



## **Brand Identity Co-creation In Video Game Communities**

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## Abstract

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<p>This thesis originated from a personal connection to the video games industry as well as a profound interest in the concept of brand identity co-creation discovered during my MBA studies. I decided to explore the concept in this context as I had known from past experience how central thriving communities are for success of video game, wishing to understand better the dynamics of co-creation in this context, especially in relation to branding and brand identity co-creation.</p> <p>In my theoretical framework, I laid out a foundation of what brand identity co-creation is and how branding theory has evolved to reach it, moving from transactional, almost one-way signalling from brands to consumers towards a relational place where consumers are active contributors instead of being considered simply recipients of brand signals. Brand identity co-creation was acknowledged to be a process of interaction and influence, which could be initiated by either brand managers or stakeholders or taking place between stakeholders in environments facilitated by brand managers - such as online communities. Forms of active and passive co-creation were identified, active referring to conscious interactions and passive referring to collection of data and signals from the community by the brand managers. A worthy learning to note was the fact that co-creation between stakeholders may also occur in channels outside of the brand facilitated communities, potentially leading to brand identity co-creation outcomes where the brand managers have limited control over.</p> <p>In the empirical part of the thesis, I contacted three industry experts to take part in a concept synthesis workshop, where my goal was to collect both practical experiences of brand identity co-creation and co-creation overall, as well as use the concept synthesis tool to begin formulation of a model for brand identity co-creation in a community driven context, such as the video games industry. The conversation revealed a great deal of practical insight and challenges regarding brand identity co-creation. Among the most important ones being that for situations of actively engaging stakeholders in co-creation, they need to understand what they are contributing to and the possibility of attempting to co-create abstract subjects like brand identity along may lead to receiving inactionable input. Brands should thus understand what they are attempting to achieve in the brand identity co-creation process to be able to engage stakeholders in co-creation processes that deal with elements and concept they can understand easily. I demonstrated the different steps happening in brand identity co-creation and what aspects of it relate to the community heavy context of the video games industry in a process chart in this thesis.</p> <p>In the thesis I conclude that community heavy businesses understanding the process and the motivations behind it have improved odds of success in engaging a community in these practices, increasing loyalty and ultimately co-creating a brand identity that becomes stronger and stronger with every input provided by community members.</p>
<b>Keywords</b> Brand identity co-creation, community co-creation, video game communities, brand management in communities

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## 1 Introduction

As a long-time avid gamer myself, and having worked in the industry for a while, it is a space in business I have had a personal interest towards for a while and where I've kept an eye out for new developments. Brands in the gaming space often emphasize a strong connection between the brand and the community. This has been particularly visible in the video games industry, where communities are often encouraged to provide feedback for titles that are early in development and to participate in communities built around these games. Examples include Manor Lords, which turned out to be one of the most anticipated PC game releases of early 2024 due to their strong collaborative approach with the community (Evans-Thirlwell, 2024), to Hell Let Loose, who faced great adversity late 2023 when rolling out major updates that went against what was largely requested and expected by the community, leading to great deal of lash back (MoiDawg, 0:00-10:08, 2023). These games gather hundreds of thousands and even millions of people together into communities that engage in discussions between themselves, as well as the developers - or the brands - of the games they've gathered around.

The theory of co-creation, and more closely brand identity co-creation surfaces in this context. I first encountered the concept during my MBA studies in Haaga-Helia and became interested in exploring it further to understand the inner workings of what this looks like in practice, for a start, and what kinds of factors should brands consider when engaging in brand identity co-creation. In the video games industry context, several types of communities are commonly formed around brands, and big communities seemed like circumstances where strong interactions within the community seemed to carry the risk losing any kind of control or management a brand may have over their identity.

In a world that is interconnected and where every voice can be made heard towards brands – as well as other consumers – one begins raising questions about how much actual control brands can sustain over their brand image and even brand identity. If brand communities in the video games industry already have a strong say in what the products should be like early on in its lifecycle, how can brands take this feedback in and act upon it without sacrificing their brand integrity, while accommodating the feedback provided by the community to keep them engaged and loyal? It becomes a balancing act of applying input while maintaining a clear direction and appeasing the crowds that provide said input to keep them engaged.

How much control do brands actually have over their brand identity, and how much external influence is guiding it? How much of the brand identity and the perceived image is in the end co-created between the brand and the communities, and how much control do brands retain? What

are the tactics and strategies brands can leverage to maintain as much control as they can without sacrificing the engagement with their communities?

This is what I'm setting out to learn in this research-focused thesis. I will define what brand identity co-creation is based on the research conducted around the subject, what it looks like specifically in the context of gaming brands, and what tools and strategies are available to those working with brands to manage their brand towards a desired direction in the long term. In the context of this thesis, I will primarily focus on the game brands and to an extent, the brands of the developers due to the closer proximity with the consumers – or rather, the players.

### **1.1 Research objectives, scope, and research questions**

The goal of this thesis is to propose a framework that gaming brands can leverage in co-creation, where a balance between brand identity control and community engagement is struck. I have outlined three research questions for this thesis:

Research question 1: What is brand identity co-creation and how does it relate to branding theory?

Research question 2: What does brand identity co-creation look like in the context of the video games industry?

Research question 3: What kinds of practices for brands exist in the video games industry to maintain long-term consistency in the context of brand identity co-creation?

Research question 4: What does the video game industry and other community-focused industries have to gain from brand identity co-creation practices?

I begin the thesis by describing the video games industry, discussing the nature of brand management in this context. In the theoretical framework of the thesis, an outline of brand theory will be provided from a point-of-view of evolution to establish what kinds of steps have been taken to reach the theory of brand identity co-creation. I will observe definitions of key concepts such as brand, brand identity and brand image, as well as the transition from transactional brand management to relational brand management.

Moving more towards the dynamic nature of modern brand management, I'll dive deeper into what brand co-creation is and establish core explanations for the phenomenon. I observe strategies described in research literature for navigating brand co-creation and wrap up the theoretical part by discussing how the discussed theory and phenomenon have manifested in the video games industry.

In the research phase, I've invited three industry experts to join a workshop where we discuss observations about the brand co-creation phenomena, its position in current managerial practices and what kind of tactics and strategies have evolved around it. Based on the workshop observations, combined with the theoretical know-how, a framework proposal will be made, for which feedback is collected from the industry experts. To summarize the structure of the thesis and give an overview of the structure, I've provided an overlay matrix in table 1.

Table 1. Overlay matrix.

Research question	Theoretical framework (chapter)	Results (chapter)
1. What is brand identity co-creation and how does it relate to branding theory?	3.1.6, 3.1.7	6.1
2. What does brand identity co-creation look like in the context of the video games industry?	3.2	5.2, 6.1, 6.2
3. What kinds of practices for brands exist in the video games industry to maintain long-term consistency in the context of brand identity co-creation?	3.2	5.2, 5.7, 6.1
4. What does the video game industry and other community-focused industries have to gain from brand identity co-creation practices?	2.1.2, 3.2.1	5.1, 6.1

## 2 The video games industry

As the thesis is scoped to focus specifically on the brand identity co-creation in the video games industry, I begin by observing what the video games industry is and what significance it has in today's business world, focusing on a marketing and brand point-of-view.

Video games are often touted to be a massive and fast-growing industry, with Ernst & Young (2023, 2) predicting it growing from 93,6 billion dollars in annual revenue in 2016 to more than 210 billion by 2025, and PwC expecting 299 billion dollars by the same year (2022). To little surprise, the video games industry continues to be of great interest towards business analysts and corporations alike, with huge business opportunities as according to a study by video games industry analytics company Newzoo (2024, 17) the global number of players reached 3,27 billion people in 2023, with forecasts of the number growing to 3,795 billion people by year 2025.

When speaking of the video games industry, multiple mediums are referred to. By large, the video games industry is split into three major categories of business between console gaming, PC gaming and mobile gaming. The categorization refers to the medium with which players engage in gaming. Console gaming refers to the domain of Playstation, Xbox and Nintendo with both their handheld devices as well as the consoles plugged into televisions. PC gaming refers to desktop computers and laptops, and mobile gaming, as its name suggests, focuses on activities occurring on smartphones and tablets. Newzoo's industry report (2024, 17-18) provides us visibility into how the three categories split the industry in terms of player volumes as well as its revenue in the year 2024, with parts of the data forecasted. This information is summarized in table 2. It is worth noting that a single person can be a gamer of multiple categories, which is why the total number of players referred to on the 5 bottom row is not an exact sum of the categories.

Table 2. Forecast number of players and revenue in 2024, summary of data from Newzoo.

Category	Number of players (millions USD)	Revenue (billion USD)	Relative revenue
Mobile gaming	2 848	96,2	50,3 %
Console gaming	908	51,9	27,1%
PC gaming	603	43,2	22,6 %
Total	3 422	191,3	100%

As we can learn from table 1, mobile gaming represents a massive majority of the global player base, as well as half of the hundreds of billions of revenue generated by the gaming industry. Companies like Rovio, Supercell and Tencent are among some of the most remarkable companies operating in the mobile category of the video games industry, with their success – and the success of the video games industry as a whole – not going unnoticed by investors. According to Statista (2024), the number of investments into the video games industry grew from 220 in 2016 to 990 in its peak in 2022, before slowing down again to 672 in 2023. As the data suggests, the peak times of investor money flowing into the industry may have passed, with venture capitalists stating how the industry remains incredibly interesting and lucrative, but the criteria for committing to an investment have become much stricter compared to what they used to be (Dring, 2024). The pioneers of video games from the 1970s can only marvel at the magnitude the industry has grown into, even if the industry grew to tens of billions of revenue at an early stage of its lifetime (World Economic Forum, 2020).

## **2.1 Marketing and branding in the video games industry**

The video game industry effectively consists of transactions between businesses and consumers, so many of the traditional marketing and branding theories still apply to it to a great extent. There are some special features about the industry that are worth noting to fully embrace the context of the industry for this thesis.

### **2.1.1 Brand architecture in the video games industry**

When discussing brands and brand architecture in the video games industry, there are usually between two to three levels recognized by consumers: the brand of the game itself, the brand of the developer and/or the publisher - or corporate brands (Webber, 2023). The brand of the game is usually the closest one to the consumer, with the developer being at a higher level and the publisher being at the same level with the developer, or above them. In some situations, the developer and publisher are the same company and brand.

Game brands can refer to specific titles or a series of titles with continuation between them. Some of the most notable game brands out there include Legend of Zelda, Metal Gear Solid and Counter-Strike. For fans of the games and brands, the name alone is enough to give them an idea and set expectations as to what to expect from the game in terms of how it plays, what it looks like and what the experience is like overall. Sometimes, the game brand can be the brand of its main character, which is the case for example with the Super Mario, Sonic the Hedgehog and the Crash Bandicoot franchises, all of which are built around their very recognizable main characters.

Developers, or development studios, is the party that creates the game (Wasetis, 2021). They tend to develop recognizable patterns and styles over time, and often they choose to work on specific genres of games. Developers gain a reputation according to the quality and style of games they develop, and associations begin to form based on their catalog, similarly to how game brands create expectations towards players regarding what they can expect in terms of gameplay, art style and the likes. Similarly to other entertainment mediums, such as Pixar in movies, game developers can form something of a recognizable fingerprint both players and consumers can identify with (Webber, 2023).

Publishers are responsible for distributing games developed by their partner development studios or by themselves (Wasetis, 2021). More often than not, publishers oversee marketing and branding of the games they release and distribute. Some of the largest publishers in the industry include companies (and brands) like Nintendo, Sony, Electronic Arts and Activision Blizzard (Clement, 2024). While the catalogs of publishers may contain a wide variety of several types of games from a great deal of developers and in-house production, publishers too tend to have recognizable styles or franchises associated with them. For example, Electronic Arts has become widely known as a publisher and developer of many the leading sports game franchises in the world, while Sony's reputation is closely tied to their gaming console, the Playstation and its recognizable, platform-exclusive franchises – such as Horizon (van Beek, 2023) and Uncharted (Gray, 2016).

### **2.1.2 Significance of the community in video games marketing**

Gaming today is largely a social activity, especially for multiplayer games connecting players worldwide. As a result, it is not entirely unsurprising that communities tend to form easily around games because of solidarity between likeminded players, becoming emotionally connected to the game and community and creating a sense of belonging (Zakaria et al, 2022, 2215).

While gaming communities can form very naturally, it is also a practice pursued by the corporate side of the industry as well. Newzoo's found in their 2024 industry report that community management was one of the common denominators for successful game releases between 2022-2024 (16, 2024). Community management is a collection of practices deployed by company employees and/or volunteers built around to communicate and engage with the community members and moderate discussion occurring within the community channels (Zimmerman, 2019).

As a trend of in the video game industries, there has been a shift in how publishers would work towards maximizing PR outcomes. Whereas in the past the bulk of this work would have been done among gaming journalists to ensure maximized press coverage in industry leading publications, it is becoming "increasingly complemented by influencers and social media, giving unprece-

mented levels of power to the gaming community” (Newzoo, 16, 2024). As an example of this trend Newzoo points at the publishing and development mechanism of early access, where players are granted access to earlier, work-in-progress versions of the game than would’ve been made available at a standard launch. Motivations for engaging in early access from a developer’s side may range from collecting feedback early from players and involving the community in early stages of development, to assessing market-fit and generating revenues before actual launch of the game (Newzoo, 16, 2024). Newzoo argues this is the “ultimate” form of community management, making community members more involved already before a full launch of a game.

This community management aspect and especially the idea of early access is one of the main drivers of interest in this thesis. Even if community members are having a say in what could be considered somewhat technical aspects of game development, there is bound to be input that makes it through to the game that may impact elements that go beyond technical functionality. Developers should understandably be the ones in control in terms of what their product is, and what the brand is like, but communities may still provide input and feedback on these aspects. Should developers turn this input away, do they risk upsetting the communities and causing themselves harm in the long term? These are questions I’ll look to answer in both the theoretical framework as well as the workshops with industry experts.

### 3 Theoretical framework

In the theoretical framework I will be establishing the groundwork for the brand theory relating to our topic. I will define the heavily involved concepts of brand identity and brand image and observe the evolution of brand concepts towards its dynamic aspects, building up towards the theory of brand co-creation. The theoretical framework is wrapped up with observations of co-creation in the context of the video games industry, as well as the existing strategies for navigating co-creation as recognized by existing literature.

#### 3.1 Evolution of brand concepts

To set the stage and provide brand identity co-creation more context, I'll start by observing where the theory has emerged and how brand management theory has evolved in the past 20 years to reach the theory of co-creation. Whereas "traditional" brand management activities have been observed as "static", transitioning towards modern theories proposes a more "dynamic" approach in which brands have room to evolve without the specific decision to rebrand (Prymon, 140, 2016).

##### 3.1.1 Brand definitions

A brand is popularly defined by Keller as "a set of mental associations, held by the consumer, which add the perceived value of a product or service" (Kapferer, 10, 2008). A brand helps a product, or a service stand out in the marketplace, communicating the value said brand provides to consumers. Other definitions propose that a brand is a distinguishable element or symbol that works towards the previously mentioned goals of a brand (Prymon, 138, 2016), to an extent of what almost feels like simplifying the concept of the brand. Smith and Taylor (527, 2002) propose a brand is to be interpreted as an all-encompassing collection of the "beliefs and expectations about a product (or services) which make it relevant and distinctive".

Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou offer what seems like a great summary of the various brand definitions: "an evolving mental collection of actual (offer related) and emotional (human-like) characteristics and associations which convey benefits of an offer identified through a symbol, or a collection of symbols, and differentiates this offer from the rest of the marketplace" (257, 2019).

In their book "New Strategic Brand Management", Kapferer (12-13, 2008) extends the brand definition into a brand system that adds to the thinking of names and symbols to the beliefs and associations. The brand system proposed by Kapferer includes the tangible and intangible value propositions of a brand as well as the product or service experience. These elements come together as a "brand triangle" which according to Kapferer addresses many of the perceived issues of brand

management, such as brand identity and positioning, brand extension and brand stretch, as well as how a brand should evolve and how often this should occur.

Kapferer expectedly goes into more depth about what the brand is and its impact on the consumers perceptions of a product. Brand equity is brought up in this context, meaning that a brand should add value to a product or service; without it, the product or service would become less desirable. Ultimately, Kapferer poses a crucial question for brands; “what would the market lack if we did not exist” (14-31, 2008).

In this thesis, I will lean on Delgado-Ballasters and Veloutsous definition with additions of Kapferers brand system. To summarize, a brand is to be considered a set of characteristics and associations, expectations and distinguishable elements that set a brand apart from the market, communicating to consumers what the tangible and/or intangible value the brand adds are.

### **3.1.2 Brand identity – controlled signals**

An important aspect of brand identity co-creation is defining what is meant by brand identity. Brand identity is described by Kapferer as a tool of brand management, where a company sends messages and signals towards consumers, specifying the unique aspects and features of the brand (171-174, 2008). A distinction to this theory could be applied from Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou (256-257, 2019) who specify that brand identity is the perception formed by internal stakeholders, whereas brand image is the perception of external stakeholders. Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou again offers a great definition for brand identity as supported by relevant literature in their research: “the symbols and the set of the brand associations that represent the core character of the brand that the team supporting the brand aspire to create or maintain as identifiers of the brand to other people” (257, 2019).

The importance of consistency in the formulated brand identity is emphasized in research since the 1980s, to help companies secure a competitive position in the markets and differentiate themselves from the competition in the eyes of the consumers. Similarly, brand image is noted to be an important factor for users making choices between brands, as well as a strong factor for building brand equity (Siano et al, 375, 2022).

While traditionally it has been proposed that brands are in full control of their brand identity, and it is formulated according to the signals the brand sends out, it has been proposed in more modern research that brand identity can and has included input from the consumers, even without specifically touching upon the co-creation framework (Siano et al., 376, 2022). This supports Prymon’s criticisms brought up earlier about how brand identity would dictate a closely controlled brand im-

age should not be considered as a correct assumption. Regardless, to establish the theoretical framework for this thesis, it is important to understand where the theory of brand identity co-creation originated and what its building blocks are.

