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Understanding Customer Engagement in Online Brand Communities

A social psychological perspective

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Executive summary

Online brand communities are increasingly used nowadays by companies to establish significant relationship with potential customers. Acting as an effective platform for information exchanges, such communities represent a medium for interactions and self-expression between the brand and members. Dependent on their members' involvement web-enhanced brand communities adopt social features from social group psychology as well as customer-brand characteristics from relationship marketing. Identifying the motives for customer engagement in online brand communities is considered a challenge for both researchers and companies, probably because studies so far have mostly focused on commitment and loyalty.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the dimensions that influence customer engagement in online brand communities by conducting a theoretical interdisciplinary study on customer-brand relationships through a social identity perspective. A review of the literature determines the linkage between customer engagement and brand identification. In order to apply our findings, we examine the theories in correlation with the relevant concepts for a better understanding of their association to customer involvement in web-enhanced brand communities.

The model that we propose includes the concepts and establishes the connections and antecedents to customer engagement. Whereas theoretical in nature, the thesis brings significant value to the development of customer-brand relationship meanings and can act as a foundation for further empirical study.

Chapter 1. Preliminary considerations

1.1. Introduction

In the past years there has been a fundamental shift in the way people are communicating. More and more companies resort to online brand communities use in their integrated marketing strategy and aim to establish more significant relationships with potential consumers. At the same time, communities are becoming essential for customer-to-customer (C2C) exchanges (Adjei et al., 2009), customers increasingly seeking information and a medium for self-expression (Cova & Pace, 2006).

Identifying the motives for customer involvement in online brand communities has proven to be a real challenge for both researchers and companies (Gruen et al., 2005). Virtual and greatly dependable on their members' interactions, virtual brand communities adopt social features from social group psychology as well as customer-brand characteristics from relationship marketing.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the dimensions that influence customer engagement in online brand communities by conducting a theoretical interdisciplinary study on customer-brand relationships through a social identity perspective. Online brand communities are considered relationship partners and interaction between customer and brand reveals social identity motives (Fournier, 1998). Moreover, consumers construct self-brand connections and form their self-concepts through community participation (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

The focus of the paper is on the connections that can be established between social identity theories and customer engagement in virtual brand communities. Through constant comparisons and correlations of the relevant construct with examples from previous researches, we will identify and conceptualize several factors that determine consumer engagement in OBCs.

1.2. Motivation

The growing interest in the field of new media marketing has placed the focus on consumer-brand relationships. Online brand communities (OBC) have the potential to offer companies the opportunity to engage their customers into dialogues and meaningful information exchanges, adding thus value for all parties involved, namely the customers, the community and the firm. In addition, we believe that fast-paced technological developments place the spotlight even more on consumers and how their social identity can influence the environment they socialize in. Last but not least, the existing theories on customer engagement do not offer the sought answers to companies' and researchers' who are increasingly interested in the understanding of more personal motivations of members' participation in OBCs. The topic is exceptionally inspiring and challenging, hence our motivation for this study.

1.3. Structure

The paper is structured into 6 chapters. It starts with introducing the field of research, the matter investigated and the research problem. In Chapter 2 the rationale for selecting the theories is presented together with delimitations. Chapter 3 further establishes the paradigm of online brand communities. The theories are then evaluated and correlations with relevant concepts are made in Chapter 4. Subsequently we present a synthesis of the two theories in a model framework in order to answer the research questions. In the last chapter we formulate the conclusion, as well as recommendations for further research.

1.4. Relevance of the study

The aim of this study is to explore customer-brand relationships in online brand communities from both a marketing perspective and a psychological one. The purpose is to evaluate how social identity¹ theories can add value to the understanding of customer engagement in the virtual brand communities, thereby obtaining a significant representation of the underlying motives for customers' involvement.

¹ 'Identity Theory' is a microsociological theory that aims to explain "individuals' role related behaviours " (Hogg et al., 1995). 'Social identity theory' is a social psychological theory explaining group processes and intergroup relations (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994)

The marketing perspectives as well as the psychological one, draw attention towards identification being a key factor in determining customers' motivation to participate in a community or a group. For online brand communities identification is particularly salient as brand and consumer identity are interrelated. The challenge for companies appears to be the understanding of customer engagement motives, often believed interchangeable with commitment and loyalty. The goal of this thesis is therefore to investigate the customer relationship marketing and psychological theoretical research for a better understanding of the underlying motives for customer engagement in online brand communities.

For this purpose, the scientific research conducted on consumer-brand relationship is analyzed from a psychological perspective, with a particular focus on concepts such as identification and social comparisons. The study is relevant for contemporary development in the study of virtual brand communities, the analysis of customer engagement being a central issue in relationship marketing. It is hence in the interest of researchers and practitioners to acquire detailed knowledge of the relevant elements that determine active customer participation in online brand communities.

In the broader context of relationship marketing and international business, the issue of customer engagement is an essential area of research for academia and companies alike. In online brand communities, customer engagement may determine collaboration and co-creation activities, community design, potential for innovation and product development. Furthermore, for the company, customer participation in its virtual brand community has impact on the brand equity (Keller, 2001). Hence, a clear understanding of customer engagement affects the development of businesses of which brands are linked to online brand communities. The thesis contributes to this bigger goal by investigating a fundamental piece, namely the psychological motives of customers to participate in virtual brand communities, which may represent the backbone of further research in this field.

1.5. Presenting the problem

This research paper will specifically focus on the following research question:

To what extent can the understanding of customer-brand identification help explain customer engagement in online brand communities and what are the theoretical implications for further empirical research?

Subquestion 1: How does research on customer-brand relationships attempt to explain customer engagement in online brand communities?

Subquestion 2: Which social psychological constructs can be applied to customer - brand relationships in online brand communities?

The overall research question will be examined by using the following objectives:

- To evaluate the existing marketing literature on customer-brand identification in online brand communities
- To evaluate social psychological theories that can add value to the understanding of customer-brand identification in online brand communities
- To illustrate in a model how the abovementioned tracks can complete each other for the benefit of further academic research in online brand communities

1.6. Clarifications

This paper focuses on the type of online brand community, as it has been found by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) to play a significant role in mediating the dialogue between the firm and the customers. Throughout the paper we use the terms 'online brand communities', 'web-enhanced communities' and 'virtual brand communities' interchangeably. Indeed other researchers have used similar terms such as communities of consumption (McAlexander et al., 2002) and postmodern tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002), in which they have expressed their own views regarding particular phenomena they had explored.

To be specific, the study considers both user-initiated and firm-initiated online brand communities. From a psychological individualistic point of view it is assumed that the members of the aforementioned subtypes display similar characteristics in terms of social identity – namely social needs and self-exposure through the community. In addition, online brand communities are considered to be in a post-initial phase of development, among the members being included ‘fans’. Moreover, we use the term “customer-to-customer exchanges” (C2C exchanges) without distinguishing whether the virtual brand community is consumer-initiated or company initiated. The present study does not consider the different hierarchical levels in an online brand community, nor different industry sectors, due to limited research in this context.

Furthermore, the thesis does not include pure crowd sourcing communities or knowledge communities. Moreover, the term customer and consumer are used interchangeably because in a brand community both types can exist at the same time. The notions of customer participation, customer involvement and customer engagement are used interchangeably in this study.

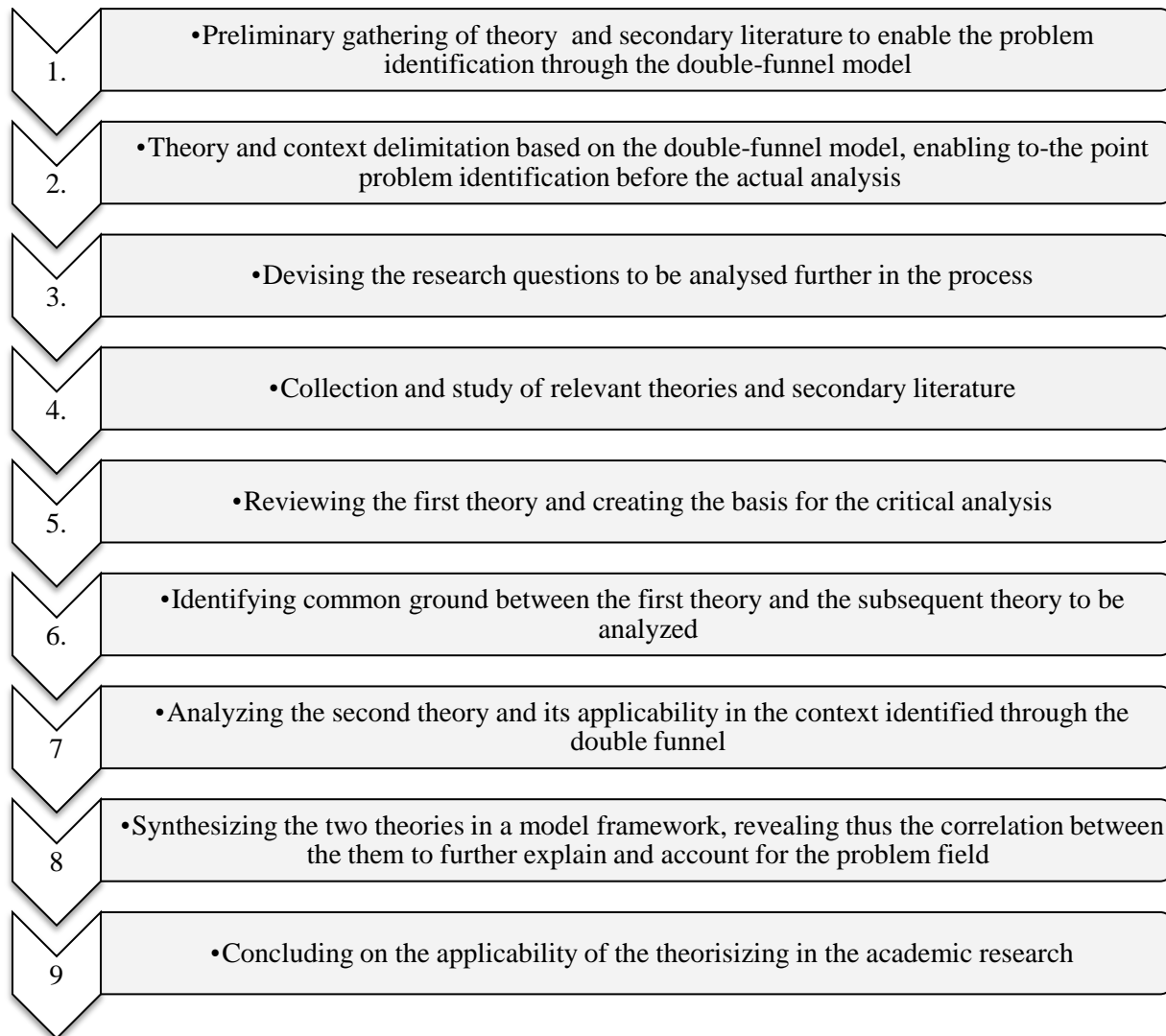
Lastly, to be precise, we use the terms “thesis”, “study” and “research study” interchangeably in order to refer to the present work.

Chapter 2. Research plan

This section illustrates the methodological approach adopted in the present theoretical research study, in terms of the theory and qualitative data included in the analysis. It further creates an overview of the structure of this paper.

2.1 Methodology

Figure 2.1.1.1 Argumentation pattern



2.1.1 Employed Research Strategy

The research strategy employed in this study follows the argumentation pattern previously described in Figure 2.1., for building an overview of the work flow. In the subsequent parts the approach and the rationale for selecting the theories is presented.

2.1.2. Methodological Approach

The research approach employs an inductive procedure regarding theory selection and exploration of the conceptual findings. From the beginning the study was conducted starting with the objective to understand customer-brand interconnections associated with customer-relationship marketing theories in the online brand communities' literature. This process led to further investigation of the issue of customer engagement in such virtual communities. Moreover it was deemed necessary to employ a theory from psychology, in order to explore the correlations between customer-brand relationships in the field of marketing and psychology and to further answer the research questions. By aiming to understand a phenomenon the research is qualitative in nature (Sharan, 2002). From this elaborate analysis and learning process we intend to provide valuable recommendations to academic researchers and to companies interested in exploring the issue of customer engagement from a freshly investigated perspective.

Based on two frequently used theories, customer relationship marketing and social identity theory (abbreviated from now on as SIT), the present research aims to discover the underlying motives for customer engagement in online brand communities. So far, studies in marketing relevant to the current topic have focused on brand loyalty, commitment and organizational change resulting in outcomes instead of antecedents of customer participation. The gap in the marketing literature prevents further investigation on customer participation in online brand communities. Therefore, conducting a theoretical interdisciplinary exploration on customer engagement is proven necessary. Klein (1996, cited in Repko, 2008, p.38) mentions that there exist gaps and fragmentation in the organization of knowledge and that integrated approaches to such matters are required. After all, the advancement of scientific disciplines depends greatly on the cooperation between researchers and interdisciplinary analyses (Hey et al., 2009).

The purpose of the investigation is to identify the characteristics which generate customer engagement. Hence, it is believed that the theoretical analysis would benefit researchers in the first place and companies interested in securing customer-brand dialogues in their online brand communities. Our objective is not to draw conclusions beforehand through the use of a hypothesis; the present study being theoretical in nature aims to explore, analyze and synthesize in a potential novel perspective the understanding of primary motives for customer engagement

in online brand communities. The topic itself is prone to offer new insight through the interdisciplinary examination of theories.

The theoretical research process, which employs here two theories from too seemingly different disciplines, brings forth in point of fact the fundamental similarity between relationship marketing and psychology, namely intergroup communications: they both deal with groups and the relationship between group members. Nevertheless, by correlating the two theories' relevant concepts, it is possible to explain a more complex issue transcending the individual disciplines (Repko, 2008).

The interpretive philosophy

It is essential at this stage to mention that the interpretative philosophy embedded in the qualitative approach is present in this research, both in the process of structuring the theory and in its analysis. The purpose is to gather, to structure and correlate theoretical information in order to understand and offer a novel perspective on a particular phenomenon (Sharan, 2002). Also known as the 'understanding' approach (Antorini, 2007), in terms of brand community studies the aim of this philosophy is to gather knowledge about how people include brands and consumption experiences in their way of living (Belk, 1988). While the context of the paper is distinctive through its focus on online brand communities, it can also offer a more generalized perspective if applied the international business environment by utilizing the findings in various industries.

2.1.3 Research sampling

The present study evaluates a theory in a new context, namely the social identity theory correlated with marketing consumer relationships in an OBC. The starting point is the foundation created by the double-funnel structure (Kornum, 2008) and the first sampled scientific articles (Appendix 1). The comparative method allows for the constant verification of newly gathered theoretical data from prior scientific researches with data deemed relevant previously through the same comparative process.

