External Viewpoint: The Best Practices to Build an International B2C Online Brand Community

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Abstract

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This Bachelor's thesis is a research-based study on the best practices to build an international B2C online brand community. The study is conducted by reviewing recent literature on the topic, interviewing business professionals, and comparing successful online brand communities. The aim of the thesis was to provide a comprehensive view to online community management and identify the most essential practices utilised in B2C online brand communities.

The thesis begins with overviewing the relevance of topic, theoretical models and essential background information about online brand communities. The theoretical part is followed by literature review that covers the current practices employed in online brand communities. The sources included books, publications, and articles written by authors with high international credibility in the field of the topic. The findings from literature review indicated central themes that were further implemented to investigative questions.

The research process consists two qualitative phases with deductive approach: semi-structured interviews and comparative case study. Semi-structured interviews discuss online brand communities from the perspective of three theoretically-deduced themes and key practices employed in online brand communities. The interviewees were carefully selected by using purposive sampling method. All interviewees have work experience in managing international B2C online brand communities with large member bases.

Lastly, the comparative case study inspects three well-known and thriving B2C online brand communities based on the analysed data from semi-structured interviews. The study discovers what are the similarities, differences, and noticeable patterns between the communities. The comparative case study works as a supportive research phase to confirm some of the prior findings and find contextual differences.

The study outcomes showed that successful international B2C online brand communities share several common practices. Most importantly, the results stressed the importance of customer-centric perspective in online community management. Online brand communities should focus on catering members' needs in a fundamental way by listening to members, encouraging them for meaningful interaction and providing exciting and relevant content regularly. The practices employed in the online brand community must serve community's purpose. Moreover, the study discovered that the involvement of gamification to acknowledge members with intangible rewards contributes positively to sense of community and community participation. Also, allowing members to participate in influential activity to collectively create value in terms of finding solutions or developing products is beneficial not only as members feel more important but also it creates more trust to the brand.

Keywords
Brand loyalty, community-building, community participation, gamification, member interaction, online brand community, sense of community, value co-creation

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1   Introduction

This is a research type of Bachelor's thesis for the Degree Programme in International Business in Customer Relationship Management and Communications specialization. In this chapter, the author will prove the topicality and relevance of the study, define the research focus, and introduce essential terminology that a reader should know to better follow and understand the study. The chapter aims to educate the reader about the fundamentals of the topic and attain their interest.

1.1   Background

In recent years online brand communities have received substantial interest in the media for its increasing popularity among businesses and consumers. The study conducted by Global Web Index (2019) reveals that online communities are on the rise – an expanding number of internet users are moving toward online communities to express themselves and create more authentic relationships with the brand. This behavior demonstrates an ongoing shift from so-called 'me-centric' social sharing to more we-centric online conversations. The data collected in the US during 2017-2019 indicates that online communities' engagement has steadily increased from 72 % to 76 % in the given period. On the contrary, tangible social groups have faced a decline as the time spent online keeps growing. Surprisingly, there is no remarkable difference in the awareness of online communities between millennials and older generations; 76 % of millennials and generation Z representatives are familiar with online communities, while 70 % of older people are aware of online communities. Thus, online communities have the potential to cater to a broad group of people from all age groups. According to the study, one of the main drivers to join an online community is a sense of belonging; people want to feel connected with others who share the same interests. (Web Global Index 2019.)

From the businesses' point of view, there are also various motives to build online communities. As Richmond (2020) has stated, communities work to help customers learn, share, and collaborate with each other. In the long term, it can have a positive impact on the company's growth. Richmond emphasizes the importance of listening to what people want and letting them drive the change. For these purposes, online communities work as a facilitating tool. (Richmond 2020.) Online brand communities can also play an essential part in improving customer experience. Zimmermann (2019) points out that customer experience needs to be the driving initiative for regularly interacting with customers. Zimmermann brings up a report made by Walker's, which estimates customer experience to be

the key brand differentiator by the end of 2020. Moreover, Zimmermann finds online communities a natural place for brands to deliver signature moments to their customers. In other words, online communities can make customers' daily transactions memorable, which leads to improved customer experience. (Zimmermann 2019.)

Besides these findings, online brand communities can also create a competitive advantage as a differentiator. Digital age has created a need for online human connections because people are seeking an alternative human relationship with brands. Murphy states that allowing personality and humanity to be in a brand's heart will differentiate the brand from others. Also, a more humane brand will attract those customers who are an optimal fit and more likely to build trust in the brand. These customers have the potential to become frequent buyers as there is a special kind of connection. (Murphy 2020.)

1.2   Research Question

This thesis aims to depict the impact of today's online brand communities in terms of enhancing the brand experience, building a loyal customer base, and enabling customers to build more meaningful relationships with each other. The thesis's outcomes will be a holistic study of the most preferable practices to build international B2C online brand communities. As the study focuses on proposing the best community-building practices, it is worth highlighting that the study is made from an external point of view. The practices in this study refer to any actions the brand takes that contribute to how customers experience the online brand community.

The author formed **the research question (RQ)** as: What are the best practices to build an international B2C online brand community?

In order to answer the research question more accurately, the author formulated four detailed **investigative questions (IQ)**:

IQ 1. What are the practices that can help to create a strong sense of community?
IQ 2. In which ways can community participation be increased?
IQ 3. How to ensure the members stay in the community?
IQ 4. What do thriving online brand communities have in common? Case study approach on four online brand communities.

Based on the literature review, the author recognized a few key aspects that will require special attention in the study. These aspects are included in investigative questions 1-3

that aim to find out the practices that help to create a sense of community, increase community participation, and retain members in the community. Lastly, investigative question 4 aims to find similarities between internationally succeeded online brand communities to either support or challenge the findings.

1.3 Demarcation

The thesis will cover B2C online brand communities created and governed by the brand itself, which are referred to as brand-owned communities. Thus, the communities embedded in social networking sites such as Facebook communities and the ones that are established by consumers are excluded from this study. This is due to the research objective, which aims to discover suitable practices for businesses to build communities with full leverage over the community. Considering the relevance for today's businesses and the wide use of mobile devices, only communities established on online platforms will be studied in this research. Regarding the author's degree programme, the critical aspect of the study is internationality, and therefore the communities presented and analysed in the study will be internationally operating companies that provide access to the community from multiple places in the world. To ensure the use of adequate research methods, the author specified that the communities involved in the study will not require paid membership. Lastly, there will be no restrictions concerning industries to which the brands belong as the author found it essential to consider various business sectors to cover a diverse set of online brand community-building methods.

Table 1. Demarcation table.

Included	Excluded
Brand-owned communities	Embedded communities in social networking sites, consumer-initiated communities
International communities	Local communities
Online communities	Offline / Physical communities
B2C communities	B2B/Non-profit communities
Free of charge	Paid membership
All industries	Specific industry

1.4 International Aspect

The thesis contains an international aspect in each research phase. Regarding secondary data, most of the authors referred to in the literature review have high international credibility and are specialised in the topic under the study. Concerning the primary data, the in-

terview participants are all experienced business professionals who have worked in international companies. Moreover, as mentioned in the demarcation, the thesis examines only international online brand communities. Thus, the international aspect is present throughout study.

1.5 Benefits

The proposed online brand community building practices and other thesis findings will be generally useful for companies that are seeking to improve their customer relationships in online spaces. The study holds the most significant benefit for the companies that belong to the B2C sector and have been planning to build an online brand community. Also, the companies that already have an online brand community may gain new ideas to further improve their communities.

For the author, the thesis is a unique, in-depth learning process to gain knowledge about the topic of personal interest. Regarding the ability to conduct research in future studies, the author finds thesis-writing a highly valuable investment, which improves critical and analytical thinking, information retrieval, and academic writing skills.

1.6 Key concepts

- **Online brand community** is "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001, 412).

- **Co-creation of value** is defined as "the collaboration of producers and consumers in the creation of value through the definition, production, delivery, and use of products and services" (Sheth & Hellman, 2018).

- **Brand identity** is also called brand elements, they are "trademarkable devices that serve to identify and differentiate the brand". These include all the visible elements linked to the brand, for example, brand names, logos, symbols, characters, slogans, and packages. (Keller 2013, 77.)

- **Brand loyalty** is "the positive association consumers attach to a particular product or brand. Customers that exhibit brand loyalty are devoted to a product or service, which is demonstrated by their repeat purchases despite competitor's efforts to lure them away". (Investopedia 2019.)

- **Customer engagement** is "the emotional connection between a customer and a brand" (Clarabridge 2019).

- **Gamification** is "the application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts. It can also be defined as a set of activities and processes to solve problems by using or applying the characteristics of game elements". (Fitz-Walter n.d.)

- **Sense of community** refers to "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis 1986).

- **Social identity** means "a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s)" (Mcleod 2019).

- **Social networking** is "the use of Internet-based social media sites to stay connected with friends, family, colleagues, customers, or clients" (Kenton 2019).

2   Building Online Brand Communities

This chapter includes essential theories, models, and strategies concerning the area of study. Theoretical information is provided to educate the reader and provide the fundamentals any company should be familiar with before building a community online. The models also work as holistic and useful tools for companies. The chapter explains the meaning of an online brand community, community classifications, related theoretical models and strategies as well as the motives to join online brand communities. The second part of the chapter is the literature review of useful online community building practices. Based on the literature review, there will be presented key points of the online community practices that will create the base for a qualitative research phase.

2.1   Definition and Characteristics of Online Brand Community

As mentioned in the key concepts, the most adopted definition of an online brand community is that it is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001, 412). However, there exist a myriad of definitions that have slightly distinct aspects of the concept. According to Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006), besides online brand community members have a passion for a brand, they are on friendly terms with one another, and they develop a common social identity. Cove and Pace (2006) have specified that people in online brand communities create a parallel social universe with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary, and hierarchy. (in Martinez-Lopez, Anaya, Aguilar & Molinillo 2016, location 4244-4257.) To sum up, online brand communities seem to be centred around the idea of gathering people together who are genuinely interested in the brand, who contribute to building the community culture, and who may want to create social bonds with each other.

In terms of a community place, Zaglia (2013) has concluded that online brand communities may occur on a website that is already connected to the organization or, alternatively, on an independent site. Brand communities can also be embedded in the company's social networks. (in Martinez-Lopez & al. location 4949.) Moreover, Chodhury (2018) has made a distinction between free communities and owned communities in his blog post. Chodhury states that free communities refer to platforms, mainly social networks, that offer the company a chance to establish the community for free. Some of the most well-known free communities are Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. On the other hand, there exist owned community platforms that enable the company to have more control over the community and more freedom to design the community, such as communication and other activities. (Chodhury 2018.)

Buss & Strauss (2009) have stated that an online community's primary characteristic is that they focus on **member-to-member interaction**. This said, the conversation is not necessarily what makes an online community, yet the community must be designed for facilitating relationships among the members. This helps to spot the difference between online communities and other platforms. For example, blogs are not online communities even though the visitors can usually comment on the blog posts and create a discussion in the comment section. This is due to the intention of a blog, which is not to create direct interaction or relationships among the readers but to let the authors express what they want to say. (Buss & Strauss 2009.)

Regarding more specific community characteristics, Jones & Vogl (2020) have introduced three conditions that authentic brand communities tend to fulfil:

Mutual concern: the members should share mutual respect for one another's welfare. If the members lack mutual concern, there is no authentic community to support a company – what remains is a list of readers or followers. (Jones & Vogl 2020, 23)

Shared values and purpose: visitors are compatible when they share both the organization's values and purpose. These visitors are the right fit because they know whether they want to experience the brand on a deeper level based on shared values. The company needs to choose the values and purpose to commit to; otherwise, it is hard to provide consistent value to members. Defining these attributes is also about creating a boundary, which, according to Jones & Vogl (2020), refers to the line between members and outsiders. (Jones & Vogl 2020, 23-24)

Sense of belonging: it is crucial for members to feel appreciated in the community. In other cases, they will not stay and commit to the community. The feeling of belonging often appears when people feel valued or needed by the group. Also, the members should feel accepted, welcome, and cared for at some level. The community also grows more robust if the members possess **insider understanding**, which means they understand something outsiders cannot. The members' insider understanding especially appears in many fan communities. (Jones & Vogl 2020, 26-27.) The feeling of belonging is also sometimes interchangeably referred to as a sense of community.

Moreover, Laverie & Rinaldo (2016) have presented three characteristics that brands need to meet to form an online brand community. Their framework comprises brand characteristics that cover three elements: quality, competence, and reputation. Laverie &

Rinaldo (2016) state that the brand must first be recognized for its **quality** regarding its goods or services to make customers interested in entering an online brand community. Secondly, the brand must be **competent**, meaning having strong capabilities to perform intentions. The competent brand is often considered attractive from the consumers' viewpoint while associated with reduced uncertainty. The third essential element is **reputation**, which refers to consumers' overall assessment of a brand based on the reactions to the brand's goods, services, interaction, and communication practices. A compelling reputation is a key to having more loyal customers and creating brand identity in the consumers' minds. (Laverie & Rinaldo 2016, 12, 15-17.)

Before building the community, the company should have a base strong enough to carry the community. Building thriving online brand communities requires a lot of work and time in the planning phase. Jones & Vogl (2020) highlight the importance of defining **organizational goals** and **community purpose**. Companies should find a way to make these two attributes overlap to form a compatible match. There is a need to contemplate what the company wants to pursue with the community and what a good community will look like from the members' point of view. As necessary is to understand the members, the community will serve. This does not mean knowing the demographics solely, but who they are as human beings. The company should study its members by conducting member research to discover how the members want to grow. Besides demographics, some areas to study include the members' technological skills, career and goals, personal interests, challenges related to the community, and the communities the members already belong to. (Jones & Vogl 2020, 68-70.)

2.2 Community Classifications

To depict the diversity of online communities, the author will present a few main community classifications next. The very first online community classifications go back to the 1990s. The researchers classified online communities based on only a few attributes and gradually began to include more aspects. In 1997, Hagel and Armstrong classified online communities based on the users' motives to participate, which are either social or transactional. According to their classification, people with **social motives** are willing to create and deepen social bonds around their shared interests, similar experiences, or lifestyles. People with **transactional motives**, on the other hand, have more commercial focus. They want to make transactions such as selling or buying. (in Martinez-Lopez & al. 2016, location 4681-4691.)

At the beginning of the 21st century, Lechener, Stanoevska-Slabeva & Tan (2002) created

a classification, which supposes online communities have two integral elements: members and the platform. The classification involves the following categories in terms of the action of the former:

Discussion: the members want to have conversations, bring out different viewpoints, and form subjective opinions. Discussion communities can be based, for example, on focused discussions on a topic when members search for other people with the same interests and tastes.

Completion of specific goals: the members aim to achieve a common objective collaboratively. These communities can work as a place for members to learn more about the company's products from each other and thus improve everyone's product experience.

Virtual environments: the members seek to get new or different experiences in a social setting. These communities can provide members with an avatar or second life, which is common in online games.

