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Exploring value creative and value destructive practice through an online brand community:

The case of Starbucks

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Preface

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I come from the Port City of Rotterdam, The Netherlands. I am now 34 years old as of Valentine’s Day, and I have completed the first circle studies at the INHolland University of Applied Sciences – The Netherlands. Meanwhile, I have engaged in activities in and out of the university that have created an excellent foundation and personal development. My undergraduate programme was an English stream International Business and Management Studies (IBMS). However, through a half-year of Erasmus Exchange Master Courses (HT-2011) in Business Administration at Karlstad University – Sweden, I developed a keen interest in other disciplines, and the willingness to continue learning. In so doing, I hope to relate to a variety of audiences through Service Management.

Uzezi Dia

Karlstad, spring – 2015
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To all of you, I remain honestly appreciative.

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Karlstad, 5 June – 2015
Abstract

This paper explores value co-creation and value co-destruction with a focus on the social practices embedded in the online brand community “My Starbucks Idea (MSI).” The objectives of the research are accomplished through a detailed explanation of the study’s stages, starting with the Research design/Planning, and followed by the Community Entry (Entrée), Data collection, Limitations, and Ethical implications. Since the study is exploratory in character, the qualitative research strategy was used. As Bryman and Bell (2011) note, qualitative research gives particular attention to words rather than numbers in the gathering and interpretation of data. This study applied a modified ‘netnographic’ approach, a new qualitative method devised specifically to investigate consumer behaviour vis-à-vis cultures and communities present on the Internet (Kozinets 1998).

This study identifies three elements of practice: stalking, gossip, and exhibitionism. It also supports the idea stated by Echeverri & Skålén (2011) that there is no positive without a negative in interactive value formation. Although those authors’ work was focused on the provider-customer interface, the idea proves applicable to the online brand community (OBC) used for illustration in this study. The present study also draws attention to a vital characteristic of practice often forgotten: ‘Language’ as an enabler of all other elements (Whittington 2006). The paper contributes to the knowledge in the practice theory domain, and thus consumer culture, especially relating to OBCs.

When using OBCs as a marketing tool, considerable ingenuity must be employed by business managers to gain strategic information and feedback from online forum discussions. Such information can help in the company’s strategic decision making. By building relationships and gaining new customers through the process of collaboration, managers can become more like brand storytellers. Also, such communication can be channelled as a means to create greater awareness, both of the brand and the users’ experiences, along with aiding in the development of better services and products to meet customers’ needs. In the current study, consent was an ethical concern that limited the scope and path taken by the paper. The ten-week research period was another limiting factor in properly covering all of the contextualized consumption activities and gaining sufficient experience within the MSI community.

Keywords: Netnography, Online Brand Communities (OBCs), Brand Communities, Value Co-creation, Value Co-destruction, Practice Theory, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), Starbucks, My Starbucks Ideas, Computer-mediated communications (CMC), QSR NVivo 10, and Ethics.
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APR  Adapted PageRank
B2C  Business-to-Consumer
RQ   Research Questions
MSI  My Starbucks Idea
MSR  My Starbucks Rewards
BC   Brand Community
OBCs Online Brand Communities
IBR  Internet-based Research
OP   Open Poster(s)
S-D logic  Service Dominant Logic
G-D logic  Goods Dominant Logic
GS   Göteborgs Spårvägar – Gothenburg Tramways
VCC  Value Co-Creation
VCD  Value Co-Destruction
COR  Conservation of Resources Theory
CCT  Consumer Culture Theory
CMC  Computer-mediated communications/Channel
CAQDAS Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data
Analysis Software i.e. NVivo 10
PART I

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

The thesis evolved over a period of ten weeks and was aimed at exploring the practices of value co-creation and value co-destruction in an online brand community (OBC). In order to understand the complexities of ‘OBC’ practice, the author has chosen to observe the dynamic interaction that revolves around the interest for Starbucks Coffee. By looking beyond the physical environment and observing discussions of online community participants – open posters (OP) and company representatives. Through participant-observational engagement, the author was able to facilitate the ease of understanding the community participants, and gaining first-hand knowledge of their practices through online interactions performed as fieldwork (Dumitrca 2013).

This part of the thesis presents an overview of the thesis and introduces the integral aspects of the study for clear understanding. In section 1.2, the significance and aims behind the study are explained. Then, the research question and objectives are outlined in section 1.3 through a brief discussion. The structure of the paper is outlined in section 1.4, and the contents of each part of the thesis are presented briefly. Finally, in section 1.5, the benefits of the present study are explained, with section 1.6 providing a brief overall summary.

1.2 Significance and aims of the study

In this day and age of nearly perfect information, the roles played by brand community in modern society are vital to the marketing strategies of most firms. However, brand community formation and development have been a challenge to marketers (McAlexander et al. 2002), especially with regards to the factors that drive brand community formation (Davidson et al. 2007). While marketing practices go way back in time, they have only been complemented by theory and strengthened by research more recently, starting from the twentieth century through to the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the marketing line of reasoning came to a crossroads (Shaw & Jones 2005). The changes in real-world marketing and societal dimensions that followed has expanded and pushed frontiers in numerous domains—such as quantitative,
strategic, and behavioural aspects—towards a much more global, technologically enhanced basis (Wilkie & Moore 2003), notwithstanding the past marketing practices like the traditional 4 Ps concept or marketing mix that were once appropriate, but less relevant in today’s marketplace (Schultz 2001).

If ‘marketing with’ is the primary goal and medium of marketing in collaboration with customers to co-create value (Lusch 2007), we may infer that the logical role of marketing is to close the separation between buyers and sellers and to help society allocate scarce resources through engagement, thereby building meaningful relationships and management (Grönroos 1994). The relationship created between customers and companies through brand communities enhance customer attraction and retention, with OBCs often being used as marketing instruments (Prykop & Heitmann 2006). While it has been argued that distinct product attributes create varied levels of commitment in the minds of customers, these inherent features could result in a difference in consumer purchase decisions (Chen et al. 2012). In this context, companies could increase the social and emotional value perception of consumers towards the brand.

McCole (2004) argues that the marketing concept and the way marketing knowledge is imparted needs to be refocused to reflect practice, since what happens in reality is not always reflected in theory. In a similar vein, companies can become accountable to their customers when they openly embrace the participatory nature of the web and leverage the data trail created by people engaging in Internet communication. This information can be decoded to tell a story, allowing customers to personalize the customer experience (Rice 2014), since the narrative allows growth within communities of consumers (Ferguson & Hlavinka 2006). In this vein, marketing can be made meaningful to practice by looking at specific areas of marketing, such as brand marketing through brand community practices, where a significant number of studies have been carried out regarding value co-creation. However, none have specifically focused on online consumer brand participant interaction practices in relation to simultaneous co-creation and co-destruction. Thus, further investigation is needed to determine the effects of participant involvement in OBCs and the impact of these practices on brand value.

This study therefore seeks to understand the impact of participation on a brand’s value formation, with the ‘MSI’ community used as a case for illustration. In addition, despite the growth and development of brand
community research over the last decade (Davidson et al. 2007), looking specifically at the characteristics of community participant practices could add to the current understanding of brand communities. According to Team BE (2011) of Wenger-Trayner, a community of practice is a group of people who share a passion and concern for what they do (see: Pitta & Fowler 2005a; Duguid 2005), and who learn together as they continuously interact. The definition is not far from Warde’s (2005) idea of practice as a temporally evolving and different means of doing things.

Thus, engagement through interaction is crucial and will help in understanding the driving factors behind and characteristics of OBCs. This may be due to the fact that there is still lack of knowledge regarding consumer-firm engagement within brand communities that draws on Echeverri and Skålén’s (2011) research on co-creation and co-destruction. That research was underpinned by practice theory and based on interactive value formation at the provider-customer interface within a Swedish transport system (Gothenburg Tramways). By basing the current research on the same idea of value co-creation and co-destruction, the researcher aims to extend existing knowledge on practice theory and discover some managerial implications. Thus, the specific aim of the present study is the following:

- To explore co-creative and co-destructive practices within online brand communities.

1.3 Research Question and Objectives

The importance of research questions cannot be overemphasised, since they provide a clear guideline for what the research process will address. In this way, the researcher can arrive at clear and specific statements that identify the personal research objectives wished to be accomplished through carrying out the research (Saunders et al. 2009).

For this study, the research question is as follows:

- What is the role of online community participants in developing a brand’s value?

The research question (RQ) focuses on the participants’—community members’ and company representatives’—involvement in developing the brand’s value through interaction with each other in an OBC, as well as the positive or negative aspects that may arise from these interactions. To shed
additional light on the stated research question, and to help develop the
question and thesis topic further, two fundamental objectives were formulated:

- *To explore how users’ practices in the online community co-create value for the brand.*
- *To identify how interactions in the community forum co-destruct the company value.*

“Exploring value creative and value destructive practice through an online brand community: The case of Starbucks”

Figure 1.3 *The Thesis Statement.*

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into seven parts, in which the ideas, techniques and
methods, results, and study conclusions are discussed. The parts are divided
into sections for coherence and ease of understanding.

In Part 1, a general overview, which also serves as an introduction to the
study, is outlined. Broad research in relation to the existing knowledge and
prominent theories in the areas of interest are presented and critically analysed
in the literature review. The issues highlighted in the current research are
based on the literature; as such, concepts like the practice theory and a
refinement of consumer culture theory (CCT) are explained in Part 2. These
concepts are critical to our study of online community formation, culture and
practices. Discussions regarding OBC’s and their social identities, value
creation and value co-creation, and the possibility of value co-destruction to
the firm’s brand, forum and participants are also incorporated into Part 2.

