Branded Online Communities: Brand Loyalty and Brand Perception

Submitted by

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GRAND CANYON UNIVERSITY

Branded Online Communities: Brand Loyalty and Brand Perception

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March 31, 2017

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Branded Online Communities: Brand Loyalty and Brand Perception

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how participation in online brand communities influences brand perception and brand loyalty from the perspective of the top contributors in an online community. This study addressed two questions: RQ1: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand? RQ2: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand? This study was theoretically grounded in the customer-to-customer (C2C) exchange theory and motivation, opportunity, and ability (MOA) model. Data for this study were obtained from three sources: semi-structured interviews with significant contributors in the community, social media postings, and online product reviews. The sampling strategy for this study was one of convenience except for the interviews where the interviewees were purposefully selected; there was a sample size of 10. A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed interviews to identify key themes. A content analysis was conducted on social media postings and online product reviews related to the brand to seek out themes related to brand perception and brand loyalty. The findings from the research show value in the use of online branded communities to promote a brand and foster brand loyalty. Additionally, a branded community can be another channel to provide support to customers and feedback to the company. This research advances the practical and theoretical understanding of how participation in an online branded community can influence a brand's perception and loyalty.

Keywords: online branded community, online community, community, branding, social media

Dedication

This is dedicated to the women in my life. Annie Mullennax, my great-grandmother, you were a profound influence on my life. You believed in me, challenged me, encouraged me, and loved me. My grandmother, Edna Crozier, you taught me the importance and value of hard work. You were the hardest working person I have ever known. And, you loved me. Karen Groveunder Fleeman, my mother, you helped me understand that life is not always simple or easy and that sometimes we just have to survive. You also loved me. In addition, I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Sue Roeder Groveunder: You have been with me every step of this doctoral journey. You have read countless papers, always giving me the critique I needed even while the topic was not in your field. You have learned more about online branded communities than you probably ever imagined or desired! You love me more than I deserve and I love you with every fiber of my being.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Successful companies use marketing strategies to positively influence their brand perception and promote brand loyalty with the aim of increasing their overall brand value. These strategies include deliberate efforts to create a brand experience and to manage the product in a concerted manner. With the advent of social media have come both new challenges and opportunities for companies and their branding strategies (Shamoon & Tehsee, 2011). Online brand communities (OBC) are one area of social media where owners and potential product owners help each other by sharing experiences and ideas (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012; Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013; Singh, & Sonnenburg, 2012). These online brand communities are sometimes founded by users themselves, or are sometimes created by companies to help foster peer-to-peer discussions. Online communities create an additional area where a company's brand influences its potential users. To date, however, it is not known how participation in online brand communities affects the perception and loyalty of a brand (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

In light of this empirical need, this research focused on the potential influence of participation in an online community on brand perception and brand loyalty. If data demonstrate that such a community affects brand perception and brand loyalty, companies could be motivated to explore the use of such communities to improve their own brand perception and brand loyalty. The results of this study may therefore help to further understanding of how participation in an online brand community influences

brand loyalty. As companies seek ways to leverage social media, this research may help them create better customer engagement strategies to improve brand loyalty.

This chapter will provide a background of the study, state the research problem, and explain the purpose of the study. This chapter also outlines the research questions guiding this study, the theoretical construct used to frame the current issue within online brand communities, and the important empirical studies that influenced the conduct of this present study. Finally, this chapter includes the significance of the study, the rationale for the selected methodological approach, justifications for the appropriateness of the research design, relevant terms, and the assumptions and boundaries of the study.

Background of the Study

The practice of companies developing brand identities for consumer products began in the 1800s in the United Kingdom (Mercer, 2010). Early on, firms used branding primarily to promote a product's distinct, innovative qualities (Mercer, 2010). When branding initiatives became successful, companies saw opportunities for higher margins for products with stronger brands (Mercer, 2010; M'zungu, Merrilees, & Miller, 2010). Companies actively manage the identities and experiences of brands with the objective of maximizing value (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Fuciu & Dumitrescu, 2010; Kumaravel & Kandasamy, 2012).

Over time, branding theory has evolved and online brand communities have become relevant in business literature since the early 21st century. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) defined brand communities as non-geographical areas that constitute structured social relationships among admirers of a particular trademark. Laroche, Habibi, Richard, and Sankaranarayanan (2012) asserted that brand communities represent an association of

members enjoined in the context of consumption of a product. Further, Laroche et al. concluded that members of these communities share commonalities that serve to maintain their association with the group. With the popularity of social media, many companies use social networking sites to develop brand communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Social media sites give end-users a sense of freedom that allows them to speak their minds and engage in a free flow of information (Laroche et al., 2012).

The brand image of a product or company can have a tremendous influence on consumer choices (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). A strong brand can also command a higher price and margin than its counterparts. Online communities and social media present new challenges and opportunities for companies' brand management strategies, since consumers can share experiences more easily in online communities. Previous researchers have demonstrated the value of brands and the need for strong brand management in order to increase brand value (Fuciu & Dumitrescu, 2010; Mercer, 2010; M'zungu et al., 2010; Shamoon & Tehsee, 2011). They have revealed an increased use of social media by consumers, including those in online communities (Goh et al., 2013; Laroche et al., 2012; Zhao & Zhu, 2014). While word-of-mouth (WOM) and social dynamics have long been recognized as factors affecting perceptions and loyalty of a brand (Dubois, Rucker, & Tormala, 2011), there is a paucity of research exploring these factors in light of the emerging power of social online media (Goh et al., 2013). In particular, none of these studies has explored how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty.

Problem Statement

It is unknown how participation in online brand communities affects the perception and loyalty of a brand. What motivates some members to participate in an online branded community more frequently is also unknown. Companies frequently utilize these communities to foster relationships and assist with customers within the context of their branded products and services, but do so without the knowledge of how participation affects brand perception and brand loyalty. This lack of knowledge could cause an online brand community to be less effective and fail to meet company objectives. Both brand management and social media influence consumer loyalty and perception (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Laroche at al., 2012; Rizwan, Javed, Aslam, Khan, & Bibi, 2014).

There was a need to examine the experiences of online brand community members who are top content contributors to the community concerning their perceptions as to how participation in online brand communities influences individual perceptions of the brand. An empirical exploration concerning the experiences of participants in online brand communities may further understanding on the influence of participation in an online brand community and how such participation contributes to brand perception and brand loyalty. The results of this study contributed new information to the field of online brand communities that companies could apply in their own brand management resulting in improved customer loyalty.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how participation in online brand communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty from the perception

of the top contributors in an online community. In this study, participants in online communities were individuals who use social media to promote or talk about a certain branded product. This study focused on a single online brand community as a case unit. This online brand community within the study focused on the personal computer industry. Participants in this community do so in the English language, but are from multiple countries. When examining consumer-based perspectives, it is important to consider that brand value refers to consumer perceptions of products (Eryigit & Eryigit, 2014). The perceived value associated with a brand refers to its global business value. The global value, in turn, is associated with the brand and derived from the brand name, not just from physical aspects of the product.

Brand loyalty refers to the influence that a product's image bears on its ability to generate repeat purchases (Laroche et al., 2013). Not only can a product's usability and functionality foster a deeply held commitment to repurchasing that product—such as a specific brand or model of cellular phone—but effective marketing targeted to a specific consumer base that already owns that product can affect continuing brand loyalty as well (Lee, Moon, Kim, & Mun, 2015). The results of this study may help to inform company leaders of the value of online brand communities and their influence on brand perception and brand loyalty.

Research Questions

The phenomenon of interest in this study was the influence of participation in online communities on brand perception and brand loyalty. Given the paucity of research on the impact of participation in online communities, the researcher examined the following research questions to examine this phenomenon:

RQ1: How does participating in an online brand community influence an individual's perceptions of the brand?

RQ2: How does participating in an online brand community influence an individual's loyalty to the brand?

The first research question considers the perceptions one may have regarding a brand. How one perceives a brand creates a base perspective of the brand. This research considered the brand perceptions of the interviewees as well as those who posted on social media and online reviews.

Loyalty to a brand goes beyond ones perception of the brand. Brand loyalty can create an emotional connection between a consumer and a brand. Understanding the constructs of the participants' loyalty helped answer this research question. Answering these questions addressed the problem of not knowing how participation in online brand communities affects the perception and loyalty of a brand.

Advancing Scientific Knowledge

Companies use brand communities to create relationships with their consumers because researchers have found that brand management and social media affects brand loyalty and brand perception (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Laroche et al., 2012). However, a review of the literature has indicated that it is unknown how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Goh et al., 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Results of this study address this gap in the literature by exploring the perceptions of top contributors of an English language online branded community. While most participants in this community are from the United States, some of the participants were from France, Germany, and Italy. The focus was

how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. Further, the results of this study contribute to the existing knowledge on how to utilize online brand communities for brand management, particularly with regard to perception of and loyalty to a brand.

Two consumer behavioral theories provided the conceptual framework. Specifically, the theory of customer-to-customer exchange (C2C) described by Gruen, Osmonbekov, and Czaplewski, (2007) and the motivation, opportunity, and ability model (MOA) described by MacInnis, Moorman, and Jaworski (1991). These two foundational frameworks are important in exploring the influence of participation in online communities on brand perception and brand loyalty.

In the C2C model, Gruen et al. (2007) postulated that knowledge exchange among participants requires sharable concepts commonly derived from their education and experience. Von Hippel (1988) claimed that sharable ideas create value through the informal exchange of concepts by participants with different backgrounds and experiences. In the current study, the focus was to contribute to the understanding of the information in which participants or members in the online communities engage. In C2C theory, exchange of knowledge occurs in situations where participants take part in communication processes that detail the concerns, complaints, and recommendations that enhance the well-being of the consumer and improvements in the products offered by the company. Participants in the exchange process may thus need to have the expertise to be able to contribute in the exchange of information (von Hippel, 1988). In this study, the C2C exchange offers theoretical tenets concerning the manner by which members of the

brand communities share and interact to influence the utilization and purchase decisions of other members and potential members within the community.

In addition to C2C, which provided a theoretical explanation of members' knowledge exchange within the online communities, the present study also included the theory of MOA (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989). The MOA model could potentially explain the factors that impede or facilitate the C2C exchange process, as this model posits the degree to which individual process marketing communications is based on motivation, opportunity, and ability factors (MacInnis et al., 1991). Therefore, one can manage the effectiveness of communications proactively by enhancing the individual's levels of motivation, opportunity, and ability to share information. In the current study, application of the combined theoretical tenets of C2C and the MOA model provided an understanding of the influence of participation in online communities on brand perception and brand loyalty.

Significance of the Study

The concept of brand community arose in response to the inefficient management of one-on-one relationships with consumers (Laroche et al., 2012). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) defined *brand community* as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community and based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). Laroche et al. (2012) asserted that brand communities have attracted much attention among researchers because they enable businesses to learn consumers' perceptions regarding new products and competitive actions. Brand communities also maximize the opportunities to collaborate with loyal consumers who influence the brand community

members' evaluations and actions. They also disseminate information quickly and allow companies to gain the trust of loyal consumers.

According to Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013), brand communities can bring consumers together, create conversations among them, and enable them to obtain information about a company's products. These capabilities have raised companies' interest regarding the advantages of online brand communities as a way to maintain effective communication between marketers and customers, and as a method to obtain essential information (Hede & Kellett, 2012). Furthermore, these communities often contain virtual forums where consumers can come together and share their interest in a product, whether through exchanging knowledge and information about a product or service or by simply expressing their admiration for the brand through online correspondence (Zaglia, 2013).

As previously mentioned, researchers have demonstrated the value of brands and the need for strong brand management in order to increase brand value (Fuciu & Dumitrescu, 2010; M'zungu et al., 2010; Mercer, 2010; Shamoon & Tehsee, 2011). Additionally, other researchers have noted consumers' increased use of social media, including those in online communities (Goh et al., 2013; Laroche et al., 2012; Zhao & Zhu, 2014). Within this intersection of brand communities and brand loyalty is a gap in the existing literature (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Goh et al., 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Existing literature lacks information on how and why one would use participation in an online community as a means to strengthen brand perception and brand loyalty. This case study included the exploration of the insights of consumers who have

previously chosen to participate in an online community and investigated how such an engagement relates to their brand perception and loyalty.

Earlier researchers have claimed that a brand community may have a strong influence on brand loyalty (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Wirtz et al. (2013), for example, asserted that consumers who are passionate about a specific branded product often create brand communities as a focal point of social interaction, and that these social interactions "occur within small groups, typically comprising fewer than ten close friends" (p. 17) within that brand community. Though many companies have already included brand communities as a part of their marketing plans, there are no conclusive findings as to the relevance of brand communities for marketing programs or the way in which these communities can best facilitate brand loyalty. The findings from this qualitative case study can help company leaders understand the importance of online brand communities and if these communities can play an important role in improving positive brand perceptions and brand loyalty.

Rationale for Methodology

Qualitative research is a systematic inquiry designed to explore complex situations in order to enhance understanding and build theory (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Qualitative research enables the expansion of knowledge about a phenomenon and the attainment of answers to research questions through experiences of participants (Yin, 2014). This exploration of how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty utilized a qualitative methodology. According to Yin (2014), qualitative methods can be used to explore complex situations, and therefore, are an appropriate choice for this study. Given that the how's and why's of participation in

online branded communities, an exploratory qualitative method can be useful. By contrast, researchers use quantitative methodology in studies with known and defined variables to measure and explain the phenomena under investigation (Zaglia, 2013). Such methods, however, may overlook the social and cultural formation of the variables that quantitative researchers seek to investigate (Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony, 2013). The use of quantitative methods may overlook deep and complex narratives of personal experience often found in social science research (Brodie et al., 2013). A qualitative approach is therefore appropriate, as the methodology allows one to obtain deeper knowledge and understanding of the behavior and attitudes of participants in online communities affecting brand perception and brand loyalty.

Nature of the Research Design for the Study

"Qualitative case study is highly personal research. Persons studied are studied in depth. Researchers are encouraged to include their own personal perspectives in the interpretation" (Stake, 2010, p. 135). The case study is a research design that involves the uniqueness and commonality of people and programs (Stake, 2010). The use of a case study depends in large part on the research questions. Research questions that seek to explain how and why some social phenomenon works lend themselves to case study research (Yin, 2014). Researchers use case study research to derive in-depth understanding of a single or small number of cases set in real-world contexts (Yin, 2014). Case studies are relevant when one has a descriptive research questions or an explanatory research question (Yin, 2014). In this project, the researcher had explanatory research questions of how participation in an online branded community influence a participant's perception and loyalty for a brand.

The researcher employed a qualitative case study design to explore how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. Case study design is particularly useful to help clarify the how's and why's of a research problem (Yin, 2014). Such a design was an appropriate choice to understand the influence of brand loyalty when participating in online communities in order to understand behavior and focus on contemporary events, which are characteristics of a case study design.

Other qualitative designs considered for this study included narrative research, ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory. Narrative inquiry uses conventional sources such as field notes, letters, stories, and journals that have a common storied form. The use of narrative inquiry can be slow and painstaking, requiring attention to subtlety (Merriam, 2014). It would be difficult to capture the nuances of intent within social media and online review postings. Additionally, no texts were available that would lend themselves to a narrative inquiry. Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture. Ethnographers immerse themselves in the culture in order to observe and record the participant behavior in their natural setting Merriam, 2014). Ethnography was not possible as a method of research, as time and cost constraints prevented the dedication of the resources necessary for immersion in the participants' culture and community (Merriam, 2014). Phenomenological research design analyzes how people experience the world and is useful for surfacing deep issues and making voices heard (Merriam, 2014). While this made phenomenological design attractive for this project, the researcher was not intent on determining the lived experiences of the consumers concerning their participation in the brand community. Grounded theory is a systematic

inductive qualitative method with an aim toward theory development. Researchers often use it to discover emerging patterns within data (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002). For this research project, relevant data on the motivation for participation in an OBC did not exist. This made grounded theory a poor design fit.

The research questions for this project focused on how participation in an OBC influenced the brand perspective and loyalty of the top contributors. Yin (2014) suggested that case study design is appropriate when the main research questions are "how" or "why," when the researcher has little or no control over behavioral events, and when the focus of the study is contemporary rather than historical. Using a case study, one investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context; participation in branded online communities is an example of such a phenomenon.

The population for this research was OBC within the global high tech industry. The researcher selected the particular OBC in this study out of convenience. Participants targeted in the study were community members that the company has designated as top contributors to its community. The company designated these top contributors "superfans". The company has created a program to recognize the superfans within the community. Superfans contribute approximately 80% of the useable content in the community. The researcher purposefully invited all of the superfans in the selected OBC to participate in the study. The social media postings and online reviews were also purposeful samples. The researcher used the NVivo Ncapture tool to retrieve the 50 most recent social media postings for the brand for each social medium. The researcher used this same application to capture the 50 most recent online product reviews – 50 from Walmart.com and 50 from BestBuy.com.

The online community selected for this study has over 200,000 registered users. Some users register once just to obtain an answer regarding a product or service and then never return. Others access the online community frequently and answer questions other users may post. Superfans are the users who provide a significant number of answers to other users and are the top contributors to the online community. A *superfan* has been described as "… customers who are so positive about a brand that they do much of its marketing and sales themselves – and for free" (Harris & Rae, 2010). At the time of the study, there were 14 superfans within this selected online community. These 14 superfans were the target audience of this study. The researcher invited all 14 to participate in the study. The minimum number of superfans needed for the study was 10. The researcher obtained the list of the current superfans, along with their e-mail addresses, from the company's community owner.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews via video conference calls using Skype or WebEx, depending on the technology that worked best for each participant. The video conference calls took place on a date and time of each participant's choosing. The transcription of each recorded interview became the functional source of data for analysis. A second source of data for the study involved online product reviews using the retailer websites, Walmart.com and BestBuy.com. These two companies sell approximately 50% of all personal computers to consumers. This market presence, along with thousands of online product reviews on their websites, represents a powerful market presence. The sheer size and presence of these two websites make them important sources of consumer feedback on brands. Facebook and Twitter postings about the brand served as the third source of data for the study. These two social mediums represent the

vast majority consumer postings related to products and brands making them a significant source of data.

Definition of Terms

This study included the following operational terms.

Brand community. A brand community is a "specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Companies use brand communities as a place to engage with customers. Consumers who engage in these brand communities often exhibit enhanced consume loyalty (Brodie et al., 2013).

Brand value. Brand value is the influence of brand knowledge on consumers' behavior regarding the marketing of the brand (Eryigit & Eryigit, 2014). Consumers attach perceived value to a brand when considering the purchase of goods. Frequently consumers consider the brand first because it indirectly leads consumers to associate products with certain attributes (Wang & Tzeng, 2012).

Brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is the continuing purchase of the goods or services offered by a particular brand or brands over time. There is a link between brand loyalty and company success. Companies seek to increase brand loyalty to increase sales and margins (Schultz & Block, 2012).

Brand perception. Brand perception is the manner by which people relate to a brand, much like how they relate to people around them. Perceptions of a brand develop over time. The emotional response a brand elicits from a consumer may be positive, negative, or indifferent (Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012).

Social media. Social media is a "group of internet based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and it allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media has become dominant in our society. Companies have to adapt to the perceived power that social media gives to consumers.

Superfan. People often use the term superfan to describe people who are above average in the support of a product, brand, school, or even a celebrity. For the purposes of this study, a superfan is a top contributor of content to the community and the company behind the community recognizes their contributions. Superfans within a branded online community are typically more engaged in the community, especially when it comes to providing answers to other members' questions (Harris & Rae, 2010).

Web 2.0. According to Berthon et al. (2012), Web 2.0 "…can be thought of as the technical infrastructure that enables the social phenomenon of collective media and facilitates consumer-generated content" (p.262). These services and technologies have transformed the use of the World Wide Web in commerce. Consumers have become more empowered because of Web 2.0 technologies (Berthon et al., 2012).

WOM and WOMM. Word of Mouth (WOM) is the "intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communications by professional marketing techniques" (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010, p. 71). WOM affects perceptions and loyalty of a brand (Dubois et al., 2011). Word of Mouth Marketing (WOMM) developed because of the recognition of the power of WOM. Kozinets et al. (2010) defined WOMM as a direct technique in communicating product information.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions are boundaries or conditions believed to be true without proof. The following are the assumptions that were set forth prior to the commencement of this study:

1. Study participants trusted that all information obtained from them would remain confidential. Having participants' trust provided the researcher access to their true feelings and opinions. Without this trust, participants may hold back in offering useful and important input.

2. Participants were willing to share their perceptions and experiences concerning online communities. Honest responses to the questions asked generated accurate information for use in designing online community advertisements that are effective in developing positive brand perceptions.

3. The researcher assumed a qualitative case study is the most appropriate methodology for answering the research questions. Other designs, such as phenomenological may have yielded different results.

4. The researcher assumed the data collected was a good representation of opinions of the whole population. Since the number of superfans for the OBC within this study was small and the vast majority of the superfans did participate, there was little risk in the data collected from the superfan interviews. However, the social media postings and the online product reviews were a small sample of the population of these data.

5. The data analysis was a thematic analysis for the interviews and a content analysis for the social media postings and the online product reviews. It was assumed that the coding for these analyses were a fair representation of the actual views within the data.

In addition to assumptions, *limitations* are constraints in the research design or methodology that can affect the results of the study (Hyette, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014). One limitation in this study was that participants were not representative of participants in all types of online brand communities. This study focused on an OBC within the personal computer industry. In effect, small sample sizes in case studies typically limit the generalizability of results (Shih & Fan, 2008). Findings from this proposed study are therefore only applicable to the study participants' working

environment. Thus, results are only applicable to the brand promoted by online contributors. The data collected from the social media postings and online product reviews were limited to the brand within this study and were a limited quantity of recent postings. A broader audience may have different perspectives. The analyses conducted were limited to the coding done by the researcher. Other researchers may have coded differently, thus providing some different outcomes.

Delimitations are boundaries set in the study that are under the researcher's control (Yin, 2014). The researcher has chosen to limit the study to the current superfans of the online community as designated by the company. Using the 50 most recent social media postings and only using Facebook and Twitter created a delimitation of that data. The same is true of the delimitation of the 50 most recent online product reviews. The timeline of the study included a conclusion of data collection by the end of August 2016 per the site authorization from the company. This deadline served as delimitation of the project.

Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how participation in online brand communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty from the perception of the top contributors in an online community in the United States. Using the theoretical foundations of C2C exchange theory (Gruen et al., 2007) and the MOA model (MacInnis et al., 1991), the researcher intended to answer the following research questions: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand? How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?

The researcher recruited 14 online top contributors to participate in semi-structured interviews via Skype or WebEx. Ten of those targeted elected to participate in the study. The researcher then transcribed the recorded interviews with the participants. Additionally, given the qualitative case study design, data triangulation is essential. Thus, in addition to conducting the semi-structured interviews, the researcher reviewed social media postings and product reviews for the brand from 2015 to extrapolate a case scenario for data triangulation.

Chapter 2 presents the study's theoretical foundations and current research related to online communities, brand perception, and brand loyalty, including the use of the C2C exchange (Gruen et al., 2007) and MOA model (MacInnis et al., 1991) in marketing research. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, the research design, and the procedures necessary for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 describes the data analysis and provides the results from the data analysis. Finally, Chapter 5 presents the interpretation and discussion of the results in light of the current knowledge on online communities and brand perception and brand loyalty.

The next chapter (Chapter 2) presents the theoretical foundations for this study. As described in Chapter 2, there is a significant existing literature in the areas of brand theory, brand management, WOM, and the role of social media in brand management. This prior research provides the basis for this current research, yet also presents the lacuna in the literature on how participation in an online branded community affects brand loyalty and brand perception that this study addressed. The summary of Chapter 2 provides an argument for the need to apply brand management principles to the social medium of online branded communities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Chapter and Background to the Problem

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty from the perception of expert participants in an online community in the United States. In this chapter, the researcher explored the literature and research pertaining to online communities, product branding, brand perception, and brand loyalty. This review of the related literature includes the theoretical foundations of the study and a discussion of branding theory, branding communities, and their evolution.

The researcher included these topics as relevant to the problem statement and purpose of the study. The materials used included peer-reviewed journals, articles, the Internet, and books. The resource databases used included LopeSearch, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, Business Source Complete, ABI/INFORM Complete, and Gale PowerSearch. The researcher used key words and phrases to collect academic sources, including “brand perception,” “brand loyalty,” “online community,” “online branded community,” “brand value,” “social media and online community,” “participation online branded community,” “brand value and online branded community,” and “social media and online branded community.” The literature includes a background of online brand communities and the way in which current studies highlight issues concerning brand perception and brand loyalty.

While branding strategies require efforts to create a brand experience and to manage the brand in a concerted manner, outcomes of these branding strategies increase the overall value of market products (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Fuciu & Dumitrescu,

2010; Kumaravel & Kandasamy, 2012). In the 21st century, social media has created new challenges for companies and their branding strategies. The Internet and other related technologies have heightened the influence of social media on business, particularly on brand management (Laroche et al., 2012). Among the social media that has influenced changes in branding management are online communities. *Online communities* are virtual gatherings of owners and potential owners of products who come together to share experiences and ideas, and to help each other with aspects of product brands. Communities may be founded by the users themselves or created by the company to help foster peer-to-peer discussions. Ultimately, these communities create additional influence on the company brand.

Researchers have demonstrated the increased use of social media by consumers, including those in online communities (Goh et al., 2013; Laroche et al., 2012; Zhao & Zhu, 2014). Consumers in the social media-driven branded communities tend to exert more influence than that of the producer or the company itself (Laroche et al., 2012; Shamoon & Tehsee, 2011). Other researchers have suggested that consumers aspire to go beyond ordinary consumerism, and that the branded community is one way to achieve this (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). While the power of WOM and social dynamics have long been recognized as factors that affect perceptions and values of a brand (Dubois et al., 2011), there is a paucity of research exploring these factors in light of the emerging power of social online media (Goh et al., 2013). It is thus this unknown how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The researcher of this study,

therefore, intended to fill the empirical gap by exploring how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty from the perception of expert participants in an online community in the United States.

Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Framework

In this study, the researcher utilized both the C2C exchange (Gruen et al., 2007) and the MOA models (MacInnis et al., 1991) in exploring how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. In the past, researchers have investigated brand communities utilized C2C exchange and the MOA model in explaining value generation of the product through information sharing (Hui-Chen, Kuen-Hung, & Chen-Yi, 2014; Jepson, Clarke, & Ragsdell, 2013). The C2C model posits that the knowledge exchange among participants requires sharable goods commonly expressed from the participants' education and experience (Gruen et al. 2007). von Hippel (1988) suggested that the sharable goods create value from the informal knowledge trading among process participants with varying levels of education and experiences. The current study focused on brand perceptions and brand loyalty of participants in an online community.

In the theory of C2C, knowledge exchange occurs in situations where individuals participate in communication processes that detail the concerns, complaints, and recommendations that enhance the well-being of the consumer and the product (Gruen et al. 2007). The participants in the exchange process may need to have the knowledge to be able to contribute to the exchange of information (von Hippel, 1988). In this study, the C2C exchange focuses on the way members of the brand communities share and interact with other members to influence the utilization and purchase decisions of other members,

as well as potential members, in a specific brand community. This theory guided the examination of the role that the online community plays in shaping the individual's perception of and loyalty to the brand.

Though C2C helps explain the knowledge exchange among members within online communities, this researcher felt it important to include the MOA theory (Leung & Bai, 2013; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989), as it may explain the factors that impede or facilitate the C2C exchange process. The MOA model discusses the degree to which an individual processes marketing communications and is based on motivation, opportunity, and ability factors. One may proactively manage communication effectiveness by enhancing the individual's levels of motivation, opportunity, and ability to share the functional information.

In the MOA model, the first element is motivation. This refers to a force impeding or facilitating consumers' engagement, behavior, decisions, and information processing. Motivated consumers in the online communities are willing to engage in influencing positive product perception, brand perception, and brand loyalty. The second element, opportunity, refers to a situation conducive to the implementation of activities that could achieve desired outcomes (Kim, Hur, & Schoenherr, 2015; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989). These situations may include time, consumers' attention, distractions, and repetitions of information. The third element is ability, which refers to the availability of resources that participants can use to achieve desired outcomes. These resources may include knowledge, money, intelligence, and charisma. In this study, the MOA model focuses on the way members of the brand communities engage in marketing communication processes to influence other potential members and brand users. From an empirical

standpoint, it is unknown how such participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. These theories will provide a foundation for answering the research questions. The MOA model specifically guides the researcher in evaluating the flow of communication among members of the online community, particularly in the aspects of motivation, providing opportunities, and available resources to accommodate consumers' varied needs.

Review of the Literature

This section included a review of business concepts that are applicable to the current research. Included with this is existing literature describing and defining each concept. These topics begin with the concept of branding as a cornerstone of this research. This is important because of the interest in examining how one might influence a brand by participating in an online community. The researcher also looked at social actions that play a role in participation in online communities. For example, the dynamics of WOM communications play a role in online communities just as they have in other media. Reviewing these business concepts sets the framework and context for the current study.

History of branding. In order to understand the complex manner by which online communities can influence consumer perceptions and brand loyalty, it is important to understand the history of branding. Kastberg (2012) suggested that the notion of branding is probably as old as commerce itself. First, it is easier to identify a product when it is associated with a brand. Branding is also essential in the creation of an emotional connection between the consumer and the product (Kastberg, 2012). Further, as commerce has evolved, so have the concepts and strategies of branding. For example,

while Kastberg described branding largely as a sign that generates an emotional response, Lundqvist, Liljander, Gummerus, and van Riel (2013) used the metaphor of storytelling to describe the manner by which one manages the consumer brand experience. What follows is a brief, high-level review of the history of branding.

Mid-20th century. In the early 1950s, the notion of product segmentation emerged as an important concept in branding theory (Moschis & Moore, 1982). Segmentation refers to the process of identifying and isolating buyers' properties in order to select markets. Organizations offer products and services to these markets by designing products and marketing programs targeted at these consumer properties (Kim & Ko, 2012; Venter, Wright, & Dibb, 2015). While there is a diverse demand in a heterogeneous market, it also consists of smaller homogeneous markets established using different variables. These variables differ depending on the type of targeted consumers based on demographic, geographic, and financial factors. With this empirical advancement, researchers developed segmentation theory—a theory that is "conceptually simple to define and understand, but [that is] inherently a multi-criteria problem that is hard to measure and computationally difficult in many aspects"—to better understand the process of segmentation in the market (Liu, Kiang, & Brusco, 2012, p. 10292). Moschis and Moore (1982) presented the basic concepts of segmentation, and more recent studies have expanded segmentation theory to include motives, consumer patterns, buying behaviors, preferences, and consumers' values (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011; Simkin & Dibb, 2013).

In the 1960s, companies' primary strategies were limited to mass production and mass communication. *Lifestyle marketing* refers to segmenting a complex market into

niche subdivisions according to interests, attitudes, and beliefs (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011). This type of marketing helps firms create products and services to meet particular market segments, and with the phenomenon of social media, the specifics of lifestyle marketing have changed drastically in recent years. Mehta and Anand (2012), for example, provided a relevant description of the evolution of lifestyle marketing, from the beginnings of the mass marketing of the television to the present day:

> The precursor to the usage of social media marketing for life style products has been the extensive use of television channels for programmes based on appliances and products of day-to-day use ranging from gym equipment to kitchen knives to jewelry. With the advent of satellite television and day long beaming of television programmes, an unexplored opportunity presented itself for airing of content that catered to the segment of population with disposable income and readiness to try new products. From here, the transition to Internet-based platforms was quick and smooth. The audience has kept up with the technology and since almost all professional work requires comfort with computers, there is hardly any resistance to access goods and services on social media marketing platforms. (p. 46).