The fourth category is a **hybrid community** that can consist of a mixture of elements of the other categories. (in Martinez-Lopez & al. 2016, location 4701-4710.)

Lechner & Hummel (2002) have divided online communities based on the aspect of commercial goals. According to this classification, the communities where users build relationships with each other are communities **without commercial goals**. They are further broken into game communities and communities of interest. On the other hand, communities based on the relationship between the company and consumers are referred to as communities **with commercial goals.** These are divided by the participants of the community into B2B, B2C, and C2C communities. (Ibidem, location 4720.)

In relation to the prior classification, Franz & Wolkinger (2003) have suggested two types of communities based on the company's goals when introducing an online community. First, **standalone communities** are built to gain direct benefits through the online community while not integrating the user into the company's processes. Standalone communities may include advertising, subscription, and e-commerce communities. **Add-on communities**, on the other hand, make customers a part of the company's processes. Add-on communities may receive ideas from the users or get prototypes reviewed by the users, and therefore these communities include an aspect of consumer integration. Also, add-on communities can make users participate in product development by offering valuable data

by taking surveys. (Ibidem, location 4730)

One of the most well-known and used classifications is Porter's (2004) **Five Ps of virtual communities**. The model comprises elements from prior classifications, thus being more precise. The five attributes are purpose, place, platform, population, and profit model. **Purpose** describes the topic of discussion or the central theme of communication between members. **Place** is where interaction happens. **Platform** refers to interaction design, which allows interactions in real-time through a chat, asynchronously via email, or it can be the combination of both. **Population** means the type of interaction between the members, which varies on the group's structure and the intensity of the social bonds. The population can be social networks or small groups, for example. The last P stands for **a profit model**, and it considers the aspect of generating tangible economic value, which the community may or not do. (Ibidem, location 4742-4752.)

Furthermore, Porter made a distinction between the proprietors of online communities. The communities can be either **member-initiated**, which means the users have built them by their own interest in connecting with like-minded people. The established relationships in member-initiated communities can be either social or professional. On the contrary, there are **organization-sponsored** communities, also known as community-initiated communities, that the company has created around the company's brands or other aspects. These communities can be either commercial or not-for-profit communities. (Ibidem, location 4762.)

2.3 The Framework of Communal Branding Strategies

Beverland (2018) has mentioned four vital processes that facilitate building enduring brand communities: social networking, community engagement, impression management, and brand use. These practices are closely attached to each other, and together they comprise the process of collective value creation. Firstly, the practices related to social networking provide linking value between members. In other words, the purpose of these practices is to build, deepen, and sustain bonds between members. The members can welcome newcomers as they join the community. Members can often empathize as they remember how it felt to be a newcomer in the group. Also, members can introduce the rules for new members. (Beverland 2018, 182.) These actions are very much similar, for example, to the duties of tutors in schools.

Community engagement aims to enhance members' engagement with the community. The practices in this category seek to build the community instead of using the brand. By

these practices, the goal is to respect sub-groups within the community, maintain the distinction between members, and value diversity. To clarify each term's meaning, Beverland (2016) describes staking as setting out one's degree of engagement. Staking can come in many forms; for example, the brand can recognize engaged customers by targeting them with unique offers. Multiple social media platforms practice milestoning, which comprehends participation in key events. For instance, Facebook reminds users about friendship anniversaries while LinkedIn applies the same reminder for full years of working at the current company. Badging, on the other hand, is a way to recognize the milestone in a visual form. For example, YouTube rewards creators with Play Button awards by achieving a certain number of subscribers. Lastly, documenting is a way to share their own experiences as a community member. (Beverland 2018, 182-184.)

Impression management includes actions that strive to deliver a complimentary view of the community, the brand, and its members to outsiders. These actions involve evangelizing and justifying. Evangelizing is a lively talk about the brand by evangelists that are loyal fans of the brand. Justifying is often the proceeding action in which the members justify an ongoing commitment to the community. These practices are external driving forces to maintain and grow the community by attracting outsiders. (Ibidem, 182-184.)

The practices related to brand use aim to improve members' use of the brand, leading to stronger perceptions of value and better commitment and brand equity. Grooming is about sharing the best tips, such as completing a challenging mission in an online game. Customizing results from the innovation in brand use; the members customize their relationships with the brand. A well-known example of customizing is letting consumers share ideas for new products on the website. Commoditizing ensures access to the brand, which can be information on where to buy the brands' products at an affordable price or provide exclusive brand-related material to the community. (Ibidem, 183-184.)
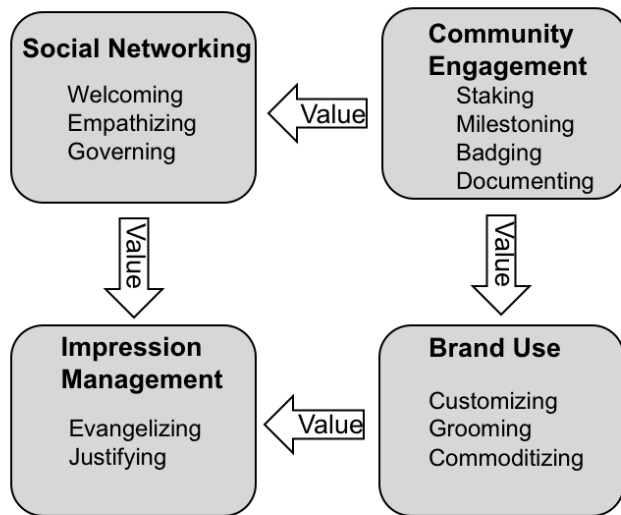
Figure 1. The process of Collective Value Creation in Online Brand Communities by Schau & al. 2009 (adapted from Beverland, M. 2018, 34-35.)

2.4 Brand Loyalty

As online brand communities enhance brand loyalty by uniting like-minded people in the same place to discuss and share, the author found it essential to explain brand loyalty. The well-known model concerning brand loyalty is Keller's Brand Resonance Model, also known as Brand Equity Model. The model describes how to create dynamic and intense relationships with customers. More specifically, the model views what kind of influence brand positioning has on the way consumers think, feel, and do. Also, the model considers the degree to which consumers resonate with a brand. The brand resonance model considers brand building as a sequence of steps in which each step is essential and subject to achieving the preceding one's objectives. (Keller 2013, 107.)

Figure 2. The Brand Resonance Model (adapted from Keller 2012, 107-108)

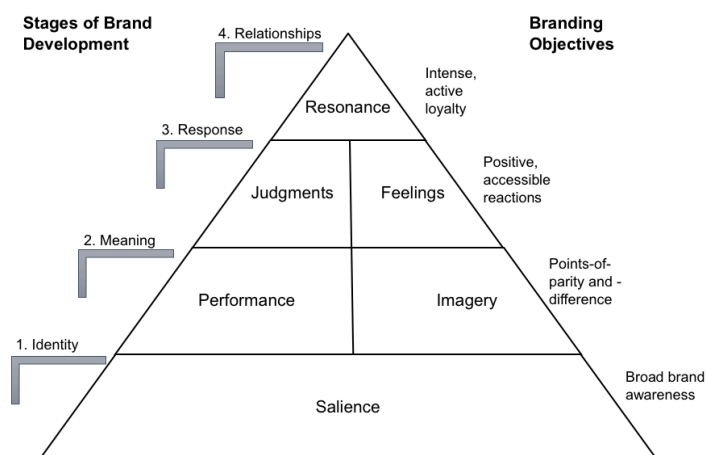The figure above illustrates the four stages and their relation to each part of the pyramid and branding objectives. Understanding the pyramid's structure, the author found it essential to explain all the pyramid segments. First, the bottom component, **brand salience**, measures various aspects of the brand's awareness and how easily and often the brand is brought to consumer's minds in different situations. The first stage aims to gain broad brand awareness, which refers to customers' ability to recall and recognize the brand under different conditions. Brand awareness also provides the product with an identity by linking brand elements to a product category, associated purchase, and consumption or usage situations. Brand awareness facilitates customers to realize the category in which the brand competes and what goods are sold under the brand name. In this step, the emphasis is on building brand equity. (Keller 2013, 107-108.)

The second step, **brand performance,** expresses how well the product or service meets customers' more functional needs, such as utilitarian, aesthetic, and economic needs. At its best, brand performance should turn the product or service features to include dimensions that will differentiate the brand. Some of the differentiating attributes mentioned by Keller (2013) that apply both products and services are price, design, and supplementary features. Concerning only services, the additional details are service effectiveness, efficiency, and empathy. Whereas for products, the characteristics consider product reliability, durability, and serviceability. (Keller 2013, 112-113.)

Brand imagery is the other primary type of brand meaning. Unlike the brand performance measures the practical needs of the product or service, imagery involves more intangible aspects of the brand. Some central intangibles consider user profiles, purchase and usage situations, personality and values, history, heritage, and experiences. (Keller 2013, 113.) Associations related to performance or imagery may become linked to the brand. Strong brands tend to have unique, favourable, and strong brand associations with customers. (Keller 2013, 117.)

Brand judgments refer to customers' personal opinions about the brand established in customers' minds by combining all the brand performance and imagery associations. There are four types of judgments: quality, credibility, consideration, and superiority. **Brand feelings**, on the other hand, cover customers' emotional responses and reactions to the brand. These feelings can vary from mild to intense and positive to negative. The common brand-building feelings are warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval, and self-respect. The key to this step is that the customer response should be positive,

accessible, and instant when customers think of the brand. (Keller 2013, 117-120.)

The final aim at the top of the pyramid, **brand resonance**, focuses on the ultimate customer relationship and customers' strong identification with the brand. Resonance is separated into two characteristics; intensity, which describes the depth of psychological bond with the brand, and activity, which stems from loyalty. The level of activity can be found out by examining the frequency of purchases and the extent to which customers search the brand information. Furthermore, these two characteristics are divided into four categories: behavioural loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community, and active engagement. (Keller 2013, 120.)

Applying the brand resonance model to this study, the author considers the online brand community a supplementary service the brand provides to its customers. The online brand community, therefore, seeks to strengthen all these four parts of the pyramid to gain a better brand resonance, leading to more intense and active brand loyalty.

2.5 Community Pareto Principle

According to the original Pareto Principle introduced by Dr. Joseph Juran, 80 % of the consequences stem from 20 % of the causes. The principle is not seen as a law, but rather an observation, which illustrates the unbalanced relationship between input and output. (Chappelow 2019.)

The widely known principle is also called the 80-20 rule, and it can be applied to online brand communities as well. Jones & Vogl (2020) have utilized the principle to state that only 20 % of the community members generate 80 % of all the community activities. Given a community of 100 members, 20 members are responsible for most actions in the community. Yet 20 % of these 20 core members, only four members, have done as much as the rest 16 members. Therefore, it can be claimed that 4 % of all resources (members) usually can generate 64 % of results from a resource set. As this rule is regressive, this can be calculated further, meaning that just 0,8 % of resources can produce half of all success. That is why the members belonging to this smallest category are called critical members. The most involved 20 % represents the core members, while the less involved 80 % are called general members. The principle shows that inequality is normal in communities in terms of member participation. Over time, the members' roles and the number of active members will change, but the groups' contribution remains uneven. Internalizing this principle, the companies know to identify these core members and pay attention to what they want and how they prefer to participate. (Jones & Vogl 2020, 86-87.)
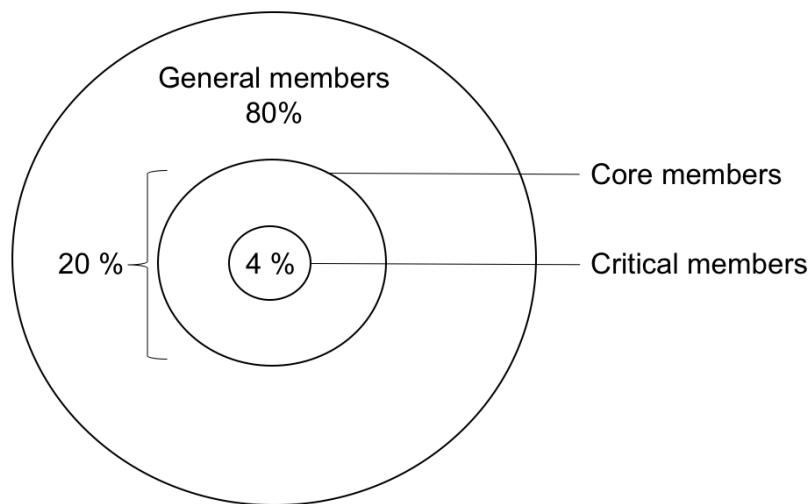
Figure 3. Pareto Principle applied to communities (adapted from Jones & Vogl 2020, 88)

2.6 Motives to Join Online Brand Communities

In order to internalize what makes customers willing to be a part of online brand communities, the author will first present the common theories related to joining any type of online community. Äkkinen (2005) has combined theoretical explanations of the motives of why people want to be a part of an online community. The motives come down to three theories: economic theories, social theories, and theories of interest.

In the study by Äkkinen (2005), **economic theories** are further divided into the resource-based model and economic theory. **The resource-based model** (Butler 2001, in Äkkinen 2005, 23-24.) suggests that individuals invest their resources, such as time and effort, for the community's purposes, and if the perceived benefits from belonging to the community outweigh sacrificed resources, the community will generate value for its members. **Economic theory** (Gu & Järvenpää 2003, in Äkkinen 2005, 25.), on the other hand, highlights that users only contribute when the inputs they get are greater than outputs. (Äkkinen 2005, 23-25.)

Äkkinen (2005) has grouped **social theories** into social exchange theory, social identity theory, and the social influence model. **Social exchange theory** (Gu & Järvenpää 2003, in Äkkinen 2005, 25) proposes that people contribute to communities because of benefits or potential reciprocity arising from what is earned in return, not because of benefits from incentives by itself. **Social identity theory** (Gu & Järvenpää 2003, in Äkkinen 2005, 26.) describes how a customer identifies with other customers. In this theory, customer contribution is driven by a sense of unity and collaboration. Moreover, Wasko & Faraj (2005, in Äkkinen 2005, 26-27.) have brought up that people voluntarily contribute their resources

toward the collective benefit even if they do not benefit from it. For example, individual motivations such as reputation and joy of being of help are factors that lead to this type of knowledge contribution. (Äkkinen 2005, 25-27.)

In terms of **interest-based motives**, Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo (2004) have recognized five values that drive people to join online communities: purposive value, self-discovery, maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity, social enhancement, and entertainment value.

The purposive value consists of informational and instrumental values. Concerning informational value, participants are motivated by sharing and receiving information in an online community. Participants may also want to know the opinions and thoughts of others in the community. Instrumental values refer to participants' willingness to complete a certain task, for instance, to solve a problem, buy or sell something, or generate new ideas. (Dholakia & al. 2004, 244.)