In Part 3, the research methodology is presented, along with the design stages
used to achieve the goal of the chosen research approach. The data collection
approach and tools are justified and the content is discussed. In addition, the
limitations of the paper, the issue of gaining access, and the ethical
implications are stated, explored and defended. In Part 4, the findings or
results of the primary research are presented. Part 5 focuses on the analysis of the qualitative primary data using the netnographic approach, sorted with NVivo 10 software. Part 6 includes a detailed discussion of the findings, an analysis of the theoretical and managerial implications, and a discussion of the emerging issues that may lead to indispensable contributions to knowledge, practice and further research. Part 7 provides the thesis conclusion and recommendations. Figure 1.4 below provides a simplified illustration of the thesis structure:
PART I - INTRODUCTION
- Overview, Significance and aims of the study, Research Question and Objectives, Structure of the Thesis, Benefits of the study, & Summary.

PART II - LITERATURE REVIEW
- Review of the related literature, Value Creation/Co-Creation, Co-Destruction, Practice Theory/Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), & Summary.

PART III - METHODOLOGY
~NETNOGRAPHY~
- Method and Justification.
- The Design Process: Planning, Entrée, & Data Collection.
- Limitations.
- Ethical Implications.
- Summary.

PART IV - RESULTS.
- Findings (or) Results.

PART V - DATA ANALYSIS
- Using NVivo 10 Software.

PART VI - FRAMES OF DISCUSSION
- Interpretation of Findings.
- Theoretical & Managerial Implications.

PART VII - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
- Write, Present & Report Research Findings.

Figure 1.4 Simplified Structure of the Thesis (Adapted and developed from Kozinets 2010)
1.5 Benefits of the study

The benefits of brand communities have not been fully realised, even after the focus from marketers and academics over the last decade (Davidson et al. 2007). Authors like Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) and McAlexander et al. (2002) ascertain that a strong brand image in relation to history, consumption and competition allows a brand to influence community formation and development. Yet, the characteristics that drive the many factors found in brand communities are under-explored, especially the need to expand into new contexts and industries, i.e. outside the durable goods sector (Davidson et al. 2007).

In this sense, products/services that are frequently purchased, like those in the Food and Beverage service industry, could benefit from the application of brand communities. Understanding the roles of participants like marketers (firms), consumers, enthusiasts and researchers (members) in relation to brand community formation and development will also be beneficial in determining other characteristics significant to participant practices. This will also help in filling in some gaps in the literature.

The current exploration will provide insight into the practices found within online brand communities, thus extending the literature and knowledge on how users’ interact within OBC forums can influence both value co-creation and value co-destruction. In other words, the positive and the negative aspects of participant interactions and collaborations could open up a new understanding of how to build, manage, sustain, and develop future brand communities. Meanwhile, the findings can also provide managerial implications and help in formulating recommendations for further study.

1.6 Summary

Overall, this part has presented an overview of the study. It introduced the rationale and aims behind this exploratory research. The question and objectives were specified, and the thesis structure was provided. Lastly, the benefits of the study were briefly summarised to highlight the importance of the research goal. The next part of the thesis will review the works of literature relevant to this research.
PART II

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Review of the related literature

Part 2 reviews the previous research that supports the present thesis. First, a brief review of online brand communities is given. Then, insight into the combined themes of value creation and value co-creation is presented. Value co-destruction, which lies at the core of this exploration, will be discussed. Finally, a brief reflection and summary of the literature review will be given.

2.1.1 Online Brand Communities (OBCs)

Online brand communities (OBCs) have begun to have a significant influence on both consumers and organizations. OBCs allow companies to transcend geographical boundaries with the help of Web 2.0, a medium that changed the focus of the Internet from the delivery of content (Web 1.0) to participation centred on communities (Adebanjo & Michaelides 2010). This change allowed faster means of communication as the Internet became less expensive and more accessible, shifting the power advantage from marketers to web customers. Companies now use OBCs as a marketing tool for building the customer-brand relationship (McAlexander et al. 2002), and because of the implications these communities have for managers (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder 2008).

As Hagel (1999) notes, trade, content and interaction are the fundamental elements of a community’s web presence. OBCs also affect the buying behaviour of consumers (Adjei et al. 2010). Thus, firms who control popular online communities are in a position to dominate commerce over the Internet (Farquhar & Rowley 2006). In the area of brand communities, a number of studies have been carried out. Kozinets (2001) performed detailed research focusing on the cultural and subcultural formation of consumption meanings and practices, as procured from mass media images and objects. It was found to fulfil the modern desire for a conceptual field in which to create a sense of self and something of vital importance. The findings also reveal the broader cultural balance between the investments people make in material objects and the intrusion of marketing for profit.
Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) demonstrated that communities add value to brands and play a vital role in branding. Furthermore, the value of a brand diminishes when users are denied the social connections established through OBCs. The authors note that brand communities reveal the socially established nature of brands as something more than an extension of attitudes or incorrect stereotypes. More often, consumers are indulging in brand usage, for the enhancement of lifestyle the brands bring with them (Fournier 1998; Cova & Cova 2002; Prykop & Heitmann 2006).

Less focus has been given to brand communities in terms of the relationship between marketers and consumers. According to Firat and Venkatesh (1995), brands are, in fact, social entities, created as much by consumers as they are by marketers through a mix of social development. Understanding such collaboration is required when looking at consumer behaviours and brand community practices. The opposite consequence may be what Holt's (2002) reasoning of consumer culture and branding study implies—the rise of an emerging countercultural shift. In this sense, consumer resistance may generate a societally harmful modern consumer culture and its operations.

As Muniz and Schau (2005) note, practically everything in society is branded. Thus, the brand is a critical element in the narrative of relationship building and development, but is something that can also be obstructed by consumer resistance. Nevertheless, Algesheler et al. (2005) describe how identifying with a brand community leads to positive results, such as greater community engagement. At the same time, associating with a brand can create negative consequences, like establishing community pressure and limiting specific behavioural freedoms, like making choices. Thus, it is acknowledged that both positive and negative characteristics may exist within a brand community.

Since members of a community are often product evangelists, firms have begun monitoring their customers through online communities as a source of feedback (Dwyer 2007). The information gathered in this way may provide important insights about the consumers (Williams & Cothrel 2000), as well as a better understanding of virtual communities. The data can also offer other marketing opportunities and serve as a successful online marketing strategy (Sicilia & Palazón 2008; Seraj 2012), since brand-related discussions and opinions within a community forum can instigate engagement, and stimulate ideas and propositions that are beneficial in starting new marketing initiatives.
Cova and Paranque (2012) argue that organizational culture and brand communities, while different, are also compatible, given that the threats of the financialization of branding are avoided. This idea can be justified, as brands have become the new medium for creating social, intellectual and cultural relationships inside a company’s environment (Kornberger 2010). Consequently, the notion of relationship creation between actors such as consumers, marketers, and financiers within a business ecosystem could influence and intersect with the practices of OBC’s.

OBCs have also been described as the communities organized in cyberspace based on commercial brand attachment (Sung et al. 2010). In other words, OBCs consist of a group of people with a common brand interest who electronically interact with one another through a forum (De Valck et al. 2009). Such an environment can be likened to Castells’s (2010) examination of the creation of intangible spaces, whose identity is grounded in the interaction of those that compose it. However, the brands themselves do not always support such communities.

Whatever the purpose are of forming a brand community, there is still a difference between consumer and traditional communities due to differences in commercial and common interests (Albert et al. 2008). The development of traditional communities occurs within restricted geographical areas (Charitsis 2009). As Durkheim (1964) observed, however, modern society seems to build communities around interest rather than locality.

Charitsis (2009) notes that consumer communities have a voluntary and communal character that is common to members. An example of this sort voluntary character can be drawn from a community of Alfa Romeo enthusiasts (Alfisti), the Fiat brand community studied by Cova et al. (2015). The community’s voluntary character is vital and differentiates it from traditional communities (See: Figure 2.1.1a). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) describe the idea behind brand communities. While they place the brand at the centre of focus, they indicate that the customers interact around the brand – the customer-customer-brand union (See: Figure 2.1.1b). On the other hand, McAlexander et al. (2002) suggest a model extension and a change in viewpoint in which the brand community is customer-centric. This places the customer at the centre, with more types of interactions taking place (See: Figure 2.1.1c).
Figure 2.1.1a Traditional Customer-Brand Relationship (Adapted from McAlexander et al. 2002)

Figure 2.1.1b Brand Community Triad (Adapted from McAlexander et al. 2002)

Figure 2.1.1c Customer-Centric Brand Community (Adapted from McAlexander et al. 2002)
2.1.1.1 Brand communities’ social identities

Brand communities are emerging as a new form of grouping established around existing symbols, rather than creating symbols (Stratton & Northcote 2014). So what is a community? Casually, most people correlate community with a place or socializing around common interests (Pahl 1995). In this sense, communities are the support systems that people build among themselves. There are many such communities in existence, each with varied characteristics and created within various subcultures of society (De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan 2007). The term Brand Community was coined by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) to encompass a broader concept of consumer communities. The brand community concept contains three crucial elements or markers (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001):

[1] The consciousness of kind: The consciousness of kind or shared consciousness is a way of thinking about things that goes beyond shared attitudes or perceived similarity; it is the natural belonging that the community members have in connection with the brand, their feelings towards each other, and the group sense of difference that separates users of the brand and non-users who are not part of the community (See: Fournier 1998; Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006). Sustaining shared consciousness often requires two processes:

- (A) Legitimacy: the belief of being real appreciators or those who know the culture, traditions, history, and symbols of the brand, and who may marginalise outsiders; and
- (B) Oppositional brand loyalty: members may show active hostility towards competing brands.

[2] The presence of shared rituals and traditions: Rituals and traditions prolong a community’s shared history, culture and awareness by serving to hold the changing significance of meanings while binding community members together. This social process helps community members maintain their identity, reinforce oneness and spread their traditions within and beyond the community’s culture (See: Casaló et al. 2008).