Neil Borden introduced the concept of the marketing mix, also referred to as the "four Ps" of marketing: product, price, place, and promotion (Borden, 1964). Borden asserted that marketing mix be treated as a recipe, whereby consumers use a mixer to achieve the goals. The four Ps then pertain to the marketing tools the company utilizes to attain its goals. In the 21st century business field, the term "four Ps" bears no connection to branding, contrary to Borden's early postulations (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011).

Researchers have defined *brand personality* as the human characteristics that can be associated with a given brand (Aaker, 1997; Avis, 2012). Aaker's (1997) foundational research on brand personality established five dimensions of brand personality: (a) sincerity, (b) excitement, (c) competence, (d) sophistication, and (e) ruggedness. In his research, Avis (2012) suggested limitations, however, with the application of Aaker's theories and recommended humanlike brand theory as a way to address these limitations. Thus, while two stores can offer the same quality of products and services, consumers often demonstrate preference to one or the other according to individual traits that one can apply uniquely to them (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011). The reason for this phenomenon involves the personality of the store or business. Hampf and Lindberg-Repo (2011) elaborated that a marketer should utilize the power of a brand's image to create the desired personality. Moreover, consumers will prefer the store that represents their own personality. A marketer must thus consider the relationship between the product and store personality to attract consumers effectively.

Branding continued to be associated with mass production and mass communication through the 1970s. Companies utilized brand commercials to present the quality and functionality of their products. Companies later began to emphasize the immaterial value of their products in the years between 1970 and 1990 (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011). Commercials used story-telling strategies to present consumers with the meanings they desired to portray (Bastos & Levy, 2012).

1970s to 1990s. Beginning in the early 1970s, non-profit organizations began utilizing the concept of branding with the introduction of social marketing (Luca & Suggs, 2013). In this era, there was a paradigm shift from the four Ps of marketing to

relationship marketing (Luca & Suggs, 2013). Gordon (2012) pointed out limitations in the four P-framework proposed by Borden (1964). Gordon suggested the importance for one to establish, maintain, and enhance long-term relationships between consumers and companies to achieve the objectives.

In the 21st century, social marketing has been the result of the evolution of branding, which also has become the framework for the planning and implementation of changes in the market (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011). Hampf and Lindberg-Repo (2011) added that social marketing demonstrated the wide boundaries of marketing suggesting that marketers' aim is to instill the product in the minds of the consumers. Therefore, the positioning strategy does not concentrate on the core product itself, but rather on the elements surrounding it. In this case, a company could resort to changing the name, price strategy, or the package of the product (Eryigit & Eryigit, 2014). One of the primary principles of positioning theory deals with the notion of adapting a product's external elements in order to attain the desired outlooks that exist within the minds of the consumer (Urde & Koch, 2014). Advertising agencies have utilized positioning theory to emphasize stronger reactions among consumers, rather than solely focusing on commercials and slogans.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the academe popularized relationship marketing (Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998). Mercer (2010), however, argued that there was no in-depth understanding of the relationship between branding and relationship marketing at the time. Nonetheless, during the early 1980s, brand equity was a popular research topic and was an important element in strategic management (Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998). Brand equity measures the value of a brand, which is an essential aspect of present-day

marketing (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998). Researchers postulated that brand value is distinguishable from the company's other assets, including price, marketing strategy, and promotional activity (Keller, Parameswaran, & Jacob, 2011; Davcik, Vinhas da Silva, & Hair, 2015).

Understanding the concepts of brand equity helps companies understand the importance of branding because they can now measure the benefits that they are receiving from investments on their brand. Brand equity includes both the consumer perspective and the financial perspective, which constitutes the product's total value and reflects the company's performance in the market (Keller et al., 2011). Utilizing the financial market value provides a view of the company's future revenues (M'zungu et al., 2010). A consumer-based perspective should focus on consumers' reactions to products (Eryigit & Eryigit, 2014). *Brand equity* has a significant relationship with brand loyalty, and is defined as a set of brand assets that have the potential to influence consumer's behavior regarding a firm's brand, including visual brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations (Toufaily, Ricard, & Perrien, 2013; Zhang & Niu, 2015). Hampf and Lindberg-Repo (2011) added that consumers' strong, positive, and unique associations constitute a well-known brand. When considering a consumer-based perspective, it is important to consider that brand equity refers to consumer perceptions, rather than any objective metrics. In addition, the brand and the brand names set the product's global value.

Davcik, Vinhas da Silva, and Hair (2015) asserted that the financial and consumer-based perspectives have not encompassed the overall picture of brand equity. The global brand equity valuation model (Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998) measures three

brand multiples: (a) customer-base potency, (b) competitive potency, and (c) global potency (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011). Brand image and customer loyalty shapes customer-based potency. These components constitute the core dimensions of brand equity (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011). This concept suggests that brand loyalty is dependent on brand image. Brand trend, brand protection, and brand support characterize competitive potency. Furthermore, the dynamic factors between local and global markets determine global potency.

1990s to the present day. Starting in the 1990s through the present, relational branding has become the current paradigm in branding (Hardy, Norman, & Sceery, 2012). Relational branding is the branding style that takes into account para-social relationships, which consist of the connections between the consumers and the company (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011). Relational branding can specifically impact the company's image when presented through company name, brands, and personalities that represent it. Relational branding also refers to the power given to consumers to dictate the brand relationship. Brand relationship determines the individual's perspective toward the brand relationship and relational value (Avis, Aitken, & Ferguson, 2012). Moreover, consumers develop individual relationships based on their perceptions of brand value and their experiences with the brand. Hampf and Lindberg-Repo (2011) further elaborated that consumers actually create the brand through communications in different contexts. Bastos and Levy (2012) contrasted the work of other researchers with the realities of the complex nature of brand management, suggesting the transformation of branding into a multidimensional, multifunction, and malleable entity.

Business marketing leaders have also emphasized brand identity (Peterson & Jolibert, 1995). According to Kapferer (2012), brand identity provides information on ways to improve the product over time. Kapferer asserted that brand identity emphasizes the role of the internal brand builders. Additionally, employees' attitudes and behaviors are crucial to creating brand identity, such as being visionary and determined. Therefore, employees' vision and culture influence the process of brand building. Moreover, it is essential for companies to determine and control the way in which employees influence their positioning. Successful management of this positioning will result in attainment of the desired value. There is therefore a relationship between brand identity and employee behavior (Kapferer, 2012); organizational leaders who can create a work environment where every decision and behavior employees demonstrate highlights specific attributes of the brand can influence the brand's performance. Further, employees whose thoughts and behaviors prioritize the brand's interests can benefit the brand and the company. It is also essential that the staff members' attitudes correspond to one another in order to communicate the company's desired image and personality. Thus, the company must prevent or eliminate the discrepancy between the desired values and the values reflected by employees (Kapferer, 2012).

Another milestone in the evolution of branding was the utilization of the country-of-origin (COO). According to Peterson and Jolibert (1995), the concept of COO has become one of the most researched topics in the field of marketing. Studies have revealed that because of the increasing competition of global brands, consumers have developed sensitivity to COO (Fatma, 2014). Hampf and Lindberg-Repo (2011) added that the variables of price, origin, and brand name guarantee the quality in the branding of COO

approach. However, branding the COO is not applicable to all products, especially to those of everyday use. Branding the COO is crucial, however, for products that are dependent on brand image, such as expensive wines.

The above discussion illustrates how the concept and practice of branding within business marketing has evolved in phases over the years. It began with product segmentation in the early 1950s, which gradually led the way to lifestyle marketing in the 1960s. The 1970s saw the rise and popularity of mass production and mass communication. Gradually during this time, social marketing also emerged as a popular practice, which marked a shift from the four Ps of marketing to relational marketing that continued as the dominant marketing practice into the 21st century. Brand equity and brand identity are two other concepts that have emerged as integral elements of branding since the inception of the practice.

Brand communities. In response to the inefficient management of one-on-one relationships with consumers, the concept of brand community has emerged (Laroche et al., 2012). Different scholars define the concept of brand community variously highlighting its key features. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) defined *brand community* as a community with members who have specialized knowledge about a specific brand. McAlexander and Koenig (2012) alternatively defined brand communities as non-geographical areas that constitute structured social relationships among brand admirers. Laroche et al. (2012) also asserted that brand communities represent association rooted in the consumption context surrounding a product and that members of these communities have similarities that differentiate them from other communities. The most essential entity shared by brand community members is the formation and negotiation of meaning

in three domains of cognitive schemas: social relatedness, personal involvement with the company and brand, and psychosocial symbolic connections to the product and brand (Morandin, Bagozzi, & Bergami, 2013). Overall, the definitions of brand communities focused on shared knowledge (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), structured social relationships (McAlexander & Koenig, 2012), similarities (Laroche et al., 2012), and common meaning formation (Morandin et al., 2013) among members as core features.

Relevant to brand communities is a phenomenon of user generated, brand-related messages in which individuals develop relationships with other consumers of the brand through formal and informal interactions, the latter of which has been referred to as "the collapse of the private sphere" (Yannopoulou, Moufahim, & Bian, 2013, p. 88). These interactions typically occur within a social medium such as Twitter, YouTube, and branded communities. McAlexander and Koenig (2012) asserted that these relationships within each group are strong because members usually prefer only a few brands. They added that theories governing the two concepts added to the body of theories in the literature of relationship marketing. They concluded that these concepts supported the development of a framework that explains the complex relationship between people and brands (McAlexander & Koenig, 2012).

In the extant literature, there has also been a focus on the association between branding and corporate social relationship (CSR). Hampf and Lindberg-Repo (2011) proposed that at the beginning of the 21st century, individuals witnessed the merging of two concepts: (a) branding and (b) CSR. Comparatively, highlighting the association between the two, Kitzmueller and Shimshack (2012) noted that CSR has become a mainstream initiative for almost every type of organization. CSR offers an understanding

of the relationship between a company's reputation and its brand equity. Moreover, CSR has introduced the notion that customers, employees, and other stakeholders have the power to disapprove of an organization's CSR strategies and actions, thus implying the need for organizations to be in tune with CSR stakeholders.

Hampf and Lindberg-Repo (2011) concluded that the main aim of CSR is to influence consumers' perceptions through the activities the company performs. Because these activities affect a company's reputation, it is essential that the company consider such activities in the name of the brand. There are four reasons for companies to utilize CSR: (a) to understand the brand promise, (b) to maintain customer loyalty, (c) to maximize the effect of investments that were to be directed toward CSR regardless of the brand, and (d) to avoid conflicts with stakeholders (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011). Kapferer (2012) added to this concept by suggesting that companies could use ethicality as a brand benefit. Consumers will also feel satisfied, given the linkage between a brand's responsible behavior and its relationship to society.

There are several methods for organizing brand communities, such as the Internet and social media, where one may co-create value (Goh et al., 2013). Researchers have also explored the conceptual and empirical dimensions and factors that influence brand communities (Laroche et al., 2012; Matzler, Pichler, Füller, & Mooradian, 2011). The focus of these studies was on examining the connections and relationships among individuals who prefer a certain brand. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), many companies take advantage of the capabilities of brand communities as well as social media. In addition to the research on offline brand communities, the concept of online brand communities has emerged, which are social media-based. Laroche et al. (2012)

thus concluded that the prevalence of brand communities supports the need for both marketers and scholars to have more in-depth knowledge about communities.

Several factors have increased scholars' attention in exploring the concept of brand communities (Laroche et al., 2012). Laroche et al. (2012) asserted that brand communities have attracted much attention among researchers for the following reasons:

- learning consumers' perceptions about new products and competitive actions,
- maximizing the opportunities to collaborate with loyal consumers,
- influencing the evaluations and actions of the members of the brand community,
- disseminating information quickly, and
- allowing companies to gain the trust of loyal consumers.

Acknowledging the factors identified by Laroche et al. (2012), Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) concluded that the vast influence of social media on brand communities has engaged many companies in this area of research.

Laroche et al. (2012) proposed that consumers have individual motivations for engaging in a brand community. The authors noted that brand communities address psychological and social needs by providing a form of expression for the individual or group. Joining a brand community helps individuals to identify themselves with certain brands, which fulfills their social needs and their needs to self-identity. Moreover, brand communities tend to help consumers reflect on who they want to be and how they want to present themselves to others. Other studies have corroborated the motivational aspect of brand community engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Jin, Lee, & Huffman, 2012). Brodie et al. (2013) and Jin et al. (2012) also highlighted that the interrelationship in a brand community is motivational, as consumers favor self-associations with the signs and symbols they prefer.

Brand communities can bring consumers together, create conversations among them, and enable them to obtain information about the brand (Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013). Brand communities' capabilities have raised ideas among companies interested in tapping into the advantages of offline brand communities, such as effective communication between marketers and customers as well as obtaining essential information. These brand communities serve as a communication channel that links devoted users (Goulding et al., 2013). Laroche et al. (2013) further posited that in brand communities, consumers are valuable sources of information for companies, and their ideas can lead to the production of the right products and the right product modifications.

In contrast to online brand communities, offline brand communities have geographical constraints and thus, are limited (Goh et al., 2013). However, the use of online social media may help address such constraints, as brands tend to transcend geography with the use of social media. Laroche et al. (2012) added that the role of social media is essential for brands to gain potential customers as well as to foster the marketer–consumer relationship without any constraints. The authors further concluded that it is important for companies as well as consumers to utilize the benefits of new technology and brand communities (Laroche et al., 2012).

Historically, customers have been separate from the value chain within a firm. More recently, however, this practice has become an issue due to Web 2.0 technologies, such as online social media. Using social media, companies may give consumers the opportunity to create brand communities and the freedom to alter their products. There are three markers within brand communities, namely "shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions, and obligations to society" (Laroche et al., 2012, p. 3). In addition,

there are specific practices that contribute to the development of values in brand communities (Laroche et al., 2012).

Trust is highly significant to a brand community. To examine this concept, Hur, Ahn, and Kim (2011) interviewed 200 female brand community users who were mobile phone consumers and concluded that a company's brand community marketing activities can influence the relationships among the community participants as well as the brand and the company. Hur et al. (2011) suggested that customer participation often leads to brand loyalty activities.

Moreover, the phenomenon of tribal marketing has emerged as online communities make use of Web 2.0 technologies. Branded communities, according to Laroche et al. (2012), have a significant influence on contemporary marketing. These researchers concluded that the nature of consumption, work, and marketing is moving into the hands of the consumer. The above discussion highlights that brand communities play an integral role in branding activities. Researchers have focused on the various functions served by the brand communities for the consumer such as fulfilling consumers' social needs and obtaining information about products quickly. What researchers had not examined is the how participation in a brand community may influence brand loyalty.

Online brand communities. The concept of community is typically an emotional and humanistic dynamic, meaning that it is continuously growing and needs nurturing. A common belief system and peer-based support are key attributes of a community (Maton & Salem, 1995). In addition, communities work best when participants share common values and interests. For example, Maton and Salem (1995) surveyed moderators of 13 Yahoo! groups, yielding 470 usable responses to a questionnaire. They concluded that participation in online brand communities related to a consciousness of kind, moral responsibility, and shared rituals and traditions. The limitations of the study included the use of an online survey method utilizing a self-reported instrument and the focused cameras, motorcycles, and hybrid cars. There is an opportunity to expand this research, however, by examining how brand value influence online brand community participation.

Many companies use online brand communities to support their products including the launch of new products (Gruner, Homburg, & Lukas, 2013). In their research of 81 firm-hosted online brand communities and 170 community-hosting firms in the consumer durable goods industry Gruner et al. (2013) found that a growing number of companies develop and host online brand communities to support their products. They suggested one motivation of firms to establish such communities is to increase the success rate of their new products in the marketplace. There is a broad based usage of online brand communities in the durable goods industry. Gruner et al. (2013) revealed that almost 90% of the 670 firms in their initial sample hosted an online brand community of some type. Although their research focused on whether and how online brand communities can contribute to the success of new products, but did not explore how participation in such a community may influence brand value.

In contrast, Mahar (2007) examined the factors affecting participation in online communities, surveying 1,612 active members of an IBM-based community, as well as 336 members of a Xerox community. The research questions in this mixed-methods study focused on the dynamics of participation in corporate communities of practice. Mahar found managing communities of practice to be complex, yet beneficial. Future researchers could examine the level of participation by members and potential community members with a focus on increasing participation.

Making connections with others who share common interests is essential to online communities (Kotowski & dos Santos, 2010). Kotowski and dos Santos (2010) examined the personality characteristics that enable some people to better form connections within online communities, concluding that an extraverted personality is consistent among online users. Kotowski and dos Santos concluded that communication technologies such as Web 2.0 create new opportunities for people to connect. In contrast, Wirtz et al. (2013) suggested a need to understand online community members' personality characteristics at a deeper level, such as personal backgrounds and cultural differences, to allow for segmentation.

In addition, Felix (2012) suggested that in the world of online, consumer-to-consumer communications, companies risk losing control of their brands. Yamaha learned to leverage online communities to allow customers to ask questions to Yamaha employees, and the community members—including those who did not ask a question—benefited from their answers (Felix, 2012). In contrast to Felix's research, Hashim and Tan (2015) suggested a need for a clear understanding of what and how member influence is determined.

Goh et al. (2013) investigated whether online communities could influence brand value. The researchers suggested that the risk of negative effects on the brand far outweighs the value of direct communication with customers. Companies seek opportunities to create brand loyalty in this peer-to-peer setup because of the emotional connection that occurs within a social media environment (Goh et al., 2013). Consumers want confirmation that they bought or are buying the right product and will trust others in an online community to help them with that decision. Users of online communities trust members more than they trust the company behind the brand.

The above-discussed literature focused on the various factors that govern the participation and functioning of online brand communities. Some of the key features of online communities are shared rituals and practices, emotional connections with others who share similar interests, and trust among the members (Goh et al., 2013; Kotowski & dos Santos, 2010; Maton & Salem, 1995). Companies also benefit by getting the opportunity to foster brand loyalty among the members of the online communities.

Crowdsourcing. One way to leverage a community is to allow participants in a community to contribute to the overall well-being of others. Marketing experts refer this concept as crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing is the process whereby a company or institution takes a function previously performed by its employees and then outsources this function to a large, but not defined, network of people through open call. As an example, an organization can ask a crowd to find and gather data into a common location as well as a common format. Organizations can also ask a crowd to create and choose creative ideas. Another form of crowdsourcing involves organizations asking a crowd to solve empirical problems (Wexler, 2011). Wexler (2011), for example, examined three

phases of the crowd, and suggested that society is now in the third phase of crowds, which facilitates problem resolution. The concept of crowdsourcing strategically merges the consumer of a good with its producer.

In comparison, Zhao and Zhu (2014) examined previous research on crowdsourcing. The researchers stressed the need for refined sociotechnical systems to support the implementation of an online community. With a well-defined community and process, companies can drive growth and support a culture of innovation. One example of the use of crowdsourcing is for conducting research through surveys, which is an area that Behrend, Sharek, Meade, and Wiebe (2011) explored. They concluded that the use of crowdsourcing has considerable potential for researchers. Behrend et al. contrasted the research of Behrend et al. by highlighting the issues with crowdsourcing surveys. As an example, there is a possibility of over-surveying, which could skew the data.

WOMM. According to research by Keller and Libai (2009), marketers expected to spend $3 billion on WOMM in 2013. However, the WOMM phenomenon was not new to this report; rather, marketers and scholars have recognized WOMM for decades (Kozinets et al., 2010). Marketers expect to benefit from understanding WOMM, especially given the accessibility of the Internet (Kozinets et al., 2010).

In contrast, Dubois et al. (2011) noted the influence that rumors can have on products, brands, companies, and even people and, as such, stressed the need for rumor management, rather than leaving WOM to chance. WOM plays a significant role in social media, including online communities, because its dynamics are the same in these venues as they are in others, but may actually exert a greater influence due to the exponential effect of social media (Sun, 2013). WOM also heavily influences online consumer

interactions. Companies are utilizing virtual social networks to develop strong ties with consumers. This is particularly important because a specific user behavior in online communities is the seeking of recommendations (Sun, 2013).

According to Kozinets et al. (2010), WOMM is an integral part of the current cultural process. While the use of WOMM appears to be the same with the process of public relations and promotions, it has less complex cultural interactions. Kozinets et al. added that the elements of WOMM are communications related to marketing. The four essential factors, which include character narratives, forums, communal norms, and promotional characteristics, influence WOM online communications.

***Character narrative*.** The first factor that affects WOM online communication is character narrative. Character narrative causes people to associate with a particular type of character and endures personal stories (Kozinets et al., 2010). Researchers have argued that while narratives differ from time to time, there are particular archetypal patterns that manifest among them. As an example, a blogger may relate to a particular character within the narrative, which leads to the blogger's positive presentation of the character.

***Forums*.** The second factor affecting WOM online communication is the online forum. Online forums such as social networking, websites, and blogs may address a wide range of topics. Other WOM contexts might include dinner parties, bars, and other face-to-face forums.

***Communal norms*.** These govern the expression, transmission, and reception of a message and its meanings. Characteristics such as the size of the community, the interests of the members, and social class, among others, can affect these communal norms. In turn, this influences the type of audience and the narratives amongst the members. In

addition, the third factor involves the communal norms that facilitate the exchange of messages and their embedded meanings. Kozinets et al. (2010) suggested that these norms depend on the size of the online community.

Promotional characteristics. Finally, the fourth factor affecting WOM online communication involves the promotional characteristics of WOMM. These characteristics pertain to promotional campaigns such as brand equity and humor. Kozinets et al. (2010) concluded that these four factors work collaboratively to influence the meaning of WOMM. The authors added that online users transform WOMM from commercial promotion to information valued by the online community. Kozinets et al. elaborated that these norms attract bloggers and other members in the community.

The preceding discussion highlighted the considerable research conducted to study the influence of WOMM on online consumer interaction. Studies stressed the key role of WOMM in social media, greatly influencing interactions among online community members. It is important to control strategically how WOMM affects products and their brand images. Certain norms govern the impact of WOMM on online communications, and companies leverage the influence of WOMM to develop close ties with consumers.

Branding and brand experience. There are many motivations for the use of brands; such motivations create product distinction through innovation (Mercer, 2010). A brand tells others who someone is and what someone wants to be, thus serving as a psychological symbol for the consumer and thereby differentiating it from other brands (Lysonski & Durvasula 2013; Singh, 2012; Spence, 2012). When the concept of branding emerged, companies had opportunities for higher margins for products with stronger

brands (Mercer, 2010; M'zungu et al., 2010). These companies examined ways to manage their brands to maximize value (Avis, 2012). Ultimately, this led to the concept of brand management and the idea of a brand experience (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Fuciu & Dumitrescu, 2010; Kumaravel & Kandasamy, 2012). Other researchers added to the concept of branding by suggesting the need to apply significant resources in the area of brand creation and brand experience management (Lysonski, S., & Durvasula 2013; Singh, 2012; Spence, 2012).

Consumers interact with brands in a number of different ways. Brand experience is thus critical, as it influences an individual's sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses to the stimuli companies create to define a personality for their brands (Schmitt, Zarantonello, & Brakus, 2009). Schmitt et al. (2009) asserted that brand experience has generated much attention in the field of marketing as marketers have realized that having the knowledge about consumers' experiences can help them develop effective marketing strategies.

While a number of constructs have been studied in the branding literature including brand personality, brand love, and brand community (Aaker, 1997; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Schmitt, 2012), there is limited research focusing on measuring brand experience (Schmitt et al., 2009). Moreover, most past research has focused on contexts where specific products and services have arisen. Despite the fact that researchers have studied the contexts in which specific product and service experiences were optimal, researchers have not given priority to the nature and structure of brand experience (Newbery & Farnham, 2013). Schmitt et al. (2009) further concluded that brand experiences are demonstrated when consumers look for products. The same

can be demonstrated when consumers shop for products and when they receive services (Newbery & Farnham, 2013).

Klaus and Maklan (2013) claimed that product experience pertains to the interaction between the consumer and the product. This occurs when consumers look, examine, and evaluate products. However, Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013) suggested an important role of online aspects of a brand, specifically noting that "online brand experiences depend on the perceptions of the usefulness of the brand, trust, and indirectly, on its reputation" (p. 26). Schifferstain and Hekkert explained that there are two kinds of product experience: (a) direct and (b) indirect. Direct product experience occurs when there is physical contact with the product. In contrast, indirect product experience occurs when the first contact with the product is through advertisement (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). The interaction between the consumer and the business's physical environment, its personnel, and its policies and practices shapes shopping and service experiences (Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2014). Krystallis and Chrysochou (2014), for example, focused on atmospheric variables as well as the effects of salespeople and found that consumer interaction with salespeople can influence the consumers' attitudes, feelings, and satisfaction levels.

Finally, brand experience can also occur when consumers use or experience the product personally. Consumption experience, a part of brand experience, is multidimensional and includes a hedonic dimension, such as fantasies (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie (2014). Research has shown that in the area of consumption experience, the focus has been on the hedonic goals that occur before and after consumption (Schmitt et al., 2009). Conclusions from such research suggest that brand experiences occur in

different settings (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Schmitt et al., 2009). Thus, while most brand experiences occur when the consumer interacts with the product, they can also occur indirectly in the form of advertising and marketing communications, such as on websites.

In their research, Schmitt et al. (2009) addressed the creation and management of brand experience. The authors developed a brand experience scale to capture the dimensions of brand experience, as well as the level of experience the brand evoked within each dimension. Their results suggested that outside the academe, companies could apply the concept of the brand experience scale.

In addition, a good brand image strategy can be a key element in a brand experience and can help a company differentiate itself from its competitors (Kumaravel & Kandasamy, 2012). Indeed, Kumaravel and Kandasamy (2012) suggested that brand quality, awareness, and features have a significant effect on brand equity, suggesting that brand management is an important strategy to achieve brand equity. Conversely, Klaus and Maklan (2013) highlighted the need for a holistic approach to the design of a customer experience. This suggests a need to examine the total brand experience from the customer's perspective.

Researchers recognize brand experience as an integral element in the practice of branding. Studies have identified how brand experience occurs in various settings, through the direct contact of the product or through indirect contract via advertisements (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Klaus & Maklan, 2013; Schmitt et al., 2009). Companies also benefit from an evaluation of brand experience as they can get information about consumers' interaction with a product.

Brand management. The notion of branding emerged in the late 1800s as a business discipline of brand management (Mercer, 2010). Fetscherin and Usunier (2012) reviewed the evolution of corporate branding from 1969 to 2008. The authors' research is beneficial to those in corporate branding because it provided information on managing corporate brands and documenting events written from the non-scholarly documents (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012).

Balmer (2012) focused on the strategic management of corporate brands. According to Balmer:

> A corporate brand is a distinct identity type pertaining to one or more entities. It has a quasi-legal character in that it is underpinned by an informal, albeit powerful, corporate contract between the firm and its stakeholders—a corporate brand "covenant." (p. 6)

Balmer (2012) elaborated that the corporate brand covenant pertains to the consumers' expectations and other stakeholders' associations to the corporate brand name. Consumers can accept or reject brand covenants and it takes time to develop corporate brand covenants. Corporate brands also reflect the company's corporate identity attributes. Balmer added that other companies might buy, sell, and borrow corporate brands from another company.

Balmer (2012) determined three important management strategies for corporate brands:

(a) The brand custodianship imperative: ensuring the corporate brand is seen as a strategic senior management concern.

(b) The brand credibility imperative: ensuring the corporate brand covenant is bona fide.

(c) The brand calibration imperative: ensuring the corporate brand covenant is meaningfully and dynamically aligned with the identities forming the corporate brand constellation. (p. 7)

The corporate brand custodianship imperative recognizes that senior management is responsible for implementing corporate brand handling strategies. Conversely, the brand credibility imperative requires the company to implement the brand covenant in all activities. Finally, the corporate brand calibration imperative characterizes the regulation of the relationships between the corporate brand identity and other manifestations of the company's identity. The brand calibration imperative also supplements the company's credibility.

Any significant asset within an organization requires management. Corporate brand management, maintenance, and development are all critical concerns for the company's stakeholders. It is thus senior management's responsibility to address the challenges faced in corporate brand management (Balmer, 2012). Additionally, included in senior management's responsibility is the maintenance of a meaningful brand covenant. Ineffective brand management can result in institutional liability, characterized by the brand's losing consumers and other stakeholders. Other researchers have supported Balmer's research suggesting a need to focus on the corporate brand management, maintenance, and development (Felix, 2012; M'zungu et al., 2010). Given the need to focus on corporate brand maintenance, Shamoon and Tehsee (2011)

recommended that brand managers look beyond individual campaigns to appeal to the consumer's intellect.

Recognizing the importance of a powerful brand often leads to the question of how to make it stronger. Fuciu and Dumitrescu (2010) explored what brands mean for companies and consumers as well as the factors that determine a brand's value and suggested four steps to developing a powerful brand. According to the researchers, to develop a powerful brand, managers should (a) master brand management, (b) measure the brands, (c) make the brands, and (d) manage the brands. To master the brands, managers should have knowledge in arts, science, and crafts and demonstrate transparency. To measure the brands, managers should carry out market research to understand the current perceptions of the brand. In making the brand, managers should first identify the different factors that would differentiate a strong brand from a weak one. They should then carry out a pathway analysis, which involves transforming these abstract elements identified into practical as well as understandable terms for brand integration. After the creation of the desired brand, the last step involves managing the brand. This means that managers should think of the best budget as well as the appropriate media outlets in which to present the brand. These four steps are part of an overall strategy of brand management.

Thus, brand management is a crucial function within branding. Extant literature on brand management stresses the importance of corporate strategies in managing brands effectively. Studies also recognize the role of senior management in adopting effective brand management strategies (Balmer, 2012; Felix, 2012; M'zungu et al., 2010).

Researchers have also discussed the various processes that managers need to focus on in developing influential brands (Fuciu & Dumitrescu, 2010).

Role of social media. Whether it is through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or another platform, consumer exposure to WOM on various social media sites can be a significant driver of consumer purchasing behavior (Liu & Lopez, 2014). Given its enormous influence, Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden (2011) posited that the popularity of social media has revolutionized marketing practices, especially product promotion and product advertising. A number of studies also noted that social media has affected consumer behaviors, from the acquiring of information about the product to after purchasing behaviors (Goh et al., 2013; Kietzmann, Silvestre, McCarthy, & Pitt, 2012). With the vast influence of social media, it is imperative that research on this important topic continue.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined *social media* as "a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (p. 61). Laroche at al. (2012) added that social media pertains to the online technologies that people use to share ideas, knowledge, and opinions. Social media is a form of Internet social aggregation from people who have conducted public discussions with human emotions that lead to the formation of personal relationships in cyberspace (Aiello, Barrat, Cattuto, Schifanella, & Ruffo, 2012). There are two directly related concepts essential to the discussion of social media: (a) Web 2.0 and (b) user generated content (Laroche et al., 2012).