Self-discovery value stands for understanding and deepening salient aspects of one's self through social interactions. Members may want to interact with each other to receive social resources and achieve future goals. For example, a member can seek professional advancement by connecting with like-minded people, gain expertise in a specific topic, or improve new skills. Also, interacting with others can help an individual create and clarify their own preferences, tastes, and values. Self-discovery value differs from the purposive value as it focuses on an individual's intrinsic concerns, while purposive value focuses on utilitarian concerns. However, both values involve and refer to the person itself; thus, they are self-referent values. (Dholakia & al. 2004, 244.)

The third motive, described as '**maintaining interpersonal connectivity**', on the other hand, focuses more on others than the person itself. This value has to do with a motive to join an online community to receive social benefits from establishing and maintaining contact with other people. The benefits can be, e.g., social support, friendship, intimacy, meeting like-minded people, and relieve loneliness. (Ibidem, 244.)

Social enhancement value proposes that people join online communities to get the acceptance and approval of other members and to improve their social status within the community by contributing to the community. For example, Hars & Ou (2002, in Dholakia & al. 2004, 244) have found that many participants join virtual (online) communities mainly for peer recognition by providing information and answering others' questions. Both values, maintaining interpersonal connectivity and social enhancement, highlight the social

benefits of participation, and therefore they are group-referent. Lastly, **entertainment value** relates to members wanting to participate in the community to interact with others or play games for fun and relaxation. (Ibidem, 244.)

2.7 Literature Review on Community-Building Practices

So far, the study has concluded relevant theory behind online brand communities and what companies need to comprehend before creating a community. This chapter, on the other hand, pursues to discover the concrete actions and principles of building the online brand community. This chapter will cover the most noted and recent practices used in improving online brand community experience.

2.7.1 Increasing Participation and Member Interaction

Liao, Huang and Xiao (2016, 92) have identified three **socialization tactics** to increase the participation in company-initiated online brand communities: member education, interaction support, and participation feedback. According to Liao & al. (2016, 96), members' identification with online brand communities produces a sense of 'we-intentions' and makes members more willing to participate in the community. Socialization tactics can foster identification with the online brand community that will lead to better participation. (Liao & al. 2016, 92, 96.)

Liao & al. (2016, 99) have found that **member education** directly affects members' intention to participate in the online brand community. More precisely, the findings suggest that the content provided by the company is valued by customers, and customers like consulting online brand communities for helpful information. Thus, the relationship between the consumer and the brand will be strengthened if firms allocate more resources to educate customers. (Liao & al. 2016, 99.)

Secondly, the findings showed that **interaction support** activities contribute to a high intention to continue membership. This is due to peer influence, which has become even more significant through the development of social media. The findings indicate that companies can socialize with consumers by facilitating peer communication in online brand communities, for instance, by organizing brand events to let members share their brand experience with others. (Ibidem, 99-100.)

The researchers note that firms should also focus more on community institutions and policy design as **participation feedback** increases members' intention to participate. Moreover, an efficient feedback system provides members with clear behavioural guidelines and fosters the learning of the community's norms and values. (Ibidem, 100.)

It is shown by Casaló, Flavián and Guinalíu (2008, 32) that **trust** plays an integral part in increasing the levels of participation in virtual brand communities. As trust fosters members' participation, it is a vital aspect to ensure the community will persist. Trust can also lead to improved group cohesion and consciousness of kind. Another essential finding by the authors is that consumers' **affective commitment** to the brand around which the virtual community is developed positively affects community participation.

Casaló & al. (2008, 32-33) have recommended a few actions to enhance consumers' participation in virtual communities. First, companies should promote communication and group cohesion to encourage interactions among community members by increasing member's commitment to the community, e.g., by organizing virtual meetings to ask members for suggestions about the brand's offerings. Companies should also fulfil consumer needs so that they will be motivated to participate in the community. Lastly, companies should ensure the sustainability of the virtual community in the long-term, e.g., by continuously analysing the changes in members' needs and interests. With these practices, trust between consumers and the virtual community will be created, which in turn will facilitate turning community visitors into members, members into contributors, and contributors into evangelists of the community and the brand. Thus, consumers will also grow greater feelings and loyalty to that brand. (Casaló & al. 32-33.)

Ha (2018, 72) suggests multiple ways for marketers to improve members' loyalty in online brand communities. For online brand community members, rewards from joining the community should not be tied to financial incentives. The results imply that as members feel and recognize consciousness of kind with other members, and rituals and traditions of online brand community strengthen, the online brand community levels increase.

Based on the study, Ha (2018, 72-73) suggests that one way to enhance community loyalty is to **provide members with the influence**, an empowered feeling of impacting the community. Members can pursue such feelings when they believe they could influence the focal brand by participating in the community, e.g., when the brand asks for innovative ideas from the community. This is when the members feel they matter and eventually lead members to form a sense of community. The communities could have a unique environment that allows members to express their thoughts in terms of consumption experiences.

For instance, discussion forums designed for a specific purpose would attract members to give their opinions more easily. (Ha 2018, 72-73.)

Another recommendation is to **provide members with status**, as achieving a desired social status is an important driver that makes consumers join the online brand community. This can be encouraged by publicly showing the members' contributions to the community so that other members can perceive them as experienced members. Also, providing promotional items that display authenticity, such as an emblem, could create a sense of affiliation to the authentic community. This will also create feelings that the community has a higher status compared to other communities. (Ha 2018, 73.)

Besides members feeling some power over the community, the members must also believe the community possesses some influence over them. This feeling is vital to create a sense of community. It is also essential for community members to maintain the brand's meaning, which is why the online brand community could reproduce the brand's original meaning by cultivating rituals and traditions that underline the brand's authenticity. (Ha 2018, 73.)

Islam & Rahman (2017) have conducted a study on the impact of online brand community characteristics on customer engagement. The study outcomes suggest that information quality, system quality, virtual interactivity, and rewards all positively affect customer engagement and brand loyalty. Out of these characteristics, **information quality** and **virtual interactivity** were the most influential precursors of engagement. Islam & Rahman states that thriving brand communities allow customers to interact, post reviews, earn rewards, receive, and contribute updated and reliable information concerning their brands. (Islam & Rahman 2017, 105.)

Based on the results, Islam & Rahman (2017) recommend companies to provide relevant, timely information and encourage customers to interact with each other and the brand. There is also a need for quality control mechanisms to ensure the information is high quality; marketers should monitor, filter, and remove unreliable content. The community could also ask for feedback from members related to the helpfulness of information, and therefore members will better understand the topic and follow the discussion. Companies can also create and direct popular topics for certain members by tracking down member activities. These actions contribute to a sense of belonging and eventually attract and retain customers in online brand communities. (Islam & Rahman 2017, 105.) Furthermore, to improve system quality and virtual interactivity, the information search can be made more efficient by utilizing convenient navigation tools and implementing organized ways to share

content. The community should also acknowledge customer contributions by spotlighting active customers, for example, by providing badges for top contributors.

2.7.2   Boundary and Gatekeepers Ensure a Sense of Community

A significant principle in community building emphasized by Vogl (2016) is having a boundary, a recognized demarcation between insiders and outsiders. The purpose of a boundary is not to close the community to outsiders but to let members know who belongs to the community and share the same values. Thus, the boundary makes the inside space safe for insiders, which builds more confidence and understanding between members. If the community is open to everyone, the community may not differ much from places that are not communities. Vogl describes this type of situation as an "everything-nothing co-nundrum." Therefore, strong communities tend to have a clear boundary, knowing who is in and who not. (Vogl 2016, 33-35.)

However, it is essential to allow visitors to attend and learn about the community; there should be a so-called exploration zone for visitors, including outer ring activities. Outer ring activities are meant for everyone to participate in, and they give outsiders a chance to assess a community before deciding whether to become an actual community member. In fact, most community activities can be an outer ring, yet it is vital to have some activities that are only available for members, which are referred to as inner ring activities. Inner ring activities can also motivate outsiders to join the community as they are starting to aspire to more exclusive activities. This division of inner and outer ring activities protects the safe space for insiders while letting outsiders get to know the community. (Vogl 2016, 36.)

Moreover, Vogl (2016) states that the boundary is maintained by an authority that could be formal or informal. It must be secured based on community values, not personal preferences. It is also worth pointing out how a boundary can be improperly protected. Firstly, if the boundary is overly inclusive, people who do not share the same values are allowed inside. In this case, members feel unsafe, and they cannot trust that other members share the community's principal values. Consequently, it is challenging or even impossible for members to share their vulnerability and create deep connections with each other. On the other hand, the boundary can be overly exclusive, meaning the like-minded participants are excluded. Therefore, members will start wondering what real community values are and where authority lies. The key to creating a boundary is identifying what unstated values are applied compared to outwardly stated values. When the explicitly stated values are the base of the boundary, and members trust it, they will also appreciate the enforcement of the boundary. Thus, creating a clear boundary requires a company to address

and prioritize explicit and implicit values. (Vogl 2016, 37-39.)

Furthermore, there is a need for gatekeepers that are in charge of helping visitors across the boundary. In other words, they are the people who can provide newcomers with access to the community. (Vogl 2016, 40.) Some examples of gatekeeping mechanisms are introduced by Barzilai-Nahon (2004, 4-5.) Briefly, there are at least the following types of mechanisms that can be applied to online communities:

Censorship mechanisms consist of tools and technology to help to delete, filter, or block content or users. The person in charge of these mechanisms can be, for example, a moderator.

Editorial mechanisms comprise the modification of content and decisions concerning what will be published. (Cf. The editor of the newspapers)

Channeling mechanisms facilitate direct users' attention, including making specific issues more perceivable or apparent for members. This can be done by adding hyperlinks, ranking content, and displaying the issues in a particular space in the community.

Security mechanisms aim to protect the boundaries of a community by managing authentication procedures for users and black/whitelists.

Localization mechanisms adapt content and technology to certain cultural characteristics.

Infrastructure mechanisms control users' behaviour at the infrastructure level, e.g., provide space for groups to do more than just asynchronous correspondence.

Regulation mechanisms create rules of behaviours, training, and guidance on how to act in different situations inside communities.
(Barzilai-Nahon 2004, 4-5.)

2.7.3   The Importance of Subgroups

Online communities also need members who organize and take the **lead** in groups. This need becomes especially relevant as the community grows, and the overload of information may become a problem. In this case, members might not feel such a sense of intimacy with each other, and their needs and interests start to disband. Thus, **subgroups**

are needed to keep the discussions organized and members closer to like-minded people. Without sub-groups, the community can turn to a list of strangers publishing content while everyone receives only marginal attention. Also, it has been noticed that communities without sub-groups usually have a small group of active members. (Millington 2018, 21.)

Also, Jones & Vogl (2020) have pointed out the pros of creating sub-groups. Subgroups increase the members' participation as they offer better attention to the discussion. Besides participation time increases in subgroups, the participants in smaller groups can gather more frequently in real life to strengthen their relationship, which over time leads to a stronger community. Moreover, subgroups are often more convenient places for members to show vulnerability and discuss with more trust. (Jones & Vogl 2020, 101.)

It is worth noting that sub-groups are not recommendable for starting communities as the community's activities can easily be separated into too many places. It is often best to gradually expand the groups. Another challenge is controlling the discussions. When members can create groups, they might do it and notice the maintenance of the group requires too much time and effort and then decide to give up. In this case, the community is left with so-called empty shells, which negatively affects the customer experience. However, organizations can handle this issue by controlling the community, e.g., restricting the number of groups a member can create or give access only to certain members who pass certain criteria. (Millington 2018, 22.)

Vogl (2016) has noted the importance of sub-groups as well; however, he uses the word inner ring. Inner rings are important as people want to be special to someone or several people. Besides, almost everyone aspires to belong to inner rings for varied reasons, such as new ways to participate, authority, or respect. Moving from one ring to another depicts the journey of progression. (Vogl 2016, 87-88.)
Vogl also states that mature and strong communities create various levels of inner rings members can join. Members can obtain certain advantages related to their maturation or formation by belonging to each inner ring. The benefits can comprise, e.g., new access, knowledge, authority, or acknowledgment. It is up to a community to decide what makes an appropriate inner ring and how many members there can be. Also, strong communities provide opportunities to progress in their series of inner rings; however, it is not necessary for each member to pursue inner rings. (Vogl 2016, 89-90.)
At its best, the inner rings should make members grow into having more concern for others, while the concern for themselves reduces. For example, the community visitor may visit the community for just search for noteworthy information and thus may not have concern for anyone else. On the other hand, the community members may already have

found a suitable group that has become important. Thus, it is likely that members have more concern for others in the community. Further, the smaller and more exclusive the ring, the broader the concern for others. (Vogl 2016, 91.)

2.7.4 Harnessing Stories and Rituals

According to Vogl (2016), stories are the most powerful way people learn. When it comes to the community's connections, sharing stories can play a significant part in deepening the connections. Also, sharing stories helps people understand the community's identity and values. There are multiple types of stories that communities can share to help members understand the community better. As stated by Vogl (2016), the most remarkable stories are **the origin stories**, which narrate how something began. The origin stories can be shared in different sections of the community. However, it is essential to have at least a single story about how the founders were inspired to establish the community. In this type of story, it is also vital to mention whom the community serves, why, and how. Moreover, stories are an effective method to talk about the community's values. Value stories should explain the community's identity and how values affect real people.

Strong communities also share **vulnerable stories** as they strengthen the bonds within the community. This type of story could tell, for instance, when the organization had tough times. Vogl (2016) states that the feeling of connection can remain superficial among members and with leadership if stories are not shared. The community should also allow members to share their own stories, as they help them feel seen and understood. (Vogl 2016, 75.)

One of the principles for creating a sense of community, Vogl (2016) has mentioned **rituals** that refer to "any practice that marks a time or event as special or important." Rituals are a way of adding meaning to people's lives. They usually involve a special symbol and are emotionally meaningful. Strong communities create formal and informal rituals. However, rituals have become so typical that people might not always recognize them. To identify a ritual, one can think whether removing the activity would make time feel less important. (Vogl 2016, 49-50.)

Vogl (2016) has recognized three distinct types of rituals:

The rites of passage are the most usual rituals to recognize in a community. The rite is when the community acknowledges that someone advances from one status to another, such as promotion or graduation. The rites often involve celebrations, which make people feel proud, worthy, and connected.

Community display rituals are rituals that expose the community to itself. There must be collective displays of participation and community membership. Therefore, there should be certain activities where members can see each other involved. If the members participated only individually, the community would lack deeper cohesion. Also, the rituals will reveal the scale and strength of the community. These rituals can include, for example, competitions and cooperative community service.

Lastly, there are **play rituals** that enable members to play together. In real life, play rituals can be as common as eating together.
(Vogl 2016, 52-53.)

2.7.5 Reputational Incentives Encourage Education and Support

Irrespective of the community type, there is a need for members who **educate and support** each other in the community. However, members are only willing to advise if their efforts are valued enough. Due to this, the community must encourage members to help each other in several ways. (Millington 2018, 90.)
One method to create a more supportive community environment is to give exclusive rewards to members who contribute to the community by providing high-quality resources. Instead of compensating creators financially, Millington (2018) proposes that a more efficient reward is paid in reputation. The problem with financial rewards is that other members are not ready to pay enough for the creators for their time. Nevertheless, these active members can be recognized as offering them a special spotlight in the community. (Millington 2018, 71.)