[3] A sense of moral responsibility that relates to brand consumption behaviour: The obligation or dutiful sense of commitment that members owe to the community and the individual members (See: Capece & Costa 2013).
McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) overview of communities encompasses four elements:

[1] Membership: The emotion of togetherness or sharing a feeling of personal relatedness.

[2] Influence: A sense of making a difference to the group and of the group’s importance to its members.

[3] Integration and fulfilment of needs: The encouraging belief that the needs of the members are met by the resources received from the group.

[4] Shared emotional connection: Commitment and the belief that members have a shared or similar experience.

These four elements of a community can be likened to the three markers of Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001), since they carry the same meanings.

Alternatively, the customer-centric brand community model developed by McAlexander et al.’s (2002) ethnographic research describes four relationships experienced by consumers within a brand community:


[2] Customer-Brand relationships: Important brand-related values or associations that have been promoted by the marketer, and the customer’s identification with the brand (i.e., brand loyalty).

[3] Customer-Company relationships: The feelings customers have about the organizations that sponsor events, or the concern companies have for customers.

[4] Customer-Customer relationships: The feelings product owners have about other product owners. This type of relationship can translate into how customers feel about other customers in an online brand community.

Overall, the above-described elements of brand communities establish the fact that these communities revolve around relationship building. The notion of brand community relationships has also been acknowledged by Charitis (2009), who argues that the relationships developed between members of a community are the most significant elements found within a brand community.
Wirtz et al. (2013) explored online brand communities from both the consumer and organizational perspectives, combining theories from the existing literature to better understand and expand the field of research. The conceptual framework they applied also extends the knowledge regarding consumer engagement, with four principal dimensions of online brand communities identified:

[1] Brand orientation: The central focus of the OBC is usually the brand, including brand-related consumption experiences, such as riding a motorbike or drinking a unique coffee like those sold at Starbucks.

[2] Internet-use: Brand communities can be ‘online,’ ‘offline,’ or both. Wirtz et al. (2013) considered both online and online/offline hybrid brand communities as OBCs.

[3] Funding: OBCs can range from being entirely funded by the firm to being fully funded by the community of enthusiasts.

[4] Governance: OBCs can be governed either entirely by the brand, entirely by the brand community or a combination of both the brand community and the firm.

Three antecedents to consumer online brand community engagement have been proposed:

- (A) Brand-related drivers – Brand identification is a social construct that involves the integration of perceived brand identity into self-identity. Customers may decide to participate in a brand community because they want to live up to the brand’s symbolic function.

- (B) Social drivers – OBCs provides a wider set of social and effectual benefits to its members, just like traditional communities. Social identity theory claims that self-concept is attained in part by psychological membership in various social groups since people strive for the positive self-esteem derived from social group membership.

- (C) Functional drivers – Functional benefits are obtained directly from the information support system that a consumer receives from an OBC (Dholakia et al. 2009). OBC members have extensive expertise that can be tapped into by other members.
2.1.2 Value creation & Value Co-creation

Many organizations set up brand communities to co-create value with their consumers (Payne et al. 2009). According to Grönroos (2008), the concept of value is difficult to define and measure. Thus, value is often an incorrectly used term in marketing, especially where it may imply different meanings (Leszinski & Marn 1997), and as such is understood differently in the literatures (Ramírez 1999). In fact, value creation also has often been referred to as being among the ill-defined and elusive concepts used in service marketing (Carù & Cova 2003). However, Grönroos (2008; 2012) has provided a simple working definition of value:

“Value for customers’ means that after they have been assisted by a self-service process or a full-service process, customers feel better off than before” – (Grönroos 2008; p. 303)

At the same time, the value experienced or instrumentally created through customer co-creation can also be negative or destructive (Echeverri & Skålén 2011). Holbrook (2006) extends the definition of value, implying that value dwells only in the user’s experience, rather than in an object, a product or possession. Value as a term thus remains an elusive concept (Woodall 2003). While trying to discuss value creation and value co-creation, one must ask, ‘What is value?’ According to Lusch and Vargo (2014), a value is a benefit or advancement in the well-being of a particular participant in an action or process.

This argument indicates that value is proposed, but cannot be provided by one actor to another. The value proposition is thus a representation of how an actor offers to participate in value creation with other beneficiaries. Likewise, because every instance of value creation is contextually different, the occurrence becomes unique in that it creates an experience. Thus, Lusch and Vargo (2014) argue that value is co-created since resources from multiple sources are always integrated to create value.

Initiating value creation in an interactive context, such as was studied in the early 1970s, can result in value co-creation through direct interactions between customer and provider (Grönroos 2012). Grönroos argues that Vargo and Lusch’s (2008) concept of value co-creation departs from the literal use of the words, and as such, acts as a barrier to verifiable analysis. In the work of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a, 2004b), the market is viewed as a forum or a potential space for co-creation. For instance, when considering co-creation
from the company’s point of view, an online brand community, which lacks geographic or social barriers, provides a forum where individuals can share ideas and feelings. The forum is thus a space for consumer-company interactions, which can lead to co-creation through the implementation of four building blocks: dialogue, access, risk assessment, and transparency. These building blocks are also called the ‘DART’ model of value co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004b). Co-creation of value only applies to the stages of the value-creation development process in which there is the customer-company interaction (Grönroos 2012).

The past several decades have seen new perspectives rise to prominence in the marketing worldview. According to Vargo and Lusch (2004), this shift includes a reconsidered logic focusing on intangible resources, relationships, and the co-creation of value. Consequently, marketing has shifted from goods-dominant logic ‘G-D’ (products) to service-dominant logic ‘S-D’ (services). Among the many discussions regarding service-dominant logic, one central proposition is that a co-creator of value is always the customer (Vargo & Akaka 2009; Lusch & Vargo 2014). This particular axiom of S-D logic contradicts G-D logic’s view of the firm as the creator of value. Instead, it suggests that value is something that is always co-created through a direct interaction between actors or goods (Lusch & Vargo 2014). From the G-D logic perspective, operand resources are the focus of the companies, and these static, potential, and natural resources are tangible and can be acted on to provide benefit.

In contrast, the S-D logic has shifted the focus to operant resources such as human skills, knowledge and know-how. These are the intangible and dynamic capabilities that act upon other potential resources like the technological use of the Internet to create benefits (Lusch & Vargo 2014). One example is that companies must use their core competencies when co-creating value with consumers through their value propositions. However, the framework of Vargo and Lusch does not go far enough for Peñaloza & Venkatesh (2006), who advocate for an extensive and transformative marketing practice, for instance, through the development of a new concept that includes the definition of the nature of value creation.

Schau et al. (2009) use practical social theory to highlight the usual process of collective value creation among networked firm-facing actors in brand-centred communities. The authors argue that:
“Value is manifested in the collective enactment of practices, which favour investments in networks rather than firm-consumer dyads; surrendering control to customers enhances consumer engagement and builds brand equity; and firms derive added brand value by creatively using willing customer (operant) resources.” – (Schau et al. 2009, p. 41)

The authors’ work showed that all such collectives reveal community-like qualities. Moreover, such collectives provide value for their members through various types of emergent participation, as consumer cooperatives are the sites of much value creation.

2.1.3 Value co-destruction – Is it possible?

While the co-creation of value has attracted much attention from marketing academics and practitioners, the concept of value co-destruction is a relatively new term. In fact, Plé and Cáceres (2010) found an omission of the term ‘value co-destruction’ in the index of the S-D Logic of Marketing Book of 2006. The term was also absent in Elton B. Stephens Company ‘EBSCO’ bibliographic database of 2009.

In their study, Plé and Cáceres (2010) critiqued the dominance of value co-creation and value-in-use within S-D logic, proposing the new concept of value co-destruction. Value-in-use is the extent of contribution to the well-being of a beneficiary during the use of something (Lusch & Vargo 2014). This was the first time a study had introduced the idea of value co-destruction into the academic discourse by providing a detailed account of how the process could occur. Despite the lack of research on this idea, its potential cannot be overlooked.

Plé and Cáceres (2010) explored the interactions between service systems and questioned why the consequences could not also include value co-destruction. They argue that if a value can be co-created through an interactive process, it is logical that it can also be co-destroyed. Thus, value co-destruction should be possible. As the authors examined value co-destruction within the S-D logic framework, it was realized that S-D logic mainly focuses on value creation and co-creation.

At the same time, service, as proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2008a), is done for the benefit of another beneficiary or the entity itself. Thus, the standpoint would be that the implied positive connotation of value has no negative alternative in a value-related outcome; this is because academicians have
focused mainly on the measurement of created value (Ulaga 2003; Cretu & Brodie 2007). In contrast, Plé and Cáceres (2010) argue that in G-D logic, value can have inverse process direction: In ‘production’ – value creation and ‘consumption’ – value destruction (Grönroos 2006; Vargo & Lusch 2008a).

In their research on the empirically under-explored area of co-creation and co-destruction, Echeverri and Skålén (2011) present a practice theory study on interactive value formation at the provider-customer interface. Their study was carried out using a Swedish public transport organization, “Göteborgs Spårvägar” (GS) – Gothenburg Tramways, as the centre of interest. The research activities were conducted using interactive engagement processes. The engagement process brought together the bus/tram drivers and travellers using the transportation system in the form of encounters.

Their approach uncovered not just the positive outcomes, but also the negative practices present in an interactive value formation. The authors argued that there is a correlation between actors (provider–customer) of value co-creation and value co-destruction in interactive value process. Furthermore, the research reinforces that in any interactive setting, e.g. online brand communities, varied practices can thus be identified. Echeverri and Skålén’s (2011) research forms the basis of the present thesis study, which could prove relevant to practices in OBCs.

