified?

The research started with a desk research as the main research method. The initial dataset contained 229 peer-reviewed articles related to online brand communities, from which 29 articles were selected for thematic analysis. The selection criteria were based on relevance, recency, empirical data quality, innovativeness, and authority (peer-reviewed) of the articles.

The findings of the desk research were validated through the focus group interview conducted online together with the two other members of the master thesis seminar group working for a joint commissioning party. The data of the focus group interview were thematically coded and analyzed to complement the findings of the desk research.

5.1 Key outcomes

Q1 is related to the concept and definition of online brand community, OBC. Through the desk research, the thesis explored the existing definitions and defining characteristics of online brand communities. The starting point was this general brand community definition: a brand community is a community based on social ties among brand admirers with no geographical limitations (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

When considering the online nature of online brand communities, technology was added as an additional defining factor. Further, due to the existing organizational characteristics of communities (in comparison with situational short-term non-organized crowds), the trait of the collective was added

to the concept, resulting in this final set of parameters that define the concept of online brand community:

Social identity + non-geographical + brand affection + technology + organized collective

To sum up, online brand communities are defined as organized collectives integrated into the digital environment, characterized by existent social identities and shared brand-related interests among members.

With **Q2**, the thesis aimed to identify types of online brand communities. The classification was made using three sub-types:

Sub-type 1 distinguishes OBCs that are either traditionally organized by brand-owning companies or initiated by brand admirers on their own. Despite the higher levels of participation in communities initiated by admirers, there are some risks for companies in place. Admirers can present the brand in a non-desired manner or even compete with the original brand, running their own marketing campaigns.

Sub-type 2 splits the communities into those expressing either positive or negative attitudes to the brand. The former can be run either by the company or they can be self-organized. The latter are initiated by consumers with negative attitudes towards the brand.

Sub-type 3 classifies online brand communities by the goals of participants and typical activities and practices within the communities. The communities with mainly functional goals practice education and knowledge sharing. The communities with social goals as the primary ones for the participants are concentrated on communication, support, and feedback activities. There are also co-creation and professional online communities that often practice collaborative activities, jointly developing the admired product or sharing professional pieces of advice.

Of course, there are also online brand communities that cannot be precisely categorized using this classification, which are mixtures of different goals and typical activities.

The main part of the thesis is exploring **Q3** and **Q4** to identify the main drivers and barriers affecting active participation in online brand communities.

The initial list of drivers to actively participate online was identified from the desk research phase and validated through the focus group interview. The motivations are summarized into four sub-groups:

- Socio-psychological need to belong to a group,
- Brand loyalty and organizational commitment,

- Interest in social activism,
- Personality traits and individual motives.

As online brand communities are mainly communities and are based on social interactions and connections the fundamental, the findings of social psychology are generally applicable. The analyzed research literature discussed the social identity of community members, value congruity, and the need to balance the perception of communicated messages and sources. In addition, the research articles discussed community members' gratification expectations, need for social capital exchange, and other motivations to be part of a community. These drivers discussed in socio-psychological theories were often regarded as being valid both for offline and online groups. The focus group interview also underlined the importance of social interaction and various social identity factors.

At the same time, brand loyalty and organizational commitment can be the reasons why people join communities and actively participate in them. The desk research brought the readiness of community members to act when there is trust and loyalty to a specific brand in place. The focus interview pointed out the importance of organizational culture and openness to expressing opinions as a decisive factor of active participation in discussions, online or offline.

The thematic analysis of both the desk research and the focus group interview demonstrated the importance of social activism as a driver to actively participate in a community. Interesting cases described in the desk study data set showed the emotionally triggering power of social activism. During the focus group interview, it was seen that when people believe that they can contribute to a societally important change they are ready to participate, especially if they have knowledge of successful and inspiring examples.

There are also personal traits that may affect an individual's readiness to act. These include the extrovert or introvert type of personality, the readiness to innovate, and other individual preferences. Several focus group interview participants also highlighted personal growth and getting professional support for work activities as a viable motivation to participate in online communities.

The barriers of participation were discussed less often than the drivers in the research articles. One reason for this is the difficulty of getting information on people who prefer to stay inactive and invisible online. Some identified barriers were brand negativity, cultural differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures in terms of the readiness to act and participate in a community, and environmental discomfort (for example, task complexity or concerns about anonymity). To better understand the barriers of participation, the topic of lurking was additionally explored. According to the marketing rule 90-9-1 (1% of the digital audience are producing content, 9% are

commenting, and 90% are the silent readers of the content or “lurkers”). Considering the significant majority of lurkers, this topic was regarded as relevant and important in view of the thesis objectives.

In addition to carrying out desk research into lurking, the topic was also discussed in the focus group interview. Some valuable findings were obtained, including the typical reasons for being active lurkers (meaning rarely or never posting, but daily reading the community content). In addition, possible facilitation strategies were discussed (Chapter 4.5, Table 4).