Community leaders can easily go wrong with rewards, acknowledgments, and incentives. The key is to understand that each member can be motivated differently. If external rewards are the only reason members decide to participate, the community lacks connectivity and relies on transactions. (Jones & Vogl 2020, 155-156.)

Besides getting members to contribute to the community, it is vital to encourage them to provide valuable resources, which in this context refer to the content. Concerning the value of resources, Millington (2018) has presented three determinants: time, expertise, and passion. The members who possess all these determinants are likely to provide high-quality resources such as blog posts, reviews, tips, and solutions. On the other hand, the members who do not have any of these are only likely to express their opinions. The con-

tent is more valuable the more time, passion, and expertise it requires. When the community provides quality content, the community will become more valuable as the members feel they are learning new things and getting the most out of the content. (Millington 2018, 75.)

The members who support others are needed more as the community grows since the number of questions companies receive tends to increase along with the growth. As many online communities already have their own spaces built only for questions, the challenge is to get members to volunteer and provide free support. One solution is to let only selected people help others by recognizing the most active and helpful members. (Millington 2018, 76-77.)

2.7.6 The Importance of Community Design

There are many practices that online brand communities can foster a faster and appealing way for members to learn. Millington has stated that customer support centres are wasteful as the representatives are receiving the same few questions repeatedly, and usually, most of the customers have already figured them out themselves. Frequently asked questions are widely known and can help, but the FAQ's problem is that only a certain number of questions can fit into an FAQ. Therefore, Millington proposes creating a community database of questions. At its best, the questions are asked in various ways, which makes it more likely and quicker for customers to find solutions. (Millington 2018, 38.)

A remarkable challenge in online brand communities is lurkers, which refer to visitors who explore and seek answers but do not participate in community activities. What makes it a concern for organizations is that these individuals cannot be identified easily. The value lurkers hold for online communities is significant since often there are more lurkers than participants. One method to resolve this problem comes down to the **community's design**. As lurkers are seeking information, they are also learners as well as participants. The key is to think about how to make them better learners by designing the community to optimize their learning experience, therefore increasing the chances to getting them involved. Organizations can think, e.g., how to reduce the time spent on finding the solutions or how to identify the best tips they want to know. (Millington 2018, 38-39.)

Besides solving problems, some communities can focus on sharing new and intriguing information. Hence, members may learn and see something exciting every time they visit the community, which makes the community addictive to its nature. Also, members can be given a chance to vote for the most exciting posts, making the most voted posts move at

the top of the page for everyone else to see first. (Ibidem, 41-42.)

Millington (2018, 47) argues that the members' relationship with the community is defined by what the members see when visiting a community for the first time. The banner, which appears at the top of nearly every online brand community, is the prime opportunity to deliver the most relevant message. It tells what the community is about, who it is for, and what information will be provided for community members. Unlike many brands do, the banner should not be a place for calling out visitors to participate, connect, or share. What members see first is what they will remember, and it is often the reason they will come back, e.g., if they see solutions to problems, they will return when they have a problem they want to solve. (Ibidem, 47.)

In relation to community design, Jones & Vogl (2020) have introduced three principles that can help to design a brand community in digital space. Primarily, online communities should not let visitors feel like outsiders. The visitors need to visit the community on purpose, and they must choose to become members. (Jones & Vogl 2020, 142.)

Some thumb rules to make visitors feel special are as follows:

 1. **Generic welcomes should be avoided**. Instead, the community should welcome members as they want to be recognized; reminding them of the community's shared identity is essential.

2. Before participation, members should acknowledge the **community's culture and norms**. If forums allow immediate participation, the chances are there will be asked the same questions multiple times, which indicates the place is not well monitored. Even though the barriers restrict participation, the appropriate barriers will foster meaningful engagement and connection within the community, which in turn leads to the impression of an authentic community.

3. To create a feeling of trust and safety, community **guidelines** should be made known and used. This is where the moderators come to play. They should practice consistent and public moderation, including also private conversations, e.g., with harassment victims and perpetrators. (Jones & Vogl 2020, 142-143.)

2.7.7 Community Development

According to Millington (2020, 68), the simplest way to improve the community is to utilize the **insights** more efficiently. Even small communities can receive insights as helpful as more prominent communities receive. The objective is to capture the insights while they are new and relevant. (Millington 2018, 54.)

Millington has further explained the importance of insights in his company's blog. Millington has divided the insights into four categories: ideas and opinions, complaints, sentiment, and qualitative data, and behavioural insights. These insights are further divided based on whether they are solicited or not from the company's viewpoint. More value can be gained if the company starts incorporating more than one of these methods. The insights companies ask for are ideas and opinions, and sentiment and qualitative data. **Ideas and opinions** can be collected, e.g., by surveys, polls, and interviews. The members are aware that they are offering their ideas for the company's use. By analysing **sentiment and qualitative data**, which comprises, e.g., the language members use and their reactions, can help in several ways to improve the community. For example, the way consumers speak about a particular feature or product can reveal the weak points the community should work on. The insights that are not asked by the company but are valuable are complaints and behavioural insights. Usually, **complaints** posted in the communities are more impactful than ideas since they tell what members genuinely care about. Complaints also warn about issues arising and let the community managers know to fix the problems. (Millington 2 January 2018.)

Humphrey & al. (2016) have pointed out that handling complaints also received on social media platforms can be turned into successful service recovery and more content customers. Addressing issues also works as a protection for the brand. Handling complaints can be facilitated by having a social team that is encouraged to handle complaints and able to redirect them in a proper way. One way to direct complaints is to establish a separate place for that, for example, on Twitter. Also, when dealing with issues, the brand must be aware of social media's impact, such as word of mouth and the effect of influential consumers. (Humphrey & 106, 63-65.)

The **behavioral insights** such as clicks and conversions are insights members provide without realizing they are giving insights, yet companies are not asking for them either. The figure below helps to grasp each of them. (Millington 2 January 2018.)
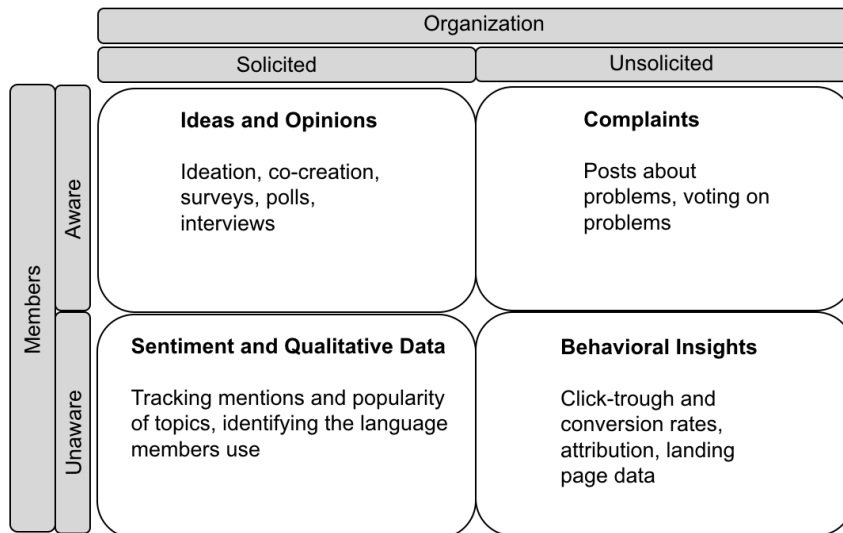
Figure 4. Types of Insights in Online Communities (adapted from Millington 2 January 2018)

One example of generating insights from customers is **value co-creation**, which involves more benefits than solely finding novel solutions. A few successful companies that have harnessed the power of co-creation are LEGO, Starbucks, and DHL. According to Wylie-Harris (2018), co-creation is the future for brands. Co-creation means developing products, services, and campaigns with customers. Furthermore, co-creation can bring members closer to the brand and strengthen the relationship. The approach of co-creation is that customers are not only consumers, yet they are active creators of content to promote the brand. There are many advantages linked to co-creation; it is a way to gain more trust, become more authentic and transparent, create better products and services, and elevate relationships with customers. Despite the great benefits, the co-creation brand survey, executed by Bulbshare in 2018, showed that a remarkable 77 % of consumers felt that brands do not listen to their feedback, opinions, and ideas. (Wylie-Harris 13 March 2018.)

2.7.8 Advocates for Increasing Awareness

Millington (2018) stated that **advocacy** is the most valuable thing a community member can do. The advocacy is about promoting the organization and the community to other members. However, nowadays, few members are being asked to advocate. The company can start with a small group of advocates that can be simply identified based on their actions. For example, the company can select the people who write helpful reviews or talk about them on social media as advocates. The tasks assigned to the advocates need to be thought up meticulously. The key is to think about what has the most significant impact

and give the advocates all the resources necessary to conduct the tasks. The tasks could include, e.g., providing direct referrals or reviews.

It is also essential to reward the advocates immediately; the more unique the rewards are, the better. However, tangible rewards are not the reason members stay active in a community. Millington emphasizes the community aspect concerning advocacy, stating that the sense of community is what keeps members coming back. The sense of community is built over time as it requires members to get to know each other and feel they are a part of something bigger. (Millington 2018, 17.)

Concerning advocacy, Humphrey & al. (2016) have pointed out there can also be informal brand ambassadors that are passionate users volunteering in giving their time and expertise to support the brand. For example, Evernote, a company that provides an application for notetaking, has brand enthusiasts sharing their knowledge of utilizing the app, which leads to better service adoption, user retention, and fosters premium subscriptions. The informal ambassadors are not compensated, but it is essential for a company to recognize them. As an example, Evernote has recognized these experienced users and provided them with a special ambassador community place. (Humphrey & al. 2016, 66-67.)

2.7.9 Summary of Literature Review

Based on the information presented retrieved from secondary data sources in previous chapters, the author concluded the main findings in a simple table chart. A significant finding that was emphasized by several researchers and authors was the importance of creating a powerful sense of community. Otherwise, it is hard to get members to commit to the community. Findings also propose multiple practices to increase community participation, member loyalty, and engagement. As can be noticed, these themes are partly intertwined. During the literature review, the author gained a holistic overview of the topic that will help to proceed to the research part of the study.

Table 2. Main findings from a literature review

Theme	Authors	Findings
Community participation	Liao & al. 2016	Member education, interaction support, and participation feedback enhance community participation.
	Casaló & al. 2008	Trust and affective commitment to the brand have a positive effect on community participation.
	Jones & Vogl 2020	Subgroups increase the members' participation as they offer better attention to the discussion.

Member loyalty	Ha 2018	Providing members with influence and status increases their loyalty
Customer engagement	Islam & Rahman 2017	Information quality and virtual interactivity are the major precursors of customer engagement besides rewards and system quality
Sense of community	Vogl 2016	Having a clear boundary and gatekeepers as well as sharing stories and creating rituals contributes to a stronger sense of community.
	Jones & Vogl 2020	Making community culture and guidelines known fosters meaningful engagement and creates a feeling of trust
	Millington 2018	Subgroups enhance the sense of community
	Vogl 2016	Sharing stories and implementing rituals in communities deepens community connections
Community development	Millington 2018	Utilize several types of insights to improve the community: member feedback, complaints, ideas, sentiment, and qualitative data
Community design	Millington 2018	Optimize the learning experience by providing a community database of questions and quick ways to find solutions Involve members in designing the community, e.g., by giving them a chance to like the content.

3   Research Methods

In this chapter, the author explains and justifies the choice of research methods utilized in study. Each research phase with corresponding research methods will be explained in detail to better internalize the structure of the study.

3.1   Research Design

Research design is a general plan that shows how the research questions will be answered. The research design includes clear objectives stemmed from the research question and it clarifies how the data is collected and analysed. (Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis. 2019, 173.)

The figure below illustrates the research process. In this study, research is divided into two phases, of which both are necessary for successful execution. The author decided to utilize qualitative research methods in the study since the research question requires profound information that cannot be obtained with quantitative research methods. The research begins with a semi-structured theme interview that aims to find answers to investigative questions 1-3. Based on the analysed interview data, the second phase involves practical analysis of similarities between a few successful online brand communities. The case comparison analysis will scrutinize four chosen online brand communities that have managed to stand out and obtain a broad international member base. Hence, the second phase will concentrate on investigative question number 4 with a case study approach. Based on all the data collected and analysed in the study, the author will discuss and provide the conclusion of the results to answer the research question.
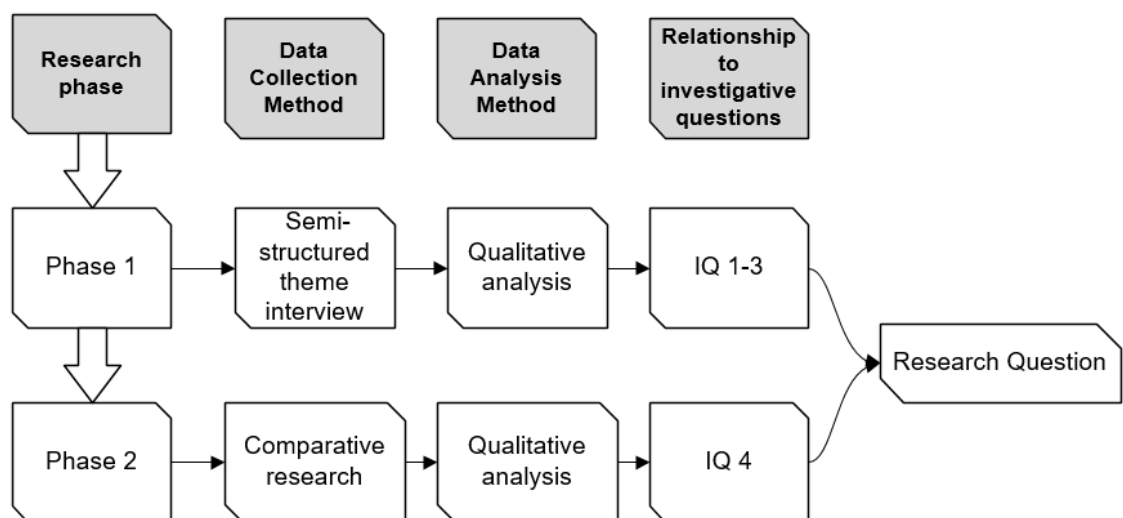
Figure 5. Research Design

RQ: What are the best practices to build an international B2C online brand community?

IQ 1. What are the practices that can help to create a strong sense of community?

IQ 2. In which ways can community participation be increased?

IQ 3. How to ensure the members stay in the community?

IQ 4. What do the thriving online brand communities have in common? Case study approach on four online brand communities.

3.2   Populational Sampling

This study relies on non-probability sampling due to the absence of the sampling frame and the fact that the research objective requires qualitative data that cannot be drawn with probability sampling methods. The choice of a non-probability sampling method in the study is purposive sampling, also known as judgmental sampling. Purposive sampling requires the researcher's judgment to select suitable cases to answer the research question in the most appropriate way. Purposive samples are not statistically representative of the target population. Moreover, the purposive sampling in this study is homogeneous. Homogeneous sampling is used when all the sample members are similar, for example, in terms of their occupation in the organization. (Saunders & al. 2019, 321.)