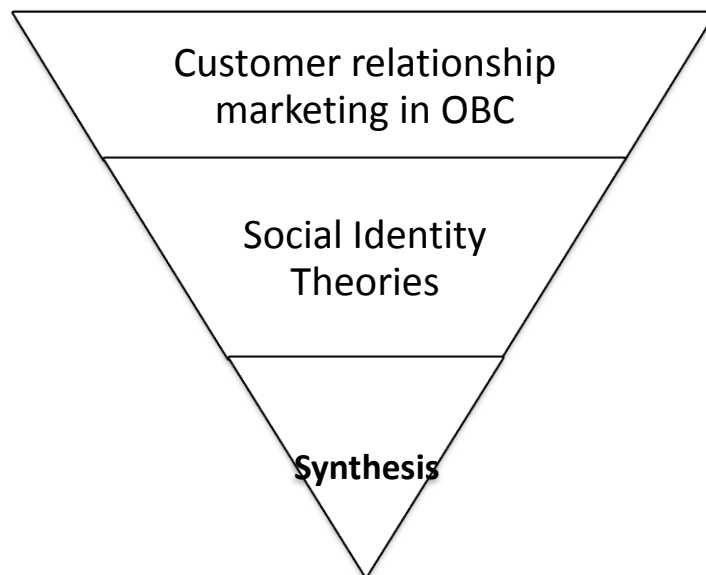
As a basis for getting familiar with the existing studies concerning customer-brand relationships in the online brand community context, we reviews scientific research articles from marketing theory. The relevant literature was identified using a snowball technique, by starting

with three several highly cited papers on community involvement and brand involvement in virtual brand communities. We further used their bibliographies and the EBSCO and SAGE Databases to identify relevant research. The papers used to identify and discover relevant studies together with some notes are summarized in Appendix 2. As this is the first two-layered interdisciplinary research to our knowledge, the research sampling method could not be compared to alternatives.

Besides the scientific research found through the abovementioned sampling method, secondary literature such as books and company research i.e. IBM and Microsoft studies, in the field of online brand communities and new media marketing were used. These served the purpose of connecting the body of scientific research to the organizational world, which is actively experiencing the virtual connectedness among brands, customers and firms.

As illustrated in the figure below, I have chosen to structure the data by using a two-layered-theoretical model, aiming to broadly introduce the theories and analyze the relationship between concepts to further answer the research question. The figure clearly illustrates the links between the firm perspective, community perspective and individualistic view, both in relation to the community and to the firm. The aforementioned create an overview for the analysis following in the subsequent chapter.

Figure 2.1.3 Two Layered Theory



2.1.4 Analysis

The inductive approach used in this research study is complemented by a grounded theory strategy, as the latter is, according to Goulding (2002, cited in Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007), helpful in predicting and explaining behavior while emphasizing the development and building of theory. The study indeed has its goal to develop a new theoretical perspective, through constant investigation, argumentation and correlations among the two theories.

2.2. Delimitations

Research is usually constrained by time and limited resources, as well as the intrinsic impossibility to examine the continually emerging scientific research (Saunders et al., 2007). This is valid especially in the case of university students. This thesis has been particularly affected by the abovementioned constraints, in terms of method. It would have added more significance to the findings, had we had employed a mixed methods design. However this could not have been an entirely reachable goal during the set time frame for the research study. Nevertheless, the employed method is favourable in the case of the grounded theory strategy (Creswell, 2003) as the goal of the thesis is to develop a new conceptual perspective that can improve the understanding of customer-engagement in OBC.

The choice of theoretical research arose from the necessity of a potential new conceptual framework to explain the underlying motives for customer engagement in OBC. Nevertheless, due to lack of resources, the conceptual frame is to be empirically analyzed by other researchers who would benefit from an already developed model. The theory grounded approach might still be moderately subjective, despite our attempts to critically investigate the scientific data. However, the comparative theoretical approach has the potential to constitute the foundation of subsequent studies in the field of consumer marketing relationships and the context of OBC. The validity of the research is nevertheless highly dependent on the information we have available (Saunders et al., 2007), namely the scientific studies already employed.

The present thesis does not focus on a specific region or country, as we consider online brand communities are international in their virtual nature. Nevertheless, in regards to theory

selection, it would have added an additional level of understanding of the online brand community environment, had we had included socio-cultural theories² in combination with the topics of community dynamics and organizational change. While brands can be international in their strategic branding approach, proper understanding of market segmentation and cultural differences play a major role in the successful performance of generating customers and assessing the impact of online brand communities for the customer relationship marketing. However this detailed consideration is beyond the scope of the present research.

Additionally, we do not refer to the design process of online brand communities, as this is also beyond of the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, we do not consider specific issues of group conflicts because this would complicate the theoretical considerations even further and would lead the present research to a different direction.

The term ‘social identity theories’ in plural refers to both SIT and self-categorization, like they are considered together also by other authors (i.e. Hogg et al., 1995; Hogg, 2001) and because the collective term adds an ease of expression to the context.

The goal of the present research being thus delimited, we conclude this section with the mention that alternative methods of data collection and analysis remain for the time being beyond the scope of this particular study.

² ‘Socio-cultural theories’ refer to e.g. Hofstede’s Five Dimensions (Hofstede & Bond, 2001)

Chapter 3. The Paradigm of Online Brand Communities

Prior to investigating the theories referring to a particular phenomenon in online brand communities, in this section, we present what constitutes an online brand community and how the research so far has described its linkages to marketing and psychology. In addition, we examine the types of users and relationships in an OBC, concluding with a short discussion linking to the following chapter.

3.1 Characteristics of Online Brand Communities

The new media nowadays is prolific in opportunities for various information exchanges enabling consumers to become content producers in the sphere of collaboration (Berman et al., 2007). Faced with the online community notion most people would, from personal experience, automatically relate to social networks and the possibility of virtual interaction. The more time a person spends online, the probability that they will join an online group rises (Kozinets, 1999). At the same time the paradox of being isolated by technology while being connected to the world online emerges (Cova & Cova, 2002). When it comes to brand communities online, people might automatically think of brands such as Apple, Harley Davidson, Saab or Nutella, mostly due to the intrinsic perception of identification with the brand and with what it encompasses.

The relationship perspective on brands

Throughout this thesis we use the relationship perspective on brands (Esmann Andersen, 2006, cited by Antorini, 2007) which is consistent with the focus of our study, namely customer engagement in relation to social identity theories. This perspective has proven popular in the recent years through studies investigating consumer-brand interactions (Swaminathan et al., 2007) This perspective had initially the view of the brand as an identity which customers assume when their personal needs match the brand meaning. However, as a development in the theory, brands are now considered to be directly influenced by the relationships between consumers and the brand, relationship from which brands are in fact created (Fournier, 1998; Hogg & Michell, 1996).

Virtual communities

The term ‘virtual community’ was first used by Rheingold (1993, cited in Kozinets, 1999) to define a certain amount of individuals with similar interests gathering online. Since then, online communities of various characteristics and initiated for diverse reasons, have been defined by researchers based on typologies of users and associated phenomena originating in the actual collective activity or interest. Armstrong and Hagel (1996) notably proposed four categories of online communities: communities of relationships, communities of fantasy, communities of transactions and communities of interest. Kornum (2008) characterised three types of online firm-initiated communities: brand communities, CSR communities and innovation communities. To present knowledge there is no specific typology for user-created online communities.

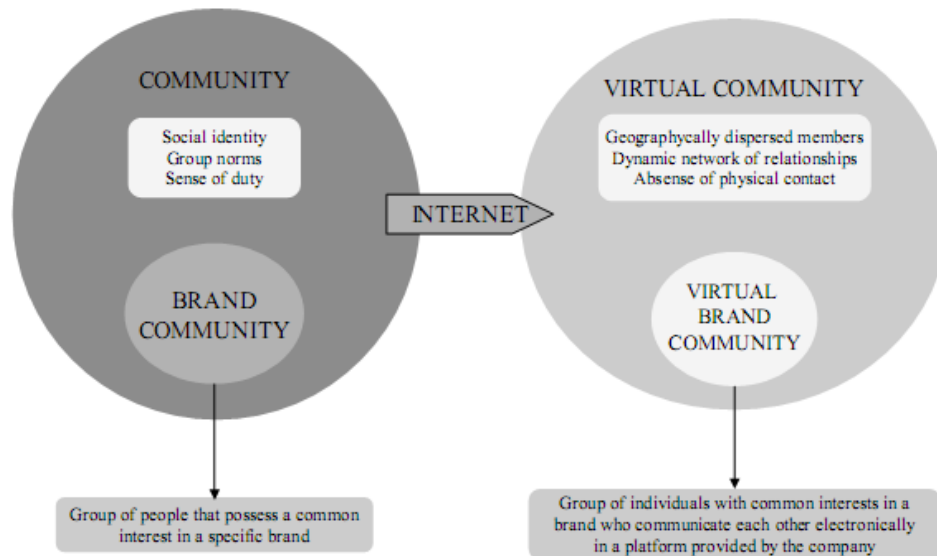
This thesis does not make a distinction between user-initiated and firm-initiated online communities, because it is assumed that the underlying motives for customer-engagement do not depends on this typology. Rather, we focus on group antecedents of participation and specific relationships between the actors involved in the community. Additionally important is the fact that the specific context for our analysis is the online brand community. For this reason, it is imperative to further identify the type of online brand community.

Brand community characteristics

Definitions for brand communities, i.e. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), Andersen (2005), Adjei, et.al. (2009), have in common shared passions, norms and emphasize information exchange. Amaral and Monteiro (2002) were the first to mention the use of social identity theory in online communications, however with unexpected results: the results of their study places the technological identity as a singular identity unrelated to social interactions. One can argue that this cannot be the case in online brand communities, as the concept itself is centred around the idea of exchanges and social identity development for members.

As an overview of distinctions between brand community and online brand community, we consider it useful to exemplify below in Figure 2.1.4.1 From off-line community to virtual communityFigure 2.1.4.1.

Figure 2.1.4.1 From off-line community to virtual community



Source: (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008)

In the sociological field, brand communities are argued to display three fundamental components: (1) shared consciousness, (2) rituals and traditions and (3) a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). I will shortly detail each of these in the following paragraphs for a better understanding of relationships in brand communities.

- *Shared consciousness* refers to the sense of connection between individual, other members of the community, as well as the community brand: e.g. the hobby to play with Lego. It is further determined by two elements, namely: legitimization or discovery of opportunistic behavior, and opposition to other brands.
- *Rituals and traditions* are used by members of a community to spread the group meaning to other members in process of sharing. The interaction regarding major events that had happened or information about the brand form a common identity to which consumers in the community relate to. The common identity can be represented by specific behaviours, norms, language etc.

- *Sense of moral responsibility* is represented by the attitudes and feelings that influence commitments in the community. Moral responsibility is divided into two actions, namely integration and retention of members ensuring the continuity of the community, and support of the correct brand use.

By connecting the three brand features in a traditional brand community, it has been proved that brands can nurture communities (Antorini, 2007). These brand characteristics have been further investigated in the case of online brand communities and considered salient (McAlexander et al., 2002; Algesheimer et al., 2005). These characteristics were deemed suitable for the evolution of social brand communities.

Connections and identity

Connections between brand and consumers emerge when the individual uses the brand to build their self-identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Hence, the interest in the brand, the community and its members happens through brand identification. Consumers thus create their self-image through their brand choices. Accordingly, by acquiring membership in a brand community, consumers construct their self-identity through social discourse, becoming consequently 'communicatively competent' and attaining the social identity of the group (Eastman, 1985). As a result, brand communities are identity based, because they are gathered around a brand which offers a bundle of associations to self and to group identity.

The shared interest in the online brand community is thus represented by the brand which is the centre of interaction. The brand connects consumers and offers the identity base for relationship establishments. As members build their self-identity through interactions, they may acquire specific roles through which they become characterized. Such roles will be described in section 3.2.

Space and time

The space for interaction in an OBC is represented by the online setting organized for participants to engage, to experience and share information. This space is accessible to all members in the community and it does not depend on time and geographical location. The new advances in technology offer a multitude of options for online interaction and collaboration which makes this space a valuable setting for sharing the brand and establishing mutually

beneficial relationships. Hence, face to face context is not necessary anymore (de Valck & Dambrin, 2007 cited by Sicilia and Palazon, 2008).

Real time and time distortions in online brand community refer to entertainment experiences and to communications (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). Both notions are valuable in that they form an integral part of the consumption activity.

Brand meaning

In the last part of this subsection we considered it important to include notions about brand meaning as the concept relates further to relationships and identification in later chapters.

Brand meaning is generally perceived as representing more than a product's use and benefits (Schultz & Hatch, 2003). In online brand communities members usually build and discuss a variety of brand meanings (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), this leading to the concept of brand interpretive community (Kozinets, 1997; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). One can argue that brand meaning negotiation is strongly related to social identity theory, because in the process brand community members build their identities as they relate to the brand characteristics.

We further illustrate typologies of customer-brand relationships in OBC, connecting the above mentioned characteristics of virtual communities for additional understanding of processes and connections developed in these communities.

3.2 Types of relationships and types of users

Types of relationships

Relationship marketing together with the notion of loyalty-based segmentation cannot be fully applied to online communities of consumptions, according to Kozinets (1999, p.256), hence nor to online brand communities, the latter being a subtype of the first. A plausible reason is that online brand communities display a different social environment, with consumers presenting equally different behaviours. In concordance with the OBC definition obtained in subsection 3.1, identification plays a central role in OBC relationships.

Kozinets' Relationship Framework

Kozinets (1999, p.254) details two types of factors leading to lasting membership, which translated for the OBC context are the following: (1) customer-brands relationship and (2) customer-to-customer relationship.

The first factor leads back to the definition of OBC, by mentioning the self-concept identification with the brand. Hence the stronger the individual identifies with the brand or the consumption activity, the more valuable their membership becomes. Valuable in this sense does not necessarily mean that self-identification with the brand automatically determines a higher level of community engagement. This issue will be further analyzed in the next chapter.