### **3.1.3 Brand image – interpretations and associations**

Keller and Swaminathan have proposed that brand image is formulated based on how consumers' perceptions are affected by the brand associations from their memories, meaning how the experiences of said consumers with the brand in question form the brand image (2020). Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou define brand image as "the perception formed to the mind of a member of the external audience about the brand after one real or mental encounter with the brand". Brand reputation derives from the accumulation of brand images and is approached here as "an aggregate and compressed set of public judgments about the brand" (257, 2019).

Kapferer's interpretation of brand image is the result of brand identity signals being transmitted to consumers, affected by competitors and noise and leading to interpretations of brand image among the consumers (174, 2020). This adds an important aspect to the thinking of brand image – brands rarely operate in a vacuum and should not assume the signals they are passing are received as is. Consumers are likely subject to communications from a variety of brands and sources, and associations may form in unexpected manners. This is also reflected in figure 1 from Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou (261, 2019), where uncontrolled elements affecting the brand image are recognized as similarly strong influences as controlled signals communicated by the brands.

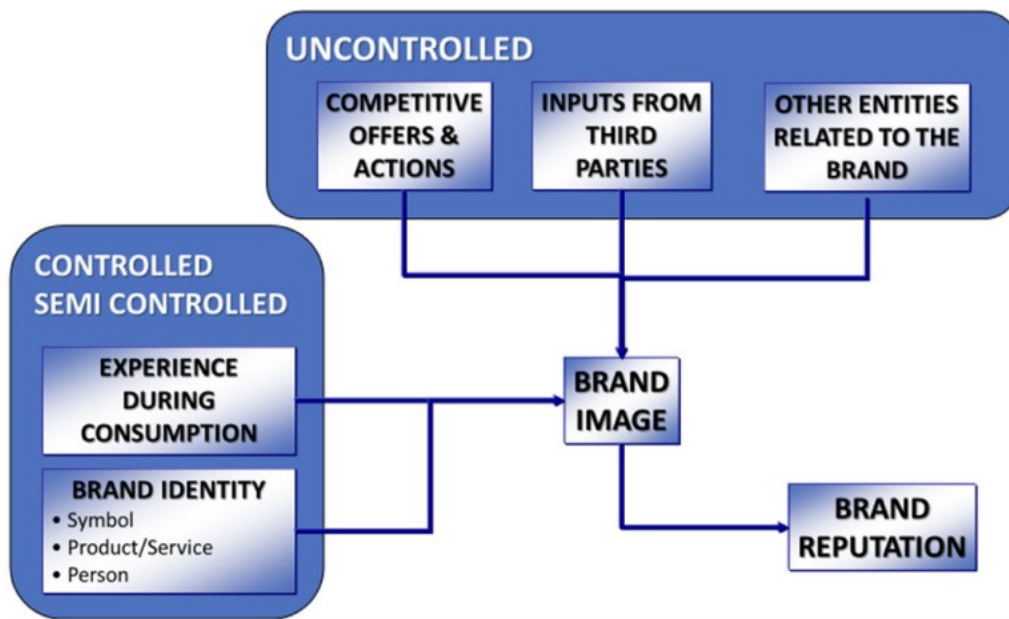


Figure 1. Controlled, semi-controlled and uncontrolled signals impacting brand image. Delgado-Ballaster, Veloutsou, 261, 2019.

In Kapferer's theory of the brand system, it is proposed that brands have majority control over the various elements, relying on a set of activities that projects a specific brand identity, ultimately leading to a desired brand image among the consumers receiving these communications. Prymon criticizes that this approach interprets brand image being the direct result of the brand identity (139, 2016), implying that brands are expected to exert a great deal of control over what consumers can interpret the brand identity to be, while having little to no impact on the brand identity definition.

### 3.1.4 Transitioning from transactional to relational

The idea of a brand making a product more than "just" the product is expanded upon further by Kapferer. They discuss how a brand should aspire to be a preference, be passionate themselves and incite passion among consumers (156, 2008). Kapferer notes a transition in brand management practices by stating how they've evolved from being simply transactional practices towards being relational. It is explained how brands should strive towards being aspirational and provide consumers something to identify with, in order to build their own personal identities through the brand. Kapferer goes on to specify that these relations cannot be built by simply communicating in a transactional manner, but brands should consider activation plans; specifically, within virtual communities created around the brands (160-163, 2008).

While Kapferer's book dates back to 1992 with its first edition, and even the fourth edition isn't necessarily the most recent publication, the significance of brand communities has not been missed. One could expect the significance of specifically online communities to be highlighted even further today in the 2020s, should Kapferer's marketing strategy staple be revisited today for a more recent edition.

This similar transition from transactional to interactional can be observed among the other theories as well. As mentioned earlier in this section, we've seen criticism towards the assumptions of brands telling consumers what their brand image should be by way of brand identity signaling and rather assume consumers input may already have an impact when brands are defining their brand identity.

### **3.1.5 Dynamic aspects of brand management**

As we progress through the evolution of brand management and begin observing the practical implications, we start moving towards the thinking of how brands should be considered dynamic entities that can change and evolve rather than simply static formulations that can be changed from time to time at the whims of brand management teams.

This for one is a need imposed by the fact that the operational environment has changed a great deal for brands. Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou note specifically how brands cannot be "managed through a well-structured and predetermined process like the way that one would run a factory or operate a garbage disposal" in a fast-changing environment that is becoming increasingly global and interconnected as a result of technological advances made (262, 2019). Not only has the rise of internet and social media communities changed – or enhanced – the ways consumers experience brands, but consumers also have much better tools to make their voices heard among wide audiences online (Delgado-Ballaster, Veloutsou, 263, 2019).

Prymon (140, 2016) suggests the traditional "static" approach to branding assumes that the brand choices made early in the products or services lifecycle can live infinitely as they are until brand management teams propose rebranding. Prymon (136-138, 2016) describes the dynamic approach to branding through a product specific lens, where a product has consistent core attributes, and a layer of elements that may be subject to change as time goes on. These elements would be allowed to have continuous changes and updates, rather than being statically set in stone for long periods of time and be changed only at the discretion of the brand management teams. The difference between these models is greatly portrayed in figure 2. Prymon argues this also applies to brands as they would to a product. This model implies that as long as the products – or brands –

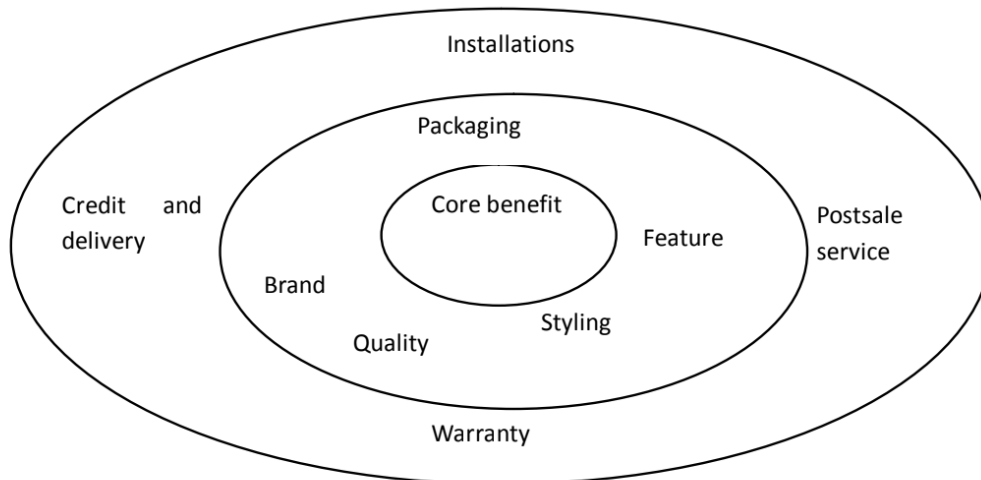
core attributes are consistent, their other elements can be subject to change even on regular intervals.

A similar transition towards a dynamic brand management approach, moving away from a transactional, brand controlled process towards collecting consumer input is observed by Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou. They describe how consumers are evolving from being passive observers into active contributors across different industries to the extent that Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou note consumers and customers as “the most significant contributors in the development of the brand and its meaning”, even if they are not the only stakeholders in the process (260, 2019).

The rise of the dynamic nature in brand management and what could be considered “surrendering” control from the brand management side is observed to have practical implications in terms of how teams should perceive themselves in the branding process. While Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou provide insight into 2016 research having mixed views regarding how much control brand management teams still retain over the development and management of brand meaning, they agree that brand management teams need to perceive themselves as “one actor among many in a network of relationships that (is) developed by multiple stakeholders” (262, 2019). Brand management teams should not thus assume that they maintain full control over the aspects of the brand, even brand identity to an extent.

### **3.1.6 From brand control to brand co-creation**

The impact of digital engagement on brand management has been a well-documented topic for research since the early 2000s, and it has not lost its significance in today’s world of being increasingly interconnected with one another online, making it the norm rather than an upcoming trend. The increase in access consumers have towards brands means that managing brands is becoming increasingly complicated from brand management teams’ point of view. With the wide adoption of social media and other similar technologies, consumers have gained closer proximity with brands, leading to an observation of power transfer from brands towards consumers (Iglesias & Bonet, 253, 2012). As an important factor and motivator for brand co-creation, Kennedy notes “if a brand is perceived as being unable to be influenced, then not only will consumers not engage in co-creation, but the attributions toward the brand and the outcome of the co-creation effort will also be negatively affected” (343, 2017).

**Figure 1** Three product levels

Source: Kotler, 1988: 445, also Kotler, Armstrong et al., 2002: 615

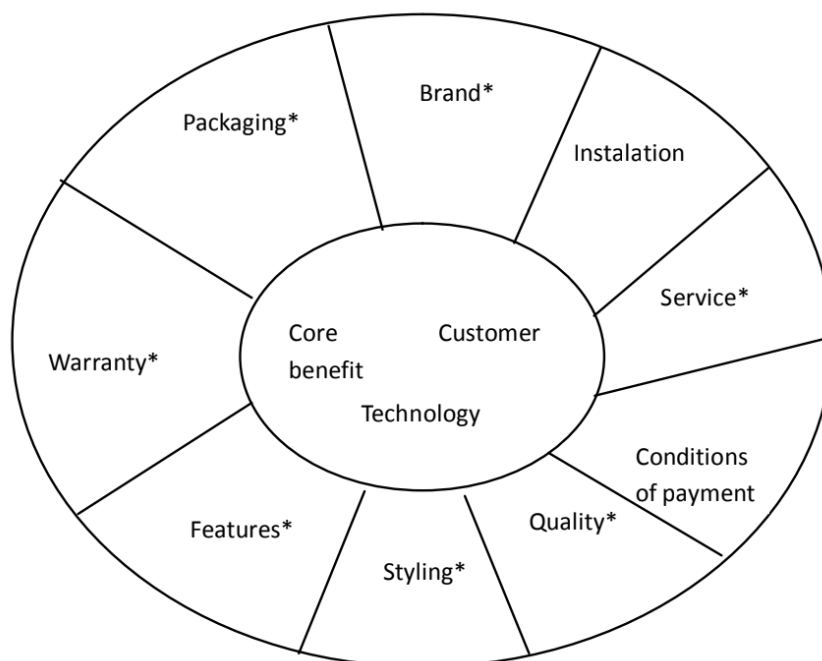
**Figure 2** The dynamic concept of a product

Figure 2. Difference between static and dynamic concepts of a product. Prymon, 137, 2016.

In Veloutsou's article (262, 2019), it is mentioned that research in the mid-2010s was mixed about how much control brand management teams actually have over the brands, and how much of that control is relinquished to external parties through co-creation. According to Veloutsou, many different stakeholders create a network that contributes to the formation of brand meaning, whether brand management teams like it or not.

Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) observed the interactions among this network of stakeholders in their paper “An online discursive inquiry into the social dynamics of multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation”. Due to the complex nature of these networks and a multitude of interactions happening between the members of the networks, Vallaster and von Wallpach suggest “management can no longer control brand meaning but is only one of many actors in the brand meaning co-creation process and needs to actively engage in a multi-log with salient stakeholders” (1506, 2013).

In their 2017 research “I create, you create, we all create - for whom?” Eric Kennedy discusses the power consumers attain to shape brands due to the interconnected nature of today’s digital era. Kennedy proposes that this power is what creates the phenomena of co-creation, transforming consumers into active participants instead of passive recipients (68, 2017). Instead of simply receiving messages, consumers interact with brands more and learn to expect this from brands as well.

As a phenomena in the context of branding, co-creation has been becoming increasingly popular, as noted by Sarasvuo et al (544, 2022), who observed a significant increase in articles about co-creation in branding starting in mid-2010s with an upward trend towards the 2020s. I will next begin to explore the phenomena of co-creation in the context of branding.

### **3.1.7 Co-creation in branding**

Co-creation is described by Kennedy and Guzmán as “the process where two or more parties come together to create value” (343, 2017). At a top level, co-creation is about developing methods to interact and co-shape consumer expectations (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) that lead to the dynamic formation of associations that feed a brand’s identity (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013) (Kennedy, 69, 2017). It heavily involves the shift from controlled brand messages towards a more participatory approach, as we have discussed in the previous section of this thesis.

As Sarasvuo et al set out to clarify the conceptual understanding of what co-creation in the realm of branding is, we’ll lean on the description provided based upon their extensive research into 148 articles from 55 publications (555-556, 2022). Articles selected for their research seemed to focus on co-creation first, and co-creation in branding context as secondary for the most part, with multiple references to the theory of value co-creation. Based on their review, co-creation is best described to be a process that has two dimensions: interaction and influencing, seem to summarize the definitions provided by Kennedy, Guzmán, Prahalad, Ramaswamy, Vallaster and von Wallpach well.

Interaction is described to take place in both online and offline environments, with specific mentions of online environments providing better opportunities for masses of stakeholders to take part in the co-creation process. This has opened better opportunities for brands to engage with stakeholders and encourage a more active role in branding (Sarasvuo et al, 556, 2022). Interaction is described to have two aspects: direct, between consumer-to-business, and indirect, between consumer-to-consumer. Direct interaction could be a competition about product development - for example, Burger King recently invited fans of the restaurant chain to come up with new ideas for their iconic Whopper sandwich (Burger King, February 2024). Indirect interaction on the other hand is described in research of Sarasvuo et al. as the consumers interacting with their peers such as friends, family, colleagues or community members (546, 2022).

Influencing referred to Sarasvuo et al (556, 2022) relates to much of the traditional branding literature and suggests that co-creation can occur without clear interaction between brand and consumer but can take place without intentional action. Much of this influence observed in the research is described to be a more traditional process of brand sending signals and stakeholders receiving them and being influenced by them but does not dismiss the possibility of this process working the other direction as well (547, 2022). Sarasvuo et al also note that stakeholders may generate content themselves to be consumed by other stakeholders, who may be influenced further by these signals which have not originated from the brand itself. Influencing from this point of view could be interpreted to contain a similar direct and indirect dimension and Sarasvuo et al. noted interaction to have.

Sarasvuo et al. go further to provide a clarified description for what co-creation in branding is. Their proposed definition is as follows: "Co-creation in branding refers to a process of intentional interaction between or among two or more parties that influences a brand." The influenced brand is noted to refer to both the marketer's and stakeholder's perspectives, depending on who the interaction occurs between. Sarasvuo et al. (557, 2022) also note that interaction can occur between marketer and stakeholder (B2C or C2B), internally within organization (Employee-to-Employee) or among external stakeholders (C2C).

Sarasvuo et al. also identify in their study that past research on the subject of co-creation relating to branding identified that co-creation may be initiated either by the brand managers (for example by involving stakeholders in branding strategy or rebranding processes), the stakeholders themselves (volunteering feedback or discussing brand among peers) or by the brand managers facilitating stakeholder interactions - "for example, in firm-created brand communities" (550, 2022). In these facilitated communities, members can be seen as co-creators of brand identity as parties who keep sending brand related signals, reinforcing said brand identity among fellow stakeholders.

To add more depth to the idea of interaction and influence as proposed by Sarasvuo et al (2022), I sought out more information about the process itself. Hatch and Schultz (594, 2010) proposed an integrative framework for what a co-creation in branding looks like. Their framework consists of four key elements: dialogue, access, transparency, and risk.

Hatch and Schultz note how branding is recognized “for its ability to create dialogue” both inside an organization and among external stakeholders. They also point out that from a stakeholder’s point of view, branding provides an access point into an organization or at least some members of the organization. This access works both ways, as these organization members also gain access to the networks where these stakeholders are originating from. This access in turn creates transparency, “revealing more of the organization’s culture, decision-making and management practices, and the technical knowledge” (595, 2010). According to Hatch and Schultz, this increase in access and transparency exposes the company to more risk, including risk of company culture, practices or technologies being copied by competitors and risk of control loss from brand management teams to the dynamic nature of co-creation by stakeholders (596, 2010).

### **3.1.8 Measuring co-creation**

The article by Sarasvuo et al also touched upon an interesting aspect of co-creation - measuring it (547-550, 2022). While many proposals for measuring co-creation were identified as simply measuring the instances co-creation occurs in, or the perception from the perspective of either the brand or stakeholder regarding whether or not co-creation is actually occurring, I found the concept of measuring the willingness to interact in co-creation setting an interesting method of measuring co-creation. As referred to by Saravuo et al, this willingness to interact was proposed as a co-creation measurement method by Chistrodoulides et al in 2012, Rather et al. in 2019 and Tajvidi et al in 2020 (549, 2022). This seems like a rather simple method of measuring co-creation, measuring for example how large of a proportion of the target audience - or a community - is actually engaging in the co-creation.

### **3.1.9 The role of working consumers in brand identity co-creation**

As pointed out in the work of Sarasvuo et al, the interactions between stakeholders and businesses and among stakeholders themselves are deeply rooted in the concept of brand co-creation. The stakeholder's role is something that Black and Veloutsou researched more closely, observing co-creation in the context of an election in Scotland, creating the idea of the working consumer in 2017. The working consumers are described as individuals who volunteer their time and resources to create value for a brand or a cause (8, 2017), referencing a form of co-creation interaction

among stakeholders external of the brand or marketer, as described according Sarasvuo et al's work in the previous chapter.