The five dimensions (informing, greeting, delivering, charging, and helping) provide a basis for Schau et al.’s (2009) identification of the twelve value creation practices within brand communities. Echeverri and Skålén’s (2011) study can also help distinguish how consumers co-create or co-destroy value within an online community during interactive and collaborative practices. Here, the question is whether the benefits derived from the various interactions within OBCs are value-creative or value-destructive. It is rightly argued that:

“Value is not just something that is co-created at the customer-provider interface, but can also be something that is co-destroyed.” – (Echeverri & Skålén 2011, p. 370)

Thus, value co-destruction is equally important during interactions among participants in a process. Mutual interaction in this sense would enable the discovery of the prevalent practices within communities. Since not all of online community members’ interactions will be beneficial, value co-destruction can also occur in community relationships.
In a study, Cova and Paranque (2012) established a link between consumers, marketers, and financiers that highlights the value-creating and destructive practices of companies aligned to brand communities, management, and valuation. The three cases in their study were based on the principle that consumers who have grouped themselves into communities are sometimes responsible for the creation of brands through their value-creating practices (Schau et al. 2009).

Cova and Paranque (2012) study revealed a process that reverses a value creating circle, actually causing a destructive brand value generated by the process’s very existence. The authors suggest that marketers’ maximization of the value co-created between a company and community, in response to the financial requirement for brand strengthening, could damage value co-creation, which could in turn result in the risk of consumer resistance to branding maximization or the development of an alternative or reverse brand value destruction process in the form of a competitor’s brand community.

Smith (2013) used the framework of the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al. 2003) to investigate the process of value co-destruction in the ways organizations misuse their resources and those of consumers. In the study, the critical incident approach was implemented, in which 120 consumers recounted negative experiences that identified the nature of the resources and the processes involved. The study found that value co-destruction resulted from a failure of the resource integration process to co-create expected value.

The conservation of resources (COR) theory thus provides valuable insight and comprehension into the processes of value co-creation and co-destruction from the customer perspective. However, Smith’s findings suggest alternative propositions for service recovery, where efforts run parallel to the timing and nature of the resource loss. The findings from Smith’s study have the potential to vary across cultures through the many constructs and the relationship identified.
2.1.4 Practice Theory & Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) – Integrating Communities

Echeverri & Skålén’s (2011) study identifies five interactive value practices: informing, greeting, delivering, charging, and helping. An association between value co-creative ‘congruent’ (harmonized) and co-destructive ‘incongruent’ (incompatible) dimensions were established. The authors argue that the five practices are made up of elements like procedures, which also discursive knowledge. Other elements include general rules, principles, and instructions; understanding – communicative knowledge and know-how; and engagements – emotionally committed purposes and aims (also see: Whittington 2006).

The above elements of practice enable the theorization of interactive value formation and how value exists between agents. The idea implies that practice is social, a type of behaving and understanding that emerges at different locales and points of time carried out by distinct body/minds (Reckwitz 2002). Duguid (2005) argues that community of practice theory as a social theory favours varied accounts of knowledge. In this sense, the theory can be applied to collectives and their shared artefacts, observed through exploration, in our case, within OBCs. Reckwitz (2002) confirms the idea that practice theory constitutes a subtype of cultural theory that places the social aspect in another domain from other cultural theories. A practice locates the social or collective in the human mind. An example of practice is the interactive value processes within an online brand community.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) conceptualizes culture as the very fabric of experience, meaning, and action (Geertz 1983). It is not a uniform, grand theory (Arnould & Thompson 2005), but rather, is a group of theoretical viewpoints that address the changing relationships that take place between users’ activities, the marketplace, and cultural meanings. CCT thus represents a plurality of theoretical paths that could link many situations. An example is the cultural meanings that are understood and interpreted within an online community’s activities. The meanings are personified and negotiated by users, particularly in a social context. Consumer culture imagines the interconnected system of commercial products that groups use. These usages are carried out through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, and meanings to make collective sense of the environment and to orient members’ experiences and lives (Kozinets 2001).
2.2 Summary

The literature reviewed has shown that OBCs have evolved over the last decades to become relevant in today’s customer-dominated marketplace. While marketers may control the market elements (4 Ps), they no longer control the system. Marketers must now scramble to adjust, adapt and respond (Schultz 2001), and simultaneously, collaborate to co-create value and make the marketing process work. When value creation, co-creation, and co-destruction are associated with direct or indirect collaborative or interactive processes, value formation emerges. The ‘value formation’ procedure takes three sub-steps to achieve:

[2] The customer acts alone by bringing together available resources to operation processes close to the firm (Grönroos & Ravald 2011).

The use of the phrase ‘value formation’ indicates how the above values may unfold or be created. Recalling the three elements of practice (procedures, understanding and engagements) identified by Echeverri & Skålén (2011), Whittington (2006) had a fourth, almost forgotten, element: language. Language or ‘terminology’ is the key factor in communities that encompass the elements mentioned earlier (Herring 1996). This implies that without a language, all elements would be impractical.

Drawing from Echeverri & Skålén (2011), practice theory could be framed as:

“Background coping skills that simultaneously limit and enable interactions between provider and customer” – (Echeverri & Skålén 2011, p. 355)

Rather than replicate prior efforts, an understanding of practices and cultural phenomena are essential to OBC creation. CCT focuses on the experiential and sociocultural dimensions of experience not plainly accessible through experiments, surveys, or database modelling (Sherry 1991). Furthermore, the theory looks at the symbolic boundaries that structure personal and communal consumer identities (Arnould & Thompson 2005).
PART III

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In this part, the research methodology is presented and justified in Section 3.2. Section 3.3 is organized into individual sub-sections describing the integrated design process taken in the research through the following steps. Design (Planning), Community Entry (Entrée), and Data collection. The study’s limitations and ethical implications are examined in Sections 3.4 and 3.5, respectively. Section 3.6 provides a summary.

Figure 3.1 Design process (steps)
3.2 Method and Justification

Research is part of people’s daily activities. According to Saunders et al. (2009), research is the systematic assembling and interpreting of information with reason, to find out things. The research strategy distinction commonly drawn among academic scholars is between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for gaining an understanding of organizations (Maxwell 2008). According to Adams et al. (2007), qualitative research aims to investigate social connections and depicts reality as experienced by the respondents. However, according to many writings on qualitative research presented since the 1970s, specifying the difference as a distinct research strategy is not straightforward (Bryman & Burgess 1999). Bryman and Bell (2011) argue that qualitative research as a term is seldom used to indicate a proposition for business research in which quantitative data are not obtained or generated. The following excerpt provides an excellent description of the differences between the two types of research strategies:

“The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency.

Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry.

Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes.

Proponents claim that their work is done from within a value-free framework” (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 8)

Since the present study is exploratory, the strategy applied is qualitative. The research approach used is netnography, which adapts common ethnographic participant-observation procedures to the unique contingencies of computer-mediated social interaction. Observation allows an understanding of complex real-world situations, more so than by asking questions or conducting interviews (Wilkinson & Birmingham 2003). For instance, natural interactions
can be observed in context from behind the researcher’s computer, since access is continuously available, around the clock.

The netnographic technique was devised specifically to study the consumer behaviour and cultures within community forums on the Internet (Kozinets 1998; 2002). While it is based on online fieldwork, the approach is quicker, easier and less costly than traditional ethnography, and more naturalistic and unassuming than focus groups or interviews (Kozinets 2002). Thus, observing OBC’s has advantages in comparison to the conventional qualitative methods of ethnography.

Participating in an online brand community is another way to understand what the business and its consumers are doing right or wrong. It allows the opportunity to experience the embedded cultural understanding of the practices and how the participants either contribute to elevating or destroying brand value. Such an approach offers more detailed or rich descriptive data (Kozinets 2010).

3.3 The design process

The steps taken consist of the three processes discussed in sub-sections below.

3.3.1 Planning

My Starbucks Idea (MSI) was chosen as the research field site. It is one online community and meets the requirements of an interactive, communicative process between the consumers and company representatives. It was thus deemed the most suitable choice after exploring other community sites like Nike Inc. and Formabilio SRL, which had less consumer-company interaction. Also, the community has a large and active member database. The community reflects the features of the vital actor types (consumers/employees). Therefore, these actors contextual meaning can be understood as a social construct (Macintosh, 1994; cited in Johnson, 2007:51, p. 23).

The approach used, i.e. planning, entrée, and data collection adheres to the practices of netnographic research. This was a modification of the six steps of ethnography described by Kozinets (2010).
However, in order to fit the study, there was a point of departure from the ethical procedures described by Kozinets: no formal written permission from the case company (Starbucks Coffee) was received. This is an example of the kind of moral dilemmas facing researchers who seek to use the Internet for research. Such research creates a situation in which researchers must make the choice between two options: using the Internet as a private field site or a public field site. In this vein, the paper considers online community forums on the Internet as involving unrestricted or public space, and will be discussed in section 3.5.

Figure 3.3.1 Kozinets Six Steps of Ethnography (Adapted from Kozinets 2010)
Figure 3.3.1a *Main Starbucks homepage screenshot* (Starbucks 2015)

Figure 3.3.1b *“My Starbucks Idea” Community homepage screenshot.* (Starbucks 2015)
3.3.2 Community Entry (Entrée)

Starbucks, was established in 1971 (Bhasin 2012), but only introduced “My Starbucks Idea (MSI)” in 2008 (Husain et al. 2014). Upon entering the community at the outset of the research, there was a need for the researcher to gain familiarity with the community participants and their language (terminologies), interests, and practices. To join the MSI community, personal registration was completed, although this was not necessary to obtain data since the site could be accessed without membership. A Starbucks Card was obtained to reach the welcome level of the community and to receive exclusive offers. There was also “My Starbucks Rewards (MSR),” which is meant to generate rewards such as ‘Stars,’ ‘Badges’ and ‘Coupons’ for free drinks.

In the community, a rating system has been implemented to enable users to vote on the ideas of other users that they think are crucial. Each month, the ideas with the highest scores are discussed and considered by Starbucks representatives, who make the final decisions on whether to implement the ideas. The partners (representatives or employees) then place the results of selected top ten ideas’ list for the month on a ‘Leaderboard.’