In this study, potential sample members are business professionals that have experience in managing international B2C online brand communities. Thus, they should share a similar current or prior occupation at the company. The online brand communities must also be similar in the sense that they are meant for individual customers. The population is extremely specific and reaching the right people that fulfil the characteristics is crucial to receive the most reliable insights. The author aims to interview at least three business professionals since involving any fewer interview participants may not generate sufficient data to be analysed.

3.3   Data Collection

As the results of the study will be given from an external point of view, the author has decided to include more than one data collection method to provide more justified results. These methods are qualitative interviews and comparative case study. These methods will be discussed more in detail in the subchapters.

3.3.1 Qualitative Interview

The qualitative data will be gathered through semi-structured theme interviews. Semi-structured interviews begin with a predetermined list of themes and key questions related to these themes. In this case, the themes were created based on the findings from literature review *(existing theory),* which means the data collection is deductive. The author applied investigative questions to be the key questions of each theme. Due to a deductive research approach, the intention of the semi-structured interviews is to test the theoretically deduced themes. All the interviews will therefore follow the same interview framework (appendix 2) to produce reliable and comparable data. (Saunders & al. 2019, 437-438.)

The selected interviewees represent experts in the field of study; thus, they can provide insightful information on community-building practices for each theme. The interviews will be conducted individually and remotely using Zoom, an application designed for video meetings. The length of the interview is expected to be 30 minutes.

3.3.2 Comparative Case Study

The case comparison study seeks to provide answers for the investigative question 4 by discovering what thriving international online brand communities have in common and how they differ from each other. The chosen case online brand communities are all internationally well-known B2C online brand communities that have an active member base. The communities will be compared based on the same variables, after which the results will be discussed.

Comparative case studies examine the similarities, differences and patterns across at least two cases that have a common goal or focus. Comparative case studies are reasonable when experimental study is not possible to conduct and when there is a need to assess different contexts. (UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti 2014)

3.4 Data Analysis

Regarding data collected from interviews, the data analysis method in this study will be thematic analysis. The purpose of thematic analysis is to recognise patterns or themes that appear repeatedly in the data set for further analysis. The recognized themes should

have a clear connection to the research question. The author chose this method as it enables the analysis of large qualitative data sets. Moreover, thematic analysis is a flexible and accessible way to analyse qualitative data as it is not tied to a certain research philosophy and it can be used irrespective of the research approach. The author follows a deductive approach for analysing the qualitative data derived from the interviews. A deductive approach means that the interview themes or questions are generated from the theory. Theoretically-deduced themes are same in each interview to ensure comparability and validity of the results. (In Saunders & al. 2019, 651-652.) In the comparative case study, the analysis method will be qualitative analysis also with deductive approach.

3.5   Reliability and Relevance

When it comes to reliability, the chosen data collection and analysis methods for this research are designed to support one another. First, the author has completed a literature review to gain a better general understanding of the topic before forming investigative questions. In this way, the relevance and connection between the research question and investigative questions have been assured. The reviewed literature of the community-building practices is also from recent years to minimize the risk of obsolete information. As mentioned, the participants for the qualitative interview have been selected carefully with the purposive sampling method to receive as reliable answers as possible.

4 Qualitative Interviews

This chapter entails presenting and analysing data generated from the qualitative interviews of the research. Each theme and the conclusions for them will be given one at a time. The author interviewed three online brand community experts that will be introduced in the next subchapter.

4.1 Introduction of the Interviewees

Table 4. Overview of the interviewees

	Interviewee A	Interviewee B	Interviewee C
Name	*(N/A for confidentiality reasons)*	Ditte Solsø Korsgård	Keir Edmonds
Company	*(N/A for confidentiality reasons)*	Sonos	Native Instruments
Position	Online Community Manager	Community Manager	Senior Social Media & Community Manager
Sector	ICT/Telecoms	Technology	Entertainment
Experience in community management	2,5 years	10 years	+15 years

Interviewee A has worked in their current position since December 2018. They have also been involved with the community before in diverse ways; first, as an internal stakeholder and then briefly as a community/project manager when the community migrated to another platform in 2016. Besides, they have work experience as a community manager of the company's social media.

Interviewee A describes their primary tasks in the current position in the following way: *"My current position is a combination of several tasks, roughly I would say 30-40 % of the time I use with the community and the community management, which is basically developing the community, activating the community, and taking care of the community. I have two colleagues with me, so I am not the only one responsible for the community. In addition to community management, my role consists of developing our other support channels online; meaning our self-service, our support site, and we also do communication that tries to promote the self-service site and our other online channels to customers. So, we are trying to make it easier for people to serve themselves online."*

Interviewee B

Ditte Solsø Korsgård has a decade worth of experiences in online community management. She has worked with two major online brand communities in the technology sector, Tomtom and Sonos, consisting of hundreds of thousands of community members. She started her career with online brand community management in 2011 when she was hired at Tomtom's community team as a community specialist. Also, prior she used to work in a gaming company with tasks related to community moderation. At Tomtom, she was later nominated as a Team Lead, and she has trained community specialists for the brand's German and French communities. In 2017, she joined Sonos as a community manager to oversee the four Sonos communities: English, French, German and Dutch communities. As these communities were quite old, she was hired to bring that community forward to the next century. Solsø Korsgård also mentions that besides work experience in community management, she belongs to many forums for curiosity and interest in brand communities.

Solsø Korsgård describes her tasks in the current position in the following way: *"If I have a team, it is checking in the team to make sure they are all okay and to make sure them as persons are doing fine. I take people management very seriously. And then it is the community as well, as in are we hitting the overall target, the KPIs from day to day, as in if we had set a number of goals are we tracking towards step. Then we have the community itself as in checking in the people if there is anything I need to be aware of, anything I need to bring forward to the rest of the company to marketing, to support people something like that. Oftentimes actually, if there is something to be brought forward, it would be delegated back to the people to handle them effectively. Then it is the data aspect; tracking the data perspective, not so much from the quality perspective but quantity perspective as in are we tracking on our promises and strategies and tactics."*

Interviewee C

Keir Edmonds had started his career with online communities already at the beginning of the 21st century when web 2.0, the social web, started to become a thing. Back then, he was involved in creative communities as an artist and as a hobby, for example, interacting in communities such as Deviant Art and SoundCloud. At the time, he was working in the games industry and doing customer support-related tasks and eventually managing the Championship Manager community, a PC-based football management game. Edmonds stayed in the games industry until he received a position in Native Instruments.

Over the years in community management, Edmonds has experienced many industry changes, which also means that his work tasks have changed quite a lot. In the beginning, a large part of his job was educating people internally in the organisation about the potential priority, and the necessity of community, as communities were relatively new, and people did not understand it. However, that has changed as companies gradually became more aware of online communities and realised it is an important way to communicate with people. Edmonds tells his tasks in the current position include looking after an organisation powered by Native Instruments called Metapop.com, a community of music makers. He runs the community activations there and does a lot of different stuff, such as newsletter marketing, as they have a start-up vibe on that project. Overall, Edmonds has a wide range of tasks, along with strategy work.

4.2   Theme 1: Sense of Community

This subchapter will present data related to the first theme of the interview. The first theme, sense of community, aimed to find answers to the investigative question 1: **"What are the practices that can help to create a strong sense of community?"**

According to Interviewee A, the most significant factor is that there is involvement in the community and that the people are committed to the community both from the company and from the active community members. They also added: *"I think the most important thing is that there are several people within the company that are committed to contributing to the community. It doesn't have to mean that they are all active within the community, but they need to somehow contribute, giving information or whatever that is, but we need to have commitment."*

Solsø Korsgård mentioned that the sense of community does not come from being an active participant from a company's side. However, it is important to be aware of what is going on in the community and overview it. In fact, she adds: *"There has never been a bigger engagement killer than an overactive moderator. So be aware of what is going on and step in when you can make a difference.That is probably my biggest advice for making a good sense of community. You need to know when to step in and when to take a step back because the sense of community does not come from the brand, the community managers or moderators – it comes from participants."*

Edmonds brought up two principal factors, firstly, the user experience aspect: *"Community is about relationships so everything that I do, whether it's, I'm doing some strategy, a deck for the CEO, or whatever it is, I'm speaking to a user in the community. Everything is done*

with the community with user experience. Then, any interaction we have, whether it is like a newsletter or someone is taking part in a competition, or they have got a question on circular people need to come away from that interaction feeling good."

Secondly, the focus in community building should rather be on a small group of people: *"I just concentrate on a small number of very passionate people. I mean, it is kind of a Silicon Valley mantra but and making their experience great. And then I have noticed that when you do that, then it just spreads out. So, rather than trying to get big numbers and speak to as many people as possible, if you try to do that, I find it is not so effective but if you really concentrate on what are the key values of this core group of people that love the community and how can I help them, then it just kind of grows rapidly. It's also a more fun way of working for me because it aligns with my personal values too."*

Sub-question 1.1: What do you think are important practices to make the new members feel like a part of the community right in the beginning?

According to Interviewee A, the community and the platform need to be welcoming and easy. Also, it needs to be easy to register and to type in the first topic or comment. Moreover, the members of the community should have a welcoming attitude and, most preferably, someone from the company should welcome new members.

Solsø Korsgård told most communities that have superuser programs suggest these super users to welcome new members. Most of them do it by themselves simply because they like to do it. However, she prefers that members segment themselves into the people: *"Just because people sign up does not necessarily mean that they want to participate, they may just have done that because your call-to-action sequence, customer journey, have told them to sign up. But a lot of times they are there to get information effectively."* To sum up, the advice Solsø Korsgård gave was not necessarily reaching out to the new members but instead letting them reach out to you first. In that case, if they respond to something and you can see they are new users, you can welcome them.

Edmonds brings up the onboarding experience: *"I think the onboarding experience, so in terms of our site, we have a five-step onboarding experience, which isn't too high of a barrier to entry, but it gives you a flavour of the community, and we try and funnel them to take the first action. And then, I guess I am lucky because the Map community is very constructive, warm, welcoming, and supportive. So, I want to use it in the pool then. It's generally the other community members that look after them."*

Edmonds has also found out that when community members interact in a meaningful way, whether with like or comment; they are ten times more likely to stick around. Thus, it is about finding useful ways to encourage users to have that first meaningful interaction – however, not with spamming them. One way to do that could be, for example, in a music community, getting the members to share an insight into how they make music or share something that may be inspiring or valuable for someone else.

Sub-question 1.2: How do you think the way the community is controlled affects the sense of community?

Interviewee A says that in their online brand community, regular community members can only have limited rights. The community has so-called super users that are trusted members of the community who have some power and control over the community but are still quite limited. The reason for providing only little control for members is that as a sizeable ICT-based company with B2C community they feel that the community needs to control the content and the conversation that goes on in the community. Interviewee A states that if the community was, for example, a B2B community, then the case might be different.

Solsø Korsgård stated that the way the community should be controlled depends on the strategy and so-called backline resources to oversee all the things and features you have. According to her, members can create their own groups if there are guidelines for it. When it comes to moderation, she adds that it can be useful not only as it reduces the tasks and responsibilities of the community team but also allows users to get to know each other. However, she mentioned that people that voluntarily want to be moderators, they should not be allowed to moderate since some people that end up with a lot of control can start thinking they own the place. Instead, it is better to ask a few key users that are doing an excellent job, for example, by welcoming and helping others to do moderation. However, the community team should never tell them to do moderation – there is a big difference.

Edmonds also mentions that people from the community could be asked to moderate or administrate: *"I have always been a big believer of promoting people from within the community to support like a moderator or even admin level. Over the years, I have hired people I have seen in the community who are very generous with their time, really knowledgeable, helpful, very intelligent. So, they end up getting hired, and then I recruit them to work on a hub on a part-time or full-time basis. I would say enabling the community with as much power as possible is generally a good thing. But maybe that could be gamified. Stack Overflow, for instance, I think is a really good example of a gamified community."*

Sub-question 1.3: What do you think about creating subgroups in the community and their impact on the sense of community?

Interviewee A: **"***If they are closed, yes they can because then there might be some groups that are really active, and the rest of the community is not so active, and there is no sense of community in the other groups.***"**

Solsø Korsgård responded that subgroups could have a positive impact on the sense of community but also a detrimental impact when further segmenting the community. For example, suppose the main community is already categorised well enough for specific interest areas. In that case, people are already segmenting those areas. Therefore, creating a distant subgroup may not be a promising idea. She adds that however, subgroups of regions could be an opportunity as they allow people with the same language to talk with each other. Also, the subgroup can be created for specific products so that the people who own the product can speak with each other, but only if there is no category for that product.

Edmonds also says subgroups are doable: *"For instance, on Metapop, we have a groups function, which is kind of like Slack or Discord. It is for different groups – some people like 24-hour challenges, some people like drum and bass, some people like techno – and so they set up their own groups, but they are still a part of the whole community. So, when we are running activations and competitions in the main part of the site, they are still kind of interacting there, but they also have the option to find and connect with people who share similar interests."*

Sub-question 1.4: What kind of community content or activities can deepen the relationships between community members?

Interviewee A favours off-topic conversations: ***"We have some off-topic conversations that help me and other employees to know the community members and make it easier for us to communicate with them when we sort of have a feel of them as in persons."***

In addition, Interviewee A tells their community has had successful cases of different beta tests. For example, they have invited technologically savvy members to test new firm wares. As the members are involved with influential activities, they feel they are an important part of the community, and when they get this sensation, they are active not only in a closed beta group but also within the community. The community has also been introducing gamification to provide members with an opportunity to earn badges and ranks.

When it comes to inspirational content, the community has tried it. However, being in a technical industry has not worked out at this point for them.

Solsø Korsgård told that suitable content depends on the community type; for example, there is not much to give what the members can engage with in the support community. However, she said that open-ended questions are generally good. Another type of content she recommends is news and announcements: *"From a brand perspective, one thing that I know always drives a good amount of engagement is news and announcements around the products and new features, specifically bringing your 360 feedback back to the community and actually going the full mile around like 'Hey guys, we saw you over here asking this particular feature, well here you go, here it is' and that always brings a lot of good engagement."*

Edmonds says the most valuable thing for their community is commenting. For example, the Metapop community's success is due to members helping each other and leaving insightful and constructive comments. Thus, the community should encourage members to produce insightful content. Also, Edmonds tells their community strives to celebrate users' success, which also contributes to the creation of community aspiration. Moreover, user-generated content is essential since people relate to it more and find it more genuine these days than polished marketing materials.

Conclusion of Theme One

All the interviewees agreed that the community members who welcome newcomers contribute positively to the sense of community. Most interviewees preferred community members to welcome the newcomers instead of someone from the brand's community team. The community culture where members are encouraged into a meaningful interaction can also enhance the sense of community. The results stressed the importance of giving members enough space in the community as communities are about relationships. The sense of community comes from participants.