Laroche et al. (2012) posited that Web 2.0, introduced in 2004, characterized a new method that application programmers as well as end users could use through the

World Wide Web. Web 2.0 is a platform whereby participants collaborate to publish software and content. Conversely, user generated content emerged in 2005 as a method for end-users to make content and utilize social media on the grounds of Web 2.0. It also contains various forms of media content available publicly, ranging from text to audio to video materials created by the end users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Laroche et al. (2012) posited that social media includes a vast array of Internet-based applications and programs, such as Wikipedia, YouTube, and Facebook. They added that social media has been the center of attention among researchers in different industries because of its capability to directly connect businesses to end consumers in a timely manner at a low cost, in influencing customer perceptions and behavior, and in bringing together like-minded people. Moreover, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) added that, due to the increased efficiency of social media as compared to other modes of communication, industry leaders have insisted on companies participating in different social media to succeed in the online setting. More industries maximize the benefits of social media in developing strategies, managing others' strategies, and following others' directions (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011).

People address their need for belongingness as well as their need for cognition when they participate in social media through the sharing of norms, values, and interests (Laroche et al., 2013). The feeling of being socially connected is central to the individual's psychological sense of community. While feelings of belongingness are weaker in the online environment, weak ties could bridge people and encourage members' participation in communities that can reach intimate levels (Laroche et al., 2013). Laroche et al. concluded that people take advantage of social media capabilities

through contribution and participation in communities that address their needs for belongingness. It is thus essential to discuss social media with brand communities.

Functional blocks of social media. Kietzmann et al. (2011) devised a framework of seven functional building blocks that describe social media: (a) identity, (b) conversations, (c) sharing, (d) presence, (e) relationships, (f) reputation, and (g) groups. In their research, Kietzmann et al. studied the implications of each of the seven blocks to companies' engagement with social media. Moreover, they examined consumers' experiences using social media by utilizing the seven blocks framework. Their findings suggest, however, that these building blocks may or may not be included in social media activity, depending on the configuration of the social media.

Identity. The first functional block of social media is identity. Identity occurs when a social media user reveals the consumer's identity to the social media setting (Kietzmann et al., 2011). These authors suggested the "identity" functional block includes the disclosure of personal information such as name, gender, and age. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) expounded that the presentation of one's identity can occur through the conscious or unconscious disclosure of subjective details such as feelings and thoughts. Moreover, Kietzmann et al. (2011) added that users have various preferences in using social media. While many users prefer engaging in online activities using real names, others prefer using nicknames (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

In addition to these preferences are the various social media sites that require users to create their own profiles to represent their identity. Here, users may treat the social media sites in the same way one may treat a business card by creating profiles, which market their identities and enable other users to know and follow them. Social

media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are now regularly used by more than one seventh of the world population (Schwartz et al., 2013), which allows for hundreds—if not thousands—of varying consumer bases to which firms can specifically market.

Furthermore, the role of identity in social media platforms has influenced companies in developing their own social media sites (Kietzmann et al., 2011). The authors added that one of the implications of social media on companies developing social media sites is the sense of privacy. While social media users freely share their personal information on sites such as Facebook and Twitter, users are keen to determine how these sites use the information. Social media users have significant concerns about how companies use their personal details. Thus, in response to such concerns, governments around the world have begun to initiate laws regulating social media privacy issues (Child, Haridakis, & Petronio, 2012; Sánchez Abril, Levin, & Del Riego, 2012). Kietzmann et al. (2011) asserted that social media users have developed strategies in presenting identities, such as the use of a real identity as opposed to a virtual one. Other users, however, have utilized social media for self-promotion and self-branding. Kietzmann et al. further concluded that it is critical for companies to utilize social media sites to balance the sharing of identity and the protecting of privacy. Failure to balance these actions may lead to cyberbullying and a lack of accountability among social media users.

Conversation. The second functional block involves conversation between social media users with other social media users (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Kietzmann et al. (2011) noted that conversations in social media are inevitable and thus, several social media sites cater to conversations among users and groups of users. Some online users

utilize social media conversation as a response to political issues (Valenzuela, 2013), environmental concerns (Bennett, 2012), as well as for other humanitarian purposes (Madianou, 2013), among others. Furthermore, most of the message exchange among users is brief in nature, which requires no obligation for a response.

Kietzmann et al. (2011) noted that the diverse frequency and content of the conversation reflects conversation velocity. They defined *conversation velocity* as "the rate and direction of change in a conversation" (Kietzmann et al., 2011, p. 244). Companies can utilize these conversations by having a collective sense of several short conversations among users. Through such conversations, companies can gain an idea of the users' perceptions of the brand or product of discussion. Understanding user perceptions can help companies gauge important factors that can affect their success, including brand loyalty, brand commitment, and brand value.

Sharing. Another functional block of social media is sharing, which pertains to the exchange, distribution, and receipt of content in the social media setting. Kietzmann et al. (2011) noted that a sense of sociality facilitates a link between individuals and the product. Moreover, the sharing of such objects is a method of interaction in social media. According to Kietzmann et al., one use of the sharing functional block provided by social media is to fulfill the need to evaluate the objects the users share. Moreover, sharing functionality determines what objects can mediate users' share interests (Kietzmann et al., 2011). These objects can take the form of a brand or a product that connects social media users. Another important aspect of sharing functionality involves the degree to which users share activities. The sharing of information among users can initiate a wider range of products and service dissemination.

Presence. The next functional block is presence, which pertains to users' knowledge of users' accessibility. According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), presence functionality includes having the knowledge of the location and availability of other users in the virtual or real world. Kietzmann et al. elaborated that presence status can be determined using terms such as *available* or *hidden*. The increasing connectivity among people serves to bridge the virtual and real world (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Considering the presence functionality in social media can help companies to assess users' availabilities and locations. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) concluded that presence functionality influences the intimacy and the immediacy of relationships. Moreover, higher levels of presence functionality lead to conversations that are more influential, making the introduction of a brand more effective during functional conversation.

Relationship. One may characterize relationship, the fifth functional block, by how a social media user relates to others (Kietzmann et al., 2011). *Relationship* refers to the association between two or more social media users that enables them to share objects, converse, or even acknowledge friendship (Kietzmann et al., 2011). The depth and type of exchange of information depends on the connectivity of the social media users. An example is the social media site LinkedIn, where relationships tend to be more formal and structured as compared to less formal social media sites such as Facebook. LinkedIn reflects how users connect with one another and determines how many degrees of separation exist between users, which can link people to potential employers. Moreover, membership acceptance requires validation from other members. LinkedIn focuses on building relationships through a referral system and membership acceptance requires validation from other members (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

In contrast to LinkedIn, Kietzmann et al. (2011) asserted that other social media sites tend to provide a more informal and unstructured format. Blogs, for example, do not require users to have a formal arrangement on the degree of information that one may share in an established relationship. On sites such as YouTube and Twitter, relationships may not necessarily matter at all. Kietzmann et al. concluded that on social media sites, the degree to which identity is considered determines the degree to which the relationship is valued. Thus, companies utilizing social media sites should know how to maintain users' relationships. These site set-ups depend on users' expectations of privacy and identity in social media relationships. Social media relationships are strong bonds that companies can use to disseminate their brand or product. These relationships create opportunities for companies to venture their products and services.

Reputation. The sixth functional block of social media is reputation, characterized by users' acknowledgement of others' views, beliefs, and standpoints in the social media setting (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Reputation is a matter of trust on most existing social media sites. For example, Twitter reflects brand reputations based on the number of followers a user has. Conversely, LinkedIn reflects users' reputations through the number of endorsements the user has. Kietzmann et al. (2011) argued that in social media, content through voting systems determines the brand reputation. Additionally, social media sites such as YouTube exhibit reputation through the rating and view counts of a particular video.

It is essential for companies utilizing social media advertisement to consider a site's reputation system. Furthermore, it is also important to identify the appropriate metric to assess the reputation of the social media community's engagement.

Additionally, upon identification of the appropriate metrics, it is essential to determine the appropriate evaluation tool. Evaluation tools can be in the form of objective data or the collective intelligence of the crowd. For example, the number of views of a particular web page or a system to rate the top contributors. Reputation functionality can be the best vehicle for brand advertisement. Companies have utilized the popularity of social media users to advertise their brands or products.

Groups. Finally, the group functional block pertains to users' abilities to form social media communities. Kietzmann et al. (2011) asserted that when a network is more social, larger friend and contacts groups form. In this context, Saramäki et al. (2014) proposed that individuals have cognitive limits to the number of stable social relationships they can have. For most people, the cognitive limits tend to fall around 150 social relationships. However, social media sites reveal that several communities have exceeded this limit (Kietzmann et al., 2011). According to Kietzmann et al., there are two types of groups in social media. One may characterize the first group as self-creation, in which users can modify the members of the group, while the other social media type pertains to groups similar to clubs in the real world. These groups can be open to anyone, closed, or private (Kietzmann et al., 2011). These social media communities influence companies' advertisement strategies. Social media communities serve as an arena for the discussion of brands and products. Companies can thus hone their brand modification or improvement through inputs from the social media communities. The next section details the input required to modify and improve a brand.

While Kietzmann et al. (2011) suggested functional building blocks to leverage social media in business, other researchers have suggested such an approach may

encroach on consumers' space reserved for friends and family (Laroche et al., 2013). However, the preceding discussion demonstrates the crucial role social media plays in promoting, advertising, and marketing products among consumers. In the extant literature, researchers have explored the various conceptions of social media, evolving technologies that have affected its influence on marketing, social functions served by social media, and the mechanisms underlying social media functioning. The authors have discussed the advantages for companies advertising through social media.

Social media and brand communities. According to Laroche et al. (2012), the discussion of social media and brand community leads to the concept of *social media-based brand community*, which falls under the broader concept of virtual or online brand communities. The main difference between social media and online brand communities involves their platforms. Social media utilizes Web 2.0 plus user generated content, while online brand communities utilize Web 1.0 as the core platform. However, given the popularity of social media, many companies use social networking sites to develop brand communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Online communities intended for information sharing rather than for commercial purposes exert the greatest influence on members' opinions and purchase intentions (Naylor, Lamberton, & West, 2012; See-To & Ho, 2014). Social media-based brand communities cater to members' active participation in consuming content as compared to traditional media, which tends to be more passive. Zhu, Dholakia, Chen, and Algesheimer (2012) concluded that consumers' active participation mediates users' influence on one another. Furthermore, these communities create a distinctive knowledge base from the aggregation of collective member expertise. Wirtz et al. (2013) offered a

contrarian perspective by suggesting online branded communities are a place for providers, consumers, and users to unit by the value they associate with engaging in a relationship with a brand. In the next section, the researcher discusses the strategies in the creation of customers' valuable experiences.

Customers' experience, brand experience, and purchase decisions. Consumers are now digitally empowered and more well informed in their purchasing decisions (Keiningham, Frennea, Aksoy, Buoye, & Mittal, 2015; Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). In addition, businesses also have the opportunity to operate in a better environment, where they can make more informed and smarter decisions because of technology (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). As technologies empower both buyers and sellers, the consumer–seller relationship is consistently changing. For example, customers are increasingly demanding better and more innovative products, services, and ultimately, experiences from the companies that they patronize (Keiningham et al., 2015; Hudson & Thal, 2013). In sum, a positive customer experience is essential in corporate branding (Verhoef et al., 2009).

Verhoef et al. (2009) provided a conceptual model of customer experience, assuming eight customer experience constructs: (a) social environment, (b) service interface, (c) retail atmosphere, (d) assortment, (e) price, (f) retail brand, (g) customer experience in alternative channels, as well as (h) previous experience with the specific brand. Customer experience now extends to the online domain, making Verhoef et al.'s seventh construct of customer experience in alternative channels relevant. Further, Klaus and Maklan (2013) extended Verhoef et al.'s work by suggesting customer experience as a holistic concept comprising of various components. For example, blogging provides

corporations a platform allowing their customers to experience a brand. Corporate blogs are an important platform for which companies can influence their consumers' experience. A number of recent studies have found that blogs can be positive and significant methods for the transmitting of advertisement messages, influencing purchase motivations, forming conversations, and facilitating a trusted resource that can ultimately shape purchasing decisions (Chau & Xu, 2012; Halvorsen, Hoffmann, Coste-Manière, & Stankeviciute, 2013; Ho, Chiu, Chen, & Papazafeiropoulou, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012).

As Verhoef et al. (2009) asserted, customers evaluate their experiences holistically. As such, leaders of firms must think broadly when designing and ensuring positive customer experience. Klaus and Maklan (2013) identified activities that help assure positive customer experiences, including ensuring positive before-and-after service encounter experiences, responding to emotional and functional aspects of quality, and considering customers' social contexts. Similarly, Hollebeek et al. (2014) also recognized practices to ensure good customer experiences that include the carrying out of an assessment of value-in-use as well as the recognition of use through multiple channels.

Klaus and Maklan (2013) recommended that managers design and employ a clear strategy for ensuring positive customer experience if they want to earn good profits. Failure is highly likely for marketing managers who lack a clearly articulated strategy, a focused ambition, or dynamic capabilities (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). Implementing customer experience strategy is challenging because the concept of customer experience has a broad reach. Ensuring positive customer experience also covers a much-extended period and requires looking at every customer touch point. It is therefore essential to

measure both functional and emotional results. Unless managers have a clearer understanding of what they should do to build their dynamic capabilities as well as the scope of their programs, they will repeat the mistakes of previous leaders, especially marketing leaders (Klaus & Maklan, 2013).

According to Klaus and Maklan (2013), measuring customer experience would require the researcher to observe several tenets. First, customers' general perceptions are essential in customer experience assessment. In addition, customers' assessments are dependent on overall value-in-use and not just generated from a summary of performance when getting individual sessions of certain services. SERVQUAL, a widely used survey instrument that measures the quality of services in a product, is not sufficient to measure customer experience, as it only measures the emotions and influences of peers. These authors also asserted that customer experience starts before customers even encounter the service and furthermore, will continue after these service encounters. In addition, service encounters cross all the channels and thus, an ideal measure can link experience with customer behavior and business performance and not necessarily to customer satisfaction.

The concept of customer experience is not a novel one (Sirapracha & Tocquer, 2012). Sirapracha and Tocquer (2012) claimed that consumption has experiential effects and that famous brands such as Google, Netflix, IKEA, and Starbucks, among others, have all become powerful names not only because of their creative and strong campaigns, but also because they provide compelling and positive customer experiences. They do not just focus on how good the features of their services are or the functional benefits that their services can offer, but they also incorporate customer experience as one of the

significant sources of their competitive advantage. The researchers concluded that customer experience is a driver of brand equity.

Conversely, Grönroos and Voima (2013) suggested that customer experience is an individual interpretation of the service process that the person has encountered as well as the interactions experienced, both of which affect customer feelings. Customer experience is therefore a result of the interaction between companies and their customers, including interactions with the staff, technologies, and the environment present within the companies. Therefore, positive perceptions come from the positive interaction between the consumers and owner of the product. The fact that the very term customer experience deals with consumers' feelings and perceptions makes it difficult to properly measure. In fact, Teixeira et al. (2012) have averred that "while existing methods address some of the elements of customer experiences, there is no systematized representation of a more holistic view of the customer experience" (p. 363) to support service design that could optimize dealings with consumers.

Clatworthy (2012) emphasized the importance of customer experience in shaping a company's brand. Essential steps in the creation of customer experience include developing a service personality, considering service touchpoint behaviors through conducting analytical work, and carrying out experience prototyping. Clatworthy emphasized the highlighting of touchpoint behaviors and strategic brand identity or "brand DNA," which depicts the brand's essence. In particular, Clatworthy provided a three-stage process to improve customer experience and align this with the company's brand. First, the company should summarize its brand DNA. Second, the company should establish service personality as well as touchpoint behaviors. Lastly, the firm should

enact and refine the experience, defined as experience prototyping (Clatworthy, 2012). The goal of this process is to enable the designers, clients, as well as users to experience the brand themselves, rather than observing the effects of these brands through the experiences of others. This type of role-playing improves communication within the design process and forms customer empathy. Clatworthy claimed that the concept phase of a project is the most important phase when transforming a brand strategy into a service concept. While the transformation is underway, the establishment of critical elements of customer experience is necessary. The researcher also found that customer experience relates with service personality as well as the behavior of certain service touchpoints, regardless of whether they are people or technologies. Firms that focus on the initial stages of a project upon customer experience can also develop team coherence and facilitate a culture of innovation (Clatworthy, 2012).

Additionally, Fatma (2014) reviewed empirical studies concerning customer experience, with particular attention to the methods of improving this experience and the effects of such improved experience. Fatma found that brand performance, multichannel interaction, service interface, physical environment, social environment, and price and promotions can all affect customer experience. In turn, customer experience can shape customer satisfaction, loyalty, and equity levels. According to Hwang and Kandampully (2012), a company's brand offers both functional and emotional benefits, enabling customers to perceive the product and service that they are receiving as meaningful and worthy. This study illustrates that concentrating on "emotional connections with consumers, rather than just on functional benefits/advantages, can be a viable and critical consideration for [a company's] management decisions in order to enhance customer

brand loyalty" (Hwang & Kandampully, 2012, p. 105). Even though both data mining and customer relationship management can enable firms to track the level and patterns of customer transactions, customer experience is what influences positive or negative reactions and whether a customer will make referrals.

Comparatively, Sukwadi, Yang, and Fan (2012) claimed that customers are more willing to pay premium prices, refer the company or brand to others, and establish longer-term relationships with companies that provide superior customer experience. According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), in order to instill a positive experience in customers, it is essential that companies recognize the importance of customer experience. If they recognize how these experiences are developed, they can carry out strategies to capture customer feedback, determine where business processes can be improved, and ensure that negative customer experiences are avoided. Lemon and Verhoef also asserted that consistent positive customer experience is one method of ensuring company success and effectiveness.

Additionally, Fatma (2014) claimed that in the current digital world, companies could easily improve customer experience by using several technology solutions such as site search, personalization, content management, as well as other e-commerce platforms. These technology solutions can help personalize the customer experience. Keiningham et al. (2015) studied the relationship between product purchase and customer experience. The researchers looked at a product that necessitates special skills, such as the use of computers and cellular phones. They found that customers' purchase decisions depended on their anticipation of the speed at which they could master these required skills. In addition, Giebelhausen, Robinson, Sirianni, and Brady (2014) claimed that technologies

are increasingly important for ensuring positive consumer experience, especially because interpersonal exchanges between customers and companies involve the use of technology. Examples of these are point-of-sale terminals, tablets, and kiosks. All these technologies can enhance consumer experience.

Company leaders deliberately seek to improve costumers' experiences in product and product branding with the intent of achieving business advantages. For example, Starbucks created a customer experience in their stores to be a "third space" between the home and the office. Businesses adapted this concept to create a place where customers can work, relax, or both. It was important for this third space to be a fulfilling customer experience, as focusing on serving consumers' social needs as well as their traditional customer needs, has the potential to foster greater loyalty behaviors, which may result in repeat customers (Rihova, Buhalis, Moital, & Gouthro, 2013). It is thus, essential to evaluate the efficacy of information sources such as media, peers, and other online stakeholders to improve marketing, branding, and product development with the goal of improving customer experience. The models reviewed in this section have provided a broad, yet essential framework in managing business using online communities.

Ultimately, the existing literature points to customer experience as a key element influencing product branding. Researchers have explored the various components of customer experience, factors determining positive customer experience, the role of managers in enhancing positive customer experience, and measurement of customer experience (Klaus & Maklan, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2009). Most importantly and pertinent to the current study, researchers have highlighted how customer experiences influence

product branding and how companies should leverage technological advancements to enhance positive customer experience (Clatworthy, 2012).

Methodology

Most of the empirical studies reviewed have employed a quantitative design, focusing on the effects of social media on consumer behavior (Goh et al., 2013; Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Laroche et al., 2012; Yi & Jeon, 2003). Quantitative research methods are appropriate for determining the relationships among one or more numeric variables. Such designs are effective in contrasting variables and evaluating whether or not statistically significant relationships exist between them (Barnham, 2015). Fundamentally, researchers use quantitative designs to account structurally for the contributions of two or more variables in a specific model. When building a structural model, researchers use descriptive to test hypotheses regarding the interactions of proposed factors. Descriptive designs measure the relative associations between or among variables, while experimental designs measure the evidence of causal relationships among variables. The studies of Goh et al. (2013), Laroche et al. (2012), and Yi and Jeon (2003) are examples of quantitative designs examining the relationship between social media and online communities and consumer behavior.The reseach of Goh et al. (2013) used text mining of user generated and marketer generated content for a quantitative analysis. They found evidence that social media brand community contents affect consumer purchase behavior. The work of Laroche et al. (2012) was a quantitative study that used a confirmatory factor analysis to analyze several, scaled type data. They concluded there is value in social media based brand communities in that these OBCs offer brand owners the ability to enhance value, brand trust, brand loyalty, and feelings of

community among members. The quantitative study by Yi and Jeon (2003) investigated how reward schemes within loyalty programs influence perceived value of the program and how the perceived value affects customer loyalty. These authors found that the value perception and customer loyalty link could be divided into two different paths: a direct route from value perception to brand loyalty and an indirect route with program loyalty as a mediator.

A qualitative study by Cova and Pace (2006) examined the power that an OBC exerts over a brand of a mass-marketed product. They concluded that OBCs demonstrate a form of sociality and customer empowerment based on the personal self-exhibition in front of other consumers through the marks and rituals linked to the brand rather than interaction between peers. Another qualitative study followed a grounded theory approach to explore the domain of engagement to develop the scale for online brand community engagement. Baldus, Voorhees, and Calantone (2015) examined six previous studies to develop and test a typology of online brand community engagement (i.e., the compelling intrinsic motivations to continue interacting with an online brand community). These researchers identified 11 independent motivations and tested the scale's predictive power for participation in an online brand community. Baldus et al (2015) suggested their study provided managers with new insight in the motivations for and influence of interacting in online brand communities.

The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods for prior research on OBCs suggests either method will suffice in the study of OBCs. However, prior research has not examined the how participation in an OBC might influence brand perception and brand loyalty. The research questions of this study leads one to choose a qualitative

methodology given the frequent use of qualitative research when looking how or why questions.

Quantitative approaches. In quantitative approaches, authors carry out research from a positivist scientific paradigm to interpret general patterns (Behrend et al., 2011). Researchers use quantitative designs when succinct information about the constructs is readily available and requires further testing to assess whether the same pattern holds true to a specific population (Merriam, 2014). Quantitative studies on the marketing industry and business performance, for example, have tested variables previously unrelated to one another, but applied in a different business environment. The purpose of the current dissertation research, however, is to explore how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty from the perceptions of 10 expert participants in an online community in the United States. Exploring this phenomenon thus requires the researcher to use the qualitative approach to achieve an adequate understanding of the constructs of interest.

In another quantitative study, Zheng, Cheung, Lee, and Liang (2015) examined the concept of user engagement in the context of online brand communities. Zheng et al. proposed a model explaining how one might develop brand loyalty through user engagement. One hundred eighty-five current Facebook users responded to an online survey and results revealed that user engagement influenced brand loyalty both directly and indirectly through online community commitment. Thus, users tended to focus on the benefits derived from usage when they engaged in an online brand community. Like Rohm et al.'s (2013) study, participant recruitment was also bound to the Hong Kong area, representing a limitation to the study. In addition, this study involved a cross-

sectional design rather than investigating the development of brand loyalty from a long-term perspective. Nevertheless, the results helped inform e-marketers of the importance of user engagement behaviors for building brand loyalty through online communities. The authors also provided strategies to encourage members to engage in online brand communities in social networking sites such as Facebook. Zheng et al. presented a research model introducing the concept of user engagement in social media research and empirically examined its role in building brand loyalty in online brand communities.

Qualitative approaches. According to Lin (1998), the *interpretivist* perspective in qualitative research is appropriate when the researcher's intention is to evaluate details pertaining to preferences, motivations, and that actions are not easily quantifiable. An interpretive study seeks to combine qualitative data into systems of belief whose manifestations are particular to a case (Lin, 1998). Interpretivist approaches differ from positivist approaches in the types of questions asked and the types of conclusions drawn by the researcher (Lin, 1998). For instance, interpretivist researchers may ask "how" and "what" questions to gain an understanding of the phenomenon, while those from the positivist perspective may ask a defined question answerable by one or two answers. Positivist researchers work to interpret general patterns, whereas interpretivist researchers work to explain how general patterns apply in practice. The interpretivist approach is therefore an appropriate perspective to investigate how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty from the perception of the 10 expert participants in an online community in the United States.

Yin (2014) stated that qualitative research is appropriate when the researcher's intention is to garner an understanding of a phenomenon prior to the study. In this

context, qualitative research describes the experiences or feelings of a small sample of participants who provide their own explanations in a given setting. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative studies typically sample a small number of participants who have relatively rich experience with the phenomenon under investigation. However, given that qualitative research is reflective of participants' personal experiences and based on what their engagement with the phenomenon has meant to them (Yin, 2014), such data may lead the researcher to a biased conclusion. Thus, safeguards must be in place to ensure the study's validity. Furthermore, although qualitative research is a valid research design, qualitative studies are not generalizable to other populations in other locations or sociocultural environments. As such, the differences in human experience are a limitation to qualitative research.

Researchers often analyze qualitative data in a textual format. Text analysis is appropriate when the researcher's intention is to explore information and stratify the data into themes (Hyette et al., 2014). Yin (2014) defined *qualitative research* as an attempt to understand a phenomenon based on participants' natural experiences. Bernard and Bernard (2012) stated that if scant empirical research exists, the researcher might then use explorative techniques to determine necessary future research and generate hypotheses for quantitative research. Qualitative research techniques often involve explorative methods of inquiry and may utilize a number of data collection techniques, including (a) in-depth interviewing; (b) direct observation of participants and their environments; and (c) documented analysis to identify, prioritize, and develop new concepts as they emerge from the study (Bernard & Bernard, 2012; Merriam, 2014). Qualitative research as a methodology is therefore relevant in garnering an in-depth understanding of an

experience of a particular phenomenon. The questions “what” and “how” provide an in-depth understanding of a specific problem as they can answer questions as yet unknown to the researcher, yet still important in the context of the examined problem.

Pereira-Correia, García, Romo, and Contreras-Espinosa (2014) explored Facebook’s contribution as a marketing tool in companies’ business performance. Using interviews and a questionnaire, the authors analyzed individuals’ reactions in social media. The overall aim divided into three objectives covering marketing communication related to consumers and businesses within the context of Facebook. The goals were: (a) to learn about users’ visions on Facebook and their points of view as part of it, (b) to understand Facebook’s strategic vision from those responsible for marketing and communication within companies, and (c) to analyze Facebook’s role in marketing activities and interactive communication (users and companies). Findings suggest that organizations are consistently using traditional communication channels to market sales and promotions when they should move to create interactions that are meaningful to the audience before focusing on sales. Pereira-Correia et al. thus recommended that organizations consider the way they communicate with their target audience and consider social networks and mobile technologies as a new way of expanding the business.

Sources of data. The researcher utilized three data sources: (a) interviews of superfans, (b) social media postings related to the brand, and (c) online reviews of the brand’s products. Crucial to this study was the development of the interview guide (see Appendix C). The interview guide provided the researcher some structure for the interviews, but also allowed for flexibility in the interview process. The works of Seidman (2013) and Merriam (2014) served as resources in the development of the

interview guide. The brand's global marketing organization also served as a valuable resource in the development of the interview guide by suggesting questions that are relevant to an online branded community as well as brand perception and loyalty. Ultimately, the questions within the interview guide solicited germane discussion relevant to the participation in an online branded community within the global personal computer industry. The interview guide comprised semi-structured questions giving the interviewer the latitude to ask additional questions for clarification. The researcher recruited 14 online top contributors, designated as "superfans," to participate in semi-structured interviews via Skype video conference calls. Ten of the 14 elected to participate in the study. The researcher transcribed the recorded interviews with the participants. In addition to conducting the semi-structured interviews, the researcher reviewed social media postings and product reviews for the brand during 2016 to extrapolate a case scenario for data triangulation. Empirical research has demonstrated the viable use of semi-structured interviews, social media, and online reviews as viable sources of data (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016; Rohra & Sharma, 2016; See-To, & Del Rio, 2011; Snelson, 2016).

Summary

Great companies tend to use branding strategies to increase their overall value. Such branding strategies include deliberate efforts to create a brand experience and to manage the brand in a concerted manner. Social media is creating new challenges for companies and their branding strategies, however. The advent of the Internet followed by Web 2.0 technologies has introduced the influence of social media into business, including brand management (Laroche et al., 2012; Shamoon & Tehsee, 2011). Online

communities are one such area of social media, where owners and potential owners of products share experiences, ideas, and help each other. These communities may be founded by the users themselves or created by the company to help foster peer-to-peer discussions. These communities influence a company brand. What differs among social media-driven branded communities is that the "power" of influence is in the hands of the consumer more than in those of the producer or the company itself (Laroche et al., 2012; Shamoon & Tehsee, 2011). However, firm-hosted online communities are relatively new and research is lacking as to their influence on key company objectives, such as brand value (Brodie et al., 2013; Gruner et al., 2013).

This recent combination of brand experience management and social media creates opportunities and risks for companies. Findings from studies suggest that brand management can increase the value of a brand, but this has largely occurred with environments and structures that companies could control (M'zungu et al., 2010; Shamoon & Tehsee, 2011). With social media, companies no longer retain their previous levels of control, and therefore must find ways to influence brand value within the context of social media. There have been cases of social media having short-term influence on a company's market value, but the long-term influence of social media on brand value is still uncertain. This dissertation focused on the specific area of social media known as "online brand communities" and how participation in such communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty.

A product or company's brand image can have a tremendous influence on consumer choices. A strong brand can also command a higher price and margin than its weaker counterparts. While brands and the concept of brand management have existed

for 150 years (Hampf & Lindberg-Repo, 2011), new forms of management have emerged with the advent of social media. One type of social media involves online communities, which present challenges and opportunities for companies and their brand management strategies. WOM is a powerful social dynamic within these communities; participants in these communities often seek the advice and help of others in the community, to the point of often trusting the advice of strangers in the community more than the input from the company behind the brand. Previous research has demonstrated the value of brands and the need for strong brand management to increase brand value (Fuciu & Dumitrescu, 2010; Mercer, 2010; M'zungu et al., 2010; Shamoon & Tehsee, 2011). Other research has confirmed that consumers increasingly use social media, including those in online communities (Goh et al., 2013; Laroche et al., 2012; Zhao & Zhu, 2014). The power of WOM and social dynamics exponentially influences perceptions of a brand and, in turn, its value (Dubois et al., 2011). Online communities are sometimes founded by the users themselves and other times created by the companies to help foster peer-to-peer discussions. These communities may influence a company's brand, though not necessarily in a way that the company controls. It is thus far unknown how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Previous researchers have examined the various dynamics of online brand communities. Gruen et al. (2007) conducted a content analysis of previous research on the topic of online brand communities. Their analysis described characteristics of participation in online brand communities. These characteristics included trust in the community, increased satisfaction, customer engagement, and difference in the size of

communities. However, they did not examine how participation in an online brand community may influence brand value. Brodie et al. (2013) conducted a netnographic study of customer engagement in a virtual brand community. They found customer engagement to be an interactive, experiential process. Though their research demonstrates the importance of understanding how consumers engage in specific brand communities, it does not examine such engagement from a brand value perspective. The authors also suggested this is a complex and emerging topic that requires additional research (Brodie et al., 2013).

Previous researchers built a strong foundation for the use of online brand communities, yet they never explored how participation in an online brand community might influence brand value. Past research has not examined the connection between participation in an online brand community and brand value and thus, there is a gap in the current literature. Thus, in the light of this empirical need, this researcher focused on understanding how participation in online communities influences brand perception and brand loyalty using the C2C theory (Gruen et al., 2007) and the MOA model (MacInnis et al., 1991).