The Starbucks online community has had great success in creating brand awareness, with more than 3 million visitors and over 60,000 ideas generated by customers (Weber 2013). Dewey (1954) and Barber (1984) argue that communication produces social knowledge by allowing people to share and judge their experiences and viewpoints; recognize the common good and engage in self-governance. There are many discussion threads that signify behavioural changes in community practices, which can have a positive or a negative impact. Notably, there is only one Starbucks online community, “My Starbucks Idea (MSI).” This community comprises three major internal idea streams: product ideas, experience ideas, and involvement ideas Illustrated below.
Starbucks set up its online community as a forum to allow customers to share ideas, thoughts and as a way to both learn from and act on customer contributions. After registration, it became apparent that Starbucks uses its Starbucks Card strategically to achieve a competitive advantage. The observation made upon entering the Starbucks community was that there was a research advantage to interacting with the forum participants to gain a deeper awareness and understanding of the community’s inner culture. Thus, the forum was used as a netnographic field site to gain knowledge of the participants’ practices.
Users in the community are openly urged to share opinions about current and future products. For instance, they contribute ideas about desired tea/coffee blends, or provide feedback about their favourite drinks, service experiences and encounters with ‘baristas’ – the bartenders working at the counter. There are many online community member types (de Valck 2005; Kozinets 2010). Upon entering the community, the author played the role of a ‘lurker’ so as not to interrupt the natural discussion flow, since a written consent have not been received after a formal request was made to the firm.

A lurker acts as a passive observer in a discussion forum for the purpose of gathering data (Griffiths & Whitty 2010). Moreover, the author actively observed to learn about the forum by following discussion threads, scrutinizing the practices and reading pieces of information as a member of the community. As Chen et al. (2004; cited in Madge, 2007, p. 659) suggest, lurking is an essential act preceding informed consent, done in order to understand the themes and tone of interactions. The activities aid in developing the potential over time to become a newbie and even to eventually achieve insider status.

Figure 3.3.2b Types of online community participation (adapted & developed from Kozinets 2010.)
A good entry point into the Starbucks environment was by participating first as a member, rather than as an academic researcher. In this approach, the researcher can enter the community as one of the following member types:

[1] *Lurkers*: Active observers who learn about a forum by watching and reading. They login to community forums but seldom post (Sun et al. 2014). However, they have the potential over time to become newbies and to progress to insiders as they gain social and cultural capital through engaging in the community's core consumption activities.

[2] *Makers*: Participants developed in their online social abilities, making them central to the community. The makers are active builders of OBCs and social spaces, and can, in some cases, form other communities.

[3] *Interactors*: Members who are highly engaged in the consumption activity. They are from other communities, usually in-person ones, only using the online channel to keep connected.

[4] *Networkers*: Those who enter a forum to build social ties and interact with the members of that community. Their interest may not be content related, but rather connected to particular members’ social ties.

As can be seen in Table 3.3.2b, there are four additional types of relationships and interrelationships present in online communities (Kozinets 2010):

[1] *Newbies*: Members who maintain superficial or weaker interest in the consumption activities and who lack strong social ties to the group. They have relatively weak online community abilities and skills. A newbie uses the community to learn about the core consumption activity or to try to build social relationships. Newbie participation cannot be readily recognized, but can be trailed through the shadow footprints they leave behind.

[2] *Minglers*: The fraternizers, or in other words, the socializers who keep strong personal relationships with many members of the community, but who are apparently interested only in the central consumption activity.

[3] *Devotees*: Members with core capabilities. They have intense enthusiasm and interest in the consumption activity of the community. However, they do not maintain serious social ties with other members.
[4] **Insiders:** Members with strong social ties to the online community and with a good understanding of the core consumption activity. They have natural forum working abilities and the tendency to identify with the community.

### 3.3.3 Data Collection

The primary data collection occurred through participant-observation. This is marked by a continuous period of intense social interaction, during which data, in the form of field notes, are systematically collected (Bogdan 1972). Two categories of data were obtained: archival data and direct copies of pre-existing discussion ‘threads,’ which are the subject headers of a discussion (Pitta & Fowler 2005b).

Joining the community was important, as it created the opportunity to examine discussions and observe participants within the forum, as well as to actively participate in the consumption activities, e.g. social interactions (Adams et al. 2007). The main technique used for data collection was to assemble discussion threads. The data collected were used to provide useful insights into the consumer practices within the community. The goal was to explain, but not predict phenomena (Leavy 1994); to understand, but not measure (Gordon & Langmaid 1988).

Meanwhile, any data elicited through interactions were not used since the study was an exploration done in the short-term. Data was extracted and saved as computer-readable files (PDFs). The extractions were also done as visual images through screen capture of still images as they appeared on the screen. These images were collected using the Print Screen (‘PrtScn’) button located on the computer keyboard, and aggregated together into a file.

The collected data were a selection, since not all of the 2,020 discussion threads reviewed were relevant to the study. As such, only 210 postings were saved as PDF files, which provided enough threads to sort into categories. In gathering these data, the researcher observed online cultural interactions over time through reading messages regularly as well as monitoring the Leaderboard bulletin frequently.

Alongside the primary data collected, secondary data from previous studies were collected from related academic databases, using relevant keywords such as “Netnography,” “Netnographic,” “Value,” “Value Creation,” “Value Co-creation,” “Value Co-destruction,” “Practice theory,” “Consumer culture,”...
“Brand Community (-ties),” “Online Brand Communities,” “Starbucks,” and “Coffee.” These resources were valuable and significant because they provided abundant information relevant to the present thesis.

Resources of various kinds were used, including reports, past dissertations and theses, and articles from online databases such as DIVA-Portal Academic Archive, EBSCOHOST Academic Search Elite, Business Source Premier, EMERALD Insight, Google Scholar, LIBRIS Online Library, Jstor, SAGE Journals, Wiley Online Library, Science Direct, Scopus, and Springer Link. These were all located in the e-library portal of the Library of Karlstad University, Sweden and the Varmlands Regional Library, ‘Värmlands Bibliotek,’ situated at the city centre of Karlstad, Sweden. The data assembly path following the gathering of unstructured data threads is illustrated in Table 3.3.3 below.

Figure 3.3.3 Data assembly path followed (Adapted from QSR NVivo 10).
A brief outline of the path followed is given below for a clear understanding.

[A] *Coding*: The gathering together of all the materials on a topic and categorization into particular themes.

[B] *Queries*: A flexible method of gathering and exploring subsets of data. Queries can be saved as the research gradually develops, to be able to return to them at a later time. They are used for comparing themes that can be developed and separated further into categories and elements.

[C] *Virtualization*: A process of putting query results into charts, models or matrices, if required. These are mostly used in presenting the results.

[D] *Memoing*: A process of making annotations of data and linking key ideas or reflecting on what was observed within the community.

### 3.4 Limitations

As with any other research, there were limitations to this study, stemming from the research method means of gaining access and consent, to the observational approach, which can be more demanding and taxing than other research methods (Wilkinson & Birmingham 2003). Other limitations were the general constraints of the short study time of 10 weeks.

The paper would have taken a different turn if the Starbucks Coffee Company had granted the required permission the author had sought prior to the study. Gaining consent was a hindrance to actually pursuing the full process necessary for completing the thesis. Company representatives actually advised that written approval is not required, since such permission is given only for commercial and not for academic purposes. Nonetheless, a written consent could have changed the lurking approach used in the exploration, especially with enhancing the ethical aspect and the way data could have been handled.

The inclusion of additional sources of data via other online social media channels like Twitter, YouTube and Facebook sites administered by Starbucks Coffee Company could have added support to the study’s validity and credibility. For instance, it could have brought in more information and created another outlook for the analysis. However, the use of netnographic observation has its processes. There is an understanding that the method rules out other valuable research instruments like focus groups, interviews or
surveys, as they would not produce the insight required for the research exploration.

Selecting an appropriate guideline for OBC research has its challenges. According to Carson (1990), there are unique characteristics that differentiate modern businesses from conventional business establishments. It is particularly true in the Food and Beverage industry that practices within the communities found in this sector may be different and not apply to communities from other sectors or industries. However, with the overwhelming amount of secondary data from interdisciplinary study sources, as well as the data gathered through observation, there was already a challenge in combining or reducing the information into a manageable amount of data.

Lastly, the study focused on only one community forum. Comparison would have been possible and beneficial for analysis if there were more community forums available. Nonetheless, presuming that all participants might not give consent or approve of the findings; and when compelled only to report what members of the community approve, could be unfairly giving one side of a contentious issue and findings. This would not, therefore, guarantee the best interests of the research. Consequently, doing this might limit credibility and include unjust representations.

3.5 Ethical implications

Since the advent of the Web 2.0, there has been increased interest and an upsurge in Internet-based research (IBR), creating a constant challenge for the communication medium. The discussion generated by IBR raises more questions than it answers. As Watson et al. (2007) suggest, consulting different sources of guidance would help to decide on ethical guidelines while conducting online research. Thus, sources like the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2002; 2012), the Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research (BPS, 2013) and Ethics for Researchers (EC, 2013) were consulted for this study. Based on the insight from these sources, three aspects were chosen to be addressed: the human subjects, data protection, and the issue of public/private online spaces. No set of rules have been prescribed to guide online research.

When considering the social dynamics and technicalities associated with public networks, there are no codes, policies, or procedures that provide a complete set of rules for every situation that might arise. As West (2013) suggest, the
Internet can be considered as one part of a public domain if the ideal public sphere has a deliberative component, to which all have equal access because of its popularity. Dahlgren’s (2005) key analytic dimensions of the public sphere (the structural, representational, and interactional) suggests, the Internet is like an agent of mobilization that serves as an extension of an already existing public sphere and its fundamental ideas (Gimmler 2001).