When it comes to community control, the interviews results showed that, in general, allowing members certain control over the community can be useful and strengthen the sense of community. In terms of moderation, the community team can ask critical members who have been active and helpful to do moderation. If the community has super users, they can be provided with exclusive rights in the community, giving them more power than general members. Thus, it creates aspiration to become a superuser. However, allowing members control over the content and conversation may not be the best option in every

type of community.

The subgroups' impact on the sense of community received a supportive response from the interviewees. If the subgroups serve purpose and the community does not already have a related space, they are reasonable and can deepen the members' relationships with each other who have the same interests. However, the community team needs to ensure that the people in the community are not getting overly segmented as it can have a detrimental effect on the sense of community.

Off-topic conversations, brand and industry-related news and announcements, open-ended questions, and user-generated content were considered as favourable content to the sense of community. Involving members in beta testing and celebrating them were brought up as examples of how to make members feel valued and important. Also, gamification was brought up in the interviews as earning badges or providing ranks could make members feel important.

4.3 **Theme 2: Online Community Participation**

The second theme's objective was to gain answers for investigative question 2: **"In which ways can community participation be increased?"**

Solsø Korsgård emphasised asking questions, and providing wrong answers or creating small 'crisis'. She clarifies the latter one in the following way: *"I don't know if you have ever heard about that but if you want the right answer to something you need to get the wrong answer out there first and that's always a good thing. Happy people never discuss how happy they are. However, unhappy people are always willing to share why and how unhappy they are. That specifically goes into brand communities as well. You can give people what they want, what they have asked for years and then they will come back and tell you it's not good enough. So, if you want engagement, a little crisis is always good; there is nothing more community-building than a good crisis!".*
In addition, she mentioned that content-wise relevant news and announcements from the industry are good. Also, letting members be in the community is vital as they know better what they want to talk about. They are the ones who start the conversation and keep it going.

Edmonds considers interacting with customers after their contributions are essential: *"I think there are some basic tactics that you can employ. So, good newsletter marketing*

and a kind of community retention in that way. That also goes back to one of my first points: if someone has interacted on the site, or in a competition that they receive, even if they didn't win, or they submit something, they receive targeted correspondence." It's about acknowledging members' contribution, which can also strengthen the relationship with them.

Edmonds brought up other points such as the functionality of the site and gamification so that people see that they can progress in the community or get a good user experience such as getting valuable feedback when the members interact and when they get notifications.

Sub-question 2.1: What is your opinion about incentives to motivate members to participate, and do you think some incentives are more effective than others? For example, if comparing financial and reputational incentives.

Interviewee A pointed out the importance of ranks and badges: *"We do have ranks which basically means that whenever you are active in the community you can get a new rank, which is a title to your username. When you come to the community your first title will be a 'new discusser', and the more active you are, the higher up your rank is. Then, another one is the badge, meaning that when you are active within a certain field, you will get a badge that says you are an expert within this field."*

Interviewee A sees that reputational incentives work better in their community: *"We don't really use financial incentives. We have a closed group of super users so we might sometimes send them chocolate or some brand stuff but we rarely ever do any other financial incentives, it is just about the reputational. Last year we re-introduced a competition of who was the member of the community that year, and that is something that the member of the community can vote themselves, and I think we will continue that because that is like the highest reputational thing you can achieve in our community."*

Likewise, Solsø Korsgård mentioned they have never actually used financial incentives. She doesn't believe in paying people to do something they enjoy since it becomes work then. She also prefers reputational incentives instead: *"When it comes to incentives, I'm a huge admirer of gamification aspect: awards, ranks and badges, new features, and being allowed to moderate as a reward. I prefer that much more over financial incentives."*

Solsø Korsgård also mentions that a gift for super users in specific cases can work. For example, if you know some of your super users are going for a holiday to a certain place,

you know that a map of that region could be a good gift in Tomtom's case. However, the gift should not be an incentive-based on what the user has done, the gift should be a thank you for being who they are and the impact they have in general on the platform.

Edmonds says that in their community both external and intrinsic motivation is involved. External motivation, such as prizes can be good to a certain extent. However, the real key is intrinsic motivation that develops through experiences, such as competitions or getting help from other users.

Edmonds adds that the successful community needs to meet a user's needs in a fundamental way. In their case, the users' need is to improve their music to get heard, to feel like an artist, and matter. When Edmonds worked in the games industry, he told the users' need was to get an answer and therefore the focus was more on user-to-user support. Moreover, Edmonds thinks that some users get intrinsic rewards from helping others. He adds that these types of members are rare, but they are the best sort of community members.

Sub-question 2.2: Do you think the community should acknowledge certain members? If yes, in which way?

Besides providing ranks and badges, Interviewee A mentions that they react to members' answers and mark the best answer to acknowledge members: *"We tend to give the community time to answer questions. This is for us the way how we try to activate the community so that we employees don't go there and answer the questions first. We let the community members answer, and if the community member goes and answers and if the answer is right, we like their answers, and we try to support that this is a good answer. In our community, we also have three different types of content: regular discussions, questions and ideas. Whenever there are a question and an answer, we mark the best answer, and that is also another way to promote the community members because everyone can then see that this community member has given the right answer."*

Another way to recognise members that Solsø Korsgård mentioned is to interview top users, for example, how did they discover the company or what was their first product from the company. This way is to offer special recognition and put emphasis on these participants. However, there can be people who are not happy about being even more visible as if they already have higher visibility in the community with the amount of content and posts they have out there.

Edmonds tells members should be acknowledged in any good community, and he favours gamification from the recognition aspect as well: *"The example of a metaphor would be we have Metapop mentors who are sometimes professionals but more often not. They are people selected from the community who are extremely active, knowledgeable and generous. And so, they get a little badge. Basically said, they have helped set the tone of the community because people see like 'Oh, this is someone who has been promoted' and they are behaving in a certain way, which is being helpful, active, supportive, and generous with their knowledge. I fully believe that kind of stratified gamification of the community is a great way to go. […] Stack Overflow, for instance, I think their model of gamification or that kind of structure is really good where you can become an expert. It is definitely something I would like to see more of."*

Sub-question 2.3: How can the community design foster better community participation?"

According to Interviewee A, they think the main factor is usability. In other words, the community needs to be easy to use, but it also needs to encourage people to participate. Also, new content and related content should be readily available.

Solsø Korsgård told that communities should stop being about landing pages and front pages of things. Instead, the communities should pay more attention to where people land when they do a Google search since a vast majority of people looking for something start with Google search. She also added: *"I think rather than designing like the most spectacular front page, start with where people actually see the content and where they experience the content which is deeper into the topics and pages. That design can then be completely redone in a way that makes more sense to the end-users for what they are looking for. Rather than having a thread listing, you could also have a search at the top of that thread rather than at the top of your landing page, for example."*

Edmonds said he would see curating and highlighting user activity where possible as it creates the aspiration. Secondly, he suggested surfacing some of the best activities that are most useful for other members of the community, which again helps form the culture of the community. As an example, Edmonds mentions Adobe's community called Behance that uses a lot of inspiring curated content. In terms of community design, it is about giving members those features and functions that will empower them and help them connect as then it will be natural the members will stay in the community, and it will help the community grow.

Conclusion of Theme Two

The second theme received partly similar answers to the first theme, as there are practices that can affect both the sense of community and online community participation. For example, content such as news and announcements as well as letting members discuss by themselves were mentioned as practices to boost community participation.

Regarding incentives, all the interviewees preferred reputational (intangible) incentives over financial (tangible) incentives. When the motivation to participate in community activities comes from an individual's intrinsic values or concerns, the community will more likely build long-term relationships with the members. However, there are a few cases where tangible incentives could work, for instance, when giving a gift for super users on special occasions. However, the focus should be on intangible incentives instead and of creating community aspiration so that the members want to be a part of the community. Intangible incentives were discussed in the context of gamification, which the interviewees think is a significant feature in online brand communities. While gamification makes the user experience more pleasant, it also empowers members and provides them with an opportunity to progress and pursue new member status, badges, scores, and other goals. The community can even recognise members in other ways, such as with ranks, awards, competitions and interviewing the key users of their experiences in the community or with the brand, for instance. Also, the community team can support the members who help others in the community by liking their comments, and if there is a question that another member has correctly answered the community team can mark them as the best answer.

The community itself should be easy to use, it should encourage people to participate, and it should have new and related content easily available. Curating and highlighting user activity where possible will create community aspiration. Also, the community should provide members with features and functions that empower them and help them connect. The communities should also concentrate on the content of the pages where people land via internet search and not only focus on the front page and how it looks like for members. Relevant and tailored landing pages will make more sense to the customers.

4.4   Theme 3: Online Community Development

The last theme aimed to answer the third investigative question: **"How can the community retain members in the community?"**

According to Interviewee A, they are in the progress of trying to invite people to the community more, which can be done via email. For example, if the member has asked a question in the community the company can send out an email and encourage the members to come and check if the question has been answered. Also, they keep all email notifications under continuous review to improve them and make them more welcoming and inviting.

Both online brand communities Solsø Korsgård has run, the priority has been to ensure that the people that enter the community will also get the information they need at that moment. Regarding how to retain the community members, she considers it hard to get rid of them: *"Well, I find them really hard to get rid of! Not that I want to get rid of them but oftentimes, depending on the size of the community team, it can be hard to run really massive communities and the more users you gain, the more responsibilities there is to make sure that those people are having a good time as well. I think, from my perspective, it is not actually hard to keep them because they found you in the first place usually through Google search somehow and if they see what they like – and again that responsibility is onto you; are you creating a good atmosphere, do you have engaging content – then they will stay."*
Moreover, she said that most members who land on the community would leave after they got the information they searched. Hence, the aim should never be to keep all customers engaged in the community. Rather, she recommended that the community team should aim at answering 80 % of the customers' questions and if some customers decided to stay in the community, it is great.

According to Edmonds, the answer to this question goes back to the relationship point that users need to feel valued. On the other hand, he thinks that there should be regular touchpoints, whether it is via newsletter directly or within the community. Also, there must be the functionality to contact people, meaning once they have had an interaction, there is a follow-up, so they feel valued. Edmonds also emphasises that community culture is hugely important as it is a major factor that leads to retaining members in the community. He also mentions that moderations are especially important for forums because if a forum is not well moderated, it goes downhill quite fast. As an example of a well-moderated community, Edmonds mentions Gearslutz, which is an old-style music community, but it is solid because of its moderation and the members there have been built up over an extended period thus the culture is strong as well.

Sub-question 3.1: What kind of data can or should be collected to develop the community?

Interviewee A: *"Data about which content is most interesting for the community, both which pages and topics get most visits but also in the sense of activity like which topics do gather most comments. Then, of course, basic web analytics is very important – which pages are the most popular ones, which pages are the ones that people come from Google, if they come from Google do they exit immediately, and so on."*

Similarly, from a traffic perspective, Solsø Korsgård would collect data of what people are looking for, how do they land on the community page and do they find what they are looking for – if they do not find what they are looking for, a good start would be to create that content, so they know what to look for. She also emphasised the importance of making promises that are not necessarily public ones, for example, to yourself, the community team and community strategy. Also, listening to community members if they have suggestions is essential as they will always know more about a brand's products than the community team does because they use them in a separate way, they do not only test the products, they use them more often. If customers have requested product features, the community team should at least consider them.

Edmonds thinks there should be collected as little data as possible from a user's perspective since these days people are less interested in signing up to products or things that mine their data. Edmonds links this to the belief that a successful community can be a bit more cultural or with softer values at heart rather than actual user data. However, he points out the behavioural data, for example, through Google Analytics is important to see behavioural trends, not necessarily on an individual basis about users but on a group level.

Sub-question 3.2: Do you think value co-creation could be useful in an online brand community?

Interviewee A says that value co-creation is something they are doing; as mentioned before, they have beta tests that usually require some designing or giving out opinions about layouts and other things. Interviewee A adds that value co-creation is both an important but also something that is not suitable for everything: *"The people that come to our community they are usually really tech-savvy so they are not maybe always the best people to tell how some service should be designed because they are a quite niched group of people, but in technical things, they are almost irreplaceable."*

According to Solsø Korsgård, ideation as a practice has a great idea behind it, but it can involve some issues as well: *"Theoretically, it's awesome. Absolutely, everyone should do it from a customer-centric perspective and giving your customers what they want and need. But the problem with ideation is that I have considered it many times and discarded it many times since it is unbelievably hard if not completely impossible to effectively manage people's expectations when it comes to stuff like that."*

Another problem also Solsø Korsgård mentions related to ideation in product development is that the product management team might not agree with the ideas that customers have for the new product. Thus, there will be an issue if the company has promised customers that, for example, the most voted design will be in the next launch and product management team will not do it. In addition, she mentions the purpose aspect: *"If you are just setting it up to give your customers something to do or to draw traffic, you are doing it wrong, and it is not customer-centric anymore, and it becomes a click-through-rate situation. And then it is your marketing department running everything. And that is just not cool to your customers."*

Instead of using ideation, Solsø Korsgård suggests read everything on the community and take notes if customers mention that they want certain changes to the products. In this way, the community team can make an internal report and consider the changes without making any external promises to customers. Also, when asking customers' opinions, it is good to give certain options since when asking an easy question, the outcome is also easily manageable. Usually, customers will still talk about all the other aspects of the product they would like to include in it, and therefore these comments are really valuable.

Edmonds says that ideation is especially important for Native Instruments and Metapop. He actually does ideation on a smaller level daily: *"[…] We have this groups feature. It is a bit like Slack or Discord. I go in, I speak to the users, and I say what do you think about this, and then they give me their feedback. Then I can learn so much from what their opinions are and, obviously, they are also the core user group, so their needs are super important. It also saves me lots of work and thinking because they give me their ideas."*

Edmonds tells that on Native Instruments, they have a history of developing products with the community involved, for example, large scale monitoring of what the community is saying. They have test groups with many very dedicated users who are feeding back and in contact with the development team, thus helping with the development process with testing and telling ideas. In the future, they will focus on looking into ways to maximise the

ideation so that they will give the community a much bigger say in terms of giving feedback on what the members want to see coming up.

Sub-question 3.3: Based on your observation, what are the ongoing trends in community development and how do you think communities will evolve in the upcoming years?

Interviewee A said that in the beginning, when the community started, the product managers wanted to know what the customers feel and what their opinions are. To this day, they have come a long way and tested out several diverse ways and strategies. Considering the future of online brand communities, Interviewee A mentions: *"I feel that an open and honest discussion between the company and the users is the way communities are going to. I think that what customers nowadays want is the possibility to discuss with the people that actually make the decisions."*

Solsø Korsgård told she loves social media involvement in community. From a brand's perspective, it will provide a lot of data that will help segment people in the community. Also, it will be easier to involve the community in the CRM system and get data through. However, in a broader picture, she thinks it is improbable that online brand communities will start to change anytime soon given that communities have existed in its written form since 1970s and usually when something new comes along it gets discarded practically immediately, and we go back to basics.