Black and Veloutsou observe that consumers can contribute to brand identity and reputation in two ways. First, expressing opinions and sharing experiences or other information about the brand makes them a source of information that can shape the reputation of the brand. Black and Veloutsou add that brands lack control over this source of information (8, 2017).

The second way of contributing observed by Black and Veloutsou is getting more involved with brand identity co-creation, "producing signals that wider audiences perceive as originating from the brand or by helping develop new products" (8, 2017). The two ways of contribution can be differentiated to an extent by how external parties perceive them – the first way of expressing one's opinions is more clearly coming from a peer, whereas the more involved contributions towards a brand identity can be perceived to originate more closely from the brand itself. Black and Veloutsou point out that there can be a risk that working consumers and brand employees are not as clearly distinguishable from one another (9, 2017).

Black and Veloutsou suggest a process of "reciprocal identity construction" where a brand sends controlled messages to consumers, who then send their own signals based on these messages to other stakeholders (10, 2017). The nature of these signals becomes more uncontrolled when sent out by the working consumers, suggesting the relinquishing of brand control noted earlier in this thesis.

This is expressed in further detail by Black and Veloutsou by referring to research by Ahuvia (2005). Consumers are said to have the ability to express their identity through the brands they admire and love. Further research by Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas (2015) as referenced to by Black and Veloutsou suggests that individuals "support their own desired identity by expressing their admiration for the brand, actively engaging in and contributing to the brand development, and participating in brand communities" (10, 2017).

### **3.2 Co-creation in context of the games industry**

Examples of the stakeholder networks referred to by Veloutsou (2019), Vallaster and von Pallach (2013) could be online communities of fans for a specific brand. In the context of games, these communities can be for example members of Discord servers dedicated to discussion around the brands they are fans of. Discord is an online platform built to enable communications between community members in both text and speech (Discord, 2022). For gaming communities, their dedi-

cated Discord servers are used to engage with community members to provide updates and especially collect feedback and input from community members.

Vallaster and von Pallach (1507, 2013) specifically observed virtual environments and the stakeholder interactions in them. According to them, “the unconstrained nature and the lack of individual accountability in virtual environments support the emergence of emotionally colored, unconditioned, positive or negative online brand-related text”. The stakeholder interactions may be thus difficult to predict, as stakeholders may encourage each other towards specific types of interactions – potentially affecting the image of the brand in the process.

In Discord communities, this can be specifically observed in the way the communities discuss communications provided by the brand or its representatives. Community members may provide personal interpretations of brand messages, which in turn can skew the intended message. This relates to the theory of the working consumer posed by Black and Veloutsou (2017) and relates to Vallaster and von Pallach’s idea of the different types of stakeholders easily banding together for like-mindedness and a common cause (2013).

As described earlier by Sarasvuo et al (546, 2022), co-creation is a process with two dimensions - interacting and influencing. The interaction is further divided into direct interaction between the brand and the consumer and indirect interaction among consumers themselves. This indirect interaction is a perfect way to describe how many of the communities can work, even when more often than not brands have a presence among these communities. It in general is community members discussing among themselves, looking for meanings in brand provided communication

### **3.2.1 Impact of the community on brands**

Often in the context of games, one may hear remarks about a specific game - or a brand - having a specifically toxic or unwelcoming community, while others are noted to have an extremely positive and welcoming community. It is noted and documented that especially the toxic behaviors or reputations of communities can cause players to avoid a specific community - and by extension, the associated brand (Gametree, September 4th 2024). Toxic behaviors and toxicity overall mean negative behaviors of individuals, causing stress and negative situations for others around them. In gaming context, toxicity can manifest as aggressive behaviors such as trash talking and name calling, as well as discouragement of peers (Turpeinen, 30-31, 2023).

While research on community toxicity on brand image is somewhat limited, some studies into the subject have been conducted. Kakelis and Vallabhu (2024) studied the impact of toxic gamers on consumer behaviors in their master thesis. They discovered that while consumers are unlikely to

completely abandon games and the brands associated with them, the negative associations created with the brand are very strong and recognisable. Kakelis and Vallabhu suggest that companies should be active in combating the toxicity in their communities, for failing to do so carries risks of financial losses in the long run due to loss of players who lose connection with the community and by extension, the company behind the product, its brand and its community (28-30, 2024).

In their master thesis, Turpeinen (2023) also studied the impact of toxic communities on the brand image associated with the game the community plays. While Turpeinen noted that the sample size of their study was somewhat limited and further studies in the subject are required, they observed that the toxicity of a community can lead to somewhat negative connotations with the brand among the people who belong in the community. However, the impact was perceived to be more significant among consumers who do not belong to the community, meaning Turpeinen's study suggests negative impact on brand image is more significant to consumers on the outside looking in; which can include potential players and thus customers (87-88, 2023).

### **3.2.2 Motivations for co-creation in the video games industry**

While little research has been conducted regarding brand identity co-creation specific to the video game industry, value co-creation in this context has instead been studied in 2021 by Afi and Ouidad. Observing the value co-creation phenomenon in the video game industry, they point out that for companies, the upside of integrating online platforms is acquiring and retaining customers better, becoming a "powerful mechanism to engage consumers, guarantee their loyalty and strengthen their relationship with the brand" (370, 2021). Observations made by Afi and Ouidad work as great basis for building upon the idea noted by Black and Veloutsou regarding consumers' motivations for joining brand communities driven by a need to express themselves, as pointed out in chapter 3.1.8.

From a consumer perspective, Afi and Ouidad bring up the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), according to which consumers are active participants on media platforms, conscious of their role and driven by specific interests and motivations. Afi and Ouidad refer to studies about UGT to identify the following motivations for consumers to actively seek out different media platforms; cognitive: the ability to meet learning desires; social: interacting with other peers; personal: the need for recognition; and hedonic: the expression of emotional pleasure (372-373, 2021). Afi and Ouidad focus on social, personal and hedonic motivations in their research. Afi and Ouidad proposed that the social, personal and hedonic motivators drive engagement among community members, which in turn leads to loyalty within the community itself (375, 2021). Their research included a survey which was built around testing their hypotheses of how significant these motivators

are for driving engagement in video game online communities, for which they gained significant support (378, 2021). Thus, companies should strive towards tapping into these motivations to ensure they keep their communities engaged and loyal.

Social motivations observed by Afi and Ouiddad specify how consumers are driven to online communities and games to interact and communicate with one another, fulfilling social needs and to “primarily relieve loneliness, and receive social support from other users of the community” (373, 2021), positively impacting user engagement in video game related online communities. While Afi and Ouiddad recognize that social motivations play an important role on co-creation due to the communal nature of the online platforms, its influence was observed to be weaker than for personal and hedonic motivators (380, 2021).

Personal motivations include seeking recognition and earning gratitude from fellow community members, improving their status and enhancing their reputation. Especially providing helpful comments and advice to fellow community members was recognized as being strongly motivated by a desire to enhance one’s reputation (Afi and Ouiddad, 373, 2021). As examples of activities tapping into personal motivations, Afi and Ouiddad bring up community badges that provide ways for community members to distinguish themselves for making significant contributions to the community, such as donations or providing help to other members (380, 2021).

Hedonic motivations revolve around finding enjoyment and excitement in personal experiences. In the context of video game online communities that are by nature built around playful experiences designed to provide enjoyment and excitement, Afi and Ouiddad recognize these hedonistic motivations are important as well, even though they argue a strong social aspect attached to them. According to them, these hedonic motivations of enjoyment and excitement can manifest themselves through altruistic actions of helping others or a pleasure of belonging to the community (374, 2021). As an example of hedonic motivations in action, Afi and Ouiddad observed in their research that consumers are more likely to respond and engage with community activities when they view the community as being playful (379, 2021).

As a conclusion, companies should look towards tapping into personal, social and hedonic motivations of community members to promote positive interactions between community members and the brand, while discouraging negative and toxic behaviors to strengthen loyalty towards the brand through strong engagement.

### **3.3 Strategies for navigating brand co-creation**

In this section of the theoretical framework, I look into existing theories of what kinds of strategies and tools are observed to have for navigating brand co-creation according to the literature researched for this thesis.

#### **3.3.1 Discursive strategies of stakeholders**

Research about brand co-creation notes strategies of stakeholders for when they engage in discussion with a brand and amongst themselves regarding the brand. Vallaster and von Pallach (1513, 2013) emphasize the role of brand managers as being parts of expansive and dynamic networks that involve a multitude of stakeholders interacting with each other simultaneously.

Vallaster and von Pallach also identified three major discursive strategies stakeholders use when co-creating brand meaning, in order to “uphold their brand-related interests and mobilize support” (1513, 2013):

Brand promoters are considered to “defend originally intended brand meaning and distance themselves from other stakeholders promoting brand meanings management does not intend.” Stakeholders engaging in this strategy are considered to be loyal to the brand through difficult times as well.

Brand offenders on the other hand “distance themselves from originally intended brand meaning and spread alternative, negative brand meanings through their brand-related discourse.” These stakeholders may engage in hostile actions on online platforms and showcase their “disapproval through active forms of protest”.

Brand neutrals are stakeholders who largely “lack evaluation or emotional commitment on the brand” (1513, 2013).

Vallaster and von Pallach note how these three strategies, or rather types of stakeholders, can easily gather among themselves for their like-mindedness and begin working together towards common causes - which may range from promoting brand meanings or spreading negative brand meanings (1513, 2013).

These three strategies, or types of stakeholders, will be leveraged as the basis for the practical part of the thesis when discussing coping strategies brands leverage when seeking to maintain control in brand co-creation scenarios.

### **3.3.2 Community management**

Community management was referred to earlier in this thesis as the collection of practices for engaging with community members. This practice ties in well with the discursive strategies discussed by Vallaster and von Pallach, as one could argue the function of community management is to ensure that the number of brand promoters in a community is as high as possible while the number of brand offenders is as low as possible.

Zimmerman (2019) proposes the role of community managers in especially the gaming industry on the other hand is to facilitate the community growth and discussions, ensuring that people find and join the communities and progress in their life cycle, turning from visitors into regulars and possible eventually leaders who take on responsibilities of enforcing community rules - becoming types of community managers themselves. Zimmerman (2019) in their article also notes that research and literature on community management is relatively limited, which became apparent in the search of additional peer-reviewed sources, coming up short in my search.

### **3.4 Conclusions of the theoretical framework**

Conducting research for the theoretical framework made me think that the observation made by Sarasvuo et al regarding co-creation in the context of branding being a relatively new field of study was an accurate one. Peer-reviewed sources on particularly brand identity co-creation were not excessively abundant and seemed to revolve around the works of a relatively narrow selection of academics, with names like Veloutsou, Kennedy, Vallaster and von Wallpach surfacing in many of the research articles written about the subject. Co-creation on a broader scope, especially relating to value co-creation, seemed to have more academic substance to it and as these theories were leaned upon as well in the branding related research around co-creation, they felt appropriate to be included in the theoretical framework of this thesis as well.

As a specific observation, concrete examples of co-creation in branding as well as strategies for navigating co-creation successfully seemed even rarer. While the theoretical framework has provided decent grounds for progressing into the discussions with the industry experts in the methods and implementation phase, I have realized that their input has become even more significant for providing much needed understanding of what co-creation in branding context looks like in practice and how it is perceived by professionals working in the video games industry.

Personally, at times I felt like branding related co-creation theory teetered on the edge between brand identity and brand image, not always being explicitly clear about where the line between co-creating brand identity and simply manifesting brand image in the consciousness of consumers

was drawn. However, the deeper I went into the theoretical framework, the more clear this difference became, with co-created brand identity being inherently a brand manager driven activity, where conscious decision regarding the brand were made with the influence of co-created input from external stakeholders - such as community members - in contrast to brand image being simply the impression brand signals create in the consciousness of consumers receiving the signals. The degree of consumer input in branding co-creation in the theoretical framework seemed to be portrayed as a strong force brand managers have little control over, pointing more towards the need of accepting that control for brand management in today's interconnected world is limited and that brands as well as their managers should accept their role as simply being a part of the network that co-creates brand meaning, ultimately co-creation the brand identity.

## 4 Methods and implementation

While existing literature has identified some strategies and tactics for brands to navigate brand identity co-creation, it can be acknowledged that a more in-depth overview is needed to establish a full picture in order to provide a more informed answer for research question 3: what tools and strategies do brands in these industries have to maintain long-term consistency in the context of brand identity co-creation?

To ensure collecting insight and discussing the topic is carried out efficiently, I have decided to tap into the method of Concept Synthesis (Haaga-Helia). Described as “the process of consolidating needs, unmet needs -- and defining impact it may have on users and organization”, the Concept Synthesis seemed like a good fit for assessing relevance and practical application of the brand identity co-creation theory, integrating the theory, ideas and perspectives into a cohesive concept. Other evaluated methods included the Value Proposition Canvas (Haaga-Helia), but a comparison of the two tools lead to the conclusion that Concept Synthesis is better equipped for handling multiple stakeholder perspectives, as by nature, co-creation will have a minimum of two stakeholders participating in the process, who in this context would be the community members, and the community managers. Also, for the purpose of collaborative ideation and building something new, concept synthesis seemed like the better fit over value proposition canvas where focus seemed to lie in refining value proposition for an existing product.

### 4.1 Concept Synthesis session

As described in the Haaga-Helia Tool Factory, Concept Synthesis is a five-step process with step four broken down further into five steps. The process starts with preparations of stating what challenge or question it is the concept synthesis is looking to solve. Based on this, suitable participants and potentially more specific areas of focus are identified. In preparation for the concept synthesis session, preparations are made for facilitating the session, where we can expect to collect ideas and insights in a manner that allows for recording them for analysis.

To gain more insight on both community management and other strategies that exist for navigating brand identity co-creation in the video games industry, I decided to tap into the experience of three industry experts working in either directly community management roles or such that strategize and supervise community related activities. This allowed me visibility into practices that are already deployed as well as discussing the theory on brand identity co-creation to gauge the value industry professionals see in it. All three experts who've been invited to participate in the concept synthesis session have worked extensively in the video games industry and were found in my professional

network, with expert 1 having held several more senior positions in marketing and brand management in the industry; expert 2 having a lot of hands-on community management experience; and expert 3 having experience in leading community management teams. The experts took part in the process anonymously to ensure fair treatment and minimize the risk of unwillingness to share insights at the risk of being identified by their team members or employers.

The concept synthesis template was built in a Microsoft Whiteboard to facilitate the online nature of the session. As the Haaga-Helia Lab8 source failed to provide a template outside of a written description of what elements should go into the Concept Synthesis template, I chose to devise this as a whiteboard divided into sections, waiting for input via virtual notes. The template is outlined in figure 3 below.

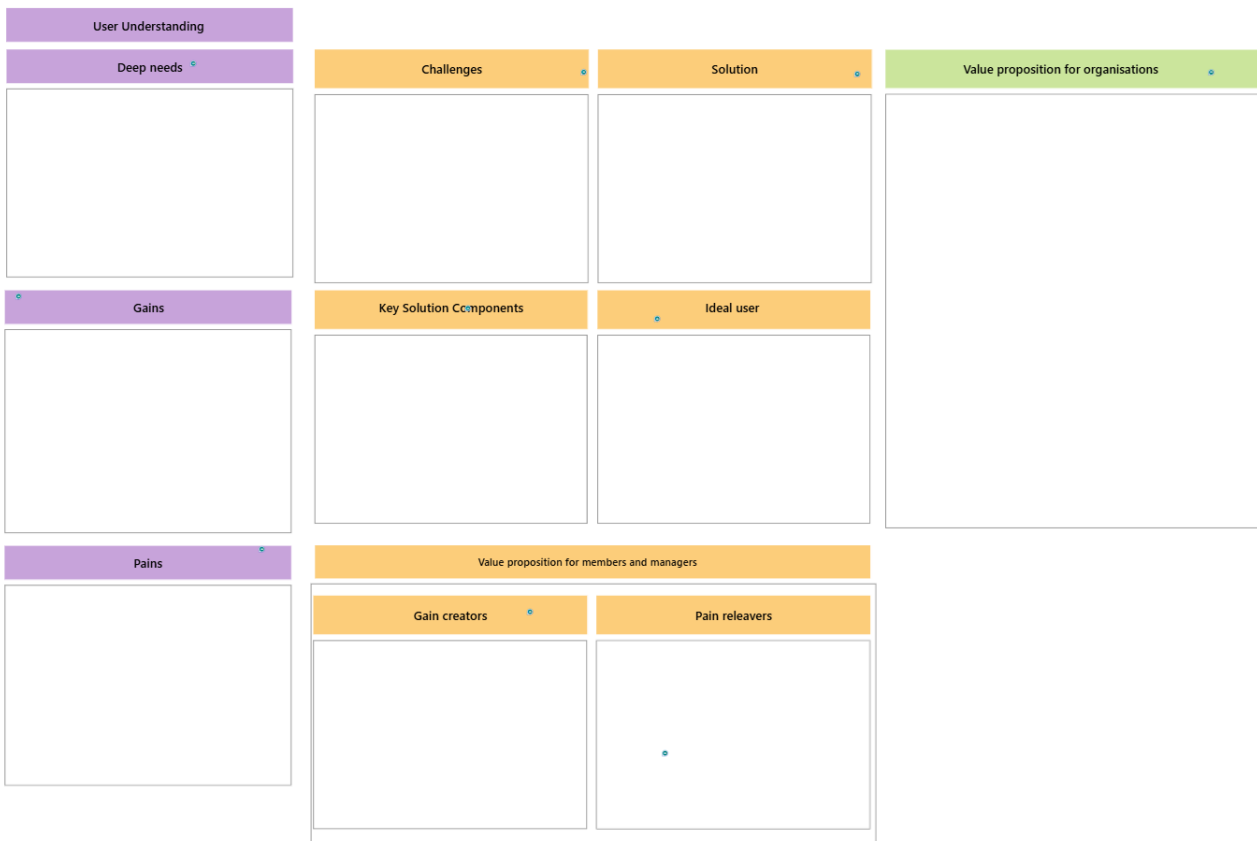


Figure 3. Concept synthesis template made for the session.