Using a case study design, the researcher investigated a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context—namely, participation in branded online communities. Participants were community experts that the company had designated as key contributors to its community. The company has created a program to recognize the top contributors to the community. These top contributors contribute approximately 80% of the useable content in the community.

The online community selected for this study has over 200,000 registered users. Some users register once just to obtain an answer and never return. Others access the online community frequently and answer questions other users may post. Superfans are users who provide a significant number of answers to other users and are typically the top contributors to an online community. The researcher conducted interviews via video conference calls using Skype or WebEx. The calls took place on a date and time of each participant's choosing. The researcher then transcribed each recorded interview. A second source of data for the study is online product reviews. The researcher reviewed retailer websites Walmart.com and BestBuy.com for these product reviews. Facebook and Twitter postings about the brand served as the third source of data for the study.

Chapter 3 details the methods and research design. This includes participant recruitment and selection, sources of data, and procedure for the proposed study. The researcher also addresses the data sources' reliability and validity, ethical considerations, and limitations of this qualitative study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. This was from the perspective of the superfans in an online branded community. This community was an English language OBC, but the participants were from multiple countries.

The content of this chapter readdresses the problem under investigation and this study's underlying research questions, and provides justification for the chosen methodology and research design. As the researcher was investigating the effects of participating in online brand communities on brand loyalty and brand perception, a qualitative case study was an appropriate research design. Additionally, the researcher discusses the population and sample selection, the data collection process (including data sources and the validity and reliability methods used to ensure viability in the data analysis procedure, and data management), ethical considerations, and limitations and delimitations.

Statement of the Problem

Prior to this study, it was unknown how participation in online communities affects the perception and loyalty of a brand, though these communities are now established places where companies create and cultivate relationships with and between customers. Within an online brand community, customers can assist each other with the company's products and services by relaying reviews, criticisms, and suggestions, and by posting queries about the products or services for other customers or company employees. Companies can also create such a community to foster brand value, as

stimulating ongoing conversation about their products and services in an online environment allows personnel to better gauge customer reception and opinion. An online brand community can also facilitate WOM brand influence and can cultivate a larger customer base. However, there is a paucity of research conducted related to how one may leverage these online brand communities (Wirtz et al., 2013).

Research Questions

The phenomenon under study was the influence of participation in online communities on brand perception and brand loyalty. To gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, the following research questions guided this study.

RQ1: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand?

RQ2: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?

Given the nature of this study's research questions, the researcher has deemed a qualitative approach more appropriate in exploring the phenomena of an individual's brand perception and brand loyalty on the premise that the individual participates in an online community than other approaches. The researcher drew insights through in-depth exploration of behavioral patterns that influence brand perception and brand loyalty. To do this, the researcher gathered data from in-depth interviews, online social media postings, and third-party reviews, all of which correspond to the concerning brand's products and services. In-depth interviews are the best approach to capturing consumer perceptions because of the opportunity for the interviewer to ask follow up questions to clarify participant opinions and allow the participant to bring up additional points. The

researcher sought a minimum of 10 superfans who are top contributors in the concerning brand's online community to conduct these interviews. Additionally, an analysis of archival data from customers' social media postings on the brand's products and services also provided data on brand perception. Moreover, the researcher examined online reviews of the brand's products and services listed on Walmart.com and BestBuy.com to seek insight into brand perception. These three sources of data allowed for triangulation of the data to assess commonalities regarding overall brand perception. The main goal was to understand how these particular individuals perceive the brand and how they demonstrate brand loyalty, thus answering the questions "how" as posited in the aforementioned research questions.

Research Methodology

The researcher utilized a qualitative method to explore how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. According to Muzellec, Lynn, and Lambkin (2012), a researcher can use a qualitative research strategy to describe complex situations that may not immediately lend themselves to quantifiable measurement. While quantitative research can also analyze complex situations, qualitative studies are more adept at examining the "how" and "why" of a situation. Qualitative studies are inductive in nature, examining a particular subject within its context (Shahrokh & Dadvand, 2014). Qualitative studies focus on ascribing meaning to ones lived experiences within the conditions wherein these experiences occur (Lundqvist et al., 2013).

In the case of this study, the researcher investigated the phenomenon of building brand perception and brand loyalty within the context of participation in brand

communities. Using a qualitative method allowed for emphasis on the existence of multiple realities within one situation and differentiated by the varying perspectives of the individuals who experience it (Muzellec et al., 2012). By choosing to use a qualitative method of inquiry, the researcher sought to solicit various perspectives on building brand perception and loyalty within online brand communities, while at the same time identifying trends that depict the phenomenon. The researcher collected data based on participants' observations and experiences and drew conclusions based on the data (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Wiles, Crow, & Pain, 2011).

In comparison to qualitative studies, quantitative studies are more deductive in nature, typically originating from a theory. Based on this methodology, one formulates hypotheses and collects numerical data quantifying the study variables (Jara & Cliquet, 2012; Merchant & Rose, 2013). Using the data collected, the researcher conducts mathematical or statistical analysis to test the hypotheses and draws conclusions and generalizations based on the results of the analysis (Jara & Cliquet, 2012; Merchant & Rose, 2013). The researcher elected did not use a quantitative method because this study focused on exploring how participation in online brand communities affects brand perception and loyalty. The use of qualitative methodology, by contrast, was an appropriate choice for this study, as brand communities' influence can be a complex area of exploration not easily reduced to quantifiable terms. Furthermore, a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to gain deeper knowledge and understanding of the problem by analyzing participants' underlying behaviors and attitudes.

Research Design

This research focused on a single case study unit. This case for this study was an online branded community within the personal computer industry. This OBC was an English language OBC used in multiple countries. The researcher employed a qualitative exploratory case study design to add to the understanding of how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. A case study is appropriate as the researcher sought to understand behavior and focus on contemporary events, which are characteristics of such a design (Yin, 2014). Researchers conduct case studies to analyze people, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems holistically, using multiple data sources (Shahrokh & Dadvand, 2014) and resulting in in-depth knowledge on the subject under investigation (Yin, 2014). In case studies, researchers explore a specific subject within its particular context (Cronin, 2014); in this case study, the researcher analyzed the phenomenon of brand perception and brand loyalty within the context of brand communities.

As noted, Yin (2014) suggested that a case study design is appropriate when the main research questions are “how” or “why,” when the researcher has little or no control over behavioral events, and when the focus of the study is contemporary rather than historical. Case study research is useful in investigating a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context; participation in branded online communities is a prime example of such a phenomenon. Moreover, as the influence of participation in online brand communities on brand loyalty and brand participation is unknown, a case study is an appropriate choice (Yin, 2014).

Outside of case study design, other designs considered for this study included narrative research, ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory. The researcher decided against narrative inquiry because the study involved firsthand information from participants through Skype video conferencing interviews. Further, the researcher did not include the use of other conventional sources for narrative inquiry, such as field notes, letters, stories, and journals (Merriam, 2014). The researcher also rejected the possibility of using ethnography because the study did not focus on tapping into the culture online community members embrace, but rather to understand how participation in online brand communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty (Merriam, 2014). Furthermore, the researcher did not choose phenomenology because participants' lived experiences were not the focus this study.

As previously noted, participants were experts that the company has designated as key contributors to the company's online community, or superfans. The company has created a program to recognize the top contributors to the community. These superfans contribute approximately 80% of the useable content in the community.

The researcher conducted video conference call interviews using semi-structured questions. The conference calls took place on a date and time of the participants' choosing. The researcher used Skype or WebEx (depending on which technology worked best for each participant) to facilitate and record the conference calls. The researcher then transcribed the recorded interviews. Apart from the interviews, the researcher also gathered online documents and reviews of the concerned brand's products and services from Walmart.com and Bestbuy.com, as well as data from social media postings. The researcher ensured the validity of this aggregate data via triangulation and cross-

referencing of the data gathered from these three sources, as well as by conducting a member check of the transcribed data.

Population and Sample Selection

The population for this case study unit was English language online branded communities (OBC) within the personal computer industry. The selection of the particular OBC for this study was a sample of convenience. The researcher collected the data from three sources: (a) semi-structured interviews with superfans of the concerned brand, (b) a review of online social media postings for the brand, and (c) online reviews of the brand's products and services. The superfans in the selected OBC were purposefully invited to participate in the study. The researcher also purposefully selected online social media postings and online product reviews. This was done by selecting the 50 most recent postings on each of the brand's social media presences on Facebook and Twitter. Likewise, the most recent online product reviews were selected – 50 from Walmart.com and 50 from Bestbuy.com.

There is often debate as to the sample size in qualitative studies, though in general, sample sizes are much smaller in comparison to quantitative studies (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). This is often because data collection reaches a point of diminishing returns in qualitative samples, whereby more data does not necessarily lead to more information. Furthermore, the integration of data is important and the researcher must ensure that each data source becomes part of the analytical framework (Merriam, 2014). Thus, O'Reilly and Parker (2012) suggested that the guiding principle for sample size selection in qualitative research should be *saturation*. In qualitative research, saturation implies the point at which a researcher finds no new information or themes in the data. "In qualitative

research the selection of respondents cannot follow the procedures of quantitative sampling because the purpose is not to count the opinions or people but explore the range of opinions and different representations of an issue (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012, p. 192). This researcher focused on conducting interviews with the superfans within a particular brand's online community. The researcher invited the 14 superfans within this community participate in the study. Since these 14 superfans are all of the superfans within the OBC in this study, the researcher was confident of obtaining data saturation via the semi-structured interviews (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Yin, 2014). Of these 14, 10 agreed to join the research ensuring saturation.

The researcher assigned interviewees a unique, anonymous identifier, and used this identifier for all records. No records included the participants' names or other personal identifying data. The researcher assigned codenames to each participant to assure anonymity. The researcher stored all textual or video records of the identity of the interviewees and the interviews on an encrypted external hard drive. When not being used for this research project, he kept this external hard drive in a locked compartment in his office. The researcher will retain records of the interviewees' identities and their subsequent interviews for a period of 3 years. The researcher will destroy the records after the 3-year period.

During each interview, the researcher used an interview guide (see Appendix C) detailing a list of semi-structured questions for the interview process. The researcher field-tested the interview guide with at least three online brand community participants to ensure reliability. The researcher excluded the field test participants from the final interview. Even though the interview guide provided some structure, participants had the

opportunity to respond freely and to expand on their answers (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The researcher was also free to ask follow-up questions that arose naturally from each participant's response (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Interviews took 45 to 60 minutes, including all follow-up questions.

Sources of Data

The researcher collected the data from three sources: (a) semi-structured interviews with participating superfans of the concerned brand, (b) online social media postings related to the brand, and (c) reviews of the brand's products and services as posted on Walmart.com and Bestbuy.com. Additionally, the researcher took into account that validity and reliability are both important aspects of many qualitative study designs. The researcher ensured validity by the triangulation of data from all three sources. Once the researcher completed data triangulation, he performed a member check to improve the validity. The researcher ensured reliability by conducting a pilot test for the interview questions and by triangulating the data.

The researcher developed a case study protocol to guide the collection of data from each of the sources (see Appendix D). A protocol is necessary in a qualitative case study to provide the procedures and general rules to be followed (Yin, 2014). The case study protocol is comprised of four sections. The first section is an overview of the case study. This covers the background information about the case study, substantive issues, and the relevant readings about the issues (Yin, 2014). The next section describes the data collection procedures. Yin (2014) suggested some major tasks in collecting data:

1. gaining access to key organizations or interviewees;
2. having sufficient resources while doing fieldwork – including a personal computer, writing instruments, paper, paper clips, and a pre-established, quite place to write notes privately;

3. developing a procedure for calling for assistance and guidance, if needed, from other team members or colleagues;
4. making a clear schedule of the data collection activities that are expected to be completed within specified periods of time;
5. providing for unanticipated events, including changes in the availability of interviewees as well as changes in your own energy, mood, and motivation while doing fieldwork. (p. 89)

The third section is the heart of the protocol, containing the substantive questions that reflect the line of inquiry (Yin, 2014). Some researchers view this section as the case study instrument. However, two characteristics distinguish case study questions from the type of questions one finds in a survey instrument. First, the questions within a case study are for the researcher, not the interviewee. The questions serve as a guide for the researcher to lead the conversation that is the interview. The main purpose of the protocol is to keep the researcher on track as data is collected (Yin, 2014). The second important characteristic is a case study protocol should distinguish clearly between different types or levels of questions. Yin (2014) suggested potentially relevant questions could occur at any of five levels:

1. questions asked of specific interviewees,
2. questions asked of the individual case,
3. questions asked of the pattern of findings across multiple cases,
4. questions asked of the entire study, and
5. normative questions about policy recommendations and conclusions.

While all levels of questions may be used, researchers should focus heavily on the Level 2 questions for the case study protocol (Yin, 2014). The Level 2 questions should lead one to the heart of the research. Level 1 questions are often used to create conversations with the interviewee without betraying what the interviewer is thinking

(which would be a Level 2 question). Yin (2014) posited the difference between Level 1 and Level 2 questions is highly significant. The researcher carefully guided the interviews with this advice in mind.

There are three sources of data for this research. The primary source of data was semi-structured interviews of the superfans. The researcher conducted these interviews via Skype and recorded (both audio and video). The researcher transcribed the recorded interviews to create a useable dataset for data analysis of the interviews. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews. The researcher used NVivo 10 for this thematic analysis.

With qualitative research, it is important to triangulate the data sources (Carter, 2014; Yin, 2014). The researcher used two additional sources of data to create such triangulation. One source of data for this triangulation was social media postings about the brand. The researcher used NVivo to collect these social media postings from Facebook and Twitter, as it has the capability of connecting to social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter to pull in content for analysis. With NVivo, one may apply chosen criteria to target specific keywords for a search. In the case of this research, one such criterion will be the brand selected for this research. This allowed the researcher to download the relevant content from the social media platforms and import the content into NVivo for analysis.

The third data source for the data triangulation consisted of online reviews found on Walmart and Best Buy's websites. More specifically, it was comprised of reviews of the brand's product that one may find on www.walmart.com and www.bestbuy.com. The researcher downloaded these reviews using NVivo's Ncapture feature that allows one to

download content from a website. Once downloaded, the researcher imported the content into NVivo for analysis.

Validity

Validity refers to the trustworthiness of the quality of the data in a given experiment and the interpretations or conclusions drawn from the data (Cousin, 2013). Strategies for enhancing validity in qualitative research include (a) triangulation, (b) coherence, (c) uncovering self-evidence, (d) testimonial validity, and (e) reflective validity (Bernard & Bernard, 2012; Leung, 2015). Within this study, the researcher employed both data triangulation and member checking as means to validate the data analysis. To ensure validity, the researcher triangulated the data from all three aforementioned data sources to reveal patterns relating to brand perception. As an additional validity check, the researcher also employed member checking by providing the interviewees with a synthesis of the analyzed data. This synthesis included the thematic analysis of the interviews and the content analysis of the online product reviews and social media postings. The researcher asked the interviewees to review and validate the summary of the synthesized data (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Harvey, 2015). The researcher's use of a case study protocol also aids in ensuring validity. When one follows a protocol for data collection, one creates a chain of evidence that provides construct validity (Yin, 2014).

Reliability

Krippendorff (2012) described some methods to ensure the reliability in qualitative research, including observing, in-depth interviewing, and comparing and contrasting any similarities. In this study, use of both a pilot test and triangulation of the

data helped to ensure reliability. Given the use of an interview guide, pilot testing helped to ensure that the researcher was be able to collect the necessary information to answer these particular research questions.

Pilot testing strengthened the reliability of the interview questions (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). To run the pilot test, the researcher first asked a set of respondents to evaluate each interview question for overall comprehension, clarity, ambiguity, and to assess potential difficulties in answering. The second step determined the interview guide's reliability by checking for test–retest reliability. The researcher assessed how each question in the guide helped meet the study objectives from the pilot participants' perspectives and identified any issues with the interview guide. Through this process, the researcher was able to eliminate redundant questions in the interview guide. The researcher utilized insights gained from the pilot testing to improve the interview questions. Furthermore, the researcher was conscientious about controlling for self-imposed bias when gathering data from interviews (Hyette et al., 2014). This study's reliability depended on the accurate reviews of previous relevant literature and the researcher's non-biased presentation of findings.

Yin (2014) asserted that case study research demonstrates reliability through consistency and repeatability. This researcher utilized data triangulation to determine the consistency of the findings from all three sources of data—the participant interviews, product and service reviews, and social media postings. The researcher used the thematic analysis technique in generating emergent themes and patterns to answer the research questions (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The use of a case study protocol helped with reliability by providing a clear view of the plan and expected outcome of the

research. As Yin (2014) noted, “The protocol is a major way of increasing the reliability of case study research and is intended to guide the researcher in carrying out the data collection” (p. 84).

Data Collection and Management

To address the research questions, the researcher collected data from three sources of data. As previously mentioned, these three sources are comprised of (a) interviews with superfans, (b) online social media postings, and (c) online reviews of the concerned brand’s products and services. The researcher obtained approval from the company as well as IRB approval from the university. After obtaining IRB approval, data collection commenced.

The brand’s global community manager provided a list of top contributors from the brand’s online community. The top contributors received email recruitment letters describing the study, seeking a minimum of 10 participants who are the top contributors in the brand’s specific online community to participate in the interview portion of data collection. The expectation was the involvement of the top contributors would reach the saturation point required in understanding the phenomenon under examination. There were 14 designated top contributors—superfans—in the concerned online brand community. The e-mail included an informed consent form for participants to sign and return to the researcher as a sign of willingness to participate in the study. The informed consent form included the study’s purpose and assurance of participants’ confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher assigned a unique code to each participant to ensure confidentiality. All documentation and other records included this code for participant identification.

Given geographical constraints between the researcher and the 10 participants, the interviews took place via video conference calls using Skype or WebEx. The researcher employed the interview guide while performing the interviews. As the researcher self-developed the interview guide, field-testing utilizing a pilot test aided in ensuring validity. The researcher then modified the interview guide as needed prior to the actual interviews. The researcher recorded and transcribed the interviews for preliminary data analysis.

Through the interviews, the researcher gathered participants' firsthand perceptions of the concerned brand and of the online brand community in order to answer this study's research questions. As aforementioned, even though the interviews are partially structured, participants were able to respond and elaborate in open-ended ways, generating follow-up questions arising naturally from their unique responses (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The semi-structured interviews took place at a time and locations of the participants' choosing. The researcher used Skype or WebEx to record all interview proceedings and transcribe thereafter for the data analysis procedure.

The researcher collected data from the online social media postings pertaining to the concerned brand via a data analysis program, NVivo 10 (QSR International). This program enabled the researcher to retrieve, code, organize, store, compare, and link data from social media sites regarding the concerned brand. The researcher utilized this software to gather data from social media sites Facebook and Twitter, and used the program's filtering systems to search for data by keywords. In order to collect these data, the researcher searched keywords including the name of the concerned brand as well as its products and services, and additional popular, more general keywords relating to these

products and services. The researcher only used data from social media posts that specifically discussed the concerned brand's products or services. Similarly, there was an examination of the data from customer reviews on Walmart.com and Bestbuy.com. The researcher only used data from posts ranging from the beginning of 2016 to the time of data collection to ensure that he captured the most relevant and contemporaneous brand perceptions.

The researcher will maintain all gathered data in a locked filing cabinet for 3 years. An external hard drive contains encrypted versions of all textual and video records. After 3 years have passed, the researcher will destroy the records using a commercially available shredder to destroy any hard copies. The researcher will also use a software utility to destroy any electronic files. This software utility will meet the Department of Defense (DoD) 5220.22M Guttman method of file deletion requirements to ensure destruction of the electronic files (Seo & Park, 2014). Appendix E is the 12-step process map used in this study and depicts the cohesive process of data collection and analysis, including all of the steps regarding data collection, analysis, and storage and destruction of data files.

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher utilized an inductive thematic analysis (TA) technique to analyze the data from the transcribed interviews. The semi-structured interviews provided newly created data and were narratives of life stories, so the researcher used an inductive TA to identify themes. TAs are used to identify patterns of meaning across a dataset that provide an answer to the research questions (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The analysis of the interviews yielded codes as part of the process. Therefore, this was an inductive TA. The

researcher codified data within the interviews using the NVivo 10 to identify themes. The researcher created codes in parallel with the analyzing of the data. Appendix J contains these codes. This followed Clarke and Braun's (2013) six steps for conducting a thematic analysis.

Predetermined codes provided a framework for the content analysis (CA) of the social media postings and online product reviews. Existing literature on brand participation, loyalty, and value guided the development of these predetermined codes for the CA. The analysis of these two sources of data was deductive since it involved the application of predefined coding in the analysis of the text. The researchers objective with the analysis of the social media postings and online product reviews was to identify with the text key themes related to the research questions by using predefined coding. Appendxi J lists these predefined codes.

The researcher examined the key themes of brand loyalty, brand perception, and participation in the online branded community.

The researcher utilized NVivo's capabilities to search for data by keywords to identify themes for the content analysis of the data retrieved from the product reviews and from social media postings. The keywords searched included the name of the concerned brand, names of the concerned brand's products and services, and additional popular and more-general keywords relating to these products and services. These keywords codified within NVivo to identify recurring themes within the content. The researcher coded and similarly utilized essential texts and phrases for content analysis by manually searching for and coding words and phrases to be analyzed and by aggregating, coding, and stratifying certain keywords and phrases using NVivo. According to

Vaismoradi et al. (2013), thematic analysis is a method to identify and understand the themes that emerge from the interviews. This type of analysis is excellent for researchers seeking to develop meaning and draw conclusions using multiple interviews. The researcher coded the themes extrapolated from the three data sources to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand?

RQ2: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?

The researcher then evaluated the data for consistency through a process of comparing and identifying relevant cases demonstrating the meaning of participants' perceptions. The researcher codified the perceptions to aid the data analysis. Once the researcher derived meaning from the codes, he extrapolated the codes to identify the themes relevant in answering the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

Upon both the university's IRB approval and the concerned company's approval, the researcher sent an e-mail invitation to the company's top online community contributors. The e-mail invitation described the study's purpose and included an informed consent form, which explained the study in detail and provided potential participants with all information necessary for them to make an informed decision about participating in the study. The researcher informed the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. This research did not incur any ethical issues, although these may occur in any study. If unexpected ethical issues

had arisen, the researcher would have addressed them in a manner consistent with the Belmont Principles. Furthermore, the researcher assured participants' confidentiality and anonymity by removing any identifying information and replacing their names with pseudonyms and by storing all data and forms in a protected, private location. As aforementioned, the researcher will keep data for 3 years before destroying it.

Limitations and Delimitations

One may draw important limitations influencing the generalizations from this study. First, the qualitative exploratory case study design with analysis of a small number of online community brand experts (superfans) within a particular online branded community within the global personal computer industry. As such, it may not be broadly generalizable. However, the goal of this exploratory case study was to produce accurate findings that increase the understanding of the case and though the examination may not be broadly generalizable, stakeholders in marketing and brand management will find the case narratives and details of the results useful. A second limitation involves the use of bias within the self-developed interview guide. The researcher reduced the potential bias imposed by devising an interview guide which was field tested in a pilot study with participants of the online community. This study used recent postings to social media and online product reviews related to a specific brand. A broader audience may have different perspectives. The analyses for this project were limited to the researcher. A project with other researchers may have coded the data differently and yielded different results. Finally, time boundaries limited this study. Data collection was limited to postings from January 1, 2016 to the time of data collection. The data from this period may not completely reflect the data before January 1, 2016 or after the date of the collection

period. The three forms of data therefore only provide a snapshot of a dynamic process. Brand loyalty at a moment in time captures some of the dynamics in action, but is unable to address those dynamics in environments with different variables at play. The purpose and nature of this exploratory case study, in addition to its design, built in these limitations; however, the researcher has taken steps to minimize them and they did not affect the results in a meaningful way.

The size of the sample delimits this research. There were only 14 superfans within the targeted branded community. This represents the entire population within the scope of this study. Nevertheless, 14 is a small population. However, the 10 interviews conducted presented a more than reasonable sample size of the 14 superfans. This research project had a data collection deadline of August 31, 2016. This deadline delimited the data. The researcher delimited social media postings and online product reviews data sources to 50 from each source. Another possible delimitation of this study is the scope of the research. The researcher only looked at one brand's online community, which may not represent the opinions of superfans from other branded online communities.

Summary

A review of existing literature has indicated a dearth of literature on how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. There is also very little known about how brand communities can best be utilized to increase brand value and profit (Wirtz et al., 2013). To address this gap in the literature, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how participation in online brand communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty from the perception of the top contributors in an online community in the United States.

The researcher formulated the proposed research questions in this study to understand how participation in online brand communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. These questions provide a framework for exploring brand perception and brand loyalty for a group of superfans within the particular branded online community examined in this study. The advent of social media, along with the existing dynamics of brand management, poses new challenges to companies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Laroche at al., 2012; Rizwan et al., 2014). The use of branded online communities is one area of social media that presents brand management challenges.

The researcher elected to use a qualitative research methodology to carry out this study. Brand management within a social medium such as a branded online community is complex and qualitative methods can be useful for researching complex topics, particularly in relation to the purpose of the study (Lin, 1998; Muzellec et al., 2012; Yin, 2014). The researcher desired to examine various perspectives on creating brand perception and loyalty within online brand communities, while simultaneously identifying trends that depict the phenomenon. The objective was to understand the "hows" and "whys" of brand perception and brand loyalty when one participates in a branded online community (Lundqvist et al., 2013). Qualitative methodology was therefore more appropriate as compared to the quantitative methodology. Similarly, in line with the study's purpose, the researcher chose a case study design because it allowed the researcher to examine a specific concept within a specific context in a holistic manner (Shahrokh & Dadvand, 2014; Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013). In this study, the researcher sought to explore the concepts of brand perception and brand loyalty within the context of online brand communities.

The 14 superfans who participate in the brand's online community represented the study's target population and encompassed the entire population within the scope of this study. Qualitative research uses saturation as a guiding principle (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012,). Ten of these superfans agreed to participate in the study. While a sample size of 10 appears small, it did reach the point of saturation as these 14 represented the entire population of superfans within this particular branded online community. While the researcher desired to interview all 14 of these superfans, he was able to interview 10 participants, which was the minimum.

The primary data source for this study was semi-structured interviews with the superfans of this branded online community. The researcher conducted and recorded these interviews. The researcher developed an interview guide to facilitate the interviews. These interviews also present a limitation of this study, as the researcher had no control over the answers given. However, this did not adversely affect the overall results of the study negatively, given the exploratory nature of this research project.

The data analysis required triangulation to ensure reliability. Two additional sources of data were necessary to conduct triangulation. These other two sources were (a) product reviews for the brand on BestBuy.com and Walmart.com websites and (b) social media mentions of the brand. The researcher compared a thematic analysis of the interviews to a content analysis of the reviews and social media postings on Facebook and Twitter. The researcher looked for common themes within the three sources of data. The researcher used this process to answer the research questions:

RQ1: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand?

RQ2: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?

Chapter 3 detailed this study's procedure and methodology and provided justifications for the appropriateness of the case study method in facilitating a detailed understanding of how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. The researcher also reviewed the population and sample selection, the data sources, validity and reliability of the data, data collection and management, the data analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and the limitations and delimitations of the study. Along with the presentation of the study plans, as well as a process map for the collection and analysis of data, the researcher justified the use of three different sources of data and the use of the content analysis technique in generating emergent themes and patterns to help address the research questions.

Chapter 4 contains the results and findings generated from the data analysis. Exploration of the phenomena within the scope of the participants' experiences with the branded online community yielded answers to the research questions. Additionally described is how this study may influence other research.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

Prior to this study, the effect of participation in online brand communities on the perception and loyalty to a brand was unknown. Companies frequently utilize brand communities to foster relationships with customers and assist customers within the context of their branded products and services. Both brand management and social media influence consumer loyalty and perception (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Laroche at al., 2012; Rizwan et al., 2014). Hence, there was a need to examine the experiences of online brand community members who are top content contributors to the community concerning their perceptions on how participation in online brand communities influences individual loyalty and perception of the brand.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how participation in online brand communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty from the perception of the top contributors in an online community in the United States. When examining consumer-based perspectives, it is important to consider that brand value refers to consumer perceptions of products (Eryigit & Eryigit, 2014). The results of this study may help to inform company leaders of the value of online brand communities and their influence on brand perception and brand loyalty.

The phenomenon of interest in this study was the influence of participation in online communities on brand perception and brand loyalty. The proposed study included the following research questions to examine this phenomenon:

RQ1: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand?

RQ2: How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?

The researcher employed a qualitative methodology and a case study design to explore how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty. The three sources of data for this research were (a) 10 semi-structured interviews with participating superfans of the concerned brand, (b) online social media postings related to the brand, and (c) reviews of the brand's products and services as posted on Walmart.com and Bestbuy.com. These three sources allowed for data triangulation regarding overall brand loyalty and brand perception.

Table 1 lists these questions and the themes identified within these questions. These seven themes are outcomes of this research. Appendix I lists portions of the conversations with each participant that align with each of the major themes.

Table 1
Major Themes

Research Question	Major Theme
How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?	• Brand loyalty to other brands, and brand loyalty to this brand. • Level of online forum participation by respondents. • Recommendations to others. • Recommendations for the online forums to increase brand loyalty.
How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand?	• Brand perceptions (positive and negative). • Perceptions about the brand's online forum. • Reasons for joining the brand's online forum.

Presented in this chapter is a review of the problem statement, the research questions, the research methodology, and the data sources. Presented as well is the capture of data, the analysis of the data, the codification of the data, and the identification of themes. This chapter concludes with the results from the study.

Descriptive Data

The researcher recruited 14 superfans who are top contributors in the concerning brand's online community to conduct these interviews. The company had created a program to recognize the top contributors to the community. These superfans contribute approximately 80% of the useable content in the community. The participants were all male with a considerable length of experience with computers. While most of the participants were from the United States, there was some representation from other countries. The community under study is an English language community. Having participants from countries where English is a second language illustrates the global reach of online communities.

This study collected data from three different sources: (a) interviews with superfans, (b) online social media postings, and (c) online reviews of the concerned brand's products and services. To do this, the researcher gathered data from in-depth interviews, online social media postings, and third-party product reviews, all of which correspond to the brand's products and services. The researcher developed a case study protocol to guide the collection of data from each of the sources (see Appendix D).

During each interview, the researcher used an interview guide (see Appendix C) detailing a list of semi-structured questions for the interview process. The researcher field-tested the interview guide with three online brand community participants to ensure

reliability. The researcher excluded the field test participants from the final interview. Even though the interview guide provided some structure, participants had the opportunity to respond freely and to expand on their answers (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The researcher was also free to ask follow-up questions that arose naturally from each participant's response (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The interviews took between 48 and 74 minutes, including all follow-up questions. The researcher used Skype or WebEx, depending on which technology worked best for the participant, to facilitate and record the video conference calls, and then transcribed the recorded interviews. In total, there were 110 pages of transcribed text (single-spaced, Times New Roman, and 12-point font).

Moreover, archival data from customers' social media postings on Facebook and Twitter of on the brand's products and services also provided data on brand perception. The researcher used NVivo to collect these social media postings from Facebook and Twitter, as it has the capability of connecting to social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter to pull in content for analysis. With NVivo, one may apply chosen criteria to target specific keywords for a search. In the case of this research, one such criterion will be the brand selected for this research. This allowed the researcher to download the relevant content from the social media platforms and import the content into NVivo for analysis.