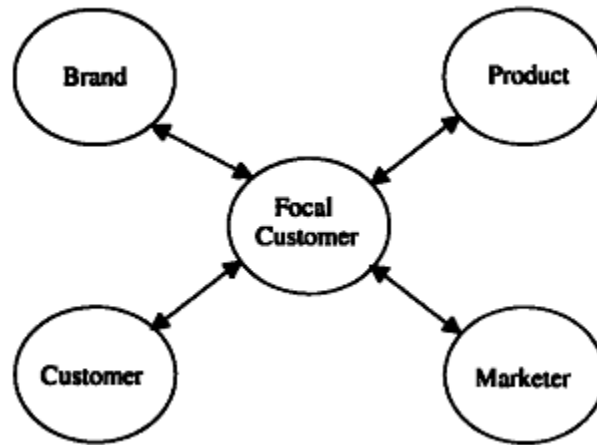
The second factor deals with customer-to-customer (C2C) relationship, which may be regarded from a perspective of information exchange (Gruen et al., 2005) and the psychological intragroup communication perspective through brand associations (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

McAlexander's Model of customer-brand relationships

Customer-brand interactions in brand communities have been investigated by other researchers as well i.e. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), McAlexander et.al. (2002). Whereas Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) and Kozinets (1999) envisage a brand community to be governed by a customer-customer-brand relationship or a triad, McAlexander et.al (2002) evaluate brand community through a dynamic customer-centric perspective. This dynamic model is however empirically investigated solely in brandfests³.

³ **Brandfest** is a company sponsored event with the purpose of bringing together the users of a brand. It is typically organized as "two- to three-day firm-sponsored events where consumers gather at 'brand-intense galas' in the 'celebration of brand ownership' "(McAlexander & Schouten, 1998, cited in Antorini, (2007).

Figure 2.1.4.1 Consumer-Centric Model of Brand Community



Source: McAlexander et.al. (2002)

Fournier's Typology

Fournier's (1998) typology of consumer-brand relationship distinguishes between 15 forms of relationships with brands through the use of metaphors, after investigating three in-depth case studies. The typology, developed by the use of the relationship metaphor, illustrates the partnership connection of customers with brands. Moreover it also highlights the multitude of roles that brands can play in peoples' lives i.e.

The Three Wheel Relationship Gear Model

Considering the above relationship perspectives in brand communities, we formulate a three-wheel Relationship Gear model

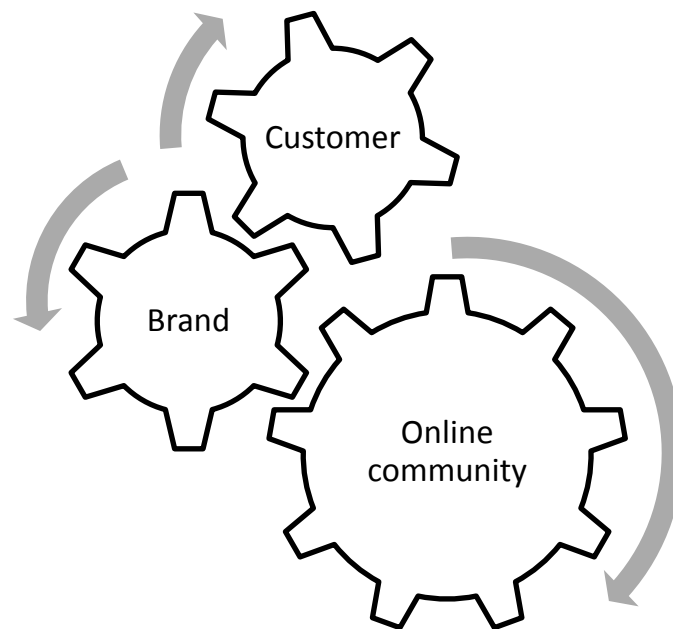
Figure 2.1.4.2), which dynamically emphasizes the interdependence of the three main actors involved in the OBC. The three actors are the brand, the customer member of the community and the online brand community. As portrayed in Section 3.1, a customer identifies with a particular brand. This identification leads to processes of establishing relations both among the members of the community and between one individual and the community as a whole. The brand is the central focus of the OBC, in which the customer engages. The brand is

represented by the company, which can influence the brand in various ways and thus, the community and each member. It is clear that the three actors are interrelated and a change in one of the three parties can generate a change in the other two.

Figure 2.1.4.2 aims to portray thus the dynamic relationship between the three levels. In the following chapter we attempt to explain how customer-brand identification determines a customer's engagement in the OBC, which fuels the entire OBC gear to function through interactions. The note related to the Gear Model depicts the two social identity concepts which are analyzed in section 4.2.1.

Figure 2.1.4.2 Online Brand Community Relationship Gear

Note: (a) the relationship between the individual as a focal point and the brand – *identification with the brand-*, and (b) intra-group relationships – *social comparisons*.



Typologies of users

Kozinet's (1999) two factor perspective on membership leads to a categorization of members in a virtual community of consumption. This perspective is based on the two factors as axes forming four quadrants equal to four typological dimensions as represented in Figure 2.1.4.3: the devotee, the insider, the mingler and the tourist. These four types are relevant for the present thesis, as they refer to member interaction in the virtual community. Thus, whereas the devotee and the insider are highly involved in the consumption activity⁴, their ties to the social community vary, with the insider also interacting with the other members, while the devotee is purely a member for the consumption experience. On the other hand, the mingler is part of the community for the social interaction and less for the consumption opportunities, while the tourist is involved in neither of the two. This typology is relevant further when discussing community involvement in OBC.

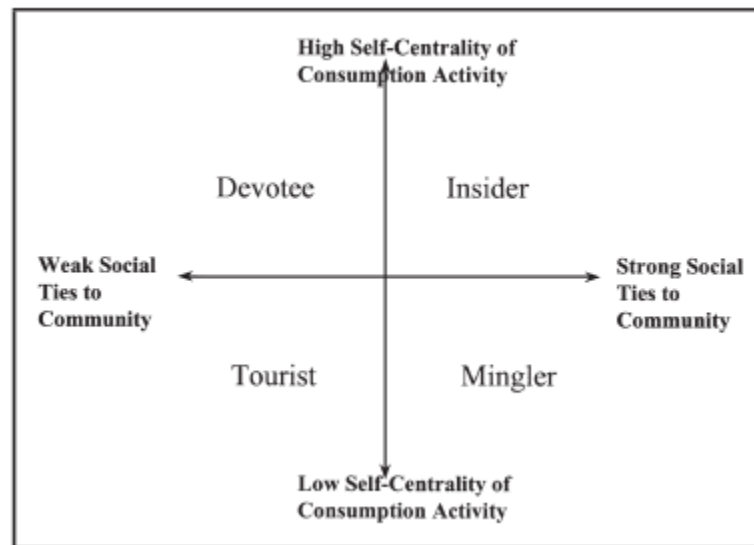


Figure 2.1.4.3 Types of virtual communities of consumption member

Source: Kozinets (1999)

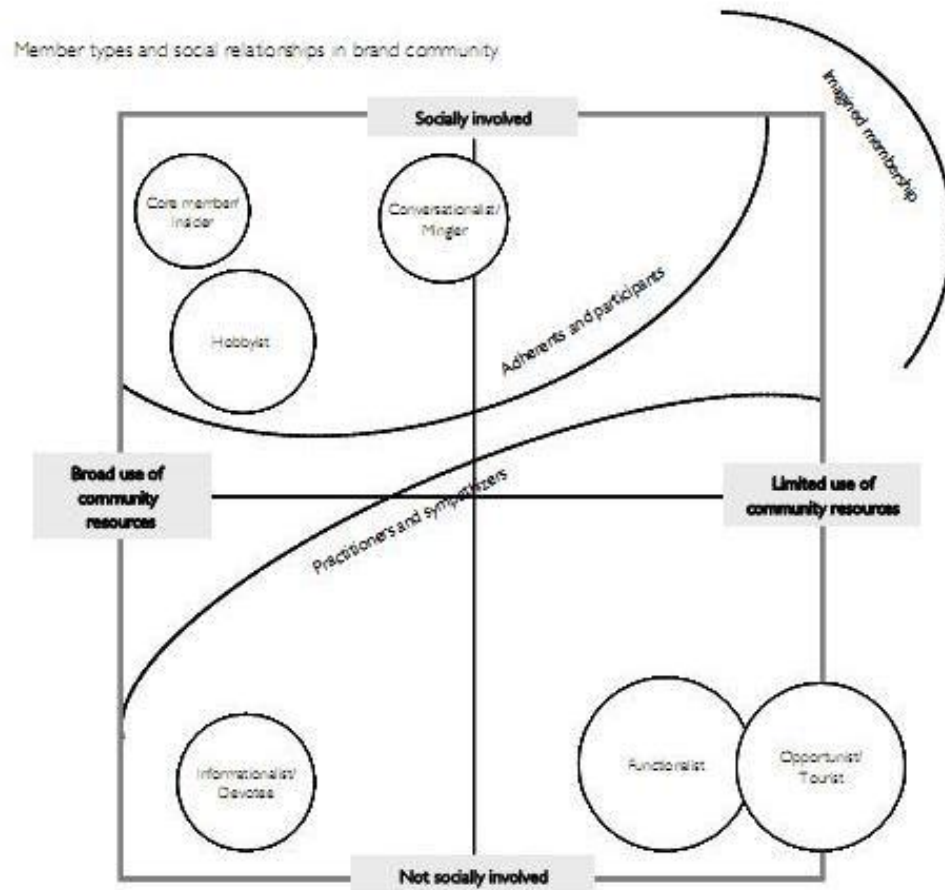
⁴ 'Consumption activity' refers to activities in which members of a community of consumption engage, either by using the brand or interacting with other members in the community (Figure 2.1.4.3)

Cova and Cova (2002) develop a typology of users based on a combination of contexts and consumption activities. However it is not explained how the results of the typology were obtained, whether conceptually or empirically. The Clover typology is depicted with two axes, the horizontal one for the axis of visibility and the vertical one for the axis of invisibility. The visibility axis represents imaginary places on top and everyday life at the bottom. In turn, the invisibility axis deals with Institutions on the right hand and Occasions on the left. The four roles of tribe members depend apparently on the location they find themselves in. Thus, Sympathizers are situated on the Imaginary top, adherents and devotees in the Institutions right side, Practitioners in the Everyday Life bottom place and Participants in the Occasions left side.

This clover-role typology is particularly useful for distinguishing between categories of consumers, when location is a salient determinant. However, the model does not consider the perspective that consumers would especially use brands for connecting to like-minded social individuals or groups (Antorini, 2007), as consumers nowadays tend to come together and bond rather than enjoy brands individually. The framework developed by Cova and Cova (2002) does not appear relevant for this thesis in terms of the research question to be answered, nor in regards to the chosen context of non-location-based online brand communities. Hence the clover-role typology will not be analysed further.

Attempting to structure the typologies of users and relationships based on Kozinets (1999), Cova and Cova (2002) and de Valk et.al.(2005, cited in Antorini, 2007) Antorini offers a significant overview and correlation of the three typologies developed by the aforementioned researchers.

Figure 2.1.4.4 Member types and social relationships in brand community



Based on: Kozinets (1999), Cova & Cova (2002) and de Valk et al (2005). I arrived at the relative sizes of individual member types, indicated by various sizes of the segments, using de Valk et al's study (2005).

The framework above is developed starting with two axes, the social involvement from Kozinets and the community resource use from de Valk et.al. Additionally, the types of users are positioned according to the two axes, with the actual member types are taken from the model of Cova and Cova. Furthermore, the sphere of *adherents* and *participants* highlights the fact that there should be a highly committed and engaged type – as depicted the *Mingler* or *Converstationalist*. Antorini (2007) argues that the *participants* and the *adherents* are the most researched types in the literature – their engagement in communities offers indeed many opportunities for study. These types have the potential to influence other members’s social behaviour through their high-status (Schau & Muniz Jr., 2002).

In contrast, *imagined* members do not participate in the community and have no contact whatsoever with other members nor resources. This type is not represented in the literature and due to their characteristics are outside the axes.

Concerning the sphere of the *participants* and *sympathizers*, these types are very little involved and display a ‘lurking’ behaviour. They are sparsely represented in the literature and hence there is scarce information about them.

Considering Antorini’s adapted typology, we can argue that indeed, highly engaged members offer significant value to research, being especially suitable in the study of customer engagement in OBCs. Henceforth, their typology – the adherents and participants - will be considered in the analysis in Chapter 4.

3.3. Benefits of OBC

Online brand communities create links between customers and the brand in a dynamic continuum as depicted in the OBC Relationships Gear (Figure 3.1.2). This benefits the members which are part of the community, the community as a whole and also the brand. The benefits can also be understood as motivations to exist and function as member of the community. They comprise fulfilling each party’s expectations in terms of i.e. quality of information sharing, level of engagement, personal fulfilment, brand equity, establishment of brand relationships (Kornum, 2008).

Paterson (2009) investigated the benefits of online consumer communities to both companies and consumers by conducting surveys to both company-sponsored and member-initiated communities. The type of online consumer community is a generalization of brand communities. In the online consumer communities the focus is the exchange of knowledge which is also present in OBC, although in the latter the focus is on the brand. As the brand is not in focus in Paterson’s research, the findings do not offer a full picture for the present thesis. Nevertheless, for companies, some of the benefits consist of: increased customer loyalty, effective marketing tools and an instrument to increase customer satisfaction. For customers, the study revealed the motivations for community participation: the social nature of communities, the value of content and the availability of customer support.

Keller (2001) investigates customer brand equity through a model which involves both active engagement and the sense of community. The importance of a strong, resonant brand, leads to customer-brand identification and an aspiration to be engaged in the community activities. The ultimate goal of the paper is to lead to a successful marketing strategy through a step-by-step model for brand building. This is, however, too general for the present thesis and we consider that while the general aspects of Keller's study are relevant for online brand communities, the scope is beyond due to its focus on creating brand equity. Nevertheless, an online brand community can lead to a long-term brand equity, this usually being one of the firm's motivation to be engaged in an OBC (Kornum, 2008).

Brand communities are also believed to have a positive effect on brand loyalty and on representing a platform for customer to customer exchanges (Andersen, 2005). Online brand communities establish thus a productive space for collaboration and dialogues which determine links between customers and the company (Del Rey, 2008), thus forming a common social identity through which the brand develops. Hence a benefit for the company is represented by the development of the brand itself, which by means of activating social interactions attributes purpose and continuity to the online brand community. On the other hand there are researchers who argue that online interactions cannot replace face-to-face conversations, being mediocre especially when it comes to building relationship of trust (Rask, 2001, cited in Andersen, 2005). However, as a platform for information exchange, a brand community rather an adds value to non-virtual social interactions that happens in a defined location.

An international perspective

In the international business environment, online brand communities are assembled around a brand with specific brand meanings. These meanings can be interpreted differently according to national ideologies and individual experiences of consumers. The formation of so-called "clusters of affiliation" (McLuhan, 1970, cited in Kozinets, 1999) has the potential to structure the environment according to common interests and expectations. However, brands as identities are only stronger if portraying an authentic image, specifically to its brand community.

The challenge in the international environment is to skilfully combine both an authentic brand identity and a localized adaptation of the brand characteristics.