The challenge for the concept synthesis is to understand the impact the communities have on video game brand identity according to the brand identity co-creation theory, both from the community member perspective and the community manager perspective, as well as determining what the process of brand identity co-creation in this context would look like.

To make the most of the concept synthesis session with the industry experts, I started the session by presenting the theory of brand identity co-creation to the participants briefly, explaining what brand identity co-creation is and how the two stakeholder groups of community managers and community members are involved in it. Then we proceeded into user needs, gains and pains. We discussed the challenges and potential solutions, breaking down key solution components and describing the ideal user experience. For the value proposition for the stakeholders, we discussed gain creators and pain relievers, before summarizing with organizational value propositions.

The session was organized on a Microsoft Teams online call, which was recorded and transcribed at the permission of the participants. The Microsoft Whiteboard was shared as a blank template which was then filled out with post-its by me, acting as a note taker for the conversation while driving the discussion forwards with targeted questions about the different sections of the concept synthesis tool. Parts of the whiteboard were reviewed using the transcription and the recording of the session in order to ensure no important points were missing. The filled-out whiteboard can be seen in figure 4 with more detailed section specific screenshots found in the appendices. In the following paragraphs I will provide brief summaries of the different sections of the whiteboard and examples of the input provided, but more in-depth analysis of the conversation will be carried out in chapter 5.

The concept synthesis template was laid out in 10 sections. At the top in the middle were Challenges and Solution. Challenges identified from the community member side included the lack of means to contribute as well as willing to contribute going unnoticed or ignored, or lacking feedback on application of inputs. On the manager's side, challenges were easier to identify, including the balance of community input and maintain control; community members not necessarily understanding abstract concepts relating to branding; members being unable to provide actionable input or effectively communicating it. The solution concept was outlined as brand identity co-creation, where community members are helped to participate and contribute easier, and managers are enabled to improve engagement as well as deepen the connection between community members and the brand.

In the left-hand side, the deep needs of both community members and community managers are identified, along with the benefits (Gains) both stakeholders seek from community activity participation. Pains on the other hand describe the challenges the stakeholders face in more detail.

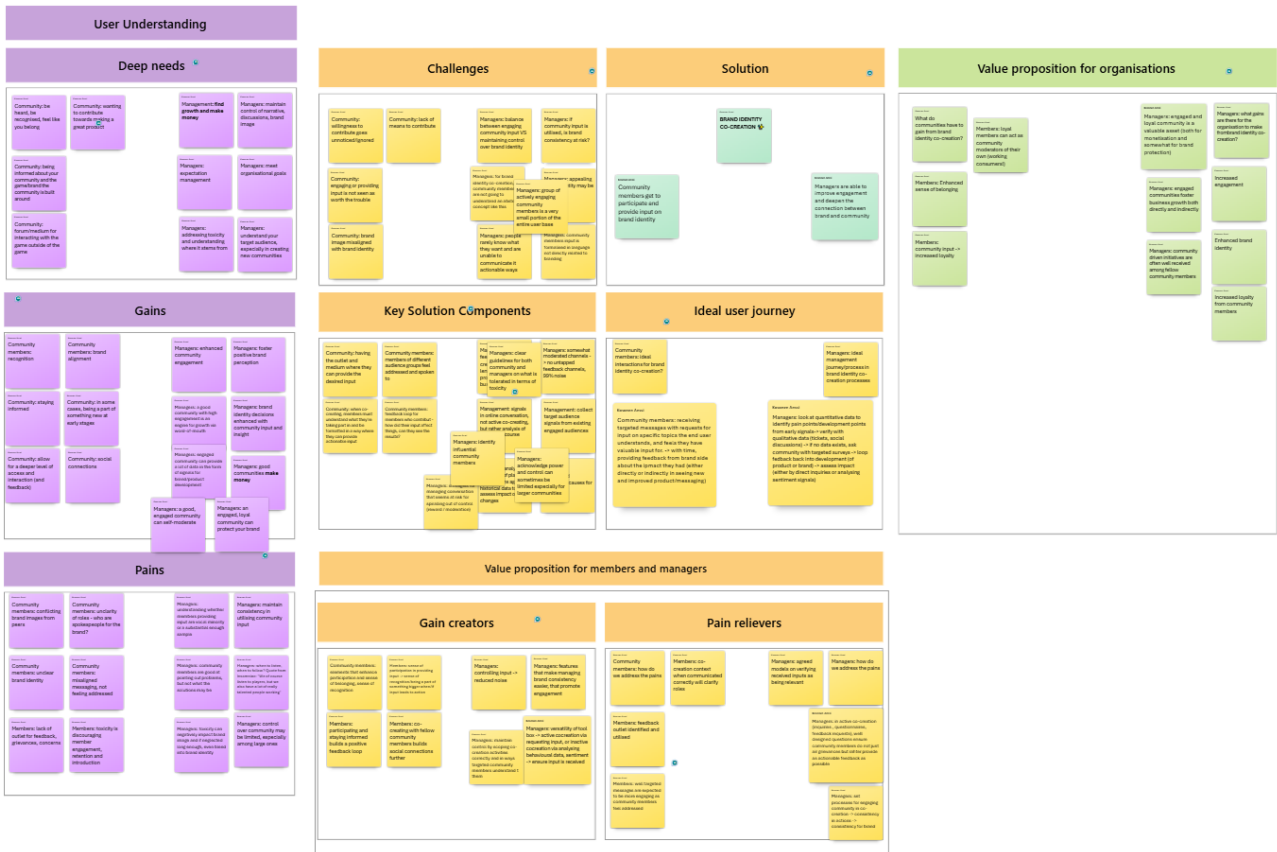


Figure 4. Concept synthesis whiteboard applied with industry expert input.

For deep needs on the community side, the need for recognition was identified in the discussion as well as the desire to contribute towards making a product they care about and a brand they've better connected with. Additionally, needs of being informed about the community and the brand built around it were identified, as well as needing a medium for interacting with the brand or the game outside of the game. For managers, a strong need was business outcomes, or more specifically, finding growth. Other needs included understanding the audience especially among new communities, managing community members' expectations as well as understanding community members' behaviors and motivations behind them.

Gains followed deep needs rather closely, with recognition and staying informed raised for community members. However, the discussion revealed more benefits, especially in terms of the social connections engaged communities allow for creating between members. It was also noted that co-creation practices allow for a deeper level of access and interaction with the brand they are associated with via the community. On the managers' side, fostering positive brand perceptions via co-creating with community members, building and maintaining high engagement and loyalty among the community as well as making better informed decisions regarding brand identity with community input were brought up.

As for the pains, lack of channels for feedback, grievances and concerns were brought up among community members, as well as misaligned messaging resulting in feelings of not being addressed were brought up. Additionally, toxic behavior among communities was noted as a pain point, discouraging member engagement, retention and introduction. On the managers' side, pains included understanding whether co-created input was representative of wider audiences or just of a vocal minority, limits of control over especially larger communities and community members' inability to provide solutions to the problems they are keen on raising.

In key solution components, tools and methods are identified for both the community members and managers. For community members, the tools and methods should enhance the sense of brand alignment and participation. These included providing the outlet and medium for providing input; ensuring that when co-creating, community members should fully understand what they are taking part in and what kind of input is expected from them; and ensuring a feedback loop exists, where community members are informed and given credit for co-created outcomes. For managers, the goal is to shape and maintain consistency of brand identity. The key solution components for managers included moderation of input channels to ensure not of all of its simply noise; segmenting users carefully to assess who it is that are providing input; aligning co-creation with both business objectives and scope of the project; as well as understanding the means of co-creation in terms of active co-creation of actively interacting with users and passive co-creation of gathering quantitative data and signals of sentiment from the community.

As for the ideal user experience, the ideal co-creation interactions on the community side were seen as the members engaging in active co-creation, receiving well targeted messages they find appealing and addressed to them specifically, regarding input on topics they understand and feel like they have input for. Expectations would of course be managed from the brand side, but ultimately, the community members would see their input in action, with recognition given from the brand side regarding the input received and how it was utilized. On the managers' side, the process was seen as beginning with passive co-creation, looking at quantitative data collected from the community, identifying pains or development points, then proceeding to gathering qualitative data from active co-creation practices, looping input back into the development of the brand and finally assessing the impact of said developments.

In the value proposition section for members and managers, the concept synthesis tool seeks to identify gain creators - factors that enhance user satisfaction among community members, or that make brand management more effective - as well as pain relievers, or ways to address the challenges identified in the Pains section.

For gain creators on the community side, being part of co-creation processes were seen to enhance the sense of participation and belonging, as well as deepening the social connections between community members further. For managers gain creators included, collecting input in more controlled manners meant easier means to distinguish valuable input from the noise; tapping into both active and passive co-creation mechanics were seen as ensuring input from the community is received; and correctly scoping active co-creation activities in ways community members understand.

As for the pain relievers on the community members' side, providing and utilizing feedback outlets and targeting active co-creation practices accurately were identified. For the managers, pain relievers identified were conscious practices of analyzing validity of input; carefully planning active co-creation practices to manage forms of input; and setting processes for engaging the community in co-creation practices to ensure consistency for the brand as well as enhancing loyalty among engaged community members.

Finally, on the right-hand side, the value proposition for organizations outlines the collective benefits of brand identity co-creation from the perspective of communities - increased loyalty, engagement - and brand managers, in terms of supporting broader organizational goals, for example. From the community member perspective, organizational value additions were the enhanced sense of belonging; increased loyalty from collecting and utilizing community input; as well as loyal members acting as moderators and advocates on the brand. On the managers' side, the increased engagement and loyalty of the community were seen as valuable assets and drivers of growth. Additionally, community driven activities were identified to be well received among fellow community members, further enhancing that loyalty and engagement. Additionally, co-creation practices in a brand context were seen as useful methods for enhancing the brand identity, potentially making it even more appealing among the currently targeted audiences or expanding the reach even further.

## **4.2 Data analysis**

As the conversation covered many topics and was much more qualitative than quantitative in its output, I decided to deploy a thematic analysis as the analysis method of the collected data- The recording, transcription and the whiteboard were formatted and reviewed for analysis, as described by Mortensen in their online article *How to Do a Thematic Analysis of User Interviews* (2020). The steps for thematic analysis are outlined by Mortensen in table 3 below.

Table 3. Steps of thematic analysis process.

Step	Goal
Familiarization with data	Identify the most important themes in the data.
Generating and assigning initial codes	Arrange data according to the themes and codes.
Developing themes	Group codes into broader themes.
Review themes	Refine themes to make analysis more coherent.
Define and name themes	Describing what the themes are, what about the theme is interesting and why the theme is interesting for the thesis.
Producing report	Summarizing findings.

While the concept synthesis framework is built to follow a process of discussing topics in a specific order, thematic analysis of the conversation revealed several overarching themes that were raised by industry experts throughout the different stages of the discussion. Despite the structured approach of the discussion, some of the points raised were also deemed more appropriate for different parts of the concept synthesis model, hence direction of the conversation occasionally deviated from the topic at hand. These deviations were intentional as the points raised seemed to be very relevant.

As the workshop ran for 1 hour and 20 minutes and the transcription of the conversation reached 37 pages in length, I decided to experiment employing ChatGPT 4.0 for theme discovery in addition to my own notes taken during the discussion. I made my personal analysis first and then supplemented the analysis with ChatGPT 4.0. To make the transcription of the conversation applicable for use with AI, I anonymized all participants and mentions of either of them or their employers by name, as well as any references to organization sizes or bases of operation. References to third parties, such as other brands used as examples, were kept in as some of them were leaned on for quotes from other industry experts. Additionally, I removed any discussion transcribed that did not relate to the topic at hand. These measures were taken to ensure the AI was not fed any personal identifiable information or sensitive information.

The AI was given a prompt for what the transcription contains and what the context of the discussion was and was asked to identify significant themes. As the first few outputs identified introductions to the theme, where I described the concept of brand identity co-creation briefly and compared it to the concept of brand image, ChatGPT 4.0 was given instructional prompts on which parts of the conversation it could ignore. ChatGPT was not given other theoretical basis for what brand identity co-creation is outside of the brief introduction made to the topic in the beginning of the workshop, which was included in the transcription and the analysis until instructed it could be ignored.

To summarize the themes identified both by myself based on my notes, the transcription, the whiteboard output and recording of the session and compare them against the observations made by ChatGPT 4.0, I've collected the identified themes in table 3. The first column portrays themes identified by my own analysis, the second the themes identified by Chat GPT 4.0, and the final column is a summary of the themes that seemed relevant for more thorough analysis and significant for the thesis. Where alignment between manual theme identification and AI assisted theme identification was discovered, these themes are entered onto the same row.

While the majority of the themes identified manually and with AI assistance did align, there were a couple of themes missed by the AI analysis. However, the AI did discover a couple of themes I had not surfaced in my personal analysis, but upon closer inspection, they did seem relevant for the purposes of this thesis. The summary of the themes can be found in table 4, where they are in the order of analysis rather than discovery.

The first theme on the table is the significance of communities from a business perspective. This was identified both by me and ChatGPT. This theme was raised early on in the concept synthesis workshop, and it carried on until the end, focusing on the fact that the video games industry is also a business and one of the primary goals of teams working in that industry is finding growth. Communities and success with them were identified to be effective drivers of said growth.

Partly related to the growth, communities working as a brand extension were something that I originally did not notice in my personal identification of themes, but upon being raised by ChatGPT, I decided it was worth including in the analysis. This theme relates to the idea that communities act as public facing channels of providing information and a place of discovery for consumers not yet engaged with the brand the community is built around - as one of the experts put it, playing a similar role as the website has done for the past few decades.

One of the most significant themes identified in both my personal analysis as well as by ChatGPT was the multiple forms of community input that can occur, categorized on a general level by into

two main classes; active input (different ways of submitting feedback and active interaction) and passive input (brand managers collecting and analyzing community data and discussions to leverage in branding related decisions). These different ways of community input came up in multiple different parts of the discussion and especially active input in the form of different types of feedback being sought out and received came up a lot.

Relating to the forms of co-creation, another significant theme identified in the discussion during the concept synthesis workshop and something that carried over regularly during the discussion was the challenge of co-created input from parties that do not necessarily understand what is asked of them or how they should format their input in a way that it becomes actionable. This theme was identified by me and ChatGPT, formalized as “From abstract concept to actionable input” for further analysis.

Table 4. Identified themes based on analysis.

<b>Manually identified themes</b>	<b>Themes identified by ChatGPT4.0</b>	<b>Theme for further analysis and discussion</b>
Engaged communities fostering business growth directly and indirectly	Growth and scalability	Why communities matter to businesses
-	Community as Brand Extension	Community as brand extension
Multiple forms of community input - active and inactive	Community Engagement and Feedback	Forms of community co-creation
Community members understanding what is asked of them and what kind of input is expected	Challenges in co-creation	From abstract concept to actionable input
Understanding what input is valuable and what is noise	Feedback mechanisms and data analysis	Distinguishing meaningful input
Alignment with scope of project and business goals	-	Alignment with scope of project and business goals
-	Community as a brand multiplier	Role of advocates and co-creators in community
Acknowledging limits of control and power that can be exerted over communities	-	Limits of control and power over communities
Understanding the brand's target audience and the com-	Inclusivity and Audience Diversity	Challenges posed by diversity of communities

community demographics		
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Another theme relating to the input I identified was understanding which input is valuable and what is simply noise from disgruntled community members. While ChatGPT did not specify this particular theme, it identified “Feedback mechanisms and data analysis”, where the short description provided revolved around the same idea. This theme was formalized as “distinguishing meaningful input”.

A theme I discovered in my personal analysis but was ignored by ChatGPT - possibly due to it thinking it was already included within “Growth and scalability” was alignment with scope of the project and business goals. While this came up only in conjunction with discussing key solution components during the concept synthesis workshop, it was agreed that this should be something to keep in mind throughout the various stages and forms of co-creation processes. It was identified as another mechanic for establishing whether or not input received is relevant for the particular branding decision in question, reviewing both business goals and the project scope in question were seen as vital.

Another theme identified by ChatGPT but not surfaced in my personal theme identification phase was “Community as a brand multiplier”. Upon closer inspection of what ChatGPT explained this turned to be a theme that related to the theory of brand promoters in the theoretical framework: “The role of the community as advocates and co-creators came up consistently. The idea of empowering engaged players to not only provide feedback but also to defend and promote the brand organically was emphasized. Examples included creators driving new players to the game and players correcting misconceptions or toxic narratives.” I decided to formalize this theme as “Role of advocates and co-creators in the community” for further analysis.

A prominent theme discovered in my personal theme identification phase was acknowledging the limits of power and control when dealing with communities, especially big ones. This went unflagged by ChatGPT, but as this has been one of the central themes throughout the thesis and a particular research question, I may have been biased to being more sensitive towards signals and discussions relating to this subject.

The final theme identified and deemed worthy of including in the analysis was the challenges posed by the diversity of communities - and specifically their members. The versatile makeup of communities in terms of the different segments of users that exist in them in both demographic and behavioral aspects was brought up several times in the concept synthesis workshop. This was seen as helpful for both ensuring the messaging among the community is correctly targeted in ad-

dition to helping with analyzing the inputs received by understanding who it is that is providing them.

Using ChatGPT in the data analysis by providing an anonymized transcription of the workshop proved to be an interesting experiment that ultimately yielded valuable input for the thesis. The limitations of the system were apparent as well though, which I believe could have been possible to navigate by providing the system more detailed theoretical contexts to reflect the data against, as well as stricter instructions on how to conduct thematic analysis. Upon further attempts of asking ChatGPT to unearth more themes, it seemed to start recycling much of what it had already discovered, just by wording it a little bit differently. In these situations, human intervention felt very much called for as this attempt to spin existing insights into new ones was quickly revealed on closer inspection. There were also signs of the AI picking up isolated parts of the conversation and giving them too much emphasis.