The third data source for the data triangulation consisted of online reviews found on Walmart and Best Buy's websites. More specifically, it was comprised of reviews of the brand's product that one may find on www.walmart.com and www.bestbuy.com. The researcher downloaded these reviews using NVivo's Ncapture feature that allows one to

download content from a website. Once downloaded, the researcher imported the content into NVivo for analysis. These three sources of data allowed the researcher to triangulate the data and seek commonalities regarding overall brand perception and loyalty. Samples of the transcribed interviews are interspersed throughout this chapter and can be found in Appendix I. Appendix F contains samples of social media postings and online reviews. Table 2 demonstrates the descriptive data from this study.

Table 2

Sources of Data

Source	Quantity	Additional Notes
Interviews	10	A range of 48-74 minutes for each interview 110 pages of transcribed text in total, single-spaced An average of 7.85 pages of transcribed, single-spaced text per participant
Social Media	100 postings for each medium • Twitter: 1607 words; 40 contributors • Facebook: 2,147 words; 43 contributors	Facebook & Twitter
Online Reviews	50 posted reviews, 3,137	Walmart.com • 4 ½ pages transcribed, single-spaced • 32 individual contributors
Online Reviews	50 posted reviews, 2,208 words	BestBuy.com • 2 ½ pages transcribed, single-spaced • 15 individual contributors

Table 3 contains details on the timing, length, and medium for the interviews. Shown in Table 4 are participant demographics.

Table 3

Interviews Summary

Participant	Interview Date	Interview Time	Interview Medium	Interview Length	Transcribed Pages Single Spaced	Received Consent Form?
P1	5/25/2016	8:00 AM CDT	Skype	67 minutes	14	Yes
P2	5/25/2016	12:00 PM CDT	Webex	63 minutes	13	Yes
P3	6/6/2016	7:00 PM CDT	Webex	56 minutes	8	Yes
P4	6/2/2016	5:00 PM CDT	Webex	61 minutes	12	Yes
P5	6/9/2016	2:00 PM CDT	Webex	74 minutes	16	Yes
P6	5/31/2016	3:00 PM CDT	Skype	62 minutes	14	Yes
P7	6/8/2016	12:00 PM CDT	Webex	51 minutes	8	Yes
P8	6/7/2016	2:00 PM CDT	Webex	57 minutes	11	Yes
P9	7/8/2016	4:00 PM CDT	Webex	48 minutes	7	Yes
P10	7/14/2016	1:00 PM CDT	Webex	53 minutes	7	Yes
Total				592	902	

Table 4

Participant Demographics

Participant	Location	Years as Member	Years of Computer Experience	Gender
P1	US	2	30	M
P2	France	1.5	15	M
P3	US	4	35	M
P4	US	4	20	M
P5	Germany	2.5	18	M
P6	France	3	16	M
P7	Germany	2	8	M
P8	Italy	3	22	M
P9	US	—	8	M
P10	US	1	10	M
Average		2.6	18.2	

The interviews of the superfans provided the most insightful information as to the how's and why's of their participation. The social media postings and online reviews helped illuminate brand loyalty and contained information that helped validate the results from the interviews. However, little demographic information was available from the social media postings and online reviews. Those sources are typically anonymous and lack demographic details. The nature of the Facebook postings was different from the Twitter posts. It was more common for customers to use Facebook to seek help with their product. Twitter users mostly used it for promotional purposes. Table 5 has a summary of the Facebook posts. Table 6 has a summary of the Twitter posts.

Table 5

Facebook Summary

Source	Context	Timeframe	Perspective	Percentage of All Posts
Facebook Users	Service	June, 2016	Negative	34%
Facebook Users	Service	June, 2016	Positive	2%
Facebook Users	Sales	June, 2016	Negative	0%
Facebook Users	Sales	June, 2016	Positive	26%
Company representative	Service	June, 2016	N/A	28%
Company representative	Sales	June, 2016	N/A	10%

Table 6

Twitter Summary

Source	Context	Timeframe	Perspective	Percentage of All Posts
Twitter Users	Promotional	June, 2016	Positive	46%
Twitter Users	Sales	June, 2016	Positive	21%
Twitter Users	Service	June, 2016	Negative	33%

The researcher retrieved online product reviews from Walmart.com and Bestbuy.com. From Walmart.com, there were 50 reviews with 32 individual contributors; from bestbuy.com, there were 50 reviews with 15 individual contributors. These reviews provided better insights into the customers' perspectives of the brand because they contained more content than the social media postings. These perspectives were all post-purchase reviews of specific products from the brand. The reviewers, for the most part, had a positive view of the brand and its products. Online product reviews, like the social media postings, lacked detail demographic information. Table 7 below is a summary of the online reviews.

Table 7

Online Reviews Summary

Source	Context	Timeframe	Perspective	Percentage of All Posts
Walmart	Product Review	June, 2016	Negative	12%
Walmart	Product Review	June, 2016	Positive	28%
Best Buy	Product Review	June, 2016	Negative	14%
Best Buy	Product Review	June, 2016	Positive	46%

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher used two distinct types of qualitative data analysis approaches: thematic analysis (TA) and content analysis (CA). An inductive thematic analysis technique provided analysis of the data from the transcribed interviews. The purpose of a TA is to identify patterns of meaning across a dataset that provide an answer to the research questions (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The researcher identified patterns through a rigorous process of data familiarization, data coding, and theme development and revision. The researcher used this process for the interviews in order to ascertain themes

and patterns across participants' experiences in participating in an online branded community within the global personal computer industry.

The researcher based the thematic analysis on Clarke and Braun's (2013) six steps. These steps for analyzing the data included:

1. Familiarization with the data: This phase involves reading and re-reading the data, to become immersed and intimately familiar with its content.

2. Coding: This phase involves generating succinct labels (codes!) that identify important features of the data that might be relevant to answering the research question. It involves coding the entire dataset, and after that, collating all the codes and all relevant data extracts, together for later stages of analysis.

3. Searching for themes: This phase involves examining the codes and collated data to identify significant broader patterns of meaning (potential themes). It then involves collating data relevant to each candidate theme, so that you can work with the data and review the viability of each candidate theme.

4. Reviewing themes: This phase involves checking the candidate themes against the dataset, to determine that they tell a convincing story of the data, and one that answers the research question. In this phase, themes are typically refined, which sometimes involves them being split, combined, or discarded.

5. Defining and naming themes: This phase involves developing a detailed analysis of each theme, working out the scope and focus of each theme, determining the 'story' of each. It also involves deciding on an informative name for each theme.

6. Writing up: This final phase involves weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts, and contextualizing the analysis in relation to existing literature.

Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within existing texts or sets of texts (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Since the text of the social media postings and online reviews already existed, the researcher utilized a deductive content analysis to analyze the data captured from these sources of data. A deductive approach fit because of preconceived themes often found in social media and online reviews (Bernard & Bernard, 2012). A list of predefined codes provided the basis for the content analysis. The researcher derived these codes from existing research on

brand perception and brand loyalty. Appendix J contains these codes. The researcher used NVivo 10 to search for data by keyword to identify themes for the content analysis of the data retrieved from the product reviews and from social media postings. The keywords searched included the name of the brand, names of the concerned brand's products and services, and additional popular and more general keywords relating to these products and services. The researcher did this after using a manual approach to coding themes.

The researcher based the content analysis on work of Krippendorff (2012). The content analysis involved:

1. Copy and read the transcript - make brief notes in the margin on the discovery of interesting or relevant information as well as possible code assignment
2. Go through the notes made in the margins and assign codes to the text using the predetermined code list.
3. Identify any possible new codes that did not exist in the predetermined codes and assign them to the text
4. Identify whether or not the codes can be linked any way and list them as major themes and / or minor or themes. Major themes were directly related to the research questions
5. Compare and contrast the various major and minor themes
6. Repeat the first five stages again for each transcript
7. Collect all of the themes and examine each in detail and consider if it fits and its relevance
8. Review to ensure that the information was categorized as it should be
9. Review all of the themes and ascertain whether some themes can be merged or if some need to them be sub-categorized
10. Return to the original transcripts and ensure data categorization

The researcher chose to use a TA for the interviews because it is useful for analyzing narrative materials like life stories (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The participant interviews were life stores of their experiences with participation in an online branded

community within the global personal computer industry. The deductive CA of the social media and online reviews data used predefined codes to provide a framework of brand participation and loyalty. The analysis of the date yielded themes. These themes became the foundation for answering the research questions. Table 8 illustrates the original coding in NVivo. Quotes from the data serve as supporting examples of the coding.

Table 8

Original NVivo Coding

Code	Description	Example
Reasons for Joining	Why superfans joined the online community originally and why they continue to participate	“Well, I went there for, to find an answer for myself and I got to looking at the questions people were answering and I just thought, "Well, I could answer that," and "I can answer that," and pretty soon I was involved.”
Brand Perceptions	Superfans’ and social media users’ opinions about Acer, other brands, and why they hold these attitudes	“My overall experience with Acer, I have some very strong feelings about it. I feel that they make a superior product for what I was buying.”
Changes in Perception	If, at all, superfans’ opinions about Acer changed over the years and why this change occurred	“Nothing scared me off the Acer brand. I think, I still think they're good computers.”
Perceptions of Online Community	General insights into how the online forum community functions	“It's a good community, there's good people on there, and there's good people supporting us. They give us better tools to use than, like, the Lenovo forum does. They don't, as far as I can see, they don't give you access to the repair manuals and things like that, which really helps.”
Brand Loyalty	Superfans’ and social media users’ level of loyalty towards Acer, other brands, and why are/are not loyal	“I look at all the different manufactures and then choose the one that is the best for the best price for my needs at that moment. I give a little bit more weight to the brands that I'm more familiar with and less to the ones that I'm either not as familiar with or have had bad experiences with in the past.”
Levels of Participation	How active superfans are on the online forum, including how long they have been superfans	“I have around 11, near to 12,000 replies and over 1000 solutions”
Online Forum Recommendations	Suggestions for improvements to the online forum and for the online community	“Meaningful participation by representatives from the product and it's sort of like a two part thing because number one, you need participation from people that represent the brand in the forums.”
Recommendations to Others	How/if superfans and social media users would recommend Acer to others and why/not	“Most Chromebooks sacrifice display quality for the low price but not his model. The last thing is the excellent keyboard and trackpad. Acer did a really great job on this product and I highly recommend it.”

Member checking helped boost the validity of the interviews. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher created a summary of the interviews (brand community

participation interviews observations version 0.1) and each participant received an e-mail with this summary. Each participant reviewed this information and emailed the researcher to confirm their agreement or suggest modifications. Some sent back their feedback while others simply said they agreed with the version 0.1 observations. After reviewing the feedback, the researcher created the brand community interviews observations version 1.0 document. That document is the basis for Appendix H. A summary of this member checking is in Table 9 below. In addition, the researcher used negative case analysis, which involves a conscious search for negative cases and unconfirmed evidence. This helped with the reliability and validity of the data.

Table 9

Member Checking

Participant	Interview Date	Date Member Checking Sent	Confirmed or Suggestions	Second Member Checking Sent	Confirmed or Suggestions
P1	5/25/2016	7/16/16	Confirmed	7/22/16	Confirmed
P2	5/25/2016	7/16/16	Suggestions	7/22/16	Suggestions
P3	6/6/2016	7/16/16	Confirmed	7/22/16	Confirmed
P4	6/2/2016	7/16/16	Confirmed	7/22/16	Confirmed
P5	6/9/2016	7/16/16	Confirmed	7/22/16	Confirmed
P6	5/31/2016	7/16/16	Suggestions	7/22/16	Suggestions
P7	6/8/2016	7/16/16	Confirmed	7/22/16	Confirmed
P8	6/7/2016	7/16/16	Confirmed	7/22/16	Confirmed
P9	7/8/2016	7/16/16	Confirmed	7/22/16	Confirmed
P10	7/14/2016	7/16/16	Confirmed	7/22/16	Confirmed

The interview guide (Appendix C) provided structure for the interviews. Both the interview and interviewee asked additional questions and provided additional responses as part of the flow of the conversation. Tables 10 and 11 contain the essence of these conversations and the resulting themes.

Table 10

RQ1: Questions with Codes and Themes

Questions	Codes	Themes
What is your perception of Acer's brand? What are your perceptions of other brands?	Previous use experience	Brand Perceptions
Could you please describe how a company brand could use online community in marketing their products?	Current use experiences	
How do you define brand perception?	Features & Functions of Product	
Has your perception of the Acer brand changed since you started participating in the Acer Community? If so, in what way has your perception changed?	Marketing	
Do you look for other member's answers before you post a question?	Helpful	Perceptions of Online Community
If you post an answer to another member, what process do you go through to develop your answer?	Welcoming	
Tell me about your experience with the community – what is your opinion of the setup of the community?	Community Activity Level	
What elements are in online community that could influence brand perception and brand loyalty?	Size of Community Brand Employee Involvement	
What is your level of participation in the online community?	Had an issue with product	Reasons for Joining Community
What led you to this community?	Helping a Friend	
What motivates you to continue participating? Please describe a situation where online participation influences brand perception and brand loyalty.	Helping Others in Community	

The codes listed in these tables related to the themes. Some of the codes were predetermined and some the researcher discovered as part the data analysis process. Appendix J lists the predetermined codes and the codes discovered during the analyses.

Table 11

RQ2: Questions with Codes and Themes

Questions	Codes	Themes
What is your level of participation in other online communities How would you describe your brand loyalty to the companies that have these communities? Has your brand loyalty changed after you started participating in this brand's community? If so, in what way have they changed? How do you define brand loyalty?	Previous History with Brand Current Experience with Brand Comparison of Brand to other Brands	Brand Loyalty
How long have you been participating in this community? What is your level of participation in the online community? How often do you read the community? How often do you post on the community? How often do you respond to others in the community?	Frequency of Involvement Reasons for Involvement	Level of Participation
What products do you discuss most often in the community? Why do you discuss these products? How would you describe your personal criteria for recommending to others?	Product Use Product Features	Recommendations to Others
Do you participate in other online communities? What other companies and/or brands? What is your impression of these other communities? How do they compare to this community? What are some good ideas you have seen with other online communities? Could you please describe how a company brand could use online community in servicing or supporting their products?	Ease of Use Brand Employee Involvement Transparency	Recommendations to Online Communities

The actual data analysis followed the original data analysis plan as described in Chapter 3. The remainder of this chapter includes a discussion of how these findings correspond to the topic and research questions as well as a narrative presentation of the results with illustrative quotes supporting the evidence. This includes a discussion of each research question as viewed through the specific themes and categories that have

emerged during the coding process. In addition, the researcher identified any outliers or discrepancies that emerged during analysis.

Results

The findings within this research answered the original research questions. Themes emerged which addressed perceptions and loyalty to a brand via the participation in an online branded community. Data and the analysis of the data indicated value in the use of online branded communities to facilitate conversations between like owners. The participants communicated loyalty by way of participation, but not without limits. The quality of the product and the support of the company behind the product are more important than the online branded community and the participation within that community.

Research Question 1. The first research question explored how participating in an online brand community affects an individual's perceptions of the brand. Three major themes emerged: (a) Brand Perceptions, (b) Perceptions About the Brand's Online Forum, and (c) Reasons for Joining the Brand's Online Forum.

Brand perceptions. Within the first major theme of Brand Perceptions, two main subcategories emerged: (a) Positive Brand Perceptions and (b) Negative Brand Perceptions. Participation in an online community has some influence on the likelihood of recommending the brand to someone else. If the brand has a good community, then this is a positive factor in the recommendation. However, the product features, price, and online product reviews seem to be stronger factors than the community is. Eight out of the 10 participants (80%) specifically spoke about their positive brand perceptions of this brand. For P6, this company brand has a good reputation. P6 believed that new customers

would buy this product because the brand has a good reputation according to the magazines or websites. As P1 explained, the product and features were responsible for his positive brand perception:

> My overall experience with Acer, I have some very strong feelings about it. I feel that they make a superior product for what I was buying. It was the most intelligently designed laptop I've ever had…It's a very simple laptop but it's got the form factor, it's got the performance, and it just checked all my boxes.

P3 similarly noted that his positive perception of the brand was based on the product itself and the features it offers:

> The list of features that are going to be important to me are going to be dependent on what I'm buying the product for…This is a product that fits into my needs and at the time I was looking for a super-fast processor or a lot of memory or super lightweight or anything like that.

For P3, product and features were first, but this participant also stated that price and the brand were relevant. In this way, both price and performance of the product drive the brand and loyalty to the brand:

> What was driving me was the touchscreen, the keyboard, the ability to run without the keyboard and to a lesser extent the resolution of the screen... The price was a second factor and the fact that it was an Acer was [a] good factor.

The same was true of P7, who measured this brand's perception by price and performance as the most important parts of brand loyalty:

> Let's say the first impression of my first Acer Notebook was like that, and if you compare price and performance. Compared to the price of other products it was

> really, really new and it's still working; it's going well after 5 years. It's a really good product I really still love it.

However, P7 also noted that the brand's online community was also important in constructing a positive perception of the brand. The entirety of the product is essential to building loyalty: "I think it's really good public relations in such a community." For P5, the recommendation of others was important; he cited participation in an online community as having some influence on the likelihood of recommending the brand to someone else. P5 explained, "You can get a pretty good sense of the product from those reviews. You know, you have 1,000 reviews and 79% of them, given they're the 5-star [reviews], it's, I'd go read the 1 star and 2 stars, but 79% of 1,000 people giving it a 5-star review influences me highly."

The construction of the brand perception was also evident on social media. The brand itself posted on its Facebook page, bragging about its awards in order to boost brand perception writing, "Our Products went for gold at COMPUTEX TAIPEI 2016. The Revo Build mini PC was among some of our winners, winning Best Choice of the Year award as well as a Best Choice Gold." In addition to the self-created brand reputation, users helped to build others' perceptions, as well as reinforce their own perceptions, through online reviews. Many reviewed the product and the company, glowingly. One review posted on Best Buy's website proclaimed the brand's tablet an "outstanding value," basing his perceptions on price and product:

> For a hundred bucks, you definitely can't beat the deal on this tablet. It's got decent performance for the price…Camera is pretty decent and camera App has quite a few features. Quad core processor is pretty snappy. Nice bright display.

> Fast Wi-Fi Connected to my 5GHz network. . . . Overall, this is a great value for an Android tablet and blows most other budget tablets away in terms of what you get for the price.

Another online review claimed one of the brand's products was "exactly what I was looking for." He added his brand perception based on the features of the product, including "newer, faster ram" as well as "speakers [that] sound better than any other laptop I've tried (for < $1,000)." The reviewer also cited the how the screen looked and how the keyboard functioned, finally saying that "hands down, I think this computer is better than anything else available around this price range. If you're looking for something similar, at least track one of these down to take a look for yourself."

For a Walmart online reviewer, the product and price upped the brand's reputation. The reviewer wrote that the brand's Chromebook was "worth the buck," because it was easy to use and set up for someone who was not good with computers: "I have a very technologically challenged mother and she found it so be simple and a great way to start! All in all, it is a great computer for its price."

On Twitter, a user with the handle INKSQUIDDD put his perception of this brand's products this way: "Willing to sell my right testicle for Acer predator 4k monitor: ball condition unused #4k #pc #twitch #pcgames #acer @Acer." Another Twitter user, Alicekeeler, engaged in a Twitter discussion with another user (@Crippit) who was asking her opinion of a specific brand product. She tweeted, "@Crippit @Acer I like the larger size but the smoothness with how everything works won me over," and earlier, "@Crippit @Acer I am VERY picky about the keyboard and trackpad. Big factor in me

saying I could give up my Mac for R11" focusing on the features that boosted Acer's brand perception for her.

The second subcategory of this theme, on the other hand, was Negative Perceptions. Only two of the 10 participants (20%) had some negative perceptions of the brand. Positive perceptions by these two participants offset any negative perceptions they held of this specific brand. However, on social media and online reviews, customers also had negative perceptions of the brand. Table 12 demonstrates the distribution of themes within the negative perceptions of participants, social media users, and online reviewers.

Table 12

Negative Brand Perception of This Specific Brand

	P1	P8	Social media user	Online reviewers
Poor Customer service	Y	Y	Y	N
Inferior Technology	N	Y	Y	Y
Slow processor	N	N	N	Y

While P1 also had positive perceptions of this brand, he did note that his main problem with the brand is customer service. This issue with customer service was detrimental to the strength of his brand loyalty: "But the problem is, as good as this laptop is, the service has been way, way below par." Part of the problem of customer service was the staff, whom P1 thought was not very knowledgeable about the products, which hurt his faith in the brand: "I noticed that there is a profound lack of knowledge among their general technical staff about this laptop. I mean profound." Moreover, P1 argued that his positive perception was more product than brand oriented: "Like my brand perception of Acer is actually probably less than my appreciation of the product

that I have from them. Because generally, Acer to me makes a lot of cheaper, more consumer-oriented products."

Like P1, P8's negative perception of the brand had to do with the European brand smartphones, and the lack of customer service response to the problems those smartphones had: "Acer smartphones updates on Android system are sometimes crappy quality, to be really honest." P8 told Acer about these problems in "weekly or daily reports" but he noted that "they sometimes they never fix the sound issue. To be honest, I saw some [problems] that I highlighted about two or three years ago, and they never fixed it."

For online reviewers, their negative perceptions of the brand were centered on products rather than the company or brand specifically. One reviewer, Jerome, said on the Best Buy website that one of the brand's products was "not a good laptop," referring to how slow the processor was: "I have been using it for 2 days and it is very slow. Hiccups constantly when just surfing the web …Would not recommend this laptop. Spend the extra money and just go with a better brand."

Another user also had a negative experience with another of the brand's products saying it was a "waist [sic] of money; died quickly," adding that their previous experience with Acer was positive but that this most recent computer "died after only thirteen weeks refusing to take a charge." For this customer, performance was more essential than the brand. A third review simply said one of the brand's products was an "awful computer" noting, the user "bought it about a month ago and hate it. I'm not too picky with computers but this one is by far the worse one I have ever had."

In the Twitter universe, one user had multiple tweets about her negative experiences with, and concurrent perceptions of, the brand and their products. TracyGesare tweeted, "@Acer I think you just shrank the abacus system and packed it up as your new and advanced technology." Her next tweet read "@Acer and wasting my time. With your lackluster support. You can reply to this tweet in 2074 as well. Since this is how you work." She continued with another tweet: "@Acer I am disappointed. I can't even help myself. Thank you too for wasting my enthusiasm for your 'state of the art creation.'" Her final tweet cemented her negative brand perception: "@Acer thank you for helping me explore all possible hardships beyond limits with your ever failing system!!! You're the worst!!! Officially."

Perceptions of the brand's online community. The second major theme is Perceptions of the Brand's Online Community. Three subcategories came from this theme: (a) Helpful and Welcoming; (b) Small, Active Community; and (c) the Brand's Employees. Across all three of these subcategories, however, participants saw the community as good public relations or marketing program for the brand.

The first subcategory in this theme was Helpful and Welcoming perceptions. Nine out of 10 participants (90%) cited that the brand's online community was both helpful and/or welcoming. Having this sort of attitude not only made the participants more likely to visit the forum but also more likely to be loyal to the brand. P1 specifically focused on the usefulness of the online forum, noting that it felt like a community, and that people cared about each other and their problems: "The community is helpful . . . I can't always find my answers there, but I appreciate that people do try and chime in. . . ." P7 also focused on his perception of the brand's online community as helpful. He noted that

people share their experiences – both positive and negative – which helps with the feeling of community. As P7 noted, “If you go to some forums you always find threads of people asking, ‘Is it possible to do that with the product?’ They are asking for real experiences… The nice thing and also if someone has a bad experiences I had too, I too find some real solutions there—good things and bad things.” P5 noted that not only is the community helpful—in part because of the resources the brand gives them—but it is also hospitable toward its members. Because of these positive, welcoming feelings, the brand is augmented and reinforced:

> It’s a good community, there’s good people on there, and there’s good people supporting us... If they help cheerfully, and, we have a couple people on the forum that get a little rude with people and just somebody being rude to you can throw you off a brand, you know? They perceive that you’re part of the company and you be rude to them, [and] I’ve seen them go, “I’ll never buy another Acer,” just because somebody was rude to them.

P2 also perceived the online community as useful and friendly, as well. He said that people always try to be helpful, even if they do not know the answer: “It’s the best community that I’ve joined more or less with the support members of trying to help or trying to ask for help... So far what I’ve found is many people are trying to help even if they don’t give you any reason. . . .” Similarly, P3 noted the welcoming atmosphere of the online community, which allows people to ask any sort of question: “I see that the people that come in and ask a really dumb question are treated gently and so the community is a welcoming community. Probably it does make so that I would be more likely to suggest an Acer product to someone else because I know that that person, if they

had to ask a question on the community, wouldn't hit like half a dozen trials or just try to not come down immediately." Because of the welcoming feelings, P3 is more loyal to the brand. P8 similarly specifically noted that the welcoming and helpful online community was important to building a positive brand:

> I think it can be really positive for the Acer brand, the Acer community. . . The user can feel like it is followed by a brand. An answer from another user or an ACE that can help you with an issue or confirm you learned the problem, can help a user to feel followed or to feel important to a brand.

The second subcategory within this major theme was a small, active community. For three of the 10 participants (30%), they saw the brand's online community as driven by a small, dedicated number of participants. As P4 said, "Mainly it's become a global community as well as the local one. It's become the telephone of this age." P8 specifically noted the tightknit element of the brand's online participants: "I know few people on looking at the Acer community, it is very few people right now active. Really, it probably is 90% of traffic or 90% of contributions." P3 similarly mentioned the small community, but argued that was, in part, what led to the development of a stronger brand:

> If you're talking about the community of people, then certainly 95% or higher of the people that join the community are there to ask one or two questions and never come back… I find that personally I do have a higher affinity to the brand because I'm involved in their community. . . . I spend more time on the Acer website because I'm more comfortable with the rest of the people that are active on the site.

The final subcategory within the major theme of perceptions of the online community was the Brand's Employees. Five out of the 10 participants (50%) mentioned the involvement—or lack thereof—of the brand's employees within the forum. Moreover, the brand tried to highlight its customer service proficiencies on social media. P1 believed the brand's employees needed to exert a stronger, more individualized presence: "One thing that I noticed with this community—and I noticed it with a lot of communities—is there always seems to be somebody from the company who jumps in with a canned response and I think that a lot of people see that for what it is." P1 argued that the employees' responses make it seem as if they do not care about the customer or they do not know the solution to the problem, both of which are problematic for brand loyalty.

P2 noted that much of the brand's company does not have an online presence, which can affect its brand perception. Because, as he notes, "90% of the company is not there [online]" customers are unable to find solutions to their problems. Therefore, "their opinion will be 'Oh, this product is not good. Next time I will not buy from this company.' More employees online to help with customer would assist with brand loyalty and customer satisfaction.

P3 saw the role of the employees as technical moderators of the online community more than helpful technical assistance, unless the person who is asking the question is confrontational. He argued that were "a fixed number of Acer employees that spend time on the community. Mostly the Acer employees are hiding in the background." P3 argued that this invisibility is appropriate, and that employees surface when community members aren't either able or willing to respond to a support request or if

there is a “belligerent post that’s asking a question but asking in such a way that they’re acting like they’ve got a chip on their shoulder.” This allows the community to bond together, rather than having a top-down structure at Acer. This community feel, then, aids in brand loyalty.

Alternatively, P7, unlike P1, actually praised the brand’s employees when it came to individualized, technical support, arguing that it is essential for customer satisfaction: “Every time I ask and put in a German community, I get an answer to a question from an Acer technician and it was really good. It was not a standard answer by standard e-mail or something; it was a really good technical explained answer.”

The company also tried to project a brand that cares about individual customers. The Twitter handle for the company, tweeted directly to customers, trying to assist them. One tweet read “@sweetcurves79 @Acer Sorry your computer is no longer charging. Can you send us a direct message so we can help you get a new charger?” while another one similarly said, “@GrapeCollie @Acer Sorry your monitor isn’t working. Can you send us a direct message so we can help you get it working again?” Individual customers also tweeted at the company, asking specific questions to help them with service. A_true_blonde tweeted, “@Acer where can I find an Acer repair centre in Valencia, Spain?” This customer service presence on social media may act to augment and solidify a positive brand perception.

Reasons for joining. The third major theme that emerged from the first research question is Reasons for Joining the Brand’s Online Forum. Two main subcategories contribute to this theme: (a) Participants Initially Came to the Brand’s Community Because of a Problem, or (b) Participants Became Active in the Brand’s Community

Because of a Desire to Help Others. Additionally, two participants' had disparate reasons for joining the brand's online community, representing outlier responses. Table 13 demonstrates the dispersion of responses to the theme.

Table 13

Reasons for Joining Brand's Online Community

Participants	Questions about brand product	Desire to help	Other
P1	Y	Y	N
P2	Y	Y	N
P3	Y	N	N
P4	N	Y	Y
P5	Y	Y	N
P6	Y	Y	N
P7	Y	N	N
P8	N	Y	Y
P9	Y	Y	N
P10	Y	Y	N
Total	8	8	2

Eight of the 10 participants (80%) noted that at least one reason for joining the brand's online community was that they had questions about specific brand products. That acted as a gateway, and those participants began answering other people's questions about the products. As P3 explained, "I bought an Acer tablet . . . and I got in the community because I had some questions about it. I found myself answering more questions than I was asking and I've been on ever since . . . I would expect that that's what would lead most people to a community like this." P7 shared P3's sentiment. He also joined the brand's forum because of a problem with his own computer: "I just started to some year[s] ago when I had an Acer V3, I had some problems…as you start a with new product you'll always have problems at the beginning therefore community is very interesting." In addition, P5 noted that his own questions, which led him to the brand's

online community, led to a desire to help others with their questions:

> Well, I went there for, to find an answer for myself and I got to looking at the questions people were answering and I just thought, "Well, I could answer that," and "I can answer that," and pretty soon I was involved.

In addition to personal problems with the brand's products, eight out of 10 participants (80%) said that their desire to help others was the reason they were active members of the brand's online community. As P1 simply explained, "I feel I can help that will be a motivator." P5 agreed, saying: "I enjoy doing it, the biggest reason I do it is because I enjoy it. You know, it keeps my mind sharp and I like helping people, that's part of the enjoyment." P6 also said he became active in the brand's community because of desire to help others, while P8 said it this way:

> I enjoy helping other users when has problems with computers or tablets or smartphones. . . . When I see a new user posting a problem, I always try to think is a guy or woman or what it is. . . . . He or she really needs an answer to understand how to fix something important because I feel like for lots of people, computers, smartphones, technology, personal technology, is something really important for work or life, so maybe if they can solve the problem or the issue in about a day or something less, we're really very happy. It's all about enjoy[ment], nothing else.

In addition to these two main subcategories, however, there were two outlying responses. While both P4 and P8 gave reasons that did fall within the main subcategories, they also provided other responses for why they joined the brand's online community. For P4, it was for "relaxation," a form of enjoyment. P8 felt differently—the brand

recruited him for his specialized knowledge: “Around 2009, I was contacted by one Acer employee from Taiwan. . .. I started testing mostly all the android devices from Acer and so one day at the end of the product I started to look around and found the Acer community and I registered.”

Research Question 2. How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual’s loyalty to the brand?

From the results of this question emerged four major themes: (a) Brand Loyalty to Other Brands and Brand Loyalty to This Brand, (b) Level of Online Participation, (c) Recommendations to Others, and (d) Online Forum Recommendations for Brand Loyalty.