Evidence of subcultures spread around the world (Cova et al., 2007) can be found in the case of Warhammer, through an analysis of two subcultures in two different countries – France and US communities. The study is a comparison of the brand meanings assigned to the Warhammer global brand, with data collected through naturalistic inquiries, in-depth structured interviews, as well as participatory observations. Findings of the Warhammer study present the elements of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the brand meanings. The article is significant in that it analyzes a brand community at a global level. Moreover, it brings forth the concept of subcultures, which perceive the brand according to their specific culture. In the international business environment, international brands should pay attention to the tensions between national ideologies and the identity of each individual.

Some of the large companies have indeed been unsuccessful in creating their own virtual brand community (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). When managing global brand communities differences in perspective towards meanings can potentially cause clashes in the community as a whole, unless perhaps managed separately. The Warhammer case is thus valuable in understanding the global nature of brand community, but it does not investigate a virtual brand culture. Nevertheless, taken into consideration the fact that the same participants would be found in the equivalent OBC, together with their cultures and experiences, the context of the Warhammer case is not considered unapplicable to OBCs.

The case of Nutella (Cova & Pace, 2006) is an actual study of consumer participation in online brand communities, with a global brand as its focus. However the study itself was only conducted in Italy, without offering the possibility of intercultural comparisons. The general specific subject of the case is an investigation of the power of virtual brand communities over the product brand. The research is not based however on interaction among peers, but on a platform for sharing brand related feelings and media. The results highlight the fact that the company should not interfere with fans' personal expressions online, in order to enable, in a non-intrusive way nonetheless, the positive development of both the brand and the social identity of the fans. The public exposure of consumer expressions in the case of Nutella reinforces the idea of OBCs' importance as a forum for customers exchanging common interests (McWilliam, 2000).

In the case of Adult Fans of Lego (AFOL) community (Antorini, 2007), the focus of the research is user-driven innovation, through online forums where Lego fans can further engage in their hobby by contributing to the brand and to the dialogues. Thus another benefit of OBC is collaboration and innovation, which benefit both the brand and the consumers by bringing them together. The strong the connection to the brand develops a feeling of “we-ness” (Bender, 1978, cited in Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) which has the potential of empowering fans to build their social identity through interactions and contributions to the web-enhanced brand community they belong to.

In brand communities that are not virtual in nature, but based on meetings or *brandfests* (McAlexander et al., 2002), it can be inferred that the strength of interaction in OBC is at least the same as in non-virtual brand communities. The members in communities like Harley Davidson however may experience a higher public self-expression and the need to fulfil hedonic needs (Kornum, 2008) due to the intensity of interactions which depict the strength of attachment and identification with the community (Keller, 2001). Besides Harley-Davidson, Apple and eBay can be considered brands of high resonance. The benefits of BC and OBC in such intense cases are represented by long-term brand equity for the company, whereas for customers the benefits are psychological in nature.

Through the use of online communities, firms have many advantages, such as a multidimensional inexpensive platform offering information about the potential customers. (Kozinets, 1999). Moreover, companies have the possibility to directly engage with community members and focus their marketing efforts into developing an effective strategy for customer relationships. (Kim et al., 2007)

In general it can be assumed that a virtual brand community is reachable by anyone online internationally; however this matter depends on the community culture, brand meanings, industry and design characteristics which may form the scope of another study. Nevertheless, according to the examples presented above, OBC are already benefiting both communities and brands, either through innovation and collaboration in online forums or through personal self-expression on websites. Even though OBC may have different goals, customer engagement is a desired outcome for all. Without customer engagement a community does not evolve and ultimately cease to exist. What specifically generates customer participation has been the object

of several studies. The present thesis focuses on the psychological motives customers have for establishing social interactions in OBC.

3.4. Summarizing discussion for the chapter

To conclude this chapter, it is necessary to briefly mention what has been presented and how the paper will proceed forth. Hence we started with clarifying the concept of online brand community, by relating it to definition of renowned authors. We further attempted to set a set an overview of how social identity relates to online brand communities by explaining customer-brand identification and mentioning the existence of typologies for users and relationships inside the community.

Subsequently we discussed two conceptual models of relationships in brand communities and also types of users. This section is useful for the following chapters, because the relevant typologies will constitute elements of correlation between social identity theories and customer relationship marketing in virtual brand communities.

Moreover we considered it significant to exemplify the importance of OBC for both consumers and companies, as this relates to customer engagement. Hence we illustrate the benefits and motivations using brand community literature cases conducted by other researchers and briefly analyzed their relevance for the present study.

In the following chapter we analyze and discuss customer-brand identification literature to further correlate it with social identity theories. The objective is to understand to what extent customer-brand identification, depicted in section 3.2 via the Three-Wheel Relationships Gear Model, can play a role in further determining the underlying motives for members' engagement in OBC.

Chapter 4. Customer-brand relationships in online brand communities

This chapter continues on the previous one with a deeper analysis regarding customer-brand relationships. The present research so far has identified the online brand communities as beneficial for the company, for the community itself and the members. The potential for the company to gain a valuable understanding of what specifically determines customer engagement will be investigated with the individual as a focal point, by correlating identification as described in the social identity theories with the existing research on customer-brand identification in OBCs.

4.1. Customer-engagement in online brand communities

Having previously identified the three relationships present in an OBC, this section will build on by reviewing and analysing customer engagement literature, as well as establishing the linkage to the following section. We start with general considerations regarding customer-brand identification and then move on to reviewing the relevant literature, constantly analyzing and relating concepts in order to answer the research question.

Customer identification with the brand, respectively the company, is particularly present in online brand communities. It is here that associations and interactions, information exchanges and the general sense of sharing provide a strong foundation for marketing relationship development. Hence identification in this context is believed to be the basic psychological foundation for relationship marketing (Batcharaya & Sen 2003, cited in Adjei, Noble & Noble 2009).

4.1.1. Review of customer engagement and identification in OBC

A starting point in the analysis of customer engagement is a review of the relevant literature that contributed to the developments in the field of online brand communities. The goal of this section is hence to offer a thorough overview of various perspectives on customer engagement. We begin with the often cited paper of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) and continue with related discovered studies. This section attempts to represent in an objective manner other authors' points of view, in comparative correlation with the present study.

In brand communities, participants constitute the social sphere gathered around the brand. According to section 3.3, a major benefit for customers who actively engage in the community social environment is the intrinsic development of motivation to engage. The latter is determined by feelings of identification to the brand⁵ and the contentment when the community responds positively to information or support inquiries.

Previous research on brand communities consider customer identification as a trigger for members' involvement in the community (e.g. Algesheimer, Dholakia & Hermann, 2005) and it is considered to be an essential condition for a social group to be considered a community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Hence in online brand communities, one can argue that customer identification is similarly an antecedent of customer engagement.

Researchers in the brand community literature have investigated the three characteristics of communities⁶ as defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) and the result was positive for their existence in brand communities (Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002). It can be argued that the three elements of brand communities appear to have a direct effect on customer relationships, as well as on relationships between consumers and the brand. In order to relate these to customer engagement in online brand communities, it is imperative to note the social development aspect of community which relates directly to shared identities and information exchanges. Such interactions are possible in an organized communal way only if members appropriate the elements to their social identity.

The case of Coloplast (Andersen, 2005) is significant because it examines customer to customer exchanges in online brand communities. The study is conducted with a focus on B2B market in the health care sector, investigating the community building processes in web-enhanced brand communities. The author details activities of recruitment and involvement in OBC and benefits of customer participation in direct relation to the brand. Thus brand involvement is considered paramount in the development of the community and the author also highlights the role of the community host. The results of the study are noteworthy as they reinforce the idea that members' interactions in OBC add value to brand growth. It is worth

⁵ In this thesis, as OBC have the brand as main focus, the company is recognized as the brand.

⁶ The three characteristics of brand communities defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) are mentioned in section 3.2. of this thesis

mentioning that the present thesis adds value to the conceptual notion of member engagement, studying the underlying motives for participation.

Furthermore on the customer involvement topic, Carlson et.al. (2008) conducted a study about the social processes that motivate participation in brand communities. The research is relevant in that it empirically investigates the psychological sense of brand community (PSBC) in both social and psychological communities, as antecedent to brand commitment. It is mentioned that brand commitment has the capability of engendering community involvement.

Brand commitment has also been investigated by Algesheimer (Algesheimer et al., 2005) in a survey-based research with data from a sample of European car club members. This study together with Carlson et.al.' mention brand identification as antecedent to customer engagement and commitment respectively. It can be argued that the brand community literature should standardize the term used for members' involvement or interactions. This thesis advances further and concludes from a parallel between the studies of Carlson et.al. and Algesheimer et.al. that engagement and commitment refer to the same phenomenon. Therefore, it can be concluded that these studies offer empirical evidence that brand identification has a positive effect on customer interactions.

A valuable addition to the literature concerning customer involvement in online brand communities constitutes the study of Gruen et.al. (2005). Value creation in brand communities can be perceived as benefit to both the customers and the company. It is argued that customers' social interactions in an OBC directly determine a raise in perceived contributions from the company towards community. A notable point is the two-fold task of the marketing organization benefiting from customer-to-customer (C2C) exchanges. The study develops a framework theoretically investigated for C2C exchanges in OBC, based on the motivation, opportunity, ability (MOA) theory (MacInnis et al., 1991, cited in Gruen et.al., 2005). According to the model, customer involvement in the community essentially affects the importance of their membership.

One can argue that the three elements used by Gruen et.al. (2005) to develop the model are none but personal characteristics of individuals adapted to the context they interrelate. The authors mention the challenge companies face when trying to understand C2C motivations and

consequently the study attempts to explain the issue. The framework depicts that customers are motivated in their consumption actions by the image of the company's offering, image which is nevertheless influenced by the actual involvement of the customers. This perspective of constant influences reminds of the dynamics in the Three-Wheel-relationship Gear Model developed in the present thesis (section 3.2). All point considered, Gruen et.al.'s (2005) framework is valuable in its complexity to attempt to explain customer involvement, though without creating a linkage to brand identity, nor identification.

In the same sphere of C2C relationships, Adjei et.al. (2009) analyzed the influence of C2C communications in OBC on the buying behaviour of customers. In developing their model the uncertainty reduction focus led the study to be focused on brand use, which as they mention can represent an precedent research to motivations for customer engagement. The results of their study are not however relevant for the present thesis, as they deal predominantly with the consumption activity without a focus on community engagement. Nevertheless, it is argued that, according to Adjei et.al.'s (2009) research, C2C communications are beneficial for the company. In other words, customer involvement through communications has a positive effect on the brand in virtual brand communities.

Research in the context of consumer-company relations uses the concept of identification based on Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979, cited in Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994) in combination with the Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT, Turner et.al., 1990, cited in Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). The notion of customer-company (C-C) identification developed from the aforementioned theories defines the relationship between the consumer and the company through self-comparison processes between the social identity of the two (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Accordingly, it is argued that C-C interactions are a consequence of consumer identification between customer and the company.

The previously noted C-C relationship can be applied to online brand communities where customers, according to the above motivation where customers become members of OBC in order to fulfill several personal needs. Moreover, it can be argued that company identification represents brand identification in OBC, as the brand is the focus of the relationships in the brand community. Lastly, consumer nowadays build their identities and self-concepts by interrelating with a brand culture (Schroeder, 2009), e.g. a brand community.

Consumer-brand relationships have also been connected to brand loyalty. Thus it has been argued that consumer loyalty may be promoted by online brand community engagement (Andersen, 2005; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). It is even mentioned that the intergroup relationship literature has been sparsely used in explaining consumer-brand connections (Fournier, 1998). One can argue that customer-brand identification, studied from the psycho-socio-relationship perspective, has the potential to explain underlying motives for interactions in a social brand context such as an online brand community. Fournier (1998) mentions that the self-concept can be constructed through meaningful relationships and that it can lead to self-worth and self-esteem mechanisms. This view is consistent with social identity theories analyzed further in the thesis, in section 4.2.

Additionally, self-esteem and self-expression, as well as hedonic needs have been found by Kornum (2008) to represent consumers' personal motives for participating in online brand communities. The three elements are part of typology of three online brand communities (see Appendix 4) and in addition they are related to social identity theories. It becomes clear that the latest research in the field of customer-brand relationships has attempted to identify the motives for customer engagement. Moreover this is also supported by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) who state that social needs of individuals can establish participation. Thus, one can argue that together with brand identification personal needs are influenced, process which further establishes customer involvement in brand communities.

Additionally it appears necessary to shortly investigate the three characteristics of brand communities examined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) and presented earlier in section 3.1., for a better understanding of how they relate to customer engagement in online brand communities, as detailed by Kornum (2008). Thus, hedonic needs refer to feelings of excitement, enjoyment and exhilaration and they are mainly present in intense fan based brand communities, such as Harley Davidson, where the members are especially motivated to fulfil these particular needs through their involvement. These needs were also mentioned earlier in the thesis in section 3.3, when discussing the benefits of high-resonance brands. Moreover, self-expression and self-esteem denotes members' feelings resulting through interaction due to social identity and self-comparisons, as analyzed in Chapter 5.

4.1.2. Commitment and community engagement

The importance of virtual communities is growing, especially because marketers begin to understand the value of customer interactions and sharing (Andersen, 2005). Yet most studies in the field of OBC have merely developed conceptual frameworks (Koh & Kim, 2004). This section aims to present the literature on commitment which appears relevant to customer engagement and relate it to brand identification in OBC.

Whereas there is a lack of studies in the field of customer involvement, many researchers focus on the notion of commitment, including Casalo et.al.'s (2008) who studied the effects of customers' participation in a virtual brand community on consumer commitment. Moreover they studied some factors that motivate participation in these communities. First of all, they found out that trust favours community engagement, thus appearing a significant element in the continuity of an OBC. In addition empirical evidence shows that customer engagement positively influences affective commitment, making virtual communities an important platform establishing and fostering relationship.

Casalo et.al.'s (2008) research paved the way for more studies that incorporate both commitment and customer participation in a virtual brand community. Thus, Carlson et.al (2008) investigated psychological factors that would lead to brand commitment through psychological sense of brand commitment (PSBC). Their study, mentioned in section 4.1.1 is significant also from the point of view of building long-term customer brand relationship that display commitment.

It is argued that the unique feature of communities is the commitment displayed by members through C2C exchanges and how individuals in the community influence each other's behaviours (Williams & Cothrel, 2000). Customer commitment is further empirically investigated by Kim et.al. (2007) in how it is influenced by the online community. Their model, though limited by the methodology, is developed based on social identity theory and reciprocal action theory and consequently the results depict that community commitment significantly influences brand commitment. Last but not least, it is argued that members of online communities participate in C2C exchanges as long as their interest identifies with that of the community, hence the brand in OBCs. All in all, the study does offer a useful perspective and even relates to community and brand identification.