To sum up, to engage community members more effectively several facilitation strategies can be applied:

- Environmental technical (user interface, simplicity of action, multi-language feature)
- Environmental psychological (welcome message, moderation of comments)
- Importance of action (examples of effective common actions)
- Users' interaction within the community (knowledge sharing, member status for activity)
- Personal preferences (emotionally triggering content for the target segment)
- Security and privacy (ability to use avatars instead of personal details, unpost feature).

These different strategies to engage community members in active participation were identified both through the desk research and the focus group interview.

5.2 Suggestions for companies

The desk research data set included recommendations for community managers and brand-owning companies that might help to engage community members more effectively. In the research articles, the recommendations suggested by the authors are based on the results of the analysis of a significant quantity of data obtained from surveys and interviews with online community participants. Additionally, several recommendations were brought up by the focus group interview participants.

It is advised that community managers stimulate members' experiences within OBC by adding elements of gamification, planning offline events or trips, and supporting the self-esteem of community participants (Kumar and Kumar, 2020). By adding interactive elements, such as quizzes, community members are more engaged and interested while exploring the community. Offline events are showing a positive correlation with community engagement and especially interaction between members, but this type of socialization is not always possible for internationally spread online communities. There are, for example, invitations to WordPress community offline events in Finland, which sound inspiring (Figure 28).

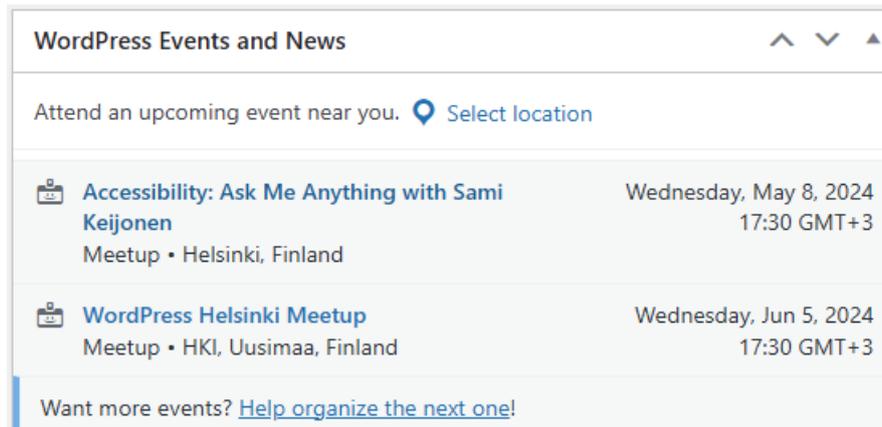


Figure 28 Offline events for online communities: WordPress

Self-expressiveness through online communities is not desired by every type of person. As it was shown in the thesis, a significant part of community members prefer to stay silent readers, but still considering themselves important and valuable parts of the community. At the same time, some members do have a need to express themselves. It is a good practice to encourage such members by rewarding them for creating so-called user-generated content (UGC). UGC is usually highly appreciated by other community members.

It is also proposed that community managers use proven socialization techniques, including educational approaches, participation feedback, and support when interacting with the community (Liao, Huang and Xiao, 2017). As communities are often formed around people's interests and social interactions, it is important to keep the online brand community inspiring and engaging for community members. During the focus group interview, several participants highlighted that they use online communities specifically to learn from other members and to get professional support for their work activities.

Other important community elements are related to social functionality, co-creation, and peer-to-peer interaction between participants and with the brand. Thus it is recommended in the literature to fuel the activities of a community and encourage people to cooperate and to communicate, which is important not only for active members but also for the lurkers (Mousavi, Roper and Keeling, 2017). Some members may also feel shy or be afraid to become a victim of online harassment (also noted during the focus group interview), which is why it is critical to provide a psychologically safe environment for the community. This can be achieved through welcome messages, assigning mentors to new-comers, moderating offending types of comments, promoting cooperation, and following the set community code of conduct. For example, when joining one of multiple Reddit communities you often see a message explaining the rules within this specific community. Also, members get upvotes and downvotes from other community members for their levels and quality of

participation in the communities. In general, any activity that increases the social identity of community participants is beneficial for engagement.

Another interesting recommendation comes from the understanding that there are different types of brand communities in place, both run by a company and consumer-initiated. It is recommended to foster cooperation between these different types of communities, e.g. by organizing brand fests or other common meetings (Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou, 2020). Often self-organized communities of brand admirers are highly engaging and popular, and it is more effective to collaborate jointly than to enter into a confrontation.

It is important also to plan brand campaigns and public community messaging considering the value congruity between brands and their consumers (Johnson, Bauer and Carlson, 2022). When a message coming from a brand resonates with customers' feelings and values, the result is better and brand loyalty increases. This is in line with the congruity theory often used in marketing research. Despite the possible effectiveness of cause-related marketing, companies need to be strategic and accurate with this type of activity. An interesting case with a chocolate producer (Chapter 2.4.1) showed the importance of the linkage between how a brand is perceived by consumers and what message is communicated. Companies should have strategies in place to deal with cases of negativity online, as negative backlash can easily happen in digital surrounding.