At the same time though, it was very interesting to see that the AI had indeed discovered similar themes as I had myself, or at the very least themes that had overlap with the ones noticed upon manual inspection. While I believe ChatGPT can be leveraged for use in a thematic analysis of a transcribed workshop session, I strongly believe human review is also required to ensure that ChatGPT is actually successfully distinguishing unique themes and that it is not overemphasizing specific parts of the conversation. It is possible that pointing these errors out to the AI would have resulted in a more accurate analysis, but as these are shortcomings noticed only after having done a manual pass at the material as well, fully relying on an AI provided theme identification risks beginning the analysis with themes that overemphasize parts of the conversation or repeat similar topics.

## 5 Results

In this section of the thesis, I will discuss the concept synthesis session and its outcomes in more depth in relation to the themes identified during the thematic analysis. A total of nine themes were discovered that seemed to carry relevance to brand identity co-creation practices, building a base for a framework proposition. The identified themes are explained in the following sub-chapters and summarized in the final subchapter where I propose a framework for brand identity co-creation in the community driven video games industry context.

### 5.1 Why do communities matter to businesses?

To emphasize the relevance of the topic and the discussion that was had, the overarching theme of communities' significance to business outcomes feels like a reasonable place to start with. Throughout the discussion, growth was identified as a major business motivator and something that kept surfacing again and again. This was identified in the theoretical framework in chapter 2.1.2 as well, where success in community management and growth was seen as closely associated with commercial success of a game. This was likewise observed by Afi and Ouiddad (2021) in their research where they identified online communities as being powerful mechanisms for acquiring and retaining customers better, building the relationship between consumer and the brand, as describe in chapter 3.2.2 of this thesis.

This was observed in the discussion among the industry experts as well. The general notion during the discussion was that an engaged and loyal community can foster growth both directly and indirectly. According to Expert 3, an engaged community can act as a growth engine for a business via generating word-of-mouth, with existing community members introducing the community and by extension, the brand associated with it, to new potential members outside of the community.

A loyal, engaged and positive community can also act as retention improving factors, whereas negativity and disengagement among the community can lead to negative perceptions regarding the brand, potentially leading to discouragement from new members to join or even to existing members leaving. This was discussed in chapter 3.2.1 of this thesis, where research conducted by Turpeinen (2023) noted how a negative, toxic community can lead to negative associations of a brand and its community, especially among people who are not yet members of said community.

A healthy, vibrant and big community was seen as a valuable asset to any brand by the industry experts, speaking well for both the popularity of a brand as well as acting as evidence for how the brand conducts community management. Expert 2 in particular raised that in their experience and

among industry literature it is recognized that a good community will not make a bad product or brand good, but it can make a good one great.

### **5.1.1 Community as brand extension**

A prominent distinction in regard to the significance of the communities for businesses was made in regard to how the communities in today's environment already act as brand extensions. Expert 2 emphasized how important of a role the communities play when potential players and customers progress along the funnel of awareness and consideration, noting that the communities can often be among the first sources of information the users look into to assess whether or not the brand they're interested in is something they wish to engage with.

Expert 1 added that the communities are already playing a similar role for many brands and products as the website has been for the past few decades, acting as a public source of information and center of promotion, where users gather to find information. It was agreed among the three industry experts during the discussion that communities act both as means to attract new customers, keeping the base of users participating in community actions informed about the developments of the brand as well as keeping the community members engaged with the brand.

Expert 2 also noted that consumer behavior in terms of how they seek information has shifted significantly these days, especially among younger demographics. Whereas before search engines were relied on providing answers and discovering new games and brands, social media platforms like TikTok have become more significant in that regard. And since communities form and interact with each other on these social media platforms as well, it becomes increasingly important to at the very least stay informed of the discussion regarding your brand on these platforms, and preferably, try to engage with the community members and creators to engage in co-creating the messages that circulate on the viral social platforms.

## **5.2 Forms of community co-creation**

One of the overarching themes in the workshop was discussing the nature of co-creation and finding concrete examples of what it was perceived to look like. All three industry experts identified and agreed that co-creation will happen in two forms – actively and passively, referencing how intentional community members are in providing input. Another way to describe this was raised in chapter 3.1.7, where I discussed the idea of influence and interaction in co-creation described by Sarasvuo et al (546, 2022) - influence can be a two-way street between brand and community member, both influencing each other with signals in discussions and communications, whereas in interaction we can see brands and community members interacting directly in the form of feedback, or

the community members among themselves in their discussions. As mentioned by Sarasvuo et al as well, co-creation can be initiated by the brand managers; the stakeholders; or in brand manager facilitated communities where stakeholders interacted and influenced one another. While the industry experts seemed very focused on co-creation activities initiated by brand managers, from the theoretical framework and the context of the discussion it can also be identified that the most common form of co-creation occurring in this context is actually in the form facilitation commenced by the brand managers by providing the communities and managing where the stakeholders interacting and influencing each other. In itself, this form of facilitated co-creation can already be seen as brand identity co-creation in itself, as the stakeholders are discussing brand signals, or even passing them on to other community members in their communications among different social media channels, should they choose to share and discuss the brand messages. In further discussion I will refer to brand facilitated community channels meaning the communities formed and referred to by the industry experts, and unfacilitated channels as other channels not directly managed by the brand managers where community members are sharing and discussing brand signals, subjecting members external to the community and brand to its signals.

Among the industry experts, methods of active co-creation were identified as seeking input from community members with active practices like directly inquiring about specific topics or submitting surveys. Passive co-creation was seen as leveraging signals and sentiment that already exist in the community, for example by collecting data about the community members and analyzing who they may be, what the sentiment of the conversation is and if there are differences between how target audiences engage with the brand messaging.

Expert 3 mentioned that their team has a strategic goal of involving their community members more closely in defining development road maps and decision making. While not directly brand or brand identity related, the team has identified the value of involving the community more to increase the engagement of said community, expecting positive impact on brand image as well. The extent of how far the community input is intended to go was yet unclear, but hearing co-creation was recognized as an important phenomenon was encouraging.

Expert 1 also raised a great point during the discussion about being data-driven, or rather, data-informed. While during a lot of the conversation leveraging data to validate decisions was brought up consistently, Expert 1 pointed out that simply being data driven may not be enough on its own to find major success. Just following data points and making decisions solely based on those can box managers and brands into spaces where they can no longer find growth in. According to Expert 1, "some creative madness is required", which was echoed by Expert 2, who also noted how data alone does not always create the best end results. In this sense, co-creation can be very help-

ful, as the creative capacity among thousands or hundreds of thousands of community members can be exponentially larger than that of a 10-person creative team working on the brand.

During the discussion among industry experts, it was agreed upon that community driven initiatives and activities tend to be the ones that resonate among community members the most, compounding the positive impact they can have. Expert 2 also emphasized that whenever co-created and community driven input does get implemented, it's important to give community credit on this and celebrate the fact that something has been co-created, to both motivate the community and encourage positive co-creation activities further.

Dota 2 is an example of a game where community driven creativity is leveraged significantly. Community members are able to modify and create almost any visual element of the game through the Dota 2 Workshop (Dota 2, 2024), where “thousands of items have been created and submitted -- by community members”. Managers at Dota 2 review and accept the submissions to be included in the in-game store, where these items can be purchased by fellow community members, with the original creator receiving a share of the profits. While this is again tied to specific game mechanics and in-game visuals, community members are able to co-create the direction where those in-game visuals are going, making it possible to impact some aspects of the brand itself.

A final example of co-creation surfaced during the discussion was not directly referred to but rather surfaced itself during the analysis phase. As described in chapter 3.1.2, brand identity was defined by Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou as “the symbols and the set of the brand associations that represent the core character of the brand that the team supporting the brand aspire to create or maintain as identifiers of the brand to other people” (257, 2019). As an integral part of the communities and co-creation's nature is that the members - or stakeholders - can interact and co-create also between themselves, it should be noted that the communities have the potential to impact the associations and through collective action even create commonly used identifying elements for a brand without the influence of brand managers. This was indirectly referred to when discussing the impact excessively toxic communities can have on a brand, which was also noted by Turpeinen in chapter 3.2.1 of the theoretical framework.

The discussion with industry experts raised two examples of games whose communities had given the game - and the brand - itself a form a reputation and association even without becoming associated with the community. The games League of Legends and Rainbow Six: Siege were discussed as examples where they were known for the rampant toxicity among the communities, even among players who had not played these games or engaged with the communities before. This could in turn be interpreted as the community affecting the brand identity indirectly. In the con-

text of this conversation, Expert 2 specifically mentioned that a community's toxicity and by extension the impression it creates is not built so much by what the brands communicate, but rather what they tolerate, meaning that brands should be quick to act on rampant toxicity among communities before it can lead to greater harm.

### **5.3 From abstract concepts to actionable input**

While examples of co-creation were mainly limited to game development and mechanic related topics, such as identifying issues or gathering community feedback on what kinds of features they would wish to see in a game, there was a notion in the underlying discussion that while these activities are not directly tied to branding, taking steps to involve the community more is in itself a way to build the brand. There was also a very logical reason for the focus on game mechanics in co-creation context – these are much more concrete things to collect input upon, whereas branding related inquiries were seen as too abstract to have community members weigh in on them (Expert 1, 12 Nov 2024). This led to the observation that talking about “brand identity co-creation” carried a risk of being a bit too literal in the interpretation of what this could actually be in terms of communicating with the community and involving them.

Regardless, this observation made by Expert 1 was an important one, as it led to the participants to discuss and observe that co-creating brand identity is not likely to occur by directly working on branding related questions and topics with community members. The participants agreed that for brand identity to be co-created, the brand managers will have an understanding of the process and a plan on how to execute it, but community facing activities will most likely have very limited interaction with branding related language at all. Rather, they will more likely influence the process passively via providing data for analysis which in turn can be translated into branding related input, as described in the previous chapter 5.1, or they will partake actively through providing prompted feedback or spontaneously raising ideas or points of concern, which can then in turn be translated into branding input by the brand managers.

As a part of this conversation, it was also identified that community members aren't always able to provide actionable input and feedback even when requested (Expert 2 & Expert 3, 12 Nov 2024). The community members may have the right ideas in their minds about what their preferences are, but the input provided may be limited to simply pointing out problems without much more in terms of being actionable beyond that. So, it remains a task for brand managers to take action on ensuring the input collected can be leveraged. In active co-creation, attention needs to be paid to how input is collected and questions formatted so that the recipients among the community members understand what is asked of them and that the input they provide can be utilized. To dive deeper,

the feedback received can be supplemented with more quantitative data collected from the community members or ask more specifying questions to better understand what is meant by the input provided, should it be in a format that is difficult to apply in action or even interpret. As a concrete example of such feedback that is difficult to interpret, a common feedback point is “this thing is not working” (Expert 2, 12 Nov 2024), which while does identify a problem, is not very actionable in understanding what can be done about fixing it.

Expert 2 raised an important point of being conscious about the ways input is collected. This was echoed by Expert 3, and between the two of them they agreed that a fully open and unmanaged feedback channel will most likely result in a great deal of unhelpful noise. Rather, the more controlled the collection of input is, the more likely it is that the input received will be relevant and actionable.

#### **5.4 Distinguishing meaningful input**

As much of the co-creation practices identified by the industry experts was seen to revolved around collecting feedback and data in active and passive ways, the topic of distinguishing relevant input from the noise, and understanding when input is being provided by a loud minority rather than a group of community members that represent a larger, scalable sample of people was raised. Techniques for ensuring collected input is applicable and scalable were discussed, with proper segmentation of community members – the input providers – and ensuring sufficiently large sample sizes being identified as important factors. Understanding who the people providing the input can already provide hints as to what is meant by the feedback and how relevant or scalable it is according to expert 3.

#### **5.5 Alignment with scope of project and business goals**

Relating to distinguishing meaningful input, alignment with business goals and vision was raised by expert 2. These are the lenses co-created input should be assessed through. Even if a community member is able to provide extremely actionable input or even touch upon brand management related topics, the input should be reviewed in terms of alignment with business goals and the team’s vision. In a sense, the experts agreed that while co-creation as a concept revolves around involving people, it is ultimately the brand management teams that are taking the input in and applying it to action. This does allow for a level of control over what is chosen to be applied, resulting in opportunities to maintain long-term consistency.

This does make sense as the community members have – most likely – gathered around the specific brand as a result of the branding activities driven by managers, in addition to being connected

with the community by existing members. Thus, the original branding choices made by the managers should not be abandoned – if they managed to gather a healthy community around them, something has already been working.

This on the other hand brings us to business goals. Very prominently emphasized by Expert 1, the primary goal is to grow. Video games are in the end a form of business after all. And to find growth, the community needs to grow as well. Experts 1 and 3 also raised the point that the majority of currently successful games out there are products that have been in development and in the market for years, changing throughout the years. It was specifically mentioned by Expert 3 that the game you have at the beginning of its life cycle might be a very different product in three years – and as a result, the community gathered in the beginning of the life cycle may also become different as time passes. With that in mind, the current community can already provide valuable input, but the biggest value may be discovered in understanding how to make the product more appealing to an even wider audience. This point could well be achieved by co-creating a product and its brand in its early life cycle stages – an example of which is the early access practice as described in chapter 2.1.2 of this thesis. Community input may help identify the elements that are making the product and brand more appealing to a wider audience by understanding the strengths and weaknesses better.

Expert 1 additionally raised a risk that catering only to the needs of the original community that has been around since the beginning of a games – or a brand – life cycle may result in a gilded cage of sorts. By focusing on catering to the needs of this portion of the community, managers may lose sight over where potential for growth lies. Expert 2 also echoed this sentiment in pointing out that the original idea or a starting point for a product or a brand may be very appealing and engaging to a small group of people, limiting potential for growth. Brand management teams then need to understand what needs to change about the product or brand to make it more appealing to wider audiences. While co-created inputs from these community members may not be helpful in directly identifying the target audiences where additional growth can be attained due to likely echoing the signals and positives they like about the current state of the brand, co-created input from the community was still seen as having potential in making a product and a brand more appealing by all three industry experts. In a sense, an argument could be made that simply the act of engaging the community in co-creation can in itself impact the brand image of the company, and should this lead to improved business outcomes, a brand may be encouraged to start leaning on the community co-creation even further – potentially shifting the brand identity itself.

## 5.6 Role of advocates and co-creators in community

During the discussion, experts 2 and 3 brought up many examples of what kinds of roles community members can take on that seemed like co-creation in the community. One of them was community members acting as moderators within the community, defending the brand if it was under attack from critics, correcting misconceptions arising during discussions as well as correcting toxic narratives. Here the connection to the discursive co-creation strategies can be made, discussed in chapter 3.3.1, seeing how the behavior described by the industry experts align very well with the brand promoters identified by Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013), whereas the parties being moderated by the promoters can be considered brand offenders. While brands usually employ moderators, even from the ranks of community members, of their own, community members can also grow into assuming these roles in an unofficial capacity.

In chapter 3.2.2, I brought up the theory of what motivates members to join and contribute into online communities (Afi and Oquidat, 2021). Being active contributors and being recognized for this activity was identified as one of main drivers for joining and participating community activities, which in turn explains why communities can have these active members.

Additionally, the concept of the working consumer seems applicable in the context of this theme (Black and Veloutsou, 2017). The idea that engaged and loyal members of a community assume roles of defending and even promoting a brand seemed to be prominently present in the discussion with the three industry experts. During this discussion, a general notion of identifying the advocates and influential members, and encouraging them onwards to keep contributing was present, even if this particular topic was not addressed directly.

A recurring example raised by all three industry experts was identifying online content creators to collaborate with for promoting a brand – in this instance, a game. When successful, these creators tend to bring in parts of their own communities as well, building it even further with their own engaged and loyal members. This led to the notion that for especially a community that's still starting out, an active form of co-creation would be asking the community members who their favorite content creators were and who they'd like to see collaborating with the brand. These inputs can lead to better informed choices on who the content creators should be, and how they align with the interests of the existing community members.

## 5.7 Limits of control and power

An overarching theme that came up more than once during the concept synthesis session was the challenge of how much control and power can actually be asserted over a community, especially

when they grow in size. In the theoretical framework's chapter 3.1 where I discussed the ways brand theory has moved from controlled signals to dynamic co-creation, Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsos (2019) idea of brand managers being simply parts of a larger network of stakeholders building brand meanings and brand identity emerged. The theoretical framework overall seemed to portray an image of consumers having a great deal of control over brands in the form of co-creation in today's interconnected world and astounding amount of access consumers have to brands. This can be seen as being affirmed to an extent by the industry experts, as during the discussion it was agreed that large communities may assume a life of their own; even if a community starts out facilitated by a brand and their brand managers, a point may come where the community members will keep on interacting with each other without any input required or requested from the brand (Expert 1, 12 Nov 2024). How much actual power could be exerted on an independent community like this from the brands side was questionable, and Expert 3 especially highlighted that on social media channels outside of the brands more immediate control the power of influence over community members is very limited, which is something that managers just need to accept and come to terms with. On brand driven channels – such as a Discord server dedicated to the brand – the power was recognized to be more immediate and manageable (Expert 3, 12 Nov 2024).

However, as noted in the previous subchapters, these limits work both ways – community members can have limited control and power even in co-creation as it has been emphasized in multiple occasions how brand identity co-creation was seen as an activity that is initiated by the brand managers, carefully selecting which input will be leveraged for creating the co-creation outputs. This is somewhat contradicting to the idea from Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou (2019) where it was perceived that brand managers can no longer be assumed to have full control over brand meanings or brand identity, but this may also be a contradiction posed by my original interpretation of what Delgado-Ballaster and Veloutsou actually meant by this. Yes, full control can be perceived to be lost from brand managers and they most likely need the full range of stakeholders to build and manage a successful brand, but based on the discussion with the three industry experts, a conclusion could be seen that the limited control possessed by managers is still there to be the drivers of decision making.