Community engagement is also studied in the case of Spanish virtual Coca Cola community, through a case study approach of the company website (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). The authors find out that virtual communities are particularly salient because they offer social support and entertainment opportunities. Hence it can be pointed out that members experience the virtual brand community and subsequently become committed to it, developing brand loyalty and brand identification (Kim & Jin, 2006, cited in Sicilia & Palazo, 2008). In any case, it has been noted that most communities depend on their members' commitment, C2C exchange, thus involvement in the community (Ren et al., 2007). Consequently, one can argue that the concepts of commitment and community engagement are very strongly related to one another and enable communities to grow.

In the terms of community engagement, a customer-brand relationship model on three interrelated levels is developed by Ren et.al. (2007) with the objective of examining the development of commitment in online communities. This is achieved by analyzing and comparing common identity and bond theory, which illustrate two different forms of attachment to a group. Most salient are the results obtained through the study, namely the fact that social theories offer "a more principled approach to understanding online communities" (Ren et al., 2007) and their inherent relationships. Accordingly, one can indicate that the approach followed in this thesis is relevant to the study of customer-brand identification in OBC. Furthermore, the two types of attachment analyzed by Ren et.al. (2007), specifically direct towards the following section in this thesis, concerned with social identity theories.

To conclude this section, as aforementioned research show, commitment and community engagement in virtual brand communities appear particularly interrelated, influencing one another and enabling the development of the OBC. Whilst the main purpose of an OBC is noted to be the facilitation of C2C exchanges, community commitment and involvement have as antecedents the brand and its associations. Hence, the connection to brand identification which offers consumers a collection of contributions for self and group identity. Moreover, understanding community relationships through social theories provide a more principled approach that have the potential to aid in community design for the positive influence of commitment and involvement of the members.

4.1.3. Concluding remarks for section 4.1.

The review of customer-brand relationship research in online brand communities has developed to incorporate brand identification from social psychology. This correlation represents the answer to the first subquestion in the thesis problem. Hence, research on customer-brand relationships predominantly explain customer-brand relationships in OBC through the use of identification with the brand and the company.

To further clarify the links between customer engagement and identification mentioned in previous discussions, the next section deals with the specific social identity theories and the relevant concepts that lead the theoretical and comparative analysis towards the synthesised model framework. This interdisciplinary exploration has the objective of explaining the complex issue of customer engagement in OBCs.

4.2. Social identity theories and customer engagement

This section aims to establish a clear linkage between concepts in social identity theories (SIT) and what constitutes customer engagement. This will be achieved by analyzing and correlating the SIT concepts with consumer participation.

4.2.1. SIT and self-categorization: a correlation

In Chapter 3, the preferred definition for online brand communities focuses on connections between brands and customers, where customers use the brand to build their self-identity. Hence we conceptualize brand communities using the social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979, cited in Hogg, 2001), together with Turner et.al's (1987, cited in Taylor and Moghaddam, 1994) self-categorization theory (SCT). Many authors have considered the two theories as an integrated whole (e.g. Hogg et.al. 1995, Hogg 2001).

At this point, we consider it necessary to explain the notion of self-concept, for better understanding of the other related socio-psychological processes. Thus, the self-concept is defined by Fournier (1998) as a connection, because it is used by individuals to express aspects of themselves. SIT includes the construct in both personal and group identity (Tajfel and Turner,

1979, cited in Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). However, for this thesis we prefer Swaminathan et.al.'s (2007) conceptualization, in which the self-concept connection represents the relationship between a consumer's personal self and a brand's meaning, focusing thus on personal identity rather than group identity.

Using thus the social identity perspective of self-categorization, we can include the typology of online brand communities in social categories that structure the surroundings. Consequently, we consider the OBC as a social group, an optimum setting for relation building, group perception, sharing of traditions, behaviours and norms.

We have chosen social identification as a relevant concept due to its interrelational nature, while having as focus the individual. Moreover, the choice of self-categorisation stemmed from the necessity for a process oriented factor through which individuals overlap their identity with that of another group or object. Before continuing with a detailed discussion on SIT and self-categorisation, we briefly present the concepts that constitutes the theories.

First of all, SIT explains the relations between individuals from a group perspective of ingroup and outgroup processes. The theory focus is the individual's membership, starting from self-definition in social environment and on their quest to building a suitable self-identity (Tajfel, 1974). The four concepts that establish the foundation of SIT are represented by social categorization, social identity, social comparison and psychological distinctiveness. All the time the individual's behavior is analyzed in terms of both the self and the group. In this section we discuss only social identity of the four concepts as it is the most relevant concept in regards to this thesis' focus on intragroup comparisons and identification. Moreover, we use the concept of self-categorization from SCT, through which individuals become members of a group where they find particular positive contributions they can add to their social identity.

Social identification

On the tracks of social categorisation, which involve segmentation, classification and categorisation, social identity involves particular notions of the consumer's self-image attributed from the categories or groups to which he is a member of (Prykop & Heitmann, 2006).

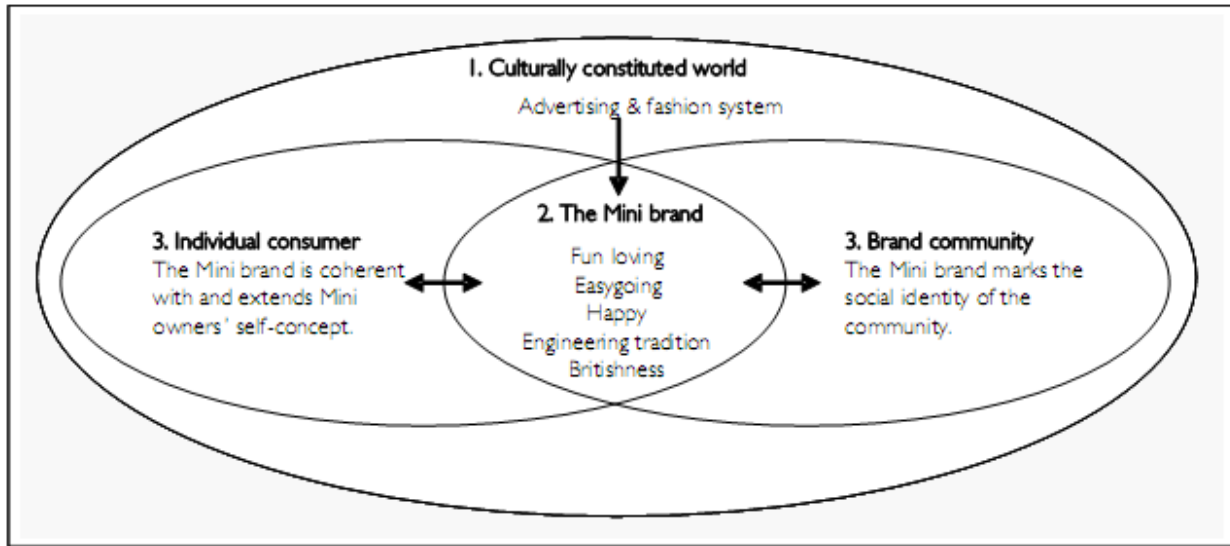
“Brand-community identification is the strength of the consumer's relationship with the community” (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Thus one can argue that when consumers identify with the brand, there is a positive impact on their relationship with the brand, thus with the community. In other words, consumer identification can lead to consumer engagement in the community, further stimulating brand-related behaviours. For example, in the case of *participants and adherents* types of members described earlier in section 3.1. high engagement relates to an established identity, as they are usually the ‘senior’ (Algesheimer et al., 2005) or ‘hard core’ members. Their identification with the brand hence determines increased participation in the community and high status gratifications.

When a consumer identifies with the brand community, a feeling of belonging is developed and the self-image is built around the brand. Researchers argue that identification with an OBC determines positive consequences (Algesheimer et al., 2005). As the focus in an OBC is the brand, customer identification may therefore replicate the association between the self-concept and the groups as an aspect of identity (Correll & Park, 2005). In other words, the consumer self-concept is constructed through brand meaning transfer. It can be argued that brand identification relates to the fact that the consumer perceives his personal interests and/or needs to be fulfilled by the brand meanings.

We consider necessary to illustrate the brand meaning transfer in the process of identification, through a concept adapted by Antorini (2007) from Broderick et.al (2003, cited in Antorini, 2007). The mini-case depicted in Figure 4.4.1.1. is a notable example of how the perceptions of the Mini brand are transferred from the cultural world to the brand. The transfer of meaning was realized via advertisements and the fashion system as presented below. The brand meaning was later transferred to the individual and the community. Additionally in the case of consumers and community, brand transfer is presented in a two way connection. One can argue that the individual consumer interacts with the brand and builds his self-concept in the brand

meaning transfer process, making the brand personal and meaningful (Schouten, 1991). In the case of the community, the brand appears to contribute to the community social identity and thus helps in the community development.

Figure 4.2.1.1 Brand Meaning Transfer



Source: Antorini (2007) / Adapted from Broderick et.al.(2003, cited in Antorini, 2007)

Generally it is noted that people need a confirmation that their perceptions, attitudes and behaviour are in tune to the world they live in (Grieve & Hogg, 1999). In other words people need to identify themselves with an entity to which they relate.

Self-categorisation

Subsequent to social identification is the internalization of the new meanings for the construction of the self-concept, process in accordance with self-categorization (Grieve & Hogg, 1999). In other words, as soon as the consumer identified with the brand, through a process of self-categorization the newly adopted brand meanings or associations are internalized.

As previously discussed, also in section 3.1, individuals who are members of an online brand community construct their social identity. This is explained through self-categorization, because the social identity developed thus provides social distinction (Schulze 1992, cited in

Catja & Heitmann, 2006). Furthermore, the need to belong and to build an individuality leads to group membership and in turn enhances self-esteem. Accepted membership in a community means that the member has acquired the representative behavior of the group (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). Self-categorization in such groups works as a method for influencing attitudes and behaviours, establishing accordingly the means for social identification of members. Consequently in order to demonstrate their social position, individuals act on consuming or utilizing the brand, a form of community engagement. For example, the 'high status' of *participants* and *practitioners* actually represents their social position in the community. Through social identification they participate a lot in the community activities and thus also utilize the brand.

In regards to the three-wheel Relationship Gear Model in OBC (Figure 3.1.2), found in Section 3.2), the previous considerations are applicable. Accordingly, a consumer member of the OBC would relate to the brand and build a social identity, which in turn would enable an enhanced level of self-esteem. High self-esteem individuals are thus motivated by this established identification with the brand and would consequently strive to appropriate all the community symbols in order to become a valid member. Self-categorisation, in turn, influences attitudes and behaviours anew. It can be inferred that though brands as a primary focus enable social-identity building for members, like in the Mini case, from the moment when community membership is fully acquired through the learning and appropriation of symbolic norms and rules of action the consumer is capable of contributing to the community as a whole, i.e. as a potentially high status member.

The dynamics can be observed in the continuous learning and self-categorisation, with each new member, or new learned behaviour. Alternatively, instead of new memberships, either the company identified as the brand or the community could instate new rules of action for the benefit of the Relationship Gear system. For example if customer engagement is low, this would signal a potential problem in the self-categorisation and identification process. Perhaps a cause could be the brand itself. Thus it is necessary to investigate a bit further.

Prykop (2004, cited in Catja & Heitmann, 2006) reveals that members of a brand community participate actively and interconnect due to three significant brand elements. These elements further preserve social identification, as well as social distinction. Hence, the

sociofunctionality, authenticity and aesthetics of a brand are further detailed further. First of all, *sociofunctionality* ensures that the members are always assisted in their behaviour and interactions (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Such assistance can be represented through customer support, information aids etc. which play a significant role in building social identity. In online brand communities, this assistance can be provided by other members in the community or by specific administrative personnel in the case of company-supported communities. This brand feature is also mentioned in Paterson's (2009) study as a motivation for members to participate in online communities.

The second significant brand element is *authenticity*, and signifies a particular aspect of the brand, namely certifying that the brand is portraying what it actively executes, not what it would like to perform. This ensures to the members the trust and credibility of the brand. Furthermore, authenticity is the enabler of a strong brand identity, hence it can also determine real social identity in its members and the aspiration to identify themselves with the group/brand identity. A strong brand in an online brand community determines in turn a powerful group identity, due to the members' interaction and collaboration that generate self-categorization on one hand, and company identification with the brand and the community through group dynamics awareness. This leads to "a shared collective identity" and strong relationships in the community (Dholakia et al., 2009).

The third brand element, *aesthetics*, reminds of harmony and cultural values shared among community members. The online community of such a brand invites and delivers social distinction, together with unique social identity (Schau & Muniz, 2002). In online brand communities, aesthetics is a powerful attribute towards bridging social values and bonds in a tranquil environment.

It is notable to associate these elements with the notion of brand meaning transfer detailed in section 3.1; accordingly it can be argued that important features of the brand are part of the brand meaning that gets transferred. Consequently, one can argue that community members who are in the process of building their identity would recognize these elements as positive and would proceed with the brand meaning transfer. In case one of the brand elements are not part of the brand meaning, then consumers might not associate themselves with that brand and hence transfer would not be made.

All in all, in brand communities the concept of brand identity can be interpreted as observed above, through the examination of specific brand elements. These elements are significant for the sharing of behavioral patterns and the preserving of social identification. Hence, the company should be well aware of these processes and accordingly strive to build a strong brand which incorporates the elements previously analysed.

Having the valuable knowledge about the brand elements that support social identification, we can discover potential malfunctions in the Relationship Gears Model. Thus, if the problem is due to the brand itself, then an analysis of the three elements could shed light on the proceedings to be taken for solving the issue. Thus, by evaluating whether the brand is authentic, the company could perfect the issue at hand and ensure that the online brand community members benefit from a genuine social and consumption experience. The same can be evaluated from the other two brand elements.