Brand loyalty. The first major theme to emerge from the second research question was brand loyalty. There were two aspects of this theme: (a) brand loyalty to other brands and (b) brand loyalty to this brand. For this study, the term brand loyalty meant the likelihood of one to recommending a brand to someone else. Seven out of 10 participants (70%) cited other brands to which they were loyal, noting both why they were loyal and how that loyalty had—and still does—shift according to price, performance, and product. Overall, participants noted that they were loyal to brands if the product itself was reliable, efficient, and suitable. Moreover, price was always a factor. In this way, the participants were not necessarily always loyal to one brand; instead, the products’ performance and price inspired any loyalty. For other participants, they choose between certain brands that had a history of strong products. Participant 3 (P3) specifically noted that price and compatibility were components to the participant’s choices:

> I typically end up choosing among about two brands; I do look at everything I can. I bought a house last November and it didn't have any appliances in it, so I had to look at appliances. I looked at all the different brands of appliances that I could find easily. I picked three or four of those brands that I was most comfortable with and then I purchased appliances that provided the best features for the price.

This participant also did the same thing with cars, for which the participant has a specific brand loyalty to Honda. P3 argued product performance was a determinant of future purchases: "I do the same thing when I'm purchasing pretty much any product and I find myself, when I look at the vehicles I've had in the past several years. I've got a lot of Toyotas and a lot Hondas and not much else . . . "P4 also declared brand loyalty to a car company, this time to GM. However, P4 also discussed why this loyalty has shifted, which he attributes to inferior products: "From 1978 to this century, I bought all GM cars, but my cars from the last century were all GM."

P5 similarly shared loyalties to a car company and noted the evolution of those loyalties, including the factors that affected those allegiances:

> I would say the biggest thing I've always had brand loyalty was Ford. I've always liked Fords but I haven't always bought Fords. I have a Toyota now because it was the best car for the money . …

Despite disparate loyalties, P4 saw brand loyalty at its highest form in Apple. P4 stated:

> The most fierce brand loyalty I've ever seen are Apple people. Of course, you have to understand the great bulk of the population doesn't like computers. They

> like what they can do. They don't like to mess things. The Apple company made a fortune off of designing computers for people who don't like computers that take almost no intelligence to use. That's because they don't do very much, but they do it extremely well.

P8 agreed with the sentiments of P4, seeing Apple as one of the only brands to inspire blind loyalty. To P8, brand loyalty does not exist in the same way because price and performance are so important:

> I'm not quite sure if they feel like they are loyal to a brand, to be honest, because many people look at the prices or some feature. I don't know; I don't think people are so loyal to a brand right now. Maybe the only can be the Apple, Apple brand—I can talk about fans more than loyal users, in my opinion.

P1, however, discussed the problems that come with brand loyalty, rather than a specific form of brand loyalty. In particular, the participant used the example of a stereo company that P1 used to work for, noting the challenges that emerge when trusted brands put out subpar products. He found that loyalty did not extend to products that did not perform to the level of the brands' previous products:

> I used to sell stereo equipment way back in the day. And there was a brand called JBL and JBL, they really made professional studio monitors…While we were selling JBL, we had a lot of JBL fans that would come in the door and they'd be very, very focused on JBL. JBL decided that we're going to try to niche ourselves in that market. And they came out with a series called the Radian series, which were absolute junk. These were speakers that were just absolute cheap, tinny, awful speakers that were nothing like JBL, but they put their name on it and their

> perception with a lot of people like me…The superfans are going to see that. So you're going to lose your superfan base when you do that because they know the product so well that they can see what's happening. They can see, "Hey, what is this?"

Overall, the results of this study indicated that an online branded community could create positive views of a brand and, as a result, increase brand loyalty. The increase in brand loyalty may be small, but it is present. However, the results also indicate that loyalty can never offset products that are lacking features or have poor quality. For P3, this brand is not the only brand of computer he uses. P3 has a small pool of brands to which he is loyal, often based on familiarity and price:

> I look at all the different manufactures and then choose the one that is the best for the best price for my needs at that moment. I give a little bit more weight to the brands that I'm more familiar with and less to the ones that I'm either not as familiar with or have had bad experiences with in the past. . . . Typically, the brand will be third but sometimes it's second.

P4 preferred the specific brand, but like P3, the participant was not exclusively loyal to the brand. As P4 explained:

> I prefer Acer because I have more knowledge of their systems and structures and machines, but I have a Toshiba sitting here. I have an Apple sitting here, so I don't confine myself, but rather it's the first one I look to if I need something.

However, P4 also specifically noted that the brand's community and his participation in that community add to his brand loyalty. He noted, "because Acer permits these forums to exist, it's part of the reason I participate in comparison to, say, Toshiba that has a very

weak structure. Dell is in the middle, but I don't really care for Dell products." In this way, not only the product but also the community drive P4's loyalty to this specific brand, as the community is reasonably easy to use and helpful, he enjoys participating in it, and "they make more information available to me on how their systems work."

P5 also has loyalty to the brand, although he cited Lenovo as his first choice. In part, P5 noted the problems online community participants discuss with their computers of this brand:

> I like Acers. My main laptop that I use is a Lenovo. I had an Acer and I needed a new laptop and I did research and the one that appealed to me the most was this Lenovo that I have. . . you know, when you're in the forum and people are calling in with their problems, you're going to see a lot of problems. I know that that's only a small subsection of the people that have bought Acers. You know, it wasn't brand disloyalty; it's just the Lenovo appealed to me, so I bought it.

P7 argued that product performance is a significant contributor to brand loyalty. This was a common theme among all of the participants. As previously noted, performance, as well as price, drives loyalty to a brand, rather than brand loyalty coming first. As P7 stated:

> The first impression of my first Acer Notebook was like that, and if you compare price and performance and so on. Compared to the price of other product[s] it was really, really new and it's still working—it's going well after 5 years. It's a really good product I really still love it. . . . [The Acer brand is built by] the product itself, also I compare it to others like Acer's and so on. I think if I compare it to Acer, [which is] always a good brand for notebooks are good quality . . . This

> product line of Predator notebook I think is very good quality because it's new it has to be competitive and also the reason why I have chosen with them. . . .

Moreover, P7 argued that one's culture could influence brand loyalty. In some cultures, product performance and experience can be a primary determinant to brand loyalty. A significant difference in price may alter the loyalty. P7 stated:

> I think the special thing with Germans is [that] we have one brand and we have a good experience; we stay there if we don't have other reasons to go so the others may be much, much cheaper, we take a deeper look at the other product at the same price…I don't know if it's the same in America, but I think it's worked because of it's really good quality.

According to P8, the basis for brand loyalty was also the quality of product. However, P8 also noted that customer service is essential to brand loyalty. This contributes to the participants' views that loyalty is earned by specific aspects of the brand, including performance, price, and customer service:

> My opinion is you need to have a very good product, that's for sure, because if you put to the market a bad product with lot of issue[s], you are going to kill yourself instantly. . . . [A company also needs] a very good balance from a good product, good price and great customer service. Without a great customer service, you don't survive in [the] market right now. In my opinion right now, without a great customer service you will die in 2 month[s].

P2 also discussed brand loyalty in terms of price and performance:

> Always, Acer is great at price to performance . . . it's proven for me that it's worked very well and it's a very good quality. That's why my notebook is always

> with Acer because I have two of them that never failed for me. Or if they failed, it was not because of Acer's fault or something like that. That's why my notebook is still an Acer.

Similarly, P6 described loyalty to some brands because of experience with their products. However, brand loyalty has to do with the products and their quality, rather than the company itself. However, he did not see his participation in this brand's community as a significant influence to his loyalty to this specific brand. Rather, the product first influences his loyalty. Secondary were his impressions that developed over a period with the use of the product and interactions with the company.

In addition to this study's participants, online reviews posted on Best Buy and Walmart's websites underscored when and how customers felt loyal to the brand. Because the online reviews were only for this specific brand, loyalty is specific only to this case study's specific brand. For these customers, product quality and past positive experiences premised their loyalties. A user named Mzsharsim wrote about one of the brand's products:

> I had an Acer tablet for years, this was an upgrade for me, and I love it just as much as I did my older one. Graphics are great, clear, and vibrant color. Response time is fast; you click and you are there. Lots of storage. Going to purchase one for my daughter next.

Another customer, Kathy, also noted past purchases influenced her loyalty. Her online review title was "This is the second one that we have purchased," and she wrote, "We love these Chromebooks so much. This is the second one that we have purchased. It

is better than laptops that we have bought in the past. I recommend it to everyone that asks about them." Another review she wrote stated:

> Bought one for my daughter when she was accepted into her graduate school of choice. She loved it so much that I bought one for my son, who was starting his undergraduate program. They both are able to use them for all of their studies and assignments with no complaints. Great purchases!

Level of participation. The second major theme that came from the second research question is the level of online forum participation by respondents. The number of years of participation in the online community varied from one to four. Table 14 demonstrates the number of years participants have been active on this online community.

Table 14

Online Forum Participation by Year

Participants	Number of Years
P1	2
P2	1.5
P3	4
P4	4
P5	2.5
P6	3
P7	2
P8	3
P9	—
P10	1
Total	23
Average	2.3

Of the nine participants who reported how long they had been active on this brand's online community, the longest was 4 years (two participants), while the shortest was 1 year (one participant). One participant did not indicate how long he was a part of this brand's community. Regardless of the number of years participants had spent on the forum, the frequency and level of participation varied. Overall, participants noted that they had first come to the community with questions, but now spent most of their time helping others with their questions. P3 explained that he had a high level of involvement because of helping other people:

> Typically, you have the initial post which is somebody who's not part of the community; he's just joined in order to ask questions. He asks a question or makes a complaint or does something like that and then there will be an interaction with one or more of the people that were qualified as superfans to respond to his question.

Moreover, P3 argued that his participation increased his brand loyalty. The time he spent on the forums made him more loyal to the brand:

> I find that personally I do have a higher affinity to the brand because I'm involved in their community. I don't know for sure whether that's because I'm involved with community or because I see how the community responds to the other members of the community.

P4 similarly categorized himself as an involved participant, both in the amount of time spent on the forum and the level of his knowledge: "The difference is I probably have that level of expertise on any number of different forums. I tend to be somewhat fanatical." P8 also placed his level of participation in the high category, explaining, "In the past year, I think I spent like 3 or 4 hours on the community . . . each day. I have around 11, near to 12,000 replies and over 1,000 solutions." P2 contended that his time and level of participation was due, in part, to his absence on social media:

> I don't like to occupy my free time like many people using Facebook or Twitter. I don't use any social media. I think it's more or less a waste of time spending on those. I'm trying to fill my free time and usually I fill it by forums, but it's really difficult.

These participants also noted that the time they spent on this online forum was most often spent helping other consumers with problems they have and answering questions those consumers had.

P1, however, did not see online forum engagement as an all-consuming endeavor. Instead, he saw the community as a pick-and-choose site:

> Most of the forums to me are sort of like phone books. It's just like you don't read it cover to cover. You just go in there, you look for one thing that you need, you pull it out and you close the book and don't look at it again till you need it again.

Recommendations to others. The results indicated that one's experience with a particular product has a larger influence on one's decision to recommend the brand than the brand itself. Using a 10-point Likert-type scale measuring how likely one is to recommend this specific brand to a friend or family member (1 = *least likely* to 10 = *most likely*), the average score was 7.68. The scores that participants gave, which corresponded to the likelihood of recommending the product to others, were based on the experiences these participants had had in the past with the product. If they had a positive experience, they were more likely to recommend the product to others. The lower scores were based on either the performance of the product or problems with customer service.

How one sees their rating of one brand or product is similar to how one might rate similar products. P3 explained his rating of an 8:

> It's a fairly high number. Other numbers I've got are other brands of computers specifically that I would be more likely rather than less likely but I can't think of one right now that would go higher than an 8.

P7 also gave a high rating, based on positive prior experiences:

> I would say 8 or 9. . . . Until now I didn't have any bad experiences; maybe it depends if somebody asks me [if] I want to buy something more expensive, more thrilling than in the notebook or something like that. It should be a reason to choose something else.

P8, however, gave a somewhat lower Net Promoter rating, grounded in problems he has had, particularly with the customer service department:

> Right now, I can tell you 7 or 8. More 7, to be honest. . . . Right now, Acer has very good products... Sometimes also on the customer service, more on the phone calls or the chat, I'm reading more and more user[s] that said, "I ask one thing and had no replies." [It] doesn't look or reply with like, "My monitor is black?" "Turn off your computer and turn it on." "Yes, I know, I already tried; my monitor is still black." "Restart your computer." I know that the phone calls they have automatic to follow, some questions to follow, but sometimes the user can't understand the agent and they want answers.

Three participants reported that they would recommend the brand, but with certain qualifications. These respondents would recommend specific models rather than a blanked endorsement of the brand. P10 supported this notion of a recommendation varying by model by giving a 9 or 10 rating for the specific brand's gaming product lineup. As P1 explained:

> I just recommended an Acer to somebody and he just bought it. The reason why, and I told him my caveat. I said, "You now, you probably won't have the problems I have cause you're getting an Acer Aspire. So you're getting more of a consumer brand." But I told him my experiences with the service.

P4 agreed, saying:

> I would be likely to recommend a specific model to someone. . . . One of the drives I have had with Acer and made public several times is they have some of the most confusing model names and designations I've ever seen. Take the R3-

> 131T. You can have wildly different performance and models all with that same designation. It's the last 4 digits that tells you what it really is.

P5 concurred, while still giving the brand a relatively low score: "I would say 5. . . . I still recommend Acers, but I recommend specific models. . . . I don't just say, 'Go buy yourself an Acer.'"

The same was true of those on social media. Past positive experiences with a product significantly influenced online reviewers' written reviews and recommendations. They were more likely to recommend the product because they personally had a good experience with the laptop. These experiences were all about the performance of the product, however. None of the posts dealt with price or customer service. As a user named Nursingstudentmom stated,

> I love this laptop you can use it as a traditional laptop or make it into a touchscreen both ways it's perfect and the battery life is very, very nice I have gotten at least 7 hours out of a charge. I would recommend this product for anyone looking for a nice laptop.

EddineN concurred, saying, "The Chromebook is one of the best Chromebooks out right now... Acer did a really great job on this product and I highly recommend it."

Enya also linked her recommendation in an online review to her experience, saying,

> I love my tablet. It is so handy for me to take anywhere and its plenty big enough to see everything one and so easy to use. I would recommend this to anyone who wants to check their [F]acebook and emails while they are away from home.

Recommendations to online communities. The fourth and final major theme from the RQ1 involved recommendations for the online forums to increase brand loyalty. Six out of the 10 participants (60%) stated that the main way this brand could improve its online forums, and in turn increase brand loyalty, was to increase its customer technical support. In addition, there were two outlying responses for this theme.

For the majority of respondents, there needed to be better customer service. They contended that if the quality of the technical assistance improved, this could help improve brand loyalty. For P1, this assistance should not be pre-formed or artificial; he argued that there needed to be personal attention:

> Meaningful participation by representatives from the product and it's sort of like a two-part thing because number one, you need participation from people that represent the brand in the forums. That's number one. And number two, meaningful. Not the canned responses.

P8 also pointed to the need for more brand-based technical help. He noted that there were so many questions from customers that Acer needed to add more employees so that they could respond. He contended that interaction could increase brand loyalty:

> In my opinion, they can reply more…I think maybe one or two Acer people on the community board can help seal the brand more stronger or more interactive on the user issue…It's very, very hard, but you know, you can try the best possible to have a loyal customer.

P2 also suggested adding brand employees, specifically engineers and technicians, enter the forum to help build the community:

> I probably think Acer community, while it's big in the numbers when you look at just pure statistics. The number of active members I don't find. It will always be kind of the same people answering. I think the community could be bigger, but that's the only thing…Here, I think a few problems could be solved if there were more suggestions passed from the forum directly to engineers or technicians, whereby some technicians [are] just watching the community and trying to find the problems.

Some participants felt the quality of answers creates a better community. If the employees are not answering questions, then the customers do not feel valued, which harms brand loyalty. P7 was one of the participants who agreed with this notion:

> In my experience, others do so for example. Their support is not very good, so you don't get any chances to get a technician by e-mail or by telephone; you only get a number and then you send it there, you have to wait until 6 weeks to get it back and they always do the following:

However, not all participants agreed that the brand needed to augment and improve employee involvement. One respondent, P5, actually praised the work that the employees do on the online forums:

> I think they [Acer moderators] do a very good job. They don't try to rule it; they just do their job and they do it well. . . . We try to do a good job in there and we help the people as much as they can but you have people that have, you know, 5- to 7-year-old computers and they're all angry because their computer is broke and we can't find a way to fix it for them.

Finally, one other participant had a different recommendation. P4 argued that this brand's product was superior to their marketing campaign, and suggested that the company, as well as the forum, make more use of advertising. As P4 said, "They don't really seem to know how to advertise, which is another comment I've made it multiple times to them."

Summary

The capture and analysis of data outlined in the proposal held true in the actual data capture and analysis. Some interesting themes emerged from the data analysis. Table 11 is a summary of these themes, including brand loyalty to other brands, level of online forum participation by respondents, recommendations to others, recommendations for the online forums to increase brand loyalty, positive and negative brand perceptions, perceptions about the brand's online forum, and reasons for joining the brand's online forum.

Within this case study, most participants elected to join the community because of their own need. Additionally, a personal desire to help others is what led them to continue their participation. These results indicate opportunities for companies who wish to create or enhance an online community.

The first major theme to emerge from the second research question had two facets: (a) Brand Loyalty to Other Brands, and (b) Brand Loyalty to a Brand. Specifically, six participants out of 10 (60%) cited other brands that they were loyal to, noting both why they were loyal and how that loyalty had shifted—and continues to shifts—according to price, performance, and product. The second part of this first major theme involved participants' brand loyalty toward a specific brand. Overall, the results of

this study indicated that an online branded community could create positive views of a brand and, as a result, increase brand loyalty. The increase in brand loyalty may be small, but nonetheless it is present. However, the results also indicate that loyalty can almost never offset products that are lacking important features or have poor quality.

The second major theme that came from the second research question is the Level of Online Forum Participation by Respondents. Of the nine participants who reported how long they had been active on the online community, the longest was 4 years (two participants), while the shortest was 1 year (one participant). Regardless of the number of years of participation in the brand's forum, their frequency and intensity of participation was similar.

The third major theme is Recommendations to Others. The results indicated that participants chose to recommend the product brand based largely on the experience with the particular product, and not less so because of the brand itself. In addition, others' online reviews influenced participants' own purchase decisions.

The fourth and final major theme from the second research question is Recommendations for the Online Forums to increase brand loyalty. The majority of participants—seven out of 10 (70%)—stated that the main way this brand could improve its online forums, and in turn increase brand loyalty, would be increase customer technical support. In addition, there were two outlying responses for this theme.

As with all studies, this study had its limitations. The participants of this study were members of only one personal computer company's online community. These participants were not representative of all types of online branded communities. The view of brand loyalty and brand perception could be different for other industries and other

brands from the results of this study. The sample was voluntary, so the participants could have different views on brand loyalty than other customers; moreover, because the participants were active members of a specific branded community, their views may be different from the average customer. Selection bias may have occurred during identification of the study population. There could also be limitations in terms of coverage, and non-response from the participants. Finally, there could have been interviewer bias in solicitation, recording, or interpretation of data.

The data collected and analyzed has clear themes identified. An understanding of these themes could be beneficial to companies seeking to deploy or enhance an online community. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the findings of this research, implications for others, and recommendations for additional research. This will include an overview of why the study is important and how the researcher designed the study to contribute to the understanding of the topic, a comprehensive summary of the overall study, and conclusions made based on the data analysis and findings of the study related to the extant literature and significance of the study. Moreover, the chapter will delve into the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, as well as areas that require additional research within this topic.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Brand loyalty has a strong precedent in influencing public perception of a product and its overall value. This study focused on the potential influence of participation in an online community on brand perception and brand loyalty. Evidence from previous studies has demonstrated an increased use of social media among consumers (Goh et al., 2013; Laroche et al., 2012; Zhao & Zhu, 2014). Social media has become a powerful WOM influence on our society, including the marketing of products and brands. Online communities, a form of social media, influence consumer behavior in a similar way as other social media.

It was unknown how participation in online communities affects the loyalty to and perception of a brand. There was a need to gain better insights into the motivation for participating in online communities (Berthon et al., 2012; Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Goh et al., 2013; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Many companies deploy online communities with different objectives in mind. However, previous research has lacked an examination of the motivations for participating in online communities (Brodie et al., 2013; Gruen et al. 2007; Wirtz et al., 2013). Companies should understand these motivations to develop communities that align better with participant motivations.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how participation in online brand communities affects brand loyalty and brand perception from the perception of the top contributors in an online community. This study examined the two research questions as follows: (a) how does participating in an online brand community affect an

individual's loyalty to the brand, and (b) how does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand? The data for this research came from semi-structured interviews, social media postings, and online product reviews. A thematic analysis of the interviews and content analyses of social media postings and online product reviews yielded the results.

Covered in this chapter are the study's results, conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions for future practice. Results from this study revealed that brand communities influence brand loyalty, which could alter companies' online marketing strategies. Online communities are a place to create bonds between owners of the same brand of product. This bond presents an opportunity for participants to help each other. It also presents an opportunity for companies to learn from the participants (their customers) in ways previously not possible. This study was the first to examine the influence of online brand communities on brand perception and loyalty.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how participation in online brand communities affects brand loyalty and brand participation from the perception of the top contributors in an online community. Participants in this research were those who were actively engaged in an online branded community. Interviews of these participants were interviewed provided insights into their motivation for participating in an online branded community. The triangulation of these interviews with data from social media postings and online product reviews provided the foundation for the research. The results from this study can inform business leaders and developers

about the value and effectiveness of online brand communities in influencing brand perception and loyalty.

There were two underlying consumer behavioral theories to this research: (a) C2C exchange (Gruen et al., 2007), and the MOA model (MacInnis et al., 1991). In C2C exchange, Gruen et al. (2007) posited that participants' knowledge exchange requires sharable concepts commonly derived from their education and experience. C2C occurs when individuals communicate concerns, complaints, and recommendations that enhance the well-being of the consumer and product (von Hippel, 1988). MOA measures one's level of motivation, opportunity, and ability to share information about a product or brand (MacInnis et al., 1991). This study combined elements of these two theories.

The use of a qualitative methodology can allow one to gain a deeper insight into the motivation of participation in online communities. Given that the complexity and subjective nature of brand perception and loyalty does not lend itself well to a quantitative analysis, qualitative methodology was therefore the most effective methodology to address the research questions. Qualitative studies are effective at answering "how" and "why" questions in research, as they allow researchers and participants to offer expansive responses to questions. These "how" and "why" questions made a qualitative case study the best methodological model for this study (Muzellec et al., 2012). Researchers often use a case study design to analyze people, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems holistically, using multiple data sources (Shahrokh & Dadvand, 2014). Yin (2014) suggested a case study is an appropriate design to understand behavior and focus on contemporary events. Participation in an online branded community is a contemporary event.

The participants of this study were individuals designated as “community experts” specific to a company and given the title of superfan, as they are the most active online users who provide significant information and answers to an online community. These community experts contribute 80% of the useable content in the community. Fourteen superfans received invitations to participate in this study from an online community of 200,000. The superfans chosen for this study were from a list of top online contributors provided by the company. The interviewer spoke with the participants via Skype or WebEx and transcribed these interviews. Product reviews from the Walmart and Best Buy websites were the second source of data. Facebook and Twitter postings from 2016 about the brand were the third source of information.

This study was important because many companies deploy online communities without understanding the depth and dynamics of the interactions between participants, between participants and superfans, and between participants and the company. By looking in detail at the motivations of a group of superfans, one can better understand what those motivations mean to the company. This can help a company modify its online community strategies. For example, most superfans in this study continued to participate in the community because of a desire to help other people. The company behind the community should therefore be aware of this dynamic and leverage it as it grows and fosters its superfans. The remainder of this chapter will include conclusions from this research as well as implications and recommendations for others who may pursue or enhance an online branded community.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

Previous research included the characteristics of online branded community. Gruen et al. (2007) described characteristics of communities including trust within the community and increased customer satisfaction. The netnographic study of customer engagement in a virtual brand community conducted by Brodie et al. (2013) found customer engagement to be an interactive, experiential process. Neither of these studies included an examination of the motivations for participation. Conversely, the participants within this study shared the "how" and "why" of their participation clearly demonstrating a deeper level of commitment than indicated by previous research. These motivations do have some similar characteristics to Gruen et al. and Brodie et al.'s findings. For example, all three studies clearly illustrate the power of community in that people seek community when they need help and wish to help others.

The three sources of data were (a) semi-structured interviews with participating superfans of the concerned brand, (b) online social media postings related to the brand, and (c) reviews of the brand's products and services as posted on Walmart.com and Bestbuy.com. Semi-structured interviews conducted with participants designated as superfans by the company were conducted via Skype or WebEx, and then transcribed, analyzed, and codified the data with the help of NVivo 10. NVivo was also the tool used for capturing social media postings and product reviews and to interpret them. This use of this software enabled the collection of both predetermined themes and new themes from the sources. The interviews provided the most insight into the "how" and "why" of participation in an online branded community. Semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewee to expand on thoughts and opinions that gave depth to the research. Although

the flexible structure of the interviews could have created some risk of not staying on topic, the interviewees revealed common themes. Each participant received a summary of the combined interviews to confirm the conclusions from the interviews. The process, member checking, confirmed these themes. The social media postings and online reviews provided some confirmation of views expressed in the interviews. Most notably, it is doubtful if that loyalty can ever offset products that are lacking features or have poor quality.

The first research question (how does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand?) was addressed using semi-structured interviews, social media postings, and online product reviews. The semi-structured interviews provided the most insight for answering the research question. Additional factors discovered in the interviews influenced the perception of the brand. This included advertising, product quality, and product features. The analysis yielded three major themes. The first major theme contained two subcategories: (a) Positive Brand Perceptions and (b) Negative Brand Perceptions. The quality and vibrancy of an online community has some level of influence on the likelihood recommending the brand to someone else. The company received positive reviews from seven of the 10 participants. The majority of participants cited personal experience, product performance, and price as the underlying factors affecting their positive brand perceptions. However, some participants argued that the brand itself, and its online community, contributed to improving brand perception. Only two participants had negative perceptions of the brand. Both participants, P1 and P8, had negative perceptions rooted in their perceived quality of customer service. These participants' negative perceptions were product-specific, and

not directed toward the brand as a whole. This is also true for most of the negative perceptions found on social media, with the exception of some isolated incidents in which social media users expressed dissatisfaction with the entire brand. As was often the case, participants' negative expressions involved dissatisfaction with service responses to product issues. Thus, it seems as though participants were tolerant of a certain level of malfunction with computer hardware as long as the service responses were prompt and helpful.

The second major theme related to the first research question involved perceptions of the company's online community. Three subcategories originated from this major theme: (a) Helpful and Welcoming; (b) Small, Active Community; and (c) the Brand's Employees. The first subcategory drew similar responses from participants. The common denominator among all these subcategories is that participants believed the online brand community to be good public relations and business. Eight of the 10 participants claimed that the online community was helpful and/or welcoming. Similarly, several participants argued that the helpfulness of this online community bolstered positive perceptions of the brand in general. As was often the case in this study, participants did not necessarily expect miracles or for all of their problems to be solved by the online community, but rather courteous and prompt service. For example, P1 noted that the community could not always solve problems. Even these instances did not hurt perception of the brand because the effort was genuine and the company offered to communicate when the issue had been resolved. P3 and P8 specifically noted that the helpful and welcoming atmosphere of the online brand community contributed to a positive perception of the brand.

A Small, Active Community was the second subcategory related to the second major theme. Three of the 10 participants (30%) saw the online brand community as one driven by a small, albeit dedicated group of contributors. This gave some participants the perception of a tightknit community that looks out for its fellow contributors. One participant also noted that the relatively small number of contributors offered some comfort and familiarity that made seeking help more casual.

Employee Participation in the Online Community was the third and final subcategory. Seven of 10 participants (70%) discussed employee participation in the online brand community. Notably, P1 wanted more individualization and fewer canned responses. P7 held the opposite opinion and claimed that responses were already individualized. The company's Twitter community reflected individualization. Users were often tweeted directly. On multiple occasions, the company's official Twitter handle responded to users to request direct messages from them about their issues.

The third major theme emerging from RQ1 involved the reasons for joining the brand's online community. There were two major subcategories related to this theme: (a) Participants Initially Came to the Brand's Community Because of a Problem, or (b) Participants Became Active in the Brand's Community Because of a Desire to Help Others. Eight of 10 participants (80%) joined the community to ask questions about specific products. Two participants originally visited the online brand community with their own questions, and ultimately ended up answering others' questions. Outliers P4 and P8 joined the online brand community for their own, unique reasons. P4 joined for relaxation while a brand employee recruited P8 due to his level of expertise.

RQ2 (how does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?) was addressed with the same sources of data as RQ1. Four major themes arose from this question: (a) Loyalty to Other Brands, (b) Loyalty to the Brand Level of Online Participation, (c) Recommendations to Others, and (d) Online Forum Recommendations for Brand Loyalty. In the context of this research, the term brand loyalty refers to the likelihood that someone will recommend a brand to someone else. With respect to the first part of the first major theme, Loyalty to Other Brands, seven out of 10 participants (70%) claimed loyalty to other brands. Their loyalties were based on and changed according to price, performance, and product. P3, for example, purchased all kitchen and laundry appliances at once. P3 chose appliances based on a variety of different features, with price being the baseline. However, the participant wanted all appliances in a specific room to be of the same brand. No predetermined loyalty existed in this instance, but the same participant did claim a brand-specific loyalty with respect to automobile purchases. The participant used a series of anecdotal opinions and evaluations to determine loyalty to Honda. P4 and P5 both claimed evolved loyalties to car companies, also based on anecdotal forms of information. P4 and P8 both believed that loyalty to Apple stood out as exceptionally strong.

The second part of the first major theme was loyalty to the online community's brand. The results showed that online brand communities create and foster positive views of a brand, and therefore can increase brand loyalty, albeit only to a relatively small extent. Conversely, the results demonstrated that brand loyalty rarely, if ever, offset poor product quality or dissatisfaction with product features. With respect to computer products, P3 claimed loyalty based on a combination of price, features, and familiarity.

P3 fluctuated among three different computer brands, but was willing to try a different brand for a lower price if it had comparable features. The product predominantly drove P4's loyalty; however, the participant claimed that its vibrant community enhanced loyalty to a certain extent.

While participation in the community typically created brand loyalty, there was one example of the company's online brand community actually reducing brand loyalty. P5 claimed that having such ready access to user problems online functioned as a turnoff to the brand. Sometimes, cultural values affected brand loyalty, in P7's experience. Being German, P7 cited the cultural value of brand loyalty based predominantly on performance and experience. Data collected from the Walmart and Best Buy websites highlighted quality and experience as the most impactful qualities to loyalty to brand.

The second major theme from the second research question was the level of online forum participation by respondents. The length of participation ranged from 4 years at the longest to 1 year at the shortest with nine participants responding. Participant tenure in the community did not influence participant activity level.

The third major theme was Recommendations to Others. The results suggested that personal experiences influenced brand recommendation more than loyalty to the brand. The Net Promoter rating, a 10-point scale, determined participants' rating of the brand. Direct experiences with the brand's products drove ratings. Three participants reasoned that they would recommend a brand's specific products with which they had personal success, as opposed to a blanketed endorsement of the brand as a whole.