In relation to this, Expert 1 raised points on the fact that any business in the world employs talented individuals who in general have a pretty good idea about what it is that makes them successful in their work. In the context of online video game communities, the managers are expected to have a decent idea what kinds of activities the community responds positively to, and what kind of brand management related decisions are most likely to have success. These decisions can and should

be supplemented with community input to make them more informed, but Expert 1's quote; "know when to lead and when to follow" was seen as a good guideline for co-creation activities.

Relating to control and power, during the discussion we also touched on the topic of whether or not ignoring community input is perceived as something that carries risks for the brand. While it was acknowledged by Expert 1 that as long as brands clearly communicate that not all of collected feedback and input will be implemented to manage expectations and thus control negative backlash, this did carry the implication that if co-creation is poorly managed and inputs are not implemented, it can lead to negative consequences. In general, though, this was not seen as a major risk by the industry experts during the discussion as long as expectations in this regard were successfully communicated and managed.

In conclusion, the limited control brand managers have over branding activities is indeed more limited among community heavy brands, but not necessarily as exhaustively as I may have interpreted from the theoretical framework at first. In the end, the brand managers tasked with the branding activities are the ones who drive brand identity co-creation activities, ultimately making the decisions of what input is applied and how it is applied. Input from community is still there, but the limits of power and control exist on both sides of the proverbial co-creation coin. This in turn does relate to the point of long term consistency of the brand being at risk if community input is leveraged; as long as brand managers maintain the ultimate power on decisions, they can ensure the consistency of the brand in the long term, even if some elements of the brand may be subject to change

## **5.8 Challenges posed by diversity of communities**

All three industry experts greatly emphasized the need to understand the composition of your brand's community and the different segments of target audience that exist among it. It is extremely unlikely that larger communities would consist of similar types of players, even if communities tend to be built as a result of likeminded people coming together as described in chapter 2.1.2 of this thesis. But as Afi and Ouiddad referenced the motivations driving community engagement, the similarities among the consumers joining the communities may be more related to said motivations rather than specifically demographic, behavioral or interest-based traits, which in turn were referenced to by the three industry experts.

Both are equally important for the success of co-creation activities, as Expert 2 pointed out by describing how community related activities and messaging need to be aligned with the target audiences active within the community. They noted that there is a risk of alienating parts of the audience if only specific segments are catered to in communications and co-creation activities, a risk that can be mitigated by properly segmenting community members and understanding what their

underlying motivations for participating in community activities are, as pointed out by Expert 3. This is also related to them raised in chapter 5.4 about distinguishing meaningful input from noise and vocal minorities to discover more growth; by understanding the different segments of users within a community and the motivations driving them, brands can tap into the growth potential more easily and find more success in their co-creation activities as well. This is due to being able to co-create a brand identity that becomes appealing to new segments of consumers and wider audiences, or doubling down on the motivations and appealing factors identified among current community segments where more potential is expected to be discovered.

As an example of segmenting users among communities in the video game industry, Expert 2 referenced the game *Hunt: Showdown* as an example. While this is a title they haven't worked on specifically, it is something they've invested a lot of time in both studying as a professional and participating as a community member. *Hunt: Showdown* is a first-person shooter game, where players either compete solo or in teams of up to three players. The game mechanics, art style and brand identity lean heavily towards the game being challenging and serious in tone when it first started out. They saw the segmentation of the community in two main categories - hardcore players, who embrace the challenging aspects of the gameplay and casual players, who wish to participate in playing a game that has become relatively popular and visible on various social media channels and online communities external to the ones specific to the brand. As described by Expert 2, the game has had a dedicated and loyal base built mostly around those hardcore players, but the growth of the game had become relatively stagnant in the long term. The developers chose to tone down the most challenging aspects that were appealing to the hardcore segment of players and make it more approachable to a wider base of players, shifting the brand positioning. While these actions made the game and the brand less appealing to the community members who found the original product and brand more appealing, even alienating the hardcore audience, the choice was ultimately a much better one from a standpoint of business, as the player counts of the game have stepped up significantly since the beginning of January 2021, when major changes started to be introduced to the game. This can be seen in figure 5, where a line graph shows the month-to-month growth of unique players for *Hunt: Showdown*. This in turn led to a discussion where Expert 3 raised the question about whether or not the hypothesis of the hardcore segment being the "core" community was actually correct at all, but rather the more casual segment reached after adjusting the game mechanics and brand positioning, resulting in stronger growth.

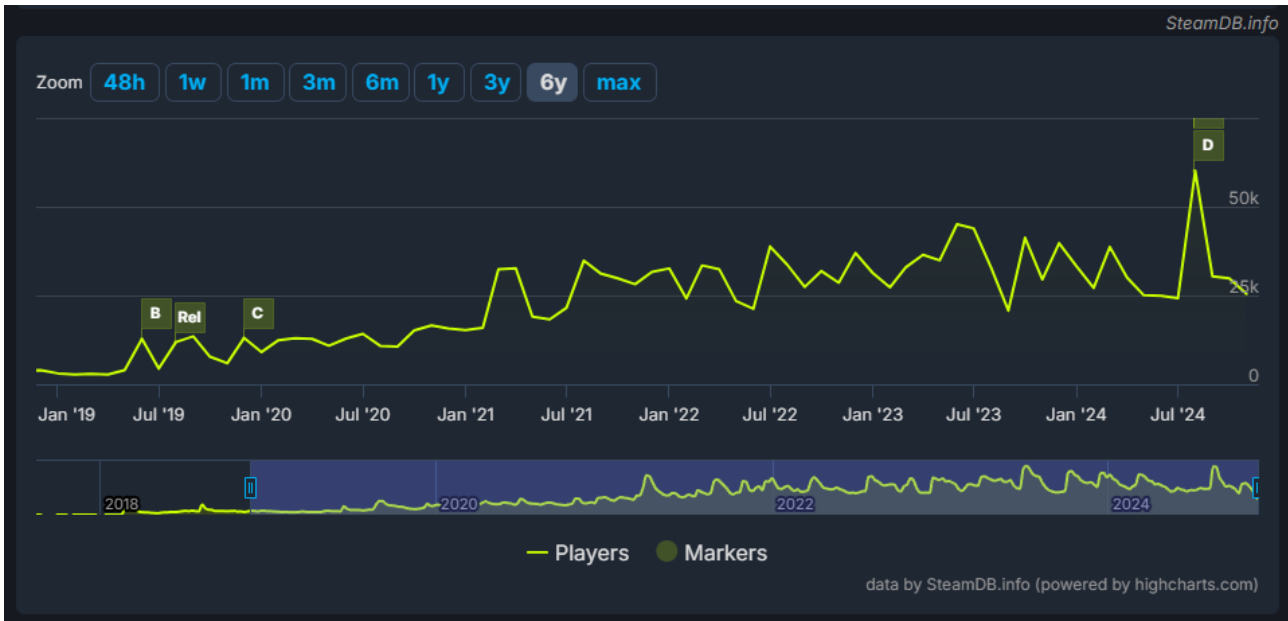


Figure 5. Hunt: Showdown unique player count month-to-month over past six years (SteamDB.info, 2024).

A challenge posed by the diversity of community members and the segment among communities is partly described in the Hunt: Showdown example described by Expert 2 above. When a community contains multiple different segments of members and stakeholders, brand communications and co-creation activities become a balancing act of keeping the different segments engaged and not feeling alienated as members of the community. Although the Hunt: Showdown example above described a more drastic strategical choice of shifting away from the original hardcore audience and it proved successful, Expert 2 pointed out that tailoring ones brand or game to only suit one specific audience increases the odds of realizing the risk raised by Expert 1 in chapter 5.5 about building a gilded cage, or rather painting the brand in a corner of sorts where they've chosen to cater to a limited audience, limiting their growth potential as a result. One should expect that in an online game community, different profiles of people, behaviors and habits will be represented, and it is up to the managers to understand what the proportions are, and where the opportunities for growth lie (Expert 2, 12 Nov 2024).

In summary, it is vitally important for brands with strong and vibrant communities to understand that the make of communities is a diverse group of different types of individuals. Managers should work towards understanding who it is that they are engaging with via proper segmentation of users, and whether or not they are actually engaging with the commercially most viable audiences.

## 6 Discussion

In this chapter, I describe the conclusions made from the combination of the theoretical framework as well as its implementation. I summarize the results in context of the research questions posed in chapter 1 of the thesis. I will also propose a framework for brand identity co-creation processes applicable for community driven brands, especially in the video games industry. In this chapter I will also discuss where future research could focus and what next steps to take from this point could be.

### 6.1 Conclusions

The somewhat immature nature of the academic research conducted around brand identity co-creation was evident in the fact that this theory had not fully penetrated into the consciousness of the industry experts. Given, this was a limited sample of individuals, so too many conclusions should not be drawn from this observation alone. However, co-creation as more broad phenomena were recognized by the industry experts, which allowed for the empirical part of the thesis to find connections with branding related activities. While activities directly linked to brand identity co-creation were not specifically discussed and identified, the many forms of co-creation occurring among the video game communities pointed at community inputs making their way back to brand identity related decisions.

Leaning upon the work done especially by Sarasvuo et al, I look to answer research question 1: “what is brand identity co-creation?” Based on the theoretical framework, brand identity co-creation is a process of active and passive interactions and influence between two or more parties, built on dialogue, providing access to consumers, increasing transparency and forcing brand management teams to assume risks of not being able to maintain full control over the brand identity. These interactions can occur between the brand and external stakeholders, or between stakeholders themselves. These interactions may also be initiated by brand managers, by stakeholders or occur naturally between stakeholders in environments facilitated by brand managers. As a result, the co-created brand identity may hold influences from the consumers and fans of the brand, potentially leading to an even more engaging brand facing consumers beyond the parties involved in the co-creation process, affecting the signals sent out by the brand and brand associations built. In facilitated environments and in stakeholder-to-stakeholder interactions, community members can act as working consumers, strengthening the brand signals sent out or potentially altering their meaning in the process of sharing them within the facilitated community channels and among other social media, for example.

Supplemented with the empirical observations made during the expert industry interview, it is noted that while the process of brand identity co-creation inherently is carried out with the influence of stakeholders external to the brand managers, it is ultimately the brand managers who choose how and to what extent the co-created input becomes utilized especially in the case of brand identity co-creation initiated by the brand managers or stakeholders in volunteering input. In co-creation initiated between stakeholders in brand manager facilitated channels, the control over selecting input that applies becomes much more limited, as the industry experts noted how communities can take on a life of their own and simply dismiss brand provided signals, opting for passing brand signals of their own.

In addition active and passive co-creation practices initiated by the brand managers, an additional avenue of co-creation was identified in how community members may interact with one another and influence each other in the process, leading to a situation where members begin to act as working consumers, interpreting brand signals and passing them on to other community members, potentially altering the intended communications. It is very possible that in some instances new members introduced to the community may face the altered signals of the working consumers first, potentially signaling a different brand identity from what was intended to be communicated by the brand managers.

As far as brand identity co-creation goes, brands may and maybe even should look into inviting input and influence from community members, to promote positive interactions and gain access to the networks built between the consumers in these communities, which in turn may unearth new learnings about how these consumers interact with each other and with the brand. In situations of stakeholders interacting directly with each other, co-creating in the process, brand managers should be aware of this process and analyze the discussions going on to assess whether or not brand signals and brand identity are being transformed into something unintended. Should situations like those arrive, brand managers would need to decide whether or not intervention is required to steer brand identity back onto its original tracks, or if the newly co-created brand identity is the direction to start leaning towards.

With research question 2: "what does brand identity co-creation look like in the context of the video games industry?" I begin observing the special characteristics that relate to brand identity co-creation in this specific industry. Looking back at the methods and motivations observed in the theoretical framework, we can conclude that brand identity co-creation within the video games industry by large occurs among the online communities built around the video game brands, more often than of a specific game rather than a specific developer or publisher - or a company. The communities allow for the fans of said brand to interact with. In the video games industry, the significance

of loyal and engaged communities built around the games and their brands is well observed in both the theoretical framework and by the industry experts, making brand identity co-creation occurring in brand manager facilitated communities a very prominent way of being initiated. In simple terms, simply the community existing and interacting is in itself a form of brand identity co-creation, where brand signals are discussed and passed on by working consumers within the facilitated community and sometimes even outside of it.

While the discussion identified that co-creating brand identity directly with community members was unlikely to happen due to the abstract nature of the concept, it was agreed that if the co-creation activities are scoped correctly based on the need of managers in terms of what input is required for in brand management activities, success can be expected in creating even more loyalty and appeal among the identified target audiences.

As identified by the industry experts, many of the co-creation practices were identified to revolve around less abstract subjects than brand identity or similar concepts, rather focusing on something more concrete the community members would understand. While this is not specific to the video games industry, it is something that was prominently raised by the industry experts who have extensive experience in engaging with video game communities. As a result, many of the identified co-creation practices were focused on collecting feedback on game mechanics, gathering creative input, and collecting data from the communities to inform branding related decisions. These are activities initiated by the brand managers, collecting either active or passive input from the community to make better informed decisions relating to brand management decisions. Active co-creation should be formatted in a way where the carefully segmented recipients understand what it is that is being asked from them, what kind of input is expected and to what extent the input will be utilized. If too abstract concepts are communicated or worked on, the risk of receiving input that can't be applied was seen as increasing a great deal.

As a more video games industry appropriate example of how stakeholders may actually affect one another in their direct interactions without interventions of brand managers, one can observe the level of toxicity among communities affecting the reputation and associations created with a brand among parties external to the community, assessing whether or not more active facilitation or intervention is required. While this is not necessarily a conscious practice the community intentionally engages in, it can have an impact on how welcoming the community looks like to potential members. Brand managers thus need to be aware of the sentiment of the discussion going on in their communities, and how it is affecting the introduction of new members and engagement of current members. By signaling what kind of behavior in a community is tolerated by the brand and its members, this can have an impact on what the brand identity is perceived to be by parties external

to the community. Control exerted over this was identified to most commonly happen via moderation of discussions either by employees of the brand or working community members, volunteering their time to moderate discussions.

Based on the theoretical framework and the empirical observations, I'm inclined to propose that brand identity co-creation practices in the video games industry are first and foremost an activity that occurs within brand manager facilitated online communities between stakeholders. The form this co-creation takes can be seen as being mostly stakeholders sharing brand signals and discussing the brand, without the influence of brand managers in the discussions going on among the community across a variety of channels, potentially altering the brand associations and reputation visible to parties who are still outside of these communities looking in, especially in terms of how toxic the community is perceived to be by external parties. An additional form of co-creation identified is primarily brand manager driven initiatives, where community members may be involved in branding activities either by actively asking feedback from them, or passively gathering data about them and analyzing it to make better informed decision regarding the direction the brand identity should be developed towards in alignment with business goals. The passively gathered data falls within the realm of stakeholder-initiated co-creation in my view, as it was described as volunteering input, even if utilizing said input does befall onto the discretion of brand managers.

Moving on to research question 3: "what kinds of practices for brands exist in the video games industry to maintain long-term consistency in the context of brand identity co-creation?" While co-creation implies certain levels of control from external stakeholders, that control is likely to be somewhat limited according to the decisions made by the brand managers, at least in situations where co-creation is initiated by brand managers or by stakeholders volunteering input to the brand. While the theoretical framework identified the importance of consistency of brand identity, not much detail was uncovered in terms of how the consistency can be maintained in the context of co-creation. Whereas the theoretical framework seemed to be more optimistic about the level of control external stakeholders possess in co-creation processes, implying clear limits to how much control brands can maintain in co-creation practices even in their brand identity, the discussion with industry experts seemed to lean more towards suggesting managers actually still retain significant amounts of control as mentioned earlier. This was manifested in communicating how managers are still in the position of selecting which input gets utilized in the co-creation process, and in cases of active co-creation, being in control of initiating the process in the first place. However, the industry experts recognized the fact that in large communities where brand managers simply act as facilitators, opportunities for exerting control may be limited.

While the lack of access, transparency and perceived inability of the brand to be influenced was seen as leading to disengagement of consumers, which may ultimately lead to negative attributions towards the brand, the empirical observations from the industry experts did not fully agree with this sentiment. The need for managing expectations was identified by the industry experts in ensuring that if co-creation practices are engaged in, the stakeholders should be informed about how the input will be applied to mitigate risks relating to negative connotations towards the brand. Due to this, as long as brand managers have a clear understanding of business goals; the scope of the brand they're working on; and the segments of audience they're working with, maintaining long-term consistency of the brand should not pose issues, even if parts of the brand identity are subject to change over time.

As for research question 4: "what does the video game industry and other community-focused industries have to gain from brand identity co-creation practices?" The benefits have been rather clear for the video games industry. The emphasis of engaged and large communities acting as drivers for business growth and success was identified in chapter 2 of the industry overview, the theoretical framework as well as the empirical discussion with the industry experts. The conclusion was that especially in the video games industry, the more engaged a community is, the more loyal to the brand associated with the community they become, leading to more opportunities of acting as engines of growth. Engaged communities act as both word-of-mouth generators, introducing new members to the communities and the brands associated with it, as well as a retaining mechanic, where positive interactions with fellow community members were seen as a tool of making members more likely to stay engaged with the community. On the flipside, a toxic community with negative interactions between members was seen as being harmful for the brand, especially from the point of view of driving potential consumers away from due to the reputation of the community.

Building upon this, co-creation practices in general were seen to promote the engagement and loyalty of the community. Specifically in the context of brand identity co-creation, based on the discussion had with the industry experts and leaning upon the theoretical framework, the biggest value brands can gain from brand identity co-creation is being better informed with branding related decisions and aligning them with what resonates with the target audiences better. While the input collected for brand identity co-creation from community members should be formalized in a way where they can understand what it is that they co-creating, input implemented should also be understandable and visible to them, creating a positive feedback loop where the applied signals from the community is communicated back to them, giving them credit on the co-created outcome. Looking at the purely community driven co-creation activities described earlier as the level of toxicity in the community affecting the brand's reputation and the associations it carries, brands being

aware of this and actively moderating discussions to weed out toxicity are more likely to find success in their community driven activities, as fostering positive engagement and associations can be seen as working as the exact opposite of a toxic community, creating positive brand associations and word-of-mouth via the impression of a welcoming and positive community.