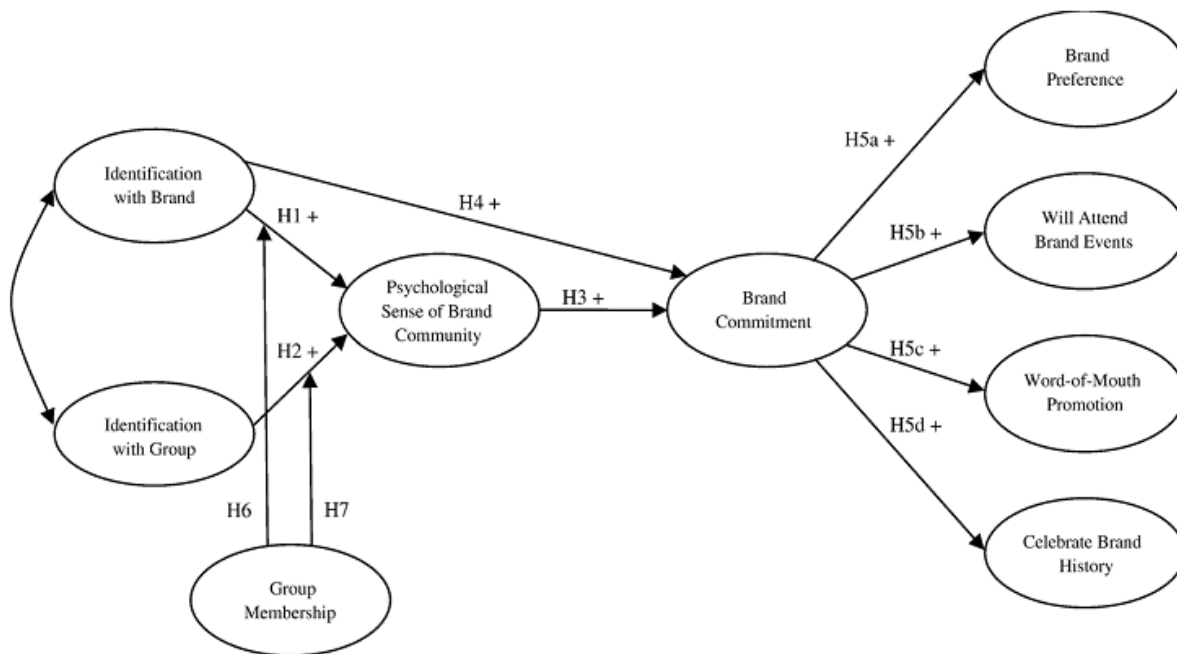
However, the problem could also be due to a particular member type. In such a case, the typology of users according to Kozinets (1999) should be investigated. According to the common social identity of the community, there might be need for specific types of customers, for the online brand community to function optimally. Perhaps a *tourist* would alarm a majority of insiders, and thus a *devotee* would be preferred. Or in the case of a majority of devotees, both a tourist and a mingler could be rejected through categorisation processes. The objective is for the brand, hence the company, to be aware of such potential inconveniences in the well-oiled gears of the online brand community. .

As a result this subsection has reviewed the SIT and SCT and analyzed the phenomenon of customer-engagement through the social psychological lenses. Furthermore, in order to better understand the correlations between customer-brand identification reviewed in the OBC literature and social identity theories, we analyzed the Three-Wheel Relationship Gear Model through the SIT and self-categorization perspective. To further achieve a comprehensive understanding of customer-engagement we also took into consideration three valuable brand elements introduced by Prykop (2004, cited in Catja & Heitmann, 2006). In the end, we investigated the the relation with Kozinets's (1999) customer typology.

4.2.2. A psychological sense of customer engagement

Our research focuses on the extent to which the understanding of customer-brand identification manages to explain customer engagement in OBC. Carlson et.al. (2008) investigate whether the psychological perspective can offer supplementary insight to the knowledge of brand community in terms of brand commitment. By employing a rather generalized view of brand community in the psychological sense, their study is relevant in that it manages to empirically prove that a psychological sense of brand community (PSBC) should be present in both social and psychological communities. The research mentions that the added social interaction factor would result in stronger feelings of PSBC.

Figure 4.2.2.1 Carlson's Hypothesized model of PSBC



Hypothesized model of PSBC. Source: (Carlson et al., 2008)⁷

⁷ A large one-page copy of the Hypothesized PSBC is attached in the Appendix for ease of understanding.

In online brand communities we consider social interaction as a main factor for enabling people to relate to each other, to build trust and exchange information based on common interests. The social interaction happens around the brand, which in turn, according to our Three-Wheel Relationship Gear, enables opportunities for identification. It has been proven that in virtual communities, the higher the frequency of interaction among members, the larger the extent to which they establish connections to members in the same community (Ren et al., 2007). Hence social interaction depends highly on the relationships that are formed between members, process which then associated with the social identity discussion in section 4.2.1 provides a thorough understanding of customer motivations for participation.

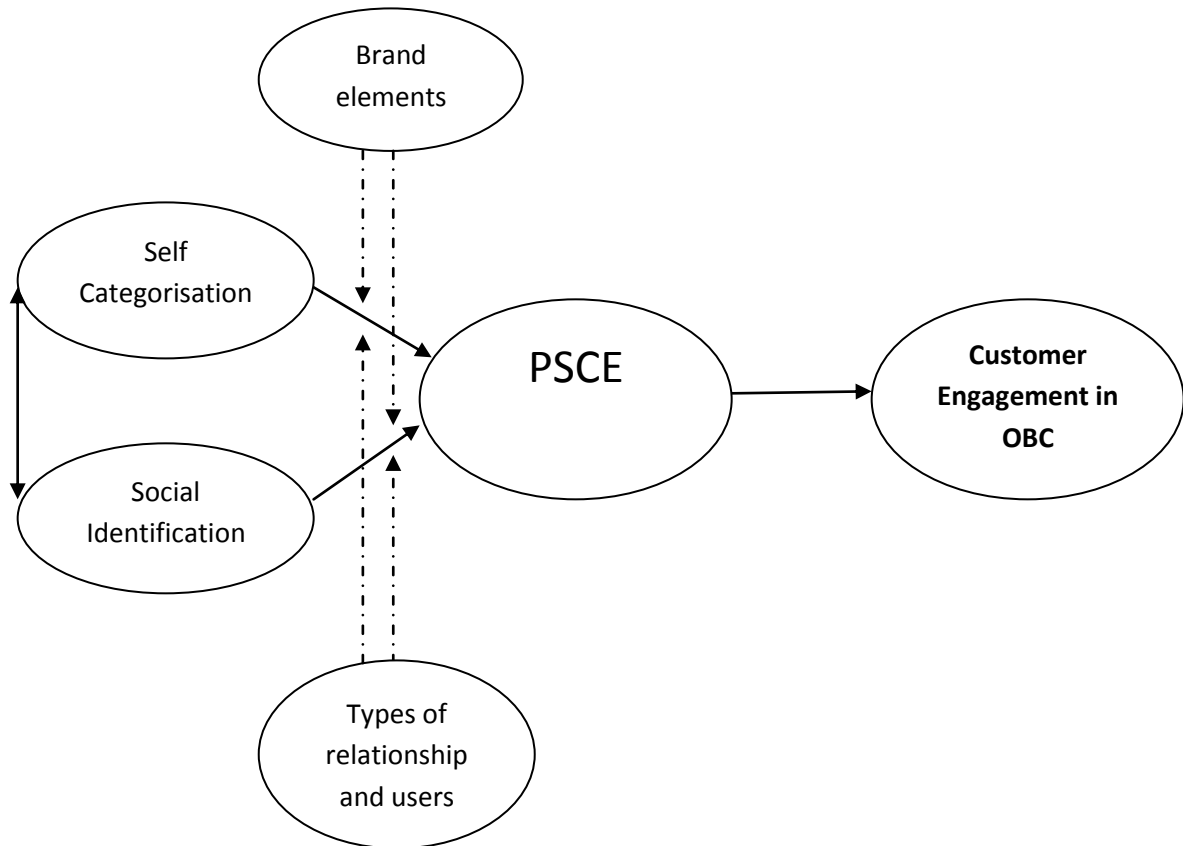
Linked to social interactions are the feelings of liking, trust and attachment that can be experienced through various exchanges among customers in an online brand community. The social interactions are dependable on the relationship typology that exists in the community, as well as the type of members involved. Accordingly, a *devotee* would not focus as much on social interactions compared to preferably experiencing the consumption of the brand. Nevertheless, a *devotee* can be engaged in conversation by an *insider* for information exchanges. Being part of the same community, these two types of members may develop the previously mentioned feelings and in turn affect other members in the community to adopt such an interaction approach.

Furthermore, according to self-categorization, when social exchanges in community provide with positive contributions to the individual's social identity, they would develop a sense of self-worth and be more inclined to participate, given the identification with the brand and community.

Using Carlson et.al.'s (2008) research as starting point we move on to employ an adapted PSBC framework to the present thesis. In order to specify the added social interaction factor, we develop the concept of a psychological sense of customer engagement (PSCE) for the context of virtual brand communities. Based on Carlson et.al. (2008) OBCs are a type of social brand community in which interaction is a key element. As mentioned in section 3.3, interaction in OBC is based largely on C2C exchanges. Hence, the motivation for customer engagement in these exchanges is assumed to have the same underlying reasons as the general sense of participation in the brand community. Consequently, our perspective on psychological sense of

customer engagement is assumed to contribute to answering this thesis' research question. The rationale is detailed further.

Figure 4.2.2.2 Modified PSBC Framework



We consider that Carlons et.al.'s (2008) conceptual development of the PSBC can be further adapted specifically to customer engagement in OBC by adding the self-categorisation concept as analyzed in the previous section on the theories. Thus, our adapted model would consist of: (a) psychological sense of customer engagement, (b) antecedents to PSCE and (c) Customer Engagement. The framework in its complexity is presented and investigated in the subsequent Chapter 5, by acting as a synthesis for the analysis and discussions of the overall reviewed literature.

4.2.3. Critique of the SIT

Several studies criticize the SIT, particularly in terms of methodology and scope. We find it necessary to include these critiques, in order to have a complete picture of the use of the theories and their applicability.

Thus, Schiffmann and Wicklund (1992) do not agree with the basic assumptions of the minimal group paradigm developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986, cited in Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). Accordingly they consider that the theory reduces the perspective on identity or the self. The reason for this is that the original studies do not indicate the psychological state of the individual before becoming a member of the ingroup as posited in the theory experiments. Moreover, Schiffmann and Wicklund (1992) contest the arbitrary assignation of membership which usually happens at the psychological level. Moreover, it is argued that differentiation between ingroup and outgroup is only an option among many that can describe a person relation to the social environment.

It is acknowledged that the social identity perspective is based on a metatheory that considers intergroup relations salient and indeed it has focused on this typology or relations. Nevertheless, it should be considered as a general approach to group membership analysis and related group phenomena (Hogg et al., 2004).

In their book, Taylor and Moghaddam (1994) further argue that individuals participating in the intergroup context do not have their priorities established. They also note that Tajfel (1974) is tautological in his utilization of the concept of salience, thus repeating terms already mentioned in context. Moreover, individuals are treated in SIT in an entirely standardized manner, behaving exactly as they perceive signals, without considering the role of emotions. Last but not least, social categorization is used as a static concept, when in reality it functions dynamically. Regarding the research methods, the minimal group paradigm is once more criticized for not demonstrating distinctiveness, while discrimination is clearly depicted.

4.2.4. Concluding remarks for section 4.2

This section has established a clear association between SIT and self-categorization concepts and what constitutes customer engagement. Thus it has been determined that the correlations between identification and self-categorization should be examined, in order to further investigate how the concepts relate to customer engagement in OBC. The connection with customer engagement was, in addition, made by correlating the concepts with the Relationship Gear Model and Kozinets' (1999) user typology. Subsequently, in the quest for explaining motivations for customer engagement, it was discovered that the typologies play a moderating role, akin to Prykop's brand elements.

We further adapt Carlson's framework for PSBC to customer engagement, attempting to use the modified model as PSCE. The introduction of PSCE in this chapter aims to integrate the framework in what has been presented up to the moment. We further relate the PSCE concept to the moderating factors, in order to correlate and analyse by comparisons, creating thus the foundation for the synthesis in Chapter 6.

Our use of SIT concepts in combination with self-categorization, attempt to explain customer engagement via a psychological perspective. Whereas SIT remains the most influential social psychological model for intergroup research, there are several studies that criticize it. In order to offer a comprehensive picture of the use and analysis of theories, we included the critique to the SIT, acknowledging that despite its limitations, the theory constitutes a general approach to group membership analysis and related group phenomena.

All in all, in this section we examined the relevant concepts of social identity and self-categorisation for a better understanding of their connection to customer engagement in OBCs. The correlations with the relationship and user typologies, as well as with the brand elements were identified as salient in the moderating effect. Accordingly the PSCE framework was developed representing a conceptual model for illustrating the abovementioned correlations.

4.3. Implications of the theoretical correlations

The theoretical review and analysis of the three conceptualizations discussed in this chapter present useful correlations for understanding the linkages between customer-brand relations and customer motives for participation in online brand communities. Thus, customer engagement, social identification and self-categorization, all emphasize the connection between the individual as a focal point, the community identity and processes of interactions. The evolution of the theories presented in section 4.1, together with the conceptual correlations in section 4.2 contribute to answering the first subquestion of the thesis.

The modified PSBC translates into a framework that combines the effects of social identification and self-categorisation - with typologies and brand elements as moderators - on the psychological sense of customer engagement connected to actual customer participation. The motivation for customer engagement in these exchanges is assumed to have the same underlying reasons as the general sense of participation in the brand community. Consequently, our standpoint on customer engagement antecedents contributes to answering the thesis' first subquestion.

Henceforth, customer engagement in online communities has as antecedent brand identification, which from a psychological perspective is equivalent to the concept of social identification. We further aim to synthesize the conceptual discoveries in a hypothesized model of PSCE in the following chapter.