The fourth major theme that arose from the second research question was Online Forum Recommendations for Brand Loyalty. Seven out of 10 participants (70%)

recommended the improvement of online technical support as a means to increase brand loyalty. Participants had recommendations ranging from better technical support to more representatives. For example, P1 suggested that technical support should offer fewer canned responses and more catered responses. Most participants desired a better and more intimate quality of technical support.

The analysis included all three sources of data; however, the semi-structured interviews provided the most insight into this question. The participants all felt some amount of loyalty to the brand because of their participation in the community. However, all of the participants also felt the community alone could not justify future purchases of the brand. Participants stated product features, quality, and price have a greater influence on future purchases.

Conclusions

This study has shed light on the previously unknown phenomenon of how participation in online brand communities affects the perception and loyalty of a brand (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Although participation in the online community was never a deciding factor in perception and loyalty, participants had both positive and negative opinions regarding their experiences with the community. The qualitative nature of this study made definitive conclusions difficult; however, participant responses made clear that participation in online brand communities was not a benign activity and did influence perception and loyalty to some extent. This finding solidified previous research that social media indeed influences brand loyalty and perception (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Laroche at al., 2012; Rizwan et al., 2014). Previous research has demonstrated that WOM influences brand perceptions (Dubois et al., 2011), and

since it is also known that consumers increasingly participate in online communities, one can safely conclude that online WOM has the potential to influence brand perception and loyalty, as it is a form of WOM (Goh et al., 2013; Laroche et al., 2012; Zhao & Zhu, 2014).

This study supports the influence of participation in online branding communities despite the paucity of evidence of its influence. Maton and Salem (1995) demonstrated a correlation between participation in communities and kindness, moral responsibility, and shared rituals and traditions. These characteristics have carried over to online communities (Goh et al., 2013). These are important and beneficial qualities for a brand to nurture, and are contrary to common perceptions of online participants as fickle and disingenuous. These are qualities of loyalty in general.

The first research question was, “How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual’s perceptions of the brand?” This was an easier question to answer than the second question related to loyalty, as perception is easier to identify based on participant responses. For example, in one study it was described how extraverted personalities were most commonly successful at forming online connections (Kotowski & dos Santos, 2010). These extraverted personality types can have an outsized influence on brand perception. Granted, perception is not always an accurate or objective reflection of reality, but it can be influential nonetheless. Therefore, companies may benefit from managing online perceptions even in the face of scant evidence suggesting their influence on overall brand perception. According to previous research, shared rituals and practices, emotional connections with those who share similar interest, and trust among members are a large part of communities, including online communities (Goh et

al., 2013; Kotowski & dos Santos, 2010; Maton & Salem, 1995). These characteristics have the potential to spread and change certain perceptions. Perception can be powerful even when untrue. For example, Dubois et al. (2011) suggested companies engage in rumor management. Rumors (WOM) influence products, brands, companies, and even people. It is important to have rumor management rather than leaving word of mouth to chance. The dynamics of WOM are the same in social media (including online communities) as they are in traditional venues, but may actually exert a greater influence due to the exponential effect of social media (Sun, 2013). This study has indicated the similar WOM dynamics in online participation. Within an online community one can save, share, and view repeatedly online comments which is a form of WOM. The implication is that online WOM may even have more potential than traditional WOM to influence brand perception.

Participants frequently cited their own personal experiences with the brand as prime influence on their brand perceptions. Researchers have suggested the importance of brand experience management (Lysonski & Durvasula 2013; Singh, 2012; Spence, 2012). Schmitt et al. (2009) found in their research that knowledge of consumers' brand experiences could enhance the development of marketing strategies. There is no more powerful feedback medium than online participation. One may obtain online brand perceptions easily and affordably via a community that solicits feedback. It is also the promptest form of feedback. Previous research demonstrates that a consumer's experiences with a company's physical environment, personnel, and policies shape shopping and service experiences (Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2014). Therefore, evidence and logic dictate that a positive consumer experience in an online brand community can

indeed affect brand perception. Several participants in this study provided in-depth responses about the influence of their online experiences on their brand perceptions. In tandem, a negative online experience had the power to turn consumers off from the brand, whether fairly or not. Conversely, a positive experience could not only bolster perception of the brand, but also help users feel like a part of a community.

Implications

Theoretical implications. This study serves as an important first step toward illuminating the influence of participation in online brand communities on brand perception and loyalty. Since most studies conducted on brand communities have been quantitative in nature, it is critical to produce more qualitative research on the subject (Hede & Kellett, 2012; Laroche et al., 2012; Brodie et al., 2013). Qualitative studies provide the opportunity to delve deeply into topics and understand how or why participants feel or react in certain ways (Yin, 2014). One of this study's weaknesses, and a weakness of many qualitative studies, was the small sample size. Surely, interviews of 10 participants are not sufficient for drawing broad generalizations about the impact of a single community on the Internet as whole. Nonetheless, the qualitative nature of the study offered a deeper examination into how and why consumers of this community develop perceptions and loyalty to a brand.

The research questions were open-ended in an attempt to offer broad leeway for drawing conclusions. This was critical due to the dearth of qualitative information available on the topic (Muzellec et al., 2012). Qualitative studies are often reliant upon the depth of participant responses, as they rarely involve simple "yes or no" questions. However, the open-ended nature of the research questions also presented a potential

weakness. They rendered it difficult to narrow down responses and get to the significant part. This required follow up and more focused questions to ensure participants' responses were adequate.

How participation in an online community affects an individual's brand loyalty is a challenging question to answer. Contentedness purchasing a specific brand is one of the most accurate ways to measure loyalty. However, this study focused on an online branded community within the personal computer industry. The frequency of new purchases of personal computers has declined in recent years and therefore, it is possible that participants' responses are less meaningful because of decreased frequency of new purchases. As such, this research was heavily reliant on the accuracy of responses. Overall, the study's results did not indicate much brand loyalty. Instead, participants were more concerned with past experiences, price, and features when determining which product to purchase. Only in a small number of cases did participants indicate a serious level of brand loyalty.

The first research question was less challenging to explore. Perception is nothing more than a participant's thoughts and opinions. The respondents freely shared their thoughts and opinions. Qualitative responses to questions pertaining to brand perception can be very illuminating. The influence of online brand communities on brand perception became clear in the course of this research. Results showed that online experiences did not have a major impact on brand perception, in most cases. However, in certain cases, an extreme positive or negative experience could change a person's perception. Personal experiences with the brand's products, prices, and other direct interactions with the products were significant creators of brand perception.

Practical implications. The results clearly demonstrated that companies could benefit from enhancing the scope and quality of their online communities. Participants outwardly stated that, at times, they sought more from their experiences with an online brand community. Companies therefore may consider transitioning more customer support to online media, since it is less expensive and a more effective support channel for customers. In addition, the potential for WOM to influence the brand via online communities cannot be underestimated. Previous research has suggested the importance of rumor control and response; this is relevant to bolstering online brand communities (Dubois et al., 2011). A dearth of employee presence online is a lost opportunity to sculpt and control a brand's narrative. For example, Laroche et al. (2012) found that brand communities enable businesses to learn consumers' perceptions regarding new products and competitive actions.

Future implications. Understanding and responding to consumer opinions on brand perception and loyalty is more important than ever in the contemporary world. Consumers can easily search for good deals and different options, enhancing competition among businesses and often making service quality a defining factor. This study demonstrated that consumers seriously consider brand choices prior to purchase and do not offer blind loyalty. An important implication of this study is that businesses can use a similarly designed questionnaire to learn about and bolster their product and service qualities. Each person's reasoning for selecting a product is subjective and dependent on many different factors, and this goes beyond impersonal mathematical measurements of brand loyalty. Therefore, the qualitative elements of this study are not only innovative, but also indispensable to brand loyalty and perception.

Recommendations

While this study was an important launching pad for qualitative research on the topic of branded online communities, brand loyalty, and brand perception, additional research could build on this foundation. Social media is ubiquitous and consumer participation in online brand communities will continue to trend upward rapidly. It is inevitable for social media to become the dominant force in brand communities.

This research had a limited number of participants. Future research with a larger number of participants could expand upon this study and lend additional validation to its findings. In addition to increasing the number of participants, a more diversified population is another recommendation. Researching online branded communities within other industries could yield different results or reinforce the results within this study. Yet another recommendation would be an in-depth study regarding repeat purchases or brand changing. This could offer additional insights on brand loyalty and brand perception. Since marketing has changes over time, the field could also benefit from research with more up-to-date information on brand loyalty and brand perception in the Internet age. Quantitative research is another recommendation. While qualitative research can provide much benefit and insights, a quantitative study could provide a different perspective on this topic.

There is a dearth of information on the influence of online brand communities on brand perception and loyalty (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Goh et al., 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This gap could benefit from additional research. Studies and investigations on this transcend beyond academia. Companies frequently expend resources on marketing research and development, and those concerned about brand

perception and loyalty can examine the results of this study to improve their understanding of their online interactions. Many companies have deployed online branded communities for various reasons including a desire to improve brand loyalty and brand perception. Yet, many of these same companies lack in understanding the motivation for participation in an online branded community. This study advances the scientific knowledge of online branded communities. In particular, the results from this study clearly suggest benefits of having an online branded community. However, companies and organizations should not assume an online branded community could provide enough value to offset products and services that lack features or have poor quality. Given the dominance of online communities on modern communication, both companies and customers stand to serve their best interests by greater investments in online participation.

Recommendations for future research. The topic of participation in online branded communities could benefit from further research. For example, modern-day marketing uses algorithms to gauge specific preferences on an individual level. If an individual loves Philadelphia baseball, for example, one could derive this preference without interacting directly with the consumer. Marketing organizations can learn these preferences and cater to them to create more targeted marketing campaigns. Future research can use these algorithmic methods to determine brand loyalty. An individual's search patterns can teach a great deal about brand loyalty. Future practices could potentially measure brand loyalty with mathematical algorithms, to analyze larger populations and quantify levels of brand loyalty. Personal opinions and perceptions have their place in furthering brand management, but such information is not concrete and one

must interpret these perceptions and opinions. Modern technology provides the opportunity to monitor online behavior, which can shed light on brand perception and loyalty. Positive or negative connotations from participants in online communities can give the opportunity to measure perception. Furthermore, how often an individual participates in certain communities can be measured directly, which can be used to gauge loyalty.

The topic of participation in online branded communities could benefit from additional research, both qualitative and quantitative, to expand and deepen the understanding of the dynamics of participation in online communities. A summary of the suggestions within this research are:

- Increasing the scope of the research could advance the scientific knowledge in the area of online branded communities. One could accomplish this by increasing the study's sample size, examining communities from other industries, or by analyzing more than one community within one study.

- The application of algorithms to gauge user preferences could be a part of future research. Such an approach could be an innovative way to analyze consumer loyalty and preference. This approach could provide insights without the need to interact directly with consumers.

- Future researchers could utilize contextual analysis software in a sentiment analysis. Such an approach could provide insights into the degree of preference for a product or brand. One could even go deeper by examining the sentiment of individual features of a product. Such research could expand on the MOA model described by MacInnis et al. (1991).

- An in-depth study on repeat purchases and brand switching could add to the scientific knowledge on branded online communities. This research project did not take into consideration the number of times participants purchased a particular brand or how often participants switched brands. Future research that includes these dynamics in a detailed study of an online branded community could add to the scientific knowledge of C2C exchange as described by Gruen et al. (2007).

The use of online branded communities is expanding and an important tool for any company selling directly or indirectly to consumers. These communities are part of a

broad social media movement that is shifting power from companies to consumers. Companies would benefit from researchers adding to the scientific knowledge by expanding on this research.

Recommendations for future practice. Examined in this study were two research questions. The first stated, “How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual’s perceptions of the brand?” The second question was, “How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual’s loyalty to the brand?” The answers to these questions provide businesses and researchers with knowledge and opportunities to improve their online communities and further studies on brand loyalty and brand perception.

It would have been reasonable to predict a relatively high level of brand loyalty because of participation in the online community. However, the data did not support this position. Price, product features, and other performance-related criteria often influenced brand decisions more so than participation in the community. Brand perception within the community had slightly different results. At times, participants’ negative perceptions of a brand increased based on poor experiences with an online community. Furthermore, positive experiences at times left participants with a sense of satisfaction and appreciation for the online attention. The online participation also had the influence of making participants feel part of a community. For the most part, online experiences were less important than price and performance when participants described their loyalty and perception.

This research is an important first step toward a new and important area of study and business. Companies are just beginning to offer online options for direct customer

service interactions. The literature review demonstrated that brand management is an important focus for businesses (Fuciu & Dumitrescu, 2010; Mercer, 2010; M'zungu et al., 2010; Shamoon & Tehsee, 2011). A brand's online presence, if not already one of the most important mediums of brand management, will likely become one. Lacking an online presence is most likely not a good decision for a brand in a global, connected world. Overlooking the research into the influence of online brand communities would be a serious misstep for the business and academic worlds. This study can advance the interests of successful business and brand management in the modern, Internet-driven world. In particular, brand managers, social media strategists, customer service leaders, and those in similar positions could benefit from this research. Some recommendations for those in such positions are:

- Define the company objectives for having an online branded community prior to launching a community. This will help ensure the community supports the company objectives.
- Identify participants who could be superfans and cultivate them as key contributors to the community. This is an ongoing process as some superfans lose interest over time and there is a need to develop new superfans to keep the community active and the content fresh.
- Actively monitor and moderate the community while allowing open and free discussion and debate. Strike a balance between healthy interactions between participants and ensuring an environment that is free of inappropriate behavior.
- Ensure company employees are engaged and available to participants to ensure the participants feel the company is listening.

The use of online communities is a tremendous opportunity for companies. These communities can have a positive influence on a brand. Communities also provide a valuable conduit of direct feedback from customers. This feedback can help companies improve their products and business practices.

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Appendix A

Site Authorization Letter

Site authorization is on file at Grand Canyon University

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Grand Canyon University
College of Doctoral Studies
3300 W. Camelback Road
Phoenix, AZ 85017
Phone: 602-639-6106
Fax: 602- 639-7820

INFORMED CONSENT FORM (SOCIAL BEHAVIORAL) MINIMAL RISK SAMPLE

CONSENT FORM
BRANDED ONLINE COMMUNITIES, BRAND PERCEPTION, AND BRAND LOYALTY

INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this form are to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record the consent of those who agree to be involved in the study.

RESEARCH

Mark Groveunder, a doctoral learner at Grand Canyon University, is conducting a qualitative study on how participation in an online branded community may influence brand perception and brand loyalty.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how participation in online communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty from the perception of 10 expert participants in an online community in the United States. In this study, participants in an online community will be individuals are considered to be the top contributors to the community. These top contributors typically make up less than 1% of the community population, but contribute around 80% of the useable content in the community. The objective is to gain an understanding of the participants' perspectives of the brand and what this means to the participants' loyalty.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY

If you decide to participate, then as a study participant you will join a qualitative study that will look at the how's and why's of participation in an online branded community. The primary method of data collection will be a semi-structured interview. The interviews will be conducted via Skype. The audio of the interview will be recorded. The recorded calls will be transposed so that a content analysis can be done. With a semi-structured interview the participant is allowed to freely answer questions.

Questions will be adjusted as the interview takes place to allow the participant to make meaningful comments relevant to the study. If the participant is uncomfortable answering any question, that question may be skipped.

If you say YES, then your participation will likely be a single session. A follow up call may be need for clarification. However your participation is not expected to last more than two phone calls both within a single month. There will be approximately 10 participants globally. All of the participants will be top contributors to the community that is being studied.

RISKS

There are no known risks from taking part in this study, but in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified.

BENEFITS

Although there may be no direct benefits to you, the possible benefits of your participation in the research are improvements to the brand's community that may indirectly benefit all participants of the community.

NEW INFORMATION

If new information is found during the study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will provide this information to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but you will not be identified. In order to maintain confidentiality of your records, Mark Groveunder will assign a code to each participant. This code will be used to identify the individual interviews, but will not link back to any personal information of the participant. .Each recorded call and related transposed text will only be identified by the assigned code. This approach will ensure anonymity of the participants. All documents and recordings will be kept for no more than 3 years. No hardcopies of documents will be kept. All records will be held electronically in a secured storage with strong password for access.

WITHDRAWL PRIVILEGE

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. It is ok for you to say no. Even if you say yes now, you are free to say no later, and withdraw from the study at any time. If any conversations with you have been recorded, those recordings, along with any transcriptions, will be destroyed should you withdraw from the study.

COSTS AND PAYMENTS

Your decision about participating in the study to be absolutely voluntary. A global system for facilitating the calls so as to avoid any telecom costs for the participants. There is no payment for your participation in the study.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

Any questions you have concerning the research study or your participation in the study, before or after your consent, will be answered by Mark Groveunder. Contact information for Mark Groveunder is provided below:

Mark Groveunder
[redacted]

If you have questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, through the College of Doctoral Studies at (602) 639-6106.

This form explains the nature, demands, benefits and any risk of the project. By signing this form you agree knowingly to assume any risks involved. Remember, your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefit. In signing this consent form, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies. A copy of this consent form will be given (offered) to you.

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in the above study. By signing the document you are granting the right to record your voice during a conference call for the purpose of this study.

_____	_____	_____
Subject's Signature	Printed Name	Date
_____	_____	_____
Other Signature (if appropriate)	Printed Name	Date

INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT

"I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits and possible risks associated with participation in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature. These elements of Informed Consent conform to the Assurance given by Grand Canyon University to the Office for Human Research Protections to protect the rights of human subjects. I have provided (offered) the subject/participant a copy of this signed consent document."

Signature of Investigator_____ Date_____

Appendix C

Interview Questions

a. What is your perception of Acer's brand?

b. How long have you been participating in Acer's community?

c. What products do you discuss most often in the Acer community? Why do you discuss these products?

d. Do you look for other member's answers before you post a question?

e. If you post an answer to another member, what process do you go through to develop your answer?

f. Tell me about your experience with the Acer community – what is your opinion of the setup of the Acer community?

g. Do you participate in other online communities?

   i. What other companies and/or brands?

   ii. What is your impression of these other communities? How do they compare to Acer's community?

   iii. What is your level of participation in other online communities? For example, are you considered a superfan in other communities?

   iv. How would you describe your brand loyalty to the companies that have these communities?

   v. What are some good ideas you have seen with other online communities?

   vi. Has your brand loyalty changed after you started participating in this brand's community? If so, in what way have they changed?

h. What is your level of participation in the Acer online community? How often do you read the community? How often do you post on the community? How often do you respond to others in the community?

i. What particular online community brands have you had relevant expertise?

j. Could you please describe how a company brand could use online community in marketing their products?

k. How do you define brand perception?

l. How do you define brand loyalty?

m. What elements are in online community that could influence brand perception and brand loyalty?

n. Could you please describe how a company brand could use online community in servicing or supporting their products?

o. What is your perception of the Acer brand?

p. Has your perception of the Acer brand changed since you started participating in the Acer Community? If so, in what way has your perception changed?

q. Please describe a situation where online participation influences brand perception and brand loyalty.

Appendix D

Case Study Protocol

A. Overview of the Case Study

B. Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how participation in online brand communities affects brand perception and brand loyalty from the perception of the top contributors in an online community in the United States.

C. Case study questions:

   a. How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand?

   b. How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?

D. Theoretical framework: In the theory of C2C, knowledge exchange occurs in situations where individuals participate in communication processes that detail the concerns, complaints, and recommendations that enhance the well-being of the consumer and the product (Gruen et al. 2007). In this study, the MOA model focuses on the way members of the brand communities engage in marketing communication processes to influence other potential members and brand users. Companies frequently utilize brand communities to foster relationships with customers and assist customers within the context of their branded products and services. However, it is not known how participation in online brand communities affects the perception and loyalty of a brand.

E. Role of protocol in guiding the case study researcher: The protocol contains the instrument as well as the procedures and general rules to be followed using the protocol (Yin, 2014)

F. Data Collection Procedures:

   a. Social media specific to the brand will be collected using NVivo's NCapture feature. NCapture will be used to electronically capture the text from those sites.

   b. Online product reviews will be collected using NVivo's NCapture feature. Specific product pages for the brand on Walmart.com and Bestbuy.com will be examined. NCapture will be used to capture the text from these web pages.

   c. The video and audio of the semi-structured interviews of the superfans will be recorded. These recordings will be transcribed into usable text and will import the text into NVivo.

G. Data Collection Questions:

   a. What is your perception of Acer's brand?

   b. How long have you been participating in Acer's community?

   c. What products do you discuss most often in the Acer community? Why do you discuss these products?

   d. Do you look for other member's answers before you post a question?

   e. If you post an answer to another member, what process do you go through to develop your answer?

   f. Tell me about your experience with the Acer community – what is your opinion of the setup of the Acer community?

g. Do you participate in other online communities?
   i. What other companies and/or brands?
   ii. What is your impression of these other communities? How do they compare to Acer's community?
   iii. What is your level of participation in other online communities? For example, are you considered a superfan in other communities?
   iv. How would you describe your brand loyalty to the companies that have these communities?
   v. What are some good ideas you have seen with other online communities?
   vi. Has your brand loyalty changed after you started participating in this brand's community? If so, in what way have they changed?
h. What is your level of participation in the Acer online community? How often do you read the community? How often do you post on the community? How often do you respond to others in the community?
i. What particular online community brands have you had relevant expertise?
j. Could you please describe how a company brand could use online community in marketing their products?
k. How do you define brand perception?
l. How do you define brand loyalty?
m. What elements are in online community that could influence brand perception and brand loyalty?
n. Could you please describe how a company brand could use online community in servicing or supporting their products?

o. What is your perception of the Acer brand?

p. Has your perception of the Acer brand changed since you started participating in the Acer Community? If so, in what way has your perception changed?

q. Please describe a situation where online participation influences brand perception and brand loyalty.

H. Guide for the Case Study Report

a. Audiences: Dissertation Committee, Chief Marketing Officer of Acer

b. This case study report will follow the GCU dissertation template.

c. APA 6th edition will be followed.

Appendix E

Process Map

Step 1	Project approval from Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and site approval.
Step 2	Obtain list of top community contributors and reach out to each individual via email per IRB approved procedures. Allow participants two weeks to respond/not respond and agree to participate/not participate.
Step 3	Destroy identifying information regarding individuals who did not consent to participate. Those participating will be assigned a unique personal identifier. The master identifier list will be kept separately from all other data files and will be the only way to match consenting participants to any data they provide.
Step 4	Begin importing social media posts from top community contributors who consented to participate via NVivo 10 social media tools.
Step 5	After completion of social media post collection begin collecting brand reviews from top community contributors via NVivo 10 web importing tools. Data from steps 4 and 5 will not be reviewed until after all initial community contributor interviews are completed. This will be done to keep each of the data sets independent. Any unconscious framing of interview questions or direction of the interview based on the online data would weaken the virtues of triangulation.
Step 6	Randomly select 3 community contributors to participate in the pilot field study of the interview guide via Skype. Upon completion of each pilot interview, pilot participants will be asked to provide feedback on all aspects of the interview and interview guide. Feedback, if any, from the pilot interviews will be integrated into the interview guide. Pilot interview files will be saved in anonymous identifier form but not uploaded for transcription.
Step 7	Begin conducting interviews with community contributors via Skype.

Step 8	After the completion of all the interviews, any identifying markers will be removed from the raw the Skype media files. After the files are saved in anonymous identifier form they will be transcribed.
Step 9	After transcription the interview transcripts will be loaded into NVivo 10 alongside the social media data set and the online reviews dataset. Social media posts and brand reviews will not be scrubbed of identifying information, as they are a public data source. However, if they are quoted in the final results write-up, the user name or avatar name will be assigned a pseudonym. Thematic and content analysis will begin to uncover themes and patterns across the three sets of data. A thematic analysis will be used for the interviews. A content analysis will be used to identify themes that exist within the social media postings and the online product reviews. In addition, NVivo will allow one to run queries that will present word and phrase distributions. This pattern-based auto coding will code large volumes of text quickly and can reveal unique ways in which the brand is perceived in real time – e.g. funny hashtags, odd verb or adjective usage around the brand, etc.
Step 10	Notations will be made in the NVivo system throughout the analysis that highlight examples of the broad trends and patterns that emerge. These highlights will provide primary evidence that will be included in the results chapter when talking about the broader findings.
Step 11	Preliminary analysis along with a transcript of the individual's interview will be presented to each of the interview participants so that they may participate in member checking. Each participant will be advised that this process allows them the opportunity edit, clarify, elaborate, or delete their own words from the work. This also provides the opportunity for participants to approve aspects of the interpretation of the data they provided.
Step 12	Revise and complete analysis and complete results write up. Destroy any remaining personal information on the participants and collapse all the data for archiving for 3 years until final destruction of electronic files via software utility.

Appendix F

Social Media & Online Reviews Sample Data

Social Media Samples

Twitter

Row ID	Tweet ID	Username	Tweet	Time	Tweet Type	Retweeted By	Number of Retweets	Hashtags	Mentions	Name	Location	Web	Bio	Number of Tweets	Number of Followers	Number Following	Location Coordinates
1	634324245242818253	AC_Nilgiri	@Acer why do I have to disassemble 3/13/2016 12:50:42 PM the laptop to access the HDD? #Aspire5 #Acer#Acer 15" 4GB RAM 1Tb HDD 8 GB,50 GB https://t.co/g6bbWKE5jV @vectorspamgmail #new #Acer#Acer		Tweet		0		Acer	TechnoSlow	Ability Way Gallery	https://t.co/0Ygn2Ddb0Vc1		8268	362	362	
2	634323437284625	tadaawas	@Acer @Acer #Aspire5 #15.4"3 3/13/2016 12:44:06 PM CORV 14" 4Gb RAM 1Tb HDD 8 GB,50 GB https://t.co/g6bbWKE5jV @vectorspamgmail #new #Acer#Acer		Retweet	ameliaholden	1	Laptop,AcerHD, new	Acer colorsaturdaymail	NADAVUL SIC	Mitmoo, OLP	http://t.co/dDmcFxrKQ	NADAVUL Services & Consultancies	1204	109	143	+19.42867-099.12766
3	634323435432038989	tadaawas	@Acer @Acer #Aspire5 #15.4"3 3/13/2016 12:43:28 PM CORV 14" 4Gb RAM 1Tb HDD 8 GB,50 GB https://t.co/g6bbWKE5jV @vectorspamgmail #new #Acer#Acer		Tweet		0	Laptop,AcerHD, new	Acer colorsaturdaymail	NADAVUL SIC	Mitmoo, OLP	http://t.co/dDmcFxrKQ	NADAVUL Services & Consultancies	1204	109	143	+19.42867-099.12766
4	634307363328647424	TerryQKeyser	@Acer I think you pick Acer because the 3/13/2016 12:13:03 PM		Tweet		0		Acer	Terry Crimson	Kent Level	https://t.co/yUB5kGSFMP	Journalist | Blogger | Writer	80862	8620	8670	
5	634307363328647424	TerryQKeyser	@Acer and sending my time. With pre 3/13/2016 12:24:00 PM		Tweet		0		Acer	Terry Crimson	Kent Level	https://t.co/yUB5kGSFMP	Journalist | Blogger | Writer	80862	8620	8670	
6	634307363328647424	TerryQKeyser	@Acer Acer Aspire E15 review - Acer 3/13/2016 12:24:00 PM		Tweet		0		Acer	Terry Crimson	Kent Level	https://t.co/yUB5kGSFMP	Journalist | Blogger | Writer	80862	8620	8670	
7	634306229260387200	Mpartz25	@Acer bonus. Since she was useless 3/13/2016 12:14:00 PM		Tweet		0		Acer	Mpartz25				75	75	75	
8	634307608273881600	TerryQKeyser	https://t.co/cxdxxNu3OD Dear @Acer 3/13/2016 12:18:30 PM		Tweet		0		Acer	Terry Crimson	Kent Level	https://t.co/yUB5kGSFMP	Journalist | Blogger | Writer	80862	8620	8670	
9	634307608273881600	TerryQKeyser	@Acer thank you for helping me recall 3/13/2016 12:18:30 PM		Tweet		0		Acer	Terry Crimson	Kent Level	https://t.co/yUB5kGSFMP	Journalist | Blogger | Writer	80862	8620	8670	
10	634320329288665008	CancerPlanner	Enter the PC Gamer @Acer Predator 3/13/2016 12:05:32 PM		Tweet		0	sanctnx sceaenrtcx sdscaenrtx scanrtx	Acer	KRC	California		Brand Enthusiasts. Social Media. Music. Movies. Video games. TV. Technology. SCIfi. Fitness. Food. Cars. Sweepstakes. Photography. Gaming. Life/Passionistas	16865	1742	1990	+34.05723-118.78607
11	634306417152767104	tanneson1	@Acer @HP @Acer @Dell @lenovo 3/13/2016 11:55:37 AM #Aspire5 #15.4"3 3 GB #Aspire5 #15.4"3 3GB 14" 4Gb RAM 500Gb HDD 8 GB,50 https://t.co/g6bbWKE5jV @vectorspamgmail #new https://t.co/		Tweet		0		microsoft microsoft	JEFF HP Acer Dell mindpoints	Maumee TN Nueces Anh	JOB Nam	https://t.co/Ffec0aZYwVb	Microsoft Innovation Educator Expert	5206	1966	2132	+34.11887-117.32223
12	634306971449362432	tadaawas	@Acer @Acer #Aspire5 #15.4"3 3/13/2016 11:39:28 AM #Aspire5 #15.4"3 3GB 500Gb HDD 8 GB,50 GB https://t.co/g6bbWKE5jV @vectorspamgmail #new https://t.co/		Retweet	ameliaholden	1	Laptop,AspireES, new	Acer vikyadeepgulf	NADAVUL SIC	Mitmoo, OLP	http://t.co/dDmcFxrKQ	NADAVUL Services & Consultancies	1204	109	143	+19.42867-099.12766
13	634306456992152	tadaawas	@Acer @Acer #Aspire5 #15.4"3 3/13/2016 11:37:13 AM RT @Acer#Acer: #Laptop @Acer #Aspire5 #15.4"3 2873 14" 4Gb RAM 500Gb HDD 8 GB,50 https://t.co/g6bbWKE5jV @ACERJAIS_SUTRA #R #new		Tweet		0	Laptop,AspireES, new	Acer vikyadeepgulf	NADAVUL SIC	Mitmoo, OLP	http://t.co/dDmcFxrKQ	NADAVUL Services & Consultancies	1204	109	143	+19.42867-099.12766
14	634306456992152	tadaawas	https://t.	3/13/2016 10:55:07 AM	Retweet	ameliaholden	1	Laptop,AspireES, new	Acer CLEAGO SATRLITR	NADAVUL SIC	Mitmoo, OLP	http://t.co/dDmcFxrKQ	NADAVUL Services & Consultancies	1204	109	143	+19.42867-099.12766

Facebook

Row ID	Post ID	Posted By Username	Post	Sentiment	Pictures	Links	Link Name	Link Caption	Link Descriptions	Videos	Time	Likes	Created Time	Updated Time	Comment ID	Commenter Username	Comment Text	In Reply To ID	Sentiment Likes	Commenter Time
1	236595_457544_														236595_457544_1007386767667544_	Dennis Schneider	Ok, wait one sec@ anim...		0	3/12/2016 1:00:00 AM
2	236595_457544_														236595_457544_1007386767667544_	Dennis Schneider	Ok, wait one sec@ anim...		0	3/12/2016 1:00:00 AM
3	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 3:51:27 AM
4	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Andrew Mulrooney-Mulrooney	Hey, Sebastian, what solitaire's, have	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 20:44:15 AM
5	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Hey, Sebastian, what solitaire's, have	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 20:44:15 AM
6	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Stephanie Aurmacher	Hand Blowing :-))		0	3/14/2016 22:52:31 AM
7	236595_457544_1007386767667544		Hey,Sebastian, we would like to hear												236595_457544_1007386767667544_				0	
8	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Bonnie Lewis	Hahaaaa		0	3/16/2016 21:21:07 PM
9	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Hahaaaa, Even the best *** Hahaaaa		0	3/16/2016 7:00:45 AM
10	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Tony Mitchell	Hahaaaa, Even the best *** Hahaaaa		0	3/16/2016 7:00:45 AM
11	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Jonathan Mosier	Dilfonnia.Icon. Lies and chaos!		0	3/12/2016 3:11:39 AM
12	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Jonathan Mosier	Dilfonnia.Icon. Lies and chaos!		0	3/12/2016 3:11:39 AM
13	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Great Job. Today, I get my Jerry Chase		0	3/16/2016 2:54:00 PM
14	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Michael Jessopson	Hold that tiger down		0	3/16/2016 9:56:11 AM
15	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 20:44:15 AM
16	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Sebastian Jenkins	Nice ole, sheets and I take a bowl cook	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 10:11:08 AM
17	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Pen Fatherfoe, we recommend creep	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 8:52:17 AM
18	236595_457544_														236595_457544_				0	
19	236595_457544_1007386767667544														236595_457544_1007386767667544_	Chris Blu	Sir, I ordered an Acer Chromebook 15		0	3/12/2016 2:30:30 PM
20	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Ashley Ashley	Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 20:44:15 AM
21	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Hey, Chris, could you send us your ch	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 2:31:38 AM
22	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Chris Vertes	Hey, Chris, could you send us your ch	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 2:31:38 AM
23	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Hold tiger 10 days just. Cool! (Jim	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/17/2016 10:34:00 AM
24	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Pen Martin, If we are experiencing a	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 4:45:32 AM
25	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Jeffrey Jaynes	Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 20:44:15 AM
26	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 3:51:30 AM
27	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Brice Crisler	Hold tiger 10 days just. Cool! (Jim	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 10:34:00 AM
28	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Pen Martin, If we are experiencing a	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 4:45:32 AM
29	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Jeffrey Jaynes	Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 20:44:15 AM
30	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 3:51:30 AM
31	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Brice Crisler	Hold tiger 10 days just. Cool! (Jim	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 10:34:00 AM
32	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Pen Martin, If we are experiencing a	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 4:45:32 AM
33	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Jeffrey Jaynes	Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 20:44:15 AM
34	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 3:51:30 AM
35	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Brice Crisler	Hold tiger 10 days just. Cool! (Jim	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 10:34:00 AM
36	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Pen Martin, If we are experiencing a	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 4:45:32 AM
37	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Jeffrey Jaynes	Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 20:44:15 AM
38	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Brice Crisler	Hold tiger 10 days just. Cool! (Jim	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 10:34:00 AM
39	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Pen Martin, If we are experiencing a	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 4:45:32 AM
40	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Jeffrey Jaynes	Hey, Sebastian, we would like to hear	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/12/2016 20:44:15 AM
41	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Brice Crisler	Hold tiger 10 days just. Cool! (Jim	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 10:34:00 AM
42	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Pen Martin, If we are experiencing a	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 4:45:32 AM
43	236595_457544_														236595_457544_	Product Vision	Hello! Is the Acer Iconia Tab 8 A1-840		0	3/16/2016 9:00:00 PM
44	236595_457544_														236595_457544_		Hmm, account for the waste of life. Ac	236595_457544_1007386767667544_	0	3/16/2016 7:36:27 PM

Online Reviews Samples

Outstanding value 8-inch tablet

Acer - Iconia One - 8 Tablet - 16GB - Wi-Fi - White @ BestBuy 21 hours ago

For a hundred bucks you definitely can't beat the deal on this tablet. It's got decent performance for the price. Like all Android devices I have ever used it can occasionally be sluggish, especially when downloads and updates are going on in the background. 16GB of storage is also good at this price point. I dropped in a 64GB micro SD card with no troubles whatsoever.