However, ethically responsible research is committed to protecting the participants of a study from potential harm (Waskul & Douglass 1996). This notion is supported by the ethical and legal frameworks for research, which require that human participants be, protected (Holmes 2009), since research ethics represent more than the conduct of a study. This idea is reinforced in the report from the Association of Internet Researchers on Internet research ethics (AoIR 2002; 2012). In this regard, care was taken to protect participants of the MSI forum by using pseudonyms or masked identity (AoIR 2002), and the data were handled to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of persons. However, this does not strengthen the scholarship quality, by not providing concrete details and allowing empirical claims to be assessed independently.

Online interaction is a unique communication form that puts its participants as special population (King 1996). However, as Bakardjieva and Feenberg (2000) state, online communities often approve any request to join request, thus undermining the argument for the right to privacy online. At the same time, others have argued that publicly available online data carry no expectation of privacy (Whitehead 2010). Whatever the concern, the Internet may highlight the lack of restraint and disregard for social conventions when communicating through the networks (Davis et al. 2010; Griffiths 2001), especially if participants go online to be heard. However, as Stein (2008) notes, in public forum law, the gatekeepers or owners of the space in which interaction takes place largely determine who can discourse in the space. Access is usually granted at a financial cost for using private online property, which includes private community space. According to Eysenbach and Till (2001), IBR raises several ethical questions about privacy and informed consent. As Holmes rightly argues,

“Eliciting informed consent, negotiating access, assessing the boundaries between public and private domains and ensuring the security of data are all problematic” – (Holmes 2009, p. 399)
The main ethical concerns that arise when undertaking an Internet-based study is whether an online community forum is considered a public or private field site, and what constitutes ‘informed consent’ in cyberspace. One example is how researchers can bring personal issues into public realms and vice versa (Meyrowitz 1985). The explanations of those who occupy an Internet community space define whether it is public or private (Homan 1991). How the division should be defined for research remains open since the blurring of both public and private experiences is characteristic of online communication, and a source of ethical controversy.

There are two sides to the issue with regards to accessibility, as those who believe such a forum is ‘public’ have argued that postings may be analysed, recorded and commented upon without due permission from or notification of the poster, since each posting is a public act performed to reach an audience that is mostly unknown (e.g. Sudweeks & Rafaeli 1995). Others see the use of the Internet for research as ‘fair game’ (Watson et al. 2007; Hair & Clark 2007; McKee 2008). The Internet is considered to heighten participation, since it facilitates and inspires the sharing of opinions (Malinen 2015), which assists in generating content that sustains the online communities.

In contrast, the ‘private’ opinion perceives postings in online forum to be private, since participants might feel it is an invasion of privacy for their conversations to be used for research purposes without prior notice (e.g. King 1996; Sharf 1999). As King (1996) argues, to protect the privacy of participants is the researcher’s responsibility. However, the fact remains that while members of discussion groups may view or presume their communications to be private, these discussions are accessible to anyone with an Internet connection, and could therefore be perceived as being in the public domain (Holmes 2009). Drawing from the Starbucks Social Media Terms and Conditions from February 19, 2015, it is stated that a poster agrees to the following:

“You are solely responsible for your User Content, and Starbucks assumes no liability for it. You agree to indemnify Starbucks against all claims and liabilities resulting from your User Content.” – (Starbucks 2015)

In reality, the Internet is often seen as a public space and in this view; public behaviour does not require ‘informed consent.’ The boundaries of private and
public spaces overlap in cyberspace (Waskul & Douglas 1996; Watson et al. 2007), since all contributions or postings may be used unrestrictedly and indefinitely by the administrators of these forums. Thus, anonymity is not embedded into the processes. More so, the forum does not designate itself as private, and as such, access is unrestricted to anyone willing to participate, which may challenge the privacy a poster might want in the forum.

Furthermore, something considered ethical in one online community might be considered unethical in another (Hair & Clark 2007). Herring (1996), on her concern called “Observer’s Paradox” – authentic data collecting without the gathering process interfering with the phenomena, argues that explaining the goals of a study to subjects and asking for their informed consent would either meet with rejection or change the participants’ behaviour, even leading to self-censorship.

3.6 Summary

Many companies reach out to their customers through online brand communities. To study such communities, netnography offers a standalone method based essentially on the observation of textual dialogue (Kozinets 2002). This means that it allows an understanding of the interactive discussions of people engaged in computer-mediated communication (CMC), which is different from the balancing of discourse and observed behaviour that occurs during in-person ethnography (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994).

Regarding the ethical concerns about netnography, a clear consensus on an ethically suitable set of procedures has not been achieved (Kozinets 2002). As Watson et al. (2007) argue, it is probably unrealistic to cover all aspects of ethics when doing Internet-based Research (IBR), and practically impossible for a complete anonymity (Herring 1996). Thus, the ethical research guidelines recommended by Kozinets can only be worthwhile when they correspond to the field site’s terms and conditions of use. This is because, as Kozinets (2010) argues, the boundaries indicating the inside and outside of a culture or community are much less clear in netnography than they are in conventional, face-to-face ethnography. However, as James and Busher (2015) suggest, online research does not occur through online communication or interactions alone. Thus, consideration was given to all sources of guidance that could help direct the study. As such, the affiliation and role of the researcher was revealed at the completion of the investigation.
Dear All,

My name is Uzezi Dia and a master student at Karlstad University - Sweden. I have been here in the community for some time now. And I have almost finished a thesis with two objectives:

1. To explore how users practices in the online community co-create value for the brand.

2. To identify how interactions in the community forum co-destruct the company value.

However, your privacy has been kept and all is done to reduce the risk of damage to any poster. The result will not only help management, but posters and enthusiasts as well. This will be posted here on ‘My Starbucks Idea (MSI)’ as soon as it is finally completed.

Thank you

Uzezi Dia (80024-T556), Karlstad University - Sweden.

Figure 3.6 Affiliation and Role revealed.
PART IV

4. RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This part discusses the findings of the qualitative exploration done for this research, and presents the data used. It also addresses the research question, which will further extended and strengthened through the two objectives in the subsequent part.

4.2 Results

The Starbucks forum offered the opportunity to examine participant narratives regarding their contextualized consumption activities and experiences. The general participants of the community directly or indirectly revealed information through the stories they told in their postings/comments about consumption experiences (see: Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Kozinets 2002). Thus, additional practice elements emerged beyond what other studies have found. On the MSI community site used for the field research, the numbers of topics noted were: 138,219, 46,524, and 25,857, divided among three idea streams: *product ideas, experience ideas, and involvement ideas* – a total volume of 210,600 topics (Starbucks 2015b). However, the actual number of participants in the community could not be verified, as users join and leave the forum at will. Also, an enormous number of the total topics found were from repeat posters, or were old posts dating back as far as 2008. Thus, 2,020 topic discussions were reviewed for the period from 15 April to 15 May 2015.

Of these, 210 threads were selected for their relevance to the two research objectives of the paper, and based on a three-year existing forum discussion period, between the years 2013 to 2015. NVivo 10 (2012), the QSR International software for Windows, was used to organize and analyse the unstructured data content of the discussions. NVivo 10 is a Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). It was designed to work with rich text-based and/or multimedia threads, where deep levels of analysis on a small or large volume of data are required.
While reflecting on the practices identified by Echeverri and Skålén (2011), some comparisons could be framed vis-à-vis with the MSI forum engagements. For instance, the following practices were observed:

[1] *Informing*: The sharing of service information between customers and employees. In the case of Starbucks, this is the exchange of various ‘Ideas’ ranging from the topics of coffee and politics, to personal information.

[2] *Greeting*: This is the manner of approach used in welcoming encounters between customers and the company. In MSI, a greeting is not exchanged until after a new member obtains a rewards card and reaches the welcome level.

[3] *Delivery*: The actual usage of Starbucks products with the aid of a rewards card, which allows community members to earn stars, badges and coupons for free beverages.

[4] *Charging*: This is carried out through the use of bank cards or free drink coupons received from rewards. Cash is used, but only in physical stores.

[5] *Helping*: Employees can provide help to customers or vice versa, or help is given between customers by way of advice on products, or supporting a good cause.

While exploring the discourses, the researcher was able to draw out special features that provided insights into meanings and helped in understanding the practices and interpreting the findings. In analysing the collected discussion threads, the pre-categorized themes of co-creation and co-destruction were used to bring focus to the main research question below:

**RQ: What is the role of online community participants in developing a brand’s value?**

Among the various roles assumed in OBCs, three themes were revealed in MSI as framing the discussions: (1) *Sharing*, (2) *Negotiating*, and (3) *Confrontations*. The interpretation of the data was established through a hermeneutical process involving the interpretation of explanatory texts that disclosed the positive and negative value practices within the MSI online community. Thus, an electronic profile (e-profile) of the three discussion categories was used to advance the data coding of all the discussion threads reviewed.
When observing the interaction dynamics within discussion topics and the comments that were made by members of the community, language meanings and practice systems that went beyond coffee were noted. During the data analysis, comparisons with other data in the same categories were carried out, and the interpretations involved the coding of open postings (Spiggle 1994).

[1] **Sharing:** Discussions in the MSI community forum encompassed coffee beverages, food items and beyond. Political, religious, and even personal issues were talked about. While the key impediment to sharing is trust (Pitta & Fowler 2005b), public sharing serves to build trust over time, as pseudonyms are used. Some members posted comments about how their favourite type of coffee is made, and others shared information about how members with allergies could modify products. An example is shown in the excerpts from threads 21 and 73 (see: Figures 4.2a and 4.2b). In these examples, a customer suggests an option for modifying certain beverage products for those with a specific ailment. In response, the firm has taken the suggestion into consideration and finding solutions.