Together with a psychologically comfortable environment, the technical side of a community should also be considered. In some cases, barriers preventing active participation as shown in the literature can be due to complicated user interfaces or the complexity of the online action (many steps, registration forms etc.). These factors can be mitigated by producing clear instructions and interfaces, sending introductory how-to messages for newcomers, embedding elements, and adding AI-driven multilanguage functionalities. The functionality to provide community participants more privacy and security should be also in place, and this is especially important for lurkers. An interesting practice is to give members the ability to create avatars. This satisfies several needs, including those related to fun, creativity, and privacy.

According to the focus group interview, one important factor driving community participation is having inspiring examples of effective common action. Thus, providing examples of community success stories could be beneficial for increasing community members' engagement and active participation. Overall, a number of recommended facilitation strategies with practical specific recommendations are summarized in Chapter 4.5, Table 4, of the present study.

5.3 Evaluation of the development task

In this Master's thesis, reliability is improved by discussing and validating the main desk research results in a focus group discussion with relevant target group members (6 master students with experience of and/or opinions about online communities). Using several data sources to formulate recommendations (theoretical desk study and empirical focus group interview) also improved the reliability of both the methodology and the results.

To ensure the validity of the research, the criteria for choosing research articles were set at the beginning of the research process:

- Peer-reviewed
- Including empirical case studies/data to get practical information and recommendations based on empirical analysis of community participants' drivers and barriers
- Authority and citing score of the author to identify influential papers
- Relevance to the explored topic (an initial set of 229 articles were browsed through to be able to identify the most relevant ones)
- Recency of articles (as the online environment is changing fast)
- Innovativeness of the research approaches to obtain diverse findings.

In connection with the focus group interview, the recommended university consent forms and research announcement templates were used. This information (organizers, purposes of the research etc.) was communicated to the interview participants in advance for review. In addition, to protect their personal data, each participant was assigned a unique participant code and the thematic analysis data was anonymized and stored with restricted access. To avoid participant and researcher errors, the interview was planned well in advance. To increase its accessibility, the focus group discussion was carried out online. To support the overall running of the interview session, a main facilitator (the author of the present thesis) and secondary facilitators (two other master thesis writers) were assigned.

To sum up, the main objectives of the thesis were achieved: concept definition, exploration of the main drivers, and identification of barriers to actively participating in online brand communities. The definition of online brand communities was approached in the research papers step-by-step in line with general definition of brand communities. However, the types of OBC are rarely met as such and the mixed nature of goals and activities of online communities are hard to classify precisely. After analyzing the main concepts, the highly relevant topic of the lurking majority was added to the phenomena to be explored further. As the thesis writing phase requires a special writing practice, an academic writing short course would be useful before starting the writing of the research report.

5.4 Limitations and future research topics

Several topics of future research were identified as potentially interesting in the analyzed literature set, including:

- Online brand communities in the B2B context
- Consumer engagement in OBC observed dynamically within a certain period of time
- Online brand communities in different cultural surroundings
- Social psychology classic theories in terms of online brand communities
- More detailed research about lurkers (less active members) of a community
- Further research and comparison of firm-owned and consumers-initiated OBC
- Company's strategies when anti-brand online social moves are met
- Consumer activism and encouragement by online brand communities
- Types of community members and their roles.

Additionally, based on the focus group interview and the thesis author's own reflection, the following topics might be also be considered as potentially valuable for future research:

- success stories of professional online communities joint actions,
- lurkers and their invisible activity outside the community,
- collaborative practices of self-organized and company-initiated brand communities.

There are certain limitations to this research. First of all, the six focus group participants were a specific segment of master's degree students and the results cannot be generalized. Also, the thesis is concentrated specifically on organized online collectives (online brand communities).

5.5 Learning outcomes

During the research, the author significantly increased her knowledge about the forces that drive online communities. Through the thematic analysis of existing relevant knowledge, the information was structured and analyzed so that it that can be considered in other contexts and applied to business cases and online social networks.

Additionally, the author got to practice qualitative thematic analysis, applying a color-coding technique and some modern coding tools. The practical experience of organizing an online focus group interview is seen by the author as a useful step taken during the research process.

One of the challenges experienced was the difficulty to recruit interviewees. A personal approach and a proper messaging strategy helped the organizers to gather the required number of relevant interview participants. Another challenge was the high amount of work required when choosing the

relevant set of research articles. For this purpose, a weighted sums method was used to grade each article depending on the target criteria.

All in all, the seminar discussions organized with the supervisor and the other master students during the thesis writing process was beneficial. In these weekly seminars, the research process and the findings were critically discussed and compared with other students.

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