Edmonds thinks there is a trend away from so-called open social media to more specialised communities that have a slightly higher barrier to entry. Edmonds believes people are getting a bit fatigued with companies that just take people's data, and then it ends up being advertising first. There will be more subscription-based, longer-term communities.

Conclusion of Theme Three

Several points were discussed during the interviews concerning how to retain members within the community. One of the main factors comes down to meeting the users' needs, for example, by being able to provide the content and resources the members want to see. To meet the needs, the community should be aware of the discussions on the community and listen to the members and their ideas. Secondly, members need to feel valued in the community. Therefore, the community should have regular touchpoints when interacting with customers. Especially when the member has had an interaction in the community, it is vital to notice it and make them feel valued. It is on the community's responsibility to ensure that the content and atmosphere in the community serve their members. The

key is not to focus on engaging all members in the community since that is not likely to happen but to aim to meet the promises made publicly to members and privately within the community team.

Besides fulfilling member's needs and paying attention to their opinions and ideas, there is some data that the community can utilise to better serve their members. When it comes to content and community pages, the community team should identify the most interesting content for the members and what they are looking for in the community. For this, the interviewees mentioned that the community team could look at which pages are most popular and get the most visits, and which topics get most comments. On the other hand, data regarding how people land on the community page and do they find what they are looking for is also considered useful. During the interviews, it was also raised that a successful community can be more cultural, and thus collecting as little user data as possible would be preferable.

As a conclusion to value co-creation, also known as ideation, it might work out for some online brand communities and be an essential and effective way to involve members and bring them closer to the product development. However, ideation requires careful consideration on whether it suits the brand's offerings and the community's purpose.

The trends related to online brand communities received different answers from the respondents. The trends mentioned included a communication aspect in which a more open and honest discussion between the company and users will take place. Secondly, it was expected that the involvement of social media in the community might increase. Lastly, it was mentioned that there can be seen a shift to creating more specialised communities with a higher barrier of entry, thus embracing long-term and deep relationships with the brand.

4.4   Summary

The data collected from the interviews supported multiple findings from the literature review, such as the benefits of having subgroups, providing reputational incentives and rewards, and giving the members an opportunity to progress within the community. Related to incentives and member progression, the interviewees emphasised the importance of involving gamification in the online brand community. Not any of the findings from the literature review were neglected, but some were not discussed, for example, sharing stories, involving community rituals, and having advocates. Given this, only the practices that were discussed and supported by the interviewees will be considered reliable to include in

the next research phase.

Thus, based on the data analysis, the author concluded a list of factors that will be covered and analysed in the case comparison study:

- General overview
- Usability
- Welcoming
- Content, features, activities
- Forums and groups
- Gamification, member progression
- Member recognition
- Ideation

Considering the scope of the thesis, the author has excluded some aspects in the case comparison study that would require deeper analysis and testing. These aspects include comparing the user experience in various interactions in the communities and delving into the content analysis of internal communication, user behaviour, and external communication materials such as newsletters.

5   Comparing International Online Brand Communities

This chapter involves a comparative analysis of four thriving online brand communities. It is worth noting that the comparison was carried out from a regular, new member's viewpoint. This chapter aims to bring up the differences and similarities between the case companies' online brand communities, identify their major features, and analyze why they have chosen specific tactics.

5.1   Overview of the Case Companies

In this study, the businesses under comparison are Spotify, Sephora, and Fitbit. The author found it necessary to involve communities from different industries, as the research objective does not specify the community-building practices for a certain industry. For the same reason, the case communities differ by their size as well. All these communities represent website-based B2C-communities, which means that their community members are individual consumers. The chosen case communities are all ranked in the top 10 list of the best B2C online brand communities in 2020 by FeverBee, a global online community consulting firm. (FeverBee 2020).

Table 5. Overview of case companies

	Spotify	Sephora	Fitbit
Member count	7,3 M	4,7 M	1 M
Sector	Entertainment	Retail & Lifestyle	Health & Sports
Main product /service	Music	Make-up	Smartwatches

5.2   Spotify

Usability

The author's first impression of the community page is modern and simplistic. The community is not full of information, photos, or other material, which makes it easy for members to find what they are looking for in the community. Also, the search tool facilitates exploring the community quickly. Below the search tool, there is numerical data about the community size, the number of solutions provided and members online. When new members enter the community, they can get a clear picture of all the features as they have been emphasised on the main page.
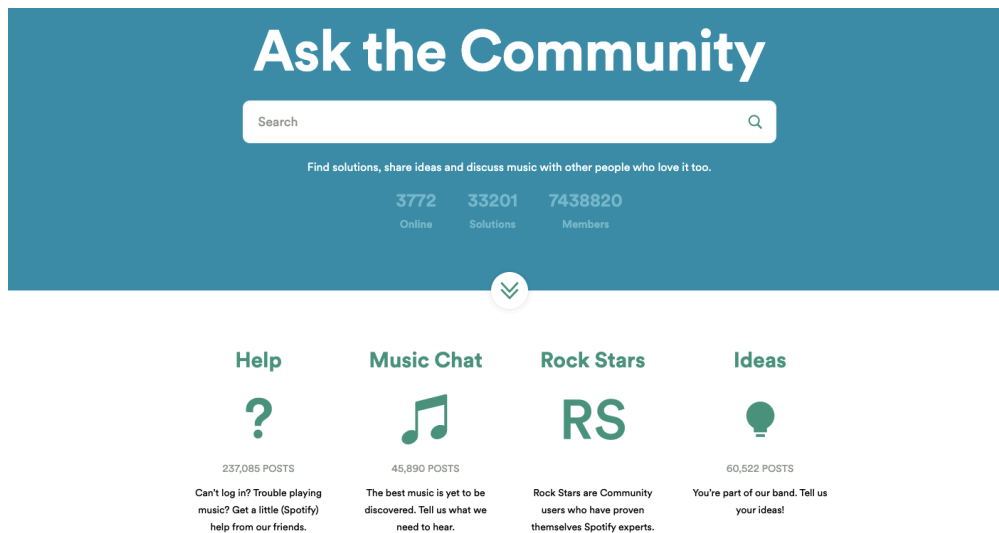
Figure 6. Spotify Online Community View.

Content and activities

Spotify's online brand community comprises four main pages: help forum, music chat, Rock Star community, and idea forum. The most active forum is the help forum with over 200 000 posts, following by the idea forum with 60 000 posts and music chat with 45 000 posts. Other central content is community blogs that are promoted on the front page. The blog posts include song and album recommendations, employee introductions, and reviews about members' ideas.

The help forum is divided into smaller categories that specify what the issue is. The music forum is for general discussions about music, sharing own playlists, and participating in challenges and forum games initiated by members. Even though the community include a help forum, Spotify also has a Twitter account @AskRockStars that offers users tips and help with questions. Thus, the support is expanded over one platform.

Apparently, there are no subgroups in Spotify's music chat, for example, forums for specific music genres or languages. However, the help forum is divided into discussions for different user groups such as families, students, and developers. There is also the Rock Star community which is a closed community for super users, but due to its closed nature, it will not be covered in this study.

Gamification and member recognition

When it comes to gamification and member progression, Spotify has their super user program where they regularly seek experienced users, Rock Stars, to help others in community forums and on Twitter. The users need to apply and meet specific criteria to be accepted in the Rock Star community. The requirements are based on user activity and prior contributions to assisting others in the forums. Once a member is taken in the Rock Star community, they will begin to earn points by helping others. These points can be exchanged for rewards such as Spotify Premium, shirts, stickers, and headphones. It also seems that Rock Star members are allowed to write posts on the community blog. Rock Star members are recognised in the community by the Rock Star mark preceding their username.

There are also moderators that are identified by a Spotify mark on their username. Seemingly, moderators can write blogs and news, answer questions in forums, and update the community guidelines.

Apart from the reward points and a special mark on the username, other members can earn different badges by participating in community activities. The badges are rewarded based on the number of likes in the posts, the number of replies received, and solutions provided, and log-in activity. Rock Stars and moderators can also be rewarded for the same contributions as well as for the contributions related to writing blog posts, for instance. All members are recognised with a title on their profile, which tells what kind of member they are. For example, there are titles such as a visitor, regular, casual listener, music fan and community legend.
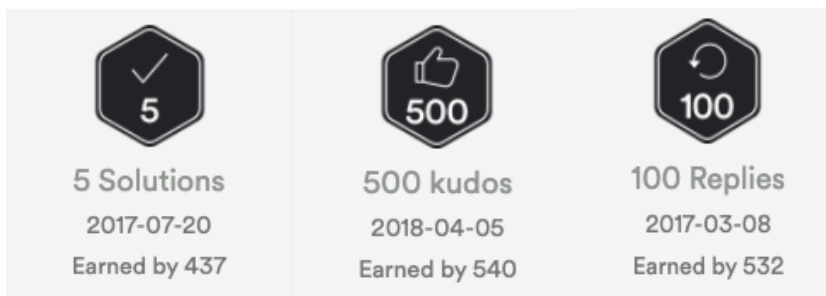

Figure 7. Examples of Spotify Community Badges

There are at least two ways of how Spotify acknowledges certain members: top contributors and top ideas. The members who contribute to the community most will be displayed on the list of the top 6 contributors in Spotify Answers. Also, the ideas submitted on the idea forum that have gained most likes from others will make it on the display of top ideas at the top of the idea page.
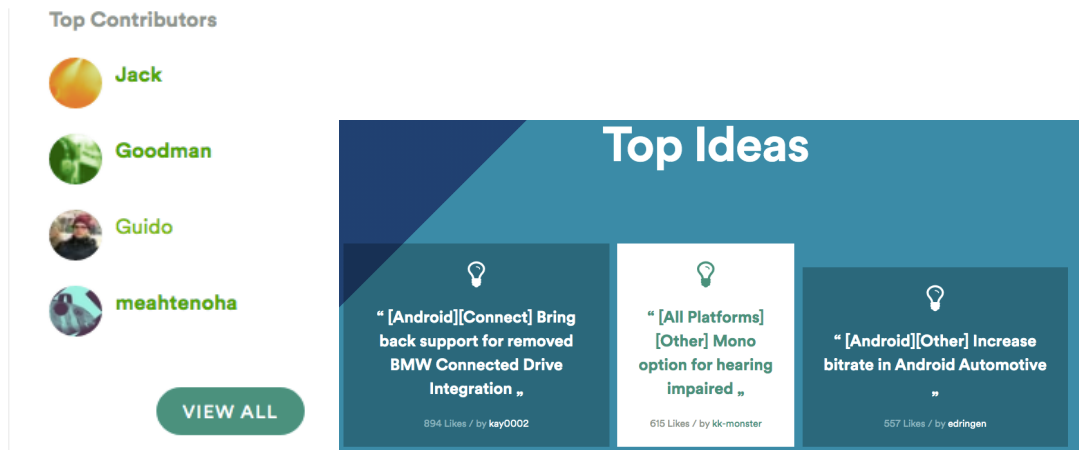
Figure 8. Recognition of Top Contributors and Ideas.

Ideation

In Spotify's idea forum, members can submit their ideas regarding new features or fixes to the music service. Spotify's community team will make monthly ideas reviews to highlight those idea submissions of which status has changed. The community team can mark the status as implemented, good idea, case closed, or not.

Besides an idea forum, some members can also sign up to join beta-testers, a group of members who will help create the best products with Spotify. The testers are divided into Alpha and Beta testers. The main difference between the groups is that Alpha testers will be introduced to new app versions earlier and they will help find issues on them. Beta testers will test the version a week before it is introduced to all users. Both testers are guided to use the app as they normally would and report any issues they find.

5.3   Sephora

Usability

The front page of Sephora's online brand community also has a search tool and the data showing the number of members and total posts in the community. However, the community design differs significantly from Spotify's community design in the sense that Sephora's community page is more filled with content. However, all content on the main page seems relevant and interesting to members and the community has a clear structure, so the page does not come off confusing. The front page displays trending groups, featured user photos, and trending and recent forum threads.

Figure 9. Sephora Online Community View.

In addition, on the main page newcomers are provided with essential information that helps them get started on. There are community guidelines, frequently asked questions, and simple guide including relevant and insightful threads about functionalities and features. There is also a specific page for members to introduce themselves and connect. Besides written sources, Sephora also familiarises and guides new members with a few videos.

Content and activities

Sephora's online community consists of three main pages: community home, groups, and gallery. Community home is the main page, where members can oversee the community (Figure 9). The community does not have one main forum for general discussion, yet it consists of 35 groups based on unifying factors between members' such as shared interests, values, and other variables. Therefore, members can find many groups they can relate to and connect with others. Each group involves at least 1000 members, and the largest groups have over 100 000 members joined. Joining the groups is free and straightforward, and there are no restrictions on how many groups a member can belong to.
The gallery is the place where members can publish photos or videos, usually of themselves wearing Sephora's products. The posts also include the chance to tag the products used. A gallery is also a place for members to get inspired.
There is no community blog or news page within the community, but the administrators can highlight certain announcements and posts to be featured in 'Trending now' section. These can include winner announcements and monthly product reviews.

Monthly Favorites: December 2020 Edition!

Posted 12-23-2020 09:13 | Updated 9 hours ago

AlexBT (ADMIN) (ROUGE)

We made it, BIC! We're at the end of 2020. We've already asked you your favorite products of the whole year (hellooooo basket-b ...read more

Figure 10. Sephora Trending Now Thread

Gamification and member recognition

Member progression is also gamified in Sephora's online brand community. Sephora recognises three types of membership in its rewards program: Insider, VIB, and Rouge. After signing up, the member automatically becomes an insider. In order to pursue a VIB or Rouge memberships, there are minimum annual spends the members must achieve. In other words, the member must buy from Sephora for a certain price in a year to qualify for another status. For VIB the limit is 350 US dollars, and for Rouge, it is 1000 US dollars. Nevertheless, every member can earn Beauty Insider points that can be exchanged for rewards. (Sephora 24 April 2020.)

Besides the rewards program relied on annual spends, Sephora also recognises members based on how active and helpful they are in the community. The members can receive labels such as rookie, rising star and boss. In addition, Sephora constantly acknowledges some members in featured photos on the gallery and the main community page as seen in figure 9. The members that have tagged Sephora on their Instagram photo have chances of appearing in the community's featured photos section.

Ideation

Currently, there is no ideation feature in Sephora's community.