While the scope of this thesis was narrowed down to the video games industry only, and the three experts were experienced professionals working in this industry, a lot of what was discussed and learned with them seemed to have practical applications for other industries where communities were naturally forming around brands and products. The learnings of understanding your audience, catering communications to them, ensuring they feel and stay engaged and recognized, leading to a loyal community felt like they do not need to be narrowed down to the video games industry only. The examples provided of course revolved around this industry very strongly, and the selection of activities may look very different for other brands, but I do believe that among especially consumer oriented brands and industries, creating communities and engaging with said communities in practices of co-creation are a path to discover stronger business growth, as noted in both the theoretical framework and the notions of the industry experts.

## **6.2 Proposal for a framework for brand identity co-creation management in gaming**

For this thesis, I set for myself an additional goal to answer the research questions of building a proposition for a framework for brand co-creation management in the video games industry. Leveraging the insights gathered and collected in the theoretical framework, combined with the outcomes of the concept synthesis workshop with the three industry experts, I've built a model of what the process of brand identity co-creation could look like. The visual representation of this process can be seen in figure 6 and I will explain the different steps in more detail in the following paragraphs.

For a start, I've outlined four major steps in the brand identity co-creation process taking place within a community channel facilitated by brand managers, or a selection of community channels. As it has been identified that the communities are very significant tools for growth and a focal point for brand managers in the video games industry, including it in the framework seemed like an obvious choice. The four steps identified occurring within these facilitated channels are active or passive community inputs; validation of said community inputs; application of the inputs into brand elements and/or decision making; and finally analyzing the impact as well as providing feedback to the community about the input they've provided. Out of these four steps, the inputs themselves, the application of them, and the communication of feedback back to the community all seemed to act

as opportunities of influencing the brand identity, depicted as the arrows pointing at co-created brand identity in the center.

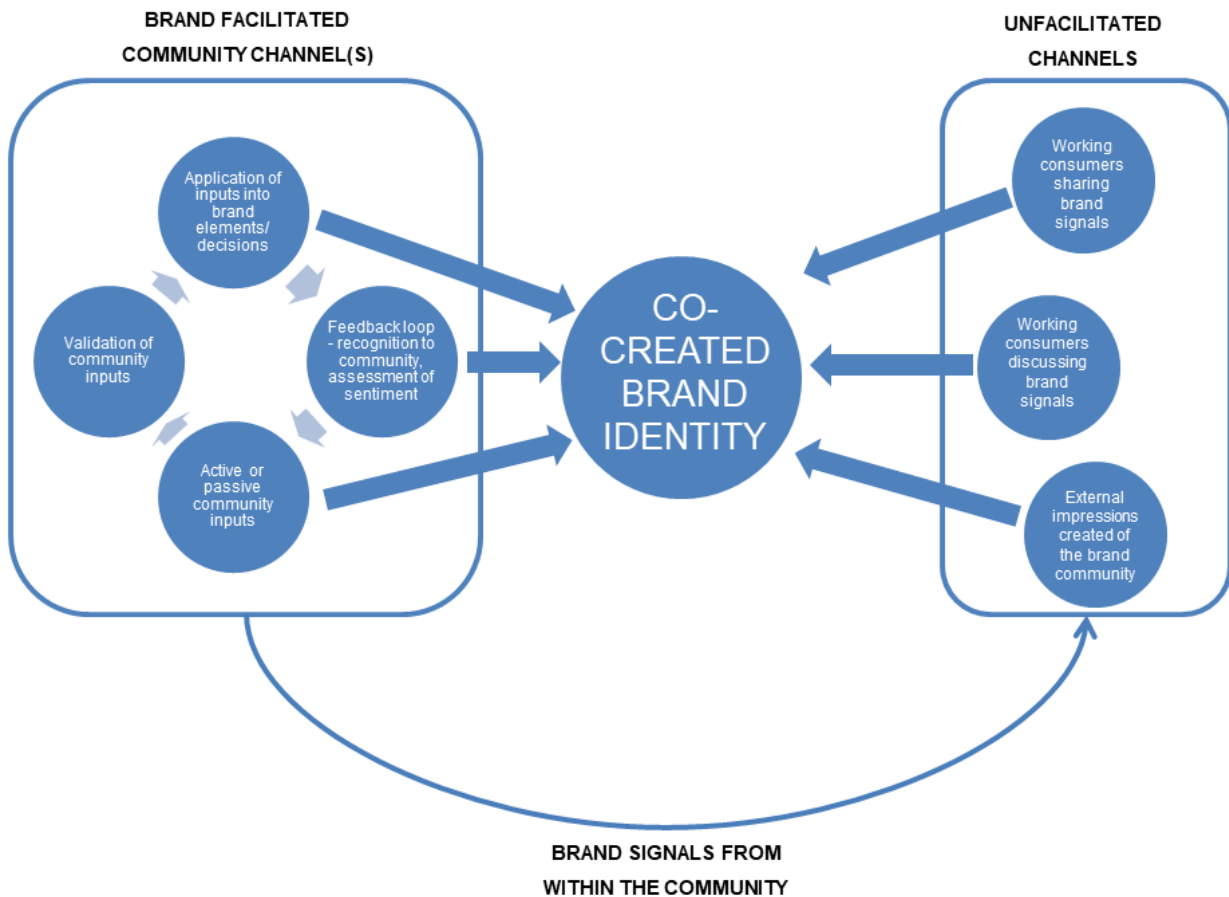


Figure 6. Proposed brand identity co-creation process.

Additionally, I've included the notion of brand identity co-creation occurring outside of the facilitated community channels, when the working community members choose to share brand signals and act as advocates for it among their personal social media channels, for example, introducing new members to the brand and community in the process. In these scenarios, it is possible that the brand signals and meaning may alter themselves in the process, as brand managers have limited control over what exactly it is the working consumers are communicating in external channels.

### 6.2.1 Brand identity co-creation within brand facilitated community channels

The process occurring within brand identity facilitated channels is depicted as continuous, but I'll start my breakdown from the active or passive community inputs. This can be either co-creation initiated by brand managers or interactions between stakeholders themselves (active community inputs); or it can be the analysis of data and sentiment of discussions occurring within the commu-

nity (passive community inputs). Especially in interactions between stakeholders without intervention from brand managers - for example between brand promoters and brand offenders - these interactions can already exert influence on brand identity, creating brand associations and passing on brand signals transformed from their original forms into something altered by community members communicating amongst themselves. The community members adopting these altered signals and passing them on according to the theory of the working consumer by Black and Veloutsou, these members start acting as advocates of sorts who may also be the very first instances of interaction for new community members only recently introduced to it. In addition, examples of brand identity co-creation identified included the instances where community members carry brand signals outside of the community into unfacilitated channels, where these working consumers are introducing new people to the brand and the community. This is depicted as the arrow pointing from brand facilitated community channels into unfacilitated ones.

To go back into observing the process within brand facilitated channels. In cases of active co-creation, and especially when it is initiated by the brand managers, communications around the process should be designed in a way where community members are aware of input being requested from them and understanding what it is that the input is for. Avoiding overly abstract concepts will help in ensuring input is received in an actionable way. It is also important to manage the expectations of the community when actively engaging in co-creation with them, to ensure that community members do not expect all provided input to be applied into practice. This should mitigate risks associated with leaving community members feeling disengaged and losing loyalty if their input goes unutilized.

In either scenario, I propose brand managers should conduct some level of validation of these inputs as the next step. If the inputs are occurring among the stakeholders themselves, brand managers being aware of this happening can analyze the online discourse and its sentiment, assessing whether or not the brand signals community members are passing on to each other are aligned with what was originally communicated, or intended to be communicated. If a shift in brand signals and even brand identity is identified among stakeholder-to-stakeholder interactions, and should it be widely adopted, brand managers can move on to deciding whether or not they should intervene or adopt the newly co-created brand identity into "official" brand communications as well. The validation process would still follow similar steps: assessing how actionable the input is; assessing which audience segment the input is originating from; assessing how wide of an audience the input would impact upon application to distinguish relevant inputs from noise originating from minority audiences; comparing against other available data sources (quantitative or qualitative); assessing how the input aligns with the current state of the brand identity; and finally, deciding whether or not

specifications are required to apply the input, for example by reaching out to community members actively for additional input or feedback.

Once the inputs are validated, application of them into brand elements and branding related decisions would be the next step. This step is more relevant for the brand manager-initiated co-creation processes but even in situations of stakeholders co-creating among themselves, a decision should be made of the following course of action once this co-creation process is identified to be going on. Brand managers will have control in this step upon making the call on what inputs or if any of them actually become applied, but as discussed already, this control is not necessarily all absolute - brand identity co-creation may even happen against the brand managers intentions and wishes. Application of the inputs in the end will depend on the form of them and the current state of the brand identity, but ultimately, applied inputs should be something that community members new and old have an opportunity to notice.

As a final step of the process, I've identified the feedback loop. Community members providing input should be recognized to further encourage future co-creation and build upon engagement and loyalty, especially in scenarios where the co-creation process is initialized by brand managers. As brought up by the industry experts, community driven or community included initiatives tend to be very well received by the community, so should such initiatives come to fruition, community members should be recognized for their participation. This may understandably be more difficult or even unnecessary in scenarios of passive co-creation, where community inputs are simply analyzed from a more a data-oriented perspective; or when the inputs are applied into areas that may be considered abstract for individuals not operating immediately with branding related tasks. Even with that in mind, people are often driven to join communities off of a need to be recognized and being a part of something bigger and catering to those needs will likely result in an even stronger community, as noted in chapter 3.2.2.

Assessment of the impact of the applied inputs is equally important to brand managers. As discussed with great emphasis by the industry experts, business growth is more often than not the ultimate goal of community related activities. When co-creating with communities, having KPIs established to assess impact is vital, especially for branding related inputs. In addition to business driven KPIs, brand managers can keep an eye out on the sentiment of discussion going on in the community, to establish how well received the applied inputs have been from a more qualitative perspective. While the theoretical framework referenced the method of measuring stakeholders' willingness to interact and engage in co-creation, as discussed in chapter 3.1.8, this seems an applicable measure mostly for brand manager initiated co-creation processes - if stakeholder-to-

stakeholder co-creation occurs, the willingness to interact is already a threshold that has been surpassed.

### **6.2.2 Brand identity co-creation within unfacilitated channels**

As noted in the brand identity co-creation process depicted in figure 6, we can expect brand signals from within the community to be carried over to channels that may be outside of the brand managers' immediate control or power of facilitation. In these instances, the nature of co-creation becomes slightly different. The working consumers carrying these brand signals to external channels - for example by sharing brand signals on their personal social media channels and accounts, or engaging in conversation about the brand on channels not facilitated by the brand - these members are engaging in activities that on their own can be considered brand identity co-creation by either strengthening the brand signals, or acting as catalysts for altering them in the process in the discussions happening within these unfacilitated channels.

In addition to working consumers engaging in communicating brand signals - or communicating about them - external influences were also identified during the discussion with the industry expert in the form of the brand facilitated community potentially forming a reputation based on how toxic the community is perceived to be. This was seen as something that could affect the brand identity as well, as both the theoretical framework and empirical discussion pointed at a toxic community having negative impact on the brand associations and perceptions of consumers outside of the facilitated community channels.

Something that should be mentioned in this context but is not depicted in the process is the possibility that co-creation occurring in unfacilitated channels leveraging the brand signals from within the facilitated channels may lead to working consumers acquiring new community members. Should the brand signals be conveyed relatively unaltered, the expectation can be on the new members being relatively well aligned with the brand as they enter the community. On the other hand, if the brand signals transform significantly in the process, new members may face a form of alienation upon entering the community and receiving more controlled brand signals. This is why it is important for brand managers to keep tabs on the sentiment of discussion going on about their brand in channels external to the ones they immediately manage and facilitate, to assess whether or not brand signals are being received as intended, or if intervention or adjustments are required. While introducing new members to the community can in the long run act as a catalyst of change in the brand identity, I felt that it is more of a possible outcome than a core part of the process, hence I left it out of the process description.

### 6.3 Future steps and research

Acknowledging that this thesis was built around a theoretical framework and the insights of three industry experts, opportunities for further research are easily identified. While I requested feedback on the model proposed in chapter 6.2, it failed to arrive in time before submitting this thesis for review. Something I would likely have done differently would have been allowing more time for feedback rounds to have included some industry expert comments on the proposal model to better understand whether or not this is something they agree with and if they noticed ways to improve it and make it more accurate. I do believe that the process can be referred to in the future by brands in both the video games industry and in other industries where communities are a central part of the business and finding growth, as it can provide a great deal of understanding behind the motivations of community members engaging in co-creation, as well as the multitude of points where brand identity may be influenced.

As a topic for future research, the brand identity co-creation model proposed in this thesis should be subjected to external evaluation among multiple industry experts, reaching beyond just the three experts whose insights were leaned on for making the model happen in addition to the theoretical framework. To make this evaluation more valuable for the video games industry, experts from multiple different types of brands should be sought out to provide input on the subject, to understand differences between mobile and console gaming focused communities, for example. Additionally, as the framework proposed was built to be general in detail rather than specifically designed for the video games industry, tapping into insights from communities in other industries would be equally interesting, to understand whether or not the process would look similar or if it would alter based on the industry of operation.

Academic research regarding brand identity co-creation specifically also seemed scarce, even if the concept of co-creation has been more extensively explored in especially value co-creation contexts. Coming to full grips with what practices exist within this domain and especially what kind of value is created in co-creating brand identity remain as avenues of interesting research.

Considering this thesis focused on collecting academic and business side input on the brand identity co-creation phenomena, it would also be an interesting subject for evaluation among consumers to assess whether or not it would be something they'd wish to engage in and what the preferred forms for it would be. Likewise, an interesting topic would be to assess whether or not consumers are actually aware that they may already be co-creating brand identity in discussing brand signals and passing them into channels external to the immediate community they're a part of.

Personally, I feel I learned a great deal about brand identity co-creation in this process. Starting out I must admit I felt it being an abstract concept even for myself, and learning more about it was one of my strongest motivators and drivers for doing this thesis. I believe the thesis helped me fulfill that goal, as I feel I now have a much better theoretical basis about brand identity co-creation. I also feel I gained a stronger understanding of what brand identity co-creation looks like in practice, and how it is discussed among industry experts. Discussing the subject with industry experts helped me understand better ways of concretely communicating about it, as well as the limitations of co-creating something that can be considered very abstract for parties not immediately working with brand related topics.

However, based on the theoretical framework and the empirical discussion, I remain confident that brand identity co-creation is something that successful engagement will lead to an even stronger brand identity, that an already engaged and loyal community can feel an even stronger connection with, all the while expanding the reaches of said community.