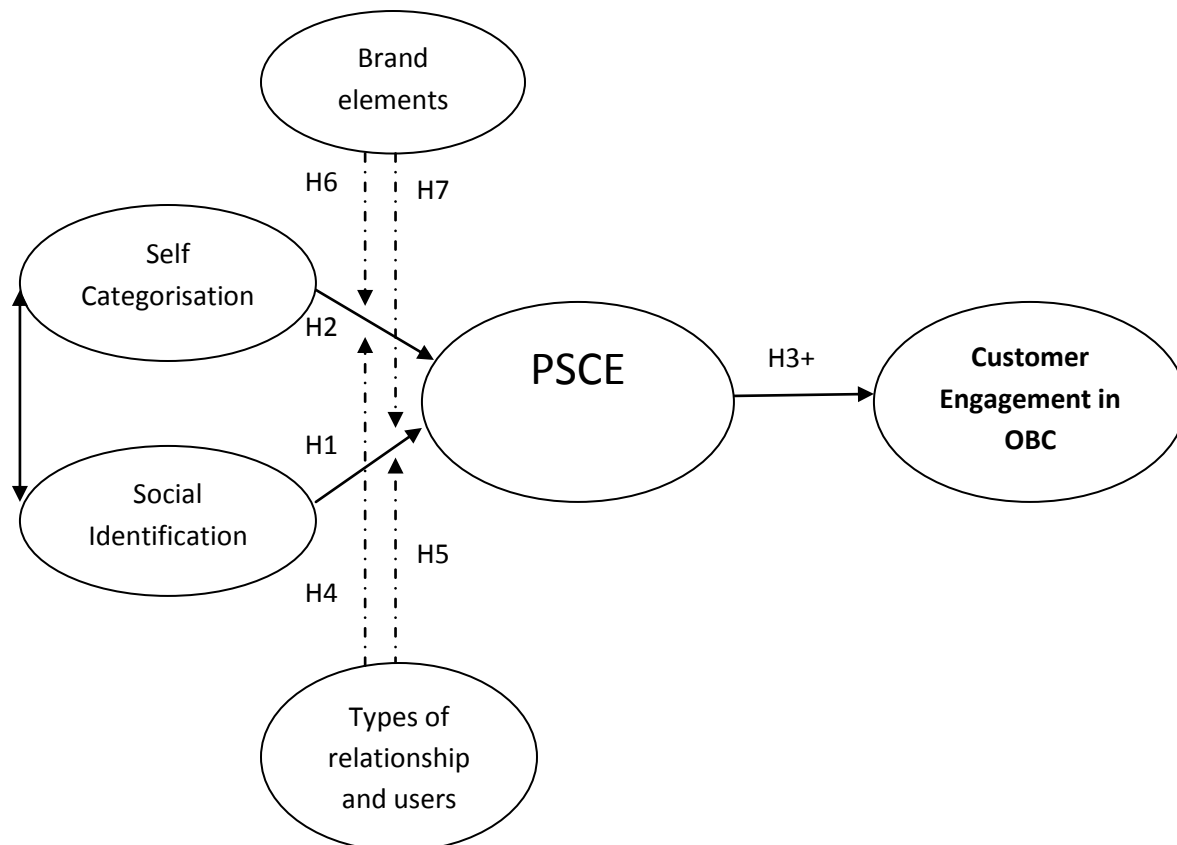
Chapter 5. Synthesizing customer-brand relationships and social identity theory: Model Framework

In the following sections we introduce the hypothesized model of PSCE with the antecedents resulting from previous analysis and correlations among customer-brand relationships and social identity theories. The model is theoretical in nature and aims to further develop recommendations and formulate implications to further research.

5.1. Model representation

The model framework below is based on the discussion of theories and concepts in the previous chapter. It should be noted that brand elements and typologies of relationships and users are not measured constructs. Moreover, it is recommended that their moderating effect be tested in multiple-group analysis to capture a comprehensive picture. It is expected that social identification and self-categorization will have a significant impact on customer-engagement in the virtual brand community.

Figure 4.2.4.1 Hypothesized PSCE Framework



5.1.1. Conceptual analysis

As analyzed and discussed in the previous chapter, we apply social identification and self-categorization to existing knowledge on customer-brand relationships as researched above, to examine PSCE. Studies so far have determined characteristics and outcomes of brand community with a focus on notions of loyalty and commitment. The objective of this thesis is to add value to the online brand community research by investigating a modified theoretical framework, based on the empirically verified model of PSBC, as presented in the previous chapter. One can argue that the PSCE model with its psychological elements can lead to a better understanding of customer engagement in OBCs.

At this point it is significant to mention that the modified PSBC does not include the study of the outcomes of customer engagement. We have chosen to focus our research on the antecedent of involvement in the community for gaining a better understanding of the motives and how they influence customer interactions. Nevertheless, authors who research customer engagement outcome have proven that the consequences of customer engagement relate strongly to a positive development of the brand (Cova & Pace, 2006). In any case, the study of outcomes does not represent the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, further research may attempt to investigate such outcomes to customer engagement in OBCs, as it can offer a potentially more holistic overview of both for companies. These outcomes can perhaps be related to firm's motivations that enables the customer engagement understanding in the first place.

To recapitulate major points from the previous discussions, consumers tend to display feelings of belonging to a certain online brand community. This is due to a process of social identification with the brand and subsequently the community. Hence the example of *participands* and *adherents* types of members. Through self-categorization, individual members in an OBC internalize the meanings of the brand for the construction of their self-concept. Taking into account the individual as the focus, we consider typologies of relationships and users in a community to have a moderating effect on the two antecedents. The second moderating effect on the antecedents is represented by brand elements as discussed in the previous chapter.

Overall, the consideration of individual factors as they relate to online brand community may provide a more detailed understanding of how to build relationships that thrive on C2C involvement.

5.1.2. Antecedents of psychological sense of customer engagement

In this section we propose that the primary drivers for PSCE are:

- (a) the extent to which individuals in a virtual brand community identify with the brand and company, and
- (b) the extent to which individuals in a virtual brand community undergo a process of self-categorization

Whereas identification can be found in the literature under various notions, it generally refers to the degree of internalization of brand identity in an individual's self-concept (Correll & Park, 2005). In other words, the consumer self-concept is constructed with elements of the brand identity, because the individual's personal needs can be thus fulfilled by the brand meanings. To illustrate this, one should consider the example of the Mini case⁸ in which consumers at individual level build their self-concept through brand interactions when the process of brand meaning transfer occurs. Thus the consumers identify themselves with the brand by overlapping brand characteristics they find to be suitable to the fulfilment of their personal needs.

Social identification is a concept from the SIT that follows social categorisation, in that individuals attempt to understand the surrounding environment by means of including self and other into groups (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). Identification emphasizes the cognitive aspect according to some authors, in terms of being aware of a certain group and the self-categorisation as a member of that group, inherited from social categorization concept (Tajfel et.al,1971, cited in Henry et al., 1999). However, we consider social identification with a base in social identity and self-categorization as the process through which the self can be defined at different levels of inclusiveness (Turner et al., 1987, cited in Schmitt et al., 2006).

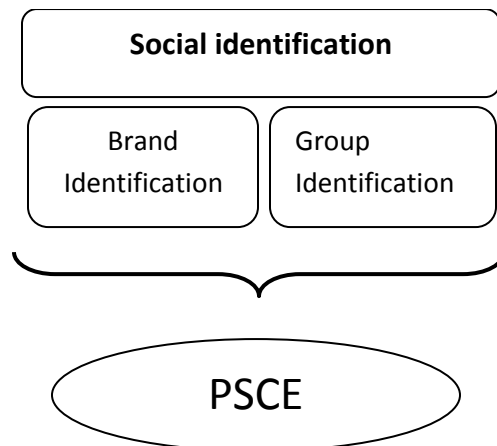
⁸ The Mini case is illustrated in section 4.4.1

The more an individual identifies himself/herself with the brand the more he/she should feel a sense of psychological customer engagement. The perception of engagement translates into activities undertaken by OBC members as they feel part of the community and thus needing social distinction through participation. One can argue that the sense of community thus transcribes the individual's need for self-expression and display of support to others through C2C exchanges. Especially in the case of high-status individuals as presented in Antorini's (2007) adapted typology, the sense of community is accentuated through their participation in the community activities. Their involvement makes the community these highly engaged individuals distinctive, hence creating a sense of the community, in other words a perception of positive associations due to these members who participate.

Moreover, social identification can be expressed towards the brand when the individual's self-concept overlaps with that of the brand identity. Equally, social identification can be examined towards the community or group, when the group's identity (collective identity) appeals to the characteristics of the individual's self-concept.

For a better understanding we include a graphic representation of the correlation between social identification and PSCE.

5.1.2.1 Graphic representation of Social Identification and PSCE



Hence the following hypotheses:

H1. Social Identification will have a positive influence on psychological sense of customer engagement

H1a. Social identification with the brand will have a positive influence on psychological sense of customer engagement

H1b. Social identification with the group will have a positive influence on psychological sense of customer engagement

When examining self categorization we refer to the process of attributing categories to the building of the self-identity or self-concept. The concept has been described and analyzed in correlation to social identity in section 4.2.1. We argue that the central role of psychological sense of customer engagement is to increase an individual's positive perception of the community identity. Again the example of *participants* and *adherents* illustrate this, as the highly engaged members lead to the creation of a sense of the community on psychological level.

Hence building on research from customer-brand relationship marketing, as brands satisfy consumers' self definitional needs, (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Fournier, 1998) consumers in turn feel the need to categorize the self and build their social identities on the brand meanings. This is present in online brand communities where fans, i.e. the case of Adult Fans of LEGO (Antorini, 2007) identify themselves with the brand and its meanings, as their hobby and representing their daily most favourite past-time activities. Online, this transcribes in their involvement in the community which creates not only a platform for innovation but also the feeling of "belonging", thus the sense of community. In conclusion one can argue that a greater individual's positive perception regarding the brand community, should relate positively to psychological sense of customer engagement.

Hence the following hypothesis:

H2. Self Categorization will have a positive influence on psychological sense of customer engagement

Carlson et.al. (2008) found out that trust favours community engagement, thus constituting a significant element in the continuity of an OBC. Trust is established as a norm of behaviour in a brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and enables C2C exchanges in an organized manner. We argue that a community where C2C exchange offer an active perception of the environment where consumers interact, determines increased involvement from community members. To exemplify this, highly engaged consumers – *participants* and *adherents* – also are the most trusted ones in the community, achieving thus a high status.

Moreover, active involvement in the online brand community i.e. the case of Spanish Coca Cola (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008) attributes to the community the characteristic of a positive environment to participate in, due to support from the community and its members, to offer an example. Hence members who might not have previously been involved would feel welcome to participate in dialogues due to the positive perception of the community environment. This is consistent with self-categorisation, as individuals would tend to emulate the general engagement attribute of the community and interact more as a consequence.

Hence, we hypothesize that:

H3: Psychological sense of customer engagement will have a positive influence on customer engagement

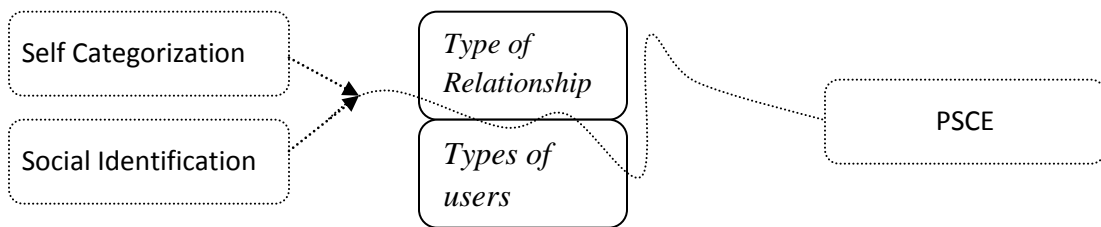
5.1.3. Moderating effects of types of relationships and users

In an online brand community it can be assumed that identification with the group would have a positive influence on PSCE. This assumption is based on Carlson et.al.'s (2008) argument that in social identification with brand communities has a greater effect compared to the situation in relational communities.

The group itself can be characterized by types of relationships and its members and the typologies mentioned in section 3.1. classify them in highly involved members either in the consumption experience or the social interactions, less involved or just not participating at all,

hence “lurking” or of imaginary membership. The highly involved individuals previously discussed would positively moderate the two social identity constructs, their typology actually influencing the types of relationships present in the OBC. On the other hand, members who do not participate, may transfer the perception of an uninvolved community which negatively affects the two constructs, as well as the relationships present in the community.

Figure 5.1.3.1 Typologies as moderators



Hence we formulate the hypotheses that depict these moderation effects on both social identification and self-comparison:

Types of relationships and users as moderator for self categorization

H4. The influence of self categorization on psychological sense of customer engagement will be lower (greater) in the presence (absence) of a online brand community

Types of relationships and users as moderator for social identification

H5. The influence of social identification on psychological sense of customer engagement will be lower (greater) in the presence (absence) of a online brand community

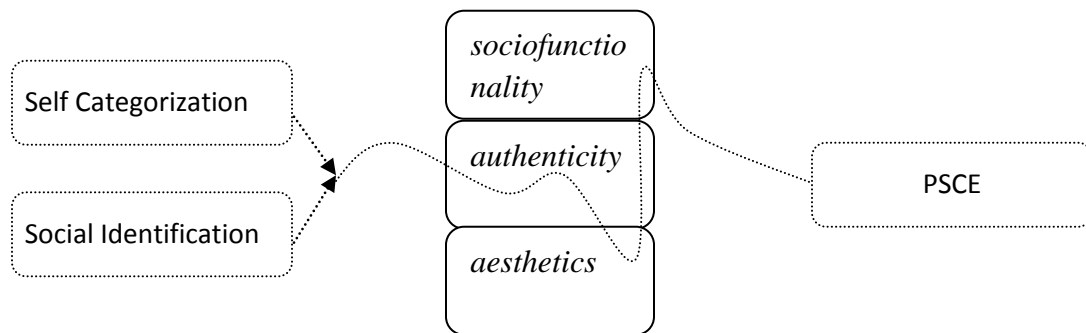
5.1.4. Moderating effects of brand elements

Prykop’s (2004, cited in Catja & Heitmann, 2006) study regarding the three significant elements that determine members’ involvement in a community, denotes that brand elements can act as moderators in relationship process developments inside a virtual brand community. Thus members who are building their self-concept would take into consideration, assumingly at a

subconscious level, the three elements in their degree of making the community suitable to their personal needs. Moreover, it can be assumed that if the brand elements are included in the brand meaning transfer, then the members would consider the brand identity suitable to their perception of self. They would seemingly appropriate the brand meanings to their self-concept, feeling in turn motivated and at ease to participate in the community.

Furthermore, in the opposite case, when the brand elements are not included in the brand meaning transfer, the consumers would at first sight prefer not to engage in the brand community that does not fully suit their personal needs. Consequently the comparative dimension adds an additional perspective to the study of PSCE in OBCs.

Figure 5.1.4.1 Brand elements as moderators



The hypotheses are thus the following:

Brand elements as moderator for self categorization

H6. The influence of self categorization on psychological sense of customer engagement will be lower (greater) in the presence (absence) of a online brand community

Brand elements as moderator for social identification

H7. The influence of social identification on psychological sense of customer engagement will be lower (greater) in the presence (absence) of a online brand community.

The hypotheses elaborated above are summarized in Figure 4.2.4.1

5.2. Critique of the model framework

Perhaps the most important drawback of the model is that it is only hypothesized theoretically. Future research should consider an empirical investigation with an online brand community contextual scope. Moreover, it would add significant value to online brand-community research if academics would test the model in various industries. The framework is supposed to lead to a better understanding of customer-engagement in online brand communities. However, perhaps a more comprehensive study on social psychological relationships in OBCs can contribute with additional antecedents to PSCE. Furthermore, a more detailed correlation to the brand as a concept may also add further understanding.