Pros:

I don't take many pictures with tablets, however, did take a few. Camera is pretty decent and camera App has quite a few features. Quad core processor is pretty snappy. Nice bright display. Fast wifi Connected to my 5GHz network. Had latest version of Android 5.1 loaded. Probably will never see version 6 but 5.1 is nice. Good battery life. I liked the EZ Wakeup double tap and 2 thumb gesture even if it didn't always respond on the first try. My 11 year old daughter tried out the Kids Center App and said that it was kind of neat even though it's probably geared towards kids a little younger.

Cons:

Back case was a hard textured plastic with an unimpressive feel to it. Would be nice to have more than 1GB of RAM so don't plan on heavy multi-tasking. But for the price you can't really complain.

Not sure what the bundled AppsGallery App adds beyond the play store. Seems like a waste of space but I understand that it recommends apps and probably also helps pay the bills. Don't care for the left swipe desktop app. There are not many options for feeds and it is not very configurable either. I'm still trying to figure out how to get rid of.

Other thoughts:

They seem ok but did not try Bundled Acer Portal apps for syncing files, music and pictures with a PC. Overall this is a great value for an Android tablet and blows most other budget tablets away in terms of what you
get for the price.

sdunnin

False advertised

Acer - Aspire E 15 15.6 Laptop - Intel Core i5 - 4GB Memory - 1TB Hard Drive - Obsidian black @ BestBuy a day ago

I bought 2 laptops during flash sale.Best Buy advertised on website as full HD 1080 screen, picked them up yesterday and realized that they are not 1080 but 768 not a full HD. I will return them back.

VanHai

Great little Chromebook

Acer - 14 Chromebook - Intel Celeron - 4GB Memory - 32GB Solid State Drive - Sparkle silver @ BestBuy a day ago
Got this laptop on sale. Knew what I was getting before it arrived. It's a great chromebook. All metal construction. Fairly snappy performance. Fanless, so runs cool. Couple of issues to consider. Only two usb ports and no sd slot (knew in advance, not really a big deal, solved memory card slot issue with 128 gig usb key). Screen is a bit dim. Resolution causes you to squint (ChromeOS issue). Non-backlit keyboard (this seriously knocked it down). I thought it wasn't a deal breaker upon ordering. but it really affects the use of the laptop. I ordered a cheapy usb light to address. Had they spent an extra few pennies on led lights this could have been the perfect chromebook. It's a big deal, but not enough to return.
skeighter

Not a good laptop

Acer - Aspire E 15 15.6 Laptop - Intel Core i5 - 4GB Memory - 1TB Hard Drive - Obsidian black @ BestBuy a day ago
I caught this laptop during a flash sale, which I thought was a good price. The resolution read 1080P and it is an I5. Well when I got the laptop it was definitely NOT 1080P. So I have been using it for two days and it is very slow. Hick ups constantly when just surfing the web. I have another low end laptop from a different manufacturer with similar specs I use as a lab server. It performs a lot better than this laptop. For an I5 this is a very disappointing turnout. It runs more like an I3 or Pentium. I'm not playing games on it. Just using it to web surf and it is struggling. Would not recommend this laptop. Spend the extra money and just go with a better brand.
Jerome

Exactly what I was looking for...

Acer - Aspire R 15 2-in-1 15.6 Touch-Screen Laptop - Intel Core i5 - 8GB Memory - 1TB Hard Drive - Steel gray @ BestBuy 2
days ago
Only had this for several days at the moment, but I'm completely satisfied at this time (we'll see how it goes in the long haul).
I was looking for a family workhorse between $500-$700, 2-in-1 touchscreen, 1080p, 8GB ram and a 1TB hard
The other three were ok, but they didn't have this one on the floor as they were waiting for the old model to sell out first. Somehow my wife convinced them to pull one out and fire it up...I knew after a few minutes that this was the one. This has the newer, faster ram...speakers sound better than any other laptop I've tried (for<$1000)...screen looks great...keypad has a large "0" like my split keyboard, so hitting with my thumb still works (some others have a small "0" buried between some keys)...and the keyboard is backlit. The only thing it's missing is the DVD/CD drive...but none of the four had one. An external USB drive will still work out...and since it had the most USB ports (4), it'll be easy to connect along with my wireless mouse, backup drive, etc.
Hands down, I think this computer is better than anything else available around this price range. If you're looking for something similar, at least track one of these down to take a look for yourself...
haw keye

Jaw dropping picture for $99

Acer - H6 Series 23 IPS LED HD Monitor - Black @ BestBuy 2 days ago
I bought one of these for a less than 2 yr old Dell that broke. Unbelievable quality for the price. I can see this really is a monitor worth $180 so a great buy at $99. Plus only $10 for a 4 year replacement plan. I plan on picking up 3 more of these today I'm so impressed. Another big plus is DVI-D, VGA and HDMI inputs AND cables for each are in the box!
flrebroker

Smooth running machine/long battery life

Acer - Aspire R14 2-in-1 14 Touch-Screen Laptop - Intel Core i5 - 8GB Memory - 256GB Solid State Drive - Black @ BestBuy 2
days ago
I love this laptop you can use it as a traditional laptop or make it into a touchscreen both ways it's perfect and the battery life is very very nice I have gotten at least 7 hours out of a charge. I would recommend this product for anyone looking for a nice laptop.
Nursingstudentmom

Appendix G

Figures for Themes

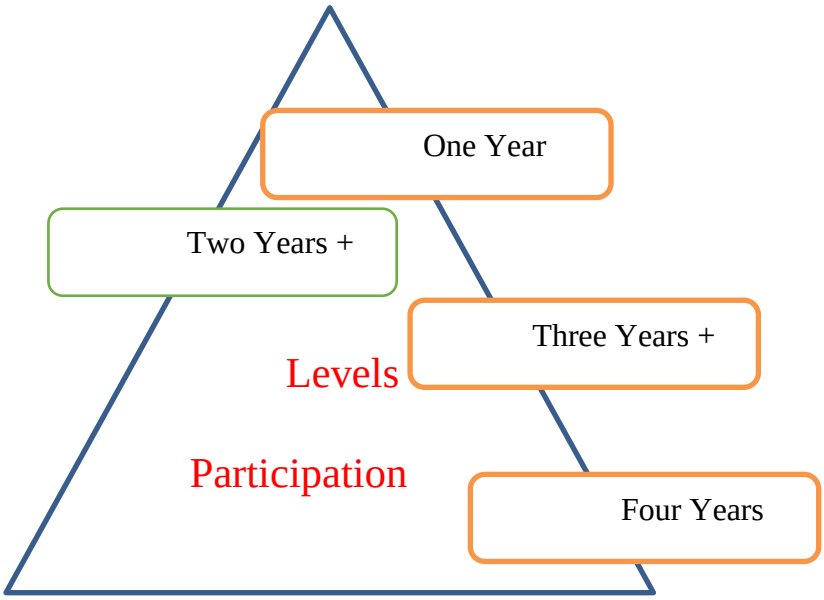

Figure G1. Levels of participation.

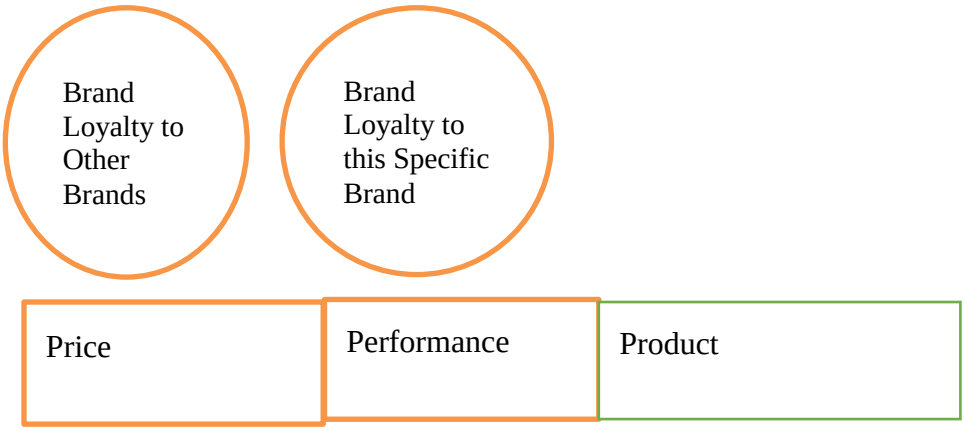

Figure G2. Brand loyalty themes.

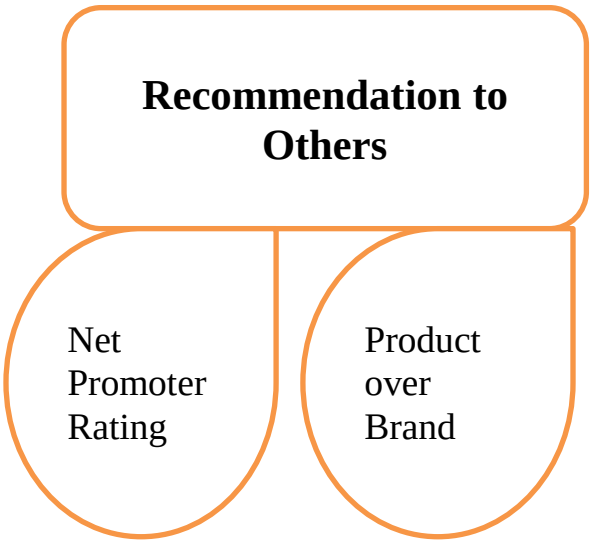

Figure G3. Recommendation to others theme.

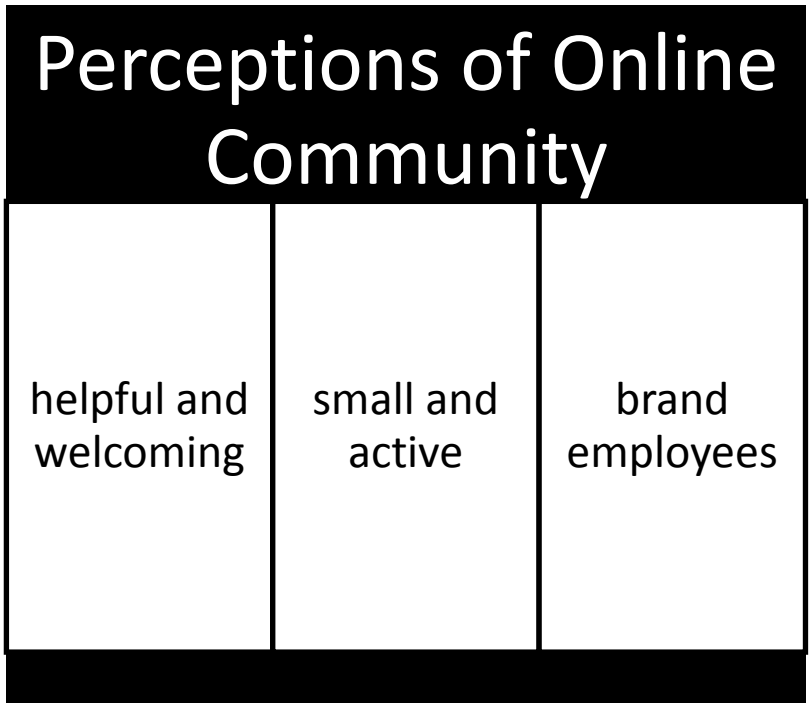

Figure G4. Perceptions of online community theme.

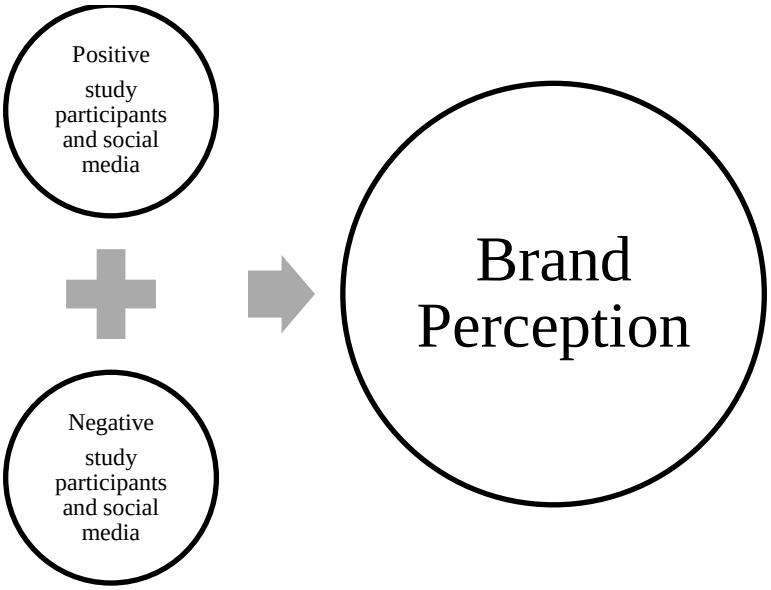

Figure G5. Brand Perceptions theme.

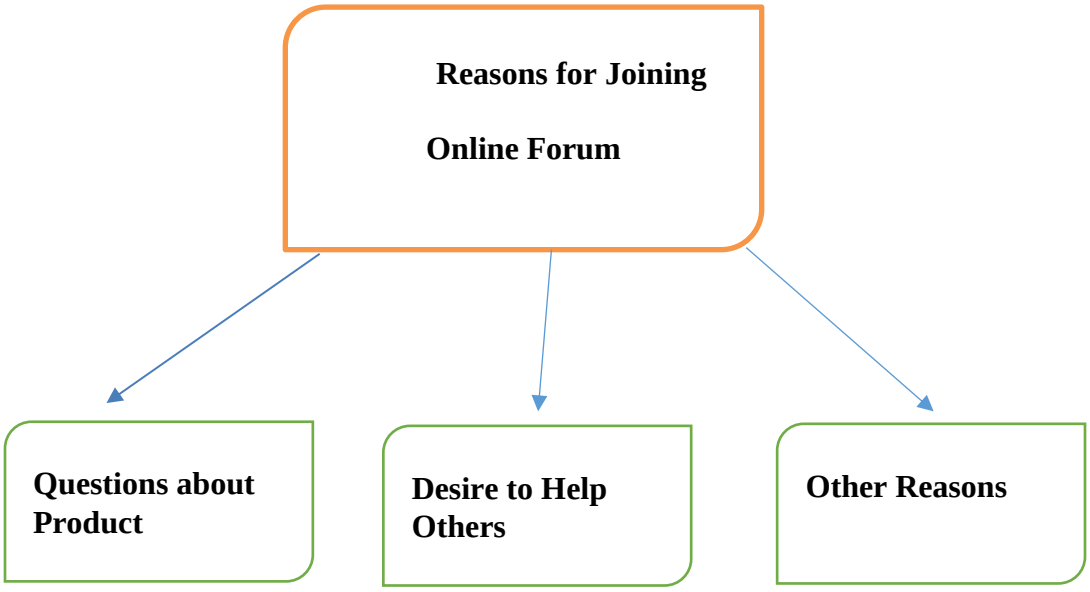

Figure G6. Reasons for joining online forum theme.

Appendix H

Brand Community Participation

Lessons Learned

- Many community participants prefer the word “forum” to describe the community. However, for the purposes of this research the word “forum” will mean the same as “online community”.
- For this document the words “online community” will mean a web based community for people to share knowledge and ideas as well as to help other participants.
- For this document the term “brand loyalty” means the likelihood of one to recommend a brand to someone else.
- Participants in an online community are typically initially led to the community because of a need or problem they or someone they are helping has.
- After the initial participation in a community, a participant may choose to continue participating. The motivation to continue participating is typically a desire to help others and share ones knowledge.
- One may also be motivated to continue participating because of an interest in meeting people from around the world.
- The original decision to purchase a product from a particular brand is usually motivated by the features of the product with the particular planned use in mind. For example, whether the product will be used for just browsing the Internet, or for something that requires more computing power such as computer aided

drafting. The price of the product and the reputation of the brand are secondary factors in the purchase decision.

- A decision to recommend the product brand is largely based on the experience with the particular product and not so much on the brand itself.
- Participation in an online community has some influence on the likelihood of recommending the brand to someone else. If the brand has a good community, then this is a positive factor in the recommendation. But, the product features, price, and online product reviews are stronger factors than the community.
- Participants see the community as a positive thing for companies to do. They view the community as a good public relations or marketing program for the brand.
- An online branded community can create positive views of a brand and, as a result, increase brand loyalty. The increase in brand loyalty may be small, but it is present. But, it is doubtful if that loyalty can ever offset products that are lacking features or have poor quality.

Appendix I
Brand Community Participation

Research Question	Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4
How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?	Brand loyalty to other brands, and brand loyalty to this brand.	My overall experience with Acer, I have some very strong feelings about it. I feel that they make a superior product for what I was buying	There's sorts of different problems that yes I can say that I have loyalty towards the brand, but it's not necessary that people would probably change to different company.	I look at all the different manufactures and then choose the one that is the best for the best price for my needs at that moment. I give a little bit more weight to the brands that I'm more familiar with and less to the ones that I'm either not as familiar with or have had bad experiences with in the past.	I just happen to like Acer
	Level of online forum participation by respondents	I would describe it as maybe moderate.	Yes, regularly I post answers. I try to check the forum regularly	I bought an Acer tablet I would think maybe 4 years ago, somewhere in that time-frame. It was a used tablet and I got in the community because I had some questions about it	Let's see, I think I joined in 2012 when I got the 512
	Recommendations to others	I'd say maybe about a seven. Which means that they're above average. But they're not perfect.	I would recommend it quite likely because I will tell you what, of course, I have three notebooks. I started on one	I would be more likely to suggest an Acer product to someone else because I know that that person, if they had to ask a	I did and they bought one

Research Question	Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4
			notebook and all of the three were Acer	question on the community, wouldn't hit like 1/2 a dozen members	
	Recommendations for the online forums to increase brand loyalty	I can't remember off hand if they rate answers as helpful or not. But I notice on some communities, you can look and people can grade the helpfulness of the answer	it's a computer company, probably it would be more interesting and I would be happy to see that the technicians, like the engineers, actively read the community and try to foundation each highlight	I've been doing that for a good portion of my life. Even when I was in college I took a lot of classes on teaching. It makes you feel good to be able to answer somebody's question or to learn something new from somebody and be able to take that and transfer it into helping somebody else.	One of the drives I have had with Acer and made public several times is they have some of the most confusing model names and designations I've ever seen
How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand?	Brand perceptions (positive and negative).	I do have an Acer laptop. It's a TravelMate which is one of their business laptops and I've had some issues with it. So that was why I participated in the Acer forum.	I've never had issues. I mean I had one issue and my old notebook is 5 years old. I never had other issues with my notebooks	It's easy to use because it has a regular keyboard as well as the touch screen and yet it's got the touch screen which I find myself using a lot as I'm navigating Windows and navigating browsers and stuff like that	Oh, to a certain extent, I would say it's both of them [community and product] for instance because Acer permits these forums to exist, it's part of the reason I participate in comparison [to other brands]

Research Question	Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4
	Perceptions about the brand's online forum.	The community is helpful. One thing that I noticed with this community, and I noticed it with a lot of communities is there always seems to be somebody from the company who jumps in with a canned response and I think that a lot of people see that for what it is.	Well it's working well. I rarely post something that I need help there. Most of the time what I post help doesn't have an answer because it's really technical questions that I would need probably a technician for my answer, not just a community	. I don't think there are many [communities] that I spend as much time on as I do with the Acer community	It's mostly a mixture, but usually when I have a problem, you're not going to find an answer in the community like that.
	Reasons for joining the brand's online forum	If it's something that I feel strongly about, not necessarily for information but I want to put in my experience or an idea or an opinion	If it's something that I feel strongly about, not necessarily for information but I want to put in my experience or an idea or an opinion, like let's say it's a political forum or a forum about something that I have had some experience with, I feel I can help that will be a motivator	I've been doing that [helping others] for a good portion of my life. Even when I was in college I took a lot of classes on teaching, thinking about possibly going into that field. It makes you feel good to be able to answer somebody's question or to learn something new from somebody and be able to take that and transfer it into helping somebody else.	Relaxation. , I get to teach and I get to send messages [socialize]

Research Question	Theme	P5	P6	P7	P8
How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?	Brand loyalty to other brands, and brand loyalty to this brand.	You know, it wasn't brand disloyalty, it's just the Lenovo appealed to me, so I bought it.	Certain members perceive the brand as a family or an environment (not me!). This is a psychological approach of brand perception. The best example is Apple. These owners only see this brand. Like a subliminal message/picture (logo)	For example, I at one time had a BMW car and my perception is the BMW makes a good quality car and I would probably buy BMW again because I'm loyal, I see value in the brand as apposed to a Volkswagen is a good brand, but I wouldn't be as loyal to Volkswagen as I would be to BMW. I have a different perception of the value of the BMW brand than I do the Volkswagen brand.	brand loyalty means that the brand can help me to solve problems with the products so can be the community, can be the from the brand
	Level of online forum participation by respondents	I believe going on 2 years, 2 and a half years, somewhere around there	I have been participating for about 3 years	I started a little over a year ago	It was in 2012 exactly, so nearly four years ago
	Recommendations to others	Well, I still, oh okay, I would say 5. I still recommend Acers but I recommend specific models.	I recommend a product more based on the product and less so on the brand	I would say between 8 and 10	Right now, I can tell you seven or eight. More seven, to be honest.

Research Question	Theme	P5	P6	P7	P8
	Recommendations for the online forums to increase brand loyalty	You know, when you're in the forum and people are calling in with their problems, you're going to see a lot of problems	It would be nice for the company to be more active in the community	every time I ask and put in a German community I get an answer to a question from an Acer technician and it was really good. It was not a standard answer by standard email or something, it was a really good technical explained answer.	I think it can be really positive the Acer brand, the Acer community
How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand?	Brand perceptions (positive and negative).	You know, when you're in the forum and people are calling in with their problems, you're going to see a lot of problems	Acer is closed and Lenove is open. The brand [Lenovo} shares each events with their members.	I was also very interested with the special product line of new Acer gaming Notebooks.	Acer giving the path, so right now, we're Acer community and the contribution from the user, from the Ace, in my opinion, the brand is more solid on the customer support. The user can feel, what can I say, like the user can feel it is followed by a brand.

Research Question	Theme	P5	P6	P7	P8
	Perceptions about the brand's online forum.	Yeah, I think it works very well. It's a good community, there's good people on there, and there's good people supporting us	When you plan the purchase of a workstation, the price/power is the criterion like a car weight/power.	At the beginning as you start a with new product you'll always have problems at the beginning therefore community is very interesting.	I enjoy helping other users when has problems with computers or tablets or smartphones. I feel like for lots of people, computers, smartphones, technology, personal technology, is something really important for work or life, so maybe if they can solve the problem or the issue in about a day or something less, we're really very happy. It's all about enjoy, nothing else.
	Reasons for joining the brand's online forum	Well, I went there for, to find an answer for myself and I got to looking at the questions people were answering and I just thought, "Well, I could answer that," and "I can answer that," and pretty soon I was involved	As I said, I like mmeeting new persons. Now this new member appreciates this community website.	when I had an Acer V3, I had some problems and I went to the community	The main thing is what happened with the community was the mobile section, so smartphones. it was called Power User. I started testing mostly all the android devices from Acer and so one day at the end of the product I started to look around and found the Acer

Research Question	Theme	P5	P6	P7	P8
					community and I registered.

Research Question	Theme	P9	P10
How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's loyalty to the brand?	Brand loyalty to other brands, and brand loyalty to this brand.	I would say I've gotten to like them, and when people ask for something I do, I'll say Acer and HP, of course being the largest. I've had a few of those, but I've said, if you see Acer get that, because I've had more problems with HP than I have with my Acers. I think I've had about three Acers.	For me, when you get to a community where the people are helpful, the questions are answered ... I've been to other forums where it could be a month or two before you even hear a single reply. With Acer, it seems that everything is answered even within minutes and they're more than willing to help. I used to have Alienware so when I asked a question on something, I was temporarily an Alienware forum member, but I could wait easily 3 weeks before I'd get a response, and even then it was a question to my question.
	Level of online forum participation by respondents	I have difficulty typing also, so that's why i don't participate as much in this stuff. It just takes so long and it wears me out, to tell you the truth, with fatigue, but I enjoy it.	I think I've been there about a year
	Recommendations to others	Right now I would say 10.	If I think about all the products that they offer and think of it globally, then I would probably go with an 8
	Recommendations for the online forums to increase brand loyalty	Acer staff really doesn't respond much on the site. Like they say in almost all those forums, they say that it's driven by other customers.	Honestly, I get the feeling that what they have set up for the Acer community is kind of basic, but compared to other forums and community areas, it's not quite as advanced. There's no different topic sections and the private messaging is a little basic

Research Question	Theme	P9	P10
How does participating in an online brand community affect an individual's perceptions of the brand?	Brand perceptions (positive and negative).	I've had a few Acers, and basically I really don't have any problems with them above what I might have with any other brand. I actually have gotten to like them a little better because they're a little more affordable	If I applied it only to the Predator line what would you say? Definitely for that, I'm going between a 9 and a 10. I spent a lot of time comparing and at least from what I can tell, it's quite a bit higher than most, especially for the price.
	Perceptions about the brand's online forum.	It just keeps the mind gears going. I just enjoy it. That's why once in a while I'll still, to keep the mind going and try to help other people with it. I don't mind. I like helping other people with the problems, as long as they aren't abrasive.	feedback, whether it's features, whether it's quality, whether it's design, or it could even be customer service, that feedback from the community is a powerful thing and companies should take advantage of that.
	Reasons for joining the brand's online forum	When I first got my Switch 10 tablet I had a couple problems with it, which I had tried everything I know and online searching through Google and Bing and all that, and I decided to go right to the community forum and check	Then I had a couple questions and just about everywhere I looked, it came back to the Acer community, which had a small forum where people were pretty much asking the exact same thing. I joined in and got a couple of my questions answered with friendly responses, they were quick.

Appendix J

Predetermined and Discovered Codes

Predetermined Codes	
Code	Description
Source	Where did the data come from (e.g. Facebook, online review, etc.)
Date	Date of posting
User-id	ID of the person who did the posting
Sentiment	What was the general sentiment of the posting (positive, negative, neutral)
Subject	What was the subject of the posting (e.g. complaint, compliment, question)
Reason	Reason for posting
Product	What was the specific product
Features	Product features discussed
Function	Functions of product (product use)
Business segment	Sales, service, marketing, other
Participation	Any of the text related to participation in the medium
Loyalty	Any of the text related to loyalty to the brand
Tenure	Any text related to length of time with the brand
Language	What language was the post written in
Activity Level	User activity level (frequency)
Discovered Codes	
Previous Use	Historical experience with product
Current Use	How is product being used now
Marketing	Source was a marketing program
Helpful	Users helping each other
Welcoming	Found the community welcoming
Size of community	Perceptions about the size of the community
Brand employee involvement	How active were brand employees
Issue with product	Had some sort of issue with the product
Helping a friend	Heling someone else led to the community
Helping others	Sought to help others
Frequency of involvement	How often reading or posting
Reason for involvement	Why stay engaged
Other brand	How does the community compare to other brands
Ease of use	How easy is the community to use
Transparency	Perceptions as to the transparency of the community