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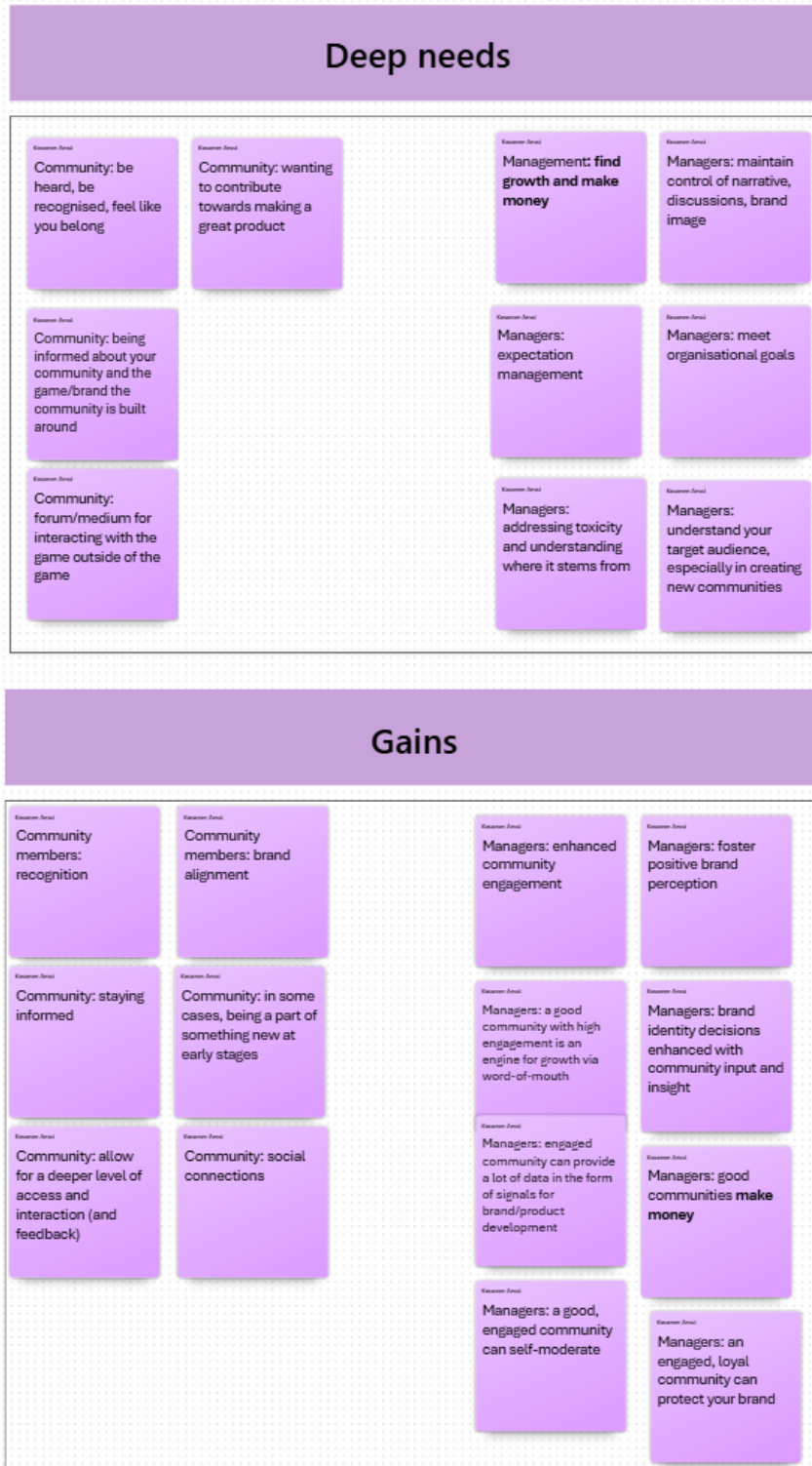
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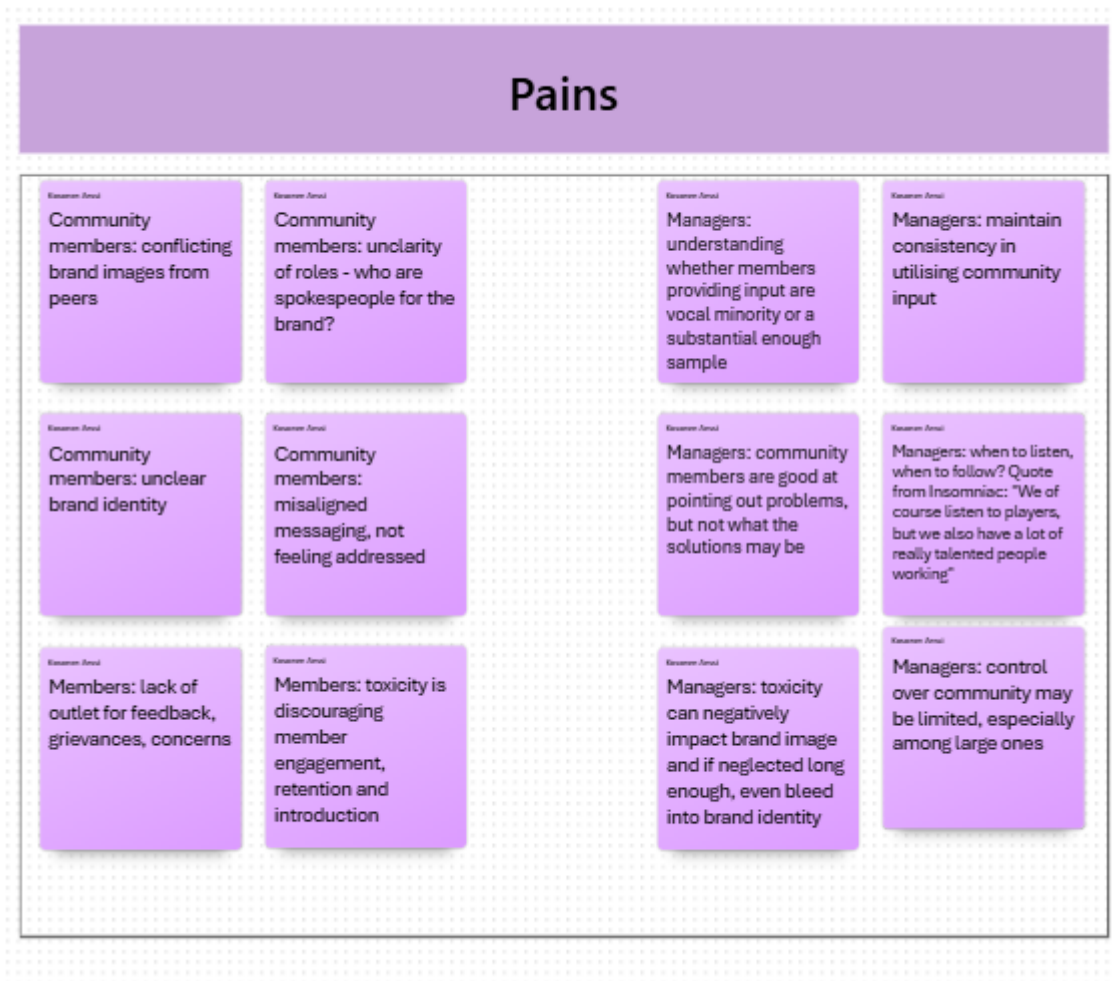
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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Concept synthesis outcomes - Deep needs and Gains



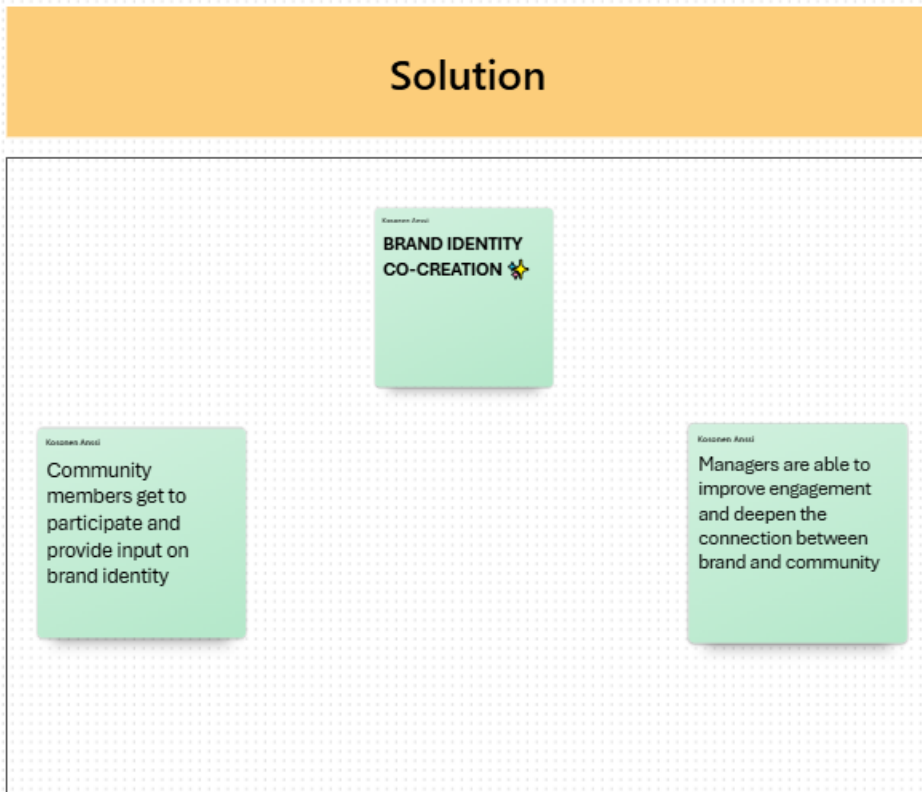
## Appendix 2. Concept synthesis outcomes - Pains



### Appendix 3. Concept synthesis outcomes - Challenges



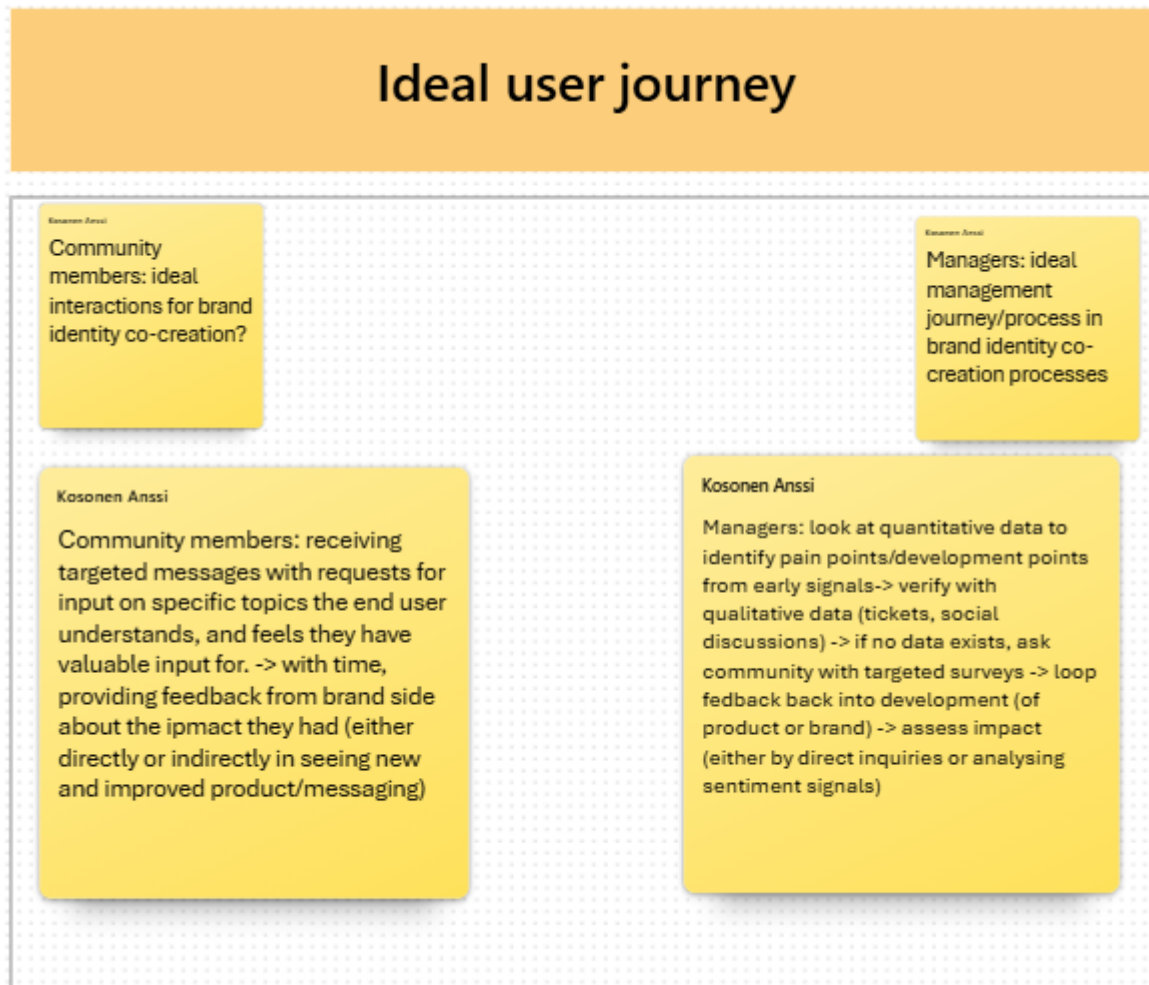
## Appendix 4. Concept synthesis outcomes - Solution



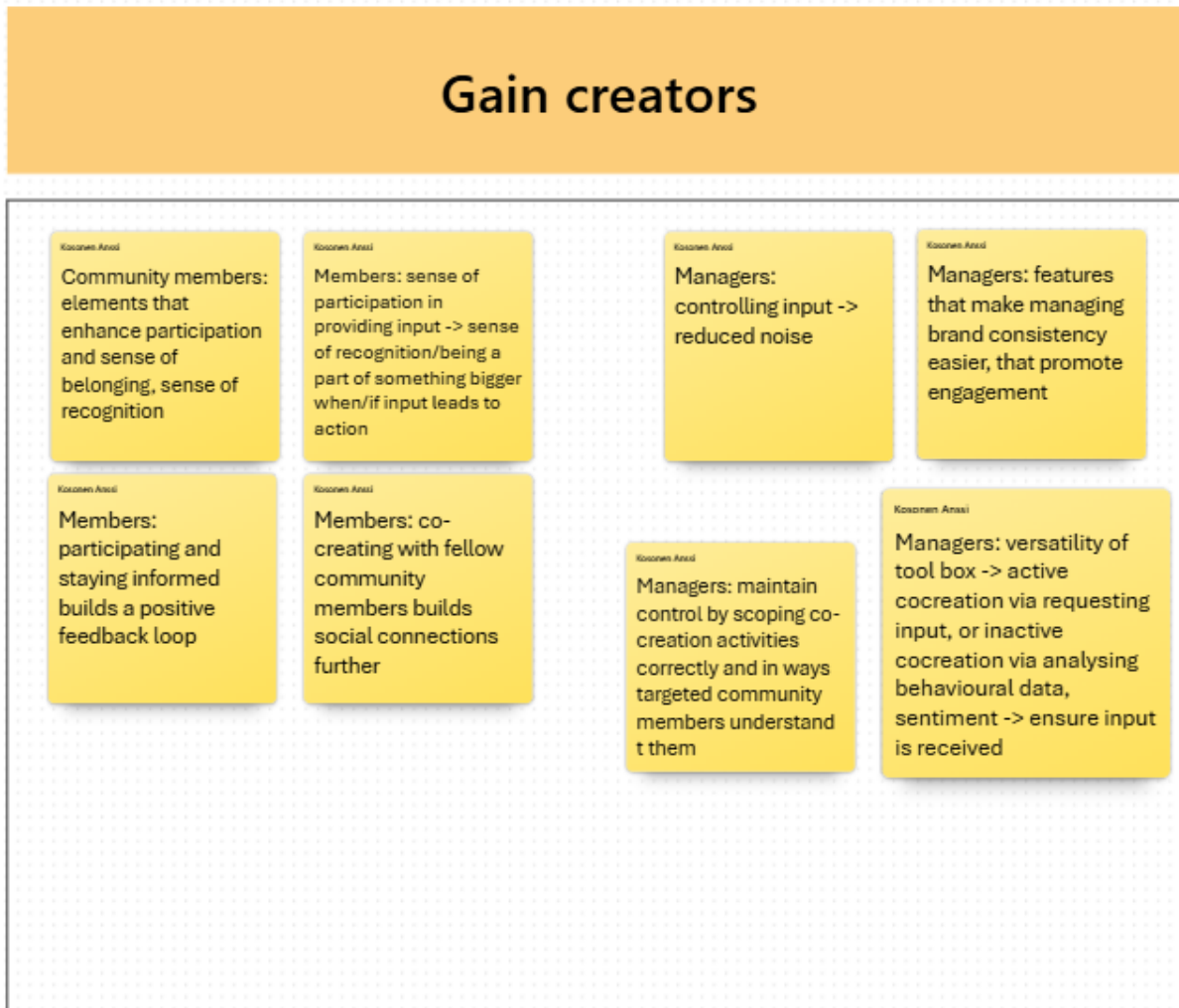
## Appendix 5. Concept synthesis outcomes - Key solution components



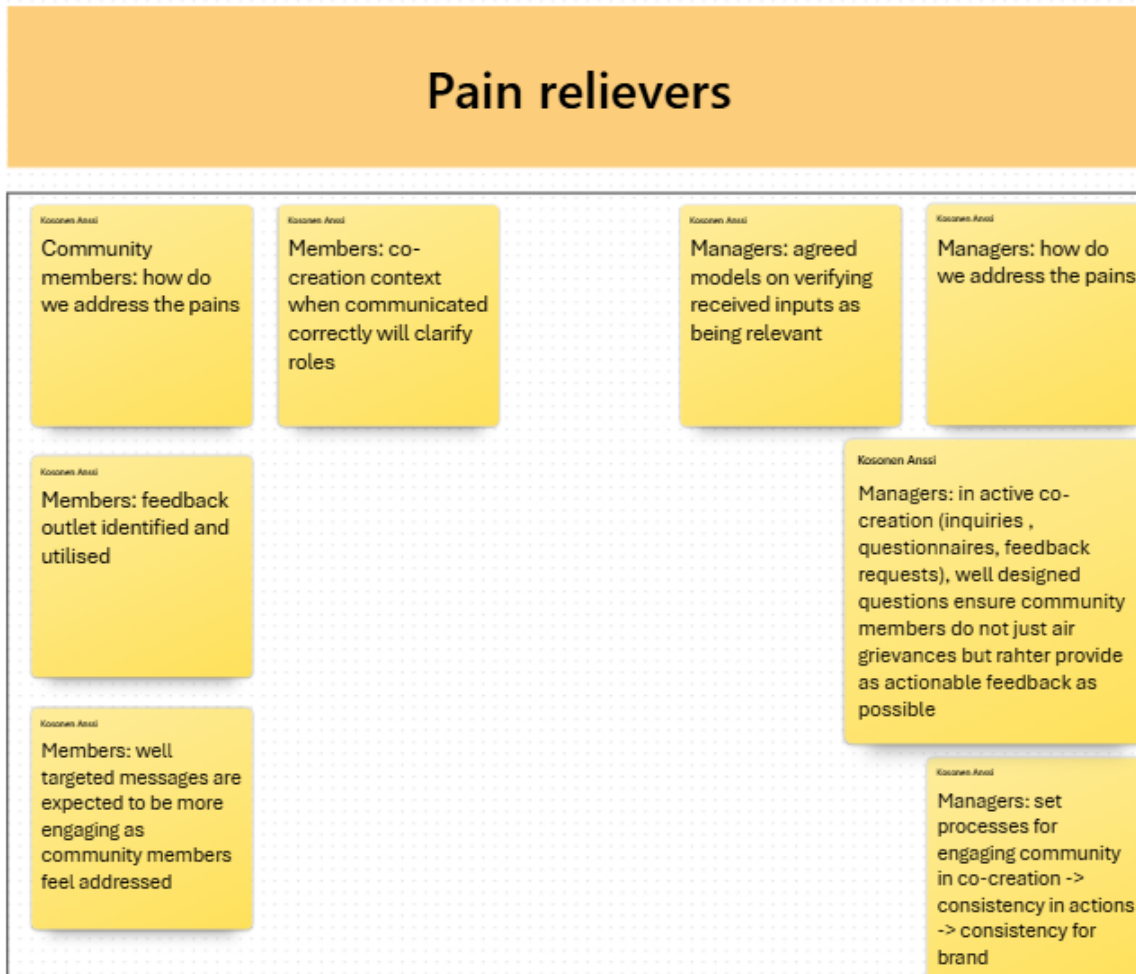
## Appendix 6. Concept synthesis outcomes - Ideal user journey



## Appendix 7. Concept synthesis outcomes - value proposition for members and managers, Gain creators



## Appendix 8. Concept synthesis outcomes - Value proposition for members and managers, Pain relievers



## Appendix 9. Concept synthesis outcomes - Value proposition for organizations