Figure 4.2a **Excerpt from thread 21**

Figure 4.2b **Excerpt from thread 73**
[2] **Negotiating:** There were ways in which members negotiated with the company to bring back products that were changed or entirely removed from the menu list. Others brought up medical issues as a reason for changing a product. Some members negotiated for discounts, while some even tried to create business relationships. The examples from threads 20 and 37 (see: Figures 4.2c and 4.2d) illustrate how negotiations within the community varied in focus. While many seized the opportunity to air their views, one customer negotiated for a cheaper coffee offer; another tried to talk his/her way into a business partnership with Starbucks. This is a win-win situation, as users take advantage of the forum meant only to share ideas.

**Figure 4.2c** *Excerpt from thread 20*

**Figure 4.2d** *Excerpt from thread 37*
[3] **Confrontation:** Some members confronted either the organization or other members on issues relevant to themselves and not to the community. Examples are provided in threads 60 and 36 (see: Figures 4.2c and 4.2f). In any form of engagement, whether between the customers in a forum or between customers and the firm, a hostile or argumentative situation between opposing parties is bound to go beyond respectful idea sharing, resulting in destructive activities.

**Figure 4.2c Excerpt from thread 60**

**Figure 4.2f Excerpt from thread 36**
4.3 Summary

The activities and synergies in the forum generated varied topics and discourses that created roles that were embedded in the users’ language of communication. Through these interactions, firms create awareness and in such way, offer their value proposition (Lovelock & Wirtz 2011). The specific role types that were observed fit into the pre-categorized themes of co-creation and co-destruction. The individual meanings that the interactions took on were sharing, negotiating, and confrontations. The discussions interpreted showed a breakdown of the 2,020 reviewed topic threads. How participants shared ideas and opinions amongst themselves and the company showed the roles that individuals within the community assumed.

Meanwhile, research has shown that the benefits of sharing knowledge while using a public platform cannot easily be achieved by using private access (Sandvig 2003). The users’ interaction approach led to engagements that were value co-creative or value co-destructive. In these encounters, confrontations became a recurring event and role members adopted to get their opinions across. Common elements were revealed: stalking, gossip, and exhibitionism. In the next parts, the objectives will be addressed to further develop the study of the research question.
PART V

5. DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

This part the paper will analyse the MSI online community’s perceptions of the loyal customers (and perhaps not so loyal customers) that make up MSI. It will be divided into two sections based on the objectives. The first section will look at how value is co-created through MSI, drawing from the findings and theories. The second section will address how online interactions within MSI have resulted in value co-destruction, both for the company and the community.

5.2 How users’ practices in the online community co-create value for the brand.

As Echeverri and Skålén (2011) assert, the sharing of information between customers is a vital component of online interaction, and something that can co-create value for both the company and the online community members. In one MSI online interaction, an Open Poster (OP), ‘D’, who seemed very concerned with the environment, sustainable development and climate change, frowned upon Starbucks’s use of palm oil in its butter blend packet. ‘D’ was particularly worried because he thought that Starbucks’s palm oil was obtained from the rainforest, which is a habitat for the orang-utan (wildlife). He disapproved of the practice and wanted it to stop or else he would stop consuming the product. Thanks to the informing component of online interaction, ‘D’ was educated by ‘J’, who referred ‘D’ to a link clearly stating that all of the palm oil used by Starbucks is obtained from sustainable palm plantations in Brazil, which do not have orang-utans. This is a clear example of value co-creation via online interaction.

Also regarding the sharing of information, ‘M’, a long-term, happy Starbucks customer from Laguna Niguel expressed dissatisfaction concerning the fact that he saw Starbucks employees throw over 100 pastries in the trash. He thought that this was pure waste and unnecessary. He further explained that he has seen some of Starbucks’s local competitors, including mom and pop coffee shops, put an entire case of pastries on ‘Half Price’ after at certain hour, when foot traffic slows down. His logic was that everyone who buys a half-
price pastry also has to buy a drink, coffee, ice tea, etc., and this would not only recoup the cost of the pastry, but would generate a pretty awesome increase in store sales. In reaction to M’s observations, ‘C’, another loyal Starbucks customer, explained that Starbucks actually donates to the food pantry in his area. In this case, ‘M’ realized that this was not the universal problem he thought it was before the online interaction. This, too, can be seen as an example of value co-creation via online interaction.

‘S’, a loyal customer, complained through an online interaction that he did not understand why the Starbucks staff in London keeps asking his name each time he orders coffee. He said that he was not interested in giving his name to anyone before drinking his coffee. Through online interaction, ‘S’ was made to understand that the reason for asking his name is so that his name can be written on the cup. This will ensure he is not mistakenly served someone else’s order. Also, another user clearly pointed out to ‘S’ that he was overreacting. Once again, information provided through online interaction changed S’s opinion toward the positive, thus co-creating value. Furthermore, a user even suggested that if ‘S’ did not like giving his name, he could use another name.

5.3 How interactions in the community forum co-destruct the company value.

In the exploration of the Starbucks community’s online forum, there were many instances in which customers expressed dissatisfaction through the site. A forum is a website comprising people’s remarks, inquiries, and answers to a particular topic (Bickart & Schindler 2001). Some online participants were just minglers (Kozinets 2010) with very limited knowledge about Starbucks, whose primary aim was social interaction rather than the constructive exchange of knowledge and ideas. Many of the online participants insulted other members of the online community, while others expressed religious and political views that had nothing to do with the issues being discussed. One reply post (thread 155) by ‘RH’ (see: Figure 5.3a) demonstrates a counter-reaction of hostility.
Such behaviour contradicts Muniz & O’Guinn’s (2001) brand community concepts of consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Such behaviour is also in complete opposition to McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) elements of membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections, all of which are essential for value formation in online communities. Hence, such practices can lead to value co-destruction.

Another example of co-destructive activities noted within the MSI community forum was the way some open posters, like ‘GG’, ‘P’, and ‘T’, seem to be in the community just to harass and intimidate other members and even the company. The irritation caused by this type of behaviour has resulted in members leaving the community. For example, ‘DC’ wrote:

Figure 5.3a Excerpt from thread 155.

Figure 5.3b Excerpt from thread 153.
Another open poster, who was against the company taking credit for the ideas contributed by users, went as far as accusing the firm of trademarking these ideas without due consent from the posters. While this firm practice may be seen to contradict ethics, it is in accordance with the forum’s terms and conditions, where it is stated: An open poster should not post or share any user content that he/she does not wish to license to Starbucks (Starbucks 2015). These are some of the misunderstandings that can be destructive to the brand. For instance, ‘P’ wrote:

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

Figure 5.3c *Excerpt from thread 109.*

Another participant threatened to protest via other social media channels for people to withdraw support for the firm, based on his/her beliefs.

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

Figure 5.3d *Excerpt from thread 113.*
The consequences of these discussions could be less postings and idea contributions to Starbucks as a company and MSI as a community. This illustrates a clear value destructive process that will have a negative effect in the long term. Referring to Echeverri and Skålén (2011), all of the excerpts above confirm the argument that interactive value formation is not only correlated with value co-creation but also with value co-destruction.

5.4 Summary

From the discussion excerpts presented above, it is clear that value co-creation or co-destruction through interaction relies on the poster’s perception of how meanings are understood and interpreted after an online discussion experience. The question is whether the user has made an effective contribution to the ideas within the community, or has shared opinion that Starbucks is dissatisfactory. The notion that the communication activities observed in the discussion forum can lead to co-creation at the same time as co-destruction is clear. The few examples and excerpts drawn from the conversation threads are important in recognising the consequences that can develop in online communities.
PART VI

6. FRAMES OF DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

The section will discuss the frames of the findings and explain how the mixed benefit of online interaction can aid in managerial decision making when it comes to improving the brand and remaining successful in today’s competitive marketplace.

6.2 Interpretation of Findings

The pre-categorization of the discussion topics opened up the three discussion frames: (1) Sharing, (2) Negotiating, and (3) Confrontations, as mentioned in the findings. This categorization subsequently revealed three activities that were found to be frequent within the MSI forum: (1) Stalking, (2) Gossip, and (3) Exhibitionism, as explained below.

[1] Stalking: It was noticed that some members shadowed other members; this trail could be observed from how questions, answers, and corrections were made. Some members were cruel and could be easily noticed as observers. A few members of the community observed the interactions and commented on their displeasure. An example can be seen from the extract below, taken from thread 155:

Figure 6.2a Excerpt from thread 155.

[2] Gossip: Casual engagement in conversations about other members of the community and individuals outside the community occurred, and these discussions included details that were not confirmed to be true. Talking about an individual in a way that is unrelated to the topic is gossip. One example was about the ‘Ks’ who are not ‘open posters (OP)’ in the forum. A fragment is
from thread 83 is shown below to illustrate how a member talked about the ‘Ks’.

![Excerpt from thread 83.](image1)

**Figure 6.2b Excerpt from thread 83.**

[3] **Exhibitionism:** Some members were attention seeking, posting comments just to gain a response and personal recognition from others. It was observed that the members with this kind of attitude tended to continue on in this way, rather than following the objectives of the community, which was to contribute ideas. Instead, they only tried to draw attention to themselves. However, as Pitta and Fowler (2005b) note, a discussion forum is a unique mixture of public/private communication. The following snippet from thread 154 is provided as an example:

![Excerpt from thread 154.](image2)

**Figure 6.2c Excerpt from thread 154.**

### 6.3 Theoretical & Managerial Implications

From the above analysis, we can clearly see that the online interactions between various users of Starbucks’s MSI are a mixed blessing. Drawing from theoretical insights, we see how such interactions can either co-create or co-destroy value. The question that arises is how management can use this information for the benefit of the company.
In today’s business world, companies are either moving ahead or falling behind. Thus, feedback from customers is vital for managerial improvement regarding quality and quantity. Through feedback from customers, companies can identify their strengths, as well as identifying their weaknesses to mitigate them.