5.4   Fitbit

Usability

Fitbit's community also has the search tool on the community page through which the user can search either content or fellow users. The member and post count is shown at the

bottom of the page. The page design is user-friendly as the features are easily available, and the forums are divided into smaller categories.
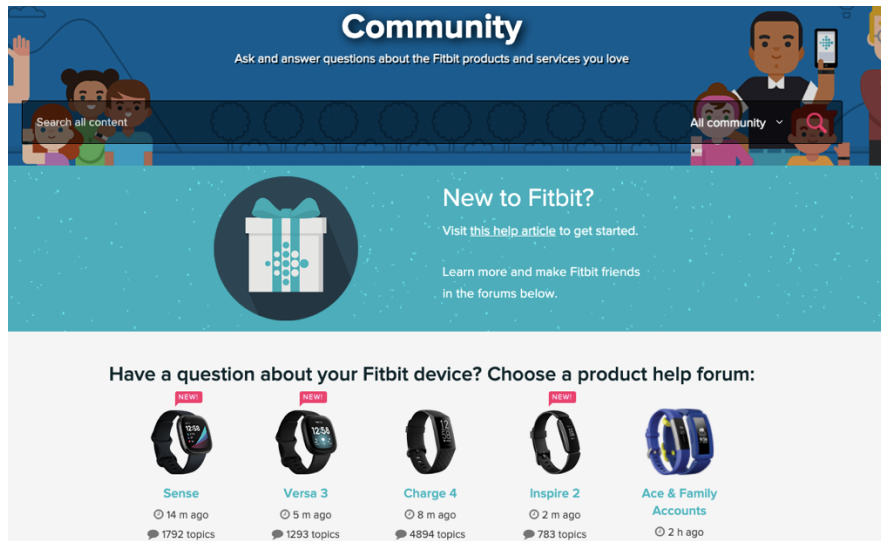

Figure 11. Fitbit Online Community View

On the main page, new members are provided with guidance that help them get started. Similar to Sephora's community, there are FAQs, community basics, and space for members to introduce themselves. Also, there is a help article to guide members with technical issues related to product sync

Content and activities

Fitbit's community consists of several forums: product-based help forums, forums for distinctive features and suggestions, forums for different platform users (iOS, Android, Windows), health and wellness-related forums, and forums for developers. The forums don't have significant differences when considering the activeness and number of posts. Various forums concentrate on discussions related to using the products. Thus, the author considers the focus in the community is to ask questions and provide solutions for users' problems and therefore improve the experience with Fitbit products. The product help forum is also highlighted at the top of the main page with a distinctive display compared to other forums.

Figure 12. Fitbit Community Blog

Gamification and member recognition

Concerning community rankings, Fitbit provides ranks that are titles on the member profile that describe their involvement with the community. The more the member spends time on the community pages, the higher the rank will go. The rank names are also sport related; new members are walkers until they become runners, followed by racers and eventually VIPs. Fitbit has two different top member lists on the front page: top answer authors and most helpful authors. These lists on the front-page display members who have overall ranked at the top in both categories. However, each forum shows a similar list of helpful authors that have been recognised as the most helpful members in only that specific forum. Therefore, the top lists can be seen on nearly every page in the community. Unlike the top lists recognise members' activity within the community, Fitbit also acknowledges members by rewarding badges for being physically active with their Fitbit device. (FitbitCommunity 15 March 2016.)

Fitbit also has a Community Council, which is similar to Spotify's Rock Star Community. Council members are dedicated members that assist others and provide instructive posts in the community. There is also an application that the members must submit in order to be considered as a part of the council. Council members are expected to educate others about products, assist with technical issues, welcome new members, and help moderators by flagging posts that require more attention. Council members will receive benefits for their contribution to the community, including access to private forums and beta test products, premium membership, special permissions in community forums, and a community council signature on the profile. The council members that have performed well in their role may also receive sample products.

Ideation

Fitbit has its own forum for members to submit their ideas for feature suggestions or comment on other members' suggestions. Before submitting ideas or comments, the members are guided by the related community policies.

5.5   Discussion on the Findings

As a result of the comparison, the author found a few similarities between the case communities. In terms of usability, every case community has a well-structured community design, as all the features are easily available, and new members can quickly learn the main functions in the communities. Also, the communities have search tools, data sorting filters, and tags to help find the information the members are searching for. The communities also let non-members familiarise with the community as they can explore and read the discussions on the forums. However, to leave own comments or posts, the member must sign up first.

All communities provide tips and guides for new members to get started in community as well as they encourage experienced members to welcome newcomers. Overall, the communities have an encouraging and supporting atmosphere. The community rules are also introduced in forums to make sure the discussions stay appropriate and in order. Also, super users, admins and moderators are present in all communities to help with difficult questions and bring up updated information. The author noticed through empirical observation that the moderators and administrators do not participate in every discussion, mainly when it is necessary. Thus, the interaction between members is on the focus in all communities.

Almost all the case communities offer members various forums they can attend while making sure there are not too many subgroups. The members have multiple opportunities to find likeminded people in the communities. Besides forums, the communities provide members with regular brand-related information, tips, and news within the community, one way or another, such as community blog or featured forum threads. There are several common functionalities that members have, such as liking, bookmarking, reporting, and subscribing posts.

Gamification is also present in each case community. The communities enable members to achieve badges from their contributions and activities as well as ranks and labels to

their profile. Besides the motivation to participate for pure willingness, the members will benefit from participation, which further improves the user experience as members feel they are valued in the community. Gamification will also encourage members to post resourceful and instructive comments and posts, thus strengthening the quality of user-to-user support. Another essential finding was that all communities acknowledge members and celebrate them. The most common recognition practices were top member lists on the main community page and forums and featured user-generated content, such as photos in Sephora and playlists in Spotify.

Two-thirds of the communities have ideation activity involved on the community page. As Spotify and Fitbit's ideation concerns technological product and application features, it might not be relevant for Sephora to practice ideation regarding actual physical non-technological products such as make-up and skincare products. Even though Sephora has its own brand line products, it mainly focuses on selling products from other brands. Thus, it appears that communities in the technology sector are able to practice reasonable crowdsourcing and involve members in an activity where they feel influential.

Additional similarities that the author found include the member profiles that have information about the membership status, statistics on community participation, and functionality to follow or add other members as friends or send private messages.

Table 6. Comparison of Case Online Brand Communities.

	Spotify	Sephora	Fitbit
Usability	Search bar and sorting tools, useful links	Search bar, sorting and filtering tools, tags.	Search bar and filtering tools, important links
Welcoming	Community guide	Member introduction forum, community guide, FAQ,	Member introduction forum, community guide, FAQ
Content/Activities	Forum games and challenges, community blogs, ideas	Featured forum threads, user photo gallery, product reviews, contests	Forum games and challenges, and challenges, events, community blogs
Forums	Help forum, music chat, idea forum, superuser forum	35 forum groups based on members' similarities and mutual interests	Help forums, health and well-being forum, developer forums, feature suggestions
Gamification and member recognition	Badges, ranks, points, leaderboards, featured playlists, best ideas	Ranks, labels, points, leaderboards, featured photos	Badges, ranks, leaderboards
Ideation	Idea forum	No	Feature suggestions

6 Discussion

This chapter concludes the study by presenting the main research outcomes, evaluating the overall research process, and explaining what limitations were associated with the study, hence proposing suggestions for future research. Lastly, the author observes and analyses the learning experience of writing the thesis about this topic.

6.1 Key Findings

As a result of the study, there were found multiple useful practices adopted in international B2C online brand communities that were frequently brought up in the literature review, interviews, and case comparison study. Primarily, the outcomes emphasised the importance of embracing customer-centric viewpoint in online community management. The community team needs to carefully listen to members' opinions and suggestions, give them enough space to interact with each other, and create an overall community culture that inspires members to meaningfully participate in the community activities. While allowing the own time and space to members, the community team should still be aware of what is occurring within the community.

In terms of user experience, usability and curation play an essential role in community design. The community needs to be straightforward and members bust be given functionalities that help them participate easily. Members must be able to effortlessly navigate within the community while being given the desired content easily available. Search tools, data sorting filter, a clear general outlook, and relevant and exciting content on the community page are examples of concrete practices to improve user experience.

Common practice in B2C online brand communities is to welcome new members to the community, which can be done by fellow members or someone from the community team. It is vital for new members to feel welcomed and to receive all essential information and guidance in terms of participating in the community. The community in best case should create culture where old members or superusers are encouraged to welcome and assist new comers.

Concerning community control, it can be beneficial to the sense of community to give members some influence over the community. In terms of moderation, the community team may ask experienced members to do moderation. Also, if the community has super users, some exclusive rights can be extended to them, granting them more control than general members. It also creates aspiration to become a superuser.

One of the most discussed finding was the benefits related to gamification. The communities can introduce gamification to enable members a chance for member progression. In gamification, the members are given an opportunity to progress in the community and pursue reputational incentives such as badges, points and ranks based on the activeness and helpfulness. Gamification does not only motivate members to participate but also it contributes to the overall user experience positively when members provide resourceful and meaningful content for everyone's use.

The community may also practice tangible incentives in special occasions, for instance, by sending a meaningful gift to superusers. However, a sustainable and authentic community should not rely only on tangible incentives since from customer's perspective, the most essential motive to participate is intrinsic which develops through user experience. Thus, the concentration should rather be on providing reputational or other intangible incentives.

Community members' contributions also need to be acknowledged by privately communicating or publicly in the form of gamification practices such as leaderboards. Regular touchpoints and communicating with members after they have interacted in community is important for the sense of community and it

The involvement of ideation can be valuable if it serves a specific purpose and is not only built up to drive more traffic. Ideation permits members to have an impact on the future of the brand and therefore makes them feel more important. However, the company must ensure that the promises will be kept to members and the product development team is well-informed about the actions. Alternative form of involving members in influential activity, such as product development, is allowing a group of members in beta-testing. Also, the community can directly ask questions about preferable new product or service with limited choices.

Additional notes that community teams should take into consideration is to provide non-members an exploration zone so they know what to expect from joining the community. Also, the goal is not to engage all members but rather the community should make private promises on how to deliver the best user experience to members. Lastly, it was discussed that when developing the community based on data, the focus should be on discovering trends that apply to a group of people than collecting individual user data.

The future of online brand communities is difficult to foresee but the study involved professionals' aspects of the communication to become more open and honest between company and users, the communities to become more specialised with a higher entry barrier, and the social media to become more utilized in communities.

6.2 Research Evaluation

The thesis was conducted mainly according to the original research plan. Regarding writing time, the author set a goal to finish the thesis in three months. The thesis plan was accepted in October 2020, and the finished thesis was ready in January 2021.

The main challenge during the writing process was time management. The time reserved for covering theories and presenting literature review was underestimated. The author wanted to cover enough different online community-building practices before forming investigative questions and structuring interview framework. Thus, the author started contacting potential interviewees later than what was planned. Luckily, all the interviewees were available to participate in the interviews on short notice. Minor challenges regarding demarcation and research methods were discussed with the thesis advisor and academic advisor.

When it comes to results, the author considers that the research question is answered with sufficient reliability. Majority of the utilised sources are from the last five years, and the author searched for books that are written by community specialists. Thus, the interviews and case comparison study involved justified aspects.

6.3 Suggestions for Further Research

There are a few limitations associated with this study that should be taken into consideration. Firstly, the study did not make suggestions of online brand community practices for specific industries. This study involved demarcations regarding community type and access, but the study did not exclude any industries. This given, to further research the topic, the data in all research phases could be collected and analysed based on a particular industry. Secondly, as this research focused on discovering the best practices from the community professionals' viewpoint, the further research could include community members' aspect. For example, there could be interviews tailored for members who belong to certain type of communities.

6.4 Reflection on Learning

Thesis writing was a diverse learning experience to the author from multiple perspectives. Considering the topic, the author gained a comprehensive view of today's online brand

communities and their impact on customer relationship. The author learned to identify several types of online brand communities and community-building practices and realised the importance of customer-centric aspect in online community management. The knowledge shared by online brand community experts was especially insightful and gave the author a more practical grasp of the work behind managing large international online brand communities.

The author also improved analytical thinking and research skills during the study. The author learned to better retrieve and collect relevant data, compare it and analyse it. The author also got the first touch to planning and conducting semi-structured interviews. As the research did not involve a commissioning company, the author learned to work independently and critically look at all the components involved in the research.

Moreover, the study developed project and time management skills. The thesis was conducted in a shorter time what was allowed, and therefore, the author learned to prioritise the most important tasks and create a suitable working schedule. The study also taught to adapt to unexpected changes in the plan.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Overlay Matrix

Investigative question	Theoretical Framework	Research Methods	Results (chapter)
IQ 1. What are the practices that can help to create a strong sense of community?	Welcoming, community control, sub-groups, content, gamification	Semi-structured theme interview	4.2
IQ 2. In which ways can community participation be enhanced?	Content, gamification, member progression, usability, features, member recognition	Semi-structured theme interview	4.3
IQ 3. How to ensure the members stay in the community?	Ideation, user experience, curation, community development	Semi-structured theme interview	4.4
IQ 4. What do thriving online brand communities have in common? Case study approach on four online brand communities.	Usability, welcoming, content, activities, forums, groups, gamification, member recognition, ideation	Comparative analysis of four case communities	5.5

Appendix 2. Semi-structured Interview Framework

Thematic Category	Questions	Sub-questions
Background	Could you tell me about your experiences of working with online brand communities?	What type of online brand communities have you worked with?
		Which industries/sectors have you worked in?
		What have been your main tasks in your current position?
1. Sense of community	1 What are the practices that can help create a strong sense of community? **(IQ 1)**	1.1 What do you think are important practices to make the new members feel as a part of the community right in the beginning?
		1.2 How do you think the way the community is controlled affects the sense of community? E.g., should members have some control over the community?
		1.3 What do you think about creating sub-groups in the community and its impact on the sense of community?
		1.4 What kind of community content or activities can deepen the relationships between community members?
2. Online Community Participation	2 In which ways can community participation be increased? **(IQ 2)**	2.1 What is your opinion about incentives to motivate members to participate? Are some incentives more effective than others? (e.g., financial vs. reputational incentives)
		2.2 Do you think the community should acknowledge certain members? If yes, in which way?
		2.3. How can the community design foster better community participation?
3. Online Community Development	3 How to ensure the members stay in the community? **(IQ 3)**	3.1 What kind of data should be collected to develop the online brand community?
		3.2 Do you think value co-creation could be useful in an online brand community?
		3.3 Based on your observation, what are the ongoing trends in online brand community development, and how do you think online brand communities will evolve in the upcoming years?

Thesis Schedule						Fall 2020 – Weeks						
X = Checkpoint	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51
Phase 1 - Desktop research	■	■	X				■	■	X			
Theories & models	■	■	■									
Literature findings	■	■	■				■	■	■			
Phase 2 - Case company comparisons			■	■	■	X						
Company introductions			■	■								
Comparative table/chart				■	■							
Analysis					■	■						
Phase 3 - Qualitative interviews			■	■	■	■	■	■	X			
Interview structuring and planning			■	■	■							
Feedback discussion with specialisation teacher				■	■							
Finalising the interview questions				■	■							
Contacting potential interviewees			■	■								
Data collection						■	■	■				
Interview 1						■	■					
Interview 2						■	■					
Interview 3							■	■				
Data analysis							■	■	■			
Phase 4 - Finalization									■	■	■	X
Discussion with specialisation teacher/thesis advisor									■	■		
Final conclusions and discussion									■	■		
Academic Writing										■		
Vocabulary										■		
Grammar check										■		
References										■		
Maturity test											■	
Publishing thesis												■