5.3. Recommendations for empirical investigation

Having theoretically studied the evolution of customer-brand concepts relationships through the social identity theories, this study does not attempt an empirical investigation to prove the model, as the scope and resources do not allow. However, further research should definitely engage in an empirical study of the relationship and effects that can result from the conceptual suggestions.

The framework hypothesized above has the objective of illustrating the social constructs that determine a psychological sense of customer engagement, in order to gain significant understanding of the antecedents of customer engagement. Thus, an empirical investigation of the model would bring additional value and would determine to what extent the chosen constructs act as antecedents for PSCE.

We recommend that the model is tested in an online brand community context, using the present thesis as a theoretical foundation. Several studies should be undergone, preferably with a wide sample of users for a better overview of how relationships and brand elements interconnect to moderate the effect of social identification and self-categorisation processes on PSCE. It is recommended that an industry displaying high involvement be chosen, in order to better assess the validity of the construal connections.

Chapter 6. Conclusions and implications for further research

This final chapter of the thesis presents the main findings of the study. Moreover it discusses the contributions of the thesis and the implication for future research.

The aim of this thesis has been to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the extent to which customer-brand identification can explain customer engagement in online brand communities. Theoretical in nature, interdisciplinary in approach, this study has set off to investigate from a social psychological perspective a challenging issue in customer relationship marketing. By always comparing and correlating concepts with examples from empirical studies undergone by previous researches, we have acquired the knowledge of relevant factors that can be combined and further analyzed.

6.1. Main findings and discussion

In regard to customer engagement literature that focuses on OBCs, we have identified empirical evidence for the linkage between community involvement and brand identification. This proves particularly significant for the development of customer-brand relationship literature, as a step forward in incorporating social psychology into research for the examination of complex situations dependant on behaviour and identity. The established correlation between customer engagement and brand identification answered the first sub-question in the thesis problem. Accordingly customer engagement in online communities has as antecedents brand identification and self-categorisation. Through these antecedents, customer engagement can be explored at a new level of understanding and assumingly provide more meaning to further research studies.

In regard to social identity theories, a clear association with customer engagement has been established. The relevant concepts, social identity and self-categorisation were examined for a better understanding of their connection to customer engagement in OBCs. Moreover the connection was expanded through correlations with the Relationship Gear Model, Kozinets' typology of users and Antorini's adapted relationship framework, as well as with Prykop's brand elements. As a consequence, it was discovered that the typology models play a moderating role.

The PSCE framework was developed further and the conceptual model model for illustrating the abovementioned correlations was introduced.

In regard to the synthesis of customer-brand relationship and customer engagement correlations to social identity, the PSCE model encompasses the relevant concepts and establishes the connections and antecedents to customer engagement. We have also developed several hypotheses to help further empirical investigations together with in-point recommendations.

The final representation of the key concepts involved in explaining the correlations between customer-brand identification and customer engagement answers the second sub-question. Hence, the concepts that can be applied to customer-brand relationships in OBCs are social identification and self-categorisation. These are an integrative part of the PSCE model and identified as antecedents to customer engagement, through a psychological perspective.

One of the major goals of this paper was to create a framework for a better understanding of customer engagement in online brand communities. Accordingly, we propose that social identification and self categorisation influence customers' participation in online brand communities.

The biggest challenge when elaborating this paper was maintaining a degree of objectivity when correlating concepts and theories. Moreover, the literature on customer engagement is spread in many areas of marketing and it is difficult to assess the thorough identification of all relevant studies. Nevertheless, we are confident that we have assessed the greatest part of it. Despite these obstacles, we believe that our framework provides the best way of analyzing customer engagement antecedents in online brand communities through the use of social identity theories, also since there is a lack of similar studies. Whereas other researchers do mention customer involvement in virtual brand communities as a challenge, none to our knowledge, manages to create a comprehensive view of which socio-psychological dimensions actually influence customer's engagement.

6.2. Implications and further research

This study has developed a framework for customer engagement and its antecedents. The potential of this framework is significant for customer relationship marketing theory, as it correlates concepts from social psychology and marketing, however it should be further tested empirically. For this reason, we support the use of field experiments in online brand communities. In order for this thesis to contribute further, we propose the use of agent-based modelling techniques which would help in the developing of grounded theory, backed up by empirical investigations.

Moreover, this thesis can offer a structured way for approaching experiments and the potential of its design can add value not only to theory but also to practice. Nevertheless, as online communities are dynamic in nature, a theoretical approach cannot always be advisable. The present study was however necessary in that we have identified the challenge and the gap in theory. Besides, communities are dependent on their members support and interaction, and oftentimes creativity either from the company's side or the customer's may not be according to theoretical designs. Hence this thesis' objective is to stimulate the interest in interdisciplinary correlations that often manage to solve complex problems, i.e. use of psychological theories in social group settings. The model developed is meant to structure interdisciplinary concepts into one accessible unit, for the better understanding of customer engagement antecedents. Nevertheless, the design should be regarded as a guideline until empirically validated.

It can be envisaged that future research extends the framework of this thesis to include various roles a consumer-brand relationship play in customer engagement. For such a study to add value to international the business environment, it should be experimented in a global online brand community where national ideologies and personal experiences can shape relationships in assumingly surprising ways.

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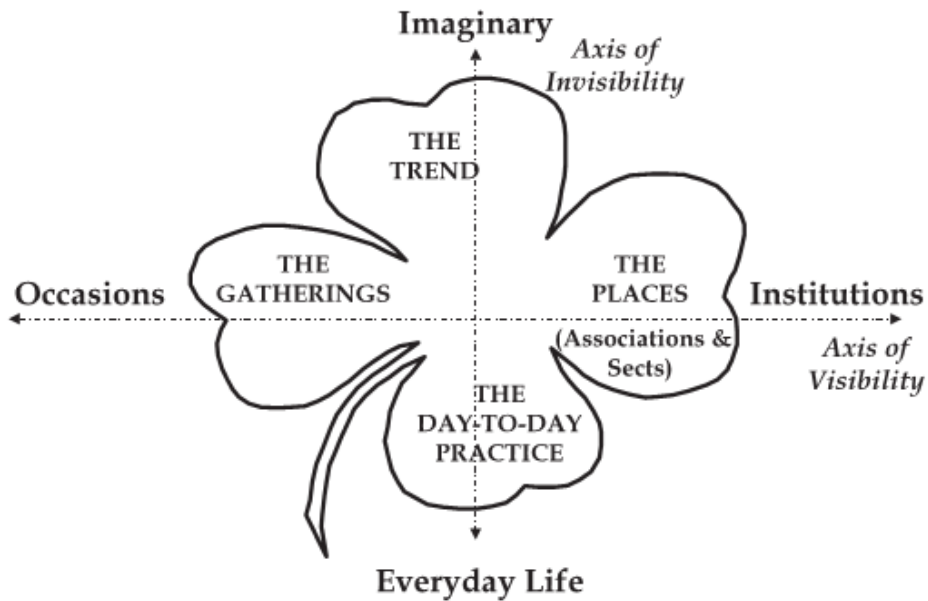
Appendices

Appendix 1

Summary of highly cited research on customer-brand relationships

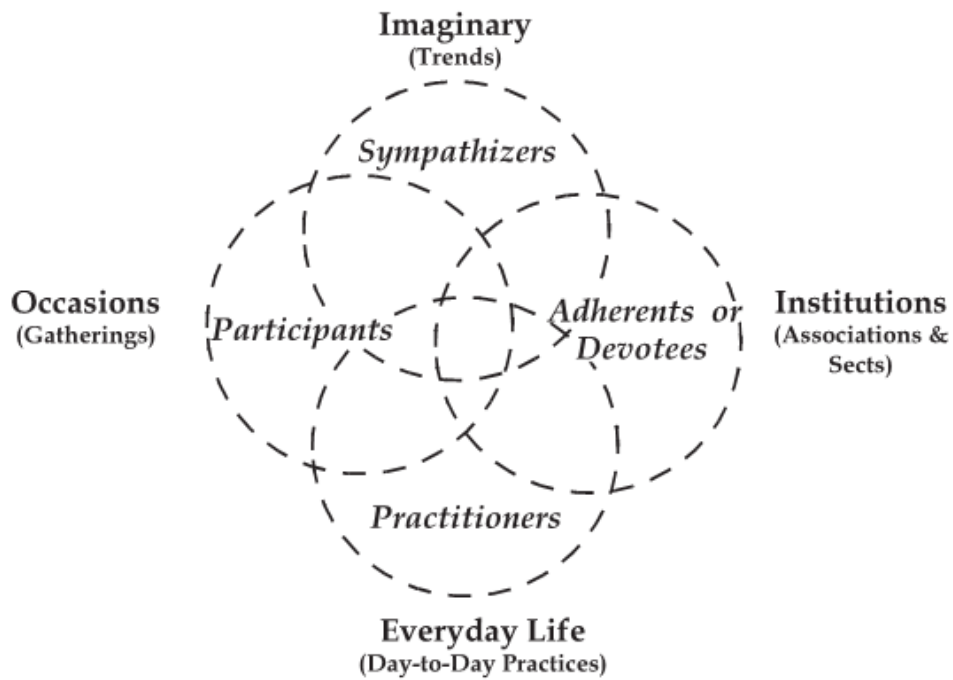
Authors	Year	Times cited in EBSCO	Concepts examined
Fournier	1998	480	Brand identification
Muniz & O'Guinn	2001	261	Brand community, brand identification
Kozinets, Robert V.	1999	46	Member participation, identification, brand identity, consumer identity,
McAlexander, J.H. & Schouten J.W.	2002	162	Customer-brand relations, identification
Schouten J.W.	1991	110	Self actualization, identity, consumers

Appendix 2



The Tribal Clover / Source Cova and Cova (2002)

Appendix 3

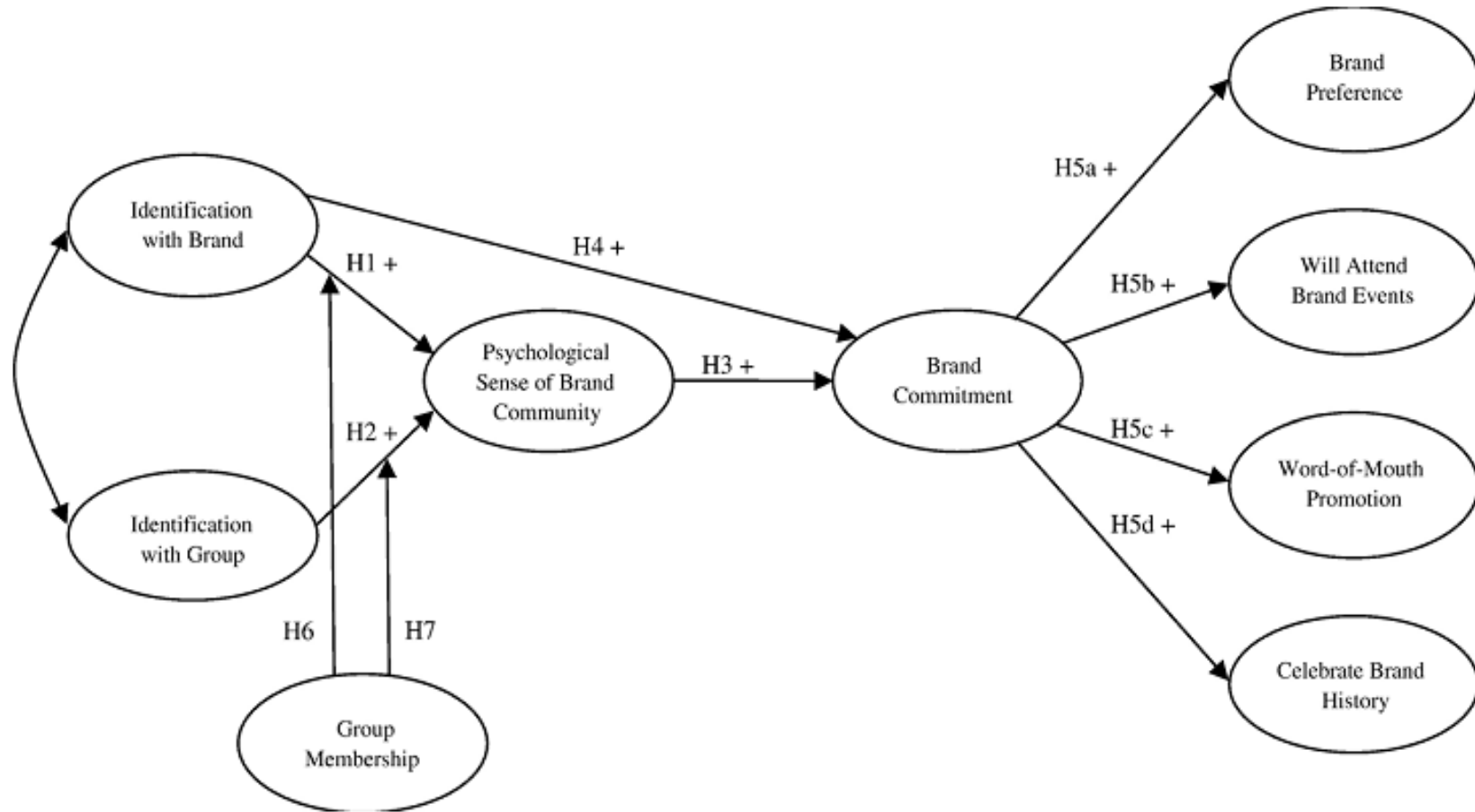


Roles of Tribe Members / Source Cova and Cova (2002)

Appendix 4

	Brand community	CSR community	Innovation community
Focal point for interaction	Brand	Member's personal & social problems	Innovating the product or service
Experienced members motivation for contributing	Maintain brand & community culture Status/peer recognition	Share harsh experience Avoid other same experience Peer recognition	Firm recognition Support community norm Obligation to assist Feedback in the future
Novice members motivation for contributing	Learn and live brand & culture Raise status	Learn about problem/ illness Learn to live with it	Learn about innovation Share user-experience & own modifications
Members' personal needs or benefits participating	Hedonic Self-expression Public self-expression	Physiological psychological, and social safety	Enjoyment or passion Unsatisfied product related need
Firm's motivation	Brand relationships Long-term brand value (equity) enhancement Brand intelligence	Use-experience intelligence Long-term value enhancement Moral obligation	Innovation intelligence Innovation relationships Long-term value enhancement through innovation
Firm's intervention method	Direct (Provide: e.g. brand icons, stories, fun, sentiments, etc.) Indirect	Indirect (Provide : e.g. funding, infrastructure, expert knowledge, etc.)	Direct (Provide: e.g. Innovation recognition, innovation cooperation) Indirect

A typology of three online communities / Source: (Kornum, 2008)



Appendix 5

Hypothesized model of PSBC. Source: (Carlson et al., 2008)