The informative component of value co-creation or co-destruction, as explained by Echeverri and Skålén (2011), is one area where Starbucks’s management can benefit from online interaction. Many online customers in MSI suggested areas where they thought Starbucks could improve to better serve its clientele. As one example extracted from thread 11, an online customer, ‘ON’, suggested the following to the management of Starbucks:

![Image](Figure 6.3a Excerpt from thread 11.)

This customer’s feedback carried an approval rating of 70 points, indicating that the customer was not alone in this opinion. Therefore, management must consider the message not as mere rhetoric but as a true concern that needs to be addressed.

As mentioned earlier, Starbucks uses its community forum as a way to both learn from and act upon customers’ contributions. Discussions may be favourable orthoughtful and, if convincing, tend to build relationships (Pitta & Fowler 2005b). A ratings system is in place as a way for customers to vote on ideas they think are crucial. Each month, the ideas with the highest scores are discussed and considered by Starbucks representatives, who make the final
decisions. The partners (representatives or employees) then place the results of selected top scorers of the month on a ‘Leaderboard.’

The Starbucks online community has also been a great success in creating brand awareness, with more than 3 million visitors and over 60,000 ideas generated by customers (Weber 2013).

All of this points to the fact that Starbucks reacts to customer feedback. That is good but not good enough. Through online interaction, the management of Starbucks can look deeper than just being reactive in solving customer-related problems to be more proactive. While it is important to extinguish a fire that has just broken out, it is more important to prevent one in the first place. The figure below contains information extracted from the online interactions of MSI.

Figure 6.3b Value co-creation and value co-destruction – Coding of twenty most used threads (item) ran on NVivo 10 QSR (2012)
The percentages in the figure indicate the amount of discussion on each particular thread, while the numbers indicate the classification of the twenty most popular threads within the community forum. The information’s retrieved from these threads can aid the management of Starbucks in prioritizing its projects regarding improvements and engagement with customers.

### 6.4 Summary

In this study, the elements that were noted from the forum’s observation after sorting the unstructured data threads from the pre-categorized frames (i.e. stalking, gossip, and exhibitionism), revealed more clearly how far some participants in the community are willing to go to achieve their personal goals.

While the behaviour exhibited a pattern that could be destructive practices, managers can also gain from these interactions through the feedback they receive. Such feedback can be beneficial in recognising destructive effects earlier, which can then be corrected. The value creating factors, on the other hand, can help the firm in developing further strategies or gaining competitive advantages.

Since the online world is a social and cultural world (Turkle 1995; Kozinets 2010; 2012), the Internet forum has an ability to generate understanding and reveal the feelings of the participants (Bickart & Schindler 2001). One observation made was that the empathy developed through the interactions can also affect the way consumers directly or indirectly behave within the community forum. However, to provide an overall sense of the practices found in the MSI community, the context and meanings of the discussions proved important. The discussions expressed more personal than business-like encounters.
PART VII

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research on OBCs has indicated an adaptation of trends with different conceptual approaches. These concepts are much focused on value creation and value co-creation (e.g. Vargo & Lusch 2004; Kozinets et al. 2008; Schau et al. 2009; Cova et al. 2015). Nevertheless, recent studies have looked beyond co-creative practices, and now focusing on practices that destroy value (e.g. Plé & Cáceres 2010; Echeverri & Skålén 2011; Smith 2013). Drawing from the literature reviewed, OBC’s have successfully been used to enhance company brands and build strong relationships with customers (Resnick 2001; Weber 2013).

Naturally, coffee is seen by many as simply a commodity since it has been with us for centuries (Michelli 2007). Meanwhile, the practice frame of a coffee community online and its pre-categorized social construction features (sharing, negotiating, and confrontations) observed in the exploration were the key to unlocking the objectives of this thesis. Looking further into value co-destruction, stalking, gossip, and exhibitionism were found to exist within the OBC environment. Based on the findings, it was shown that value can both be co-created and co-destroyed in the process of interacting.

The masking of participants has helped to remove the risk of violating the context of interaction (Waskul & Douglass 1996). However, some users within the community may present themselves under a variety of identities for the purposes of anonymity (Jones 1994). While participants can browse freely and move from one location to another, such a situation present obstacles in obtaining any form of informed consent from online community members (Schrum 1995). The BPS (2013) also indicates that informed consent is not necessary where scientific, social value or research validity concerns justify undisclosed observation.

The ethical implications have not only shown the difficulties faced by researchers, but are a barrier that impedes a good research process. Consent in certain aspect delays or shifts a research process in unexpected directions, e.g. the choice to become a lurker. As Nonnecke et al. (2004; cited in Sun et al. 2014, p. 114) rightly asserts, ‘lurkers’ and ‘posters’ join online communities for
similar reasons, for instance, to gain answers to their inquiries. West (2013) suggests, the ideal public sphere should have equal access without sanctions.

Pitta and Fowler (2005b) stipulate how information sharing is important and at the heart of consumer-to-consumer networks. Thus, considerable ingenuity must be employed by managers to gain strategic information from MSI discussions. Such information could save the company a great deal of money in a single day, since the community may react to something happening at the moment or better yet, tomorrow.

With the interactive discussions that take place in communities, managers can become more like brand storytellers to create better awareness of the brand and brand-related experiences, as well as develop a better services and products to meet customers’ needs. Since Starbucks has such a diverse service segment, MSI could be used to target other potential customers. Thus, one of the elements of practice theory noted by Echeverri & Skålén (2011), ‘engagements,’ can act as an enabler of interactive value formation within MSI.

Although this research has its shortcomings, like any other research study, it still contributes to the academic discourse in the sense that it provides a ground for future research. Future research could focus on how Starbucks can gain offers for a better service with knowledge drawn from the interactions with and between its online users. Such research could also take a netnographic approach. A comparative study could also be done using historical data drawn from these interactions. Also, the findings and links between the information gathered and a theoretical framework that includes the still under-researched idea of value co-destruction clearly show the originality of this research and how it enhances academic discourse. Also, information regarding the different topics’ popularity and approval ratings can aid Starbucks management in decision making.

- **What is the role of online community participants in developing a brand’s value?**

We can clearly define the impact that community participants have in the development of a brand’s value. Although, much research has proven that OBC’s play an important role in the creation of loyal followers toward a certain brand (McAlexander et al. 2002; Dholakia et al. 2009), hence increasing the value of the brand, it has not been explicitly outlined of the managerial implications of the research.
During the course of this research, the ideas adapted from Echeverri and Skålén’s (2011), and Kozinets (2010) netnographic insight has proven to be useful in identifying further key elements of OBCs’. The author can conclude from research that there is a generic model for the co-creation and co-destruction of brand value. As the OBC base becomes much larger, the interactive nature of the community can be helpful in identifying new possible directions that the firm can adapt to meet the ever-changing competitive environment and stay relevant.

However, brand managers should note that the co-creative tendencies of OBC’s can be stimulated in the favour of creating brand value through the following methodology:

(1) *Sharing*: When participants/users pose and answer questions that are beneficial to them or the community, they share experience, ideas, feelings, knowledge and vital information.

(2) *Negotiating*: How discussions are carried out among community members to reach an agreement. In a community, negotiation helps in understanding the meaning and symbols, and thus, the development of the brand and community.

(3) *Confrontations*: Dealing with a difficult situation in the forum results in arguments. These arguments sometimes happen between open posters that need an explanation from either one party, which could end positive or vice versa.

By adhering to the methodology mentioned above, managers can stimulate the OBC’s into collaborating on projects/design, coming up with new innovative ideas, and creating customer experience. Eventually, it would steer the company into a future direction that adapts to the wants and needs of the followers of the brand.

Meaning that if managed effectively, brand managers no longer need to “push” strategies and tactics onto the OBC’s by internally creating brand value and seeking followers, but instead “pull”. In this sense, the very identity and direction of the brand is shaped by the people who love the brand. A manager will only need to steer the direction of the brand into what is believe are the most effective means in increasing the brands’ value.
Despite the positive implications, brand managers need to take necessary precautions to avoid the co-destructive practices of the OBC to the value of the brand. Insofar as one is able to avert such means of methodology below:

(1) *Stalking:* An act of one user stealthily pursuing another member/open poster and harassing of other participants in the forum for vengeance.

(2) *Gossip:* The conversations or reports members sometimes partake in, talking about other people’s private lives which might be unkind, disapproving, or not true.

(3) *Exhibitionism:* The extravagant display of behaviour intended to attract attention to one, with the intention to influence, and so create difficulty for other members to contribute their ideas.

Looking from the brand manager’s perspective and one that interacts with the community, the aforementioned negative points should be discouraged. A positive aim is to gain the most cost-effective and efficient means to identify with possible brand followers, creating the “Pull” effect on which OBC’s are the shapers of the brand themselves, and brand managers as the gatekeepers of what is in line with the overall mission and vision of the firm.

Through this research, it is noted that the above-mentioned methodologies allows one to manage the direction of the brand, it highlights the massive creative abilities within the OBCs and also the strength of their co-creative or co-destructive possibilities. It is therefore conclusive that OBC’s can have great impacts on the development of brand value, but it is up to users to steer the brands’ value through co-creative and not co-destructive practices.

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<th>Data Analysis</th>
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Table 7: *Word counts for different parts.*
References1 2


1 Referenced according to Harvard KAU - Output Style (Universitetsbiblioteket) 2010-11-25.
2 Note: Volume/Issue numbers marked with asterisks *** are journals without these indications.


Seraj, M. (2012). We create, we connect, we respect, therefore we are: intellectual, social, and cultural value in online communities, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 209-222.


### APPENDICES

#### Appendix 1: QRS NVivo 10 Node Summary Report

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Appendix 2: Action Plan & Timetable Frame

The needed time frame for the completion of this thesis research will be formalized after due consultation with the academic supervisor(s) and based on their expert advice. Please see below ‘Time Frame’: