

How social media brand community development impacts consumer engagement and value formation; perspectives from the cosmetics industry.

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How social media brand community development impacts consumer engagement and value formation; perspectives from the cosmetics industry.

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Declaration

No portion of this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university.

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Abstract

Social media and social media brand communities (SMBCs) are powerful tools for long-term consumer-brand relationship building. As a result, SMBCs are becoming significant marketing channels. Despite the wide use and adoption of SMBCs, further research is called for, as both practitioners and academics lack an understanding of the processes taking place within SMBCs. This study aims to contribute to knowledge of: (1) consumer engagement, (2) value formation in SMBCs, and (3) establishing the relationship between consumer engagement and value formation within the SMBC environment. This thesis adopts netnography, a method commonly employed to explore online communities in the social media environment.

Three cosmetics brands were selected for this study. The selection was driven by geographical location, posting frequency and user activity. Data were retrospectively collected from Facebook SMBCs between 1st December 2019 and 31st January 2020. The data analysis employed thematic analysis techniques and was further guided by netnographic procedural steps, encompassing 25 distinct data operations. In total, 87 conversation threads were examined, which included 6,401 consumer comments.

The findings present a typology of brand posts consisting of five overarching themes: presentation of offerings, belongingness building, engagement building, value-led, and educational. The research also identified a consumer comment typology consisting of four overarching themes brand-centred communication, cognitive-centred communication, conversation-centred communication, and personal experience-centred communication. Additionally, the thesis explores value formation processes within SMBCs, and the value types formed through consumer-to-consumer value formation interaction, brand-to-consumer value formation interaction, consumer-to-brand value formation interaction, as well as individual value formation processes, i.e., customer independent value formation and brand independent value facilitation.

Through the findings, thesis broadens knowledge of the implication of SMBC development on consumer engagement. Additionally, this study extends the scope of value formation beyond service marketing, providing valuable insights into how value is created and perceived in the context of SMBCs. This research is also of significance for practice as it offers guidance and insight into how different brand posts can facilitate SMBC development, and, in turn, consumer engagement and value formation.

The research provides a link between SMBC development and consumer engagement, highlighting the

importance of SMBCs in the successful facilitation of consumer engagement. In particular, it provides evidence that the development of an SMBC has a significant impact on consumer engagement. The typology of brand posts that this study generates highlights the link between the types of posts published by the brand and SMBC development. In addition, the typology of consumer posts also suggests that there is a link between the types of comments published by consumers and the degree of SMBC development. As a result, the findings indicate significant growth in the variety of topics discussed within more developed SMBCs alongside a shift within the topics discussed. The study also investigates value formation within SMBCs, thereby enhancing the understanding of how SMBCs can facilitate value formation. By doing so, this research successfully extends the value formation lens predominantly applied in service marketing. In particular, the findings highlight the role of different actors in enabling the formation of different value types. Furthermore, the research emphasises the value of SMBCs as knowledge repositories as important virtual spaces for both brands and consumers. The findings facilitate understanding of the importance of SMBCs in value formation processes, contributing to advancing knowledge of the role of SMBCs in the development of consumer engagement and value formation.

The thesis presents a contextualised conceptual framework of value formation within SMBCs, that captures different interactions taking place in the SMBC environment but also draws attention to the different value types generated through interaction between different actors. Finally, the thesis offers a conceptual framework of SMBCs, consumer engagement and value formation, which captures the correlation between the three researched concepts.

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The Glossary

B2C – brand-to-consumer

CE – consumer engagement

CDL – customer-dominant logic

CHV – conversational human voice

CoP – community of practice

C2B – consumer-to-brand

C2C – consumer-to-consumer

OBC – online brand community

SDL – service-dominant logic

SL – service logic

SMBC – social media brand community

VBC – virtual brand community

VBCEP – virtual brand community engagement practice

Valence – pleasantness or unpleasantness of an object, situation, or emotion

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Conference Papers

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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research. It begins with a discussion of the background of this study and provides a sense of why it is crucial to continue investigating the area of SMBCs, consumer engagement and value creation. In addition, it offers a brief overview of the state of knowledge of the research area. Following that, an overview of the cosmetics sector is presented, with a particular focus on social media and SMBCs. Then, the chapter justifies the research and provides the rationale for the conducted study. Research questions, aims and objectives are then presented. Thereafter, the research methodology and research contribution are discussed. The chapter concludes with an outline of the thesis and a chapter summary.

1.2 Background to the study

Social media has been gaining popularity for several years (Riley, 2020). The development and ultimate rise in social media usage stems from the increase in popularity of the internet in the 1990s. Initially, the world wide web was used for information-seeking or transactional exchanges. However, it quickly developed into a more complex and multidimensional environment used for a variety of purposes (Kozinets, 2020). The phenomenon of social media might originate from its ability to gather like-minded people who can form groups to discuss specific interests (Habibi et al., 2014b). Social media is a complex environment that

facilitates the flow of communications and relationships not merely across regions, nations, and societies, but across different nodal connections and sub-systems of capital, flowing in the form of both social and informational exchange that, together, form ecosystems of great complexity that have major impacts upon the systems in which they are embedded (Kozinets, 2020:67).

This intricate nature of social media and its multidimensionality is a challenge for researchers, who continue to call for further research within this domain (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2020). The recent pandemic intensified social media use (Nazir, 2020), but even pre-Covid, social media was widely used (Riley, 2020). Social media come in various formats, allowing users to share videos and podcasts, and write blogs or network. The appeal for consumers is the ability to be an active participant in conversations (Brodie et al., 2013). There are several motivations for people to join social networking sites, for example, the need to self-present, self-express or increase self-esteem (Habibi et al., 2014b). Companies have also adopted social media use as a tool to enable communication and build relationships with consumers, following them on social platforms, which

can be defined as web-based technology that enables sharing and interaction of users (IGI Global, no date). SMBCs were found to be particularly useful by brands as an effective outlet for creating and sharing content and values (Habibi et al., 2014b). As social media is proven to be a powerful channel for long-term brand building (WARC, 2022b) and a valuable promotion tool, enabling strong commercial results (WARC, 2020b), it continuously attracts the interest of companies. As a result, it has become a significant marketing channel (WARC, 2022b). It is estimated that the total spend on social media advertising in 2020 reached \$96bn; the market share rose from 14.3% (2019) to 17.1% (WARC, 2021). Despite the wide use and adoption of social media within marketing strategies, social media is yet to realise its full potential (WARC, 2022b). Social networking sites also require further research as the development of a deeper understanding of social media (Habibi et al., 2014b; Li et al., 2023), brand communities (Hollebeek et al., 2017), consumer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2020) and value creation (Holmqvist et al., 2020) is called for.

SMBCs emerge as important arenas through which consumers engage with brands (Brodie et al., 2013; Lima et al., 2019). With an increasing number of social media users, SMBCs are a powerful tool that has potential to help marketers build relationships with potential and current customers. Also, the notion of engagement within SMBC gains interest among practitioners as well as the academic environment. This is reflected in the Marketing Science Institute's research priorities, as consumer engagement has been enlisted as a research priority since the mid- 2000s (MSI, 2018), brand and customer value, on the other hand, were enrolled in the 2020–2022 research priorities by the Marketing Science Institute (MSI, 2020).

1.3 Cosmetics sector overview

It has been reported that the global beauty industry was worth \$532 billion in 2019. Growth projections suggest an annual growth rate of between 5% and 7%, leading to a sector value of \$800 billion by 2025 (Danziger, 2019). In the UK, the beauty industry is valued at £27bn, therefore it is the seventh-biggest cosmetics market in the world (Hulme, 2021). Interestingly, research suggests that the beauty sector is resistant to economic crises, pointing to a phenomenon called the 'lipstick effect', which observes how consumers still purchase luxury cosmetics items, even during a recession, although such purchases are more focused on smaller items, such as lipstick (Katabchi, no date). For instance, the cosmetics industry did not experience a significant drop in sales during the 2009 global recession (Cvetkovska, 2021). Similarly, in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the beauty and personal care sector was proclaimed as resilient, as it outperformed expectations, with the entire sector recording just a 3% decline in sales and reaching \$487.4 billion. The sector was expected to rebound in 2021, with a growth of 3% (Villena, 2021).

The cosmetics sector has five big competitors who agglomerate several cosmetic brands. Among them are Johnson & Johnson Inc, Unilever Group and Procter & Gamble Co. As there are fairly low entry barriers in the sector, the major players in the beauty industry are continually being threatened by smaller, insurgent companies, with the ability to locate and exploit the gaps in the market, as well as by local brands that are more responsive to new trends. Smaller businesses can react faster to changing trends, as they are not overwhelmed by bureaucracy (WARC, 2020a). As a consequence, the combined market share of the top five beauty and personal care companies dropped from 35% to 32% between 2013 and 2018 (WARC, 2020a). The growth of the insurgent companies is partially facilitated by the skilful use of social media that acts as a marketing tool as well as a method of communication for consumers and brands, and the ability to produce strategies well-suited to their customers (WARC, 2020a). Passport (WARC, 2020a) suggests that insurgent cosmetic brands share similar values with their customers and that they are purpose-driven and consumer-centric. They also rely on a community of advocates and social media as a prime method of communication (WARC, 2020a).

In the UK, the total value of the consumption of beauty products and services reached £27.2 billion in 2018 (Economics, 2019). The majority of this was generated through the purchase of care and maintenance products, such as dental products, hair removal, nail care (£10.4 billion) and personal enhancement products (£8 billion) (Economics, 2019). In 2018 the beauty industry made £14.2 billion in direct gross value-added contributions to UK GDP, therefore this sector was the third-biggest contributor to UK GDP (Economics, 2019). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and recurring lockdowns, the sector saw a 6.2% year-on-year drop, however, it started recovering rather quickly with sales picking up in 2021 and is expected to continue to climb in 2022 and 2023 (Figure 1) (Euromonitor International, 2021).

Sales of Beauty and Personal Care
Retail Value RSP - GBP million - Current - 2007-2026

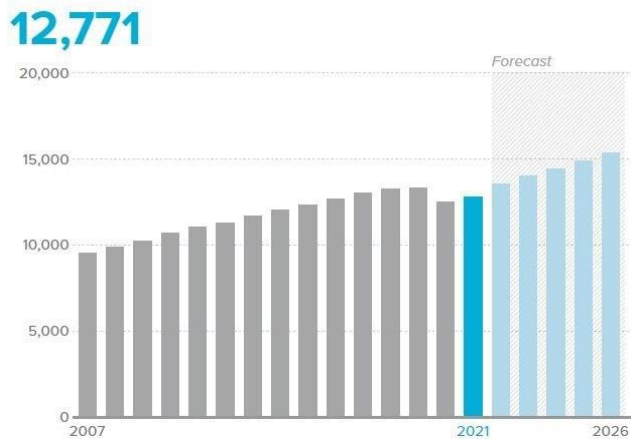


Figure 1 Sales of beauty and personal care in UK (Country Report, 2021)

Interestingly, not all categories saw a fall during the Covid-19 pandemic. While coloured cosmetics and fragrances saw a sharp fall in sales, the bath and shower category including soaps, handcare, bath additives and face masks saw an unprecedented rise (Figure 2).

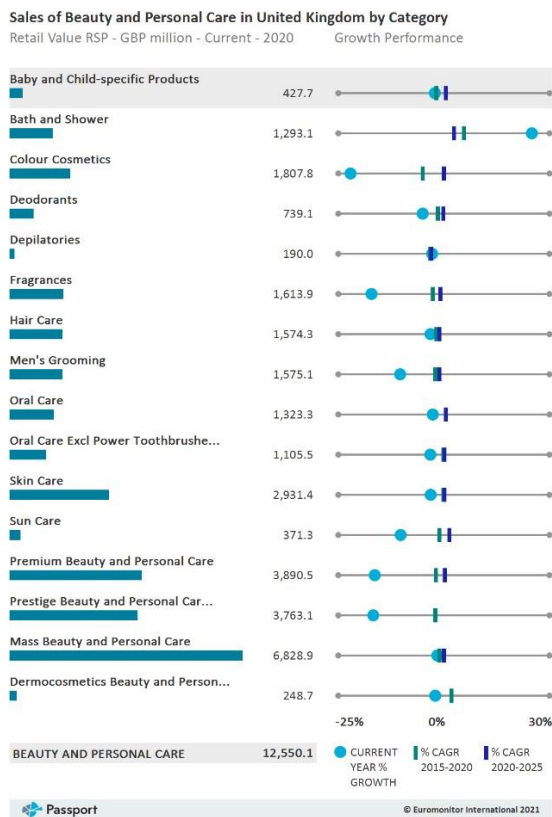


Figure 2 Sales of beauty and personal care in UK by category (Country Report, 2021)

Several factors have contributed to the rapid growth of the cosmetic industry. The increase in sales has been linked to the growing attention of people to physical well-being, by millennials in particular, together with the rise of social media and the ability to convey messages through a visual medium (Ketabchi, no date). Presently, social media plays a vital role in the cosmetics industry, with consumers acknowledging social networking sites as places where trends are set (Cvetkovska, 2021). Brands that have invested in social media strategies, especially those working to develop successful social media communities, have achieved an increase in visibility and reach, while also maintaining credibility (WARC, 2020a).

Social media is a marketing channel identified to shape the cosmetics sector and indicate the direction of brand development. Consequently, an increasing level of social media use in promoting the brand and sales can be observed. In particular, image-driven social media plays an important role in brand promotion within the cosmetics industry (Ketabchi, no date). Also, social commerce is becoming more prominent; e-commerce combined with social networking sites evolve into social commerce that allows the creation of a more immersive shopping experience for consumers (Chiu, 2019).

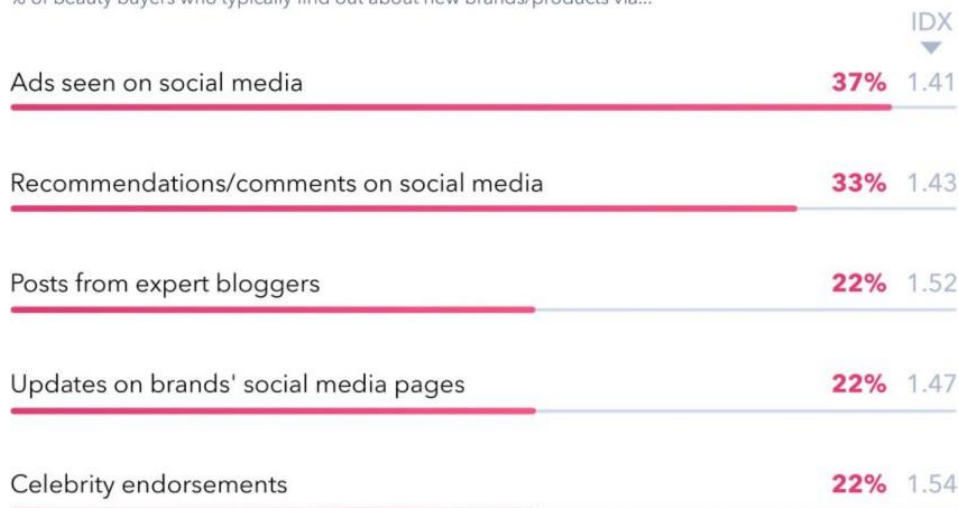
Another strong trend is the increasing use of influencers, understood as individuals who accumulate a large following on social media, and whose attitudes they influence (Hanlon, 2022). It has been pointed out that the influencer-brand relationship should be two-way, where brands not only supply information for influencers to share, but also engage in meaningful conversation with them (WARC, 2019). The value of influencers is perceived as significantly higher than an average consumer as they can drive a conversion within social media channels. Recently, the importance of micro-influencers is rising as their impact is increasing (WARC, 2019), especially since many companies are introducing marketing strategies that include micro-influencers, sometimes in 'squads' (groups of lesser-known micro-influencers, for example, beauty enthusiasts) (WARC, 2020a). Interestingly, influencers are not only important to a brand in spreading messages regarding products, but they also support the identification of new make-up and beauty trends, thereby assisting brand innovation.

1.4 Social media marketing in the cosmetics sector

Before the digital era, beauty conversations were carried out through beauty magazines (Hulme, 2021). Those conversations have moved to online environments and have gained another dimension: interactivity. Social media is a particularly important channel for brands in the cosmetics sector. As figure 3 below indicates, almost 40% of consumers discover beauty products through social media advertising. Furthermore, consumers value the opinions and recommendations of others, with 33% of responders indicating recommendations and comments on social media are the driving force behind their discovery of new products. A further 22% of responders indicated deriving knowledge of new offerings from bloggers or celebrity endorsements. The importance of others' opinions among consumers looking to purchase products in the cosmetics sector is above average; 45% of consumers claim to research reviews before purchase and almost one in two state they are motivated to purchase based on reviews of other consumers (Valentine, 2019).

Brand Discovery Channels

% of beauty buyers who typically find out about new brands/products via...



Note: Indexes are versus the global average **Question:** How do you typically find out about new brands and products? **Source:** GlobalWebIndex Q1 2019 **Base:** 40,327 internet users aged 16-64 who have purchased beauty products or make-up/cosmetics in the last month

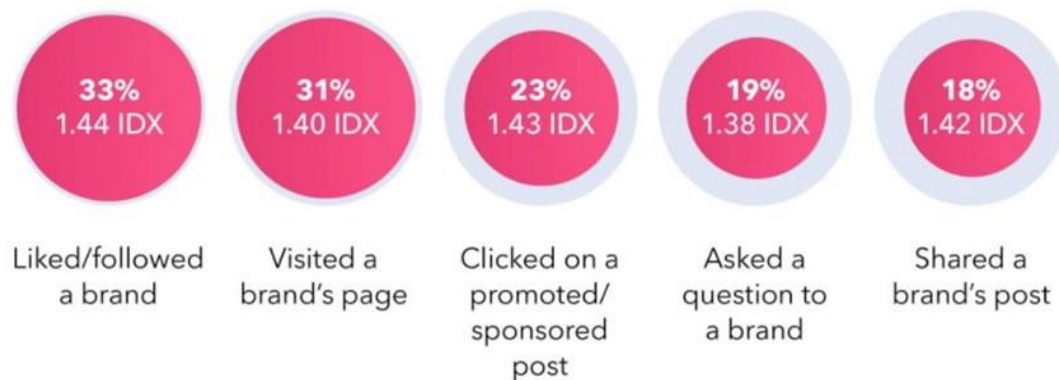
Figure 3 Brand discovery channels (source: Valentine, 2019)

Social media also provides a unique opportunity for cosmetic brands to shape and create trends (Valentine, 2019), as well as to enable them to form a two-way conversations with consumers (Habibi et al., 2014b). Consumers in the cosmetics sector utilise the opportunity given by social media to connect with the brands. This is evident in this sector's above-average user engagement with the

brands (Valentine, 2019). As Figure 4 indicates, in this sector almost a fifth of consumers actively engage with the brand by asking questions.

Brand Interactions on Social Media

% of beauty buyers who did the following on social media last month



Note: Indexes are versus the global average **Question:** Which of the following actions have you done online in the past month? **Source:** GlobalWebIndex Q1 2019 **Base:** 40,327 internet users aged 16-64 who have purchased beauty products or make-up/cosmetics in the last month

Figure 4 Brand interactions on social media (source: Valentine, 2019)

The benefits of social media are evident when looking at brands such as Glossier and Fenty Beauty. These brands have introduced the use of a social media strategy at an early development stage, using the platforms to build a strong and loyal following (Hulme, 2021).

Despite TikTok's surge in use due to Covid-19 (Hulme, 2021), Facebook remains the strong player in the context of social media use within the cosmetics market (Clapp, 2021). Facebook has a large user base, reaching 1.8 billion daily users through bespoke targeting abilities (WARC, 2022a). Furthermore, Facebook is a social media platform that has the most users across every demographic; users also spend more time using this platform than any other social networking site (Price, 2016).

1.5 SMBC in the cosmetics sector

Social media can be utilised to reach various objectives. Nevertheless, to achieve them, the brand must engage with its followers. One way to achieve this is through building a community around the brand. In 2020 the growth of brand-owned communities reached 166% (Lebeau, 2021). Despite the challenge of effectively engaging community members, 64% of marketers planned to invest in SMBCs in 2022 (Rodrigue, 2022). Glossier is a primary example of how SMBCs can work in the brand's

favour. The brand grew from a beauty blog into a \$1.2 billion company (Deceuninck, 2020). As illustrated in Figure 5, at Glossier, the brand community (consisting of a loyal fanbase) is used for product co-creation, and the user-generated content is brought forward as powerful social proof, beauty tips and product tutorials. The brand community members are also used in Glossier’s advertising campaigns, which further strengthens the consumer- brand relationship (Deceuninck, 2020).

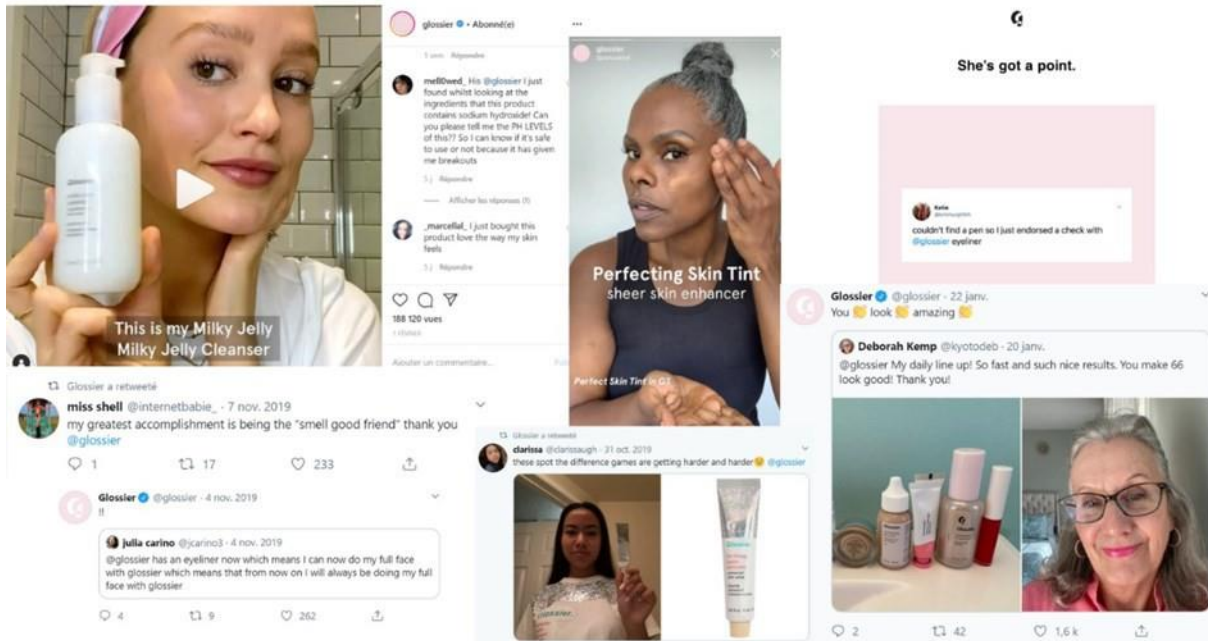


Figure 5 Examples of how Glossier uses social media to talk to their customers (source: Deceuninck, 2020)

Another SMBC winner within the cosmetic industry is The Ordinary. As illustrated in Figure 6, the company has heavily invested in educating its consumers and providing knowledge about products and cosmetics in general (Deceuninck, 2021). The Ordinary has also encouraged its consumers to publish content related to the brand’s products. The brand is actively engaging with its consumers through various channels and groups that consumers come to rely on for advice, skincare routines and product reviews (Deceuninck, 2021).

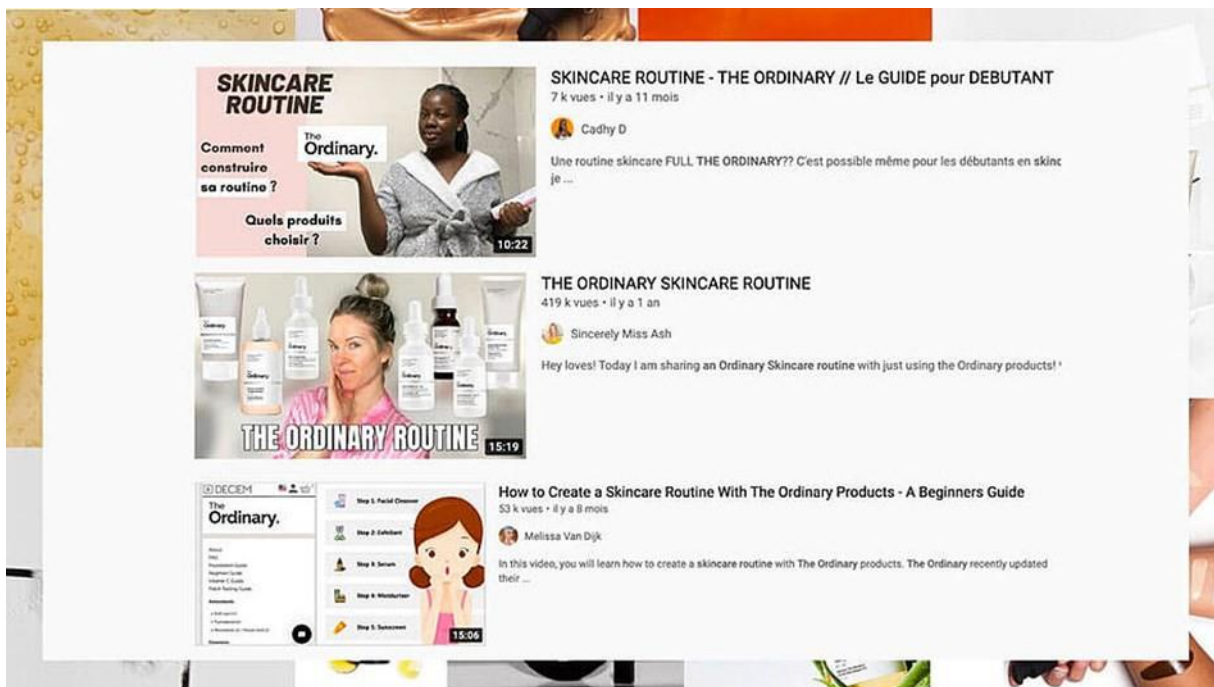


Figure 6 Example of how The Ordinary uses social media to educate their customers (source: Deceuninck, 2021)

1.6 Justification for the research

Social media has been widely adopted by companies; it has become the most popular lead media for advertising within the cosmetics and toiletries sector (WARC, 2019). Despite attracting an increase in spending on advertising, social media is still an area requiring further research as both practitioners and scholars are lacking an understanding of the mechanics of social media (Deng et al., 2020; Habibi et al., 2014b; Kaur et al., 2016; Rather, 2019). This complex environment continuously develops and changes, therefore, it requires constant assessment and (re-)investigation (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Priharsari et al., 2020). Among the areas identified for further research are *consumer engagement* (Brodie et al., 2013) identified as a multidimensional, context-dependent construct (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek, 2011), and *value formation* (Holmqvist et al., 2020), understood as autonomous value emergence through use, physical or mental experience (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). These two important notions help to understand how brands can build a long-lasting relationship with the consumer and realise where consumer value lies, as well as how a brand can benefit from interaction with consumers. The unique characteristics of social media and SMBCs (Habibi et al., 2014b) enhance the role of consumers and promote them to be equal interlocutors to the brand (Riley, 2020). As social media helps to achieve long and short-term goals (WARC, 2022b) and given consumer engagement improves brand loyalty and satisfaction (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018) it is important to understand how to facilitate said engagement.

The UK beauty industry is valued at £27bn, it is the third-largest operating market in the UK, and the seventh-largest cosmetics market in the world. Furthermore, it has been identified as the fastest-growing category in retail (Hulme, 2021). The cosmetics sector in particular benefits from a strong social media presence as beauty buyers regularly engage with brands through social media (Valentine, 2019). Brands that adopted social networking platforms early have built strong and loyal consumer bases (Hulme, 2021). Social media is also a great platform for delivering creative narratives and initiating trends (Valentine, 2019).

1.7 Research questions, aims and objectives

This study aims to contribute to knowledge surrounding the role SMBCs play with reference to: (1) consumer engagement, and (2) value formation. The research also aims to (3) explore the relationship between consumer engagement and value formation within the SMBC environment.

This thesis has been guided by the above aims; however, a set of research questions were deployed to help steer through the research path.

1. What role does the stage of SMBC development play in consumer engagement and value formation?
2. What content do consumers engage with the most?
3. How do consumers interact within SMBCs?
4. How is value created within SMBCs?
5. What value types are formed within SMBCs?
6. How do the value types differentiate across different actors within SMBCs?
7. Is there a relation between consumer engagement and value formation?

The aim of this thesis is achieved through the execution of a number of objectives:

1. To review the previous research on cosmetics SMBCs, in particular, related to value formation and consumer engagement.
2. As a preliminary study to the main research phase, to develop a list of cosmetics-based social media communities and their characteristics (social media channels used; the number of followers; posting frequency; the number of shares, likes and comments on posts published

by brands). The preliminary study aims to identify brands and communities most suitable for further research.

3. To conduct, analyse and report on a netnographic study to assess the role of SMBCs within the context of consumer engagement and value formation in the cosmetics sector, which allows the relationship between concepts to be explored.
4. To propose a contextualised conceptual framework of value formation within SMBCs.
5. To propose a conceptual framework which investigates the relationship between SMBCs, consumer engagement and value formation.

1.8 Research methodology

This thesis adopts a netnographic approach. Netnography is a well-established methodology within marketing and consumer research (Costello et al., 2017) that has been widely used to study online communities in the social media environment (Maslowska et al., 2016; Quinton, 2010).

Netnography is 'a specific way to conduct qualitative social media research...' (Kozinets, 2020:7) that has a background in ethnography, anthropology and cultural studies (Costello et al., 2017). Due to its unique background, netnography is used to study cultural qualities within online communities (Kennedy and Muzellec, 2022). Netnographic research can be conducted through a variety of methods, deployed to investigate online traces. Online traces are regarded as trails left behind by users of the digital world. Examples of online traces include comments, pictures, videos, and 'likes'.

In this thesis, internet-mediated observation was employed. Internet-mediated observation, as a method adopted from ethnographic methods, allows the researcher to investigate data derived from archived and current online social interactions (Saunders, 2019). This method was selected as it allows different perspectives to be captured and multiple interpretations to be gained to achieve a cultural understanding of online social interactions (Saunders, 2019). This thesis adopts an inductive approach; therefore, no pre-existing themes were utilised in the analysis. However, while themes emerged from the data, the analysis was informed by a prior literature review. Within the data analysis process, the research followed six procedural netnographic movements that consisted of research-focused operations, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and research presentation operations. To further ensure the validity of the findings, thematic analysis procedures were consulted (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The research methodology will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

1.9 Research contribution

This thesis makes an important and original contribution to the literature on value formation and consumer engagement in SMBCs, which should translate into practice as it will inform SMBC moderators on the types of value and engagement which can occur/be fostered within SMBCs. These can, in turn, support the development of the community, as well as help to trigger and maintain high levels of consumer engagement and value formation.

Through the development of brand posts and customer comments typologies, a link between consumer engagement and SMBC development can be made. The typologies are expected to guide community moderators on SMBC development by identifying the typology of brand posts which can support SMBC growth.

Through analysis of value formation and co-creation within SMBCs, a model of value formation processes is created. The framework highlights the various value formation processes as well as the various types of value generated, linked with SMBC development. The framework also offers insights for SMBC moderators of the types of value that can emerge through interaction or autonomously for consumers and brands.

1.10 Outline of the thesis

Chapter 2 presents the literature review. The chapter begins by discussing brand communities, focusing on SMBCs and their characteristics. Following that, consumer engagement is discussed; the discussion is linked with SMBCs. Additionally, different typologies of engagement are introduced. Finally, value formation and co-creation are discussed, as well as their links with SMBCs and consumer engagement. The theoretical underpinnings of value formation and co-creation are explained. The chapter concludes with a discussion around value types generated through value co-creation.

Chapter 3 begins with an examination of research philosophy and paradigms. A chosen philosophy is presented and discussed. Following that, the focus moves to the methodological approach of this study. Netnography, as the chosen methodology, is presented. The research stages and procedural movements suggested by Kozinets (2020) are discussed and then confronted with the steps taken to conduct this research. The chapter concludes with a discussion on research ethics and limitations.

Chapter 4 discusses the findings of the research related to consumer engagement. The chapter presents three areas of engagement that take place within SMBCs: namely brand posts, consumer posts and brand reply posts. A typology of brand posts is introduced, and a link to SMBCs is developed.

A typology of consumer posts is also created and outlined in relation to SMBC development. Finally, a discussion around brand responsiveness within the brand's reply posts is presented. A brand's use of communication style and tone, as well as technical aspects of communication, are also discussed.

Chapter 5 outlines the findings of the research related to value formation and co-creation. Different value-formulating processes are identified and discussed in relation to actors taking part in the interaction within SMBCs. This begins with the discussion around consumer-to-consumer (C2C) value formation interactions, where different types of value are identified. Following that, the discussion moves to brand-to-consumer (B2C) value formation interaction, where different value types identified are presented. Then consumer-to-brand (C2B) value formation interaction is discussed, and the value types which emerged through this interaction are offered. Finally, within this chapter independent value formation initiated by the consumer is discussed, as is the independent value facilitation enabled by the brand. The chapter concludes with the introduction of the value formation framework.

Chapter 6 presents the analysis of the findings in relation to the literature. This is achieved through the discussion of major themes and key subjects feeding into those themes identified in Chapters 4 and Chapter 5. Each theme is discussed separately. However, the discussion strongly links the themes of value formation and consumer engagement to the development stage of SMBCs. The chapter also provides an overview of how the themes and key subjects contribute to knowledge. The chapter concludes by presenting a table of knowledge gaps, as well as the contributions to knowledge that have been made in this thesis.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by revisiting the research objectives of the study. Each objective is discussed in turn, providing information on how the completion of each research objective informed the next stage of the research. The chapter then proceeds to discuss the contributions to theory and practice. Finally, the limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research are drawn.

1.11 Summary

This chapter has provided a background of the study, where the cosmetic sector overview was presented. Particular attention was paid to the role of social media and SMBCs within marketing and cosmetic sector. Following that, a justification of the study was offered. The research aims and objectives were then presented. Research methodology and research contribution were discussed, and the chapter concluded by providing an overview of the chapters which follow.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the previous literature on SMBCs (section 2.2), consumer engagement (section 2.3) and value formation (section 2.4). The chapter begins with an analysis of the previous research on communities, in particular, brand communities, virtual brand communities, and SMBCs. Within that section, the five unique SMBC characteristics differentiating SMBCs from other online communities are discussed. Next, the discussion moves on to explore consumer engagement, the formation of the concept and its relationship to SMBCs. Particular attention is paid to the typology of consumer engagement, which is assessed from three different positions. Finally, attention is directed to value formation. The foundation of the notion is discussed as its application to the SMBC environment as well as the link between value formation and consumer engagement.

2.2 Communities

2.2.1 Communities

Communities are groups of people who share a common interest that results in the development of a 'sense of community' or belonging; a perception of similarity to others within this group which perpetuates a sense of belonging to a larger unit (Martínez-López et al., 2015). Communities can be defined as 'an organization of individuals or small groups that have the intention to get together and a sense of mutual responsibility' (Jang et al., 2008:59). According to Martínez-López et al. (2015), until the development of the internet, communities were mostly defined by geographical proximity and their membership was often heavily influenced by a confined geographical location. Location was often an involuntary deciding factor of participation in a community (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). The physical location impacted community formation as it reduced the potential reach of the community (Wirtz et al., 2013), and, as a result, influenced who became a community member, often leading to participation in a community with people who already had pre-established connections with each other – for example, family members, friends, co-workers or neighbours (Martínez-López et al., 2015). While such connections might positively influence the social context of the community, as the community members have extended knowledge of one another (Sicilia and Palazón, 2008), social homophily impacts the diversity of the group, yielding limited world views, opinions and perspectives (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002).

Researchers agree that there are three markers distinguishing communities from other formations, namely *shared consciousness*, *rituals and traditions*, and *obligations to society* (Bagozzi and Dholakia,

2002; Habibi et al., 2014b; Muniz et al., 2001; Zaglia, 2013). Additionally, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) also suggest that members of communities share a common interest which can be centred around a topic, cause or, in marketing terms, a brand. If a community concentrates on a brand, the community forms a brand community (Muniz et al., 2001). The first of the markers, *a consciousness of a kind* that members of a community exhibit (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Brogi, 2014) can evoke a sense of belonging among the community members (Martínez-López et al., 2015; Zaglia, 2013) that can consequently enhance the connection an individual feels to other members of the community. It is deemed that shared consciousness is the most important marker of a community as it constitutes a shared knowing or sense of belonging (Muniz et al., 2001) that enables the consolidation of a sense of community shared by a group of people and subsequently allows them to distinguish members from non-members (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Martínez-López et al., 2015; Zaglia, 2013).

Shared *rituals and traditions* strengthen the connections within communities, providing a bond in the shape of common values (Martínez-López et al., 2015) and behaviours (Zaglia, 2013) which are exhibited by like-minded others. Rituals are understood as ‘conventions that set up visible public definitions’ (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996:43), while traditions are identified as ‘social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioural norms and values’ (Marshall, 1998:537). Together, rituals and traditions build the history, culture, and consciousness of the community (Muniz et al., 2001); rituals and traditions also help shape symbolic meanings and the culture of a community through common acts or gestures (Habibi et al., 2014a) and help establish common know-how within the community (Wenger et al., 2002).

The *obligation to society* is understood as a sense of commitment towards other community members (Habibi et al., 2014a), which stimulates integration and commitment within the community (Brogi, 2014) and a willingness to help other community members (Zaglia, 2013). It also builds a sense of moral responsibility that facilitates collective action (Muniz et al., 2001).

Given all that has been mentioned so far, it can be assumed that any construct related to the concept of community or concepts integrating communities would exhibit three community markers, namely: (1) shared consciousness, (2) rituals and traditions, and (3) obligations to society. The markers aid the development of the community by strengthening ties between community members as they form a sense of belonging (Martínez-López et al., 2015; Muniz et al., 2001; Zaglia, 2013). The evidence presented in this section suggests that discussed community markers will act as a foundation for community-related concepts, such as brand communities, virtual/online communities, and SMBCs. Therefore, they must be acknowledged as an important factor influencing

the development of other constructs associated with communities, further elaborated in the following sections.

2.2.2 Brand communities

Brand communities are specific types of communities that focus on a specific brand that connects consumers (Brogi, 2014; Zaglia, 2013). Brand communities essentially merge the idea of communities with the love and admiration of a brand, allowing consumers with similar attitudes and feelings towards the brand to communicate and interact with one another, typically through social media and other digital platforms, with brand communities often described as 'imagined' communities (Habibi et al., 2014b; Zaglia, 2013).

Early brand community research identified several concepts related to communities, brands and consumers (Canniford, 2011; Cova and Pace, 2006). The most prominent constructs are brand communities (Muniz et al., 2001), consumption sub-cultures (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and consumer tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002). Cova and Pace (2006) argue that there is no consensus regarding the differentiation between the above-mentioned concepts. However, the literature allows a distinction to be made by offering a summary of the basic characteristics.

For example, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) emphasise the importance of the notion of a brand acting as a bonding agent for community members within the brand community concept. In relation to consumption sub-cultures, their focus tends to be narrower than that of a brand community, with members concentrating on a particular product or consumption activity to the extent of developing cultural meaning around the object of interest (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). This often leads the sub-culture to steer away from mainstream culture through the emergence of powerful stories that feed into the outlaw status of consumption sub-cultures (Canniford, 2011). Consumer tribes, in a similar characteristic to consumption sub-cultures, revolve around the activity of consumption (Cova and Cova, 2002). However, unlike brand communities, consumer tribes do not necessarily revolve around a specific brand, and do not carry the outlaw status apparent within sub-cultures of consumption (Martínez-López et al., 2015). This thesis focuses on brand communities as a construct that predominantly revolves around brands and facilitates the development of social relations among admirers of a brand (Muniz et al., 2001). With the advent of more advanced online communication, brand communities were also identified as a construct from which virtual/online brand communities and SMBCs emerged (Brodie et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a).

The concept of consumption sub-cultures is strongly associated with social resistance and reaction against dominant hierarchies of control (Goulding et al., 2002) which is directly linked to the outlaw

status of the construct (Martínez-López et al., 2015). Through the creation of their own hierarchies and definitions, consumption sub-cultures result in the formation of a dominant consumer culture (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) that can be expressed through lifestyle, music or fashion (Goulding et al., 2002). Furthermore, Canniford (2011) indicates that such communities can be characterised as unpredictable as the brand's meaning is created (and modified) by consumers, rather than the brand (Holt, 2004). Consumer tribes, on the other hand, may evolve around the brand, but, equally, they may revolve around a particular consumption practice, product/service or a number of brands (Canniford, 2011; Cova and Cova, 2002). Due to the secondary role brands play in consumer tribes, the construct was considered unsuitable for this thesis, with a focus placed on brand communities.

2.2.3 Online/virtual brand communities

As the body of existing research does not differentiate between online and virtual brand communities (Kozinets, 2002; Martínez-López et al., 2015), both terms will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. The majority of the early virtual brand community (VBC) research adopted the brand community definition of Muniz et al. (Dessart et al., 2015; Gummerus et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014a; Habibi et al., 2016; Lima et al., 2019; Munjal et al., 2019; Shao and Ross, 2015; Wirtz et al., 2013), which states that an online brand community (OBC) is a: 'specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand' (Muniz et al., 2001:412). Muniz et al.'s (2001) study is pioneering and of paramount importance to brand community research, as it acknowledges one of the most important features of online communities, namely the removal of geographic constraints (i.e., that community members can interact with one another from around the world, bypassing the need for physical proximity).

On the other hand, the OBC definition proposed by Muniz et al. (2001) fails to recognise the crucial characteristic of the online environment, such as enhanced anonymity compared to traditional brand communities, and around-the-clock access to the VBC (Wirtz et al., 2013). The research conducted by Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) aided in further filling this gap by developing a definition that acknowledges the unique environment in which the communities exist. De Valck et al. (2009) indicate the unique characteristics of the online environment, which includes the ability to serve its community members as a reference group; offering community members anonymity amid an open atmosphere that stems from the ability of the community members to leave the community whenever they want. Accordingly, this thesis adopts the definition proposed by Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002:3) which assumes: 'virtual communities to be mediated social spaces in the digital environment that allow groups to form and be sustained primarily through the ongoing communication process'.

There is an ongoing debate regarding the nature of online/virtual brand communities. Some researchers argue that due to a lack of contact in the physical world, the sense of community weakens (Bloemer et al., 2013). An alternative view sees OBCs as a tool which facilitates greater involvement (Martínez-López et al., 2015), providing enhanced access to community members at any time in any geographical location (Habibi et al., 2014b). Scholars also disagree on the origins of virtual communities. Tickle et al. (2011) suggest that virtual communities derive from Communities of Practice (CoP). However, the origins are also seen in traditional brand communities (Martínez-López et al., 2015). Dholakia et al. (2004) indicate that virtual communities are groups of consumers uniting to fulfil personal goals which are shared by other community members. Therefore, it can be assumed that the focus of the community would inform its purpose. Accordingly, the focus on a brand is what differentiates virtual brand communities from other forms of online communities (Brogi, 2014; Zaglia, 2013). For that reason, it can be argued that virtual/online brand communities merge 'community' with 'love and admiration' for a brand.

Brand communities offer an opportunity for people with similar attitudes and feelings towards the brand to come together and socialise (Habibi et al., 2014b; Zaglia, 2013). In common with other brand communities, OBCs display: (1) a shared consciousness of kind (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Brogi, 2014); (2) shared rituals and traditions, that strengthen connections within the communities (Martínez-López et al., 2015; Zaglia, 2013); and (3) an obligation to the community as a whole, and to individual community members (Muniz et al., 2001).

Despite the close relationship between brand communities and VBCs, there are some differences between the constructs. Most researchers agree that the biggest distinction between traditional and virtual communities is the geographical barriers that are not present in virtual communities (Martínez-López et al., 2015). This leads to greater openness of virtual communities which allows people to join and connect to others based solely on their interests (Brogi, 2014), unencumbered by locale. Interestingly, Muniz et al. (2001) highlight that the removal of geographic restrictions on community membership started much earlier than that explored in VBCs. For example, the popularisation of other means of communication, including the telegraph, telephone, magazine, radio, and television, allowed the formation of a sense of community and the development of social consciousness before the advent of the internet. Nevertheless, it is the popularisation of the internet that accelerated the processes and facilitated the expansion of community member numbers (Martínez-López et al., 2015; Wirtz et al., 2013). OBCs would also typically gather people who do not know each other outside the community but are linked only through the common interest (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002), due to this such communities tending to be diverse (de Valck et al., 2009). Furthermore, OBC members do

not have to disclose their real identity, whereas offline brand community members bring their true identity to the community (Wirtz et al., 2013).

Table 1 Characteristics summary of brand community, OBC/VBC and SMBC

	Brand community	OBC/VBC	SMBC
Geographical barrier	Present	Not present	Not present
Location	Predominantly offline	Within stand-alone website	Embedded within social media
Cost of initiating	Medium	High	Low
Population	Small	Small to moderate	Small to very large
Mode of contact	Offline	Online	Online
Relationship between members	Tight	Loose	Tight
Identity of members	Visible	Hidden	Visible

Online/virtual brand communities have been extensively researched and classified. There appears to be a consensus on the classification surrounding who initiates the OBC/VBC, leading to a twofold classification: namely, VBCs/OBCs initiated by *consumers* and VBCs/OBCs initiated by *brands* (Henri and Pudelko, 2003; Li et al., 2018; Kozinets, 1999; Simon and Tossan, 2018). Both types of communities are similar in terms of the tools used and participation therein (Almeida et al., 2013), employing, for example, the same platforms to house the community, using the same mode of communication; yet they may have a variety of different goals. For instance, brand-initiated communities might be business-oriented, and aim to achieve marketing objectives. Consumer-initiated communities, however, usually focus on relationship-building and facilitating consumption experiences (Martínez-López et al., 2015). An interesting perspective is offered by Wirtz (2013), who suggests that ownership and governance over the community should be regarded as separate – highlighting how this can occur in a variety of configurations. For example, communities can be founded and governed by the brand (e.g., Apple); created by the brand, but governed by the community (e.g., King Arthur Flour); created by the community, but governed by the brand (e.g., Gulpener); or created and governed by the community (e.g., Lego) (Wirtz et al., 2013).

Porter (2004) offered a different categorisation, based on five attributes, namely: (1) *purpose* (which relates to the focal content of interaction between community members); (2) *place* (associated with the location of interaction); (3) *platform* (the technical design of interaction, specifically associated with the ability to communicate synchronously or asynchronously); (4) *population* (which concerns

the patterns or interactions and type of social ties which exist between community members); and (5) *profit model* (which relates to economic value, in particular, whether the community is built to generate revenue) (Porter, 2004). The attributes of OBCs were cross-referenced with establishment type (brand-established communities vs consumer-established communities). This resulted in five relationship orientations across two establishment types, viz social, professional (customer-initiated communities) and commercial, non-profit, and government (brand-initiated communities) (Martínez-López et al., 2015). These relationship orientations describe relationship types formed among community members.

Another perspective on relationships within OBCs was offered by Fournier and Lee (2009), who distinguish three types of communities based on how consumers affiliate with online communities. The first type of community, termed *pools*, is characterised by a strong link between a community member and the community objective and values and a lack of bond between community members. The second type, termed *webs*, is characterised by strong relationships between community members, based on similar or corresponding needs, and lack of or minimal affiliation with community values or goals. The third type, termed *hubs*, is characterised by a strong relationship with the leader of the community, with affiliation with other community members being of secondary importance (Fournier and Lee, 2009).

While Porter's (2004) and Fournier and Lee's (2009) research extended knowledge surrounding relationship formation within VBCs, the discussion around relationships *within* communities is not a new one. Muniz et al. (2001), for example, suggested two types of relationships: (1) relationships that exist between the brand and its OBC members; and (2) relationships that exist between members of the community itself (i.e., member-member relationships).

McAlexander et al. (2002) extended the research to four relationship types, namely consumer-brand, consumer-product, consumer-company, and consumer-consumer. However, such findings and typologies generally agree that relationships are directly connected with brand-community engagement. Discussions surrounding relationship formation is an important stream of research within the brand community domain (Martínez-López et al., 2015) and could be traced back to one of the principal characteristics of communities, as it directly facilitates the development of a sense of belonging (Muniz et al., 2001).

An interesting branch of OBC research looks at anti-branding, defined as a social movement directed at attacking brands as they are extensions of a brand's products or services, and are believed to represent the ideas and beliefs the attackers stand against (Holt, 2002). Such groups of people form

establishments known as *anti-brand communities* (Martínez-López et al., 2015). Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2010) suggest four motives behind consumer engagement in anti-brand communities, namely: (1) fighting for an identity that is based on anti-consumption movements and aimed at changing consumer culture; (2) gaining autonomy and greater control over the development of the socio-cultural world that allows members to expose unethical brand practices or deceiving sales tactics; (3) radicalising modern values in order to change the economic, political and cultural approaches in relation to brands; and (4) transforming the individual person, as anti-brand communities provide a space for exploring oneself and creating new behaviours, practices and identities (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010).

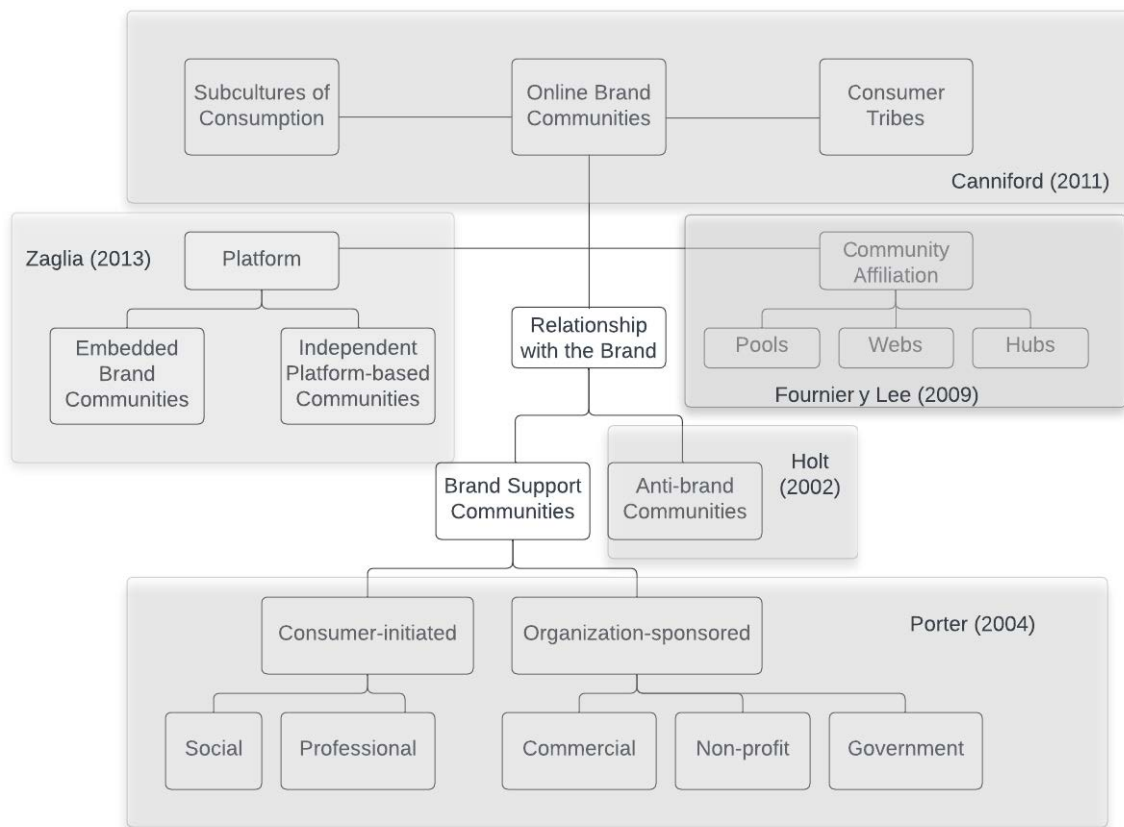


Figure 7 Visualisation of relationships between various communities (source Martínez-López et al. 2015)

Figure 7 presents an overview of a VBC classification. While the framework by Martínez-López et al. (2015) facilitates an understanding of various classifications and correlations between them, it is important to emphasise that in reality this classification is not as straightforward, and more than one classification could be applied simultaneously. For example, embedded-brand communities can be brand-initiated or consumer-initiated (Zaglia, 2013); or different types of community affiliation can be observed within embedded-brand communities and independent platform-based communities

(Fournier and Lee, 2009). Zaglia (2013) is perhaps one of the first pieces of research that acknowledges different online environments used for hosting OBCs. Two types of platforms were identified, namely independent platforms and embedded. The former refers to platforms solely owned and managed by individual brands, while the latter indicates the OBCs are hosted on externally owned platforms (Fujita et al., 2018). The embedded-brand community concept is defined as brand communities rooted in an independent social network (Zaglia, 2013). Consumers must be members of said social networking sites to be able to participate in the brand community (Zaglia, 2013). This differentiation has given a foundation for the development of the SMBC concept (further discussed in section 2.2.4).

While consumer engagement research addressing engagement across industries enhances the overall understanding of the concept (Tafesse and Wien, 2017), Cova and Pace (2006) argue that industry is an important factor in facilitating engagement within OBCs. Therefore, a more honed approach to exploring engagement through a prism of one industry is needed. This one-industry exploration does, however, emerge in existing research. For example, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) explored individually the online communities of Saab, Macintosh and Bronco. Cova and Cova (2006) investigated the Nutella community. Sung et al. (2010) included 10 brands from categories such as food, digital cameras, automobiles, cell phones and computers. Wirtz et al. (2013) also linked the OBC discussion with particular communities, namely Apple, Polar, HOG (Harley Owners Group), King Arthur Flour, Lego, Saab, Gulpener, and Stava. OBC research on the cosmetics sector is, however, rather limited (Lima et al., 2019; Shen and Bissell, 2013), despite the strong digital presence of cosmetic companies (Qitong and Rahman, 2019).

Table 2 Summary of OBC research with an indication of the brand sector studied

Brand	Sector	Research
Saab	Automotive	Muniz and O’Guinn (2001)
Macintosh	Computer	
Ford Bronco	Automotive	
Nutella	Confectionery	Cova and Cova (2006)
Not disclosed	Food, wallpaper, MP3 players, digital cameras, automobiles, motorcycles, cell phones, computers	Sung et al. (2010)

Apple	Computer	Wirtz et al. (2013)
Polar	Sport	
HOG	Automotive	
King Arthur Flour	Food	
Lego	Toys	
Saab	Automotive	
Gulpener	Brewery	
Stava	Transportation	
Estee Lauder	Cosmetics	Shen and Bissell (2013)
MAC Cosmetics		
Clinique		
L'Oreal		
Maybelline		
CoverGirl		
L'Oreal Paris Brazil	Cosmetics	Lima et al. (2019)

Lima et al. (2019) investigated consumer engagement within Brazil's L'Oréal Paris brand communities. Deploying a netnographic approach, the researchers investigated whether the conceptual model of consumer engagement in VBCs (Brodie et al., 2013) could be applied to the Facebook environment. While the study confirmed the validity of the used conceptual model, it also highlighted the complexity of consumer engagement within the SMBC environment. The authors highlighted that despite L'Oréal Paris Brazil being one of the biggest SMBCs, it generated very little engagement that failed to promote value co-creation (Lima et al., 2019). This demonstrates the intricate nature of consumer engagement within SMBCs that results in the inability to successfully stimulate engagement within large cosmetics SMBCs, such as L'Oréal Paris Brazil.

Shen and Bissell (2013), on the other hand, investigated the effect of SMBCs on brand awareness and loyalty within beauty brands. Through content analysis of Facebook posts, the authors explored how

cosmetics brands attempted to engage and interact with their consumers. Five types of brand posts were identified, namely 'event', 'product', 'promotion', 'entertainment' and 'other'. Engagement for each of the categories was measured by analysing consumer responses. Despite bringing valuable insights, the authors emphasised the need for further in-depth research on large-scale beauty brands (Shen and Bissell, 2013). SMBC studies that are conducted (Shen and Bissell, 2013; Lima et al., 2019), build the discussion on the OBCs literature, despite investigating SMBCs. Table 2 offers an overview of discussed research investigating industry specific OBCs/SMBCs. This table was curated with a specific emphasis on studies pertinent to the cosmetics industry within the OBCs/SMBCs context. Nevertheless, the criteria for inclusion were broadened to encompass research spanning a variety of industries within this domain. Table 2 does not include studies focused on other types of communities such as communities of consumption (Kozinets, 1999), and virtual communities (Kozinets, 2002) were not included. The following section explores SMBCs in further detail. The literature review highlights that while the two constructs (OBCs/SMBCs) display similarities, they are fundamentally different. The unique characteristics of SMBCs will be discussed in turn.

2.2.4 Social media brand communities

Social media brand communities (SMBCs), defined as 'a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010:61), are a relatively new phenomenon. SMBCs are embedded within social media sites and defined as 'Internet-based applications that provide users with the opportunity to create, exchange, and share content using the technological foundations of Web 2.0' (Baccarella et al., 2019:23), thereby allowing users to communicate and connect with people of similar interests (Zaglia, 2013). Social media houses a variety of applications, that include, but are not limited to, blogs, forums, reviews and social networking sites (Baccarella et al., 2019). These facilitate interactions between individual consumers and companies (Shen and Bissell, 2013). The fundamental characteristics of communities (cf. 2.2.1), on the other hand, impact relationship building within the SMBCs through developing a feeling of belonging or belongingness (Muniz et al., 2001).

Opresnik (2019) argues that social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, continue to grow in importance as consumers turn to their (online) networks for advice, rather than relying on information found through search engines. For that reason, social media offers potential for companies, who increasingly engage in social media marketing, understood as 'an interdisciplinary and cross-functional concept that uses social media [...] to achieve organizational goals by creating value for stakeholders' (Felix et al., 2017:123).

In a relatively short period of time, SMBCs have become a significant source of influence for consumers

who participate in respective SMBCs (Kaur et al., 2018). The social networking site, Facebook, is the biggest worldwide, with nearly 2.8 billion global active users (Lou et al., 2021). It is also home to 500 million SMBC fans (Zaglia, 2013). Facebook hosts a very wide range of SMBCs that can be differentiated by size or focal topic. For example, a regional SMBC of the cosmetics brand Clinique, aimed at consumers in the UK, has amassed over 11 million members on its Facebook SMBC, while the clothing brand H&M currently has close to 37 million consumers engaging with its Facebook SMBC. Such a mass of consumers who can engage with the brand and its offerings through SMBCs possess great potential for the brand, as research suggests SMBCs have a positive impact on consumer loyalty and brand trust (Brodie et al., 2013; Kaur et al., 2016). Brands utilise SMBCs to inform their consumers about new product releases or to ask consumers for their opinions (e.g., concerning product development ideas or promotional campaigns) (Martínez-López et al., 2015; Tafesse and Wien, 2017). SMBCs facilitate two-way conversations. Therefore, consumers can ask questions that can be answered directly by the brand *or* by fellow consumers, or consumers can comment on content posted by the brand through textual or visual responses (Brodie et al., 2013; Lima et al., 2019).

Research to date has tended to focus on OBCs as a primary concept concerning brand communities online. Habibi et al. (2014b) were the first to analyse different forms of communities online and provided differentiation between OBCs and SMBCs. Despite that, within the existing literature, SMBCs are not always considered as a different concept from VBCs (Dessart et al., 2016; Lima et al., 2019). However, even before the publication of Habibi's research, the differences between OBC and SMBC began to be noticed. Most pressing for companies is the cost of initiating an SMBC that is considerably lower than the cost of initiating a VBC. SMBC is often referred to as cost-effective, as researchers highlight not only the significantly lower cost of initiating the community, but also of maintaining brand communities based on social media, versus OBCs. This is due to the community's infrastructure, which is already provided and the fact that most social media sites do not charge users for creating a profile (Habibi et al., 2014b; Zaglia, 2013). In other words, brands do not have to invest to build a website that will house the community or pay for servers that will host the website. This is all provided free of charge by the social networking site. In addition, members of SMBCs when entering the community likely use their real identity, whereas often people joining virtual brand communities use pseudonyms (Habibi et al., 2014b; Zaglia, 2013). For example, a consumer entering an SMBC has already created a personal profile on the networking site so others who come in contact with that individual know what they look like (through pictures they upload); where they come from, live, work, what there are interests, their likes and dislikes (through particulars provided); and where they've been (through check-ins or reviews). This information is likely to remain faithful to an individual user's personal characteristics. Having access to such background information allows others to make

judgments on the person and bond over-familiar elements (places they have lived or visited, the school they attended, films they have watched or the food they have eaten).

Habibi et al. (2014b) investigated the characteristics of SMBCs; their research provided five unique characteristics of SMBCs, namely: (1) *social context*; (2) *structure*; (3) *scale*; (4) *content and storytelling*; and (5) *myriads of affiliated brand communities*. Each of these will now be discussed in turn.

Social context refers to the personal information of fellow SMBC members that is available to other SMBC members or users of social networking sites (Habibi, Laroche and Richard, 2014a; Kaur, Dhir and Rajala, 2016). In other words, when a person registers on a social networking site, such as Facebook, they usually provide extensive personal details, including, for example, their place of residence, place and date of birth, school, place of employment, family status, hobbies and interests. Such information can be accessed by other social media users, including fellow SMBC members. By having access to such information, consumers engaging in SMBCs can form initial opinions about the people they engage with through the SMBC that will impact their approach to relationship building. In contrast, members of OBCs are often not required to provide evidence of their real identities, or of other personal details (Kaur et al., 2016; Habibi et al., 2014a). Hence, in OBCs consumers can feel more anonymous, although, on the other hand, the facilitation of relationship-building might be significantly impaired.

The second SMBC characteristic identified by Habibi et al. (2014b) is *structure*. Habibi et al. (2014b) argue that the SMBC structure differentiates it from the structures of other communities. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) observed a strong communal hierarchy among members of the Harley Davidson biker community studied, which derived from experience, commitment and membership duration. Different membership status was often linked with privileges, for example, senior members of Vibra-Train Ltd OBC were given an opportunity to review specific brands on the OBC forum (Brodie et al., 2013). SMBCs have some structure and often there is an owner or a moderator of the community. Also, it may be possible to identify more active consumers. For example, Facebook has introduced community badges that can be enabled by moderators. These badges aim to help community members to distinguish administrators and moderators within the community. Other badges designed to help learn about other consumers within the community are available. Although they help to differentiate members through acknowledging their status (new member, founding member) or engagement (conversation starter, conversation booster, visual storyteller, rising star), the badges do not offer any additional privileges. Therefore, it can be argued that there is no explicit hierarchy within such communities (Habibi et al., 2014b).

Scale, the third characteristic of SMBCs, considers the size of SMBCs. Brand communities based on social media often gain many members within a short time span. For example, the Spanish Coca-Cola SMBC on Facebook gathered 1.5 million members within 3 years (Sicilia and Palazón, 2008), while L'Oréal Paris Brazil SMBC on Facebook attracted over 7 million members within 9 years (Lima et al., 2019). OBCs, on the other hand, are deemed popular when gathering no more than tens of thousands of members (Habibi et al., 2014a). The ability of social media to gather such a vast number of community members is likely associated with the interconnectedness that is associated with this medium. Social media facilitates connection and interaction between various actors, such as sellers, customers and non-customers (Sashi, 2012) as well as instantaneous communication that can be rapidly disseminated amongst a large number of recipients (Fujita et al., 2018). For example, Facebook users who are also members of an SMBC based on the platform can instantaneously share any information published by the brand through a variety of means (private message, share button, tagging) with anyone registered on Facebook, or even outside the platform (this is possible through a link that is being generated and can be shared via email, SMS or other messaging platform and unrelated social networking platform). Also, any content (videos, posts, pictures) liked or commented on by a Facebook user can be seen by their friends. The high levels of interconnectedness present an opportunity to gain wider brand recognition and reach new consumers. In other words, due to a wide range of links within social media, users can encounter brand content through a recommendation from a friend, or a search of social media recommendations based on interests (Fujita et al., 2018). Such interconnectedness is attractive to companies and brands who are interested in achieving strong relationships with their customers, with the brand potentially benefitting, especially when consumers act as brand ambassadors and advocate for a brand's products at little or no cost to the brand (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018).

Habibi et al. (2014b) underline the importance of *storytelling* within consumer-brand communication, drawing attention to the form of storytelling which takes place within SMBCs. Singh and Sonnenburg (2012), however, see the change in storytelling not only in terms of the form of communicating stories; they argue that the storytelling process within social media has changed, and it is now seen as '...a continuous ongoing and collaborative process, made up of interlinked content...' (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012:192). This dynamic, ever-evolving process of negotiating identities and sharing experiences (Lund et al., 2019) can lead to a blurring of the roles of the narrator and the listener as the brand and consumers can assume either role (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012). Storytelling is strongly linked with stimulating attitudes and intentions as it elicits narrative transportation (He et al., 2021) and, within the social media environment, it helps to boost co-creation and enhance perceptions (Lund et al., 2019). In other words, storytelling is a powerful tool that can captivate and charm the

consumer who would be more willing to actively participate in the story.

Myriads of affiliated brand communities is the final characteristic of SMBCs identified by Habibi et al. (2014b). This characteristic has also been identified by Wenger (2015), however in a different environment. Both Habibi et al. (2014b) and Wenger (2015) acknowledge the magnitude of various communities which exist and conclude that individuals could be simultaneous members of multiple communities within their lifespan and within the same period (Habibi et al., 2014b; Wenger, 2015). Habibi et al. (2014b) looked at the matter from an SMBC perspective. The authors argue that social networking sites provide an opportunity to create a community for everyone, therefore one can stumble upon many brand communities initiated by brand enthusiasts or company branches. There also might be communities created for a certain product of a brand (Habibi et al., 2014a; Kamboj et al., 2018). As social media facilitates multiple memberships (Hammedi et al., 2015), therefore the development of a peculiar landscape of practice can be observed. The research on this new trend is still in its infancy (Munjal et al., 2019), and the concept of multi-membership within SMBCs requires further investigation (Hammedi et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the knowledge of any SMBC memberships might be critical as it might impact attitudes towards other communities the consumer is a member of (Hammedi et al., 2015). In other words, consumer' membership of one SMBC can impact their interaction with other SMBCs they are members of.

2.2.5 Summary

In the above section, the literature surrounding communities was discussed, including extant literature which explored the concept of brand communities. The discussion moved to review the concepts of OBCs and SMBCs as notions that evolved from traditional communities. As highlighted in the above discussion, the disparity between OBCs and SMBCs is distinct. Therefore, it is argued that these two notions should be considered as separate, stand-alone concepts. As this thesis is investigating SMBCs, the SMBC concept will be taken into further discussion. Furthermore, in light of the evidence highlighted above regarding the nomenclature and categorisation of SMBCs and OCBs, only literature that specifically discusses SMBC (despite the nomenclature used) will be drawn in further exploration of the research. In other words, if an author has referred to OBCs but in fact discussed SMBCs, such an article will be considered as relevant. SMBC facilitates connections with like-minded people, and opportunities to discuss and share ideas and new content (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018; Habibi et al., 2014a; Liu et al., 2019), such as tips on how to use products, pictures of the products or consumer using the product, asking questions related to product/brand. There is also evidence that SMBCs strengthen the relationship between the brand and its consumers (Gummerus et al., 2012; Kamboj et al., 2018; Simon and Tossan, 2018), which can lead to an increase in consumer loyalty and trust.

There is a strong indication of the need for further research on SMBCs (Dwivedi et al., 2021), particularly because of the fast-paced environment (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2017) but also due to the tremendous potential of SMBCs in establishing closer ties with consumers. Despite this potential, many brands continuously struggle to maintain consumer engagement (Kaur et al., 2016), hence failing to capitalise on the prospective/value SMBCs can bring. It is crucial for brands utilising SMBCs in consumer communication, therefore, to explore consumer engagement within SMBCs, to further aid brands in developing a meaningful tool for brand-consumer relationship development. Consequently, the next section will discuss the concept of consumer engagement.

2.3 Consumer engagement

2.3.1 Introduction

The concept of 'engagement' has been widely explored in sociology, psychology and organisational behaviour (Brodie et al., 2011). It is broadly understood as 'a state of being involved, occupied, fully absorbed, or engrossed in something...' (Higgins and Scholer, 2009:102). Within the marketing literature, interest in 'engagement' has grown since 2005 (Brodie et al., 2011); from its early beginnings, scholars were particularly interested in *consumer* engagement (Martínez-López et al., 2015). Consumer engagement is viewed as a multidimensional, context-dependent construct (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek, 2011) and has, perhaps surprisingly, been explored within marketing literature relatively recently (Hollebeek, 2011). Consumer engagement is considered a vessel through which consumer relationships can be enhanced (Brodie et al., 2013; Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018; de Vries et al., 2012); it has also been concomitantly associated with sales growth and profitability (Munjal et al., 2019; Pongpaew et al., 2017). Companies that can spark and maintain consumer engagement gain superior competitive advantage (Brodie et al., 2011) as consumer engagement has been linked with loyalty, trust and commitment (Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015; Vivek et al., 2012). Furthermore, consumer engagement has been found to be an important variable that has a tremendous impact on value co-creation (Martínez-López et al., 2015), which is understood as a process of exchange of knowledge and skills with others (Vargo et al., 2020). Consequently, consumer engagement is of significant managerial interest (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018). Despite extensive research, scholars are still far from fully understanding the concept (Dessart et al., 2015; Pongpaew et al., 2017), or from achieving a consensus regarding the definition of consumer engagement (Lima et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019). In particular, it has been highlighted that consumer engagement within the SMBC environment requires further investigation (Brodie et al., 2013; Gummerus et al., 2012; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Consumer engagement in consumer behaviour literature

2.3.2.1 *The theoretical underpinning of consumer engagement*

While within consumer behaviour literature, the concept of consumer engagement is not new (Brodie et al., 2011), the discussion around consumer engagement rose in prominence, around mid-2000 (Lima et al., 2019), with most research published from 2009 to 2014 (Munjal et al., 2019). This rise in interest could perhaps be credited to the Marketing Science Institute calling for further research on engagement – and naming engagement as one of their research priorities in consecutive years (2006-2008, 2010-2012 and 2014-2016) (Maslowska et al., 2016).

The origins of consumer engagement are often sought in relationship marketing (Vivek et al., 2012). There is, however, another strand of research that sees the roots of consumer engagement stem from service-dominant logic (SDL) (Vargo, 2009). While SDL is seen as a formation that evolved from relationship marketing, some similarities between the two theoretical stances can be identified but it is also important to acknowledge their differences. Interestingly, some researchers combine both views in search of consumer engagement origins, indicating that certain elements are drawn from SDL, and others from relationship marketing. For example, Brodie et al. (2013) identified relationship marketing to have a broader theoretical lens, while detecting SDL characteristics in consumer behaviour in the shape of interactive experiences within a complex, co-creative environment. To fully understand how relationship marketing and SDL can be viewed as foundational to consumer engagement, both theoretical lenses will be now discussed in further detail.

Relationship marketing arose in a response to a call for a more flexible marketing model that could be implemented in the business-to-business and service industry (Ryals and Payne, 2001). There are many definitions of relationship marketing, with Grönroos' (1996) definition considered the most comprehensive (Harker, 1999). Relationship marketing is understood as a concept facilitating the identification, establishment, maintenance and enhancement of:

relationships with customers and other stakeholders at a profit so that the objectives of all parties involved are met. This is done by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises (Grönroos, 1996:11).

Relationship marketing evolved from traditional marketing, with marketers attempting to adopt the marketing-mix model, that incorporated the 7Ps, with customer service. However, this approach was deemed to be too restrictive (Egan, 2011). As Barnes (1994) explains, relationship marketing rose in

prominence as companies began to struggle with differentiating themselves from competitors based on core product characteristics. Therefore, a shift from the conventional marketing mix to delivering customer value took place as companies began moving away from share and sales tactics towards process-focused customer cooperation, concentrating on mutual gain (Egan, 2011). The scope of relationship marketing widened with time. As Morgan and Hunt (1994) indicate, it grew to include all marketing activities focused around establishing, developing and maintaining successful customer relations. The focus of this theoretical lens is on customer retention, value and meeting customer expectations through continuous contact over a considerable period (Egan, 2011). In other words, relationship marketing facilitates relationship building through customer-provider interaction.

SDL emerged as an answer to new technological advances that allowed better and seamless communication between brands and their consumers. The advancement of *SDL* was influenced by changes within the market, in particular the development of services (Terblanche, 2014). As earlier mentioned, *SDL* shares similarities with relationship marketing. This is because during its development, the notion passed through a transitional phase, which was strongly associated with relationship marketing. For that reason, *SDL* is considered the natural successor of relationship marketing (Egan, 2011). *SDL* can be understood as a 'view, in which intangibility, exchange processes, and relationships are central' (Vargo and Lusch, 2004:2).

The backbone of *SDL* is value, and value co-creation. Many researchers, among them Terblanche (2014), argue that within *SDL* value is created jointly by the consumer and the brand, and is not transferred during a transaction. Value might take different meanings; in literature, it is emphasised that value is an elusive concept (Grönroos, 2017) that endures 'fuzzy definitional problems' (Ballantyne et al., 2011:203). This might be because value can be understood differently by different individuals. Nonetheless, value could be comprehended as an intangible or tangible entity that delivers unmeasurable benefits to an actor (Grönroos, 2017).

Value within *SDL* is strongly associated with co-creation, an important notion within *SDL* understood as a process of exchange of knowledge and skills (Vargo et al., 2020). Vargo and Lusch (2008) argue that the customer is always the co-creator of value. At this point, it is useful to stress that in earlier literature co-creation and co-production were used interchangeably. However, they do carry different meanings, therefore it is worthwhile to differentiate them. *Co-creation* should be understood as an interaction between a customer and the brand, whereas during *co-production* a customer participates in new product and service development (Terblanche, 2014). Through the *SDL* lens, co-creation is

viewed as a participatory and interactive motion that creates value-in-use, defined as value created by customers through and during the usage of resources (Rihova et al., 2018). SDL considers co-creation to be a foundation of value creation. Furthermore, SDL assumes that customers and providers have mutual interests, hence they create value in a harmonious manner and with the same benefit to all (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018). On the other hand, Strandvik et al. (2019) argue that brands and customers come from different standpoints, highlighting that their expectations and goals may vary. As a result, there might be traction between the two actors when the goal of value co-creation is concerned, which could lead to value destruction (Laud et al., 2019).

The focus of SDL is on the service, rather than the physical good. Value is generated by the customer through service consumption. Therefore, as Egan (2011) suggests, within the SDL notion, value creation (considered as 'value-in-use') is shifted from the organisation to the customer. Despite the shift in value creation, Heinonen and Strandvik (2015) argue the lens approaches a transaction from a company's perspective. As a result, SDL does not differentiate customers by their experience or desire, but assumes they are generic actors who interact on a societal level. Nevertheless, SDL acknowledges customers as co-producers of a service (Vargo and Lusch, 2008).

A further shift towards customer-centricity is offered by *customer-dominant logic* (CDL). The development of CDL was an answer to changes in online communication tools and channels, which gave voice to consumers and allowed them to reach brands and other consumers (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Jaworski (2011), on the other hand, argues that the advance to a new perspective was urged by academics who alleged the focus on customers should be of the most importance to managers. This statement echoes the discussion about the need to understand how value emerges for customers (Fang et al., 2020). It was also suggested that viewing business through customer-related aspects, rather than product, service, cost, or growth, might prove to be essential to gain a competitive advantage (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). CDL incorporates brands' offerings in the lives of customers and positions marketing as the foundation of the business, rather than in the sidelines (Strandvik et al., 2019). CDL has been adopted in research which includes consumer communities (Rihova et al., 2018), brand relationships (Heinonen et al., 2013) and customer activities (Heinonen et al., 2010).

CDL places most importance on customers' activities and experiences (Vargo et al., 2020). The notion situates value-creating processes in the customer's own life context and beyond distinct visible customer-brand interactions. CDL can be defined as a dynamic process that is not uniquely related to

the service offerings of service providers (Strandvik et al., 2019). Created value comes from customers' experiences, their social context and interactions *with others* (Rihova et al., 2018). Despite this, the concept looks at the consumer-brand relationship and how it is both a source of value for customers and a source of information for customers regarding a given brand. Said relationships, and their quality, along with the brand experience, are the two building blocks of value within CDL (Fang et al., 2020). Relationship quality is important to CDL, as it allows for determining closeness between the customer and a brand (Zhang and Luo, 2016).

Figure 8 presents the positioning of CDL within the managerial scope and managerial focus. The managerial focus refers to the provider-customer connection, while the managerial scope considers the context of offerings. However, Strandvik and Heinonen (2015) acknowledge the evolution of marketing perspectives over the years, with the focus of the perspective moving from providers to customers, while the scope moving from encounters towards systems. CDL places great emphasis on the customer while maintaining a strong focus on relationships and encounters. On the contrary, SDL incorporates a system and relationship focus, with an emphasis on the former, and the customer and interaction area with an emphasis on the latter. In other words, SDL, unlike CDL focuses predominantly on interaction, which can be linked with the pivotal role of co-creation within SDL. This, on the other hand, impacts SDL's focus on a system built around operations supporting co-creation. While relationship marketing is firmly placed within relationship and service provider spheres with a slight outlook on interaction.

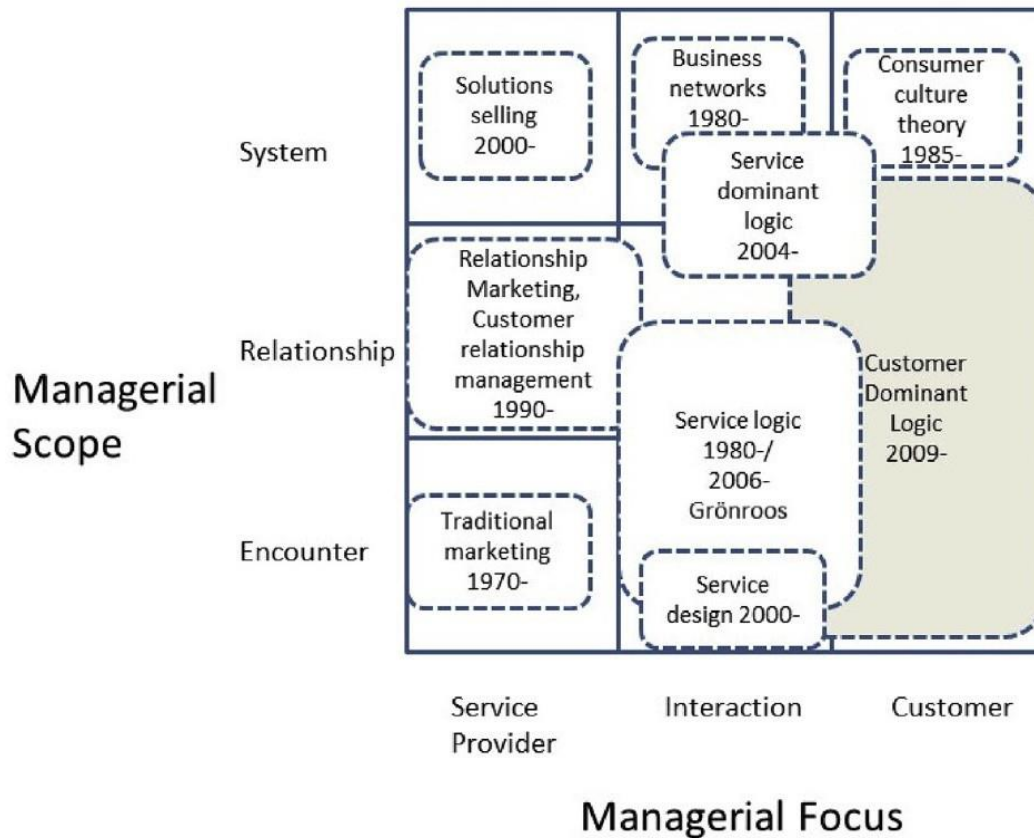


Figure 8 Managerial scope and focus of marketing theories (source: Strandvik and Heinonen; 2015)

As this thesis is situated within the customer-centric environment, that is focused on interaction and relationships, the CDL position will be adopted. Consequently, this research takes the position that consumer engagement (Rather, 2019) and co-creation (Terblanche, 2014) have their roots in CDL. Accordingly, the notions of co-creation and CDL will be discussed in more detail in the next section of the literature review.

2.3.2.2 Theoretical development of consumer engagement

With the growth of research around *engagement* and *consumer engagement*, different approaches to each concept have emerged (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2013; van Doorn et al., 2010). Discussions which attempt to differentiate between each concept primarily arose around: (1) *dimensionality*; (2) *theoretical underpinning*; and (3) *foci*. These will now be discussed in turn, with the most fundamental discussion surrounding the *dimensionality* of consumer engagement (Dessart et al., 2016). Both scholars and practitioners indicate a variety of dimensions of consumer engagement. One-dimensionality has not been as broadly represented in the literature, the work of van Doorn et al.

(2010) is the prime example provided in the literature (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2015; Dessart et al., 2016; Vivek et al., 2012). Interestingly, although van Doorn et al. (2010) identified only one, behavioural dimension, the research indicates that consumer engagement within that one dimension can take either a positive (i.e., posting a positive review) or a negative (i.e., organising public actions against a firm) tone.

It appears, however, that the most popular stance among researchers is that consumer engagement is a multidimensional concept that consists of cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions (Munjal et al., 2019). This was established in the early research of Appelbaum (2001), who leaned support for the above-mentioned dimensions. However, in the literature, other classifications of dimensions have been presented. For example, Vivek et al. (2012) distinguished four dimensions in their work exploring consumer engagement (cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social) with their research also highlighting the complexity of consumer engagement:

CE [customer engagement] is the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiates (Vivek et al., 2012:133).

Nevertheless, the two-dimensional concept has also been explored. Mollen and Wilson (2010), for example, distinguished between affective and cognitive dimensions; and Gambetti, Graffigna and Biraghi (2012) highlight experiential and social dimensions.

This thesis takes the position that consumer engagement is a multidimensional concept, consisting of cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions, following Dessart et al. (2017) and Brodie et al. (2013) who suggest consumer engagement within the social media environment is a concept that is multifocal, multidimensional and context-specific. Given that this research aims to investigate consumer engagement within the social media environment, a multidimensional approach appears to be the most suitable.

A major issue in early consumer engagement research concerned its *theoretical underpinnings*. In the literature, three main views of consumer engagement can be distinguished (Liu et al., 2019); namely that consumer engagement is initiated by: (1) the psychological state of the consumer, (2) the psychological process, or (3) behaviour. Most researchers conceptualise consumer engagement as being a result of a psychological state (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014;

Vivek et al., 2012). As Liu et al. (2019) explain, the psychological state occurs due to the interactive experience with a brand, company or other foci. The second approach views consumer engagement as stemming from a psychological process that takes place when new or current customers express their loyalty (Bowden, 2009). The final view is drawn from the behavioural background. Van Doorn et al. (2010), Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) and Kumar et al. (2010) consider consumer engagement to be behavioural manifestations beyond purchase; such manifestations include word-of-mouth or information sharing (Brodie et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2019). It appears that as consumer engagement research progresses, the view of consumer engagement as being the result of a psychological state dominates (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Vivek et al., 2012). This might be caused by researchers linking consumer engagement complicity to its origins.

This thesis adopts the dominant view that consumer behaviour stems from a psychological state. Therefore, this thesis follows the position of Brodie et al. (2011) and Kaur et al. (2020) who indicate that consumer engagement is a psychological state that is placed within broader engagement processes initiated by individual interactions. Therefore, it is argued that single consumer engagement instances are of a fluctuating nature and are situated within wider interactive engagement processes.

Early consumer engagement research did not consider what the object, or in other words, what the focus is, of said engagement. Most existing research acknowledges only one focus of engagement; typically, how consumers engage with a brand, a firm or an organisation (Dessart et al., 2016). Nevertheless, recent studies acknowledge multifocal engagement (Lima et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Pongpaew et al., 2017) which it is particularly evident in research regarding consumer engagement in SMBCs (Habibi et al., 2014a). Therefore, the consumer can simultaneously engage with more than one facet, for example, a consumer can simultaneously engage with other consumers, the brand and the SMBC. This might be due to the nature of social media which facilitates connection and interaction between various actors (Sashi, 2012) (this is discussed in more depth in the following sections).

Dessart et al. (2016) argue that consumers can be engaged with more than one object *simultaneously*. For example, consumers can engage with the community (Algesheimer et al., 2005), other consumers (Dessart et al., 2016) or/and the medium itself (Calder et al., 2009) (in the case of social media, this would be the social media platform itself). Furthermore, different engagement foci can influence one another (Dessart et al., 2016). For example, a consumer displaying engagement with another consumer can affect how other consumers engage with the brand. In other words, the consumer,

through engagement, might receive information that will affect how they choose to engage with the brand (for instance, instead of calling the brand directly, they will message them on social media). Researchers stress that when investigating engagement, one must take into consideration the multifocal nature of the phenomenon. A consumer's ability to engage with multiple foci concurrently demonstrates the interactive and experiential nature of the engagement concept (Brodie et al., 2013), and reinforces how complex it is (Dessart et al., 2016).

The above discussion stresses how dynamic consumer engagement research is. Despite great advancements in research, identified knowledge gaps need to be addressed. For example, Dessart et al. (2017) indicate the need for further research into consumer engagement within social media environments, suggesting further qualitative, netnographic research on this phenomenon is needed. Santos et al. (2022) stress the need for further research which articulates different perspectives of consumer engagement exploring different theories, research methods and variables. A comprehensive understanding of consumer engagement is seen as highly important to marketing practitioners (Rather, 2019).

2.3.2.3 Nomenclature

Before proceeding to discuss consumer engagement within online and social media environments, a matter of nomenclature ought to be addressed. A major criticism around consumer engagement is regarding the terminology which is used. To this date, the nomenclature of the concept causes severe confusion. In the literature, three main streams of research have been identified, viz. consumer engagement, customer engagement and brand engagement. In more recent work, another concept, *customer-brand engagement*, has also emerged (Pongpaew et al., 2017), believed to be a sub-form of customer engagement (Hollebeek, 2011). Many researchers in their work do not distinguish the difference between the above-mentioned terminology and concepts (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek, 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014). For instance, Brodie et al. (2011:252) note:

While the notion of 'engagement' in business relationships is not new, significant practitioner interest in the concept has developed in the last decade [...]. This interest is demonstrated by the number of business conferences, seminars, webinars, and roundtables on the topic of 'customer' and/or 'consumer engagement'.

Dessart (2017:377) writes in a similar tone: 'Consumer or customer engagement scholarship has grown significantly in the last 7 years'; while Maslowska et al. (2016) attempt to differentiate some of

the engagement terminologies, acknowledging, however, that the nomenclature can indicate the object/objects of engagement.

Other researchers, like Maslowska et al. (2016) suggest that different nomenclature highlights the different subjects of engagement. For example, Hollebeek et al. (2014:150-152) acknowledge ‘...key “engagement subjects” cited in the literature [that] include customers and consumers’, this stance is seconded by Dessart et al. (2016).

While similar terms are used in the literature (Brodie et al., 2011; Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek, 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014), the differences between them and whether they impact engagement are not explained. However, recently, Lima et al. (2019) distinguished between consumers and customers in relation to engagement. The authors note that a consumer is someone who uses a product or service, while a customer is the person who purchases it or intends to purchase it. When considering buying roles and their influence on purchasing decisions, it can be assumed that consumers are more active in driving the decision-making process. This assumption is supported by Sashi (2012), who argues that the role of the buyer and decider would be assigned to a customer, while all remaining roles (initiator, influencer, user and gatekeeper) would be held by a consumer (Bonoma, 2006).

This thesis adopts the terminology of ‘consumer engagement’ and will refer to this concept as such regardless of how it was addressed in the cited literature. This decision is commanded by the fact that in the social media environment it is hard to establish whether members of brand communities are customers or consumers. Therefore, the wider and more inclusive ‘consumer’ phrase is selected.

2.3.2.4 Consumer engagement within OBCs and SMBCs

With the emergence of the online environment, researchers were quick to recognise its effect on consumer behaviour (Gummerus et al., 2012). Furthermore, the growing complexity and interconnectedness of consumer engagement have also been noted (Brodie et al., 2013), particularly within consumer engagement within the (online) social media environment. This could be due to several reasons. For example, consumer engagement takes the most complex form within the SMBC environment, as the interactive nature of SMBCs encourages new connections and relationships (Sashi, 2012) expanding the concept of consumer engagement (Dessart et al., 2015). Social media characterises interconnectivity; it promotes dialogue between consumers and brands as well as between consumers, giving new tools, and empowering consumers (Habibi et al., 2014b).

Furthermore, the social media context, characterised by easy access and vast amounts of data, prompted researchers towards utilising readily available data for mostly quantitative studies (Audy Martínek, 2021). While acknowledging the various research within the domain, it is most important to recognise the unique characteristics of SMBCs (please see section 2.2.4 for further details). Researchers investigating SMBCs often refer to them, interchangeably, as 'online brand communities' (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018; Dessart et al., 2016; Lima et al., 2019; Munjal et al., 2019). The importance of differentiation between OBCs and SMBCs stems from the fact that consumer engagement is highly context-dependent (Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2016; Lima et al., 2019), therefore when investigating the concept, close attention to the environment should be paid to provide meaningful and accurate findings as: '...social media is a completely different context from previous contexts of brand communities' (Habibi et al., 2014a:155).

To this day, the conceptualisation of consumer engagement within SMBCs causes difficulty. Due to the concept being complex, there is no one agreed-upon definition (Kunz et al., 2017). Despite several different definitions proposed, only a few principles are common, namely: (1) multidimensionality; (2) interactivity; and (3) the existence of certain antecedents and consequences (Audy Martínek, 2021).

Multidimensionality has been discussed earlier in this chapter, in this respect, the environment does not cause a massive impact. As discoursed, the stance among researchers that consumer engagement is a multidimensional concept that consists of cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions continues to be most popular (Audy Martínek, 2021), although other dimensions are also proposed (Dessart et al., 2016; Tafesse, 2016). Those dimensions confirm the complexity of consumer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011) but also inform the sphere of consumer interest, for example, the need for information (cognitive dimension), the need for affectional connection (emotional dimension) or a need to express themselves through actions (behavioural dimension) (Liu et al., 2019). Similarly, *interactivity* has been highlighted in earlier discussions (a feature that characterises both consumer engagement and SMBCs).

The final principle (*antecedents and consequences*) has been widely researched (Santos et al., 2022). There is also significant research concerning consumer engagement as a mediator (Audy Martínek, 2021). Consumer engagement has been linked with several outcomes, for example, satisfaction, loyalty, and brand love (Munjal et al., 2019). Nevertheless, research which explores the antecedents

of consumer engagement is larger (see Figure 9) (Audy Martínek, 2021). Identified antecedents include customer participation, brand identification and community identification (Santos et al., 2022). Figure 9 also indicates reduced levels of research which explore the ‘dark side’ of consumer engagement, concerning negative engagement and disengagement; and engagement granularity – a pool of research that provides a highly detailed view of consumer engagement that includes research around levels of engagement, social media behaviours and engagement typologies (engagement typologies will be discussed in more detail in the next section). The researchers recognise the challenges concerning consumer engagement in social media. Habibi et al. (2014b), for example, emphasise the ever-changing social media environment, with Dessart (2017:390) echoing these sentiments, adding that: ‘Further research is warranted to explore the fascinating realm of consumer engagement in social media’.

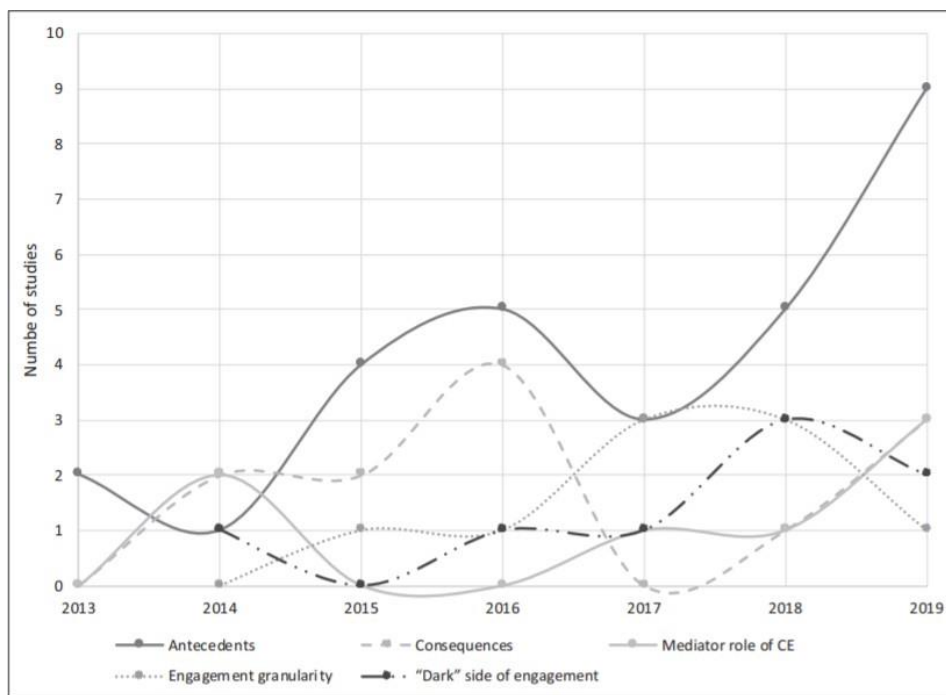


Figure 9 Trends in consumer engagement research (source: Audy Martinek, 2021)

Audy Martínek (2021) indicates that most studies on consumer engagement with brands on social media have been conducted with quantitative methods. This observation is also supported by Santos et al. (2022) who identified only 24 qualitative studies compared to 95 quantitative studies published between 2005 and 2021. This would indicate the need for diversification of research methods that would allow a more holistic understanding of the concept to emerge.

2.3.3 Classification of consumer engagement through typology

Social media has a tremendous impact on brand-consumer communication, enabling brands to communicate directly with their customers and consumers (and potential future consumers). The main modes of communication within SMBCs are posts. Within this thesis, three variations of posts have been distinguished, namely: (1) brand posts; (2) consumer posts; and (3) individual brand replies:

- *Brand posts* are understood as messages posted within SMBCs that introduce a subject and allow consumers to react to it through likes, shares and comments (see Figure 10 for an example of a brand post).
- *Consumer posts* are understood as messages published by consumers underneath a brand post (see Figure 11).
- Whereas *individual brand replies* are understood as messages responding to a consumer post, written by the brand itself/its spokesperson (see Figure 12 for an example).

Through publishing brand posts, brands attempt to engage with their consumers. However, only 1% of a given brand's followers on platforms such as Facebook engage with such content (Deng et al., 2020). This is a little return on investment when considering that on average companies spend 29% of their marketing budget on producing content (Waqas et al., 2020).

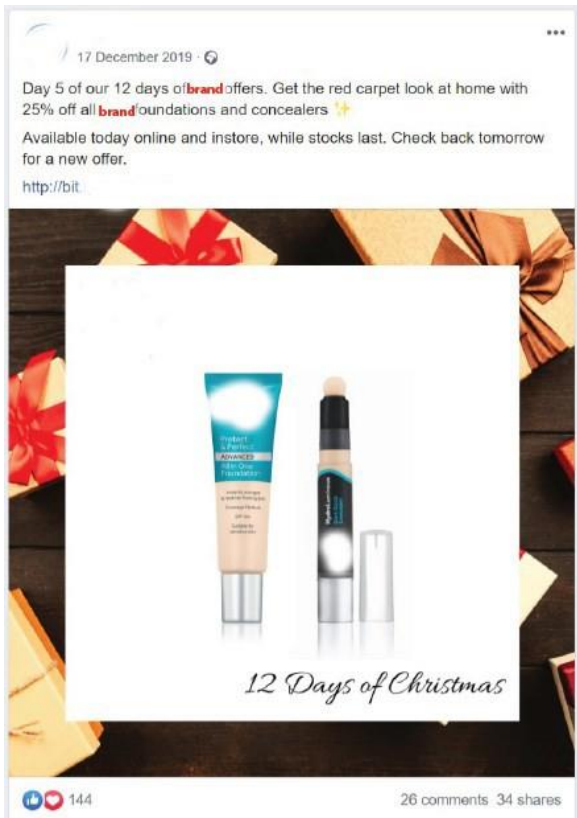


Figure 10 Example of a brand post



Figure 11 Example of consumer posts



Figure 12 Example of brand reply post (in red frame)

To gain a better understanding of consumer engagement and how it stimulates consumer actions, researchers began developing brand post typologies (Audy Martínek, 2021) that aid the understanding of how brands actively engage with consumers. Despite existing research, there are still gaps in knowledge – with further calls for consumer engagement research, particularly empirical, and qualitative, issued (Bilro and Loureiro, 2020). Similarly, an understanding of consumer posts is warranted (Hua et al., 2021). Presently, research in this arena is rather scattered as researchers use different terms to investigate this concept (Benamar et al., 2017). For example, Füller et al. (2014) examined user types, while Waqas et al. (2020) explored customer experience. Johnston et al. (2021), on the other hand, explored communicative interactions. While past research extensively examined the consumers and the link between consumer engagement and experience or other consumer characteristics, the insights into consumer engagement within SMBCs are still limited (Bilro and Loureiro, 2020; Audy Martínek, 2021; Santos et al., 2022; Waqas et al., 2020). Consequently, to assess the impact of a brand's posts and associated consumer engagement fully and comprehensively, a well-designed and extensive typology of posts and consumers' communication/response is needed. The section will now investigate brand posts typologies, with the discussion then moving towards exploring a consumer posts typology, concluding with brand reply typology.

2.3.3.1 Brand posts typology

A brand's post plays a crucial role in connecting brands to their consumers (Antoniadis et al., 2019); they are the building block for creating a community around the brand, and, as such, the posts act as vehicles to facilitate brand-consumer interactions and engagement (Dolan et al., 2019). By regular publication of brand posts, a brand strengthens the relationship between the brand and its consumers through maintaining a daily presence in the lives of the consumer (Tafesse and Wien, 2017). Despite that, according to Dolan et al. (2019), only 39% of social media users utilise the platform to communicate with brands and just 0.07% of Facebook users interact with a brand's posts. Due to the

significant loss of investment, it is of paramount importance to develop a comprehensive typology (understood as means to analyse and classify content published by brands (Tafesse and Wien, 2017) that offers insights on consumer engagement that different brand posts generate. Lost opportunity for interactions also considerably impacts the brand's ability to enhance a consumer's personal and emotional connection with the brand, augmenting an authentic brand experience (Tafesse and Wien, 2017). This, as Tafesse and Wien (2018) argue, might have a significant impact on achieving marketing targets and reaching the brand's core audience. Antoniadis et al. (2019) support this, arguing that further research into consumer interaction with a brand's posts is needed.

Early research which explored brand posts developed a simple typology, categorising posts as those consisting of information, entertainment, or transaction (Tafesse and Wien, 2018). Such an initial typology, therefore, focused on the tangible characteristics of the brand posts. Research interest expanded, with de Vries et al. (2012) investigating the tone of the brand posts, and Jahn and Kunz (2012) exploring the value of brand posts. Soon such abstract concepts such as vividness and richness of the brand posts were studied (Waqas et al., 2020). Different approaches resulted in the inconsistent categorisation of brand posts (Jones and Lee, 2021). Therefore, a formalised framework developed by Tafesse and Wien (2017) was welcomed by researchers. The framework consists of 12 mutually exclusive categories of brand posts (see Table 1) and it was later expanded to include three additional message strategies (namely informational, transformational, and interactional master posts) (Tafesse and Wien, 2018). Message strategy, in this context, is understood as a company's effort to trigger and cultivate consumer interaction through rich and interactive posts published on social media (Hanson and Carter, 2021). The *informational* message strategy provides factual product and/or service information in a manner that is easy to understand; the *transformational* message strategy is associated with the experience and identity of a brand with psychological characteristics, while the *interactional* message strategy encourages consumer-brand interactions (Tafesse and Wien, 2018).

In their comprehensive work, Tafesse and Wien (2018) linked the types of posts to message strategy, providing guidance to brands in terms of how to effectively design and communicate messages to their consumer base (depending on brand need). Tafesse and Wien (2018) argued that if marketers knew the impact of each brand post on their consumers, they would be able to design a strategy with better precision that had the potential to deliver meaningful results (e.g., enhancing brand-customer relationship, facilitating brand experience, enabling the building of a brand community). Tafesse and Wien's research (2018) revealed an interesting ratio of different post types across a range of analysed brands. Three brand post types constituted over 90% of all brand communication: emotional posts

(33%); functional posts (31%); and educational brand posts (30%). Brand posts that were identified as facilitating relationship and community building equated to 13% of all brand posts within social media, with brand community posts and customer relationship posts attracting 7% and 6% respectively (Tafesse and Wien, 2018). On the contrary, Jones and Lee (2021) identified experiential, functional, brand resonance and emotional brand posts constituting over 60% of fashion brand communication within their social media channel, indicating that experiential brand posts generated the most engagement. Table 3 includes a detailed description of each brand post type.

Table 3 Typology of message strategies and brand posts (source: Tafesse and Wien, 2018)

Message strategy	Brand master post categories	Definition and common message themes
Informational	Functional posts	<p>Functional posts highlight the functional attributes of company products and services. These posts typically promote company products and services along dimensions of performance, quality, affordability and style/design.</p> <p>Common themes: product function claims, product reviews, awards, green credentials and so forth.</p>
	Educational posts	<p>Educational posts seek to educate and inform consumers. These posts help consumers acquire new skills on 'proper' ways of applying/using company products or services or help consumers to discover new information about broader industry trends and developments.</p> <p>Common themes: do-it-yourself tips, instructions, blog posts, external articles, and technical interviews with employees.</p>
Transformational	Emotional posts	<p>Emotional posts evoke consumer emotions. These posts typically use emotion-laden language, inspiring stories or humour and jokes to arouse affective responses, such as fun, excitement and wonder.</p> <p>Common themes: emotionally expressive posts, emotional storytelling, jokes and trivia.</p>
	Brand resonance posts	<p>Brand resonance posts direct attention to the core promise and identity of the focal brand. These posts differentiate and favourably position the brand by highlighting elements of its core identity, such as brand image, brand personality, brand association and branded products.</p> <p>Common themes: brand image (i.e., brand logo, brand slogan, brand character, etc.), photos of branded products, celebrity association and brand heritage.</p>

	Experiential posts	<p>Experiential posts evoke consumers' sensory and behavioural responses. These posts highlight the sensory and embodied qualities of the focal brand, often by associating it with pleasurable consumer experiences.</p> <p>Common themes: sensory stimulation (i.e., visual, auditory, taste, odour, etc.), physical stimulation (i.e., physical actions, performances, activities, etc.), and brand events (product launches, festivals, fan events, sponsored events, etc.).</p>
	Social causes	<p>Cause-related posts highlight socially responsive programmes supported by the focal brand. These posts promote worthy social causes and initiatives and encourage customers and fans to support them.</p>
Interactional	Current-event posts	<p>Current-event posts comment on themes that capture active talking points among the target audience, such as cultural events, holidays, anniversaries, and the weather/season. These posts initiate timely conversations with consumers using current events.</p> <p>Common themes: cultural events (i.e., sports, film, TV shows), holidays, special days and anniversaries, and the weather.</p>
	Personal posts	<p>Personal posts focus on consumers' personal relationships, preferences and/or experiences. These posts invoke personally meaningful themes to initiate deeply personal conversations with consumers.</p> <p>Common themes: friends, family, personal preferences, anecdotes and future plans.</p>
	Brand community posts	<p>Brand community posts promote and reinforce the brand's online community. These posts foster a sense of community identification and engagement by recruiting new members and eliciting participation from existing members.</p> <p>Common themes: encouraging fans to become members of the brand's online community, acknowledging fans (e.g., mentioning their name, tagging them), and using/soliciting user-generated content.</p>

	Customer relation posts	<p>Customer relation posts solicit information and feedback about customers' needs, expectations and experiences. These posts seek to deepen the impact of customer relationships by encouraging customer feedback, reviews and testimonies, among others.</p> <p>Common themes: customer feedback, customer testimony and customer reviews and customer services.</p>
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The findings of Tafesse and Wien (2018) suggest that the implementation of a social media strategy can drive strategic marketing actions. Their research recognises the importance of consumer engagement, albeit though, focus on a company's or brand's point of view. Therefore, Tafesse and Wien's (2018) research fails to capture how company/brands effort is regarded and interpreted by consumers, and how brands can stimulate consumer engagement. Jones and Lee (2021) explore messaging strategy through the types of messages that encourage consumer engagement. Their research suggests that a brand's messaging strategy should engage in sensory and physical stimulation of consumers, as this can lead to a positive impact on consumer engagement.

While both Tafesse and Wien (2018) and Jones and Lee (2021) bring valuable insight into consumer engagement, calls for further research have been made, particularly, addressing fine-grained consumer engagement investigating impact of individual brand posts (Hanson and Carter, 2021). Calls for further investigation around the role of social media in facilitating consumer engagement have been made (Dolan et al., 2019).

2.3.3.2 Consumer posts typology

Identifying the consumer posts typology is problematic for several reasons. The most prosaic one being the usage of different nomenclature; across existing literature, researchers have used a variety of terms, with some referring to 'users' roles' (Akar and Mardikyan, 2018), others virtual brand community engagement practices (VBCEP) (Hollebeek et al., 2017), consumer-brand interactions (Azar et al., 2016) or the consumer expressions of experiences with the brand content (Waqas et al., 2020). Another difficulty is linked with the continuously changing functionality of social media and new features being added frequently. For example, in 2016 Facebook expanded their reaction feature, allowing social media users to react wordlessly to published posts via five pre-defined emojis: 'love', 'sad', 'haha', 'wow', 'angry' (Kaur et al., 2019). This change altered users' ability to express themselves and increased the range of emotions that social media users could use without words (Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, an ever-changing social media landscape warrants constant research which is needed to allow real-time updates of knowledge (Hanson and Carter, 2021).

Mathwick's (2002) research was one of the early studies exploring consumer post typologies – with the author identifying four types of profiles:

1. Transactional community members, who are mainly interested in maintaining a high level of service.
2. Socializers, are active online conversationalists and are keen to offer help and support to others.
3. Personal connectors, will participate in various online communities/will interact with other members of the online community, based on their shared interests.
4. Lurkers, who exhibit low relationship orientation traits and do not engage in conversations online and are very unlikely to provide feedback.

It is important to note that while Mathwick (2002) investigated user profiles, the identified characteristics emerged through behaviours displayed within social media environments, for example through posted content. Therefore, it can be assumed that the user profiles are extensions of the types of posts published by consumers.

Mathwick's (2002) initial typology has been expanded upon. For example, Füller et al. (2014) created a typology that included six user roles, namely: (1) master, (2) idea generator, (3) efficient contributor, (4) socialiser, (5) passive commentator, and (6) passive idea generator. While there is some overlap with earlier research, Füller et al. (2014) expanded their typology, including new user roles. Furthermore, the authors distinctively linked user roles with published posts through the identification of seven comment categories that were cross-referenced with the user roles. As a result, different users were characterised by various ratios of comment categories. For instance, according to Füller et al. (2014), masters produce the most support/motivation comments, while consumers referred to as efficient contributors accounted for most feedback comments. Meanwhile, idea generators were found to be the least active in making constructive suggestions and in building social relationships. It is important to note, however, that a portion of the analysed comments were assigned to more than one comment category. Such an approach highlights the multidimensional nature of the conversations which unfold in online platforms.

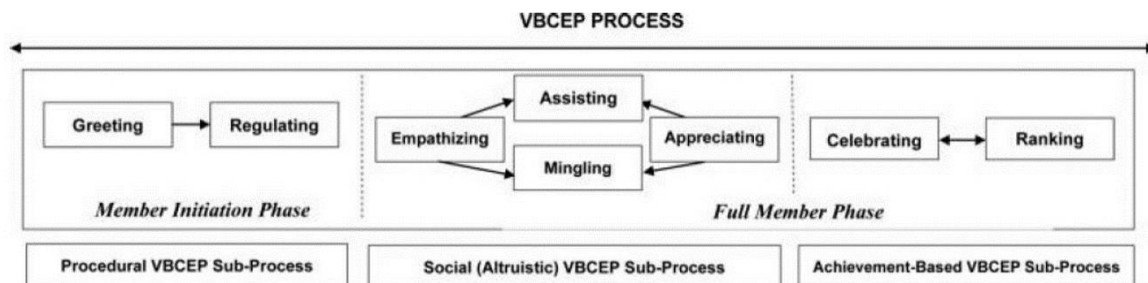
Another notable typology was developed by Benamar et al. (2017) who approached the topic with never-seen-before pragmatism. Benamar et al. (2017) identified ten core, social roles within a cooking community. The categories grasp the true essence of consumer behaviour within the community. For example, the category 'information sharing about the product: factual aspect' groups comments that share factual information about cooking-related products, while the subcategory 'practical aspects:

cleaning and servicing: advice about problem-solving...' include comments that specifically talk about cleaning and servicing of the cooking-related products. The typology is stripped from elaborate labels and sophisticated terminology. While the core roles, offered by Benamar et al. (2017), were insightful and provided a deeper understanding of the types of posts a consumer publishes within a community, certain types identified were very context-specific and could not be applied to various circumstances. For example, 'content sharing about cooking practice' that included recipe sharing and sharing information about meals could only be applied within a cooking community. Nevertheless, other categories developed by Benamar et al. (2017), for example 'questions about the product', 'link and relationship with the product' or 'personal stories related to the product' can be adapted to diverse communities in various sectors. Therefore, due to the context-specific elements, the typology cannot be applied to a non-cooking community.

Some of the consumer post typologies were developed through OBC research. For example, Hollebeek et al. (2017) present (see Figure 13) the VBCEP model. The VBCEP model presents three processes, occurring within online communities, which consist of eight further sub-processes, occurring in sequence. The model highlights processes enhancing and sustaining social ties, stressing the importance of the role of belongingness in processes observed in the community. The processes are behavioural, but with a cognitive and emotional undertone.

Within the eight-component VBCEP typology, the particular interest draws social sub-processes and achievement-based sub-processes. At this point, it is crucial to highlight that Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) research was conducted within the OBC environment. While OBCs share some commonalities with SMBCs, it is important to notice their differences. For example, OBC members do not have to disclose their real identity (Wirtz et al., 2013), while SMBCs are often referred to as cost-effective (Zaglia, 2013) (extensive discussion on this topic is located in the community section of the literature review). Despite OBCs' and SMBCs' similarities, they share some differences. As a result, some behaviours identified by Hollebeek et al. (2017) are divergent and cannot be applied to the social media environment. For example, within the first stage of the model, the authors identified greeting and regulating. These processes are highly interactive and are also characterised by contributions to the community through processes enhancing and sustaining social ties. While SMBCs are highly interactive environments, due to a sheer volume of people participating within a community, consumers do not tend to reach out to newcomers so proactively. This could be due to high levels of fluctuation of community members but also a difficulty in accessing who is a newcomer. The processes that could

be associated with SMBCs are achievement-based processes, located in the third part of the Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) model. They consist of celebrating and ranking, and concern actions directed at community building and maintenance (please see Figure 13 for more detail).



Note: VBCEP = Virtual brand community engagement practice

Figure 13 Virtual brand community engagement practice (source: Hollebeek et al. 2017)

The typology of Wang et al. (2020) links consumer engagement to value co-creation through exploring customer contributions within the co-creation of products. While, similarly to Füller et al. (2014), the typology explores different user types within the online environment, Wang et al. (2020) link user types to displayed online behaviour. This approach is similar to one presented by Benamar et al. (2017). Wang et al.'s (2020) research was set in a co-creation community aimed at sustainable innovation. Even though the typology relied heavily on information exchange, which facilitates co-creation (Füller et al., 2014), the authors were able to identify contributions around socialisation. Wang et al. (2020) identified the sharing of personal stories about products and their use as an indicator of brand learners, who are community members that are new to a brand's products. Additionally, the sharing of personal feelings about a product was identified as a marker of product critics, who are community members that express dissatisfaction or concerns about the brand's products. These findings suggest that personal experiences and emotions play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions and behaviours of community members within brand communities.

Recently, through netnographic research, Waqas et al. (2020) developed a seven-part 'branded content experience typology' which suggests that consumer experiences have either a cognitive or emotional attribute. This typology explores brand-focused posts that create an experience for consumers; this is because some categories are strongly linked to the responses of consumers to a brand's post (for example, 'aesthetic', 'humour' and 'awe-inspiring'). Other categories, for example, 'self-identity' and 'social bonding' place the consumer and their feelings/attitudes more centrally; posts within those categories explore the meaning of the brand to the consumer and examine

communications between consumers that strengthen bonds between them. As an example of the latter, conversations between family and close friends were drawn. Nevertheless, Waqas et al. (2020) fail to explore the communication between strangers and the impact of such exchanges. This is an important gap, since conversations between consumers within SMBCs are often between strangers or acquaintances (Phua et al., 2017).

From the above discussion, two streams of a customer typology within SMBCs can be distinguished: (1) one that looks at the processes and behaviour, and actions of the customer online (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Waqas et al., 2020); and (2) the second stream identifies online customer personas, based on a set of identified actions and behaviours (Benamar et al., 2017; Füller et al., 2014; Mathwick, 2002; Wang et al., 2020). These personas are then categorised forming a typology of traits based on patterns of contribution, not the contribution itself. Depending on the context of the study and the research question, the second stream can provide insights into a consumer post typology. This is because those personas identified often reveal themselves through such behaviours as posting. For that reason, researchers often link the users' profiles/roles with posting behaviour. In reviewing the current literature, it becomes evident that while significant progress has been made in the realm of user roles in online communities (as evidenced by works such as Benamar et al., 2017; Füller et al., 2014; Mathwick, 2002), the domain of consumer post typology has not seen a parallel development. The creation of empirically robust and comprehensive typologies holds paramount importance in the design and execution of effective social media marketing strategies, a sentiment echoed by Couraris et al. (2013). Such typologies serve as crucial tools in comprehensively understanding and navigating the intricacies of social media interactions and engagements. This is supported by a call for further research on consumer posts made by Waqas et al. (2020). At times, brands respond to posts published by consumers. Such replies are discussed in the next section.

2.3.3.3 Brand reply typology

The way brands communicate with their consumers through social media is of significance, as it can increase or decrease the level of trust between the consumer and a brand (Gretry et al., 2017). Strong brand-consumer communications are also important as they help create and maintain brand image, which is particularly significant for the brand when dealing with consumer complaints (Javornik et al., 2020). This is supported by Dhaoui and Webster (2020), who indicate how a brand's engagement in conversation with consumers enriches the consumer's consumption.

Work which explains/outlines a brand reply typology is a new area of research, as no such typology (to the best of the author's knowledge) is identified within the literature. Despite the lack of

overarching typology, some analysis of brand replies to consumer posts has been conducted. Two types of criteria were identified, the first revolving around the voice used by the brand and its impact on consumer satisfaction with complaint handling (Javornik et al., 2020); and the second, concentrating on communication style (Gretry et al., 2017; Deng et al., 2020).

Within the marketing communication literature, two types of communication styles have been identified: informal and formal (Gretry et al., 2017). These at times can be referred to as conversational human voice (CHV) and corporate voice (Javornik et al., 2020). Although informal communication and CHV have many commonalities (for instance, they have both been found to promote openness to dialogue), there are a few notable differences. According to Gretry et al. (2017), informal communication draws on more objective, operationalisable communication, while CHV offers more subjective perceptions. Both styles of communication are identified using common, non-official, casual/colloquial language, often associated with spoken language (Johnen and Schnittka, 2019). CHV often features non-verbal cues, such as emojis (Deng et al., 2020). It may, however, be challenging to distinguish informal communication from CHV. Javornik et al. (2020) suggest that such differentiation may be achieved through an individual approach and rhetoric that supports the exchange of opinions and strives for mutually beneficial agreement. Corporate voice, on the other hand, is described as consistent, formal and persuasive (Dijkmans et al., 2015).

Gretry et al. (2017) developed a list of linguistic features that enables the differentiation of informal and formal styles. The linguistic typology enlists features commonly used in an informal style, for instance, usage of a first name, usage of emoticons, usage of first and second-person pronouns or usage of sound mimicking. The authors also draw some comparisons between informal and formal styles. For example, comparing common expressions ('Waiting for you') vs. formal expressions ('Looking forward to hosting you'); active voice ('You can find more information on') vs. passive voice ('More information can be found on'); present tense ('Do') vs. conditional tense ('Would'). Brands often utilise CHV within social media, as social media in its nature facilitates conversations between actors (Barcelos et al., 2018; Johnen and Schnittka, 2019). Nevertheless, research shows that such an approach is not always beneficial (Barcelos et al., 2018; Gretry et al., 2017; Javornik et al., 2020), as such aspects as familiarity with the brand and brand trust have significant importance (Gretry et al., 2017). This might be linked with consumers considering a too friendly tone as a sign of manipulation.

On the other hand, consumers who already have a strong relationship with the brand are shown not to benefit from brand appreciation as they already exhibit a close relation to the brand (Andriuzzi and Michel, 2019). Gretry et al. (2017) suggest that consumers who are unfamiliar with a brand prefer a more formal style of communication, as CHV is often deemed as too intrusive; as the relationship

between consumer and brand develops, the acceptance of a more informal style increases. The use of certain linguistic features also has an impact on consumer engagement, in particular, enhancing consumers' interactivity with the brand and increasing the evaluation of the brand (Deng et al., 2020). Barcelos et al. (2018:62) recognise the fluidity of corporate and human voice, highlighting '...what exactly constitutes human or corporate voice is largely contextual'. There is still little known about the impact of tone of voice within the SMBC environment and further studies are warranted. For example, Gretry et al. (2017) call for additional investigation of the impact of employing different tones by different brand personalities on consumers, while Barcelos et al. (2018) suggest further exploration is needed to explore the tone of voice of real-life brands/its impact on consumer engagement.

2.3.4 Summary

The above subsection examined consumer engagement. Firstly, the theoretical underpinnings of consumer engagement were introduced. Following this, the concept of consumer engagement was discussed, particularly within the SMBC environment. The review of the literature has highlighted several research gaps, particularly in relation to a lack of qualitative studies in this field of research which explores how consumer engagement is built within online communities (Bilro and Loureiro, 2020). In addition, it has been noted that further research investigating different perspectives of consumer engagement is required (Santos et al., 2022), for instance, engagement granularity focusing on individual brand posts and consumer comments that provides a highly detailed view of consumer engagement through engagement typologies (Audy Martínek, 2021). Following that, an overview of consumer engagement typologies was presented, where the need for further research on refining/revisiting brand post typologies (Antoniadis et al., 2019) and consumer post typologies (Hua et al., 2021) was called for, given rapid changes in the social media landscape (Hanson and Carter, 2021).

The following section introduces and discusses value formation as a concept strongly associated with consumer engagement.

2.4 Value, co-creation and value formation

2.4.1 Introduction

Value co-creation is considered one of the key marketing concepts scrutinising processes of exchange (of knowledge and skills) with others (Vargo et al., 2020). It has been linked with several benefits for brands, including developing a positive impact on consumer loyalty (Muniz et al., 2001) and increasing consumer trust (Sashi, 2021). Value co-creation in brand communities has been linked with a reduction of marketing costs, due to the increase in communication which takes place organically between community members and the brand (Martínez-López et al., 2015). Within brand

communities, value co-creation can also help with customer relationship management, as via interactions, brands can foster and enhance around-the-clock customer relationships (Ge and Gretzel, 2018). Within the online environment, it is acknowledged that value co-creation activities are greatly influenced by the dynamics of social media platforms (Ge and Gretzel, 2018). While value co-creation is linked with consumer engagement, there is no consensus among researchers regarding the relationship between the two constructs (Abdul-Ghani et al., 2019; Chathoth et al., 2016; Cheung et al., 2021; Vivek et al., 2012). Despite opposing views, researchers agree that value co-creation in conjunction with consumer engagement creates positive outcomes for brands. For example, Siddique et al. (2021) argue that value co-creation and consumer engagement positively impact customer equity, customer trust and customer satisfaction. While there is a significant amount of research investigating value co-creation and consumer engagement, there is, however, limited research which examines engagement and value co-creation within the context of social media (Lin et al., 2018).

2.4.2 Value co-creation and consumer engagement

Co-creation and engagement share common attributes, namely interactive experiences and processes (Conduit and Chen, 2017). Both, consumer engagement and value co-creation emerge through interactive experiences, relationship marketing and SDL (Hollebeek, 2013). There is significant discussion which links consumer engagement and value co-creation (Hollebeek, 2013; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Vivek, 2009; M. Zhang et al., 2017) with increased consumer loyalty, satisfaction, consumer empowerment, connection, emotional bonding, trust and commitment (Brodie et al., 2013) and also positive purchase intentions (Kaveh et al., 2021). Engagement is thought to be a vector for value creation and co-creation (Dessart et al., 2015; Lima et al., 2019). Kaveh et al. (2021) suggest that consumer engagement is the key to the co-creation of value. Brodie et al. (2011) argue that co-creation is a process within consumer engagement through which new solutions can be developed. However, Abdul-Ghani et al. (2019) emphasise inconsistencies regarding consumer engagement and value co-creation within the literature – highlighting the debate surrounding which is a higher-order construct, understood as a larger, coherent construct used to organise knowledge (APA Dictionary of Psychology, no date). Chathoth et al. (2016) and Vivek et al. (2012) both argue that consumer engagement is the higher-order construct to the co-creation notion, as echoed by other researchers (Sashi, 2021; Zhang et al., 2017). Furthermore, this argument appears supported by Frow et al. (2011:1), who describes value co-creation as:

an interactive process, involving at least two willing resource integrating actors, which are engaged in a specific form(s) of mutually beneficial collaboration, resulting in value creation for those actors.

Nonetheless, other researchers offer an opposite view. Cheung et al. (2021), for example, demonstrate that value co-creation drives consumer engagement. This thesis takes a similar view to Brodie et al. (2011), Chathoth et al. (2016), Dessart et al. (2015) and Vivek et al. (2012), which proposes that consumer engagement is a higher-order construct to value co-creation. Therefore, for value co-creation to occur, consumer engagement must first exist.

Research exploring consumer engagement and value co-creation rose in prominence in the era of social media, as social media has been deemed a powerful environment that enables consumers to participate and be co-creators of value (Sashi, 2021). Social media is characterised by user-generated content and a constant exchange of information, therefore communities established on social media can effectively stimulate co-creation between other users (Dessart et al., 2015) and encourage collective processes of value creation (Simon and Tossan, 2018). Furthermore, social media (as an interactive environment) affords customers 'a voice', not only to express their own ideas and opinions, but also offers opportunities for them to be an active co-creator or even sole creators of value (Martínez-López et al., 2015; Sashi, 2012). For instance, Carlson et al. (2019) argue that SMBCs are an ideal environment for the facilitation of co-creation. Consumers who join SMBCs become active co-creators of their own experiences and consumption meaning (Sashi, 2012). Consumer engagement and value co-creation are of particular interest to practitioners, as the process of value co-creation can positively impact the customer-brand relationship within SMBCs (Sorensen et al., 2017; Zhang and Liu, 2021) and, through enhancing interaction and relationship building, can positively influence the affective bond a consumer has with a brand (Sanz-Blas et al., 2019). Nonetheless, despite the advancement of research, existing studies are scattered and therefore are difficult to summarise (Bailey et al., 2019; Felin et al., 2017). Priharsari et al. (2020) highlight calls for research to deepen our understanding of all the actors involved in collaborations within online communities.

2.4.3 Value and value co-creation in existing literature

The definition of 'value' depends on the context. Vargo and Lusch (2004:7), for example, defined value as: 'perceived and determined by the consumer on the basis of value-in-use'. This definition strongly links value with 'value-in-use', which is defined as value for customers, created by them during their use of resources (Rihova et al., 2018). Holbrook (2005:46), on the other hand, defines value as an: 'interactive, relativistic preference and experience'. Within Holbrook's (2005) definition, value is characterised by its uniqueness to each customer, which is conditional or context-dependent, relative (to alternatives) and dynamic (in constant change over time) (Smith and Colgate, 2007). Therefore, value is highly dependent on context and the consumer (Holmqvist et al., 2020).

Value co-creation underpins several marketing theories. Nonetheless, the definition of value co-

creation takes a different shape when considered through different theoretical lenses. However, broadly speaking, value co-creation can be understood as a: 'joint creation of value by the company and the customer' (Chathoth et al., 2016:224). Across recent decades value co-creation has been explored from different angles, and the focus of value creation has shifted from provider dominance to mutual agreement, and then more recently to co-creation and consumer dominance (Boysen Anker et al., 2015). Often, different terminology has been used to explore similar concepts. For example, in early brand community research, value co-creation was also referred to as value 'creation'. Schau et al. (2009:30) investigated 'collaborative value creation between and among consumers and firms'. More recently, the term value formation was coined (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011). As Grönroos and Voima (2013) explain, value formation processes involve both consumers and the firm. The emergence of the digital environment has had a tremendous impact on the co-creation concept (Hidayanti et al., 2018). Ge and Gretzel (2018), for example, argue that value co-creation activities are influenced by the dynamics of social media platforms. To highlight the various viewpoints on value co-creation, the key theories through which the concept is embedded will be discussed in the following section.

2.4.4 Value co-creation in marketing theories

Value co-creation is situated as a core component of SDL. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, SDL is seen to have evolved from relationship marketing and it has been developed in response to the emergence of services (Terblanche, 2014). SDL can be described as a 'view, in which intangibility, exchange processes, and relationships are central' (Vargo and Lusch, 2004:2). Vargo et al. (2020:4) describe co-creation within SDL as a process of exchange of knowledge and skills with other actors 'to support what they are trying to accomplish'. In other words, value co-creation is the goal that is achieved through the exchange of services (Grönroos, 2017; Vargo et al., 2020). SDL refers to participants of exchange as actors, to avoid division between producer and consumer which unifies the position of all parties involved (Lusch and Vargo, 2011). Despite this, it simultaneously acknowledges that the position of the actors involved might be different (Vargo and Lusch, 2015), although not necessarily lesser. This could imply that the value aspiration of each actor may vary. This view is supported by Strandvik et al. (2019), who suggest that brands and consumers have different expectations and goals, as they enter interactions with different standpoints and end aspirations. As this thesis differentiates different actors by their standpoint, this lens is not suitable and will not be taken forward in the rest of the discussion.

Service logic (SL) emerged from the service field and places emphasis on the provider-customer interaction (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Vargo et al. (2020) argue that SL builds on SDL, however,

it is much more focused on the value created between two actors. This view is supported by Sorensen and Drennan (2017), who suggest that SL explores value co-creation on a micro-level, distinguishing participants' roles and actions. The value exchange process within SL takes the form of 'value-in-use' (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015; Vargo et al., 2020), which determines the consumer-centricity of SL (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). Within SL, the brand or company is viewed solely as a value facilitator, generating potential value for customers, and is viewed as a value creator (Sorensen and Drennan, 2017). While the consumer-centric approach of SL is consistent with the approach of this thesis, the narrow consideration of value creation is contradictory. For instance, SL looks predominately at value co-creation between brands and consumers. Furthermore, the strong focus on services (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015) makes this lens unsuitable for this thesis.

Within the CDL lens, value co-creation is understood as: 'intentional goal- and task-oriented activities' (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015:479). However, unlike SDL, value co-creation does not play a central role within CDL. Heinonen and Strandvik (2015) argue that value co-creation offers limited insight into value likely to emerge, as only certain value types are co-created. For that reason, the authors suggest 'value formation' to be a more exclusive notion. Value formation is understood as autonomous value emergence through use, physical or mental experience (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Within the notion of value formation, the value *emerges* as opposed to being deliberately created (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015); it also does not indicate the pursuance of value, neither does it suggest that value emerges through action (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011). The customer drives value from brand-mediated content but independent from provider influence behaviours (Boysen Anker et al., 2015). The value formation is predominantly based on customer-provider interaction (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). However, value co-creation (within the CDL lens) can also emerge before or after interactions with a provider, as it emerges in the customer's context and practices (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018). Furthermore, value formation can be partially hidden from the provider, and may be outside of their control (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018). Any outcome of value creation is customer-specific to their interpretation, experience or everyday life expectations (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). The focus has shifted from exploring value formation through interactions to exploring the tactics that providers can utilise to be continuously present in a customer's value in use (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018). CDL views value co-creation as a special instance of value formation, highlighting that value is not always mutually co-created as providers and consumers might have conflicting interests (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018). While co-creation is an important element of SMBCs, the environment also allows value to be harnessed asynchronously. CDL acknowledges different routes to value through incorporating value co-creation within value

formation. Furthermore, CDL recognises that co-creation can result in different value for each actor involved. Thereby CDL was deemed as the most suitable lens for this thesis. As customers create value with the use of their own resources, it is in a provider's interest to supply tools and knowledge that can help customers to expand these resources, therefore enabling them to reach higher levels of value, and consequently satisfaction (Eggert et al., 2018). Practitioners should consider using SMBCs as a tool. In short period, social media and SMBCs have become a source of influence impacting their users (Kaur et al., 2018). Social media sites, in general, allow their users to communicate and connect with people with similar interests (Zaglia, 2013), or, in the case of SMBCs, to connect with a brand and to communicate with other users of that brand/its products. Communication within SMBCs is instantaneous and is rapidly disseminated among a large number of recipients (Fujita et al., 2018). Such interconnectedness is very attractive to companies and brands who are interested in achieving strong connections with their customers and seek to benefit from customers acting as advocates for their brands and products (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018). Furthermore, SMBC facilitates connections with like-minded people and offers opportunities to discuss and share ideas and new content (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018; Habibi et al., 2014b; Liu et al., 2019). Ge and Gretzel (2018) suggest that value within social media is generated through various activities, however, the value varies depending on the undertaken activity. For example, commenting on a post adds value through enhancement, while liking a post adds value through endorsement. Furthermore, the authors emphasise that through those actions value is formed not only for oneself but also for other consumers.

Despite value co-creation being widely used and researched, it still presents a challenge as it includes several actors, notions and viewpoints (Grönroos, 2017; Vargo et al., 2020). For example, Grönroos and Voima (2013) argue that research can adopt a customer-grounded view or provider-grounded view. Another challenge with conceptualising value creation comes from its fluidity. Value co-creation is very subjective and context dependent (Hollebeek et al., 2020). Therefore, a different value might be formed by different stakeholders, and the value might emerge at different moments. It is important to note that value creation is not a linear process: the customer's and provider's activities can occur in any order or sequence. It can also emerge on different levels of consciousness (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). Consequently, scholars call for further research on co-creation (Sashi, 2021), specifically exploring its links with consumer engagement (Liu et al., 2020), particularly in an online environment (Holmqvist et al., 2020; Priharsari et al., 2020).

2.4.5 Value

While the value types formed through co-creation are important to acknowledge, the co-creation

value typology is not a focus of this thesis, therefore a fundamental consumer value typology overview is provided for context. Holmqvist et al. (2020) argue that value is highly dependable on context and the customer and can, therefore, take different characteristics and attributes. The types of value and their categorisation differ across the literature (Payne et al., 2020). Also, the scope and importance of individual value creation types fluctuate throughout the years in the literature and are impacted by the technological development and emergence of social media (Zhang et al., 2017). As earlier discussed, with the introduction of customer- dominant logic (CDL) and the increasing focus on services (SDL), the viewpoint on value creation significantly shifted, placing the customer at the centre of the value-creating process, as well as highlighting possible conflicts or differences of interest between customers and brands (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018). This resulted in looking at created value from a consumer *and* provider standpoint. This idea was developed further by Holmqvist et al. (2020), who presented consumer and brand value processes that consist of value creation before and after consumer-brand interactions. By doing so, they indicate that value can be created individually, but also at a different stage of the consumer purchase process. Within the social media literature, value has been discussed and positioned in different contexts. Depending on the research design, value creation (or co-creation) is seen as an outcome (Linda Hollebeek, 2011; Kumar et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012), the antecedent of engagement (Roberts and Alpert, 2010) or antecedent to loyalty, satisfaction and trust (Martínez- López et al., 2015).

Sheth et al. (1991) identified five key customer value types, namely *functional value*, *social value*, *emotional value*, *epistemic value* and *conditional value*. Over time, the breadth and depth of value types have been developed and expanded (Smith and Colgate, 2007). However, the value types identified in the existing literature can be systemised in three, overarching categories, namely: (1) functional/instrumental; (2) experiential/hedonic; and (3) symbolic/expressive (Smith and Colgate, 2007):

- *Functional/instrumental value* refers to offerings' characteristics and functions and comprises functional value (Sheth et al., 1991)
- *Experiential/hedonic value* refers to consumers' feelings, emotions and experiences and comprises emotional value, social/relational value and epistemic value (Sheth et al., 1991)
- *Symbolic/expressive value* refers to the way consumers associate themselves with products or services or prescribe particular psychological meaning to products/services (Smith and Colgate, 2007). It is closely related to personal meaning (Holbrook, 2005) and self-expression (Woodall, 2003).

The overview of different value types identified in the literature is summarised in Table 4.

Table 4 Systematisation of value types

Functional/Instrumental value category		Experiential/Hedonic value category		Symbolic/Expressive value category	
Value type	Definition	Value type	Definition	Value type	Definition
Functional value (Sheth et al., 1991)	A value derived from physical and utilitarian attributes (Sheth et al., 1991)	Emotional value (Sheth et al., 1991)	A value derived from feelings or affective states (Sheth et al., 1991)	Personal meaning value (Holbrook, 2005)	A value derived through a development of a personal association with the brand or offering (Smith and Colgate, 2007)
		Social/relational value (Sheth et al., 1991)	A value derived from association with others (Zainuddin and Gordon, 2020), that enables enhancement of self-concept and is often correlated with engaging with like-minded people or an increase of belongingness (Zhang et al., 2020)	Self-expression value (Woodall, 2003)	A value derived from utilising an offering to express one's personalities (Smith and Colgate, 2007)
		Epistemic value (Sheth et al., 1991)	A value derived from curiosity and need of knowledge-seeking (Sheth et al., 1991)		

Despite the tremendous impact of technological developments and social media on value creation (Zhang et al., 2017), value types within functional/instrumental and experiential/hedonic categories remain amongst the most frequently discussed in the wider literature (Han and Kim, 2020; Mingione et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020), namely: social value, emotional value, functional and epistemic value. Social value is derived from association with others (Zainuddin and Gordon, 2020), which enables the enhancement of the self-concept, and is often linked with engaging with like-minded people or an increased feeling of belongingness and connection (Zhang et al., 2020). Emotional value is rooted in

experience (Mingione et al., 2020) and draws on such emotions as pleasure, delight, enjoyment or happiness (Zhang et al., 2020), but equally anger or fear (Zainuddin and Gordon, 2020). Functional value is a pragmatic appeal and refers to functionality and attributes of a product/service offering (Zhang et al., 2020). Epistemic or experiential value is observed when a customer's curiosity is awakened (Zhang et al., 2020). This type of value is strongly associated with learning and information-seeking behaviour (Pandey, 2020).

Zwass (2010) stresses the considerable role of the consumer in value creation, indicating that consumers are the creators and drivers of value which can be formed through sharing knowledge or supporting one another. Therefore, participation and collaboration within the value creation processes – along with the interactivity and ability to connect with other, like-minded people – are significant within SMBC environments (Cova and White, 2010; Sanz-Blas et al., 2019). While the overarching value types (introduced above) are adapted within a social media environment, value types stemming from psychological and sociological processes are often a focus of research (Sanz-Blas et al., 2019), especially in the SMBC environment where the community aspect is very important (Martínez-López et al., 2015). Consequently, the variety of value types derived from interpersonal interactions has expanded the value typology in said areas. For example, self-expression value understood as the ability to reflect or express personality, taste or values through an offering, has gained importance in the social media environment (de Vries et al., 2017).

While in existing literature there is a dynamic discussion focused on consumer value types, Holmqvist et al. (2020) examined value formation from a different standpoint. First, different actors within the interaction process were distinguished. As a result, Holmqvist et al. (2020) differentiate between provider and consumer value types. Furthermore, the authors acknowledge the possibility of value formation at different phases of the customer journey. Subsequently, they argue that the value process consists of value creation *before* and *after* consumer-brand interaction (Holmqvist et al., 2020). Table 5 provides an overview of the different types of value created, depending on the actor and phase of the creation process.

Table 5 Provider's and consumer's value types (adapted from Holmqvist et al. 2020)

Phase	Provider's sphere	Consumer's sphere
Pre-interaction phase	Value facilitation · Provider designs resources	Value anticipation
Interaction phase	Value co-creation	Value co-creation
Post-interaction phase	Value learning · Provider learns about value propositions, through interaction and observation of consumers' value creation.	Value creation · Consumers create value independently (on their own or with peers), with the support of the provider's resources.

2.4.6 Summary

The above section has focused on value formation and co-creation within the SMBC environment. First, the discussion linked value co-creation with the consumer engagement lens. As a result, the debate over the relationship between consumer engagement and value co-creation was revealed. The discussion also highlighted the need for further research on the relationship between consumer engagement and value formation within the SMBC environment. Following that, the focus moved towards co-creation within marketing theories. The adaptation of co-creation within principal theory lenses was discussed. Through the discussion of the most prominent theoretical lenses, SDL and SL lenses were deemed as not suitable for this thesis as the consideration of actors' standpoint (SDL) and narrow consideration (SL) led to these theories being unsuitable.

CDL was deemed as the most suitable lens for this thesis as it recognises different ways of forming value as well as different standpoints of actors involved in co-creation. Next, elementary value types widely adapted within the literature were discussed and SMBCs' perspective on identified value types was presented. Finally, a value process by Holmqvist et al. (2020) was discussed, which provides an overview of value-generating processes linked with brand-consumer interaction. Moreover, this chapter assists in addressing the research objective of reviewing research on cosmetics SMBCs, in particular related to value formation and consumer engagement.

2.5 Chapter summary

The preceding chapter has delved into three principal areas significant to this thesis, namely the communities with a particular focus on the social media environment, consumer engagement with a strong emphasis on the social media landscape and value, co-creation and value formation. The investigation into communities and SMBC literature has revealed the need for further research on SMBCs (Dwivedi et al., 2021) owing to the fast-paced nature of the environment (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2017) and the persistent struggle of brands to sustain consumer engagement (Kaur

et al., 2016). The incapability to leverage the potential of SMBCs via capturing consumer engagement has implications for a brand's capacity to strengthen the brand-consumer relationship through SMBCs (Gummerus et al., 2012; Kamboj et al., 2018; Simon and Tossan, 2018), and can negatively affect consumers loyalty and trust. Furthermore, the analysis of consumer engagement literature accentuated the need for further research due to rapid changes in the social media landscape (Hanson and Carter, 2021), in addition to a lack of qualitative studies in this field (Audy Martínek, 2021; Santos et al., 2022). The literature review has also brought to the forefront the need for further research on different perspectives of consumer engagement (Santos et al., 2022), notably granular engagement, which provides a highly detailed perspective of consumer engagement through engagement typologies (Audy Martínek, 2021). The inquiry into value, co-creation and value formation has revealed that value co-creation is highly subjective and context dependent (Hollebeek et al., 2020) and can emerge on different levels of consciousness (Grönroos and Voima, 2013). Consequently, there are calls for further research on co-creation (Sashi, 2021), specifically regarding its links with consumer engagement (Liu et al., 2020), particularly in the online environment (Holmqvist et al., 2020; Priharsari et al., 2020), as there is a lack of research that investigates engagement and value co-creation within social media (Lin et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological approach of the present study. It begins by discussing the research philosophy and outlining the most appropriate research paradigm followed. Next, it provides an overview of the netnographic paradigm in accordance with newly published recommendations. Then, it outlines netnographic movements and procedures undertaken within this thesis. Following that, a discussion around ethics and limitations is provided. The chapter closes with a summary.

3.2 Research philosophy

Research philosophy is understood as a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge (Saunders, 2019). Implementing a research philosophy is imperative to generating meaningful and credible research. An adopted research philosophy determines how the researcher looks at the research, the research questions and the world surrounding the research or what path she chooses in data collection and analyses.

The research onion (Figure 14) illustrates how the chosen research philosophy affects the research paradigm, theory development and, consequently, research methods. Therefore, the selected philosophy will influence research assumptions that stem from the stance on the nature of realities and means of assimilating knowledge (Bell et al., 2022).

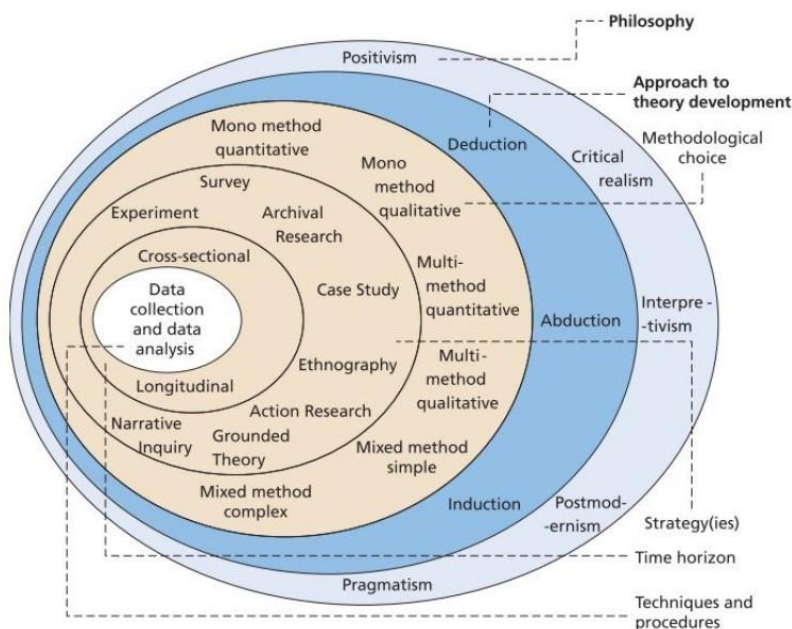


Figure 14 The 'Research onion' (Source: Saunders, 2019)

As business and management research emerged from a mixture of disciplines stemming from the social sciences, natural sciences, applied sciences, humanities and organisational practice, various philosophies are adopted by researchers (Kozinets, 2020). Despite that, two main perspectives on adopting research philosophies emerged, namely unificationism and pluralism. The former calls for conducting research under one research philosophy, paradigm and methodology, while the latter encourages various viewpoints as a useful and enriching research practice (Saunders, 2019). However, to take a stance on the research philosophy, one must demonstrate a full understanding of the foundations of philosophy: ontology, epistemology and axiology.

3.2.1 Ontology

Ontology is the philosophical field revolving around (the study of) the nature of reality (all that is or exists), and the different entities and categories within reality (Saunders, 2019). Therefore, it is related to human existence and the nature of being (Daymon, 2010). As the outlook on reality is individual, it is assumed that the researcher's view of the nature of people and their activities, as well as the culture in which those activities are undertaken, will affect the stance that she will adopt as well as research methods. Within business studies, two social ontologies are predominantly adopted, namely objectivism and constructivism (Ng, 2013). Objectivism argues that the social reality that is researched is external to a researcher and other social actors, therefore it supports realism; it contends that social and physical phenomena exist independently, outside of people's views and it is universal and enduring in character (Saunders, 2019). Constructivism looks at reality as an entity constructed through social interactions, hence social actors create meanings and realities which become intersubjective (Saunders, 2019). Therefore, categories used by people to understand the natural and social worlds are social products and their meaning is likely to change through time and place (Bell et al., 2019).

3.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is the philosophical field revolving around (the study of) knowledge and how to reach it. It presents assumptions about the validity and legitimacy of knowledge, as well as means of communicating that knowledge to others (Saunders, 2019). Business studies typically adopt one of two epistemologies, namely positivism or interpretivism (Ng, 2013). Positivism relies on verifiable, measurable data uninfluenced by human interpretation, and the conduction of hypothesis testing (Saunders, 2019) and it is rooted in the ontological belief that an objective reality exists (Daymon, 2010). The role of a researcher, who adopts a positivist's stance, is to collect and analyse data in a way that enables the development of generalisable propositions (Bell et al., 2019). Interpretivism, on the

other hand, focuses on a researcher immersed in a project and research design. Therefore, interpretivism promotes the role of the researcher and encourages, to varying degrees, incorporating personal views in the shape of the choice of literature, research design and analysis (Ng, 2013). Interpretivism is rooted in constructivism as it expresses an ontological belief in multiple realities and in socially constructed reality that is open to change (Daymon, 2010), therefore it shares the viewpoint of the social sciences (Bell et al., 2019).

3.2.3 Axiology

Axiology discusses the role of values and ethics within research. A researcher must decide upon the impact of her own values and beliefs on the research, as well as on the participants of the research (Saunders, 2019). The stance on axiology will predominantly be dictated by the chosen philosophy, thus objectivism will incorporate a value-free, detached axiology, whereas subjectivism is characterised by a value-bound, reflexive axiology (Bell et al., 2022). It is argued, however, that complete objectivity cannot be achieved as the researcher's prior knowledge, experience and attitudes will influence how they approach data collection and what elements of research they focus on. Therefore, striving for reflexivity and relation to their own values is recommended (Bell et al., 2019). Axiology also concerns ethics in research. A researcher can adopt one of two conflicting stands, namely deontological and teleological. The former claims that acting outside of set rules is never justified. The latter argues the justification of an act of conduct should be determined by consequences, not predetermined rules (Saunders, 2019). Ethical considerations might vary in a field, in business research they usually revolve around: harm to participants (and the researcher), lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception (Bell et al., 2022).

3.3 Research paradigms

To design and deliver meaningful research, one must acknowledge and understand research paradigms and select the most suitable for the planned research (Saunders, 2019). Therefore, three research paradigms applied in social sciences are presented, namely: (1) positivism, (2) interpretivism, and (3) pragmatism. Each of them is discussed in turn; following this discussion, a table presenting a summary of each concept is introduced.

3.3.1 Positivism

Positivism is a research paradigm that assumes an objective and external reality that can be observed and measured using quantitative methods. As noted by Bell et al. (2019), positivism is typically adopted by researchers working in the natural sciences who seek to produce law-like generalisations based on observable social reality. Positivist research focuses on tangible aspects of human activity, for example, behaviours or speech (Fisher and Buglear, 2007). Within positivism research, quantitative

methods, such as random sampling, empirical testing, control variables and control groups, are used to collect numerical data (Scotland, 2012).

Positivism assumes that research is value-free and not impacted by the researcher, who remains objective. The logic of positivist within social sciences is deductive, and involves hypothesis framing, data collection, and hypothesis testing or falsification (Bell et al., 2019). However, it has been acknowledged that positivism has limitations when applied to the social world, particularly linked with the aim of simplifying the research, which in social world is not always possible (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Therefore, positivist paradigm is not always applicable within social science research, as noted by Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), the social world is complex, and reducing it to simple causal relationships may not capture its richness and diversity. Additionally, the results of positivist research are heavily dependent on the choice of instruments and sample size, which can result in poor quality results if not appropriately selected (Collins, 2010; Ramanathan, 2008; Wilson, 2014).

Finally, generalising the results of positivist research can lead to minimising the significance of individual responses, as noted by Saunders (2019), Scotland (2012). This can limit the understanding of the unique experiences and perspectives of individuals and groups. Positivism's narrow focus on quantitative research can also limit the testing of causal factors in complex social phenomena (Antwi and Hamza, 2015).

3.3.2 Interpretivism

Interpretivism is a research paradigm that emphasises the importance of understanding the unique nature of human beings as creators of meaning, distinct from the physical world. According to Saunders (2019), this approach requires a research logic that recognises the distinctiveness of humans and their social and historical context. Interpretivism posits that reality is constructed by humans through their interactions with one another, and that this reality is shaped by their social and historical location (Daymon, 2010). As a result, interpretivism places significant emphasis on cultural and behavioural aspects of research (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

One of the key features of interpretivism is its social constructionist ontology (Bell et al., 2019). This ontology suggests that knowledge is not objective, and that reality is constructed through social processes (Saunders, 2019). According to this view, human beings actively shape their environment through their interactions with one another, and this environment is influenced by their social and historical location (Fisher and Buglear, 2007). As a result, interpretive research seeks to understand the meaning that individuals ascribe to their experiences within a particular context.

Interpretive research typically involves value-bound research, where the researcher is a part of the researched subject and a key contributor (Saunders, 2019). This paradigm emphasises the importance of the researcher's subjective experience and encourages them to be reflexive about their own positionality within the research process. Interpretive research predominantly relies on qualitative data, which is collected through a variety of methods, including open-ended interviews, focus groups, open-ended questionnaires, observation, think-aloud protocols and role-playing (Scotland, 2012).

The aim of interpretive research is to explore the richness of the data (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020), leading to a more in-depth understanding of the context and more insightful conclusions (Myers, 2019; Saunders, 2019). Interpretive research seeks to generate new knowledge by exploring the meaning that individuals ascribe to their experiences within a particular context. It values depth over breadth, and as a result, interpretive research is often limited to individual cases (Scotland, 2012).

However, one of the limitations of interpretive research is its limited transferability and generalisability (Scotland, 2012). This is because interpretive research relies on subjective data interpretation, which can lead to different researchers interpreting the same data in different ways. As a result, it can be difficult to generalise the findings of interpretive research to other contexts or populations.

3.3.3 Pragmatism

Pragmatism is a research paradigm that emphasises the practical consequences of concepts and ideas in specific contexts. According to Saunders (2019), pragmatism combines objectivism and subjectivism views by recognising that theories, concepts and findings are only relevant if they support action. This paradigm emphasises the importance of practical solutions to problems that are often applied, practical and instrumental, as emphasised by Daymon (2010). As a result, the choice of theory or methods is secondary to the practical implications of research.

Pragmatism is value-driven, and the researcher's doubts and beliefs are integral to the research process (Wicks and Freeman, 1998). The researcher leads a reflexive process of inquiry, acknowledging multiple points of view and the existence of different ways to interpret the world and undertake research, as noted by Saunders (2019). This paradigm recognises that research is not a neutral or objective endeavour but is shaped by the researcher's values, beliefs and experiences.

Pragmatism emphasises the importance of context in shaping the practical consequences of research (Saunders, 2019). Therefore, it recognises that what works in one context may not work in another, and that solutions must be tailored to specific situations. Pragmatists stress the importance of

applying research findings to real-world problems, and the practical implications of research are a key consideration (Wicks and Freeman, 1998).

As pragmatism offers flexibility and adaptability (Saunders, 2019), it encourages researchers to be creative and innovative in their methods and to tailor their research to specific contexts. As such, pragmatism supports the use of a mix of different research methods and modes of analysis (Mitchell and Education, 2018). Pragmatism also acknowledges that research is an ongoing process, and that findings are subject to revision and refinement based on new information and changing circumstances.

However, one of the limitations of pragmatism is its focus on practical solutions at the expense of theoretical rigour (Wicks and Freeman, 1998), as it emphasises the practical implications of research over theoretical considerations, as a result, it may overlook important theoretical insights. Additionally, pragmatism may be criticised for its lack of a clear methodological framework, as researchers are encouraged to be flexible and adaptable in their methods (Saunders, 2019).

Table 6 provides an overview of the discussed paradigms.

Table 6 Summary of three research philosophical positions: positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism (Source: Saunders, 2019)

Ontology (nature of reality or being)	Epistemology (what constitutes acceptable knowledge)	Axiology (role of value)	Typical methods
Positivism			
Real, external, independent One true reality (universalism) Granular (things) Ordered	Scientific method Observable and measurable facts Law-like generalisations Numbers Casual explanation and prediction as contribution	Value-free research Researcher is detached, neutral and independent of what is researched Researcher maintains objective stance	Typically deductive, highly structured, large samples, measurement, typically quantitative methods of analysis, but a range of data can be analysed
Interpretivism			
Complex, rich Socially constructed through culture and language Multiple meanings, interpretations, realities Flux of processes, experiences, practices	Theories and concepts too simplistic Focus on narratives, stories, perceptions, and interpretations New understandings and worldviews as contribution	Value-bound research Researchers are part of what is researched, subjective Researcher interpretations key to contribution Researcher reflexive	Typically inductive. Small samples, in-depth investigations, qualitative methods of analysis, but a range of data can be interpreted

Pragmatism			
Complex, rich, external 'Reality' is the practical consequences of ideas Flux of processes, experiences, and practices	Practical meaning of knowledge in specific contexts 'True' theories and knowledge are those that enable successful action Focus on problems, practices, and relevance Problem solving and informed future <u>practice as contribution</u>	Value-driven research Research initiated and sustained by researcher's doubts and beliefs Researcher reflexive	Following research problem and research question Range of methods: mixed, multiple, qualitative, quantitative, action research Emphasis on practical solutions and outcomes

3.4 Hermeneutic interpretation

Hermeneutics, as defined by Ferraris (1996:1), is an 'art of interpretation' that has been used extensively in qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning behind texts. It explores the ways in which texts are read and understood and seeks to establish bridges between opposing views by understanding diverse motivations (Thiselton, 2009). The process of hermeneutics encourages researchers to reach beyond the surface level of a text and seek a deeper understanding of its meaning (Diwatao, 2001).

Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2010) argue that hermeneutics considers the process of understanding to be open-ended, consisting of exploring concepts as a whole and by taking them apart. As such, it recognises that the interpretation of texts is complex and nuanced and requires a deep understanding of the underlying phenomena. According to Kinsella (2006), hermeneutics has several key principles that guide its approach. Firstly, it seeks understanding rather than explanation, which implies that the interpretive process is aimed at uncovering the meaning and significance of a text rather than offering a causal explanation (Kinsella, 2006). Secondly, hermeneutics acknowledges the situated location of interpretation, recognising that the interpretation of texts is always contingent on the cultural and historical context of the researcher (Kinsella, 2006). Thirdly, hermeneutics views language as a crucial aspect of interpretation and recognises that language is both a condition and a limitation of understanding (Wachterhauser, 1986). Fourthly, it views inquiry as a conversation, emphasising the importance of dialogue and interaction between the researcher and the text (Kinsella, 2006). Finally, hermeneutics is comfortable with ambiguity, recognising that the interpretation of texts is often complex and multifaceted, and that there may be multiple interpretations of a text (Kinsella, 2006).

Gadamer (1996) suggests that hermeneutic interpretation should take the shape of a conversation between texts and the researcher. As such, it emphasises the importance of engaging with the text and exploring its meaning through an ongoing dialogue between the researcher's pre-understandings and the text itself. Pre-understanding can be described as a preliminary understanding that provides a bridge to deeper, more secure understanding (Thiselton, 2009). Hermeneutics recognises that the interpretation of texts is only true when placed in the appropriate context (Kinsella, 2006). Thus, hermeneutics is valuable for researchers seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning behind texts and to bridge opposing views through understanding diverse motivations. By engaging in a process of open-ended exploration and dialogue, researchers can uncover the rich layers of meaning that lie beneath the surface of texts and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in their field.

3.4.1 The hermeneutic circle

Hermeneutics circle refers to a continuous dialogue between data and the researcher's pre-understandings, allowing the researcher to create meaning based on the data (Bell et al., 2023). The hermeneutic circle places importance on the process of understanding the meaning and prompts the researcher to be open to studying phenomena, rather than attaching their own meaning (Gadamer, 1989), which should support the researcher in embracing the meaning held by others. Simultaneously, the researcher should be conscious of their own bias. Therefore, throughout the interpretation process, a researcher should circle between the parts and the whole, as the meaning of the whole would change through the changes in understanding of its parts (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010).

The hermeneutic circle also promotes openness in research, as by implementing the process, the interpreter's horizons are continually moving and expanding (Thiselton, 2009). The hermeneutic circle is valuable for researchers seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning behind data and to bridge opposing views through understanding diverse motivations. It is particularly relevant in qualitative research, where the interpretation of data is complex and requires a nuanced understanding of the underlying phenomena. By engaging in a constant dialogue between data and pre-understandings, researchers can gain a more profound and nuanced understanding of the meaning behind data and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in their field.

3.5 Chosen research philosophy and paradigm

The researcher believes adopting the interpretivist paradigm is the most fitting for the present study for reasons which will now be presented. Interpretivism is usually adopted within complex and rich realities that are subjective and socially constructed. The present study is set in a social media environment. Social media is a culturally rich environment that is based on human interactions. On the contrary, positivism suggests that there is one reality that is independent of human beings (Bell et

al., 2022); therefore, this paradigm was deemed as not suitable. Interpretivists often adopt constructionism as its nature aligns with the viewpoint of realities being constructed through social interactions in which social actors partially share the meanings and realities (Ng, 2013; Saunders, 2019). This viewpoint is coherent with the nature of social media which is based on human interactions. Furthermore, this thesis places significant importance on communication within the communities as well as relationships that stem from interactions. Therefore, different opinions and narratives are pivotal for this study. This aligns with the interpretivist paradigm that focuses on narratives, stories, perceptions and interpretations; however, it is contrary to pragmatism which concentrates on problems, practices and relevance (Daymon, 2010). The use of qualitative methods is also consistent with the interpretivist research. The methodological approach for analysing brand posts and consumer comments in this study is rooted in thematic analysis. This process involves breaking down the data into segments, assigning codes, and then developing pattern codes that converge into broader themes (Kozinets, 2020). It is important to note that these themes emerged organically from the data itself, despite being preceded by an initial literature review. While the analysis aimed to provide a comprehensive depiction of the dataset, some intricacies and depth might not have been reported in pursuit of maintaining an overall perspective, as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach aligns with the interpretive paradigm, which is instrumental in examining social interactions within specific contexts – in the case of this thesis, within SMBCs. As the present research was informed by theories, it does not align with the pragmatic paradigm, which emphasises a focus on practical applications and real-world problem-solving, which is given more importance than a thorough review of the existing literature (Saunders, 2019).

In summary, this study adopts the position of the interpretivist and assumes that realities are complex, rich and socially constructed. Stories and opinions of social actors interacting within researched SMBCs are pivotal to understanding the socially constructed realities of the individuals involved in the study. This research also deploys qualitative methods and in-depth investigations where the researcher is reflexive and whose interpretations contribute to the outcomes of the research. Next, the chapter will further examine the research methodologies that are most appropriate for this study.

3.6 Netnography

3.6.1 Explanation and definitions

Netnography can be considered as

a set of general instructions relating to a specific way to conduct qualitative social media research using a combination of 25 different research practices grouped into three distinct

categories of data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation movements (Kozinets, 2020:7).

However, unlike any other qualitative methods, netnography places emphasis on online traces: records left behind by any online activity. Netnography consists of four elements, namely cultural focus, social media data, immersive engagement and netnographic praxis. These elements link netnography to fields that emerged from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, while distinguishing from other, similar methods (digital ethnography, virtual ethnography) and techniques (content analysis, text mining, big data analytics).

Netnography has been used successfully to study consumer engagement within online environments (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2017; Lima et al., 2019; Quinton, 2010). As netnography is very diverse, it can be utilised in a variety of research contexts, across different data gathered, subjects studied, and social media used. Kozinets (2020), the founder of netnography, offers guidance to navigate the spectrum of steps and pathways available when conducting netnographic studies. As Kozinets (2020) explains, such proposed steps should only be considered as guidelines, with specific detail regarding precise netnographic procedures to follow and each element should be selected based on particular research needs/contexts. In this aspect, netnography is relatively flexible in its approach. Nevertheless, all netnographies should be characterised by the use of mentioned earlier online traces and strong ethical underpinning (Buhalis, 2022).

Kozinets (2020) introduces 25 data operations, which fall under six procedural movements, and introduces a step-by-step guide to conducting netnographic research from the very beginning, when ideas and research questions are formulated, to the very end, when findings are disseminated. Each of the movements acts as a guideline and is designed for a different research phase; the implementation of each should be dictated by the nature of undertaken research. Therefore, the researcher would decide which and how many of the data collection operations should be employed within the research, guided by the research question and the design of the research (Kozinets, 2020).

3.6.2 Emergence of netnography in current research

Netnography is often associated with online ethnography (Kozinets, 2020), which offers great flexibility; however, online ethnography lacks direction and clear guidelines that result in inaccurate reporting and the inability to formulate common knowledge and research that can be recreated (Kozinets, 2020).

Netnography requires frequent updates as it is located in a dynamic social and technological context (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2022). Netnography is considered to have a pragmatic approach that offers a

baseline for researchers, enabling them to steer through research, despite how distinctive it is. Furthermore, to ensure netnography is as inclusive as possible, Kozinets refers to the body of research conducted with netnography, which 'Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research' (2020) draws on. The use of netnography has ignited a debate around the boundaries of netnography (Costello et al., 2017). Kozinets is predominantly cited as the most credible and up-to-date source of information on procedures and practices of netnography (Brodie et al., 2013; Maslowska et al., 2016; de Valck et al., 2009).

3.6.3 The inception of netnography

Considering the research landscape, netnography is a comparatively new addition (Gilchrist and Ravenscroft, 2011). Though, how it is considered heavily depends on the field that it is being adopted in. In management and business studies, netnography has been successfully adopted, with many researchers considering it to be an established research practice (Costello et al., 2017). However, as a relatively new qualitative method, it is continuously evolving. The continuous demand of evaluating netnography comes from the change of practice, but more importantly from the ever-evolving social media landscape (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2022). Its evolution, though, causes difficulties in the application of netnography.

Many researchers associate netnography with similar concepts used for researching online environments, namely online ethnography, virtual ethnography, digital ethnography and digital anthropology, and is often discussed interchangeably with the above terms (Nimrod, 2012; Xun and Reynolds, 2010). Yet, netnography is a separate construct with its own paradigm. Therefore, the first step in conducting netnographic research should be to distinguish similar constructs and to confirm the appropriateness of netnography as the selected method. Historically, netnography was considered to be the '[...] ethnography of online network actors and interactions [...]' (Kozinets, 2020:15) tightly associated with anthropology and sociology. However, through the development of praxis, and clear principles and procedures, currently it is distinctly differentiated from ethnography.

3.6.4 The stages of netnography

As the research stages and procedural movements were updated and redesigned recently (Kozinets, 2022) and have not been adopted by wider research, the next section will briefly discuss the procedural movements to provide an overview of netnographic practice. Figure 15 provides an overview of the procedural movements that will be discussed in the subsequent sections. Following that, section 3.7 will address the steps and decisions taken within this research.

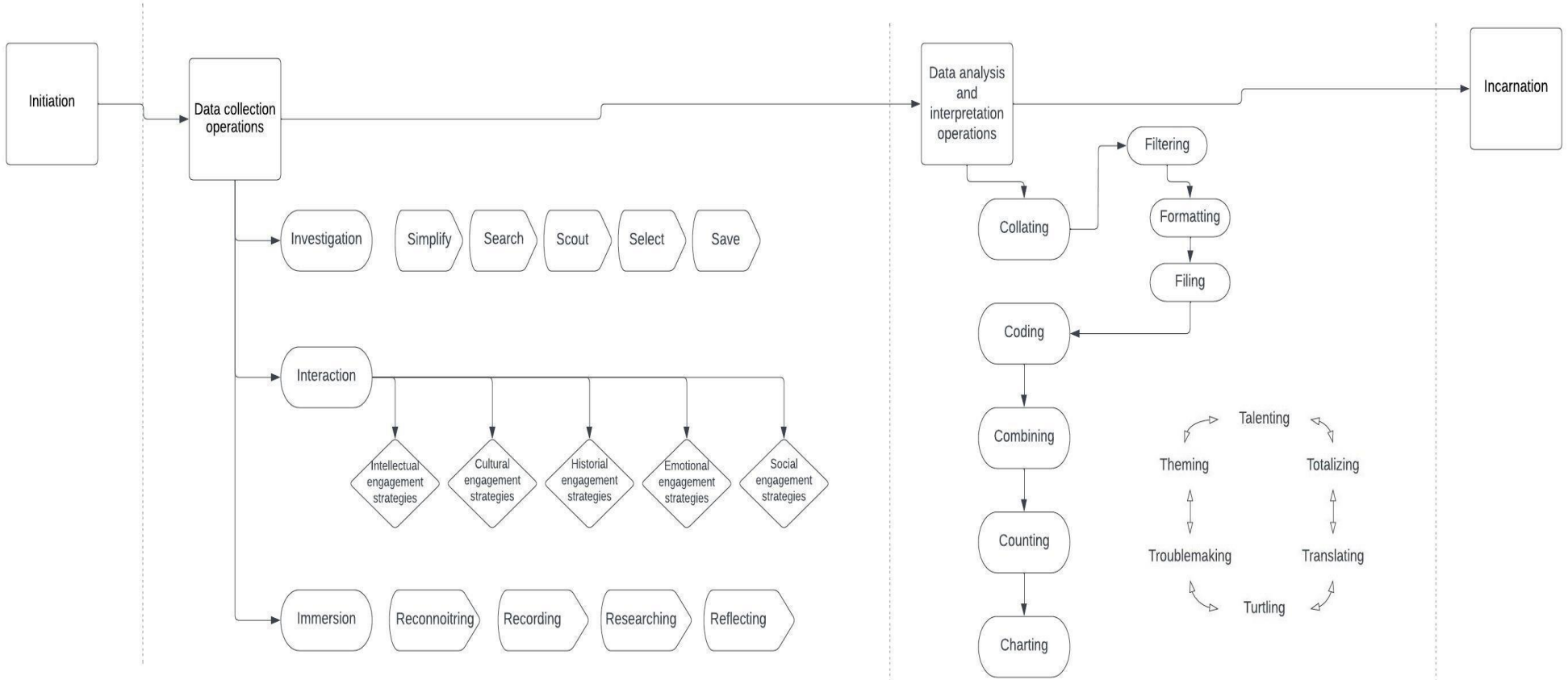


Figure 15 Netnographic procedural movements flowchart

STEP 1 – INITIATION

Within the initiation step, the researcher formulates their research question(s), establishes their objectives, and designs the general outline of the research. This is also the step where the researcher should contemplate the ethical aspects of the project and apply for ethical approval. Netnography puts a big emphasis on ethical considerations (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2022). However, various researchers approach this matter differently. Consequently, ‘the consent gap’ can be observed, which is defined as

the difference between ascribed and actual beliefs about social media users regarding the need for permission in the research-related use of the information they share online (Kozinets, 2020:173).

In other words, researchers often presume that data from social media can be obtained without any consent from individuals, as such information is shared and open to the general public, online. As Kozinets (2020) explains, the fact that information can be easily extracted from social media does not justify using it without the permission of the author, as the author may not have intended to have their posts/online comments analysed or studied. Different people might also have different knowledge of privacy settings and might not be aware that information placed by them on social media is commonly available. Particular caution should be taken when dealing with sensitive data or information that when exposed, can cause harm to its author.

The official stance taken towards ethics within online research varies across disciplines and is not coherent (Bennett Moses et al., 2021) as guidelines are being published by different bodies, namely the British Psychological Association, the British Sociological Association, or the Academy of Social Science (among others). The ethical considerations will also be different in different research environments and subjects. The stance on who to ask permission for research is also not consistent. All comments or posts published on social networking sites are the property of the networking site, therefore one would not be required to obtain permission from the author. On the other hand, big companies like Facebook or Twitter, might not be interested in giving consent or lack a person who has the authority to give such permission.

When navigating through ethical considerations, one can also consult Kozinets’ (2020) ethical process flowchart (Figure 16). The flowchart helps a researcher to navigate and decide what level of ethical considerations should be taken into account. The chart is general but comprehensive, and can be adjusted to any research, regardless of the topic and area of knowledge.

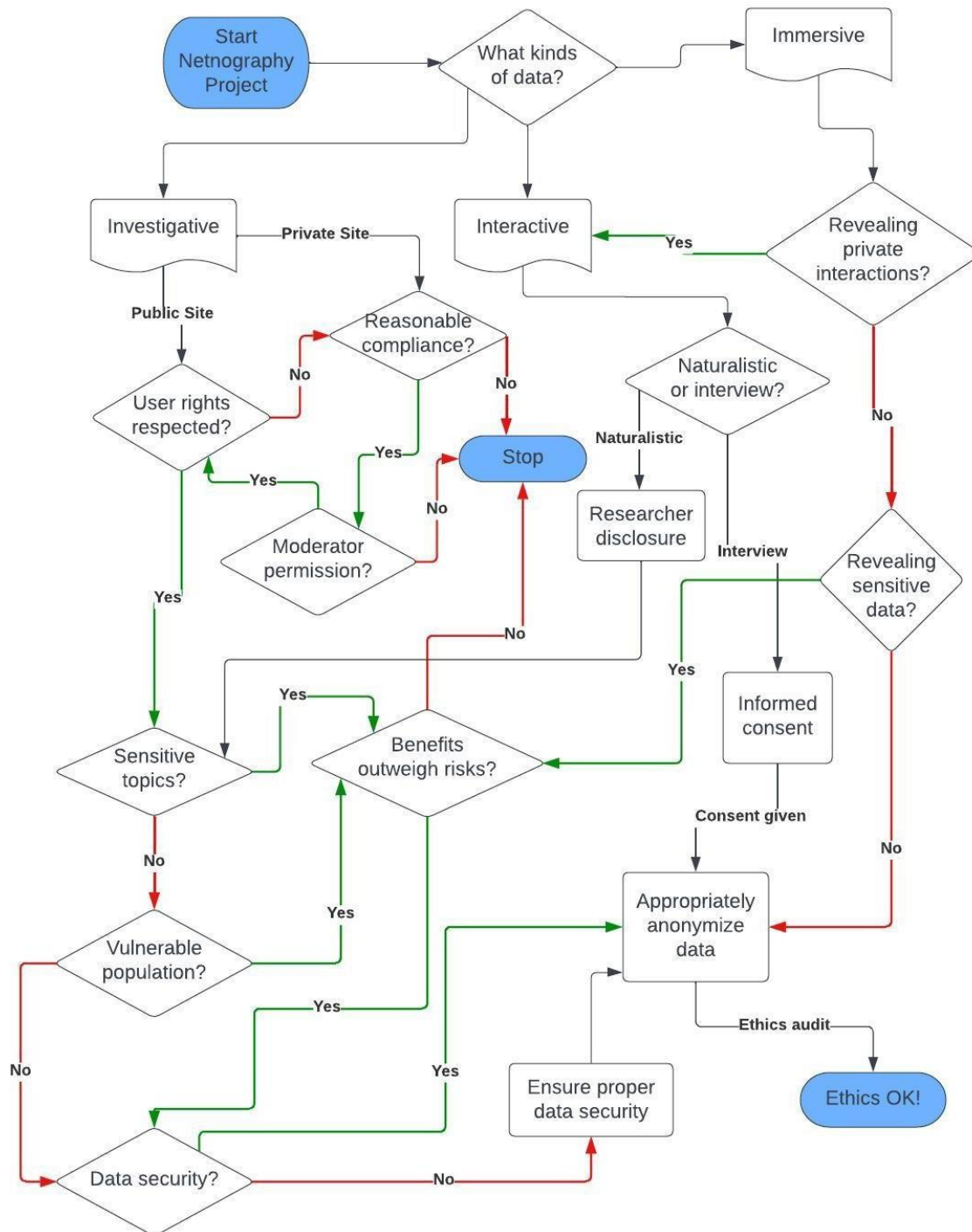


Figure 16 Ethical consideration flowchart (source: Kozinets, 2020)

Other considerations at the initiation stage include informational, organisational, regulatory and administrative aspects of the designed research. Netnographic research accommodates a variety of data collection methods; unlike common misconceptions, the range of methods does not only consist of observation.

Nevertheless, the data collection methods ought to involve online traces, as such one can opt for an in-person interview as an extension of exploration of online traces or conduct autonetnography, a type of reflective netnography that focuses on autobiographical and introspective detail.

STEP 2 – DATA COLLECTION OPERATIONS

Within the data collection operations, three process areas are explained (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2022). The movements incorporated within this step are *investigation*, *interaction* and *immersion* which run simultaneously. Within this step of netnographic research, ethical considerations need to underpin all activities.

The first area, *investigation*, involves data collection. While collecting data, researchers should simplify search terms, search selected avenues, and explore possibilities, scout and reconnoitre data sites and interactions, select data to include in the dataset and save it. Concurrently the researcher should adopt one *interaction* engagement strategies, which typically involves:

effort to gain a deeper conceptual understanding of relevant interests and information. [...] include questioning the meanings of particular ideas, the mapping of structures or relations, or seeking of a more holistic understanding of information that others take for granted (Kozinets, 2020:250).

The researcher might choose to seek a deeper understanding of the information, structures or relations (intellectual engagement strategy); look for understanding of rituals, symbols, and acronyms (cultural engagement strategy) used within the online community; try to understand customs and traditions by looking at the development of the community over time (historical engagement strategy); share emotions and feelings of studied people (emotional engagement strategy) or communicate openly and interact with the research subject (social engagement strategy).

The third and final stage of step two calls for researcher immersion in the data that has been gathered (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2022). Kozinets (2020; 2022) strongly suggests the use of an immersion journal for recording observations, thoughts, reflections and ideas. Kozinets (2020) compares the use of the immersion journal to ethnographic field notes. Nevertheless, unlike in ‘traditional’ ethnographic studies, an immersion journal is not the main source of data. What is archived and how the immersion journal is recorded is dependent on the researcher. However, the immersion journal should capture the researcher’s own thoughts rather than pieces of data. In order to achieve a satisfactory level of immersion that will enable writing and curating data, the researcher should follow four immersive operations, namely *reconnoitring*, *recording*, *researching* and *reflecting*. Although the order of these

operations is suggested, succession is not compulsory. Furthermore, these operations can, and most likely will, occur simultaneously. The process of reconnoitring (mapping out researched data) should accompany the entire research process, up until the phase of research presentation operations. Such continuous exploration will allow the researcher to form findings into a coherent outcome that is consistent with the initial objectives. The author can decide upon the form of the record: visual, verbal, audio. The means are irrelevant if the principles of sense-making, mapmaking and wayfinding are met. The immersion journal supports detailed and general outlook of the data allowing to link data to the objectives and the goals of the research.

Kozinets (2020; 2022) indicates the importance of getting close to the data and engaging with it; therefore, within data collection operations he suggests several ways through which to achieve this, as the basis for meaningful observations and conclusions. Deep engagement with data, analysis and reflection on the data from a range of different perspectives is imperative in qualitative research that looks for connections and influences. The immersion is also vital for researchers to gain a contextual understanding which is essential for the cultural interpretation of the data (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2022).

STEP 3 – DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OPERATIONS

While Kozinets (2020) divides data collection and analysis into two separate steps, it is worth noting that each project is different, and that some researchers might move seamlessly between these processes, for example, gathering and analysing each piece of data separately rather than completing the collection step to move on to the analysis. It is also important to acknowledge that analysis can begin during the data collection phase, as gathering and noting first impressions marks the beginning of the analysis stage.

Netnography allows the implementation of different analytical methods, both quantitative and qualitative. Nevertheless, as having a predominantly qualitative approach, netnographic research will only be characterised by elements of quantitative analysis. For example, counting how much data was collected or presenting data procedures in a quantitative configuration (Lugosi and Quinton, 2018). One can also opt to quantify qualitative data, which consists of counting themes or codes. In other words, presenting qualitative data in numeric form (Kozinets, 2020). Such data presentation can aid data transparency and facilitates sense-making through pattern recognition (Monrouxe and Rees, 2020). In the realm of qualitative research, the process of quantifying qualitative data is recognized for its ability to enrich the depth and clarity of findings. As Saunders (2019) articulates, this methodological approach offers several advantages: it facilitates the discovery of novel insights, aids in the

interpretation of research findings, clarifies the relationships between variables, and supports the triangulation process. Integrating quantitative elements into qualitative analysis not only enhances the robustness of the research but also provides a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying phenomena being studied (Kozinets, 2020; Saunders, 2019). Netnographic data analysis requires conducting operations on multiple levels. As the process might prove to be challenging, Kozinets (2020) offered guidance to those new-to-netnography through outlining the research phases of coding, counting or charting. He also highlights the importance of conducting simultaneously more empirical processes which are designed to deepen understanding of the studied phenomenon and help deliver robust and important interpretations.

Netnographic analysis is a process described by six interpretive operations that consist of *theming*, *talenting*, *totalizing*, *translating*, *turtling* and *troublemaking*. These operations overlap but also provide a different sense and approach to data interpretation. These operations are closely associated with hermeneutic interpretation, which is drawn from the theory of interpretation of textual data. Hermeneutics prompts interpretation of meaningful texts, actions that take the form of text. The researcher should understand the complexity of text that consists of sentences and words and the need of registering it and analysing it at different levels (Mantzavinos, 2020). Kozinets (2020) incorporates hermeneutics within totalizing interpretive operation, which helps to ensure that the research remains rigorous. Therefore, netnographic researchers are encouraged to look at their data in detail and as a whole, keeping the context in close consideration.

The interpretive operations should include:

1. Theming – grouping elements, creating a new conceptual whole from parts
2. Talenting – grouping elements with the use of art
3. Totalizing – exploring the whole and its meaning to the world
4. Translating – linking data and the theory
5. Turtling – looking at the context of the research and other conceptual systems it might be imbedded in
6. Troublemaking – critiquing notions

The operations indicate how to look at the data to produce the most meaningful outcomes and provide guidance to ensure the conducted research is replicable, reproducible and transparent.

STEP 4 – RESEARCH PRESENTATION OPERATIONS

The final stage of netnographic research is research presentation operations. While presenting netnographic research to an audience is comparable to presenting any conducted research, Kozinets

(2022) suggests including in research reporting four elements, namely

(1) the method of netnography, including conveying an understanding about netnography, its basis, and its applicability to the current project; (2) the netnographic data operations, which encompass and justify the procedures used, and what, where, when, and for how long the study took place; (3) the netnographic dataset, which overviews, describes, and justifies the data collected in the project; and (4) the data, which provides actual samples or excerpts from data in the context of the overall research presentation (Kozinets, 2020:387).

Yet again, the importance of ethical considerations is highlighted within the incarnation stage, when data extracts are concerned. In particular with regards to sharing identifiable information of the participants. There are three strategies that vary in approach from no cloaking the data to applying high cloaking (Kozinets, 2020). The decision in regard to the cloaking approach should be taken by the author of the research with consideration of such factors as data sensitivity, the vulnerability of the population or risk of harm.

3.7 Research procedures

3.7.1 Advancement and Incorporation of Netnography in the Current Study

As the researcher was preparing to collect the data for this project and start the analysis, a new edition of the *Netnography* by Kozinets (2020) was published. The book brought a new outlook on netnography, what was called a '(...) near total reboot. It refocuses netnography on social media's vital, and ever-challenging new realities' (Kozinets, 2020:5). This forced the author to stop and re-evaluate the approach. This new outlook on netnography brought a stronger focus on the technique and, furthermore, it offered clear praxis and strong guidance through the stages of the research. As such, it was essential to assess whether the planned and conducted research could be considered a netnographic research. Therefore, the researcher traced back the steps and matched them against the steps proposed by Kozinets (2020). This was to re-assess whether the already taken steps were appropriate in the light of the updated guidance on netnography.

As the author confronted the state of the research with the netnographic praxis it became evident that the research was approaching the third step.

Looking retrospectively at the planning and execution of the research, the author concluded that within the first step – initiation – the theoretical foundations were being established and the subject of the research was crystallising. This supported the formulation of research questions and objectives. During the selection of the research environments, ethical considerations were also taken under deliberation, to ensure that the research is in line with the most recent guidelines and

recommendations.

Within the second step – data collection operations – the investigation and immersion movements were adopted. As the research assumed observation without participation with data collected in retrospect, the interaction movement adopted historical engagement strategy. Some processes within the investigation movement were undertaken during step one – initiation – particularly *simplifying* and *searching*. Other processes, namely *scouting*, *selecting* and *saving*, were applied during the investigation movement within step two – data collection operations. Simultaneously to the investigation movement, immersion movement was also undertaken, as the author engaged in extensive journaling and recording all of her observations. Therefore, all the steps introduced by Kozinets (2020) were applied, although not during the recommended steps.

During step three – data analysis and interpretation operations – all processes and operations, except *talenting*, were adopted. This is due to not using any artistic expression within data interpretation. A more detailed discussion of netnographic steps implemented within this thesis is presented below.

3.7.2 Step 1 - Initiation

The research design implemented in this study incorporated netnographic observation to analyse SMBCs of cosmetics companies. This methodological approach has been employed in previous research studies (Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2020; Schuman et al., 2019), particularly when researchers place emphasis on the outcome of participants' actions rather than their underlying motives (Kozinets, 2020). During the initiation movement within the first step, the research question was formulated, and the place of the research was established. The process began with a scoping stage set to identify brand communities for the research and determine the social media environment. Various cosmetic brands' social media pages were analysed in terms of relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity and richness. The above variables were selected to warrant that chosen communities will contain enough data to ensure data saturation could be achieved to draw useful conclusions. The social media pages were also assessed for geographic location. Even though social media is borderless and exists in a virtual space, people who participate in social media communities are influenced by the culture they were brought up in and surrounded by. For that reason, it was decided to focus on communities declared to be based in the UK. Since the cosmetics industry relies on visual imagery for product promotion, and requires visual aids to showcase product features, only social media that supported image communication, while maintaining community features, were considered for inclusion in this project.

Within the brand-scoping stage, the following inclusion criteria were considered:

1. The sector in which the brand trades
2. Presence on social media networking sites
3. Geographical location
4. Brand posting frequency
5. Social media users' activity with brand posted content
6. Social media users' activity with content posted by other users
7. Consent from the brand to conduct the research.

Overall, 198 cosmetics brands were identified. The list of cosmetic brands was drawn from the Boots website (<https://www.boots.com/brands>). This was the most comprehensive list that was found. One hundred and thirty-six brands were excluded in the initial phase as they did not meet the inclusion criteria of desired geographical location (social media page that are aimed at the UK market) and/or because of brand posting frequency (no recent posts published, or posts were published at a very low frequency) and/or lack of social media users' activity. For example, the cosmetics brand 'Lush' was excluded during the first step, as the brand had decided to create its own social media and had abandoned regular activity on the well-known social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter (the main focus of this thesis). Facebook was chosen for this study, as it is one of the most widely used social networks (Islam and Rahman, 2017), and has been particularly important within the cosmetics sector (Clapp, 2021). The prominence of Facebook among brands is largely attributed to its capacity to foster consumer-brand relationship development (Akrouf and Nagy, 2018). Furthermore, its structural design supports the formation of communities centered around various entities, such as a subject, a brand, or an individual (Zaglia, 2013).

Sixty-two brands were taken forward for a more detailed analysis where brand posting frequency and social media users' activity were further investigated. The content was also examined for its style, as the research focused on engagement building. Brands such as Avon and Barry M were excluded as the content was deemed to be sales-oriented, with social media used mainly as an advertising board, rather than as a tool to create a sense of community among brand users or as means to have conversations with consumers. The brand Dior was also rejected as their social media account was not segmented by product type, namely, their content crossed over into the fashion sector.

Twenty-four brands were contacted with the request for consent to conduct research on social media communities managed by them, and four gave permission to conduct the research. While the literature acknowledges the lack of sample size guidance within qualitative studies (Boddy, 2016), it has been noted that too large samples can prevent an in-depth analysis of the data (Sandelowski, 1995). As the aim was to recruit communities of different dynamics to be able to draw more insightful

conclusions on engagement and value formation, the diversity of the brands was considered. Ultimately, the three most wide-ranging brands were selected for the research. Brands, A, B and C offered a balanced variety of SMBCs in terms of activity, ranging from a very active SMBCs to SMBCs of low activity. During the recruitment process brands were assured that their real names would not be shared, therefore brand pseudonyms were assumed. This decision was driven by the desire to ensure the anonymity of consumers participating within the SMBCs chosen for the study. Revealing the real names of the brands combined with the social media platform selected for investigation alongside the dates investigated could potentially have allowed for the identification of consumers participating within the SMBCs studied. Prior to data collection, the netnographic ethical flowchart was consulted (Figure 16). It has been established that investigative data on public sites will be gathered, and that users' rights must be respected. It was established that within the investigated sites neither sensitive topics would be discussed, nor vulnerable populations would be explored, while the data security will be maintained and appropriately anonymized. A short overview of each is presented in the following section.

As the selected brands offer a diverse overview of different practices and engagement within the cosmetics SMBCs, the in-depth investigation aids a better understanding of consumer engagement and value formation within the SMBC environment.

Brand A

Brand A is a well-established UK skincare and make-up consumer brand. It is owned by one of the most widely recognised and largest UK pharmacy-led health and beauty retailers that also has an independent and recognisable corporate brand. Brand A is sold through 2,500 branded retail outlets across the UK and through an online shop, integrated on the parent brand's website. The parent brand has several beauty and skincare brands in the portfolio, but brand A is most known and can be considered a flagship beauty brand within the parent brand portfolio. The identity and values of brand A are strongly aligned with the identity and values of the parent brand. This can also be observed in the communication strategy.

Brand A has its own social media channels; however, they do not have an independent website. Instead, there is a designated subsection on the parent brand's website where brand A's products can be purchased. This subsection is focused on product and offer presentation. At the bottom of the subsection, there is a short overview of the ranges of products that brand A houses. However, there is no information about brand A's values or history. Brand A's portfolio includes products for skincare, make-up, age-defying, sunbathing and tanning, tools and make-up accessories as well as products for

men.

The parent brand was launched in the first half of the 19th century as a herbalist store, in the East Midlands area of England, that offered alternatives to traditional medicines. Brand A was launched by the parent brand in the first half of the 20th century (Chesters, 2012), marking the entry of the parent brand into the beauty sector complementing its earlier focus on medicine and health products. A cosmetics line for men under the brand A was introduced in the second half of the 20th century, but the main focus of the product portfolio remains on women, and the brand's social media presence reflects this.

Brand A usually does not discuss values on its networking sites, and there is very little information on what stance brand A takes on environmental issues or testing on animals. However, from a short description placed within their social network profile, it is apparent that brand A adopts an ethical stance of the parent brand, which centres around social responsibility and sustainability. Sharing the same values cements the strong links between the parent brand and brand A, highlighting the dependency of brand A. Nevertheless, there are a number of values that are highlighted. For example, the promotion of a 'true and real image of women' through photoshoots that do not engage in any creative retouching of the models. The firm's stance against animal testing is also clear – with no products tested on animals included in the portfolio. The brand supports, financially and technically, the development of new techniques for product testing and has worked alongside charities towards ending animal testing. The brand is also committed to working towards protecting the environment, by developing sustainable products and/or getting involved in local communities.

Brand A is active on Facebook and Instagram, however, the links to these social media platforms cannot be found on brand A's subsection on the parent brand website. On the brand A's Facebook site, there is information about Instagram in the tab 'About' under 'General Information'. The brand's Facebook SMBC has around 400,000 members; brand A has around 184,000 followers on Instagram. The brand is committed to the UK market promoting sales on their social media sites only through the parent brand website. As a result, the brand only maintains social media channels for the UK market.

Brand B

Brand B is a stand-alone brand, owned by a corporate company that has few other brands in its portfolio. The brand was created in the second half of the 20th century by one individual, who built the brand. From the very beginning brand B had strong associations with a range of ethical values. Despite the founder having passed away some years ago, the organisation still 'lives by' the brand values that the founder promoted. The brand committed itself to lead sustainable business and is actively supporting several initiatives, from the protection of the environment to domestic abuse.

During the production process, the company uses products sourced sustainably and is committed to fair and ethical trade.

Brand B's mission and values are communicated very strongly through all its communication channels (including social media and website). The brand voices support for many ethical initiatives through its social media channels, including a ban on animal testing, sustainability, and protection of the environment. In addition, it often encourages its customers to contribute, by, for example, turning stores into donation centres where products or money can be donated to support a 'good cause'. The brand's portfolio includes skincare, make-up, hair care and bath products. Most of the products sold are unisex and can be used by either men or women. In the early 1990s, a consultant scheme was launched, which offered a flexible earning opportunity for women. Currently, many of the representatives use social media to connect with their customers and promote their products.

The brand has a presence on the following social media sites: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, G+, and YouTube. The information about the brand's social media accounts/presence is not easily accessible on the brand website. There are no plugins that enable an automated communication between the website and social media sites. In other words, none of the content published on the brand's social media is visible on its website. Also, the individual profiles on various social networking sites are not well linked. For instance, there is no information on brand B's Facebook profile about other social media channels the brand can be followed on. This prevents easier access to the brand's profiles on different networking sites, and it also impedes community cross-membership of the brand's consumers (the ability of the consumers to easily subscribe to brand B's channels on different mediums).

The brand has over 9 million followers on their Facebook SMBC, close to 154,000 followers on Twitter, 35,000 followers on YouTube and over 2 million on Instagram. Brand B is an international brand that sells products through its website in 60 countries, located across all of the continents, as well as in high street shops. Brand B takes advantage of social media functionality that allows geographic settings. The social media user is automatically directed to a geographically appropriate brand site depending on the country they are currently in.

Brand C

Brand C offers exclusively hair products to its customers. The brand was established by a well-known hairdresser who used his reputation to launch and market the products. A hairdressing salon in London was opened in the second half of the 20th century, where celebrities and royalty had their hair styled and cut by the brand's owner. In the late 1980s, the largest UK pharmacy-led health and beauty retailer asked the brand owner to design a special line that would only be available in their

store. Brand C quickly moved on to conquer other markets, entering the USA market in the 1990s, and launched a new line for fine hair in the late 1990s that established the brand in North America. The brand was also expanding in Europe (e.g., Scandinavian countries). By the 2000s, the brand recorded worldwide sales of 160 million US dollars. At that point brand C was sold to a Japanese beauty corporation. As the corporation had strong consumer links in the USA market, brand C rapidly developed overseas. Currently, the purchase of brand C's products through its own website is possible in 28 countries. Although the brand focuses mainly on the Americas and Europe, other regions such as Australia, Russia or South Africa are included. Brand C has designated social media pages for different countries.

Brand C does not focus on its heritage or mission and does not build a narrative around its values. On its website, Brand C offers a short introduction to its history, which consists of two paragraphs. The first paragraph briefly outlines the beginnings of the brand and its heritage, the second paragraph focuses on the products offered by the brand. Brand C caters mostly to women but does also have some products for men. The brand focuses its communication on different types of hair, for example, by offering solutions to frizzy hair or blond hair. Brand C is a responsible brand that is committed to sustainability and works towards achieving high product standards, while maintaining environmental goals and humanitarian goals (excluding animal testing of the products). The brand values are not emphasised in their communication strategy.

Brand C is present on five social networking sites, namely Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and YouTube. The brand has over 250,000 followers on Facebook and over 54,000 followers on YouTube. The 'buttons' directing to different social media pages are displayed on the brand website and they remain in the footnote on any subpage of the website. The brand does not, however, promote cross-membership of social media channels. In other words, brand C does not include information about other social media that is present on within its networking sites.

A summary of key characteristics of brands A, B and C related to their social media presence is presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7 Summary of key characteristics of brands A, B and C

	When established	Product portfolio	Number of followers on social media profiles	Value/product-focused communication

Brand A	The first half of the 20th century	Skincare make-up age-defying sunbathing and tanning tools and make-up accessories products for men	Facebook (423,264) Instagram (188,000) Twitter (9,217) Pinterest (44,191)	Product-focused communication
Brand B	The second half of the 20th century	Skincare make-up hair care age-defying sunbathing and tanning tools and make-up accessories bath products	Facebook (9,955,382) Instagram (2,377,436) Twitter (150,885) YouTube (34,900)	Combination of value and product-focused communication
Brand C	The second half of the 20th century	Hair products	Facebook (253,075) Instagram (29,465) Twitter (10,865) Pinterest (78) YouTube (54,200)	Product-focused communication

3.7.3 Step 2 - Data collection operations

The progression of data collection and data processing was as follows:

1. Location of conversation strip
2. Opening all comments left by consumers
3. Copying selected and prepared conversation strips through screen capture (Handy Screenshot software – a software that allows to precisely select area needed capturing, therefore reducing the amount of unnecessary data captured)
4. Saving captured data (after checking if it was correctly copied) in JPG and/or PNG format (sometimes also WEBP)
5. Anonymising the data and ascribing codes to consumers involved in the communication (Photoshop)
6. Saving an anonymised file in PDF

While older netnographic studies carried out investigation across a longer time span (Brodie et al., 2013; de Valck et al., 2009), the duration of netnographic research varies (Costello et al., 2017), with some research conducted within relatively short periods of time (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). Following the preliminary stage, which enabled the establishment of the data volume, the selected timeframe for this research was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation.

As the information collected was considered historical/collected in retrospect, the first step of data collection involved scrolling down the SMBC pages to the appropriate date within the identified data collection period that included the interval between the 1st of December 2019 and 31st of January 2020. The decision regarding the data collection period was guided by the increased activity of companies around Christmas time, as evidenced by higher Facebook revenue in the fourth quarter (McGrath, 2022). Therefore, a higher activity of researched brands on social media was expected. While above-normal activity was expected in December, stagnation was anticipated in January. Consequently, the month of January was included as a control. Once the correct post was located, all the comments left by consumers in the identified period had to be manually opened. Posts with many comments had to be inspected to confirm that the entire record was visible. When all the comments under the brand post were checked, the original post along with the comments was copied with the use of Handy Screenshot software. The copied area was selected manually to exclude side panels that were irrelevant to the study and would require anonymisation to ensure adherence to the ethical considerations of this thesis. The process was challenging when handling lengthy posts that contained 800 or more consumer comments, as the capacity of the software was exceeded. This required dividing the data at the time of copying. The data was saved in three formats (JPG, PNG, WEBP) to ensure the inclusion of a format that would allow further processing. Once a file was saved, it was checked for completeness.

The saved data were anonymised in Photoshop. All identifiable information, such as names, pictures or locations, were either erased or blurred to a degree to prevent recognition. Consumers who were taking part in a conversation with other actors (e.g., other consumers or the brand) or were called by name by the brand were given codes distinguishing them from others. Each post with attached comments was considered a separate dataset, therefore consumers were given different codes.

All the codes, across all datasets and brands, had the same structure which consisted of the letter 'P' (representing word participant), a number unique for each brand, and a letter unique for each dataset. Consequently, each dataset was given a different letter at the end of the code. When the number of datasets exceeded the letters in the alphabet, another letter was added. Similarly, each brand was ascribed a different set of alphanumeric codes to ensure easy recognition. The codes were assigned, as follows:

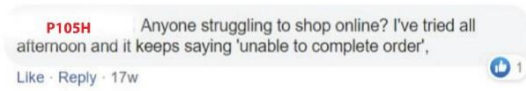
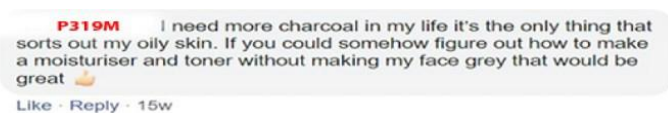
Brand A: P100A through to P101AD

Brand B: P200A through to P449Z

Brand C: P500A through to P520D

For example, the participant code in example A (Table 8) consists of the letter P, participant number 105 within the conversation strip H. In other words, it was the 105th participant coded in conversation strip H. Correspondingly within example B319M stands for the participant labelled with the number 319 within the M dataset, however, since the numerical codes for brand B start at 200, it would be 119th participant with the M dataset. Similarly, within example C, 511 is the number of participants identified within the D dataset. Alike brand B, however, numbering within brand C datasets starts at 500, therefore 511 will be the 11th participant identified within the D dataset.

Table 8 Examples of anonymised posts

Example A – Brand A	
	P – Participant 105 – Participant number H – Dataset
Example B – Brand B	
	P – Participant 319 – Participant number M – Dataset
Example C – Brand C	
	P – Participant 511 – Participant number D – Dataset

To prevent coding duplication in datasets with more than 100 participants, numerical codes were continued. An example of this approach was the Z dataset of brand B, which continued numerical codes up until the last participant: P449Z. Therefore, when coding for brand C began, the numerical code started at 500 to avoid the repetition of codes. This method was adopted to ensure each participant in the dataset had a unique numerical code, it also allowed the differentiation of each brand. The use of this approach helped to guarantee the accuracy and reliability of the coding process, which is critical for data analysis and interpretation in research.

Once the datasets were anonymised, the files were saved in PDF format and checked in NVivo for readability. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis computer software used for the analysis of unstructured text, audio, video and image data, including (but not limited to) interviews, focus groups, surveys, social media and journal articles (Kent State, no date). It was decided to use NVivo to aid analysis and support the organisation of the emerging themes. On occasions, the files were too big to be saved as one file. In such instances, the dataset was divided into separate pages and then merged into one file with Adobe Bridge.

The summary of the number of conversation threads harvested and the number of consumer posts within these threads are presented in Table 9 below.

Table 9 Summary of data quantity

	Number of conversations threads	Number of consumer posts
Brand A	39	797
Brand B	36	5535
Brand C	12	69

At the beginning of the data collection operations, an immersive journal was initiated. The journaling continued throughout data analysis operations. The journal was a space to register all observations regarding the data collected or the data collection process in general. Makeshift headings were developed which aided the grouping of the observed information (for example: general observation, example, question). As the researcher proceeded with the analysis of conversation strips, the subheadings adopted the shape of the data file under investigation. The immersive journal arrived at 22 pages in Microsoft Word document and 10,461 words in total.

3.7.4 Step 3 - Data analysis and interpretation operations

The analysis began by investigating consumer engagement within SMBCs. The investigation started with an in-depth look into brand posts. The examination of the posts was informed by the work of Tafesse and Wien (2017). Each of the posts was analysed in terms of topic. A table was formed in Excel where emerging themes were recorded. Once the brand posts of all three brands were examined, the themes that emerged were compared across the three brands and differences, as well as similarities, were recorded. At this stage, an attempt was made to synthesise themes. Following this, the themes were compared with themes identified in the literature, particularly in the work of Tafesse and Wien (2017), Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013), Shen and Bissell (2013), Taecharungroj (2017), and Kim et al. (2015). The table in Appendix 1 illustrates a snapshot of the coding process. Additional colour-coding of themes was employed to cross-check the occurrence of each theme within each of the brands.

Once the brand post types were established, attention then moved to understanding the frequency of each type of post across the three brands and the related responses from consumers. The analysis was recorded in an immersion journal for each of the brands separately. Next, the data was uploaded to NVivo for analysis of consumer posts. Each post was treated as a separate unit and was coded

individually. During coding, individual comments were compared to increase the accuracy of coding. When the coding of all data was completed, it was once again checked code by code to ensure accuracy as well as to reduce the number of codes and group single codes into overarching codes. The codes were also compared with themes identified in the literature. Therefore, theming and translating netnographic interpretive operations were employed at this stage. The table in Appendix 2 illustrates a snapshot of the analysis process with three levels of codes identified and linked with related themes identified in the literature.

Individual brand replies were also coded, but due to a lack of a useful typology identified in the existing literature, the analysis was performed using a narrative analysis (Saunders, 2019). The use of NVivo provided an opportunity to count the number of occurrences of the themes across the three brands. At this point, the author returned to the literature to understand the links between consumer engagement and value formation. This prompted a second analysis, largely supported by Holmqvist et al. (2020) and Colgate and Smith (2007) which offered an initial structure to help interpret this aspect of the data.

This second analysis focused on the conversations between actors within SMBCs, therefore only comments that were part of conversations were analysed. The data for each of the brands was analysed individually, observations were recorded in the immersion journal that formed the basis of the finding's chapters. Several examples that most accurately represented the findings were drawn (totalizing). Sketched context of the research supported turtling, which essentially aids the development of a more compelling explanation and a better understanding of the data. The troublemaking operation focused on linking empirical data to applicable theories. While doing so, the author was able to critique and question considered notions.

The analysis of the data supported the creation of two typologies is presented in Chapter 4 and two conceptual models presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

3.7.5 Step 4 – Research presentation operations

Ethical aspects were closely considered when presenting the data. While the research topic is not considered a sensitive one, the safety of consumers participating in SMBCs was a primary concern. Therefore, a medium level of cloaking was applied. As such, names of consumers participating in SMBCs as well as the names of the brands were altered beyond recognition. The snippets of data collected/analysed were also verified for any other identifiable information. Prior to data presentation, a discussion around netnographic data operations, as well as dataset overview was presented. Within the data-presentation section, a storytelling approach was adopted, as suggested by Ritchie et al. (2014). The data were presented in the order of most frequent theme to the least

frequent. Each of the themes was presented in sequence to aid understanding. Such organisation of the qualitative study is supported by the wider literature (Kozinets, 2020; Ritchie et al., 2014; Saunders, 2019). The discussion of the project findings, in Chapters 4 and 5, presents an in-depth look into consumer engagement and value formation within SMBCs, guiding the reader through the findings step-by-step.

In the discussion of the findings, this thesis employs a method of quantitating qualitative data, a process which transforms qualitative insights into quantifiable measures (Kozinets, 2020; Saunders, 2019). This approach is instrumental in addressing the research question more effectively, as it aids in interpreting the significance of the emergent themes. Additionally, this quantification facilitates a deeper understanding of the types of content that garner the most engagement from consumers. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, the analysis presents a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of consumer interactions and preferences within social media brand communities. By doing so, the chapters provide imperative context, essential in establishing a relationship between consumer engagement, value formation and SMBCs. The link to the literature has been provided in Chapter 6. While Chapter 7 provides conclusion of the thesis, outlining its contributions to knowledge.

3.7.6 Critical evaluation of the approach adopted

While other research methods were considered, netnography is a widely recognised methodology for community research within digital environments (Hua et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022; Waqas et al., 2020). Nonetheless, in contrast to other well established methods, netnography continuously develops. The development of netnography is driven by enriching practice (Kozinets, 2020). It is also characteristic of a vastly changing, digital environment (Bailey et al., 2019; Felin et al., 2017).

Navigating this developing territory has proven to be challenging at times. For example, while conducting the study, updated procedures and operations were published (Kozinets, 2020) which required verification and synchronising already conducted processes. While observation was conducted, other methods within the netnography spectrum were considered. For example, in-depth interviews could have brought more insights regarding the motives of consumer actions. As netnography offers established procedures that ensure the validity of the research (Kozinets, 2015; Kozinets, 2020), processes recognised in thematic analysis supported further the validity of the research (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

3.8 Ethics and limitations

Ethical consideration within social media research is a highly debatable arena. The status of social media often causes confusion. While few researchers consider social media as a private space, the majority classify social media as a public domain which is available for research purposes (Golder et

al., 2017). This perception often impacts the ethical considerations of researchers and is frequently referred to as the consent gap (Kozinets, 2020). The different understandings of the social media space often results in researchers omitting discussion of their ethical stance in their netnographic research (Anne-Marie et al., 2017). Ethical considerations are pivotal for netnographic research. Therefore, studies which adopt a netnographic methodology tend to pay close attention to ethical considerations (see, for example, Fenton et al., 2021; Lever et al., 2021).

Despite ethics being a core part of netnography, not all research using the methodology complies with netnographic ethical standards (Costello et al., 2017). This thesis consulted the ethical consideration flowchart developed by Kozinets (2020) to ensure the research complied with the standards. Prior to collecting data, ethical approval was received from Manchester Metropolitan University. Following this, consent directly from the brands studied was sought. Due to the number of consumers within the selected SMBCs, obtaining consent from every consumer was deemed as not feasible. In such circumstances, the consent of the SMBC manager was sought, which is acceptable within netnography (Kozinets, 2020). Nonetheless, the limitation of such approach is that it deprives customers of the ability to decide for what purpose their statements will be used. The data collection began after consent was obtained.

It is also important to consider the ownership of content posted on social networking sites. All comments or posts made on these platforms are the property of the networking site (Kozinets, 2020), and therefore, permission from the author may not be required or sufficient. However, obtaining consent from large companies such as Facebook may be difficult, for example due to lack of an authorised staff responsible for granting research permissions.

During the incarnation stage, a medium level of cloaking was applied, with names, online pseudonyms, and other identifying information altered beyond recognition. However, direct quotes remained unchanged due to the low risk of harm, the lack of sensitive data, and the non-vulnerability of the research population. Although the author tested the data could not be traced back, full prevention of backtracking would require a high cloaking approach and implementation of fabrication strategies. Further limitations regarding ethical considerations revolve around the dissemination of the findings. While the identity of the consumers, as well as the brands, were hidden as advised by Bryman and Bell (2019), identity preservation cannot be safeguarded due to the data being available online.

While some netnographic researchers interact with participants, the majority of researchers conduct unobtrusive or non-invasive netnographies (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). This research utilised a non-participatory historical engagement strategy. While a more invasive approach could have

provided an opportunity for consumers to participate in full knowledge of the research/its aims, it could also limit the findings due to participants altering their behaviour.

3.8.1 Limitations

The study was not free of limitations. First and foremost, it is important to bear in mind research bias. It has been recognised that researchers' bias, within social research, can be demonstrated through the values and knowledge of scholars (Richards, 2020). However, by following netnographic praxis and thematic analysis procedures the impact of the researcher's bias was minimised. The data collected was limited to the SMBC page, therefore any discussions that took place beyond the SMBC page was not accessible to the researcher. Another identified limitation is related to the number of consumers participating in conversations within SMBCs. The number of consumers within the researched SMBCs varied significantly, from almost 10,000,000 to just over 250,000. With so many consumers interacting within an SMBC, establishing any particular conversation patterns between consumers was unfeasible.

Due to the traits of online communication, the majority of the analysed comments were brief and concise, leading to considerable ambiguity. As a result, the researcher's interpretation may not have been in line with the original intentions of the authors. A subsequent interview with a group of consumers who actively participate in the relevant SMBCs could (perhaps) have supported the researcher's assumptions and thus help corroborate her interpretations. In addition, collecting real-time data and using a social engagement interaction strategy could have provided more profound insights into the motives behind consumer comments. Additionally, the short period of data collection could be a potential limitation. Conducting a longitudinal study may be a possible solution to explore patterns or changes in consumer engagement and value formation over time.

Finally, the study was limited by the format of the collected data which prevented the use of some of the analytical tools in NVivo and limited the variety of analyses that could be produced (for example, word count, or word cloud). Despite its limitations, the research provides a contribution to the knowledge of consumer engagement and value formation within the SMBCs arena.

3.9 Summary

This chapter presented the ontological and epistemological viewpoints of the researcher. The methodology employed in this thesis has been provided to aid attainment of the research aims and objectives. The study has been presented as a qualitative, inductive investigation within the interpretivist paradigm, as this study is subjective and set in a socially constructed environment, where realities are being constructed through social interactions in which social actors partially share the

meanings and realities (Ng, 2013; Saunders, 2019).

A discussion of the adopted netnographic methodology was then outlined. The six procedural movements of netnography as suggested by Kozinets (2020) were presented. Following that, the steps undertaken to collect and analyse the netnographic data were highlighted. Finally, discussion of ethical considerations and the limitations of this project were presented.

In the following chapter, the findings of the research are discussed.

4. Findings I: Consumer engagement within SMBCs

4.1 Introduction

The literature review chapter evaluated the current state of knowledge around SMBCs, consumer engagement and value formation. Following that, the methodology chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the research undertaken. This chapter reports the findings that examine consumer engagement processes within SMBCs. The findings are presented in three sections that categorise overarching spheres of consumer engagement practices within SMBCs, which were identified through the literature review. They are: (1) *brand posts*, (2) *consumer comments*, and (3) *individual brand replies*.

This chapter begins by presenting five overarching themes of the brand posts identified (see section 4.2): *presentation of offerings*, *belongingness building*, *engagement building*, *value-led*, and *educational*. The outline presenting each theme and the relationships to sub-themes can be found in Appendix 6. The discussion brings together a perspective across all three brands studied, drawing similarities and differences across the dataset that aids in achieving the aims and objectives of this thesis. Following this, the discussion moves to *consumer comments* (see section 4.3). Four overarching consumer comment themes are subsequently presented: *brand-centred communication*, *cognitive-centred communication*, *conversation-centred communication*, and *personal experience-centred communication*. The outline presenting each theme and the relationships to sub-themes can be found in Appendix 7. The similarities and differences across the three brands are again discussed. Finally, attention moves to *individual brand replies* (see section 4.4). The discussion highlights the different approaches to one-to-one communication displayed by each of the researched brands and discusses the implications of the different styles adopted. In summary, this chapter reports on the findings that examine consumer engagement within cosmetics brands' SMBCs. In doing so, this chapter contributes towards achieving the third research objective.

4.2 Brand posts

Within the brand posts sphere, the analysis reveals five themes, namely: (1) presentation of offerings, (2) engagement building, (3) value-led, (4) belongingness building, and (5) educational. Table 10 presents examples of each of the themes across the sphere. The different approaches, within the same theme of each of the brands, are evident. This might be driven by different strategies set by each of the three brands in terms of how they engage with members of their SMBC.

Table 10 Examples of the themes for each of the brands: A, B and C

Theme	Theme description	Example	Brand
1. Presentation of offerings	Brand posts focused on the presentation of brand products/services. These include posts focusing on price promotion and seasonal products.	The 12th and final day of our 12 days of Brand offers. Achieve age-defying results with our clinically proven Serums, now half price! Available whilst stocks last. http://bit.XXXXXXXX	Brand A
		Enriched with real banana puree from Ecuador, this cleansing shampoo is irresistible whether it's stuck to a wall or in prime position for a shelfie #brand #Meme #BananaArt #BananaShampoo	Brand B
		Don't let a few greys ruin your party style...	Brand C
2. Belongingness-building posts	Brand posts aimed at building belongingness through sharing important moments with consumers, sharing consumer points of view through reposting and encouraging relationship building through expressing concern.	Happy New Year to our fabulous followers! We hope 2020 brings everything you could wish for and more (including all the latest brand ofc)	Brand A
		BIG NEWS! We're delighted to have won MOST SUSTAINABLE BRAND for our Community Trade Recycled Plastics Initiative at the Marie Claire UK Hair Awards ! Did you know all our 250ml haircare bottles are made from	Brand B
3. Engagement-building posts	Brand posts aimed at activating consumer participation and engagement through contests and asking consumers for their opinions.	<p>We want to lift your spirit this Blue Monday by giving one lucky follower and their bestie the chance to win their skincare regime of choice from the UK's No. 1 skincare brand*</p> <p>To enter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🌟 Follow our page 🌟 Like and share this post 🌟 Tag your bestie <p>Winners will be announced on 23/01/20. The giveaway includes a day cream, night cream, eye cream and serum.</p>	Brand A

		Festive fun for the young at heart! Seasonal stocking fillers to bring us all together with a smile! Tell us in the comments below which one you're wishing for! #ImDreamingOf hppt://ms.spr.ly/xxxxxxx	Brand B
4. Value-led	Brand posts aimed at showcasing charitable actions the brand participates in.	It's National Dress Up Your Pet Day! And we'll take any pet related holiday as an opportunity to throw it back to when we, along with some of our furry friends, went to the UN with YOUR amazing 8.3 MILLION voices calling for a global end to animal testing within the cosmetics industry. We don't know about you, but we think these guys look GREAT in their #ForeverAgainstAnimalTesting outfits! ● we want to see pictures of your furry friends – share with us in the comments ●	Brand B
5. Educational posts	Brand posts aimed at educating consumers on product use or beauty-related issues.	Need some tips on how to do a smokey eye before New Year's Eve? Lifestyle vlogger Helen Anderson shares her tricks to help you perfect your look and express yourself. ● Be bold, be unafraid, be you. Did you enjoy this video? Let us know what you'd like to see next in the comments section!	Brand B

Table 11 offers an overview of the utilisation of each brand post category by brands A, B and C. Each of the categories will now be discussed in detail. To contextualise how consumers receive the brand post types identified in this research, the discussion also examines two crucial aspects: topic adherence and consumer attitudes towards these posts. This approach aids in establishing a clear linkage between the brand post characteristics and the resultant consumer engagement patterns. Of all of the themes identified, it is particularly noteworthy that only the "presentation of offerings" theme was consistently present across the posts of all studied brands.

Table 11 Overview of themes in brand posts for each of the brands: A, B and C

	Presentation of offerings	Belongingness building	Engagement building	Value-led	Educational
Brand A	X	X	X		
Brand B	X	X	X	X	X
Brand C	X				

4.2.1 Presentation of offerings

Presentation of offerings is the only theme that was evident across each brand studied. Table 12 illustrates the number of ‘presentation of offerings’ brand posts published within the period studied and the number of consumer responses. It is interesting to note that while brand B posted fewer brand posts within the theme than brand A, it received many more comments and shares from its consumers. This might be due to the development level of the SMBC of brand B. In other words, the community within brand B’s SMBC is well established and, in turn, led to consumers having a stronger relationship with one another and with the brand. Such a relationship allows people to feel comfortable in the environment and share their thoughts and opinions.

Table 12 Summary of brand posts within the theme and consumer response to them

	Number of posts	Consumer response
Brand A	35	696 comments 854 shares 6294 likes
Brand B	14	2296 comments 1304 shares 5894 likes
Brand C	8	67 comments 4 shares 204 likes

The presentation of offerings theme comprises sub-themes, all of which are related to the core activity of the brand. Therefore, the brand posts within this theme cover a variety of topics around cosmetic products or services within the brands’ portfolios. The overview of sub-themes is presented in Figure 17.

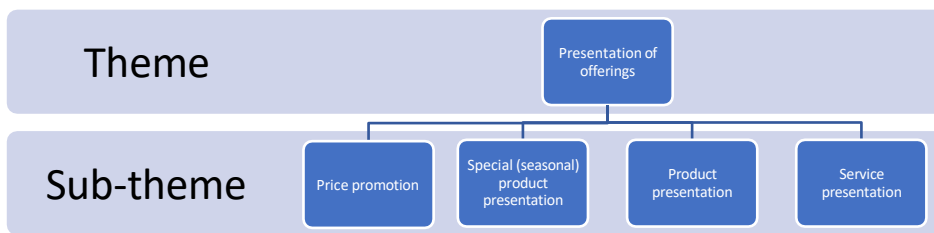


Figure 17 Summary of sub-themes within the presentation of offerings theme

It is important to observe that each brand approaches talking about its products differently. For instance, brand A places a strong emphasis on price; most of the brand posts within this category present discounts on selected products. It cannot be dismissed, however, that the strategy was selected by the brand for the Christmas period within which the data collection took place. Brand B, on the other hand, places a strong emphasis on the seasonality of its products, urging customers to purchase now since many of its products are available for a short period of time alone. Like brand A, it might seem that limited-edition products are part of the Christmas sales strategy for brand B, however, from the analysis of the consumer comments, it became apparent that this is a long-term strategy of the brand. Brand C, unlike brands A and B, does not appear to have chosen any particular strategy; its brand posts consist of a few short sentences and do not create any type of urgency through discounted prices or highlighting a limited sense of availability. Furthermore, in contrast to brands A and B, brand C is characterised by infrequent posting behaviour.

Each of the brand posts published introduces a topic to consumers participating within its SMBC. Within the presentation of offerings, the topics are closely related to the products and services offered by the brand. In most instances, consumer feedback is aligned with the topics introduced by the brands. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the alignment with the topic varied across the brands. For example, some comments within brand A's SMBC go beyond the scope of the topic introduced by the brand. For example, consumers responded by asking questions about a different product (Figure 18), reporting issues with a brand post (Figure 19) or commenting on published offer/pricing (Figure 20).

P100I **brand** I've looked everywhere for the concealer - do you have any news as to when it will be available either on line or in store please?

Like · Reply · 16w

Figure 18 (Brand A) Product enquiry

P104F The link doesn't work.

Like · Reply · 17w

Figure 19 (Brand A) Reporting an error

I would just prefer honest pricing in the first place. I do buy **brand** Restore and Renew because it's very good and suits my skin, but I resent having to shell out over £50 to buy three products at a time when I only need one of them (which should cost £18 not £27 when bought singly)

Like · Reply · 16w

Figure 20 Discussion around the price

Some consumers mentioned values in their comments, in particular, environmental issues (Figure 21) and ingredients and manufacturing (Figure 22), as well as the choice of models used to promote/advertise the brand's products (Figure 23). This might be a strong indication that although brand A does not present a stance on social and environmental issues, such topics are of strong importance to its consumers. Incorporating discussion around topics that matter to consumers into brand A's communication strategy could positively impact consumer-brand relationship building as consumers could bond through their shared beliefs.

then. Looks cheap but if it's good for environment ok

Like · Reply · 12w

Figure 21 (Brand A) Discussion around environmental issues

P105Z Are **brand** products vegan yet?

Like · Reply · 12w

Figure 22 (Brand A) Discussion around environmental issues

P100AD Why do you use a young teenage model to advertise this product? She doesn't have wrinkles lol!

Get middle aged models at least

Like · Reply · 11w

Figure 23 (Brand A) Comments regarding models used in advertising

In contrast to brand A consumers, brand B consumer comments tend to echo the topics introduced by the brand in a variety of forms. They also report on others' likes and experiences or stories (Figure 24 and 25). Such storytelling has been acknowledged as a learning tool. Stories help create a sense of connection and build familiarity and trust. Therefore, it could be a useful tool for community-building purposes. Some of the storytelling comments illustrate how committed and longstanding customers

have been to brand B. This also demonstrates how strong a relationship the brand can form with its customers.



Figure 24 (Brand B) Storytelling around a favourite product

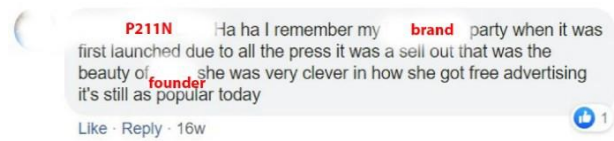


Figure 25 (Brand B) Storytelling

Consumers also engage in sharing their opinions and ideas to the brand posts, as well as making inquiries about particular products. It can also be observed, within the consumer comments, how information is spread by consumers through tagging each other. Figure 26 presents an example of how consumers use SMBCs as a source of information that is then passed on to their peers. Notably, no additional words are used, as if the brand post provided sufficient information and the reason behind disseminating the information to like-minded others. This would indicate that such tagging takes place between peers that have a relationship *outside* the SMBC. Across the dataset, and especially within this theme, consumers expressed ideas for new product development. For example, consumer P200D (Figure 27) suggests extending the product rage, and P200F (Figure 28) shares a new product idea that is not in the brand’s current portfolio. Such recommendations can be valuable for companies as they provide information on the reaction to and demand for certain products. Such recommendations also indicate consumer knowledge of products in the brand’s portfolio. Notably, product development recommendations were only identified within brand B’s SMBC. This could be an indication of a stronger consumer-brand relationship, as illustrated by the advanced consumer knowledge of the brand and its products.



Figure 26 (Brand B) Consumers tagging their peers

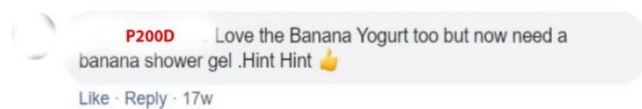


Figure 27 (Brand B) New product idea

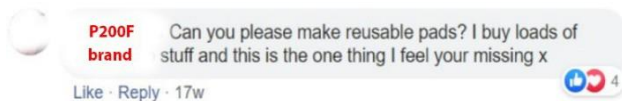


Figure 28 (Brand B) New product idea

Despite the similarity in messages within the brand posts, each of the brands received a different response from the consumers participating within their SMBCs which can be observed in the examples below. Consumer response to brand C's posts typifies a lack of emotional undertone. For example, the consumer comment in Figure 29 stated that the product does not work, however, the comment does not convey whether the consumer is angry, disappointed or sad. Similarly, the comment by P501B (Figure 30) reported outcomes of product use. While the used emojis give an indication of satisfaction, the comment itself does not portray any emotions (positive or negative) that the consumer associates with the brand. Consequently, all feedback, negative or positive, is equally expressed, in the form of facts with little or no emotional articulation. This might indicate an underdeveloped SMBC, as emotional attachment is an indication of a formed relationship. Within brand C's SMBC, however, most of the consumers do not display any form of an emotional connection with the brand (Figures 31 and 32), therefore it can be argued that brand C's SMBC is not developed.

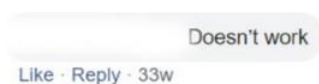


Figure 29 (Brand C) Negative feedback framed in a neutral tone

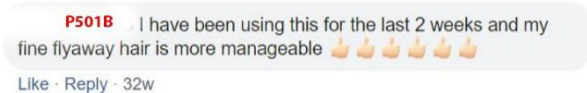


Figure 30 (Brand C) Positive feedback framed in a neutral tone



Figure 31 (Brand C) Negative feedback framed in a neutral tone

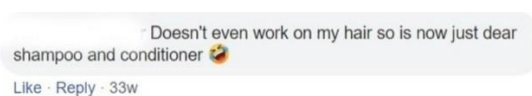


Figure 32 (Brand C) Subtle tone of a feedback

Brand A, in contrast to brand C, sparks emotionally toned feedback. For example, Figure 33 presents a comment within which the consumer uses such words as 'lovely', 'love' or 'bril' that indicate a

positive experience and convey an emotional message. The feedback brand A received includes negative and positive comments. Most negative feedback referred to disappointment with promotional offers (Figure 34). Interestingly, as the feedback is given in real-time, it allows the brand to be agile, for example, to respond to the feedback through updating upcoming offers as suggested by consumers. Nonetheless, some consumers while expressing negative opinions on a product, continue to affirm their love and attachment towards the brand. The comment in Figure 35 can be considered as a form of encouragement, motivating the brand to act. Rather than looking for alternatives, P101M prefers to continue using Brand A, but encourages the brand to improve. This could suggest that some consumers who participate in SMBCs demonstrate attachment to the brand. However, it is extremely important to acknowledge that positive comments mostly focus on products and services, and not on the brand itself (Figures 34, 36 and 37). This may indicate a lack of clarity in the brand-consumer relationship, which may arise through product and sales focused communication, which in turn negatively impacts the creation of consumer-brand bonds.



Figure 33 (Brand A) Positive service feedback

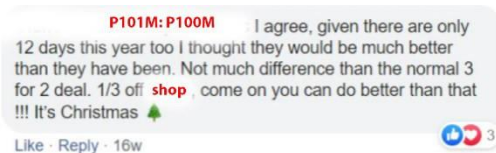


Figure 35 (Brand A) Dissatisfaction with the price offer

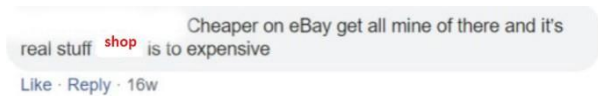


Figure 34 (Brand A) Dissatisfaction with the price offer



Figure 36 (Brand A) Positive product feedback



Figure 37 (Brand A) Constructive feedback for the brand

Conversely to consumer comments posted within brand A’s SMBC, most of the consumer responses to brand B’s brand posts were positive, although there were some individual negative comments. Like the negative feedback received by brand A, brand B consumers spoke negatively about promotional offers and the lack of transparency around brand B’s reporting on the price of a product. Brand engagement in conversation with consumers caused confusion and anger as, when asked about the price, the brand appeared secretive, which annoyed those who asked (Fig. 38, 39, and 40). As social media is characterised by transparency, such behaviour can be seen as underhanded and, in the social media environment, can easily be exposed and shared across communities and contacts, with the potential to escalate into a brand crisis.



Figure 38 (Brand B) Discussion around the price

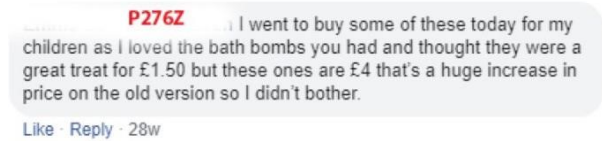


Figure 39 (Brand B) Discussion around the price

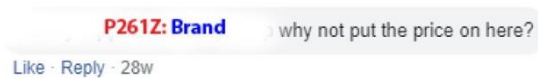


Figure 40 (Brand B) Enquiry about the price

While there were several negative comments (Figures 41 and 42), it is important to note that most consumer feedback was positive. Furthermore, the feedback was mostly directed at the brand itself. The brand was praised for its marketing efforts (Figure 44) and the models used in pictures/videos that encourage body positivity and empowerment (Figure 43), which, in turn, was perceived as coherent with the brand’s commitment to advocating self-love and body acceptance.



Figure 41 (Brand B) Negatively valenced comment

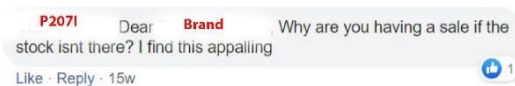


Figure 42 (Brand B) Negatively valenced comment

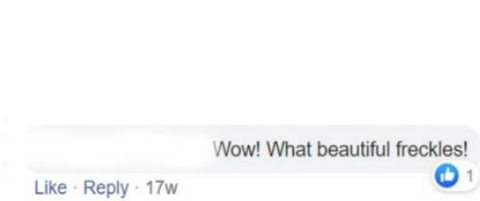


Figure 44 (Brand B) Positively valenced comments

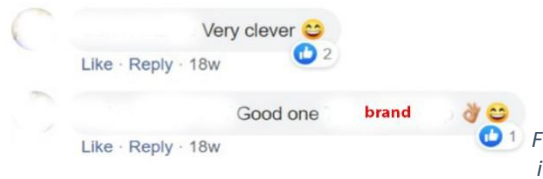


Figure 43 (Brand B) Positively valenced comments

Such feedback from consumers participating within brand B’s SMBC could indicate a strong consumer-brand relationship as well as suggesting a strong of brand values within consumer comments which, in turn, can act as a driver for the creation and maintenance of the relationship with the brand.

The SMBC is also used as a virtual space to carry out conversations. Often those conversations take place between peers who have a relationship outside the virtual world. This is assumed from the tone of the messages, and references to situations/elements of daily life, for example, work (Figure 45). The consumers tagged one another and sometimes engaged in short conversations. The trigger for the conversations would typically be the product/brand post from the brand, although often the chat would evolve to focus on another topic (Figure 46). Such behaviour makes it difficult to classify conversations. Conversations of this kind are usually kept in an upbeat, often playful tone, and to a different extent are present within all the researched brand SMBCs. Interestingly, most conversations within brand C’s SMBC take place between offline peers, while many of the conversations within brand B’s SMBC take place between online peers, linked through the SMBC. In other words, within brand C’s SMBC, consumers often have conversations through tagging people they know in the real world, outside the SMBC. On the contrary, within brand B’s SMBC, consumers often have conversations with people they become acquainted with through brand B’s SMBC. This might indicate that to grow consumer engagement within SMBCs, brands should support real-world peer conversations that can encourage further conversation within SMBCs.

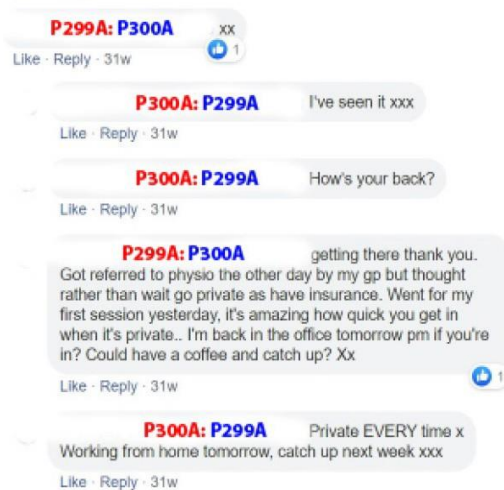


Figure 45 (Brand B) Conversation presumably with a work colleague

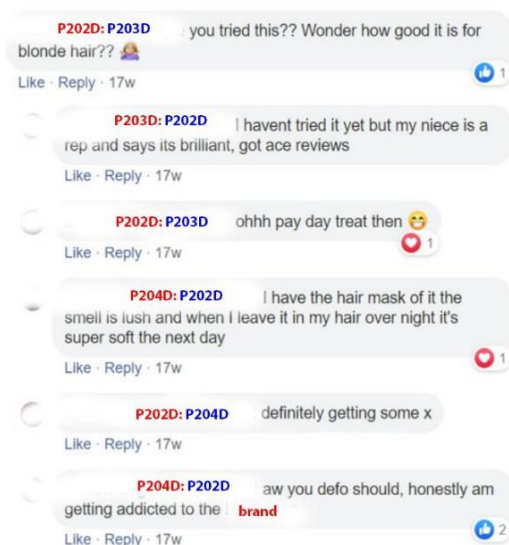


Figure 46 (Brand B) Topic-fluid chat

In addition to this, the consumers participate in the SMBC to ask questions regarding products (Figure 47), seek advice (Figure 48), and check in with others (Figure 49) but equally share their knowledge with others through sharing their experiences (Figure 50) and feedback (Figure 51). Furthermore, consumers frequently tag people they know (Figure 52), often having short conversations with them (Figure 53). Therefore, on occasion, the SMBC is used as a communication platform beyond the brand focus. Therefore, it might be assumed that SMBCs act as a form of support network for consumers to understand the products better and to improve their self-care.

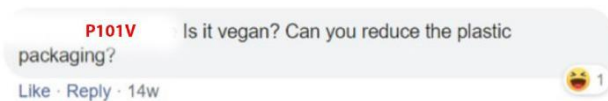


Figure 47 (Brand A) Enquiry about a product

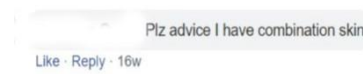


Figure 48 (Brand A) Advice seeking

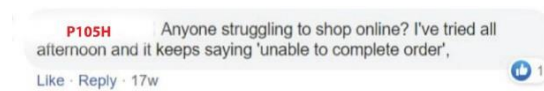


Figure 49 (Brand A) Checking-in with others

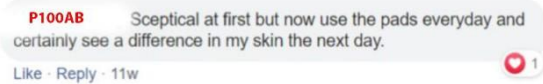


Figure 50 (Brand A) Experience sharing

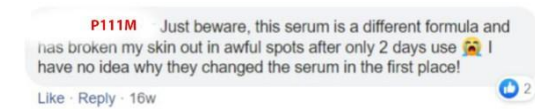


Figure 51 (Brand A) Feedback sharing

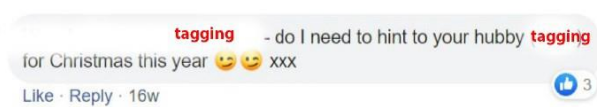


Figure 52 (Brand A) Tagging others into the brand post



Figure 53 (Brand A) Short, personal conversation within SMBC

It has been noted, however, that some participants misuse SMBCs for self-advertising purposes. This was the case for brands A and B. Such behaviour should be closely monitored by brands, as self-advertising by consumers within SMBCs can hinder the development of community and consumer-brand relationships.

4.2.2 Belongingness building

A belongingness-building theme can be observed in two of the three brands studied (brands A and B). Table 13 illustrates the number of brand posts published within the period observed which were categorised as ‘belongingness building’ and the consumer response. The analysis reveals that brand C represents the least developed SMBC amongst the brands studied – it has not published brand posts which help stimulate belongingness building. Brand B, identified as the most developed SMBC among the researched brands, has posted the most belongingness-building themed brand posts within the researched period. For that reason, belongingness building might be linked with the development of SMBCs. This finding can also indicate that the belongingness-building theme could be an indicator of the development of SMBCs and would only be in evidence within more developed SMBCs.

Table 13 Summary of brand posts within the theme and consumer response to them

	Number of posts	Consumer response
Brand A	2	67 comments 33 shares 465 likes
Brand B	4	232 comments 555 shares 1533 likes
Brand C	0	N/A

Belongingness-building brand posts strive to enhance and facilitate the development of belongingness to an SMBC. Within this theme, brand posts celebrate milestones while expressing gratitude to consumers for their support in purchasing products as well as participating in various schemes, such as recycling initiatives. These brand posts are designed to share important moments with consumers, and, in turn, enhance the brand-consumer relationship (bond). In addition, brand posts within the belongingness-building theme often thanked consumers for supporting the brand by highlighting consumers’ contributions to the brand, thereby emphasising the role that consumers play in a brand’s life and its success. The brand posts within the belongingness-building theme also utilise user content. Such brand posts are made up of reposts of content about brand products published by consumers. In other words, brand posts contain images and text of ordinary consumers who show products in use. The overview of sub-themes is presented in Figure 54.

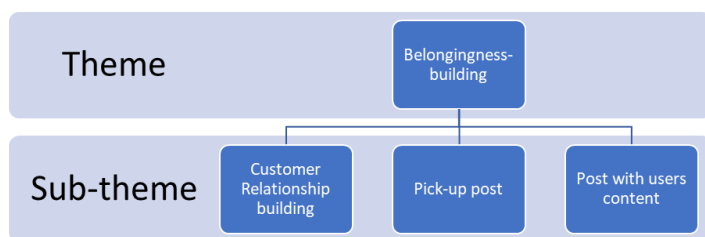


Figure 54 Summary of sub-themes within the belongingness-building them

In a similar response to the ‘presentation of offerings’ theme, consumer reactions to belongingness- building brand posts were mixed. However, unlike brand posts within the presentation of offerings theme (where brand B attracted mostly positive consumer comments), within the belongingness- building theme consumer reactions are mixed across both brand A and brand B. This may indicate that while the brands strive to facilitate relationship building, the designed content has not always triggered the desired response. For example, a brand post offering seasonal greetings was met with overwhelming disapproval from consumers, who were quick to point out the shortcomings of the brand, which were not necessarily related to the topic introduced by the brand post (Figure 55). Furthermore, some negative comments were directed at fellow consumers who shared opposing views (Figure 56), which risked upsetting consumer-consumer relations within the SMBC. Interestingly, this was the case for both brands (A and B) that utilised belongingness-building brand posts. On the other hand, the most positive feedback and excitement from consumers was generated through brand posts sharing user-generated content and content aimed at lifting spirits (Figure 57). This would indicate that consumers are interested in connecting not only with brands on various levels of life but also with other consumers. Such a multi-level connection could facilitate the development of a feeling of belonging that is essential for community development.



Figure 55 (Brand B) Comment discussing disappointment over cancelled incentive

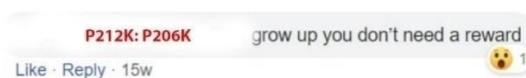


Figure 56 (Brand B) Negatively valenced comment towards another consumer



Figure 57 (Brand A) Positive reactions from consumers

An interesting observation relating to adherence to topics introduced by brand posts was made. While within both brand A and B's SMBC there was a level of diversity in terms of the relationship between brand-introduced topics and consumer comments. For example, while brand B consumers more rigorously adhered to the topics introduced by the brand (maintaining the focus intended), some consumers urged the brand to bring back their favourite products (connected with the brand asking community members to name their favourite scent) (Figure 58), and asked for details of their recycling scheme (as the brand post drew attention to having won the award for the most sustainable brand based on its use of recycled plastic bottles) (Figure 59) or complained about a cancelled incentive for recycling empty containers (when the brand mentioned it in the post wishing followers a Happy New Year) (Figure 60). The consumers were also quick to change the topic discussed (Figures 59 and 60), or to elaborate (Figure 61), leading to a high level of fluidity in the conversations that took place within the SMBC.

*

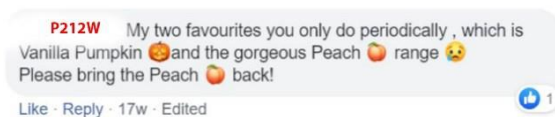


Figure 58 (Brand B) Consumer asking for reinstating a product

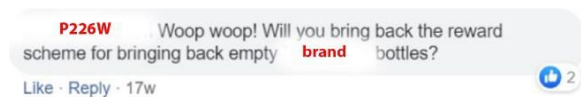


Figure 59 (Brand B) Enquiry about recycling scheme

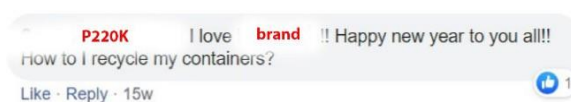


Figure 60 (Brand B) Consumer jumps from one topic

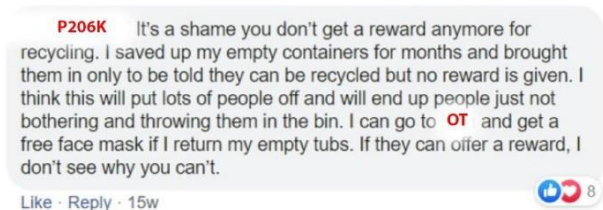


Figure 61 (Brand B) Consumer expanding discussion on a topic

On the other hand, brand A consumer comments appeared to be wandering further from the topic of the brand posts. For example, within the brand post sending New Year wishes, consumers discussed, among other issues, store opening hours (Figure 62), satisfaction (Figure 63)/dissatisfaction (Figure 64) with products and product/price enquires (Figure 65).

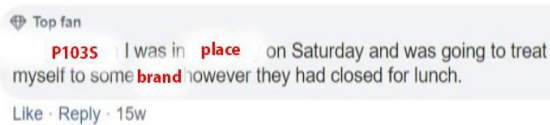


Figure 62 (Brand A) Discussion around store opening hours



Figure 63 (Brand A) Satisfaction with the brand

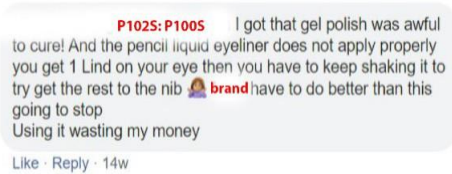


Figure 64 (Brand A) Dissatisfaction with the brand



Figure 65 (Brand A) Enquiry about an offer

Similarly to the ‘presentation of offerings’ theme, within the belongingness-building theme consumers sought to interact with the SMBCs for a variety of reasons. Customers participate in SMBCs to express their own opinions and discuss their experience of brand products (Figure 66), share acquired insights (Figure 67) and share information with their peers (Figure 68), as well as to showcase their appreciation of the brand (Figure 69), and to share their product ideas (Figure 70).



Figure 66 (Brand A) Sharing own experiences



Figure 67 (Brand A) Sharing acquired insights

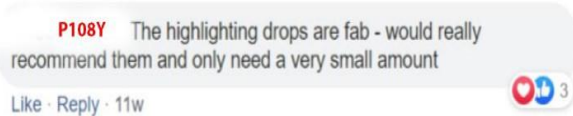


Figure 68 (Brand A) Sharing information

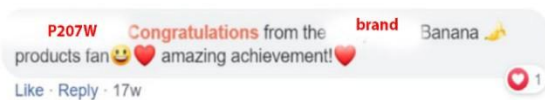


Figure 69 (Brand B) Appreciation of the brand



Figure 70 (Brand B) Product idea

Furthermore, within brand B's SMBC, the community page was also utilised by people who wanted to reach new audiences. Within the 'belongingness-building' theme, there is evidence of brand representatives seeking to recruit new customers. This cannot be confirmed due to the high level of privacy settings that hide an initial message from everyone except the recipient (Figure 71). However, it was observed that people were approached by others at random, without expressing a need for a purchase. Due to high privacy settings, the identification of such random approaches is difficult, as the initial message can often only be seen by the intended recipient. In such cases, the identification is only possible when those recipients, through their follow-up comments, expressed a lack of interest in collaboration. For example, Figure 72 illustrates how consumer P225W dismisses consumer P201W, however, the initial comment by P201W cannot be seen. Similarly, Figure 73 illustrates consumer 'P231W' who also dismisses consumer 'P201W'. Such behaviours should be closely monitored by brands and addressed when necessary as they can pose a threat to the development of the community, which instead of offering a safe space for collaboration and experience exchange could be exposed to an involuntary solicitation. SMBCs are particularly prone to such attempts as they are characterised by openness and low entry barriers.

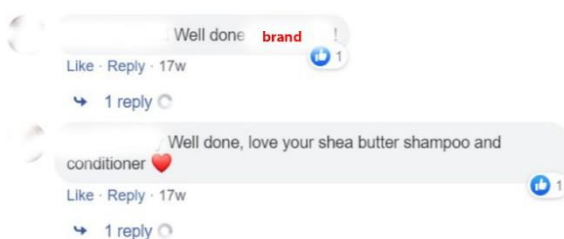


Figure 71 (Brand B) Privacy settings prevent messages loading

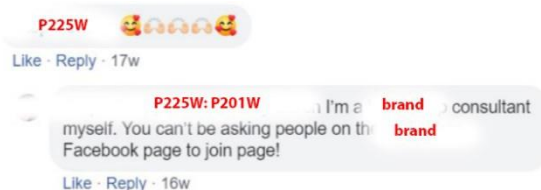


Figure 72 (Brand B) Consumer responding to personal advertising

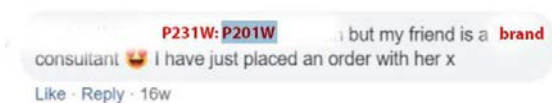


Figure 73 (Brand B) Consumer responding to personal advertising

4.2.3 Engagement building

‘Engagement-building’ brand posts were identified within the SMBCs associated with brand A and brand B. Brand posts in this theme can create high engagement levels among consumers. Most consumer reactions to ‘engagement-building’ posts took the shape of comments, shares and likes across the dataset. Table 14 illustrates the number of brand posts published within the period and the consumer responses.

Table 14 Summary of the number of brand posts within the theme and the level of consumer response

	Number of posts	Consumer response
Brand A	1	2100 comments 2000 shares 2400 likes
Brand B	10	6225 comments 628 shares 5693 likes
Brand C	0	N/A

It is important to recognise that some of this engagement building was created through incentive stimulation. In other words, this related to posts made by the brands where consumers could win a product if they followed the instructions laid out by the brand, which often included commenting, sharing and liking the post. Hence, it has been decided not to analyse the consumer comments within the ‘contest’ sub-theme, as the comments entered were closely aligned with the brand’s instructions, therefore offering little insight into the attitude of consumers, topics discussed and their purpose for participating within the SMBC. Apart from contest brand posts, brand B also engaged consumers by prompting them to share their opinions. This was done by asking questions, for example, about their favourite products or beauty tips. The overview of sub-themes is presented in Figure 74.

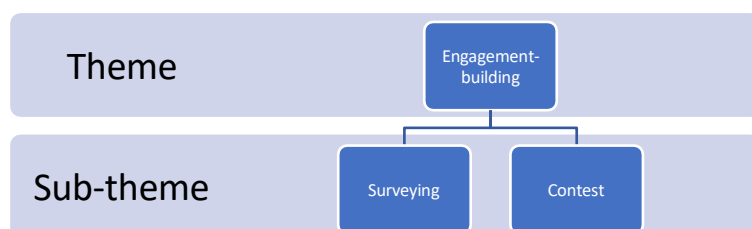


Figure 74 Summary of sub-themes within the engagement-building theme

The engagement-building theme exhibited the most positive responses from consumers across the dataset. The comments typically used an upbeat and playful tone. This might be related to the topics

of brand posts since they were not associated with any issues that might cause distress or could be perceived as controversial. Instead, the topics were designed to probe consumer preferences on overall beauty subjects. Very few posts within this category were not related to the topic introduced by the brand. This could indicate that the chosen topics used by the brand to stimulate response were liked by consumers. As a result, the posts generated higher engagement levels. The skillful choice of topics resulted in consumers focusing on their opinions and experience (Figure 75), which they were happy to share. Furthermore, experiences or preferences enabled consumers to bond over their lived experiences or likes/dislikes (Figure 76). Consumers discussed their preferences, which very often took the form of a 'story' (Figure 77). Those stories frequently included other people, often family members (Figure 78). Such storytelling is consistent across the engagement-building theme. Most stories were posted by satisfied customers; such stories also helped new customers to select the most suitable products. In summary, there is significant evidence that consumers can identify with the experiences of others and interpret their relevance to their situation. For example, by reading comments about a particular product being viewed as good for sensitive skin, another consumer can think 'I have sensitive skin, this product might be a good choice for me too'. Sharing the experience can encourage other community members to experiment and try new products. It can also have a positive effect on purchase intention and consumer satisfaction.

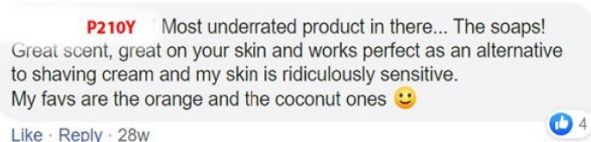


Figure 75 (Brand B) A consumer sharing an opinion



Figure 76 (Brand B) Bonding over experiences

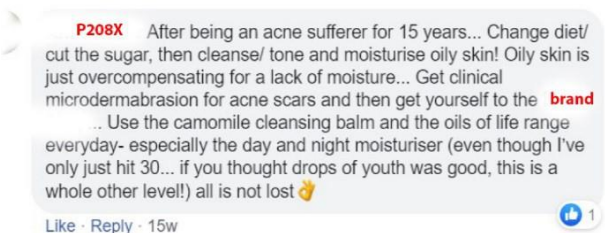


Figure 77 (Brand B) Storytelling

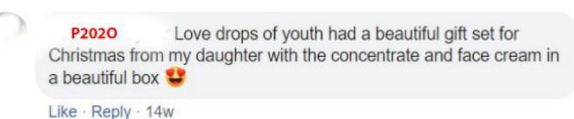


Figure 78 (Brand B) Experiences involving family member

Within brand B's SMBC, a significant number of comments request that the company reintroduces products that have been discontinued. Brand B's business model is based on a frequently changing product portfolio and limited, seasonal stock. Therefore, Brand B consumers take any opportunities to plea to the brand to make their favourite, out-of-stock products available. They also are keen to

share their ideas for new product development (Figure 79). Such strong consumer knowledge of the brand's product portfolio could indicate a robust consumer-brand relationship and one formed over a significant period. For example, consumers continue to ask to reinstate a perfume that was discontinued several years ago.

The engagement-building theme encourages consumers to share their lived experiences. Through stories, consumers express their feelings towards the brand and its products (Figure 80). To reinforce the message, some consumers provide pictures of their favourite products or the collection of brand products they have acquired (Figures 81 and 82). Sharing the experience can encourage other community members to experiment and try new products, as well as strengthening the consumer-brand relationship by acknowledging opinions and feelings towards the brand.

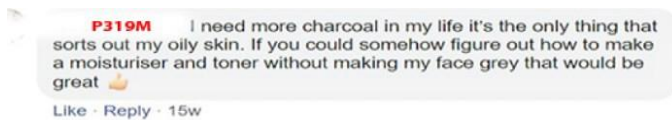


Figure 79 (Brand B) New product ideas

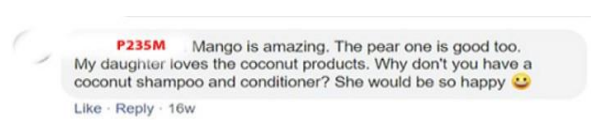


Figure 80 (Brand B) New product ideas

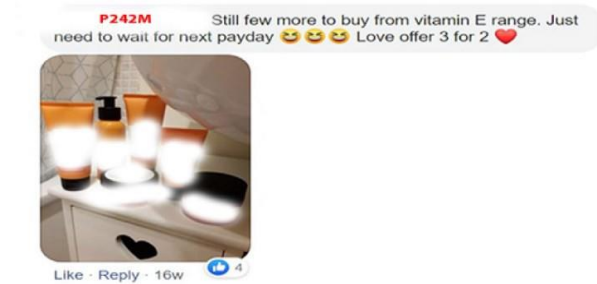


Figure 81 (Brand B) A consumer displaying the brand's products

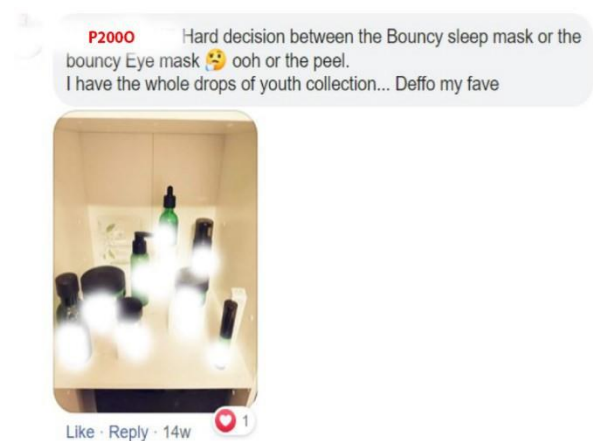


Figure 82 (Brand B) A consumer displaying the brand's products

4.2.4 Value-led

'Value-led' brand posts were identified only within brand B's SMBC. Table 15 illustrates the number of brand posts published within the observed period and the consumer response. The value-led brand posts are of the most topical variety across the dataset. For example, within the analysed period brand B published a brand post discussing the 'Bloody Good Period' campaign which fights against 'period poverty' and announced a collaboration with Plan International to help children in Brazil and Indonesia. There was also a brand post encouraging its followers to participate in the December 2019 elections.

Table 15 Summary of brand posts within the theme and consumer response to them

	Number of posts	Consumer response
Brand A	0	N/A
Brand B	7	579 comments 1624 shares 5875 likes
Brand C	0	N/A

Within the value-led theme, brand posts highlighted the different charitable programmes the company supports, at times encouraging consumers to participate and engage in philanthropic acts by purchasing selected products which support chosen charities. While some of the topics discussed within this theme align with the brand's overall corporate values (e.g., against animal testing, equity for women and girls), others appeared more peripheral, such as those surrounding the 'Bloody Good Period' campaign or participation in elections). The overview of sub-themes is presented in Figure 83.

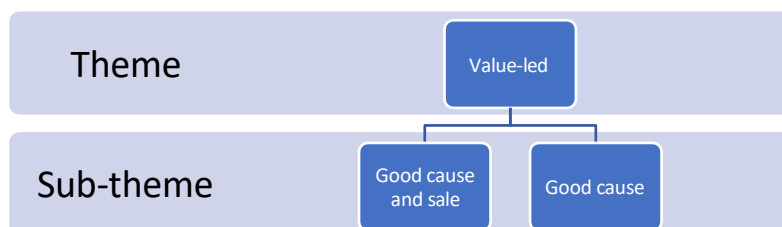


Figure 83 Summary of sub-themes within the value-led theme

Value-led brand posts encouraged consumers to discuss their principles and viewpoints. This occasionally led to consumers quarrelling with each other over their conflicting views (Figures 84 and

85). The brand did not interfere on such occasions; consumers were left to manage the conflict themselves. Therefore, negatively focused attitudes were often directed towards those who had conflicting views (Figure 86), rather than the brand itself. Most consumer responses were supportive of the brand and were appreciative of the brand’s commitment to caring for others (Figures 87 and 88). One person negatively reacted to the brand post, calling on the brand to answer cause-related questions (Figure 89). While such lively discussions provided an excellent opportunity to bond over similar viewpoints and beliefs, the topics and direction of the discussion should be carefully monitored by the brand to prevent any escalation of arguments between consumers. Such escalation could hinder consumer relationship building, instead of facilitating bond creation.

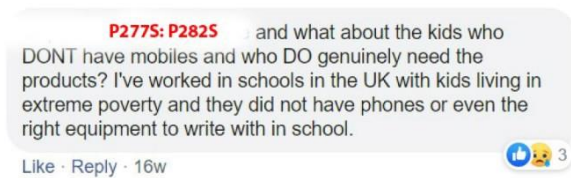


Figure 84 (Brand B) Conflicting opinions of consumers

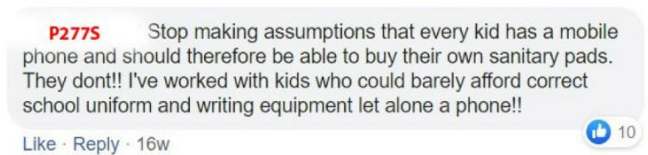


Figure 85 (Brand B) Conflicting opinions of consumers

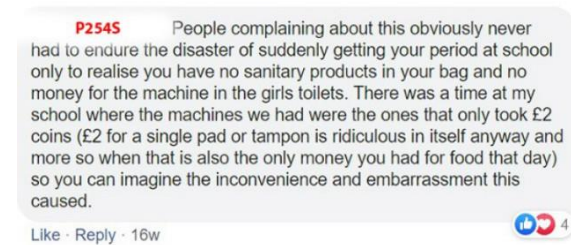


Figure 86 (Brand B) Negative valenced attitude towards



Figure 87 (Brand B) A comment praising the brand



Figure 88 (Brand B) A comment praising the brand

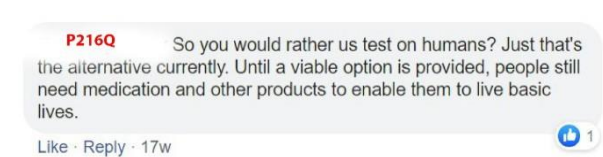


Figure 89 (Brand B) Negatively valenced comment towards the brand

Most of the comments strictly followed the topic introduced by the value-led brand posts. However, similarly to brand post themes discussed earlier in this chapter, the conversations among consumers were quite fluid, such that the topics evolved seamlessly. Some of the comments expressed gratitude and admiration for the brand for engaging in activities aimed at achieving a better world (Figure 90). However, most of the comments consisted of self-reflection (Figure 91), sharing lived experiences (Figure 92), and comments on the issues presented in the brand post (Figure 93), sometimes in a visual form (Figure 94). As such, the brand was not the focal point of these conversations. Instead, consumers engaged in the discussion of topics that mattered to them (Figure 95) and that were aligned with their belief system. Consumers exchanged views, and sometimes bonded over a similar outlook on life or experiences (Figure 96). They also reported on their actions, for example, informing the brand that they voted in the political elections (Figure 97), or had donated to an identified charitable cause (Figure 98). Consumers bonding over values can be extremely beneficial for brands. Consumers who recognise the similarities and who share the same beliefs are more likely to develop a longer-lasting, meaningful relationship with the brand.



Figure 90 (Brand B) Consumer expressing the opinion of the brand

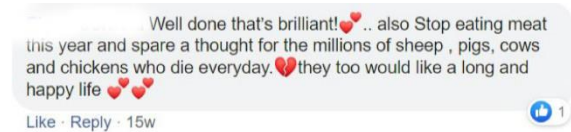


Figure 91 (Brand B) Self-reflection

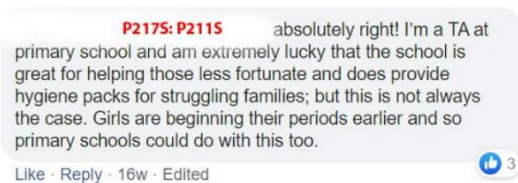


Figure 92 (Brand B) Sharing lived experiences

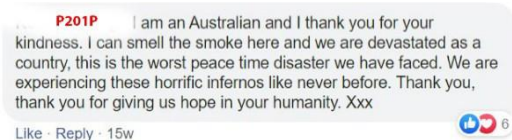


Figure 93 (Brand B) Sharing lived experiences

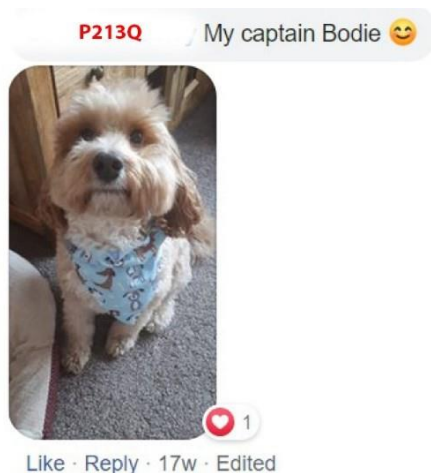


Figure 94 (Brand B) Visual sharing

P225P Thank you .I am in Australia....it's horrific and not getting any better at present . Wonderful people rescuing and caring for injured animals, making pouches and assisting with funds for veterinary care . 🐦🐶🐱
Like · Reply · 15w

Figure 95 (Brand B) A consumer discusses a topic close to their heart

P204S I agree. Even adults struggle to afford them so they should be available in workplaces too. At my workplace we provide them.
Like · Reply · 16w · Edited

Figure 96 (Brand B) Consumers bonding over similar opinions

... I've voted 🗳️
Like · Reply · 18w

Figure 97 (Brand B) Consumer sharing information about voting

P232P Wonderful news **brand** I will be donating on my next visit ❤️
Like · Reply · 15w

Figure 98 (Brand B) Consumer sharing intent for donating

4.2.5 Educational

'Educational' brand posts were identified only within brand B's SMBC. Table 16 illustrates the number of brand posts published within the period and the consumer responses. Within the dataset, the educational post took the shape of one video tutorial. Unfortunately, the lack of consumer engagement with the brand post prevented conducting deep analysis that would further the understanding of consumer attitudes towards such brand posts. The data collection took place before the Covid pandemic and lockdowns that had a tremendous impact on what content was produced for social media and how social media is utilised. During the time of data collection, the video format (broadcasted live or replied to) was not as widely utilised. The educational theme may be of more significance in post-Covid times.

Table 16 Summary of brand posts within the theme and consumer response to them

	Number of posts	Consumer response
Brand A	0	N/A
Brand B	1	3 comments 28 shares 58 likes
Brand C	0	N/A

4.2.6 Summary of brand posts

In this section, findings relating to the brand posts were discussed. The findings revealed five broad themes: (1) *presentation of offerings*, (2) *engagement building*, (3) *value-led*, (4) *belongingness building*, and (5) *educational*. Furthermore, the analysis of the emerging themes revealed that the brands selected for this study are in different stages of their online SMBC development. While brands A and C focus their efforts on producing content within the presentation of offerings theme that introduces their product/services and prompt consumers to purchase, brand B discusses a variety of topics within its brand posts. This has led to establishing a link between the brand post theme and the stage of SMBC development. It is discovered that while within the establishing stages of the SMBC development, the emphasis is placed on educating consumers and presenting offerings through brand posts, whereas in the later stages of SMBC development attention shifts towards community-building processes. This has been visualised in Table 17.

Table 17 Overview of themes occurrence across the three brands

SMBC	Establishing	Emerging	Developed
Themes			
	Offerings	Offerings	Offerings
		Belongingness	Belongingness
		Engagement	Engagement
			Educational
			Value-led

4.3 Consumer comments

4.3.1 Introduction

Another sphere of the analysis concerned consumer comments. Four broad themes emerged from the analysis: (1) *brand-centred communication*, (2) *cognitive-centred communication*, (3) *conversation-centred communication*, and (4) *personal experience-centred communication*. The breakdown of the themes across each brand can be found in Table 18. In the next sections, each of the themes will be discussed.

Table 18 Summary of consumer-to-consumer interactions across three brands

	Brand-centred communication	Cognitive-centred communication	Conversation-centred communication	Personal experience-centred communication
Brand A	28	267	40	189
Brand B	100	869	221	1146
Brand C	1	32	17	17
Total	129	1168	278	1352

4.3.2 Brand-centred communication

Brand-centred communication focuses on communication initiated by consumers which focuses on a brand (the brand of the SMBC studied, or competitor brands) and its product offerings. Within the conversations, the emphasis is on the product/brand. It is important to highlight that throughout the themes identified, brand-centred communication emerged the least frequently. This is true for all three brands within this study. The discussion within the theme was often supported by consumer stories or stories of their peers. Interestingly, consumer comments regarding brand A were largely negative. Most of the consumers were engaged in expressing their dissatisfaction with the brand (Figure 99), and comparing the brand with other, similar brands (Figure 100). Only a small group of consumers engaged in promoting the brand to others (Figure 101) and spreading positive word-of-mouth about the brand.

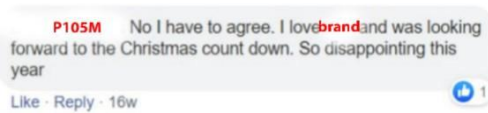


Figure 99 (Brand A) Expressing dissatisfaction with the brand

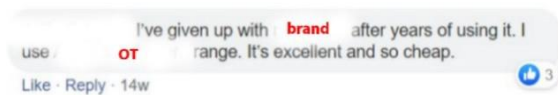


Figure 100 (Brand A) Comparing brand with other brands

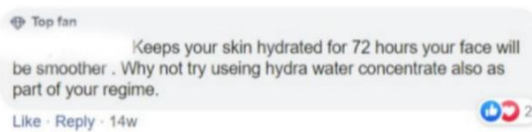


Figure 101 (Brand A) Consumers promoting brand to other consumers

On the contrary, consumer comments regarding brand B were mostly positive. Such supporting statements were aimed at enhancing the impact of the message (Figure 102). Interestingly, the communication is not only centred around the product but the brand itself and the meaning of the brand to consumers (Figure 103). SMBCs give consumers opportunity to express their feelings toward the brand (Figure 104). While the comments were overly positive, some consumers expressed dissatisfaction with brand B (Figure 105).



Figure 102 (Brand B) Personal story supports opinion of the brand



Figure 103 (Brand B) A consumer expressing their attitude towards the brand

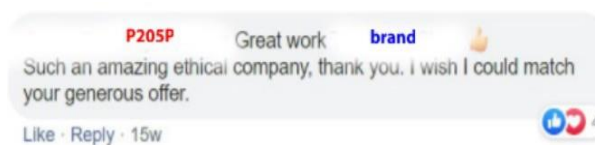


Figure 104 (Brand B) A consumer expressing feeling towards the brand

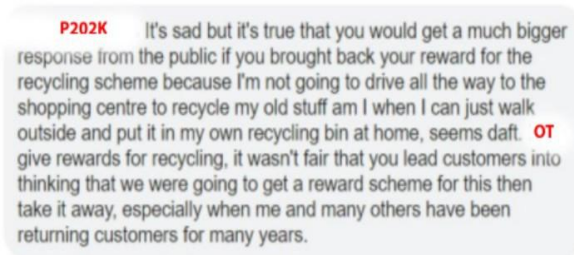


Figure 105 (Brand B) A consumer expressing dissatisfaction with the brand

At times consumers involved themselves in a discussion of brand competitors. In such instances, statements centred around other brands that are considered competitors. Interestingly, consumers within brand B's SMBC usually use other brands to highlight brand B's superiority, for example through comparison and evaluation of brand values (Figure 106), which does not always involve products (Figure 107). On the contrary, assessment of brand A against its competitors conducted by consumers within SMBC, is often unfavourable to brand A (Figure 100).

Figure 106 (Brand B) Evaluating product value through comparison with competitor's brand

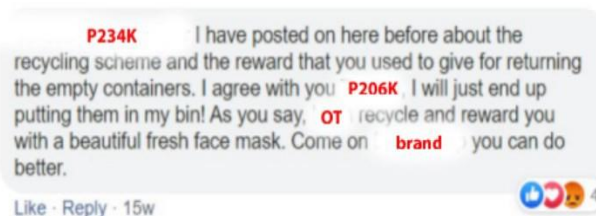


Figure 107 (Brand B) Comparison of recycling schemes across brands

The different approaches of consumers to brand A and brand B could stem from the different level of SMBC development and subsequently the relationship/bond that consumers have with that brand. Unfortunately, the low level of engagement within brand C's SMBC made it impossible to shed more

light on this matter, as only one short consumer comment was posted within the brand-centred communication theme (Figure 108).

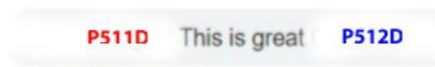


Figure 108 (Brand C) A customer comment appreciating the brand

4.3.3 Cognitive-centred communication

Cognitive-centred communication focuses on information transfer between different actors. It is divided into two major categories: (1) exchange of knowledge and (2) idea sharing. The analysis exposed diverse posting levels for each category across the three brands. It is important to highlight the difference in the number of idea-sharing posts within brand A and brand B’s SMBCs. This again might be due to the different stage of community development for brand A and B’s SMBC. While brand B is characterised by an advanced development of its SMBC, brand C is characterised by a not yet established community. Brand A’s community, on the other hand, could be characterised as emerging.

Table 19 Summary of two main categories within the cognitive-centred communication across three brands

	Exchange of knowledge	Idea sharing
Brand A	288	33
Brand B	862	152
Brand C	35	1
Total	1185	186

The exchange of knowledge focuses on knowledge transfer between consumers participating in SMBCs, for example sharing information in the shape of storytelling (Figure 109), tagging peers (Figure 110), and sharing user tips (Figure 111). The posts can take a personal character. In other words, consumers telling stories or introducing brands/products through the prism of their own lived experiences. This could indicate that people are keen to share their knowledge with others, passing on their knowledge without being prompted to do so (Figure 112). Consumers also share their experiences; however, such posts are more honed and focused on the product and immediate experience with using the product (Figure 113). Consumers also engage in providing information to specific questions posted within the SMBC. In such instances, the answer usually focuses on a question and is aligned with what the person posting wants to know (Figure 114). The questions asked within

the SMBC are of wide scope, for example how to use a product in a specific circumstance (i.e., after a caesarean-section), what the price or ingredients of a product are, or issues surrounding product availability. Particularly notable, however, are requests for recommendations from other consumers (Figure 115). Such behaviour could indicate trust and recognition of the SMBC participants as experts in the brand's products.



Figure 110 (Brand A) Tagging

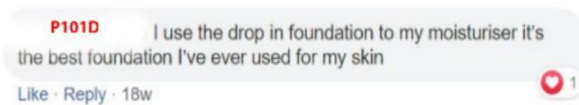


Figure 111 (Brand A) Tip sharing



Figure 112 (Brand B) Information sharing: charity

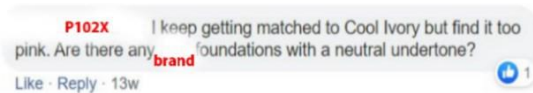


Figure 115 (Brand A) Search for recommendations

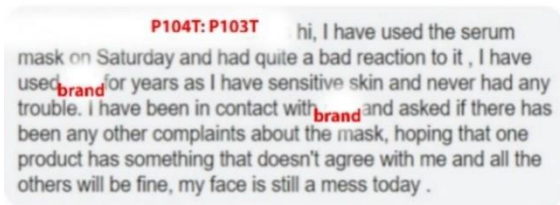


Figure 109 (Brand A) Storytelling

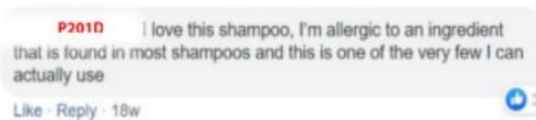


Figure 113 (Brand B) Sharing own experience

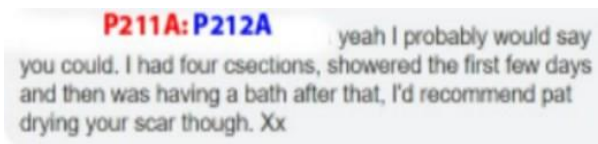


Figure 114 (Brand B) Proving information to a specific question

Idea sharing focuses on generating new knowledge through bouncing ideas off one another, suggesting solutions, or sharing one's own practices. Such novel solutions are directed to the brand as well as other consumers. For example, consumers would suggest certain actions to their peers (Figure 116) or themselves (Figure 117). They also offered support to one another (Figure 118). Finally, consumers, as active brand users, offered recommendations to the brand regarding product extensions (Figure 119), extending offers (Figure 120) or consumers made recommendations on how to best advertise the product (Figure 121).

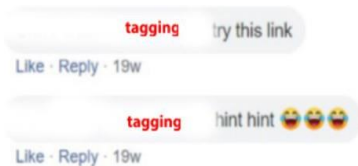


Figure 116 (Brand A) Consumer suggesting actions to their peers



Figure 117 (Brand A) Consumer alluding to actions they have to take

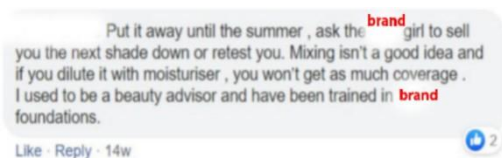


Figure 118 (Brand A) Consumer offering support to their peers

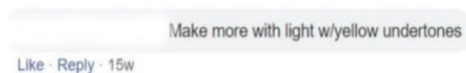


Figure 119 (Brand A) Product ideas



Figure 120 (Brand A) Consumer presenting idea regarding offers

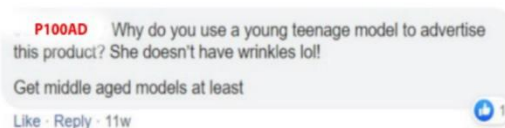


Figure 121 (Brand A) Comment regarding models used in advertising

Brand recommendations are particularly observable within brand B's SMBC in the form of new product development ideas (Figure 122), requests to reinstate products that became unavailable (Figure 123), or other suggestions to move seasonal products to a regular range (Figure 124). Such a big volume of idea generation could be due to the business model of brand B which implies the frequent introduction of new products and high rotation of stock. It could also be triggered by brand posts that brand B publishes.

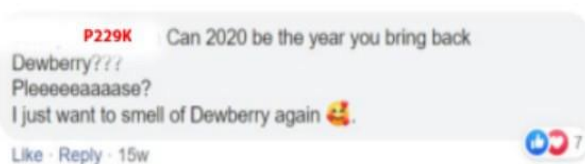


Figure 123 (Brand B) Request to reinstate a product

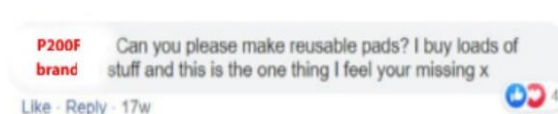


Figure 122 (Brand B) Suggestion for product development



Figure 124 (Brand B) Suggestion to move a seasonal product to a regular range

4.3.4 Conversation-centred communication

The conversation-centred communication was particularly diverse in terms of the topics discussed and modes used. However, it focuses on retaining and sustaining conversations with other consumers. Therefore, all communication included in this theme had a repetitive character.

In other words, it was often distinguishable by its recurrent nature and which may have developed from prior conversations.

Within conversation-centred communication, consumers provided updates on problems that others were seeking to resolve; this could have been another consumer (Figure 125) or the brand (Figure 126). Consumers also, through their comments, acknowledged replies provided by others or promised to follow up on advice given. The theme also consists of comments aimed at creating small conversations (Figure 127). Those conversations can be conducted using visual means, for example, pictures, or GIFs (Figure 128).



Figure 125 (Brand B) Consumer providing feedback on given advice



Figure 126 (Brand B) Consumer update on provided

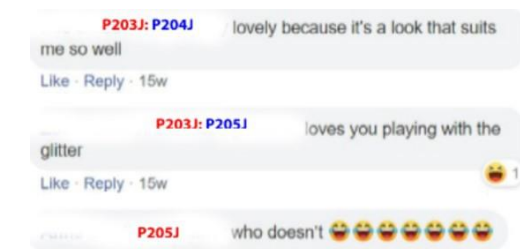


Figure 127 (Brand B) Friendly chit-chat



Figure 128 (Brand B) Visual communication in a form of a GIF

Differences were also reported within the use of visual communications across the SMBCs. For instance, consumers within brand B's SMBC engaged in visual communication more than five times more frequently than consumers within brand C's SMBC, and almost three times more frequently than consumers within brand A's SMBC. This might be an indication of the commitment to the SMBC, as finding an appropriate GIF or image for a certain conversation requires more time than typing a reply. Furthermore, as such visual communication often deciphers humour, the consumers participating in conversation would have to understand what is regarded as funny within the SMBC. This can only be achieved through engagement within the SMBC and building relationships with other consumers participating in such discussions.

Interestingly, within brand C’s SMBC, a significant portion of the communication was focused on making ‘small talk’. It appears that ‘small talk’ can be an indicator of the SMBC community development as within brand B’s SMBC the proportion of ‘small talk’ discussion was significantly lower than in the less developed brand C’s SMBC. This might be due to consumers being more focused on the discussions closely related to the brand, its products, and consumer problems related to the use of the products. This assumption can be supported by a higher number of comments updating the community on earlier reported problems.

4.3.5 Personal experience-centred communication

Personal experience-centred communication consists of two main categories that group the types of personal experience a consumer can encounter within an SMBC. The categories are as follows: (1) *emotional experience-centred communication* and (2) *perceptual experience-centred communication*. The former gathers communication involving feelings, and the latter centres on the logical evaluation of brand/products. Within brand C’s SMBC, the ratio of both categories unfolds evenly, as seen in Table 20. Out of 17 comments in this category for Brand C, nine are perceptual experience-centred while eight are emotional experience-centred. Within the SMBCs of brands A and B, most communication regards the perceptual experience of consumers (consecutively 141 out of 227 and 969 out of 1284, as seen in Table 22). This interesting observation provides a thought-provoking idea that more established SMBCs are driven more by perceptual conversation than emotions. This might offer another perspective on engaged consumers, who built a strong consumer-brand relationship. However, they do not engage in emotional conversations and do not express their emotions linked to brands and their products. This might be due to consumers being more knowledgeable about the products and the brands and wanting to pass that knowledge on to their peers.

Table 20 Summary of two categories within the personal experience-centred communication across three brands

	Emotional experience-centred communication	Perceptual experience-centred communication
Brand A	86	141
Brand B	315	969
Brand C	8	9
Total	409	1119

Within the *emotional experience-centred communication*, a strong emotional undertone of the messages was identified. For example, consumers often enlisted the help of emojis to convey emotions that are difficult to put into words. For example, the comment in Figure 129 consists only of wave emojis and a raising hands emoji. Consumers often used emotive language when expressing their experiences (Figures 130 and 131). The use of such emotive language can not only trigger emotions in readers but is also an indication of the attachment of the consumers to the brand and/or product. Consumers also engaged in exchanging pleasantries (Figure 132), which are pivotal for the maintenance of the community. This is because expressing gratitude for providing information is a vital component of a community as it signals to the advice-giver that the advice was appreciated. It also facilitates the building of relationships within the community, which helps strengthen the SMBC.

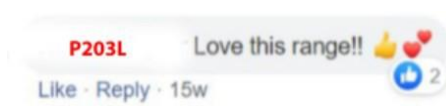


Figure 130 (Brand B) Expression of feelings: love

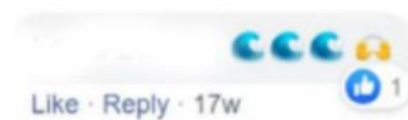


Figure 129 (Brand B) Comment in a form of emojis

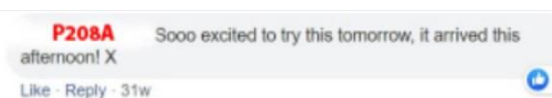


Figure 131 (Brand B) Expression of feelings: excitement

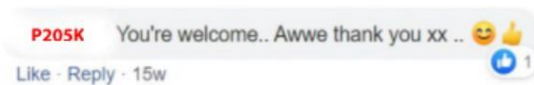


Figure 132 (Brand B) Pleasantries

Within the *perceptual experience*, communication focuses on consumers and the way they perceive the brand and its products through direct experiences (Figure 133) and stories (Figure 134) that they build around the brand and products. Such posts are linked with a reasonable evaluation of the brand's offerings (Figure 135), or any other issue presented by the brand in the brand post (Figure 136). Mostly, consumers involve themselves in providing feedback (Figure 137), sharing opinions (Figure 138), presenting their point of view (Figure 139), or discussing plans and aspirations (Figure 140). Although perceptual experience-centred communication aims to be objective and logical, it is often tinted with emotion. Interestingly, consumers appeared keen to share opinions that are tinted with personal beliefs and views, rather than offering objective feedback. Such opinions, while still providing an essential evaluation of a brand/product, focus more on personal circumstances and stories. In other words, they evaluate the brand/product through the prism of a consumer's own lived experiences. Storytelling, inspired by personal events, provides an opportunity for consumers to bond over experiences – as they might imagine themselves in the stories. This, in turn, can help cement the feeling of unity and a heightened sense of belonging.

P219N: P218N I love it and it doesn't smell "like weed" which is what a lot of people, including me first thought. I hated it when I first smelt it but it's amazing. It's helped me excema so much 🌻🌻

Figure 133 (Brand B) Consumer looking at products through own experience

P261M Dewberry, oh i haven't smelt that scent in years, my mum used to get it and it smelt to good. Been discontinued for years I think? 😞😞
Like · Reply · 16w

Figure 134 (Brand B) Consumer looking at products through personal stories

P201F: P202F the seaweed range is great for me and my nightmare skin!

Figure 135 (Brand B) Opinion sharing

P216K Yes it was then it was stopped - they were probabiy losing out ££'s! No doubt we all put them in our own recycling bins anyway. Companies should just be banned from using plastics - simple! There's a thought 🌍
Like · Reply · 15w

Figure 136 (Brand B) Consumer discussing issues introduced in a brand post

Bought the Midnight Gel polish and am so disappointed in this, the colour is beautiful but applying it and curing it 😞 is a massive problem it just does not dry at all you have to cure it for around 5 minutes instead of 1 minutes awful product

Figure 137 (Brand A) Feedback

P104I Shame you are advertising the hydrating concealer when the majority of the colours are out of stock, was the same in the store on last visit only the darkest shade left! Would of liked to of ordered on today's deal. 😞
Like · Reply · 17w

Figure 138 (Brand A) Opinion sharing

P102A: P100A same here , haven't bought anything this year , disappointed think thy could have done much better
Like · Reply · 16w

Figure 139 (Brand A) Presenting a stance on another's consumer statement

Love it, but wish I could buy here in Australia. Please make it available here 😞😞😞😞
Like · Reply · 15w

Figure 140 (Brand A) Sharing plans and aspiration

4.3.6 Topical fluidity and multi-layering of consumer posts

While the comments posted within SMBCs are usually short, they were, nonetheless, challenging to analyse. This is because the comments are extremely diverse. One of the explanations could be the high level of fluidity associated with most of the comments posted by consumers (c.f. Chapter 2.3.3.3). The shift appears seamless and effortless, and it is particularly noticeable within longer discussions. Figure 141 illustrates such fluidity; the first comment draws attention to the product while the next comments shift attention to Santa and the Tooth Fairy. While there is a link to the product (as these characters are considered as a potential source of the product) the discussion did not come back to talking about the actual product. The style of the conversations appeared to mimic conversations conducted face-to-face that are often characterised by dynamism, the interactions of an SMBC being viewed as an extension of the traditional face-to-face environment. The nature of SMBC conversations, therefore, presented a challenge during the analysis process which required careful consideration. It was decided to code all appropriate categories and themes to expose the diverse nature of the conversations. For that reason, at times more than one category was detected within comments (Figures 142, 143 and 144). Such conversation characteristics have been identified across all three brands, however, with less intensity within brand C's SMBC. This could be due to limited conversations taking place within this SMBC that could be a result of an underdeveloped community.



Figure 141 (Brand A) Example of conversation fluidity



Figure 142 (Brand B) Comment merging two sub-themes emotional experience-centred communication and perceptual experience-centred communication



Figure 144 (Brand A) Comment merging two sub-themes: Expression of feelings and Opinion sharing and Sharing plans



Figure 143 (Brand A) Comment merging two sub-themes: Bonding over experiences and Opinion sharing

Fluidity was also observed in the ease with which consumers moved from one topic to another. An example in Figure 145 illustrates how a person jumped from one topic to another. The consumer first expressed love for the brand and then shared new year's wishes with all community members to finally arrive at the topic of recycling containers. Such abrupt changes were not introduced, nor were they necessarily the result of a logical train of thought. This again strongly resembles the spontaneity of face-to-face communication. Often posted comments require context to be understood (Figure 146), as they might be difficult to understand as stand-alone thoughts. Such context can be provided by brand posts or through other consumer comments. For example, P226W (Figure 146) replied in the comment 'Woop, woop!'. Unless background information from the brand post is provided, it will remain unknown as to what this statement referred to.

The above-mentioned characteristics cause significant difficulties in the analysis as each of the comments must be considered in separation from other data as well as in conjunction with other elements that provide necessary to understanding context.

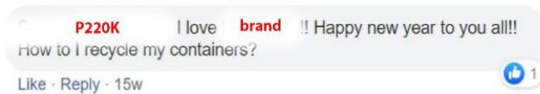


Figure 145 (Brand B) Consumer jumps from one topic to another

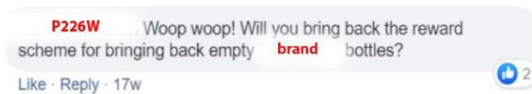


Figure 146 (Brand B) Enquiry about recycling scheme

4.3.7 Summary of consumer comments

In this section, the findings related to the consumer comments made within each SMBC studied are summarised. The findings revealed four broad themes: (1) *brand-centred communication*, (2) *cognitive-centred communication*, (3) *conversation-centred communication*, and (4) *personal experience-centred communication*. The analysis highlighted the varying frequency of themes occurring across the three brands. Table 21 provides an overview of the themes and their frequency across the three researched brands. It is also uncovered that within the less developed SMBCs of brand A and C, the most frequent theme recorded was cognitive-centred communication, while within brand B's SMBC the most frequent theme recorded was personal experience-centred communication.

Table 21 Overview of themes frequency across the three brands

High	Brand A	Brand B	Brand C
 Frequency	cognitive-centred communication	personal experience-centred communication	cognitive-centred communication
	personal experience-centred communication	cognitive-centred communication	conversation-centred communication/personal experience-centred communication
	conversation-centred communication	conversation-centred communication	brand-centred communication
	brand-centred communication	brand-centred communication	
Low			

4.4 Individual brand replies

4.4.1 Introduction

The next section investigates in more detail how brands responded to consumer comments within SMBCs. The analysis focuses on communication style and tone, together with the technical aspects of communication, such as the maintenance of communication and communication management. Within this section, there is also a brief comparison of the activity and responsiveness of all three brands.

4.4.2 Responsiveness

The analysis revealed that Brand A actively engaged in conversations with individual consumers within its SMBC. However, this engagement fluctuated significantly across the brand A dataset. This might be due to a change in the SMBC management or to the overall social media strategy adopted. Within the individual brand replies, brand A signposts consumers to other sources of information and answer queries when it is within the capability of the employee managing the SMBC at that time. On occasion, brands spontaneously replied to consumer comments that do not require any assistance/reply. For example, a consumer might have shared her appreciation of the brand, and the brand may have replied by thanking the consumer for their feedback.

On the contrary, brand B much more actively engages in conversations with individual consumers within its SMBC. The brand not only answered queries that arose, but also spontaneously commented on remarks consumers left under brand posts. This is in contrast to brand C, whose conversation activity with individual consumers within the SMBC was marginal. Through published individual replies, brand C answered queries raised by consumers on the SMBC forum. However, the brand did not reach out to consumers through one-to-one replies, unless it was prompted to do so.

Table 22 demonstrates the volume of individual replies by each brand. Differences in the level of engagement with individual brand replies is significant.

Table 22 Summary of individual brand replies

	Individual brand replies
Brand A	94
Brand B	652
Brand C	7

4.4.3 Communication style and tone

Brand A's individual replies were rather uniform. However, the style of communication began to shift towards the end of the data-collection period. The explanation for the shift was not found in the collected data. However, it could be caused by a change in the brand's communication strategy. At the beginning of the observation period, brand A displayed a corporate communication style, with elements of a CHV (Figure 147) (c.f. Chapter 2.3.3.3). Towards the end of the data-collection period, the brand shifted further towards CHV. The brand also actively worked on engaging consumers in the conversation by asking follow-up questions (Figure 148). Such a strategy shift could be informed by a need to engage consumers and facilitate consumer-brand relationship building.

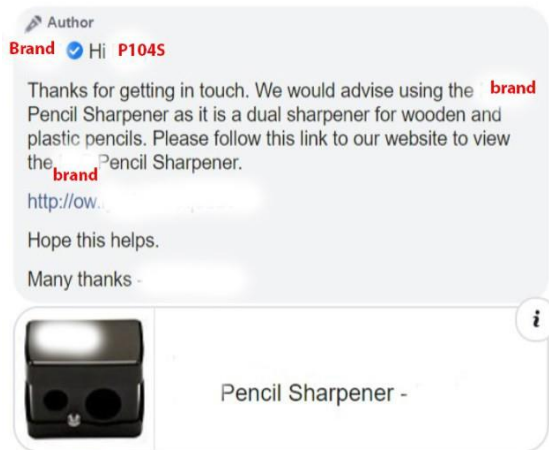


Figure 147 Brand A addressing consumers' queries



Figure 148 Brand A prompting engagement

Brand A's employees appeared to speak with one voice. In other words, the viewpoint and opinions of individual employees do not shine through in the published replies. Most of the replies use the 'we' pronoun (Figure 149), rather than the 'I' pronoun. When the 'I' pronoun is used, it is to indicate the speaker, and not to express the personal opinion of the employee (Figure 150). The tone of voice in replies changed depending on the topic of the query to which the company needed to respond. When brand A was working towards resolving a problem, the communication tended to be more formal, and corporate (Figure 151). Such a reply comprised a statement that to a degree was standardised, while maintaining some CHV. For example, replies may have addressed the interlocutor by name, using contractions and personal pronouns. (Figure 152). When the brand replied to a comment to express appreciation, the tone was casual, some emojis were also employed by the brand in such instances (Figure 153). Such a shift in tone could be dictated by the brand wanting to sound professional while dealing with an issue, but also wanting to remain friendly and approachable in casual conversations.

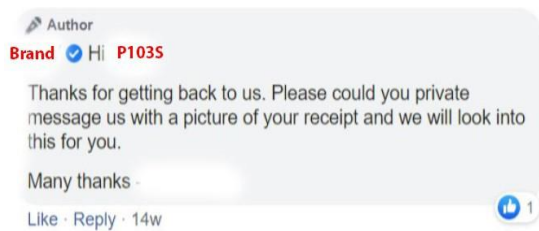


Figure 149 (Brand A) Usage of 'we'

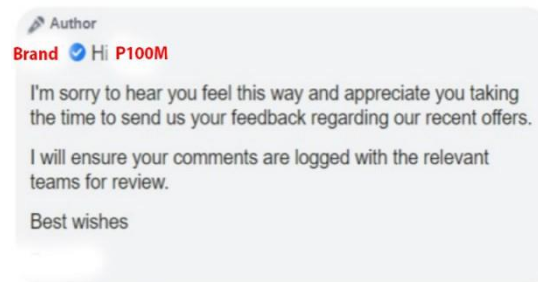


Figure 150 (Brand A) Usage of 'I' pronoun

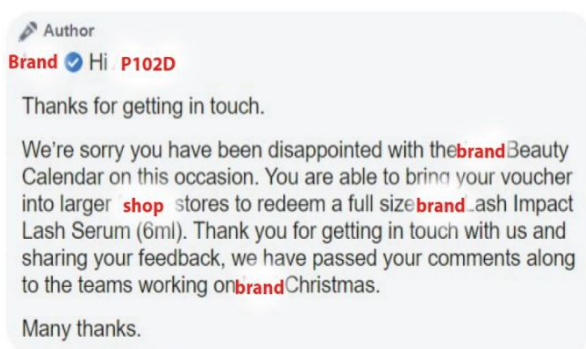


Figure 151 (Brand A) Brand response to an unfavourable comment

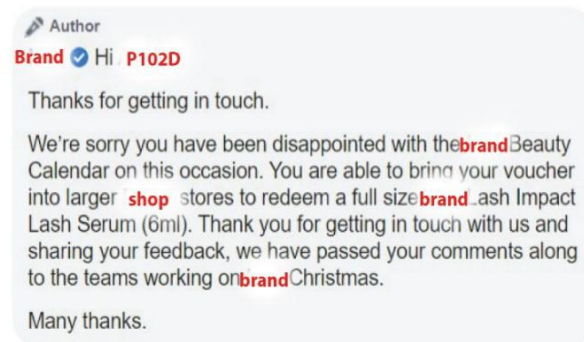


Figure 152 (Brand A) A reply utilising CHV-styled and corporate style

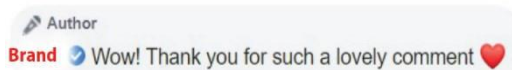


Figure 153 (Brand A) Brand response to a favourable comment

The wording of Brand A's replies appeared to be homogenous across topics, enquiries, and conversers. However, the form of CHV varied in intensity. For example, the brand might have mentioned the consumer by name but would not have used contractions or personal pronouns, or did not mention the name but use personal pronouns. The brand typically mentioned consumer names in the communication (Figure 154), which can facilitate bond development and the consumer-brand relationship, and occasionally utilised emojis in responses. Towards the end of the data-collection period, the brand began to develop a more personal style of communication, with the use of more approachable wording (Figure 155).



Figure 154 (Brand A) Brand mentioning consumer's name in a reply

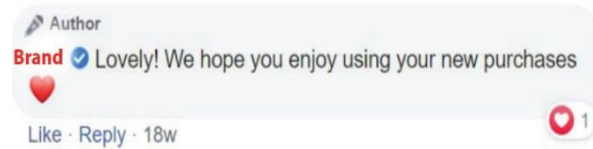


Figure 155 (Brand A) Personal-style communication

In comparison, Brand B's individual replies were diverse. They appeared to differ depending on the topic, tone of enquiry and interlocutor. The style and tone also varied between the employees who constructed the reply. In other words, each employee that was tasked with managing the community replies to consumers in a different manner. An example in Figure 156, illustrates comments posted by two different employees of brand B. While both of the comments were friendly, the way they were structured was different. One of the employees put an X after their name, the other used hearts. Throughout examining the threads, different employees' 'trademarks' that differentiate them from one another started to emerge. The difference in approach could stem from the author's experiences, likes, and dislikes, which some of them shared with the community (Figure 157). The extent of differentiation between employees cannot be fully investigated, as not every reply bore the name of the author/employee. Brand B applied a form of a CHV that varied in intensity across different responses. Furthermore, the brand utilised emojis in responses and typically mentioned consumer names in the communication (Figure 158). It is likely that in using CHV, brand B attempted to accelerate consumer engagement and the development of the consumer-brand relationship.

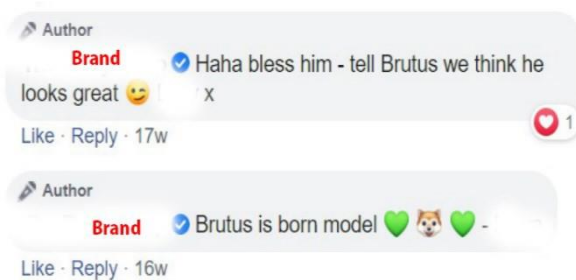


Figure 156 (Brand B) Two replies by different brand



Figure 157 (Brand B) Personal opinion expressed by the brand employee

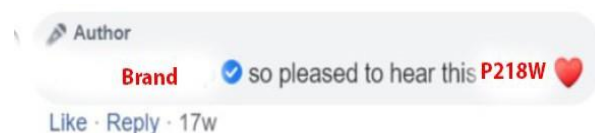


Figure 158 (Brand B) Usage of names and

Playful and intimate responses were particularly registered when responses concerned topics positively valenced that did not raise any issues (Figure 159). In such instances, the brand often resorted to emojis, with some replies consisting of emojis alone (Figure 160). This might be to speak the language of consumers as heavy usage of emojis by brand B's consumers was noticeable. Interestingly, when a problem was encountered, brand B switched its response tone to sound more corporate-like. Such a tone consisted of a statement that to a degree was standardised (Figure 161), while maintaining some CHV, for example addressing the interlocutor by name, using contractions, and personal pronouns (Figure 162). It is possible that by doing so the brand was attempting to convey professionalism to ensure that the consumer who raised the issue is handled in an appropriate manner.



Figure 159 (Brand B) Brand's playful

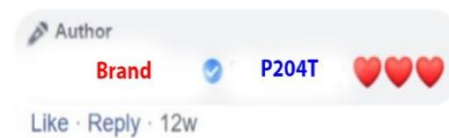


Figure 160 (Brand B) Usage of emojis in replies



Figure 161 (Brand B) Standardised answer with elements of CHV

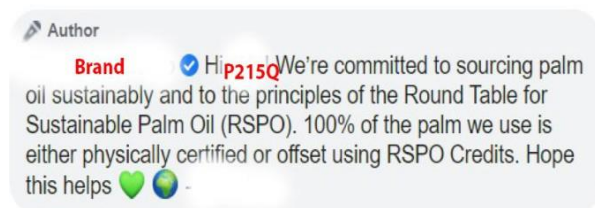


Figure 162 (Brand B) Brand utilising CHV in reply to a negative valenced comment

The data reveals that brand B's individual replies were strongly influenced by employee attitudes and experiences. In some instances, brand employees, who were tasked with managing SMBCs, expressed their own, personal preferences (Figure 163) which can foster the consumer-brand relationship through brand anthropomorphism.



Figure 163 (Brand B) Personal opinion expressed by the brand employee

In contrast, brand C’s individual communication was more uniform. Similar vocabulary was used throughout the analysed period. The wording in the replies was homogenous across subjects, enquiries and interlocutors (Figure 164). The individual replies exhibited elements of the CHV (for example conjunctions, occasional use of pronouns) and a corporate style (for example, impersonal sentence structure). In contrast to brands A and B, brand C rarely referred to consumers by name or utilised emojis in its replies. The brand typically engaged in conversations when consumers flagged an issue or had a query (Figure 165). However, few instances were recorded where the brand showed appreciation through the self-initiated reply (Figure 166). Through analysis, brand C does not have a sharp vision or strategy for communication within its SMBC and did not use it as a tool to enhance consumer engagement or to build a consumer-brand relationship.

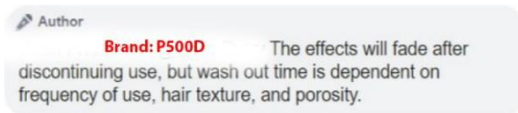


Figure 164 (Brand C) Brand mentioning consumer's name

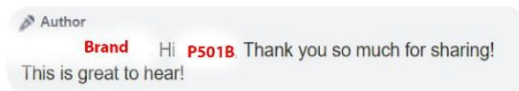


Figure 166 (Brand C) Brand voicing consumer appreciation



Figure 165 (Brand C) Brand's reply

Brand C’s responses were short, usually reduced to one or two sentences and were focused on delivering an answer to a posted query alone. Based on the few replies recorded during the observation period, it was not possible to assess whether the communication was maintained by one person or multiple employees. The brand often used an impersonal style. However, in the instances where pronouns were used, the brand used the ‘we’ pronoun (Figure 167), rather than the ‘I’ pronoun. Such a structure of individual replies ensured the responses were free from the private opinions of its employees. However, this style simultaneously deprived the brand of the opportunity to create a

consumer-brand relationship, as the brand may not have appeared approachable or relatable to consumers.

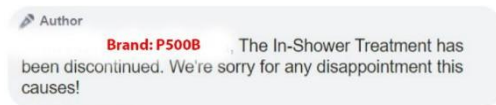


Figure 167 (Brand C) The use of the 'we' pronoun

4.4.4 Technical aspects of communication

Brand A was selective as to who it engaged with through individual replies in the SMBC. There were instances of brand A not approaching all consumer queries under one brand post. For example, Figure 168 illustrates how consumer P111M received detailed information about how to proceed with a complaint, yet others who joined the conversation (consumers P112M and P113M) did not receive a response. Such an approach to the issues raised by consumers can have a tremendously negative impact, as in the eyes of people actively participating in the community and other consumers who visit the SMBC, the brand would appear to lack a consumer-focus (with problems raised by consumers overlooked by the brand).

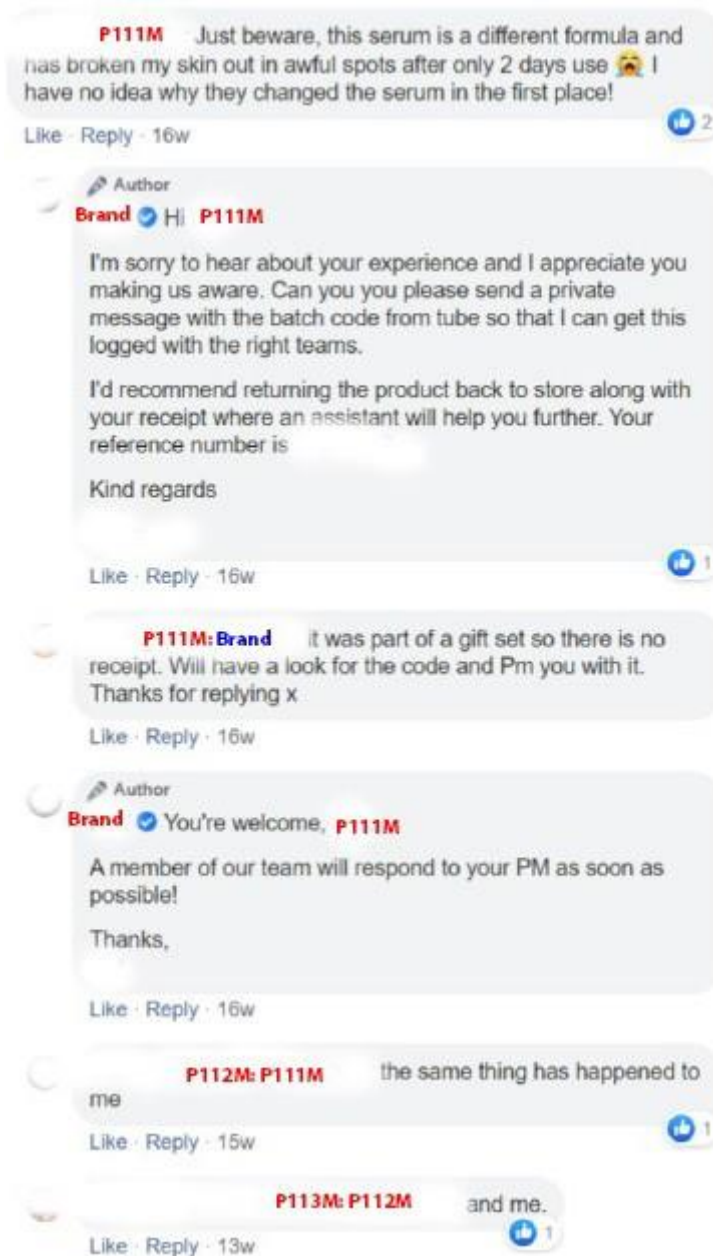


Figure 168 (Brand A) A conversation snippet that shows selectiveness in brand A replies

It is important to note, however, that the brand could contact such consumers directly, potentially resolving the problem outside the SMBC.

Brand A did not respond well to negatively-valenced consumer comments. Often negative remarks made by consumers were not addressed by the brand, such as the consumer (Figure 169) posting a picture of her face showing puffiness under her eyes after using one of the brand's products. This could be considered a lost opportunity to shift consumer perceptions by providing an explanation, voicing concern, or apologising for disappointment. Furthermore, while the brand attempted to resolve some issues raised within the SMBC, employees often lacked knowledge, which made it

impossible to successfully aid or answer the query to the consumer's satisfaction. In such instances, consumers were asked to contact the relevant team where appropriate support would be provided (Figure 170). The inability to provide sufficient assistance to consumers might be due to an expanded company structures and clear divisions between departments. In other words, employees who manage SMBCs had knowledge limited to social media platforms (and, as such, specific product knowledge may have been outside their scope). Such a strategy could have negative implications on several levels. First, diversions might impact consumer engagement; consumers might not be willing to take the extra effort to have their query answered and could switch, instead, to an alternative brand. Second, other consumers in witnessing brand A's approach (or lack thereof) might refrain from asking any questions in the future, presuming they may not receive a substantial answer. Finally, the brand might lose its position as an expert in its field, and as such, risks losing its established credibility.

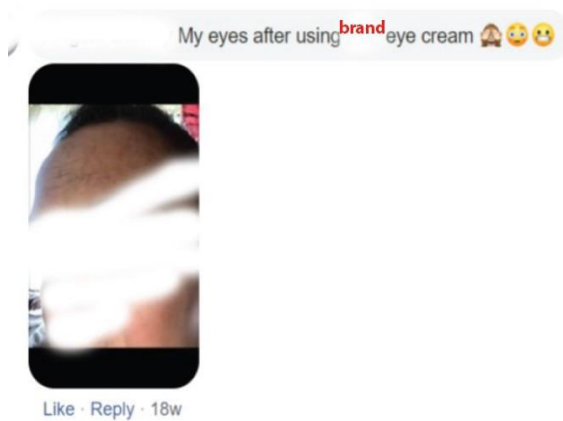


Figure 169 (Brand A) Unfavourable comment left

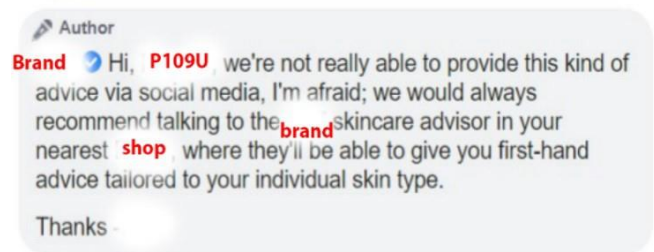


Figure 170 (Brand A) Referral of the consumer

On the contrary, brand B was active and appeared keen to engage with consumers in its SMBC. However, the interactions occasionally appeared not to be well organised. For instance, at times one consumer comment generated two or more replies from the brand (Figure 171). There were also instances of the brand not giving coherent advice to consumers. For example, within the same brand post, the brand thanked someone for the idea of introducing an incentive for recycling (Figure 172) and explained how the incentive was cancelled and would not be re-introduced (Figure 173).

P205Q Teddy, my daughter's cockatoo on Christmas day



Like · Reply · 17w

Author

Brand Hi P205Q what a cutie 🥰🥰🥰

Like · Reply · 17w

Author

Brand Hi Teddy is such a cute Santa 🍷🐣🍷 -

Like · Reply · 16w

Figure 171 (Brand B) Double reply by the brand

Author

Brand Hi P200K! Thanks so much for the suggestion. We'll make sure to let the team know. -

Like · Reply · 8w

Figure 172 (Brand B) Inconsistent information

Author

Brand Hi P202K, the brand £5 reward voucher incentive helped us to launch Return Recycle Repeat and we're so pleased so many people got behind the initiative! Whilst the incentive has come to an end after a successful launch period, we'd love it if our customers continued to help us fight plastic pollution by recycling empty packaging, from any brand, in our stores. Lots of beauty packaging isn't accepted by kerbside recycling, depending on your local council, so it's important to us to offer this facility in store. Hope this helps! 😊❤️

Figure 173 (Brand B) Inconsistent information

While the brand is an active conversationalist and engaged with consumers throughout the dataset collected, similarly to brand A, brand B occasionally failed to recognise issues raised by its consumers.

Interestingly, unlike brand A and brand B, brand C did not engage with negatively-valenced consumer comments. All remarks presenting negative opinions of the brand, or its offerings, were not addressed by brand C (Figure 174). Such a strategy could have a negative impact on how brand C is perceived by consumers. It could also be considered a lost opportunity to shift consumer perception by providing an explanation, voicing concerns or apologising for any disappointment.

I love the hair repair and hair spray in this range, but this shampoo and conditioner leaves my hair flat and greasy... 😞

Figure 174 (Brand C) Unfavourable comment left without response

4.4.5 Summary of individual brand replies

In this section of the thesis, the findings relating to the individual brand replies were discussed. The research reveals different approaches adopted by brands when speaking to consumers on a one-to-one basis, as well as the fluidity of communication style adopted in conversations. Despite this, consistencies are found across the three brands. For example, when answering consumer complaints, brands adopted a more formal style.

4.5 Summary

The above chapter presented the findings relating to consumer engagement within SMBCs and asserted its importance in the rapidly developing area of social media marketing. The discussion around consumer engagement within SMBCs was divided into three sections. The chapter began with the review of brand posts and themes that the analysis uncovered: (1) *presentation of offerings*, (2) *engagement building*, (3) *value-led*, (4) *belongingness building* and (5) *educational*. The analysis uncovered a link between the brand post theme and the stage of SMBC development, providing important insights into the role of SMBCs within consumer engagement processes.

Attention then moved towards exploring consumer comments. The analysis identified four types of communication: (1) *brand-centred communication*, (2) *cognitive-centred communication*, (3) *conversation-centred communication* and (4) *personal experience-centred communication*. The analysis exposed the varying frequency of themes occurring across the three brands. More importantly, it linked the SMBCs' development with a frequency of cognitive-centred communication and personal experience-centred communication themes.

Finally, individual brand replies were reviewed. Within the individual brand replies, the analysis explored two areas, communication style and tone and technical aspects of communication. The analysis brought to light inconsistencies in communication styles adopted by the brands as well as the fluidity with their approach to style and tone. The findings assist in addressing the research aim of contributing to the knowledge of consumer engagement within SMBCs. The findings will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. The next chapter presents the findings regarding value formation within SMBCs.

5 Findings II – Value formation within SMBCs

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on consumer engagement within SMBCs. This chapter reports the findings that explore value formation processes within SMBCs, and the value types formed through such processes. Value formation and co-creation, as well as a values typology, were discussed in Chapter 2, which assessed the current knowledge of the concepts. The findings, within this chapter, are presented in sections that support the development of a conceptual framework that illustrates the relationships between the actors involved in SMBCs and the value formed through interactions between different actors.

5.2 C2C value formation interaction

Findings reveal that within C2C value formation interactions, the interaction often occurs between multiple actors. In other words, the conversations take place between several consumers and the various interlocutors that take part in these conversations. Nonetheless, all participants in such conversations come from a similar standpoint, therefore the value created in the process of interaction should be similar for all parties involved.

There are several value types formed through C2C interaction identified through this thesis, namely: (1) *social value*, (2) *emotional value*, (3) *personal value*, (4) *self-expression value*, (5) *functional value* and (6) *epistemic value*. These will be now discussed in turn, with examples offered. Analysis of the findings revealed different types of value across the researched brands. Whilst within brand A and B's SMBCs all six value types were identified, only three value types were observed within brand C's SMBC (specifically social value, epistemic value, and functional value). The dissimilarity is most likely caused by the differences in the development stage of the SMBCs. While brand B's SMBC is characterised by a high degree of development, brand A's SMBC is in a moderate degree of development. Brand C's SMBC, on the other hand, is at the beginning stage of development. The summary of types of value identified across the three brands can be found in Table 23.

Table 23 Summary of value types identified across the three brands

	Social value	Emotional value	Personal value	Self-expression value	Functional value	Epistemic value
Description	A value derived from association with others (Zainuddin and Gordon, 2020).	A value derived from feelings or affective states (Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991)	A value derived through a development of a personal association with the brand or offering (Smith and Colgate, 2007)	A value derived from utilising an offering to express one's personalities (Smith and Colgate, 2007)	A value derived from physical and utilitarian attributes (Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991)	A value derived from curiosity and need of knowledge-seeking (Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991).
Brand A	X	X	X	X	X	X
Brand B	X	X	X	X	X	X
Brand C	X				X	X

Interestingly, the diversity of topics discussed and different individual approaches to those topics result in multiple value types emerging simultaneously. Some of the value types might be topic bound, therefore they might emerge only when particular topics are discussed, or a conversation takes a certain angle. For example, if consumers are discussing how to use a product, then the 'functional value' will be derived from such interaction. Other value types might be widely present as they are facilitated by the SMBC environment. For example, 'social value' is derived from engaging with like-minded people, therefore this can be observed during each interaction. Despite social value rising from interactions with others, rather than the product or service itself (c.f. Chapter 2.4.5), such interactions can have an impact on how the brand/products are perceived by consumers. Social value manifests through experience validation, experience sharing, and recommendation. The ability to discuss the brand's offerings and own experiences with like-minded people helps to validate customers' feelings. Furthermore, getting positive feedback from others might help to cement opinions and views about the brand and its offerings. Social value is predominantly present within conversation threads in cosmetics SMBCs as the formation of social value is facilitated by the social media environment (see Table 24).

Table 24 Social value emerging through the interaction

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P206Y: The chamomile cleansing balm makeup remover! The best product I've used for taking off my makeup, I recommend it to everyone and have bought so many!		42 thumbs-up and hearts	social value emotional value functional value
	Brand: My fave!		social value emotional value
	P207Y: P206Y this is my fave too 🟡		social value emotional value
	P208Y: I adore this too! Excellent for first cleanse!		social value emotional value functional value
	P206Y: P207Y, P208Y it's amazing!!		social value emotional value

The research findings suggest that different value is drawn from interactions with different interlocutors. This might be explained by the different relationships that consumers build with other interlocutors. For example, in some cases, the SMBC is used as a platform for conversations between peers who have a relationship outside the community. This can be assumed from the topics discussed. In such instances, the conversation focuses on matters loosely connected with the brand and its offerings. Such exchanges generate social value. Furthermore, conversations of this type do not generate rich value for other consumers participating in the community (see Table 25) as they do not provide much insight into the brands' offering.

Table 25 Social value generation among peers who presumably know each other outside of the SMBC

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P101K: P102 I've just got myself another present from you 🟡		2 laughing face	social value self-expression value
	P103K: P101K i have yours here! I forgot to tell you 🟡		social value
	P101K: P103K OMG I had completely forgotten about that!! Let me know how much I owe you! I'll be stocked up for the next year lolxxx		social value
	P104K: P101K that's the way to get what you want eh, I do that too 🟡🟡	1 thumbs-up	social value
	P101K its the best way 🟡	1 laughing face	social value
	P105K I love buying my own presents.	1 thumbs-up	social value

Consumers who do not have a relationship outside the community carry out conversations which were more focused on brands and offerings. Such discussions have a more informational tone, and hence have the potential to generate useful insights and contribute to enriching the value gained by the interlocutor, as well as impacting the value stored within the SMBC (Table 26) that can be utilised by other consumers at their own convenience.

Table 26 Value types induced through conversation with strangers

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P104L: I was instore yesterday and was told BRAND set was not part of this?			epistemic value
	P105L: P104L this is today's offer so it wouldn't have been on yest		epistemic value social value
	P104L: P105L I know that but protect and perfect was on yday gift set		epistemic value social value
	P106L: P104L they mean you wouldn't get a 3rd off the sets that they have in store as they are a good deal anyway. This would be on individual items		epistemic value social value
	P104L But online 1/3 is off the sets		epistemic value social value
	P107L: P104L a 1/3 off is suppose to be instore today today. Fingers crossed	1 thumbs-up	epistemic value social value
	P108L: P104L Offers and/or prices on the website are not necessarily the same as in store. The stores and website are run by SHOP as 2 separate businesses each with their own stock so they can have different prices and offers (often cheaper on the website).		epistemic value functional value social value

A combination of conversations between strangers and acquaintances was identified. This was observed across all researched brands. However, the majority of C2C interactions within brand C's SMBC appear to be between consumers who have a relationship outside the SMBC. The possible explanation for this could be the underdevelopment of the community and the weak relationships that currently exist between individual consumers and consumers and brands alike.

Since 'emotional value' stems from emotion, it can be triggered through strong experiences that are often linked to the relationship consumers have with brands/products (c.f. Chapter 2.4.5). Such experiences highlight the relationship the consumer has with a product/brand, as emotional responses are triggered by things a person develops a relationship with, for example, brands and

products. The emotional value can be related to the usefulness of the product but equally to the feelings it arouses in customers (Table 27). These powerful statements can have a positive or negative tone and can be influential to other community members.

Table 27 Emotional value within a conversation

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P105F: P106F love the shower gel and body scrub x		1 heart	personal meaning value emotional value
	P106F: P105F bet the body butter is nice 🟡	1 heart	epistemic value social value
	P105F: P106F 🟡	1 heart	social value emotional value
	P106F: P105F need to find someone who wants to treat me 🟡	1 laughing face	social value
	P105F: P106F he's on this way 🟡	1 laughing face	social value
	P107F: P106F I use the body butter- it's great for very dry skin!	1 heart	functional value social value
	P106F: P107F ooooooh maybe treat myself unless anybody on fb wants to 🟡	1 laughing face	social value
	P107F: P106F it's worth it! I've used it on my face too!	1 heart	functional value social value

While consumers share their experiences, self-expression value can be generated (Table 28). It, similarly to emotional value, can indicate a relationship that a customer has with a brand and/or product. Furthermore, it incorporates the product/brand into the customer's life, moulding it into part of their identity. For example, participant P213AB (Table 30) associates herself with what a coffee mask represents, the richness of the ingredients, the radiance that it promises, and the feeling that it awakens when used.

Table 28 Emotional and self-expression values exhibited throughout the conversation strand

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P213AB: I adore the coffee mask and work hard to not try and lick my face with it on! Can anyone recommend a moisturizing mask from this collection?			self-expression value social value emotional value epistemic value
	P204AB: P213AB Hemp 100%	1 thumbs-up	social value

Personal meaning value also stems from a formed relationship between a brand/product and other consumers and is also linked to experiences that consumers have with the brand or product. Through the course of interaction with the product or brand (either through self-use or use by others of significant meaning to the consumer), a consumer develops certain associations with the brand/product that are very personal. For example, participant P296Y (Table 29) expresses how the use of a product has improved her life. The attributes of the product are very personal to her as she links them with a significant improvement in her skin quality. This in turn would have positive effects on her confidence.

Table 29 Personal meaning value generated throughout the conversation strip

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P296Y For problem skin..tea tree daily solution..my skin has been so clear since using it		1 thumbs-up	social value personal meaning value epistemic value
	P297Y:P296Y is this not for oily skin?		social value epistemic value
	P296Y: Well i used to get quite a few spots but since using this i barely have any..my skin is not really oily..im more prone to dry skin but this doesnt dry my skin out at all..i love it		

Customers often develop an attachment to the brand and its offerings. It might stem from being a loyal customer and buying the offerings for several years. However, it might come from valuing and appreciating the offerings or the values that the brand believes in and supports. The example in Table 30 illustrates how personal meaning value was derived from a particular product (Endangered Species soaps) and how that value was transferred to another product that, in eyes of the consumer, has equivalent properties.

Table 30 Personal meaning value triggered through reminiscing

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P202Z: Reminds me of the Endangered Species soaps.		27 thumbs-up and hearts	personal meaning value social value
	P203Z: oh god I loved those!	1 thumbs-up	social value emotional value
	P204Z: P202Z I had those soaps, they were the best and I kept them for ages before using them 🟡	1 thumbs-up	social value personal meaning value
	P205: I loved them. I also kept them a long time before opening and using them 🟡 Bring them back!! Xx	2 thumbs-up	social value emotional value personal meaning value
	P206Z: I used to love them! They also did fruit shaped ones	3 thumbs-up	social value emotional value personal meaning value
	P207Z: P202Z I still have mine in their original box		social value

Emotional, self-expression and personal meaning value can emerge simultaneously through SMBC conversations. For example, in Table 31, a discussion of the products through the prism of consumers' own experiences can form emotional value *and* personal meaning value through the experience and association with certain circumstances. As the consumer reflects on her likes/dislikes, self-expression value also emerges. Additionally, the feedback received from other consumers allows her to derive social value from the interaction, as the ability to discuss the brand's offerings and her own

experiences with like-minded people provides social value. Furthermore, getting positive feedback from others might help to cement the opinions and views about the brand and offerings.

Table 31 Multiple values emerging simultaneously

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
<p>P200AB: My favourite is the Japanese matcha tea one. It really do make you skin feel amazing, it's helping get rid of my spots and after using it my skin looks and feels really nice. Whilst the mask is on you can feel it working it's magic and cleaning out your pores and skin. Highly recommend! I have tried soooo many masks and thought it's okay and never actually found one I just want to use all the time with how good it is but I can see this being my forever go to mask, probably going to end up spending a fortune on this mask. My absolute favourite 🟡 🟢</p>		4 thumbs-up	self-expression value epistemic value emotional value personal meaning value social value
	<p>P201AB: P200AB my daughter is 12 and she started with acne, do you think it would work on her as good as it did to you. How many time's tu apply the mask? Thanks</p>	1 thumbs-up	social value epistemic value
	<p>P201AB: P200AB Sorry I didn't realise that Brand answers.</p>		social value
	<p>P200AB: P201AB personally it's helped my spots. I love it. Masks react differently to different people but I honest think it will help, if your worried it might not you can buy mini mask of the Japanese matcha tea. It's good to get a mini mask if your trying a new mask out 🟡</p>	1 thumbs-up	social value self-expression value epistemic value
	<p>P201AB: P200AB thanks for the thought.</p>		social value

Storytelling comments, as seen in Table 33, combine several value types. However, simpler statements also can create value. For example, in Table 34, a consumer, through a simple statement that is devoid of emotional undertone or reasoning, can create self-expression value as she links herself to a particular product that reflects her character, behaviour, or who she is as a person. Similarly to storytelling posts, these would generate social value through the feedback of others. The level of personal information can vary depending on the need of the particular consumer to express themselves.

The variations of posts exhorting self-expression value through product statements are comprehensive. Comments that include very few details that would potentially only mention the products were identified, as well as comments that would include some reasoning for the choice of product that would add emotional value (Tables 30 and 31). While some posts consist only of a few words, they do convey some information about the author. For example, while P303Y (Table 32) does not provide wide insights into their personality, from the comment made, one can learn that P303Y would describe themselves as someone who loves ginger shampoo and conditioner (which presumably could be linked with their hair type).

Table 32 Self-expression value through product statement evolving into social value

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P303Y: Ginger shampoo and conditioner		1 thumbs-up	self-expression value social value
	P304Y: P303Y it's amazing isn't it x		social value emotional value
	P303Y: P304Y yes it is love it	1 thumbs-up	social value emotional value

Epistemic value and functional value are related to a product attribute sphere, rather than the customer's psychological sphere. Epistemic value type is strongly associated with curiosity and a desire to learn. It is awakened by the consumer's desire to understand the brand and its products better. The functional value type, like the epistemic value type, is strongly correlated with cognitive processes. The topics discussed are diverse but have a common denominator which is the knowledge that is created, transferred, or shared. As illustrated in Table 33, epistemic value can be derived from brainstorming product ideas or developing new uses for products. Epistemic value can also be generated through various enquires about products but also opinion seeking.

Table 33 Epistemic value emerging through product enquiry

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P283Y: Can you recommend a good face moisturiser that's not thick and greasy? ●		1 thumbs-up	social value epistemic value
	P284Y: Vitamin e day & night cream. I've used it for 35 yrs	4 thumbs-up	social value epistemic value self-expression value
	P285Y: P283Y I would love something non greasy so I'll be interested to see what recommendations you get	1 thumbs-up	social value epistemic value
	P286Y Moisture is brilliant		emotional value social value
	P287Y: Hemp cream is lovely especially if you have dry skin		social value epistemic value emotional value
	P288Y: Vitamin C day cream is a gel so it's very light and no greasy. It's great for all skin types especially dull skin. It smells lovely too.	1 thumbs-up	social value epistemic value emotional value functional value
	P289Y: Vitamin E moisturising cream, the SPF version. It's not as thick but still works as well as the original.	1 thumbs-up	social value epistemic value functional value
	P290Y: P284Y that's what I use too, I'm allergic to most face creams but I can use this one and it's nice and light.	1 thumbs-up	social value personal meaning value epistemic value
	P291Y: P283Y vitamin E cream x	1 thumbs-up	social value
	P292Y: I use the seaweed moisturiser which is lightweight and controls oil production ●	1 thumbs-up	social value epistemic value functional value

	P293Y: P283Y vitamin e gel is excellent, just needs patting on your face 🟡	1 thumbs-up	social value emotional value epistemic value
	Brand: Hi P283Y! Please go on our live chat to consult and see which range is the best for you. Good luck.	1 thumbs-up	value learning

Through sharing information about brands and/or products, consumers can also generate functional value that can act as a base for purchasing decisions for other consumers who choose to interact with the provided information. For example, participant 1002B (Table 34) provides information about the reduced price of a product that might influence other consumers who read the information to purchase the product as it is available at a favourable price.

Table 34 Formation of functional value in SMBC

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P100B: When does the star gift come out			epistemic value
	P101B: P100B it's in the stores but still £80.... It's usually that last week before Xmas I think x	1 thumbs-up	functional value social value
	P102B: P100B it's now £39		functional value social value

5.3 B2C value formation interaction

Analysis of data establishes that B2C interactions are individual interactions between a brand and consumers which occur within an SMBC. In other words, unlike the brand posts where the brand interacts in a one-to-many mode, within the B2C interactions the brand engages in conversation with an individual consumer. The analysis reveals that a brand addresses a particular customer either when prompted or through its own initiative. As the brand and consumers approach the interaction from different standpoints, each of the actors might benefit differently. The brand derives from interaction value learning (c.f. Chapter 2.4.5), as it gains insights into how customers consume products. Consumers, on the other hand, derive from interaction social value, functional value, self-expression value, personal meaning value and epistemic value. The summary of value types identified across the three brands can be found in Table 35. The analysis uncovers that the types of value derived by

consumers differs across the three brands. Within brand A and C's SMBCs, a formation of social value, self-expression value, and epistemic value were observed. On the contrary, within the brand's B SMBC, social value, personal value, self-expression value, functional value and epistemic value were observed. The differences in value types emerging across the SMBCs might be caused by different stages of SMBC development in each of the communities. Another cause could be the different approaches of the brands to communication with consumers within SMBCs.

Table 35 Summary of value types identified across the three brands

	Social value	Emotional value	Personal value	Self-expression value	Functional value	Epistemic value
Brand A	X			X		X
Brand B	X		X	X	X	X
Brand C	X			X		X

The dynamics of conversations within B2C value formation interaction is typically less intensive than the customer-to-customer interactions. B2C conversations were also much more short-lived. This could be caused to some extent by a limited number of participants taking part in the conversation or the brand's inability to sustain a conversation with consumers, but equally by a difference in experiences and a different outlook on the situation dictated by the role of each stakeholder.

As mentioned above, there are two types of B2C interactions that can be differentiated, namely *brand-initiated* and *consumer-prompted*. The first characterises an interaction which starts from the brand on its own initiative that would usually take the shape of the brand appreciating customers and acknowledging their experiences through supportive commenting. Table 36 illustrates such an interaction within brand A's SMBC, which validated consumer experiences and showed interest in consumer choices. The ability for a brand to reach out to its customers through personalised comments is a significant value learning opportunity. Through asking questions, the brand can gain significant customer insights. In addition, brands may be able to immediately rectify any issues and therefore protect the brand image from the negative impact of unsatisfactory user comments.

Table 36 Showing interested in consumer's choices

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P105U: Wouldn't use anything else. It's brilliant.		2 thumbs-up and hearts	self-expression value
	Brand: P105U Great! We are so glad you enjoy using our products. Is it Restore and Renew that you use?	1 thumbs-up	value learning
	P105U: Brand Yes it is. I have worked my way up through the the different ones as I have got older. I use the whole range of products.	1 heart	social value self-expression value

The second type of brand-consumer interaction comprises the brand reaching out to individual consumers who, through their posted comments, indicate the need for help or guidance (however, they do not directly approach the brand by tagging it into their comments). An example of such an interaction is presented in Table 37, where a consumer hints at the need for the brand's help by asking a specific product question. However, the question is not directed to the brand but to the wider, SMBC audience. Since the call for the brand's help is not explicit, it is the brand's choice to ignore the message (as it is not explicitly addressed to the brand) or address the presented issue. Similarly to the brand's self-initiated interaction, the brand derives value learning from a consumer-prompted brand-consumer interaction. The brand also has an opportunity to gain customer insight and manage brand perceptions as the conversations within SMBCs are stored and can be accessed at a future date by actively participating in the community with consumers or other social media users. Therefore, future consumers can form an opinion about the brand based on how well it answered consumer queries and handled any complaints.

Table 37 A consumer reaching out to the brand

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P500D: Is this permanent or only until you wash out			epistemic value functional value
	Brand: P500D The blending results are not permanent.		value learning
	P500D: So just until you wash is this correct x		epistemic value functional value
	Brand: P500D The effects will fade after discontinuing use, but wash out time is dependent on frequency of use, hair texture, and porosity.		value learning
	P500D: Brand thanks	1 thumbs-up	social value

Similarly to C2C value formation interactions, consumers derive social value from the B2C interactions through recognition by the brand. This can be observed across all brand-customer interactions, within all three SMBCs. It is an outcome of the brand commenting on the customers' posts and complimenting or appreciating the customers in a published reply, as well as acknowledging their questions or issues and addressing them. Also, through the ability to express opinions and share experiences, customers derive self-expression value as they articulate their preferences and choices. For example, participant P204AB (Table 38) shares her experiences with brand B's products. Through sharing her experiences, she is associating herself with products that are linked with relaxation and allow consumers to indulge themselves in a beauty regime. Therefore, she expresses herself as a person by discussing her use of certain products/brands.

Table 38 Consumer value creation through B2C interaction

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P204AB: I have the honey, Hemb and the Himalayan charcoal ones - they are all lovely my Skin was soooooo dewy after using the hemp masque. I'm just wondering if any of these are unsuitable for dry skin? I would love to collect them all			social value epistemic value self-expression value
	Brand: P204AB! Please contact our product specialists via live chat on website, and they will be more than glad to assist and advise		value learning

The analysis reveals that the type of value formed by the consumer will vary, depending on the mode of interaction. For instance, the consumer could drive functional value and/or epistemic value from the interaction revolving around product characteristics and attributes (see Table 37), but also social value through interactions concerning the choice of product or their opinion/experience with brand offerings.

The findings suggest that each brand approaches B2C interactions differently. While brand B was proactive in communicating with its consumers and tried to provide answers to all queries, brands A and C were more reserved. Brand C, in particular, did not engage in active conversation with consumers. For example, no self-initiated brand-consumer interactions were identified. Brand A, on the other hand, tried to engage in conversations with consumers, particularly towards the end of the observation period. Unfortunately, the evident lack of knowledge of employees appeared to be a big barrier in the brand-consumer interaction. The example in Table 39 illustrates the lack of knowledge of brand A's employees which results in the inability to answer queries.

Table 39 Unanswered consumer enquiry

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P109U: Hi have just bought the box set of restore and renew. I understand I can use the serum first that the face cream. When would I use the eye cream and booster serum in my routine. Would I use it all one after to the other or on separate days. Many thanks			epistemic value
	Brand: Hi, P109U we're not really able to provide this kind of advice via social media. I'm afraid; we would always recommend talking to the BRAND skincare advisor in your nearest SHOP where they'll be able to give you first-hand advice tailored to your individual skin type. Thanks -		value learning
	P110U: P109U booster serums go on targeted areas of concern first then your serum followed by your day/night cream. You would then tap your eye cream around the bony part of the eye. If you wanted a demonstration your local BRAND counter would happily show you.	1 thumbs-up	social value functional value
	P109U: P110U thank you very much. X		social value

Due to the limited information brand A provided to consumers, the latter can draw limited value. As a result, the brand-consumer interactions within brand A's SMBC have a limited value-generation capacity. This is caused by the lack of in-depth, exclusive information provided by the brand. Another explanation could be the undeveloped consumer-brand and/or consumer-product relationship that would allow the consumer to consider the brand/products in a more personal, meaningful way.

5.4 C2B value formation interaction

While it might appear that the communication between B2C and C2B would not differ, due to the initial direction of the conversation, analysis uncovers that within C→B and B→C interactions, the topics raised varied. This could be caused by the different standpoints of each stakeholder and the needs associated with that. Similarly to B2C value formation interactions, within the C2B value formation interactions, the brand is continuing value learning through independent and self-initiated customer reporting, as well as brand-prompted requests for information. However, the findings reveal that customers derive epistemic value, emotional value, self-expression value, and social value. Interestingly, social value, emotional value, and epistemic value were identified across all three brands. However, self-expression value was only identified within brand B’s SMBC. This might be caused by the different development stages of SMBCs of the three brands. Brand B’s SMBC is characterised by the most advanced development, while brand C’s SMBC is in the initial stages of development. Brand A’s SMBC is characterised by a moderate level of development. The summary of value types identified within C2B value formation interaction is presented in Table 40.

Table 40 Summary of value types identified across the three brands

	Social value	Emotional value	Personal value	Self-expression value	Functional value	Epistemic value
Brand A	X	X				X
Brand B	X	X		X		X
Brand C	X	X				X

SMBCs provide consumers with a platform through which they can reach out to the brand and take advantage of a direct and simple communication process, that allows them to address a variety of topics and issues. Such activity enriches the SMBC and enables the building of a library of knowledge accessible to other consumers that can be utilised at their convenience. For example, comments of consumers seeking answers to their questions will benefit other consumers who actively and independently engage with SMBC content, possibly seeking answers to similar questions. The analysis reveals that in most cases customers do not directly address the brand by name when asking questions. Therefore, identification of the instances where the consumer sought the brand’s assistance required a careful assessment. Such practices carry the risk of a brand not answering, due to overlooking the comment. Situations, where the brand does not address the query have potential to impact the value for consumers. It can also impact brand image as such a brand could be deemed

unresponsive and not consumer friendly. It was established, through the analysis, that the brand could identify a request for help through the type of question posted and the phrasing of the question, indicating whether it was intended for the brand. The example in Table 41 illustrates such a query. While the consumer did not address the questions to the brand, it is highly unlikely anyone else would have knowledge of the reasons behind selecting models for advertising.

Table 41 Consumer approaching the brand through a comment

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
<p>P100AD: Why do you use a young teenage model to advertise this product? She doesn't have wrinkles lol!</p> <p>Get middle aged models at least</p>		1 thumbs-up	social value epistemic value
	<p>Brand: Hi P100AD Thanks for getting in touch.</p> <p>Please be assured your feedback has been logged and passed to the relevant teams to be monitored and reviewed.</p> <p>Best wishes,</p>		value learning

As the analysis exposed, within the wide scope of queries, some of the questions required advanced knowledge of the products. Nonetheless, some queries were answered by other consumers participating in the SMBC, despite being directed towards the brand. An example can be seen in Table 26 and 34 (section 5.2).

Similarly to B2C value formation interaction, the findings suggest the significant lack of knowledge of employees. The example in Table 42 illustrates the employees admitting to the lack of knowledge of stock and availability of products.

Table 42 Consumer approaching the brand through a comment

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P100I: Brand I've looked everywhere for the concealer - do you have any news as to when it will be available either on line or in store please?			social value epistemic value
	Brand: Hi P100I Thanks for getting in touch. Unfortunately, we do not know when more stock will become available. Please keep an eye out for any further updates. Thanks,		value learning
	P101I: Brand why has this been discontinued? It's a fairly new product Quite disappointed!		social value epistemic value emotional value
	Brand: Hi, P101I - we're not made privy here to the reasons behind such decisions, I'm afraid; we do apologise for any disappointment caused, in any case. Thanks -		value learning

The analysis uncovers that queries directed to the brands tend to be more technical and orbit around practical topics (for example, product attributes and properties). As a result, the value created through such interactions tends to be more pragmatic, therefore epistemic value is frequently generated. Social value is also generated through the acknowledgement of consumer experiences and their voiced appreciation for the brand. When the brand chooses to engage with consumers, the latter can reap the benefits of social value that gives recognition and validates the importance of the query.

The data shows that brand B's consumers appear to be knowledgeable and invested consumers who actively engage with the brand and are keen to be a part of the brand, offering suggestions for future product development. The example in Table 43 illustrates how consumers can suggest new product

ideas to the brand. Such active consumers bring valuable insight into consumer needs and expectations, which can positively affect the brand’s operations.

Table 43 A consumer offering product development ideas

First post	Replies	Recognition	Value
P211AB: Why don't you do a mini hemp mask?			epistemic value social value
	Brand: Hi P211AB! Oh, thanks for the lovely idea. I'll make sure your suggestion is passed on to the team.	1 thumbs-up	value learning
	P211AB: Brand no worries and the Mediterranean almond milk and oats would be great as a mini mask. ●	1 thumbs-up	epistemic value social value
	Brand: That sounds nice too, P211AB ●		value learning
	P212AB: I definitely agree we need minis for the almond milk and oats and hemp!	2 thumbs-up	social value self-expression value

5.5 Customer (C) independent value formation

The findings of the study suggest that customers have the ability to create value for themselves independently, through interactions with resources available within SMBCs. These resources originate from C2C, B2C, and C2B interactions, as well as content published by the brand as part of the value facilitation process (this will be discussed further in section 5.6 below). The SMBC provides consumers with the opportunity to access information and resources at their own pace, enabling them to create value independently. By engaging in this process, consumers are able to generate functional value and epistemic value, through interactions with the SMBC repository, which includes brand and consumer comments.

In addition, reading and reviewing other customers' experiences with the brand and products can also ignite customers' anticipation of value. While some of these processes may remain hidden from the brand and other consumers, they still contribute to the creation of value within the SMBC. Customer-independent value formation results in the creation of several value types, including emotional value, personal value, self-expression value and functional value. A summary of the value types identified across the three brands is presented in Table 44.

Table 44 Summary of value types identified across the three brands

	Social value	Emotional value	Personal meaning value	Self-expression value	Functional value	Epistemic value
Brand A		X	X	X	X	X
Brand B		X	X	X		
Brand C		X		X	X	

It is important to note that the value types identified within the SMBCs of the different brands differed. For instance, emotional value, personal meaning value, self-expression value, functional value and epistemic value were identified within Brand A's SMBC. In contrast, Brand B's SMBC revealed the presence of emotional value, personal meaning value and self-expression value. Lastly, Brand C's SMBC identified the presence of emotional value, self-expression value and functional value, with no social value identified. This lack of social value could be attributed to the absence of the interaction needed to generate these types of value.

In the process of creating value independently, customers can also utilise the SMBC platform to deposit their thoughts, experiences and opinions. These comments may not necessarily be part of a conversation but represent statements produced by community members who can utilise these means to create personal meaning value, emotional value, self-expression value and functional value (as presented in Table 45).

By depositing comments on the SMBC platform, community members can engage in the creation of personal meaning value, which entails the ability to connect their personal experiences and beliefs to the brand and its products. Furthermore, by sharing their opinions and experiences, community members can generate emotional value, which results from the emotional connections established between the brand and its customers. Additionally, through the creation of self-expression value,

community members can utilise the SMBC platform to express their unique identities and values while interacting with the brand. Finally, the independent value creation process through comments on the SMBC platform can also result in functional value creation. This type of value results from the practical use of the information and resources available within the SMBC platform, such as product reviews and recommendations.

Table 45 Self-generated value through consumers' posting

Number	Community member post	Value
1	I can only use the original serum. I am allergic to the others.	personal meaning value
2	love BRAND makeup remover even gets rid of waterproof makeup BRAND is the best	emotional value functional value
3	Looks cheap but if it's good for environment ok then.	self-expression value
4	I do love this item so much! ❤️	emotional value
5	Another gimmick I feel. Wonder how long this one will last?	emotional value epistemic value
6	Spa Wisdom Africa Shea Butter & Sesame Oil Bobby Balm!!! Best full body moisturiser ever but it's discontinued 😞😞😞 i used it regularly for so many years because of its light and soft texture yet very moisturising! I used it on my bump for 2 pregnancies and no stretch marks at all!! unfortunately i've not been able to find anything, from any brand, that's comparable 😞	self-expression value emotional value personal meaning value
7	Doesn't even work on my hair so is now just dear shampoo and conditioner 🙄	functional value
8	I love the hair repair and hair spray in the range, but this shampoo and conditioner leaves my hair flat and greasy... 😞	emotional value functional value

5.6 Brand (B) – Independent value facilitation

Value facilitation is an element of the value process cycle that takes place before customer interaction with the brand or brand's offerings. The findings suggest that independent value facilitation consists of the creation of resources, or processes, that can be used by customers to form value autonomously

or co-create value through interaction. In the environment of social media, independent value facilitation would take the shape of planning and preparation of various communications published in a one-to-many mode. Similarly to the customer's independent value creation, value facilitation processes are hidden. The customers have access to content only when it is fully developed and published by the brand on the SMBC page. Typically, the communication would be prepared on assorted topics, strongly associated with the brand and the overall brand's marketing strategy. The diverse types of content, labelled as brand posts, and analysis of them can be found in subheading 4.2. Once the content is published on the SMBC page, the consumers can interact with it and use it independently for autonomous value formation processes. Figure 175 provides an example of brand posts published within SMBCs.

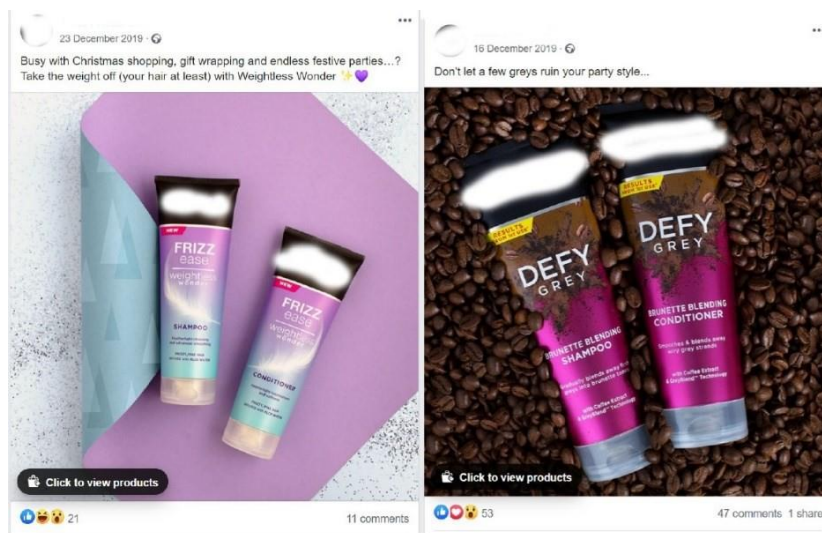


Figure 175 Value facilitation through brand's brand posts

5.7 Value formation framework

The presented research culminates in the conceptualization of a comprehensive value formation framework, presented in Figure 176. This framework synthesizes the multifaceted interactions observed within SMBCs, specifically focusing on the cosmetic industry. It dissects and categorizes these interactions into C2C (Consumer-to-Consumer), B2C (Brand-to-Consumer), and C2B (Consumer-to-Brand), along with individual consumer (C) and brand (B) encounters with the SMBC.

A systematic analysis of the qualitative data has yielded insights into how these various interactions contribute distinctly to the process of value formation. For instance, the C2C interactions are identified as particularly rich, generating a spectrum of values including self-expression, epistemic,

social, emotional, personal meaning, and functional. In contrast to the diverse value types offered by C2C interactions, B2C and C2B interactions (while effectively facilitating value formation) tend to generate a more limited range of value types. This suggests that although B2C and C2B interactions are significant in the value formation process, the spectrum of value types they produce is comparatively narrower than the extensive array of value types arising from C2C interactions.

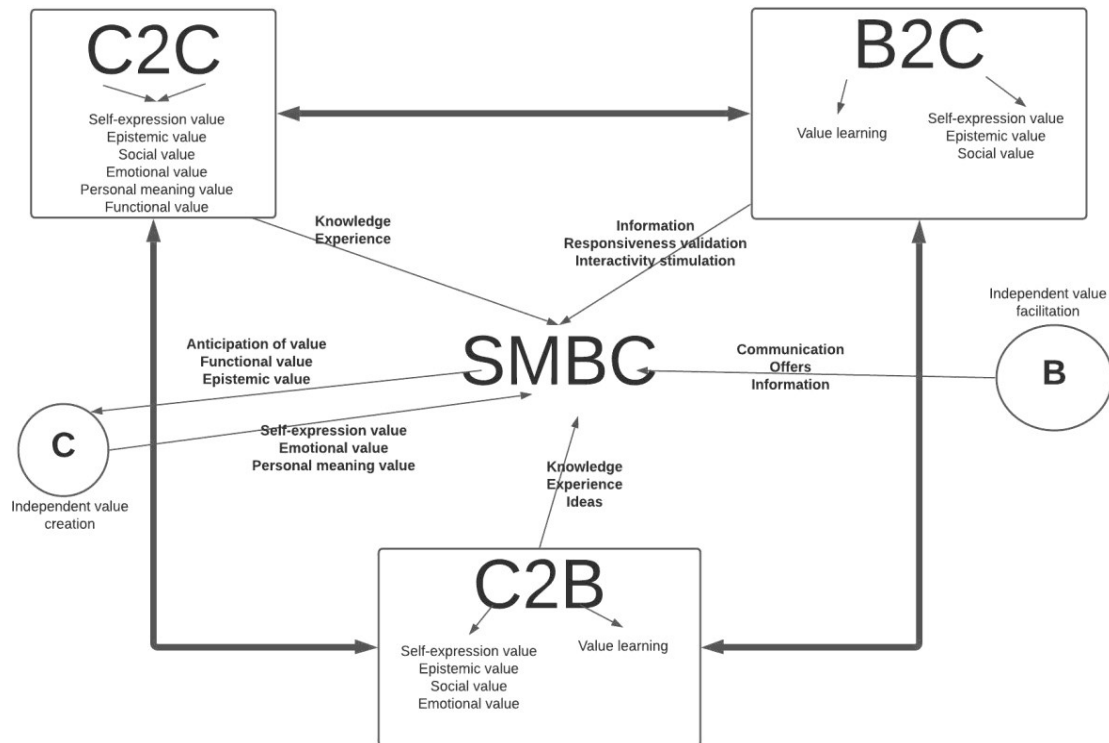


Figure 176 Value formation framework

The framework underscores the pivotal role of the brand as an autonomous facilitator of value, setting the stage for interactions by providing communication, offers, and information. Independently, consumers also engage in value formation by interacting with the SMBC’s repository, which can be a visible contribution through comments; or an invisible, passive engagement that nevertheless shapes their perception and anticipated value from the community.

Importantly, the framework reveals that the nature of the interaction—whether initiated by consumers or brands—impacts the type of value produced. It acknowledges the invisible nature of certain autonomous value formations that occur outside the SMBC, hidden from the view of other consumers and the brand. These insights enrich the understanding of the SMBC as a critical platform for knowledge sharing and value creation among consumers, highlighting the integral role of each

interaction and autonomous process in contributing to the community's collective knowledge base.

The comprehensive value formation framework introduced in this research offers an innovative perspective on the interplay of diverse interactions, participant roles, and self-directed processes within SMBCs. It enriches the digital marketing field by elucidating the complex and varied nature of value creation and co-creation within the dynamic context of cosmetic brand communities. This framework advances the understanding of the mechanisms driving value formation in SMBCs, yielding substantial contributions to both theoretical insights and practical marketing approaches.

Moreover, the framework underscores the crucial importance of each interaction type in the value formation process, particularly for managers of SMBCs. It delineates distinct outcomes based on varying actor involvements, suggesting the need for a more nuanced understanding of actor perspectives in value formation.

Furthermore, this thesis significantly contributes to the understanding of SMBCs' role in value formation processes. It emphasizes the vital function of the SMBC environment as a facilitator of these processes, highlighting its strategic importance in the broader framework of digital marketing and community management. This insight not only augments academic knowledge but also offers practical guidance for effectively leveraging SMBCs in marketing strategies.

5.8 Summary

This chapter has presented the findings relating to value formation within cosmetics SMBCs and asserted its importance in the rapidly developing area of social media marketing. Through the analysis of brief conversations, it was found that value generated within SMBCs is dependent on the actors who take part in online interactions. The interactions that were identified through the data analysis were as follows: C2C value formation interaction, B2C value formation interaction and C2B value formation interaction. Furthermore, two individual processes were also identified, namely: customer (C) - independent value formation, and brand (B) – independent value facilitation.

This chapter concluded with a presentation of the conceptual framework. Finally, this chapter has presented the empirical findings of this thesis relating to value formation processes within the SMBC environment. These findings are important because they reveal the complex nature of value formation practices in the SMBC environment. Moreover, these findings assist in addressing the research aim of contributing to the knowledge of value formation within SMBCs and the objective of seeking to propose a contextualised conceptual framework of value formation within SMBCs. The next chapter

will go on to discuss the significance of these findings considering the prior literature which has been reviewed in Chapter 2.

6. Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The literature review chapter evaluated the current state of knowledge associated with SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation. The findings chapters reported the findings concerning consumer engagement processes within SMBCs and explored value formation processes within SMBCs and value types formed through those processes.

This chapter aims to examine the findings considering the reviewed literature and highlights the contributions that the research makes to knowledge surrounding consumer engagement and value formation within the SMBC environment. This chapter begins by discussing the conducted research on the nature and role of consumer engagement within SMBCs and compares the findings with previous research. First, the three areas related to consumer engagement are discussed in turn. Subsequently, attention focuses on value formation within SMBCs through the lenses of interaction, actors and SMBC. Finally, a summary demonstrates how this thesis achieved the set aim and objectives, emphasising the conclusions which benefit theory and practice.

6.2 Consumer engagement within SMBCs

6.2.1 Brand posts

The literature review in Chapter 2 strongly indicates that further research into brand post typologies is needed due to the inconsistent findings of earlier research (Jones and Lee, 2021; Tafesse and Wien, 2018) and rapid changes which occur within the social media landscape (Dolan et al., 2019; Hanson and Carter, 2021). Furthermore, brand posts are often at the forefront of brand-consumer interaction and play a crucial role in fostering brand-consumer relationships (Antoniadis et al., 2019), facilitating a daily presence in consumers' lives (Tafesse and Wien, 2017). The findings from this thesis revealed five broad themes, namely: (1) *presentation of offerings*; (2) *engagement building*; (3) *value-led*; (4) *belongingness building*; and (5) *educational*. The themes correspond with the roles of brand posts identified in the literature (Tafesse and Wien, 2017). The typology of Tafesse and Wien (2018) and Jones and Lee (2021) identified a frequent reoccurrence of selected themes within their typologies. This thesis, in addition to recording the reoccurrence of the emergent themes across the three researched brands, identified a strong dependency between themes and SMBC development. The development of an SMBC was assessed by the level of interaction between both the brand and consumers, and between consumers. Therefore, the number of interactions between consumers as well as between the brand and consumers indicates a more developed SMBC.

There was also diversity in the number of themes across the three brands investigated. For example, within brand C's establishing SMBC one theme was identified, whereas within brand B's more

developed SMBC, five distinct themes were evident. Furthermore, different brand post themes were identified across the three brands (cf. Chapter 4.2). This has supported the development of a framework connecting brand post themes with SMBC development. While within the establishing stage of SMBC development, the emphasis appears to be on presenting offerings through brand posts, in the later stages of SMBC development, attention shifts towards more community-building processes. Significantly, the belongingness-building theme has been identified in emerging and developed SMBCs which indicates that a feeling of belonging is essential to the formation of consumer-brand relationships within SMBCs. This is consistent with other, earlier, studies that link belongingness to community development (Martínez-López et al., 2015; Zaglia, 2013). In addition, Muniz et al. (2001) linked belonging with a shared consciousness, argued to be the most important marker of communities, as it enables the consolidation of a sense of community shared by a group of people and subsequently allows them to distinguish members from non-members (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Martínez-López et al., 2015; Zaglia, 2013). The significant role of belongingness within a VBC was also noted by Hollebeek et al. (2017). The developed SMBC also appears to offer a range of topics discussed. Diversity in the approach to topics raised by brand posts can stimulate the process of consumers getting to know each other, which in turn has a positive impact on relationship building and a sense of belongingness to the SMBC. Understanding the relationships between SMBC development, brand post typology and consumer engagement can support SMBC managers in developing relationships with consumers by accelerating consumer engagement. This should be of interest to practitioners, as research suggests that consumer engagement can have a positive impact on achieving marketing targets and reaching a core audience (Eslami et al., 2022; Tafesse and Wien, 2017).

The different development stages of the communities were evident in themes utilised by brands within their brand posts. While brands A and C focused on presenting offerings and prompting consumers to purchase, brand B, embraced a variety of themes through its brand posts, for example, belongingness, engagement, educational and value-led. The emphasis on value-led brand posts, however, can be linked with very strong values displayed by brand B, which is intertwined with the overall brand strategy but also convinces consumers of the brand promise and identity (Tafesse and Wien, 2017). This could suggest that value-led brand posts are crucial to creating meaningful and lasting bonds with consumers. Nonetheless, in extending the array of themes beyond offer presentation, to the value-led theme, brands must be prepared for disagreement between consumers who present conflicting views. Further data collection is required to investigate how the conflict between consumers on ideological grounds would impact SMBC development.

6.2.2 Consumer comments

In addition to understanding what types of brand posts cosmetic organisations create, the literature review exposed the need to broaden the perception of consumer interaction with a brand's posts (Antoniadis et al., 2019). Findings from this thesis revealed four broad consumer comments themes. Unlike the themes identified in earlier literature that focused on consumer profiles (Akar and Mardikyan, 2018; Füller et al., 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2017; Mathwick, 2002), the emerging themes of consumer communication were informed by the method of data collection. In other words, within existing literature, consumer comments typologies are associated with profiling consumers (Akar and Mardikyan, 2018; Wang et al., 2020). The development of community is also presented from a consumer standpoint, as evident in Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) VBCEP model that explores processes that support the consumers in becoming full members of a community through developing expertise. Hence the development of the community is considered from the position of the individual. This thesis looks at consumer comments through a prism of a message they were conveying. The themes identified within consumer comments in this study were:

(1) brand-centred communication; (2) cognitive-centred communication; (3) conversation-centred communication; and (4) personal experience-centred communication (cf. Chapter 4.3). Interestingly, the high frequency of themes across the brands varied. Within the less developed SMBCs of brands A and C, the most frequent theme recorded was cognitive-centred communication; within brand B's developed SMBC the most frequent theme recorded was personal experience-centred communication (cf. Chapter 4.3.5). This could indicate the importance of cognitive processes in emerging and establishing SMBCs. Simultaneously, the findings suggest a change in consumers' focus within developed SMBCs to communication evolving around personal experience. The importance of cognitive and affective consumer experience within social media has been acknowledged by Waqas et al. (2020), however, unlike this research, it did not provide the link between the frequency of cognitive/affective experience and community development.

Personal experience-centred communication is a theme that captures the notion that consumers present the brand and the brand's product through the prism of their own lived experience. In this type of communication, the brand and its products take a backseat while the consumer and the consumers' experiences have a central position in their story. Therefore, the brand/products appear to be embedded in the consumer's life. This study revealed two types of personal experience, one driven by the emotional experience, and the other driven by the perceptual experience (cf. Chapter 4.3.5). Interestingly, the frequency of perceptual experience-centred communication within brand B's SMBC was higher than that of emotional experience-centred communication. This indicates that consumers were sharing mostly opinions and feedback based on their lived experiences of the brand

and its products. Conversely, within brand C’s SMBC emotional experience-centred communication was most frequent. This was less informative and focused mostly on the emotions of the consumers or managing the emotions of others (for example, through such pleasantries as ‘thank you’, and ‘you’re welcome’). This is in contradiction to findings reported by Wang et al. (2020) who suggest consumer personal stories are indicators of a person new to the brand and its products. The visualisation of the fluctuation of the emotional experience-centred communication and perceptual experience-centred communication within the personal experience-centred communication theme is presented in Figure 177.

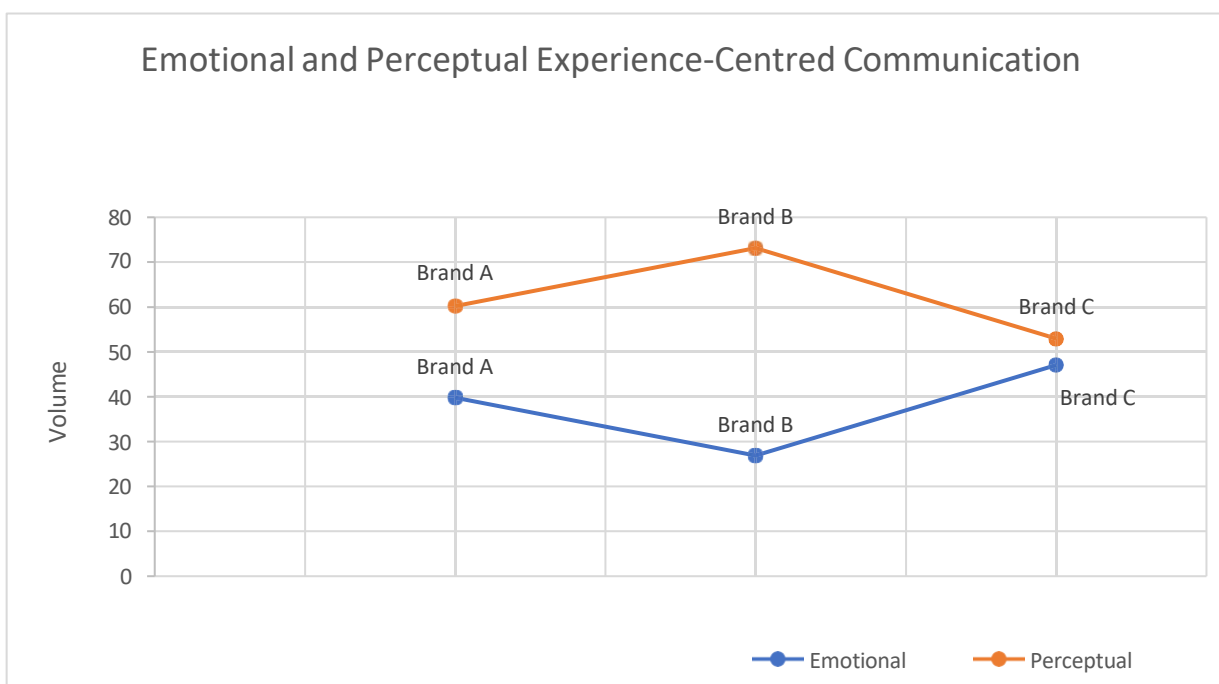


Figure 177 Visualisation of emotional and perceptual experience-centred communication across the three brands

This thesis also provides interesting insights regarding communication between acquaintances and strangers within an SMBC, as previously explored in research by Waqas et al. (2020). While conversations between acquaintances and strangers were observed across all three brands, the conversations between acquaintances within brand C’s SMBC were more prominent in comparison to conversations between acquaintances within brand A and B’s SMBC. Waqas et al. (2020) suggested that interactions within SMBCs aid the development of social ties and evoke a sense of bonding. In the light of the above, it can be assumed that less developed SMBCs will see a higher number of

conversations between acquaintances as an existing relationship between them can act as an interaction driver. On the other hand, developed SMBCs are more likely to experience an increased number of interactions between strangers as the developed consumer-brand relationship within such SMBCs will form a sufficient enabler of dialogue which can result in social bonding between strangers. As such, this study would suggest that SMBC managers should facilitate conversations between acquaintances in the establishing stage of the SMBC, for example through posting engagement-building posts encouraging discussion, as stimulating meaningful conversations that would benefit other consumers.

6.2.3 Individual brand replies

The findings reinforce the importance of individual brand communication, the significance of which was highlighted by Gretry et al. (2017) and Javornik et al. (2020). Due to a limited number of individual brand replies (and the evolving character of the replies) it was not possible to develop a typology of individual brand replies. Therefore, the analysis of these replies focused on tone of voice and communication style. The study garners valuable insights into brand communication management within SMBCs. This study aims to address identified knowledge gaps around implying different tones of voice within SMBCs (Gretry et al., 2017). The findings reveal a lack of consistency within the individual brand replies offered to consumers. For example, the findings revealed that not all complaints or negatively-valenced comments were addressed by the brands. This might significantly impact consumer perception of the brand, since previous research shows how strong brand-consumer communication is crucial when dealing with consumer complaints (Dhaoui and Webster, 2020; Javornik et al., 2020). The findings revealed that the answers to consumer complaints within SMBCs adopted a formal style (cf. Chapter 4.4.3). This was consistent across the three brands. Furthermore, when dealing with complaints, the brands implemented a corporate voice, characterised by a distant and factual approach, which can be perceived as more serious than CHV (Barcelos et al., 2018; Johnen and Schittka, 2019), regardless of the style utilised during non-complaint conversations. Such an approach falls in line with Barcelos et al. (2018), who found that the style used within negatively-valenced conversations does not impact purchasing intention.

Johnen and Schittka (2019), on the other hand, indicate how a lack of seriousness in a brand's replies might inflict doubts on consumers as to the ability of the brand to overcome performance issues. Therefore, brands adopting a corporate style while dealing with complaints, while not negatively impacting purchasing decisions, help to instil confidence in their consumers with regards to handling complaints successfully. Within non-complaint-related replies, Brand B in the majority utilised CHV. Such an approach seems to be consistent with other research that highlights frequent use of CHV

within social media environment (Barcelos et al., 2018; Johnen and Schnittka, 2019). Brand A, on the other hand, utilised a mixture of informal and formal styles that varied depending on the circumstance. This approach might be more suitable for a developing SMBC where a consumer-brand relationship is still developing. For example, Gretry et al. (2017) indicate that consumers unfamiliar with a brand prefer a more formal style of communication while considering CHV as being too intrusive. Notably, during the analysed period, brand A shifted its communication style towards CHV which would be in line with Gretry et al. (2017) with regards to the development of a brand-consumer relationship. Nonetheless, further research is warranted to gain a better understanding of consumer perception, as well as brand decision-making, regarding the selection and implementation of communication styles.

6.2.4 Summary

This section has discussed the significant findings in relation to the role of SMBCs in consumer engagement, in particular brand posts, consumer comments and a brand's individual replies. Table 46 provides an overview of the themes emerging within the consumer engagement part of the study, which feeds into the overarching and major contribution.

Table 46 Overview of key areas emerging in consumer engagement within SMBCs

Literature	Key areas	Current knowledge	New contributions
(Dolan et al., 2019; Hanson and Carter, 2021; L. Hollebeek, D. et al., 2017; Jones and Lee, 2021; Martínez-López et al., 2015; A. M. Muniz, Jr. and O'Guinn, 2001; Tafesse and Wien, 2017; Zaglia, 2013)	Developing an understanding of the links between brand posts and SMBC community development and its impact on consumer engagement.	A typology of brand posts allows for identifying categories that stimulate consumer interaction. The online environment is identified as compatible with consumer engagement.	A link between brand post typology and SMBC development was made. The organisation of the categories allows identification of brand posts in line with SMBC development.
(Benamar et al., 2017; Brodie et al., 2013; Füller et al., 2014; Habibi et al., 2014a; L. Hollebeek, D. et al., 2017; W. Kaur et al., 2019; Mathwick, 2002; Wang et al., 2020; Waqas et al., 2020; Yang and Fang, 2004)	Developing an understanding of consumer post typology and its links to community development and its impact on consumer engagement.	A typology of consumer interaction linked with consumer roles or profiles. Acknowledgement of the online environment as a factor in consumer engagement.	A typology focused on consumer communication. A link between typology and SMBC was made, and its impact on consumer engagement.
(Barcelos et al., 2018; Dhaoui and Webster, 2020; Gretry et al., 2017; Javornik et al., 2020; Johnen and Schnittka, 2019)	Investigating communication styles adopted by brands.	Brands' engagement in conversations with consumers enriches consumers' consumption. Brands often utilise CHV within conversations. The use of certain linguistics impacts consumer engagement.	The brands adopt different conversation styles which are fluid and change depending on the circumstances. The brands are not consistent with maintaining

			conversation with consumers.
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6.3 Value formation within SMBCs

6.3.1. The role of interaction within value formation in the SMBC environment

The findings reveal that interactions within SMBCs are essential for consumers to generate value, although different actors generated different types of value through SMBC interactions. This, therefore, suggests that it is important to explore value formation within SMBCs through the theoretical framework of CDL. CDL not only positions the consumer in the central point of the value-generating processes, but also acknowledges that the value formed is context dependent (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). Furthermore, CDL recognises the different standpoints of actors within the value-generating process (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018). As a result, it recognises different types of value formed by different actors. Finally, CDL recognises different means of value-generation: through co-creation or individual value formation (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011). While interactions within SMBCs took place between different actors, the findings highlight the central role that consumers play within SMBC interactions. The storytelling within SMBCs positions the consumer as a principal whose context and practices play an important role. This also supports the position that value co-creation is very subjective and context dependent (Hollebeek et al., 2020).

This thesis also highlights the collaborative nature of the SMBC environment that often resulted in multi-actor interaction, which, according to Holmqvist et al. (2020), indicates consumers' positive attitude towards interacting with others within SMBC, as well as their desire to take more active roles within the community. Therefore, it can suggest the engaged state of consumers. Notably, the research highlighted different value types emerging for different actors interacting within SMBCs. It was particularly explicit when comparing consumer-brand interaction and consumer-consumer interaction (c.f. Chapter 5.2–5.4). This supports Holmqvist et al.'s (2020) research by arguing that value is highly dependable on context and actors. This is also in line with consumer-dominant logic (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018).

Furthermore, the variety of value created through interaction differs within the three SMBCs investigated. The more developed SMBCs are characterised by the generation of more diverse value types than the emerging or establishing SMBCs. For instance, within the C2C interactions, six value types were identified. However, only three of these value types emerged within the less established brand C's SMBC. It might be argued that the underdeveloped consumer-brand relationship hindered

the formation of value types associated with an experience, for example, personal meaning (Smith and Colgate, 2007), or attachment to the brand, such as emotional value (Sheth et al., 1991).

6.3.2 The role of actors within value formation in SMBCs

The findings reveal that different actors generated different value types through SMBC interactions. Interestingly, the findings indicate a strong role of SMBC development in the value types which are generated for consumers, as certain value types emerged only within developed SMBCs. For instance, within B2C interaction only within brand B's SMBC was personal meaning value identified. Personal meaning value is strongly linked with the consumer-brand relationship a consumer develops (Holbrook, 2005). Correspondingly, only within brand B's SMBC C2B interactions self-expression value was detected. This value type can be considered as a value that requires a consumer-brand relationship (Woodall, 2003). Further research is required to establish whether brands, through their adopted approach to consumers, can facilitate the generation of further value types.

The analysis also investigated the roles actors were playing within SMBCs. While consumers could be considered as recipients, reaping the benefits in the form of formed value, the brands assume the role of facilitator. As Holmqvist et al. (2020) explain, brands can act as agents facilitating potential value. This can be performed through posting brand posts that initiate consumer conversations and through individual brand replies that provide sought-after information. Ascertaining brands as value facilitators is also in line with CDL, as the notion assumes that the customer derives value from brand-mediated content that can be consumed independently from provider-influenced behaviours (Boysen Anker et al., 2015).

6.3.3 The role of SMBCs within value formation

The findings reveal the significant role of SMBCs in providing a virtual space for consumers and brands to interact, but more importantly, SMBCs form a knowledge repository that can be accessed by consumers. Due to the interactive nature of SMBCs (Baccarella et al., 2019; Lima et al., 2019; Zaglia, 2013), consumers are engaging in two-way conversations through advice-seeking (Opresnik, 2019). The wealth of information stored within an SMBC allows consumers to educate themselves on products within the brand portfolio, which, in turn, means that they can better understand the products and improve their self-care. Furthermore, the SMBC can be considered a valuable resource for influencing future customers who, upon reading stories presented by other consumers, can identify with the opinion of others. This, in turn, can impact their brand perception and decision-making. The ability of the online world to act as a source of influence has been observed in the literature (Kaur et al., 2018). While co-creation has been researched (Sorensen and Drennan, 2017; Zhang and Liu, 2021), the understanding of SMBCs' role in value formation is still limited (Lin et al.,

2018). SMBCs can also be used as a tool to gather consumer insights. This is particularly evident within brand B's SMBC, whose consumers shared several new product and product extension ideas.

6.3.4 Summary

This section has discussed the significant findings in relation to the role of SMBCs in value formation.

Table 47 provides an overview of the themes emerging within the value formation portion of this study, which feeds into the overarching and major contribution.

Table 47 Overview of Key Areas Emerging in SMBC in relation to value formation

Literature	Key areas	Current knowledge	New contributions
(Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a; Hollebeek et al., 2020; Holmqvist et al., 2020; Priharsari et al., 2020; Sashi, 2021)	Developing an understanding of different interactions within the SMBC environment.	The acknowledgement of different actors within online environments and processes. Multidimensionality of consumer engagement.	C2C, C2B and B2C interactions can be distinguished within SMBCs. Furthermore, consumer-to-social media brand community (C2SMBC) interaction was acknowledged.
(Holbrook, 2005; Hollebeek et al., 2017; Sheth et al., 1991; Smith and Colgate, 2007; Woodall, 2003; Zainuddin and Gordon, 2020; T. Zhang et al., 2020)	Exposing a variety of value types formed through various processes within the SMBC environment.	A number of value types are identified within an online environment.	Different value types emerge during the interaction of different actors, therefore value generated in context and actor dependent.
(Habibi et al., 2014b; Hollebeek et al., 2017; Martínez-López et al., 2015)	Developing an understanding of the role SMBCs play in the development of value.	Discussion around online environment facilitating value formation.	SMBC is a key element in value formation processes. A repository that allows the formation of value autonomously and asynchronously.

The findings of this research present a refined understanding of the role of SMBCs within the value formation process, as encapsulated in the developed framework (Figure 176). This framework emphasizes SMBCs not only as platforms for interaction, but as crucial facilitators in the value formation journey.

Central to this framework is the recognition of SMBCs as dynamic environments where diverse interactions occur, each contributing uniquely to the value formation process. SMBCs act as catalysts for various types of value formation. Each interaction type within the SMBC context leads to the formation of different value types, underlining the multifaceted role of SMBCs in shaping consumer experiences and perceptions.

Moreover, the framework illustrates that SMBCs serve as repositories of knowledge and experiences, storing 'value vestige' from past interactions. This repository function of SMBCs extends their role beyond platforms for current interactions to becoming enduring resources for knowledge sharing, learning, and decision-making for both consumers and brands.

Additionally, SMBCs facilitate autonomous value formation processes, where consumers and brands independently engage with the communal space, contributing to or deriving value in unique ways. This aspect of the framework acknowledges the individual agency in value creation and the varying influence of SMBCs at different stages of the consumer journey.

6.4 Consumer engagement and value formation within SMBCs

The research reveals that the SMBC environment is a strong factor in facilitating consumer engagement and value formation processes. The characteristics of SMBCs undeniably derive from the social networking sites that they are embedded within. Consequently, they accelerate the interactions between people and brands (Shen and Bissell, 2013). This acceleration is also caused by the growing importance of social networking sites, resulting in consumers turning to such networks for advice (Opresnik, 2019), as is evident in the findings of this thesis. Consumers were turning to SMBC for product advice, but also to complain or raise a problem with the brand. While the environment has a positive impact on consumer loyalty and brand trust (Brodie et al., 2013; Kaur et al., 2016), this thesis provides evidence that the lack of appropriate brand response to consumer requests might hinder consumer-brand relationship building.

The findings demonstrate that the five characteristics identified by Habibi et al. (2014b) impact significantly on an SMBC's ability to facilitate consumer engagement and value formation. In particular, the social context characteristic that is linked with the personal information of SMBC users available to others; and content and storytelling produced by consumers. For example, consumers mostly passed on information in a form of storytelling that was embedding their own experiences and personal narratives. Such storytelling is often associated with consumer engagement and co-creation (Habibi et al., 2014b; Lund et al., 2019; Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012). Another prominent SMBC characteristic emerging in the findings is scale, correlated with the ability to instantaneously disseminate information amongst peers. For example, consumers were often spreading information by tagging their peers, hence exploiting SMBC interconnectedness (Fujita et al., 2018; Habibi et al., 2014b).

As the literature offered conflicting views on the relationship between consumer engagement and value formation (Abdul-Ghani et al., 2019; Cheung et al., 2021; Habibi et al., 2014b; Opresnik, 2019;

Shen and Bissell, 2013), one of the objectives of this thesis was to investigate the relationship between the three constructs and propose a conceptual framework of SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation. This thesis suggests that consumer engagement is a higher-order construct to value formation. Furthermore, the findings also reveal that SMBC is a higher-order construct to consumer engagement. Figure 178 presents a conceptual framework of the relationship between SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation. The findings suggest that consumer engagement facilitates co-creation and autonomous value formation within SMBCs, and also indicates the strong relationship between the development of SMBCs and the value types which are co-created through actors' interactions. The impact of the development of SMBCs on consumer engagement was also identified.

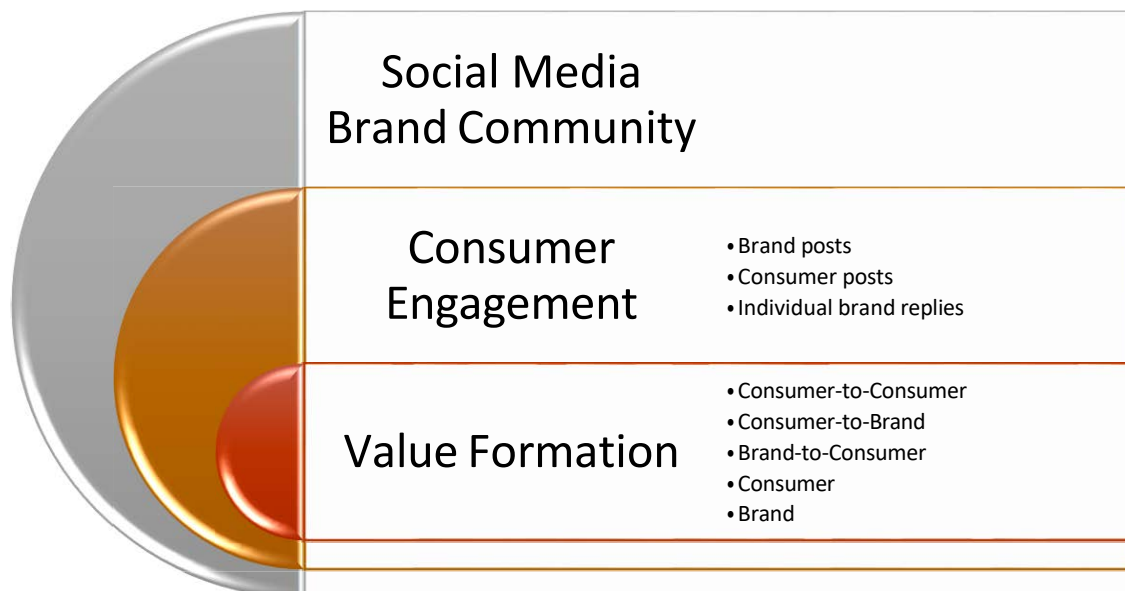


Figure 178 Conceptual framework of SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation relationship

Table 48 provides an overview of the themes emerging within the value formation portion of this study, which feeds into the overarching and major contribution.

Table 48 Comparison of key areas emerging in SMBC in relation to link between consumer engagement and value formation

Literature	Key areas	Current knowledge	New contributions
(Habibi et al., 2014b; Opresnik, 2019; Shen and Bissell, 2013)	Consumer engagement is a higher-order construct to value formation.	The literature presents conflicting views with regard to value formation and consumer engagement construct order.	Consumer engagement is a higher-order construct to value formation within cosmetics SMBCs.
(Abdul-Ghani et al., 2019; Brodie et al., 2011; Chathoth et al., 2016; Dessart et al., 2015; Vivek et al., 2012)	The role of SMBCs in consumer engagement and value formation processes.	The online environment positively impacts consumer engagement and value formation processes.	The level of SMBC development has a crucial role in facilitating consumer engagement and value formation.
(Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015; Gummerus et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014b; Lima et al., 2019; Sashi, 2012)	SMBC characteristics impact the facilitation of consumer engagement and value formation.	It was recognised that the online environment might have an impact on consumer engagement.	SMBC characteristics have a strong impact on consumer engagement and value formation.

6.5 Summary of the knowledge gaps and contributions to knowledge

Table 49 summarises the three major themes and key subjects in this thesis, emphasising how they merge to provide original insight into consumer engagement and value formation within SMBCs. Particular attention should be paid to the role of SMBCs in initiating and maintaining consumer engagement and value formation that this thesis highlights. Highlighting that in a social media community setting, the development stage of a community plays a pivotal role in stimulating consumer engagement and value formation for consumers. This study also uncovers the pivotal role community managers play in encouraging and building consumer engagement and facilitating value, and recognises the need for consistency in their approach to consumer interactions. The themes presented in the table are: (1) establishing the importance of SMBCs in consumer engagement, (2) establishing the importance of SMBCs in value formation processes, and (3) establishing the importance of SMBCs in value formation processes.

Theme 1: Establishing the importance of SMBCs in consumer engagement

This theme explores the role of SMBC within consumer engagement. Through answering the call for further research into consumer engagement within SMBC (Dessart, 2017; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hanson and Carter, 2021) due to a lack of insights from qualitative studies (Bilro and Loureiro, 2020; Audy

Martínek, 2021; Santos et al., 2022) and practitioner knowledge (Deng et al., 2020; Kaur et al., 2016; Rather, 2019) caused by an ever-changing environment (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hanson and Carter, 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2017), this thesis makes a link between brand post typology and SMBC development, as well as consumer communication and SMBC development. The thesis also highlights the inconsistencies within maintaining conversations with consumers.

Theme 2: Establishing the importance of SMBCs in value formation processes

This theme explores the role of an SMBC within value formation processes. Through answering the call for further research into value co-creation within SMBC (Holmqvist et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Sashi, 2021), this thesis makes a distinction between C2C, C2B and B2C interactions within SMBC, as well as identifying C2SMBC interactions. The findings also highlight different types of value emerging through different interactions. Finally, the thesis establishes the key role SMBCs play within the value formation processes.

Theme 3: Establishing the importance of SMBCs in value formation processes

This theme explores the links between consumer engagement and value formation within an SMBC environment. Through addressing the gap around conflicting views on the correlation between consumer engagement and value formation (Abdul-Ghani et al., 2019; Chathoth et al., 2016; Sashi, 2021; Vivek et al., 2012) and calls for further research on value co-creation and its links with consumer engagement within an online environment (Holmqvist et al., 2020; S. Liu et al., 2020; Sashi, 2021), this thesis establishes that SMBC characteristics have a strong impact on consumer engagement and value formation. The findings also validate the stance that consumer engagement is a higher-order construct to value formation within SMBCs.

Table 49 Summary of the knowledge gaps and contributions to knowledge

Areas of scrutiny	Knowledge gaps identified	Original contribution addressing the identified knowledge gap	Relevant frameworks
<p>Establishing the importance of SMBCs in consumer engagement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further research into consumer engagement within the social media environment is required (Dessart, 2017; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hanson and Carter, 2021) • Limited insights into consumer engagement perspective are available within SMBCs (Waqas et al., 2020) • The ever-changing environment of SMBCs requires constant research updating knowledge (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hanson and Carter, 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2017) • Insufficient insights on consumer engagement within SMBC exist from qualitative studies (Bilro and Loureiro, 2020; Audy Martínek, 2021; Santos et al., 2022) • A lack of practitioners’ applicable knowledge around brand posts that could be translated to more robust consumer engagement within SMBCs (Deng et al., 2020; Kaur et al., 2016; Rather, 2019) • Further research into consumer interaction with brand posts is required (Antoniadis et al., 2019; Hua et al., 2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A link between brand post typology and SMBC development was made. The organisation of the categories allows for identifying brand posts in line with SMBC development. • A typology focused on consumer communication. A link between typology and SMBC development was made, and its impact on consumer engagement. • The brands adopt different conversation styles which are fluid and change depending on the circumstances. The brands are not consistent with maintaining conversations with consumers. 	<p>Conceptual framework of SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation relationship</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scattered research regarding the generation/ identification of a consumer post typology is clear (Benamar et al., 2017; Jones and Lee, 2021; Tafesse and Wien, 2018) • It is unclear how conversations with peers within SMBCs affects consumer engagement versus conversations between strangers (Waqas et al., 2020) • There is a need for further investigation into the usage of tone of voice by brands within SMBCs (Barcelos et al., 2018; Gretry et al., 2017) 		
<p>Establishing the importance of SMBCs in value formation processes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further research into value co-creation within SMBC is required as the notion is deemed context dependent and subjective (Holmqvist et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Sashi, 2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C2C, C2B and B2C interactions can be distinguished within SMBCs. Furthermore, C2SMBC interaction was acknowledged. • Different value types emerge during the interaction of different actors. • SMBC is a key element in value formation processes. A repository that allows the formation of value autonomously and asynchronously. 	<p>Conceptual framework of SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation relationship</p> <p>Contextualised conceptual framework of value formation within SMBCs</p>

<p>Ascertaining links between consumer engagement and value formation within the SMBC environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting views on the correlation between consumer engagement and value formation (Abdul-Ghani et al., 2019; Chathoth et al., 2016; Sashi, 2021; Vivek et al., 2012) • Scattered research that impacts understanding involvement in consumer engagement and value formation processes of SMBC actors (Bailey et al., 2019; Benamar et al., 2017; Felin et al., 2017; Priharsari et al., 2020) • Calls for further research on value co-creation and its links with consumer engagement within an online environment (Holmqvist et al., 2020; S. Liu et al., 2020; Sashi, 2021) • Limited research examining engagement and value co-creation within social media (Holmqvist et al., 2020; Priharsari et al., 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer engagement is a higher-order construct to value formation within cosmetics SMBCs. • SMBC has a crucial role in facilitating consumer engagement and value formation. • SMBC characteristics have a strong impact on consumer engagement and value formation. 	<p>Conceptual framework of SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation relationship</p>
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6.6 Chapter summary

This chapter discussed the findings through the lens of prior literature. The literature review in Chapter 2 investigated the knowledge and theory in the areas of SMBCs, consumer engagement and value formation. This chapter explored the findings through the lens of each literature area, identified key contributions, and offered two conceptual frameworks which address the research objectives of the study: (1) a contextualised conceptual framework of value formation within SMBCs; and (2), a conceptual framework of SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation relationship.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis reflects on the study by returning to the research objectives and summarising the key contributions to knowledge. Following that, the chapter outlines the limitations of this thesis and offers suggestions for future research.

7.2 Revisiting research objectives

Research Objective 1: *To review the previous research on cosmetics SMBCs, in particular related to value formation and consumer engagement.*

Research Objective 1 provides a theoretical underpinning for this thesis. The literature review in Chapter 2 focused on the areas of SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation within the context of the cosmetics sector. The review found that the cosmetics industry (within the context of social media) is significantly under-researched (Lima et al., 2019; Shen and Bissell, 2013), despite the strong digital presence of cosmetic companies and brands (Qitong and Rahman, 2019). During the literature review, significant distinctions emerged between SMBCs and other online constructs, such as OBCs. These differences were identified through the recognition of five distinct characteristics: social context, structure, scale, content and storytelling, and the presence of numerous affiliated brand communities (Habibi et al., 2014b). Those unique characteristics facilitate connections with like-minded people, and provide opportunities to discuss, and share ideas and new content (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018; Habibi et al., 2014a; Liu et al., 2019). Strong evidence of SMBCs strengthening the relationship between the brand and its consumers was also discovered in existing research (Gummerus et al., 2012; Kamboj et al., 2018; Simon and Tossan, 2018). Nonetheless, a clear need for further research on SMBC was identified (Dwivedi et al., 2021), particularly due to the fast-paced environment (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2017).

Following the investigation of SMBCs, attention of the literature review moved towards the concept of consumer engagement. The theoretical underpinnings of consumer engagement were discussed. The literature review revealed that consumer engagement is often linked with relationship marketing (Vivek et al., 2012), however, some studies regarded the roots of consumer engagement as grounded in SDL (Vargo, 2009). Interestingly, some researchers combine both views in search of consumer engagement origins, indicating that while certain elements are drawn from SDL, others emerge from relationship marketing (Brodie et al., 2013). The investigation also showed the close links of SDL to value co-creation, identifying the latter notion as a vital component of SDL (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Within the literature review, CDL was discussed as an extension of the customer-centricity offered by SDL (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). As this thesis is situated within the customer-centric environment that is focused on interaction and relationships, the CDL position was adopted. Consequently, the research adopted the position that consumer engagement (Rather, 2019) and co-creation (Terblanche, 2014) have their roots in CDL. The different perspectives on consumer engagement were brought forward within the literature review. The different theoretical underpinnings were examined, as well as the different nomenclature used across the various theoretical stances adopted by the different research communities (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2016; Habibi et al., 2014a; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2019; van Doorn et al., 2010).

The literature review indicated the need for further qualitative research into consumer engagement within the social media environment (Dessart, 2017; Santos et al., 2022). Following consideration of the theoretical underpinnings of consumer engagement, consumer engagement typology was discussed. Three areas within SMBCs where such a typology could be applied were identified, namely brand posts, consumer comments, and brand one-to-one individual replies. While several typologies were identified and evaluated, gaps in knowledge were also identified (Barcelos et al., 2018; Benamar et al., 2017; Bilro and Loureiro, 2020; Gretry et al., 2017; Hua et al., 2021; Waqas et al., 2020).

Finally, co-creation was discussed. The relationship between value co-creation and consumer engagement within the existing literature was deliberated. Conflicting views on the hierarchy of the two constructs were presented (Abdul-Ghani et al., 2019; Chathoth et al., 2016; Sashi, 2021; Vivek et al., 2012). Theoretical underpinnings of value co-creation were also discussed, particularly within the realm of SDL and CDL (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2015). This uncovered a similar background of consumer engagement and value co-creation. Following that, attention moved towards exploring value types. It has been acknowledged that the literature indicates that value is highly dependable on context and the consumer (Holmqvist et al., 2020). Several value types identified by existing research were reviewed (Holbrook, 2005; Sheth et al., 1991; Smith and Colgate, 2007; Woodall, 2003; Zhang et al., 2020). The literature review was critical in providing key information for this study that allowed the identification of gaps in current knowledge. Therefore, the completion of Research Objective 1 was crucial in informing the next research objective.

Research Objective 2: *As a preliminary study to the main research phase, to develop a list of cosmetics-based social media communities and their characteristics (social media channels used; the number of followers; posting frequency; the number of shares, likes and comments on posts published by brands). The preliminary study aims to identify brands and communities most suitable for further research.*

While research objective 1 defined the boundaries of this thesis and indicated the gaps which needed exploring, research objective 2 commenced the research stage of the project. A preliminary study was carried out to establish the most appropriate platform for research, as well as to determine the level of activity within SMBCs which would inform the inclusion criteria. Furthermore, this stage was crucial for identifying cosmetics brands and their social media presence. It began with the observation of various cosmetics brand's SMBCs across Instagram and Facebook. The initial research focus was placed on these two platforms as they were predominantly used by cosmetics brands; this selection was supported by research reporting Facebook and Instagram as channels where brands spend most on advertising (Koetsier, 2019). This was determined through analysis of platforms used across cosmetics brands. The preliminary study was carried out to establish the scope of brands and consumer activity as well as to verify the most appropriate platform for building a community, engagement, and value formation. It was decided to focus the research on Facebook SMBC as consumer comments within Instagram predominantly were shorter, hence offering fewer insights into consumer engagement. Furthermore, Instagram SMBCs were lacking in consumer conversations, therefore impacting the understanding of value formation, in particular value co-creation.

It was decided to focus on communities that were declared to be based in the UK, as people who participate in the social media communities are influenced by the culture they were brought up in and surrounded by. Through the preliminary research, a total of one hundred and ninety-eight brands were identified. One hundred and thirty-six brands were deemed unsuitable due to a lack of brand or consumer activity, worldwide reach (not UK specific) or because of a lack of social media accounts. Sixty-two brands were considered potential candidates for the research. Six brands were contacted with an enquiry for permission to conduct research on social media communities managed by them, and four gave permission to conduct the research. As it has been noted that too large samples can prevent in-depth analysis of the data (Sandelowski, 1995), the researcher opted to focus research on the three most diverse brands that offered a balanced variety of SMBCs of activity, ranging from very active SMBC to SMBC of low activity. Achieving Research Objective 2 was essential as it is a fundamental element for achieving Research Objective 3.

Research Objective 3: *To conduct, analyse and report on a netnographic study to assess the role of SMBC within consumer engagement and value formation in the cosmetics sector, and the relationship between the concepts.*

Ultimately, three brands were selected for the research project. The choice was determined by the diversity within each brand's SMBC. Brands A, B and C offered a balanced variety of SMBCs, ranging

from a very active SMBC to SMBC of low activity. The brands were characterised by different activity levels, posting frequency, and discussed topics. The consumer activity on the brand's SMBC also varied across the three brands. The data was collected in retrospect, and it included the period between the 1st of December 2019 and 31st of January 2020. Collected data were anonymised and codes to consumers that were involved in C2C, B2C or C2B conversations were allocated. Collectively 87 conversation strips were collected that contained 6401 consumer posts. Throughout the research process, an immersive journal was also kept. An immersive journal is a crucial element of netnography.

The analysis began with the investigation of consumer engagement within SMBCs. The investigation started with an in-depth look into brand posts. The examination of the posts was greatly supported by the work of Tafesse and Wien (2017). Next, the data was uploaded to NVivo for analysis of consumer posts. The typologies developed through data analysis allowed links to be made between consumer engagement and the SMBC environment. Similarly, the analysis of value formation explored the link between value formation, value types generated and the SMBC environment. The findings were presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 4 of this thesis was dedicated to examining the impact of SMBCs on consumer engagement. The research focused on three key areas within the SMBC environment, namely brand posts, consumer comments and individual brand replies. The study revealed noteworthy differences in consumer engagement across the SMBCs of the three brands under investigation. The analysis of brand posts found that only one theme, i.e., presentation of offerings, was identified across all SMBCs examined. This theme also was the only one identified in the establishing SMBC. In contrast, the developed SMBCs revealed five themes, including presentation of offerings, belongingness, engagement, educational and value-led. Lastly, the emerging SMBC showed three themes, namely presentation of offerings, belongingness, and engagement.

The second area of investigation concerning consumer comments resulted in the identification of four broad themes, namely brand-centred communication, cognitive-centred communication, conversation-centred communication, and personal experience-centred communication. The frequency of these themes was linked to the level of SMBC development. The study found that cognitive-centred communication was the most frequent in the least developed SMBCs, while personal experience-centred communication was the most frequent in highly developed SMBCs.

The final analysis of consumer engagement focused on individual brand replies, where two areas were explored, namely communication style and tone, and technical aspects of communication. The findings revealed significant inconsistencies in communication styles and a great fluidity of approach to style and tone.

Chapter 5 of this thesis focused on investigating the formation of value within SMBCs. Three primary areas were identified and discussed, namely C2C, B2C, and C2B interactions. The research identified six value types that emerge through actor interactions within the SMBC environment, including social value, emotional value, personal value, self-expression value, functional value, and epistemic value. The study linked the formation of these value types to the level of SMBC development across the three interactions. The C2C interactions in the developed and emerging SMBCs exhibited all six value types, while the establishing SMBC had only three, namely social value, self-expression value and functional value.

Similarly, the B2C interactions in the emerging and establishing SMBCs showed three value types, including social value, self-expression value and epistemic value. In contrast, the developed SMBC exhibited four value types, namely social value, personal value, self-expression value, functional value, and epistemic value. The study identified three value types in C2B interactions occurring across all three SMBCs, namely social value, emotional value, and epistemic value. Additionally, self-expression value was also found in the developed SMBC.

The research also identified customer-independent value formation (C), which is generated individually and autonomously by customers. The study found that the value types generated through autonomous value formation varied across the three SMBCs. Emotional value and self-expression value were identified in all three SMBCs, while functional value was found only in the establishing and emerging SMBCs. Personal meaning value was identified in emerging and developed SMBCs, while epistemic value was discovered only in the emerging SMBC.

Lastly, the study identified brand-independent value facilitation (B) as the creation of resources or processes that enable consumers to autonomously form value or co-create value through interaction, independent of the brand.

Findings within both chapters were pivotal in the formation of the conceptual framework of SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation relationship.

Research Objective 4: *To propose a contextualised conceptual framework of value formation within SMBCs.*

The accomplishment of Research Objective 3 enabled the addressing of Research Objective 4, which aims to propose a contextualised conceptual framework of value formation within SMBCs. Chapter 5 focused on value formation within the SMBC environment. The detailed discussion significantly informed the creation of the contextualised conceptual framework of value formation within SMBCs. Chapter 5's discussion was divided by actor interaction, namely C2C, B2C and C2B. The analysis identified six value types, with their occurrence linked to the development of SMBCs, the type of interaction, and actors involved in the interaction. Different value types were also identified for the actors, linked to their different standpoints.

In C2C interaction, both actors involved in the interaction formed the same value types, while in B2C and C2B interactions, the value types varied. Within B2C interaction, the brand formed value learning, while consumers formed self-expression value, epistemic value, and social value. Within C2B interaction, consumers formed self-expression value, epistemic value, social value, and emotional value, while the brand formed value learning.

Independent value creation is performed autonomously by the customer through consuming resources available on SMBC. Such independent customer value formation can result in personal meaning value, emotional value, self-expression value, epistemic value, and functional value. Through engaging with the SMBC resources, customers can also experience anticipation of value.

Brand-independent value facilitation involves processes that aim to create resources for consumers, such as offering information or communication.

The study also highlighted the importance of interaction between actors, as well as customer-independent value creation and brand-independent value facilitation in enriching SMBCs through knowledge and experience sharing (C2C and C2B), idea generation (C2B), and providing information, stimulating interactivity, and validating responsiveness (B2C).

The research validated the pivotal role of an SMBC that acts as a facilitator as well as a repository of knowledge in facilitating value formation. It provides a virtual space for consumers and brands to interact and exchange knowledge and ideas on brand-related topics. Furthermore, the framework has exposed how diverse the interactions within SMBCs can be. This draws attention to the importance of encouraging interactions between various actors within SMBCs. The contextualised conceptual framework of value formation within SMBC brings valuable insights into the nature of SMBCs and supports the understanding of communities. It also offers knowledge on the processes within SMBCs and how those processes could be supported to aid the value formation processes. Consequently, Research Objective 4 has been met.

Research Objective 5: To propose a conceptual framework of SMBC, consumer engagement and value formation relationship.

The achievement of Research Objective 3 as well as Research Objective 4, which investigated the nature of value formation within SMBCs, allowed the addressing of Research Objective 5. The detailed discussion of consumer engagement within SMBCs in Chapter 4 and the investigation of engagement across different actors within the SMBC supported the understanding of the nature of consumer engagement within SMBCs. Following that, the detailed investigation of value formation in Chapter 5 aided the embracing of the value formation notion within the SMBC. The findings discussed in both chapters allowed connections to be made which are necessary to establish the relationship between the two concepts. While similar discussions already existed in the literature, the opinions of researchers are conflicting, causing confusion. This thesis validates the stance that consumer engagement is a higher-order construct to value formation within SMBCs, providing a deeper understanding of both concepts. This, in turn, can aid better facilitation of value formation and consumer engagement within SMBCs.

7.3 Contributions to knowledge

This thesis has contributed to the advancement of knowledge around consumer engagement and value formation within SMBCs. While previous studies investigated consumer engagement and value co-creation, existing research has not placed emphasis on the SMBC environment and its impact on consumer engagement and value formation. A detailed discussion of contribution to knowledge was presented in Chapter 6; however, a summary of the theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions is presented below.

7.3.1 Theoretical

This thesis makes a profound theoretical contribution to knowledge, in the sphere of SMBCs, by exposing the pivotal role of SMBCs in fostering consumer engagement and facilitating value formation. The study unveils a previously unexplored connection between the development of SMBCs and the dynamics of consumer engagement, thereby addressing a notable void in existing scholarly work (Dessart, 2017; Kaur et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2022).

A key research gap identified in Chapter 2 of this thesis underscores the persistent challenges that brands encounter in maintaining consumer engagement within SMBCs, as highlighted by Dwivedi et al. (2021) and Kaur et al. (2018). The literature review also revealed a significant shortfall in understanding the nature of consumer engagement within the context of SMBCs (Dessart, 2017; Rather, 2019; Santos et al., 2022). This study bridges the identified gap by shedding greater light on the effective ways to foster consumer engagement within SMBCs, a challenge that has been notably difficult for brands to navigate (Lima et al., 2019).

A key theoretical contribution of this thesis is the development of a typology of brand posts within SMBCs, responding to a research need identified in the literature (Dolan et al., 2019; Hanson and Carter, 2021). This typology, which includes offerings presentation, engagement building, value-led, belongingness building, and educational themes, reveals the relationship between specific post types and the stages of SMBC development, therefore demonstrating the alignment and influence of different thematic categories on the evolution of SMBCs.

Further, the research contributes to the literature on consumer interactions (Antoniadis et al., 2019), by identifying four central themes of consumer comments: brand-centred, cognitive-centred, conversation-centred, and personal experience-centred. This analysis not only enhances the understanding of the changing focus of consumer interactions within SMBCs across different developmental stages, but also contributes to a broader comprehension of how these thematic interactions could foster the development of SMBCs.

In addition, the thesis delves into the nuances of one-to-one brand communication, emphasizing its varied approach across different developmental stages of SMBCs and its potential impact on consumer-brand relationships (Gretry et al., 2017; Javornik et al., 2020). It highlights the criticality of brand strategies in addressing consumer dissatisfaction and the variation in brands' communication styles across different SMBC stages, which could significantly affect consumer satisfaction and brand perception.

The thesis also extends the scope of value formation, a concept predominantly explored in service

marketing (Heinonen and Strandvik, 2018), to the context of SMBCs. It presents a contextualised conceptual framework of value formation within SMBCs, broadening the understanding of diverse value formation processes from both the consumer and provider perspectives (Holmqvist et al., 2020). This comprehensive approach to value formation offers novel perspectives on the intricate nature of value formation and co-creation within the dynamic environment of cosmetic SMBCs. It underscores the multifaceted nature of value formation, reflecting the diverse experiences and needs of consumers and brands within these digital communities.

7.3.2 Methodological

The literature review highlighted the lack of qualitative studies within the consumer engagement field (Audy Martínek, 2021; Santos et al., 2022), therefore this thesis advances the pool of knowledge of consumer engagement through a qualitative lens. Furthermore, this thesis implemented the recently formed netnographic praxis (Kozinets, 2020), therefore it enhances the limited pool of research that applies the updated framework and shapes the boundaries of netnography. As there is limited research implementing the netnographic praxis, this thesis offers a valuable resource that illustrates how praxis can be accommodated within research, particularly within SMBCs, consumer engagement and value formation research.

The thesis explored the quantification of qualitative data by counting themes and codes. While the use of quantification in qualitative research is considered problematic (Monrouxe and Rees, 2020), it has been adopted to some extent in netnography (Kozinets, 2020). However, the use of quantification in netnography remains controversial (Lugosi and Quinton, 2018).

This study contributes to the discussion of quantification within netnography research by offering insights into how reflexive consideration of quantified data can inform qualitative analysis.

This thesis particularly contributes towards understanding the pitfalls and hardship of conducting research within the Facebook environment. The learnings offered through the lived experience of the researcher offers a valuable insight into the data, analysis, and software struggles. By doing so, this dissertation expands debate around the challenges of qualitative research in social media environments. It highlights, in particular, the challenges associated with identifying appropriate software to harness large and complex datasets. It also offers insights into approaches to managing many participants within the sample and analysis that differentiates the participants to draw meaningful conclusions. As such, this dissertation contributes to discussion around the complexity of not only qualitative research, but qualitative research set in a social media environment.

7.3.3 Managerial implications

This thesis provides important insights into consumer engagement and value formation within SMBCs. As managers struggle to stimulate and maintain consumer engagement within SMBCs (Deng et al., 2020), the findings provide detailed guidance on how different brand posts can facilitate community development, and, in turn, consumer engagement and value formation.

The thesis introduces a typology of brand posts that serves as a practical guide for managers. It details the kinds of content that are most effective in promoting growth within social media brand communities, particularly on platforms like Facebook. This strategic framework is essential for managers as it not only advises on the appropriate topics for engagement corresponding to different stages of SMBC's development, but also forecasts the variety of consumer reactions these posts may generate, such as attitudes and topic commitment. These insights can enable managers to assess the current phase of relationship development with consumers, and accordingly tailor their engagement strategies, enhancing engagement, and facilitating value formation more effectively.

The research also highlights how consumer interactions can be an indication of SMBC development, and it provides a direction for SMBC managers underlining how conversations within SMBC could be encouraged to facilitate the development of SMBC. Furthermore, the research also discussed different brand approaches to interactions with individual consumers, offering suggestions on how a brand's engagement in casual conversations could assist in building consumer engagement. The research also brings to the attention of SMBC managers the importance of the style of voice utilised during one-to-one conversations. The thesis explored value formation processes within SMBCs. The findings offer significant insights for practitioners into how consumers form value for themselves and others within

SMBCs, as well as the role of the brand within that value formation. The study also discusses value types, and it links to SMBC development, indicating that the ability to create different value can be linked with relationships that consumers form with SMBCs, other consumers or brands. The research also stresses the importance of SMBCs in facilitating relationship building, brand perception and decision-making. This finding can support SMBC managers in understanding the development of their SMBCs and assist in formulating action plans designed to accelerate SMBC development and, as an extension, different value formation types.

From a managerial standpoint, this thesis offers actionable strategies and deepens understanding of the dynamics of consumer engagement and value formation within digital brand communities. The practical implications of this research allow brand managers to optimise their social media strategies, thereby fostering stronger, more engaged, and value-driven brand communities.

7.4 Limitations of the study

Despite applying rigour in the netnographic approach, this research project is limited in several ways. First, this study focused on a diverse sample of three cosmetics brands. However, additional data from other cosmetics brands could have broadened the scope and therefore the generalisation of the results. Furthermore, investigation of brands from other industries would allow an extended understanding of consumer engagement and value formation within SMBCs in a wider context. While the netnographic methodology and observation are widely utilised in community research (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2020; Lima et al., 2019), other techniques and tools could have potentially created deeper insights for this thesis. For example, a combination of online observation and in-depth interviews with consumers participating within the SMBCs and/or the brands could have provided additional data to support (or otherwise) the findings of this study. For instance, interviews with SMBC brand managers could have revealed insight into the reasons behind the shift with their communication strategy or could have revealed insight into how complaints were handled (and if customers were contacted individually, outside the SMBC).

Due to the nature of online communication, most of the comments examined were short and curt, therefore at times much was left for interpretation. It might be that researcher interpretation was not consistent with the intention of each post's author. A follow-up interview with selected consumers actively participating within the researched SMBCs could have verified the assumptions of the researcher (corroborating her interpretation). While most effort was placed in investigating the relationships between consumers participating within SMBCs across conversation strips, due to the large number of participants and many conversation strips collected, it was not feasible to establish whether the same consumers within the SMBC were engaging in conversations across different conversation strips. Consequently, it was unviable to verify the possible roles of consumers within SBMCs based on their activity within an SMBC. Attempts were initially made to investigate the flow of conversation within the datasets, however, because of the high number of participants within some of the conversation strips, it was deemed unfeasible to track the conversation flow throughout the collected data.

While the study's data-collection period was chosen carefully, it is possible that collecting data at different times of the year could provide additional insights into consumer engagement and value formation. Conducting a longitudinal study could also be beneficial in revealing patterns or changes in consumer engagement and value formation over time.

Additionally, the study employed a non-participatory netnography approach. However, an alternative social engagement strategy could be considered, as social engagement strategy which involves

researchers openly communicating and interacting with research subjects. Such approach could potentially provide a more in-depth understanding of the participants' thoughts and behaviours within the SMBC.

In addition, it is essential to reflect on the ethical considerations of conducting netnography research. While the study obtained consent from the SMBC managers and followed the netnographic ethical consideration flowchart, the consumers whose comments were analysed were not asked for permission. As a result, they were not given the opportunity to consider the purpose their comments would serve. Within the ethical considerations, it is crucial to consider the ownership of the data and whether the owner should be contacted to obtain permission. Although consumers' thoughts are published, it is the social media platform owner who owns the stored content within the platform (Kozinets, 2020). Despite the best practice recommendations, however, it may not be feasible to obtain consent from the social media owner or participant in every circumstance, for example if there is a large number of participants interacting within the SMBC.

7.5 Areas for further research

As the research included an in-depth investigation of a small sample of cosmetic brands, further investigation of the contextualised conceptual framework is therefore suggested. The data for this thesis was collected through netnographic observation, but given the limited insights that could be gained from brief and concise consumer comments, future studies should consider employing other methods to gain a more in-depth understanding of consumer engagement and value formation within SMBCs. For instance, future research could incorporate in-depth interviews to explore consumers' motivations for engaging in conversations within SMBCs, beyond their written posts, as well as their views on the relationship they have with brands and other consumers participating within SMBCs. Alternatively, collecting real-time data and using a social engagement interaction strategy, that encourages researchers' participatory interaction, could provide deeper insights into the underlying motives behind consumers' posted comments.

Additionally, it is recommended to extend the study to other industries, such as the fashion industry, tech industry, or business-to-business, or to focus on specific demographics, such as gender and age of consumers. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of consumer engagement and value formation in various contexts. The present study was based solely on Facebook; however, given the constant emergence of other social networking sites that are often utilised by cosmetics brands, further research on SMBCs based on other social networking sites, such as Instagram or TikTok, would be beneficial. Such a study would provide a more extensive analysis of the various SMBCs available, and their impact on consumer engagement and value formation.

Given the limited duration of data collection in the present study, it is recommended that a longitudinal study be conducted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of consumer engagement and value formation over a more extended period. The collection of data over an extended period would allow for the exploration of patterns and changes in consumer engagement and value formation over time. A longitudinal study would also enable researchers to investigate the impact of external factors, such as changes in the market, on consumer engagement and value formation, which could further enhance the understanding of the role of SMBCs. Therefore, providing a more profound understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of consumer engagement and value formation within SMBCs.

Within the thesis, some tensions between consumers were uncovered, however, understanding of the implication is limited. Accordingly, further data collection is recommended to investigate how a conflict between consumers could impact SMBC development. Within the findings, a lack of a brand reply typology was identified, and future studies on the topic are therefore recommended to gain a better understanding of consumer perceptions as well as brand decision-making regarding the selection and implementation of communication styles. Further research could also explore how, through a consumer approach, brands could facilitate a formation of value types beyond the identified in this research. Additionally, as this thesis did not investigate the roles of consumers, no formed relationships between consumers participating within SMBC were identified; as such it would be an interesting avenue for future research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Brand post codebook

Category	Subcategory	Description	Typology in literature
Offering presentation posts	Price promotion	These brand posts centre around price reduction offers. The focus is placed on reduced price, often with links directing individuals to the online shop. Little to no product description is evident. A call to action is made, focused around encouraging individuals to take advantage of the offer.	Sales promotion (Tafesse and Wien, 2017); Information (Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013); Product (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Promotion (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Task-oriented (Kim et al., 2015); Information-sharing (Taecharungroj, 2017); Action-inducing (Taecharungroj, 2017); Exclusivity (Ashley and Tuten, 2015); Informational (Tafesse, 2016)
	Special (seasonal) product presentation	Such brand posts focus on the presentation of products that are only available seasonally, and for short period of time. The posts draw attention to the timebound availability, hinting at purchase. Call to action focuses on encouraging purchasing the product while it is still on offer.	Sales promotion (Tafesse and Wien, 2017); Information (Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013); Product (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Promotion (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Task-oriented (Kim et al., 2015); Information-sharing (Taecharungroj, 2017); Action-inducing (Taecharungroj, 2017); Exclusivity (Ashley and Tuten, 2015); Informational (Tafesse, 2016)
	Product presentation	These brand posts focus on product presentation, placing emphasis on the product and it's features. There is no emphasis on its limited availability or price. Call to action varies and depends on the context but includes gentle suggestions to purchase products at times.	Sales promotion (Tafesse and Wien, 2017); Information (Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013); Product (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Promotion (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Task-oriented (Kim et al., 2015); Information-sharing (Taecharungroj, 2017); Action-inducing (Taecharungroj, 2017); Informational (Tafesse, 2016)

	Service presentation	These posts (similarly to product presentation posts) focus on presenting brand offerings that take the shape of a service. Call to action includes brands prompting consumers to use the presented service.	Sales promotion (Tafesse and Wien, 2017); Information (Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013); Product (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Promotion (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Task-oriented (Kim et al., 2015); Information-sharing (Taecharungroj, 2017); Action-inducing (Taecharungroj, 2017); Informational (Tafesse, 2016)
Belongingness building posts	Customer Relationship building (New Years wishes, Christmas wishes)	These brand posts are design to share important moments with consumers and, by doing so, the brand enhances relationships (bonds) with consumers. Such posts often thank consumers for supporting the brand or highlight the input of consumers in the brand's life, emphasising that the consumers are integral part of brand life and success. Call to action varies, some ask consumers to continue using products, some ask consumers to share with the community information about their favourite products.	Personal brand posts (Tafesse and Wien, 2017); Interaction-oriented (Kim et al., 2015); Emotion-evoking (Taecharungroj, 2017); Action-inducing (Taecharungroj, 2017)
	Pick-up post (uplifting)	These posts encourage relationship building by expressing concern over the welfare of community members and lift their spirits. Call to action might include motivating in sharing positive thoughts and moments of their lives.	Emotional brand posts (Tafesse and Wien, 2017); Emotion-evoking (Taecharungroj, 2017); Action-inducing (Taecharungroj, 2017)
	Post with users content	These posts present consumers' points of view. They are usually reposts of content published by consumers about the brand's products. Call to action might include an invitation to purchase the product used by author of the post.	Brand community (Tafesse and Wien, 2017); Interaction-oriented (Kim et al., 2015)
Value-led posts	Good cause & sale	These brand posts showcase charity actions or other campaigns directed towards helping the vulnerable. While these posts highlight the different charity programmes the brand is associated with, they also encourage consumers to participate by purchasing selected products (with part of the sales proceeds gifted to charitable causes).	Cause-related brand posts (Tafesse and Wien, 2017); Social cause (Ashley and Tuten, 2015); Information-sharing (Taecharungroj, 2017); Emotion-evoking (Taecharungroj, 2017); Action-inducing (Taecharungroj, 2017)

	Good cause	These posts are designed to spread information about the brand's charitable actions and campaigns that they are part of. Call to action (unlike 'good cause & sale') solely encourages people to donate to the cause with either money or products. These posts are not linked with any sales of brand owned products.	
Engagement building posts	Surveying	These posts are aimed at activating consumer engagement and participation in the conversation. A subsidiary goal of these posts is to gather consumer opinions about the product by asking questions. Generally, questions are simplistic and monothematic (they don't touch upon many issues, usually one main thought is presented). Call to action prompts people to answer the question in the post.	Customer relationship (Tafesse and Wien, 2017); Entertainment (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Interaction-oriented (Kim et al., 2015); Action-inducing (Taecharunroj, 2017)
	Contest	These posts introduce contests where individuals can take part to win brand products. Such brand posts prompt engagement in various forms, usually by requesting that consumers comment or tag friends/family members in the post.	Sales promotion (Tafesse and Wien, 2017); Remuneration (Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013); Promotion (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Entertainment (Shen and Bissell, 2013); Task-oriented (Kim et al., 2015); Transactional (Tafesse, 2016); Action-inducing (Taecharunroj, 2017)
Educational posts	Video tutorial	These posts include a video tutorial of product use or other issues which require video explanation.	Educational brand posts (Tafesse and Wien, 2017)
Technical posts	Contest rules	These posts consist of rules and regulations of contests run on social media related to Facebook (Facebook, Instagram). These posts are legal requirements and are not designed for the community members to interact with.	
	Cover photo update	These posts are automatically published by the social networking site when the brand is updating its cover photo on the brand community page.	

Appendix 2 - Consumers' posts codebook

Main Category	Parent Subcategory	Child Subcategory	Description	Related work
BRAND-CENTERED COMMUNICATION	Brand (product) promotion by community members	Appreciation of the brand	The communication evolves around the brand and the brand's offerings.	Awe-inspiring (Waqas et al., 2020)
		Advertising by consumers		Information sharing: Advocating or Promoting other products of the same company (Wang et al., 2020)
		Defending the brand		Content sharing about the product: personal and relational aspects (Link and relationship with the product) (Benamar et al., 2017); Information sharing: Advocating or Promoting other products of the same company (Wang et al., 2020)
		Encouragement to continue using a product (brand)		Information sharing: Advocating or Promoting other products of the same company (Wang et al., 2020); Empathizing (Hollebeek et al., 2017)
		Prompting others to use the product (promoting product)		Information sharing: Advocating or Promoting other products of the same company (Wang et al., 2020)
		Recommending a product		Information sharing about the product: factual aspect (The product use) (Benamar et al., 2017); Product innovation: Product usage advice and suggestions (Wang et al., 2020); Information sharing: Advocating or Promoting other products of the same company (Wang et al., 2020); Empathizing (Hollebeek et al., 2017)
	Competitor brand	Advertising competitor brand		Product innovation: Discuss or share other companies' competing products (Wang et al., 2020)

		Comparing with competitor brand		Product innovation: Discuss or share other companies' competing products (Wang et al., 2020)
		Disadvantage of Competitor		Critiques (Füller et al., 2014); Product innovation: Discuss or share other companies' competing products (Wang et al., 2020)
		Dissatisfaction with competitor products		Critiques (Füller et al., 2014); Product innovation: Discuss or share other companies' competing products (Wang et al., 2020)
		Dissatisfaction with the brand		Critiques (Füller et al., 2014)
		Answer to direct question from brand		
EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE (Social sharing of emotions)	Feelings	Desire		Content sharing about the product: personal and relational aspects (Link and relationship with the product) (Benamar et al., 2017); Product innovation: Personal feelings about good or bad aspects of a product (Wang et al., 2020)
		Excitement		Awe-inspiring (Waqas et al., 2020); Product innovation: Personal feelings about good or bad aspects of a product (Wang et al., 2020)
		Hope		
		Love		Content sharing about the product: personal and relational aspects (Link and relationship with the product) (Benamar et al., 2017); Product innovation: Personal feelings about good or bad aspects of a product (Wang et al., 2020)

		Expression of affection		Awe-inspiring (Waqas et al., 2020); Content sharing about the product: personal and relational aspect (Link and relationship with the product) (Benamar et al., 2017); Product innovation: Personal feelings about good or bad aspects of a product (Wang et al., 2020)
		Regret		
		Appreciation for recognition (appreciation of somebody)		Awe-inspiring (Waqas et al., 2020); Social relationships/gossiping (Füller et al., 2014)
	Pleasantries	Gratitude for providing information		Social relationships/gossiping (Füller et al., 2014)
		Gratitude for providing information to the brand		Social relationships/gossiping (Füller et al., 2014)
		Gratitude for providing information to another member		Social relationships/gossiping (Füller et al., 2014)
		Community member reaction\Sending wishes		Social relationships/gossiping (Füller et al., 2014)
IDEA SHARING	Allusion for action	Prompting - hinting action from real-life contact	Advice giving but also suggestions for action that involve real-life contacts (for example, suggesting a family member buys brand product as a gift)	Social bonding (Waqas et al., 2020)
		Prompting - hinting action from others		Social bonding (Waqas et al., 2020)
	Support	Recommendation (advice)		Information sharing about the product: factual aspect (Practical aspects) (Benamar et al., 2017); Product innovation: Product usage advice and suggestions (Wang et al., 2020); Empathizing (Hollebeek et al., 2017)
		Brand prompted advice		Information sharing about the product: factual aspect (Practical aspects) (Benamar et al., 2017)
		Suggestion for brand		Constructive suggestions (Füller et al., 2014); Product innovation (Wang et al., 2020)

EXCHANGE KNOWLEDGE	OF	Need of support	Looking for assistance	Variety of communication involving knowledge exchange and knowledge creation. This category also contains inquiring about information as it is considered the first step for knowledge exchange.	
			Looking for assurance		
		Search for information	General enquiry		Questions about the product (Benamar et al., 2017)
			Looking for recommendation		
			Price enquiry		Asking questions (Füller et al., 2014)
			Product enquiry		Asking questions (Füller et al., 2014); Questions about the product (Benamar et al., 2017);
		Sharing experience	Negative		Critiques (Füller et al., 2014); Information sharing: Personal stories about a product or product use (Wang et al., 2020)
			Positive		Information sharing: Personal stories about a product or product use (Wang et al., 2020)
		Sharing information	Fact stating		
			Storytelling		Social relationships/gossiping (Füller et al., 2014); Content sharing about the product: personal and relational aspect (Personal stories related to the product) (Benamar et al., 2017); Socialization (Benamar et al., 2017); Information sharing: Personal stories about a product or product use (Wang et al., 2020)
			Tagging		Information dissemination (L. Liu et al., 2019)
			User tips		Content sharing about the product: personal and relational aspect (Personal stories related to the product) (Benamar et al., 2017); Product innovation (Wang et al., 2020); Product innovation: Product usage advice and suggestions (Wang et al., 2020); Information sharing: Personal stories about a product or product use (Wang et al., 2020)

		Link sharing		
	Malfunction reporting	Flagging problem		Product innovation: Reporting product problems (Wang et al., 2020)
		Voicing difficulty		Product innovation: Reporting product problems (Wang et al., 2020)
	Reporting	Outcome of requested action		Social relationships/gossiping (Füller et al., 2014)
		Requested action completed		Social relationships/gossiping (Füller et al., 2014)
		Requested action not completed		Social relationships/gossiping (Füller et al., 2014)
		Probing		
		Follow-up question		
	Community member reaction/Answer to direct question from the brand/Answer to direct questions from community member (only answer to direct question from community member)			
PERSONAL-EXPERIENCE-CENTERED COMMUNICATION	Sharing opinions	Negative opinions	This category takes the community member perspective. Communication that shares personal stories and opinions is obvious. Brand products might be presented through own prism of experiences and views. In this category are located community	Utilitarian (Waqas et al., 2020); Critiques (Füller et al., 2014); Product innovation: Personal feelings about good or bad aspects of a product (Wang et al., 2020)
		Opinions prompted by the brand		Self-identity (Waqas et al., 2020); Utilitarian (Waqas et al., 2020); Product innovation: Personal feelings about good or bad aspects of a product (Wang et al., 2020)

		Positive opinion	members outlooks on others' opinions.	Utilitarian (Waqas et al., 2020); Content sharing about the product: personal and relational aspect (Link and relationship with the product) (Benamar et al., 2017); Product innovation: Personal feelings about good or bad aspects of a product (Wang et al., 2020)
Sharing product feedback		Product feedback - negative		Utilitarian (Waqas et al., 2020); Critiques (Füller et al., 2014)
		Product feedback - positive		Utilitarian (Waqas et al., 2020)
		Service feedback - positive		Utilitarian (Waqas et al., 2020)
Presenting stance on statement		Sharing views - express likemindedness		Empathizing (Hollebeek et al., 2017)
		Sharing views - disagreement with statement		Critiques (Fuller et al. 2014); Empathizing (Hollebeek et al., 2017)
Plans and aspirations		Expressing wishes		
		Positive expectation for the future (changed to sharing plans)		
		Justification		
		Community member reaction\Reminiscing		Content sharing about the product: personal and relational aspect (Personal stories related to the product) (Benamar et al., 2017); Socialization (Benamar et al., 2017)
COMMUNITY MEMBER REPEATED INTERACTION WITH OTHER MEMBERS OR BRAND		Community member reaction	Exchange of words between community members that leads to establishing and strengthening relationships in the community and belongingness.	
	Reoccurring communication	'Chit-chat' reply		Humour (Waqas et al., 2020); Social relationships/gossiping (Füller et al., 2014)
		Promise to follow up		
		Prompting an answer		
		Update on the problem		
		Visual response		
		Acknowledgement		

		Live interaction with the content (live streaming)		
		Embracing advice		
TECHNICAL		Community member reaction/Advertising own business	Comments or actions that do not have the intention to enrich the community.	
		Following		

Participant Information Sheet

Engagement in cosmetics' social media brand communities: benefits and influences

1. Invitation to research

I would like to invite you to take part in my research. My name is Magdalena Marchowska-Raza and I am a PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities. My research project looks at the cosmetics brand communities (eg. Estee Lauder or The Body Shop) based on social media (such as Facebook or Instagram). I am looking at how and why members of these communities are engaged with the brand and/or community.

2. Why have I been invited?

You have been invited because the brand community you are the moderator of is of a cosmetic brand. Furthermore, the content published on the community site generates member engagement which should be sufficient to draw a conclusion from netnographic observation. There will be a total of 5 cosmetics social media brand communities taking part in netnographic observation to assure generalization of the results. Please be assured that no sensitive data will be shared with any of the participating cosmetics companies.

3. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide. I will describe the study and go through the information sheet, which I will give to you. I will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you agreed to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

4. What will I be asked to do?

To establish motivation of members engagement on social media brand communities I will conduct a netnographic observation of the community where I would copy through screen capture software strands of conversation. It will be a non-participatory observation, so I will not engage in any of the conversations taking place in the community. The strands of conversations will be anonymised, so all identifiable data such as names, profile pictures, or

context will be removed. Therefore, no member will be identifiable. If I were to use any quotations from the conversation, they would be paraphrased and checked through search engine whether they are still accessible.

In the second part of the research, I would like to select 5 members from each community for in-depth interviews to investigate further themes and patterns that emerged through the netnographic observation. I am planning to select a mix of “top fans” (highly engaged members) and “lurkers” (people who are part of the community but do not participate in any conversations).

In order to conduct the netnographic observation, I would like to ask for your consent, since you are the owner of the community. I would also like you to provide contact details of top fans and lurkers for the second part of the research. I will then contact each member asking whether they would be interested in taking part in the research (you can also decide to contact them directly prior to passing their information details).

5. Are there any risks if I participate?

There is a very small risk that, despite my effort of removing all personal data, some community members might get identified and linked to the community through the structure of their sentences or words they use that are unique to them.

6. Are there any advantages if I participate?

Since my project is self-funded I will not be able to offer any monetary recompense. After the analysis is complete I can present my findings to you, which might be valuable to you and your social media strategy. Certainly, the participation of the community you moderate will bring a lot of value to my research and will greatly contribute to the science, so I hope you will take pride in the fact you help to achieve progress in my field of study. I also hope it will be a valuable experience to you too as you will be able to learn more about your community members.

8. What will happen with the data I provide?

When you agree to participate in this research, we will collect from you personally-identifiable information.

The Manchester Metropolitan University (‘the University’) is the Data Controller in respect of this research and any personal data that you provide as a research participant.

The University is registered with the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO), and manages personal data in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University’s Data Protection Policy.

We collect personal data as part of this research (such as name, telephone numbers or age). As a public authority acting in the public interest we rely upon the 'public task' lawful basis. When we collect special category data (such as medical information or ethnicity) we rely upon the research and archiving purposes in the public interest lawful basis.

Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained.

We will not share your personal data collected in this form with any third parties.

If your data is shared this will be under the terms of a Research Collaboration Agreement which defines use, and agrees confidentiality and information security provisions. It is the University's policy to only publish anonymised data unless you have given your explicit written consent to be identified in the research. **The University never sells personal data to third parties.**

We will only retain your personal data for as long as is necessary to achieve the research purpose. The data will be stored at University cloud storage at MMU, a secure solution that is appropriate for storing sensitive data. Collected data in the first place will be anonymized, once that process is completed all identifiable data will be destroyed and disposed of securely. Data undergoing anonymization will be kept securely on a password protected flash drive. During that time, the data will not be shared with anyone. To protect participants confidentiality all identifiable data, such as names, usernames, profile pictures, location or contextual data will be removed. Any quotations will be paraphrased and checked through search engine whether they are still accessible.

For further information about use of your personal data and your data protection rights please see the [University's Data Protection Pages](#).

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The study result will be published as part of my dissertation. I shall also share the outcome of my research at conferences and publish it within scientific journals.

Who has reviewed this research project?

The research project was reviewed by my supervisors and two scrutineers from the Faculty of Arts & Humanities (as a part of Application for Registration (RD1)) and ethics committee (as part of Ethical application).

Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?

If you wish to complain, you may contact:

Myself, in writing:

Magdalena Marchowska-Raza

Magdalena.marchowska-raza@stu.mmu.ac.uk

My supervisor:

Prof Jennifer Rowley

j.rowley@mmu.ac.uk

+44 (0)161 247 6137

Department of Marketing, Retail and Tourism

Manchester Metropolitan University Business School

All Saints Campus

Oxford Road

Manchester

M15 6BH

Arts and Humanities Faculty Head of Research Ethics and Governance:

Prof Susan Baines

s.baines@mmu.ac.uk

+44 (0)161 247 2511

Manchester Metropolitan University

Geoffrey Manton Building

4 Rosamond Street West

Off Oxford Road

Manchester

M15 6LL

If you have any concerns regarding the personal data collected from you, our Data Protection Officer can be contacted using the legal@mmu.ac.uk e-mail address, by calling 0161 247 3331 or in writing to: Data Protection Officer, Legal Services, All Saints Building, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, M15 6BH. You also have a right to lodge a complaint in respect of the processing of your personal data with the Information Commissioner's Office as the supervisory authority. Please see:

<https://ico.org.uk/global/contact-us/>

THANK YOU FOR CONSIDERING PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROJECT

29.07.2019



Magdalena Marchowska-Raza
PhD (Postgraduate Research Courses)
Department of Arts and Humanities
Geoffrey Manton Building
Manchester Metropolitan University
Email: Magdalena.marchowska-raza@stu.mmu.ac.uk

Consent Form

Title of Project: Engagement in cosmetics' social media brand communities: benefits and influences

Name of Researcher: Magdalena Marchowska-Raza

Participant Identification Code for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 29.07.2019 (version 2) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that the participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw till 05.01.2020 without giving any reason to the named researcher. Past that date all the effort will be made to withdraw all the data from undergoing analysis.
3. I understand that strands of conversations will be downloaded and used for analysis for this research project.
4. I understand that strands of conversations used for research will remain anonymous.
5. I give a consent to conduct a netnographic observation on the community I moderate to complete the above research project.
6. I understand that at my request the strands of the conversations chosen for the analysis can be made available to me.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix 5 – Recruitment media

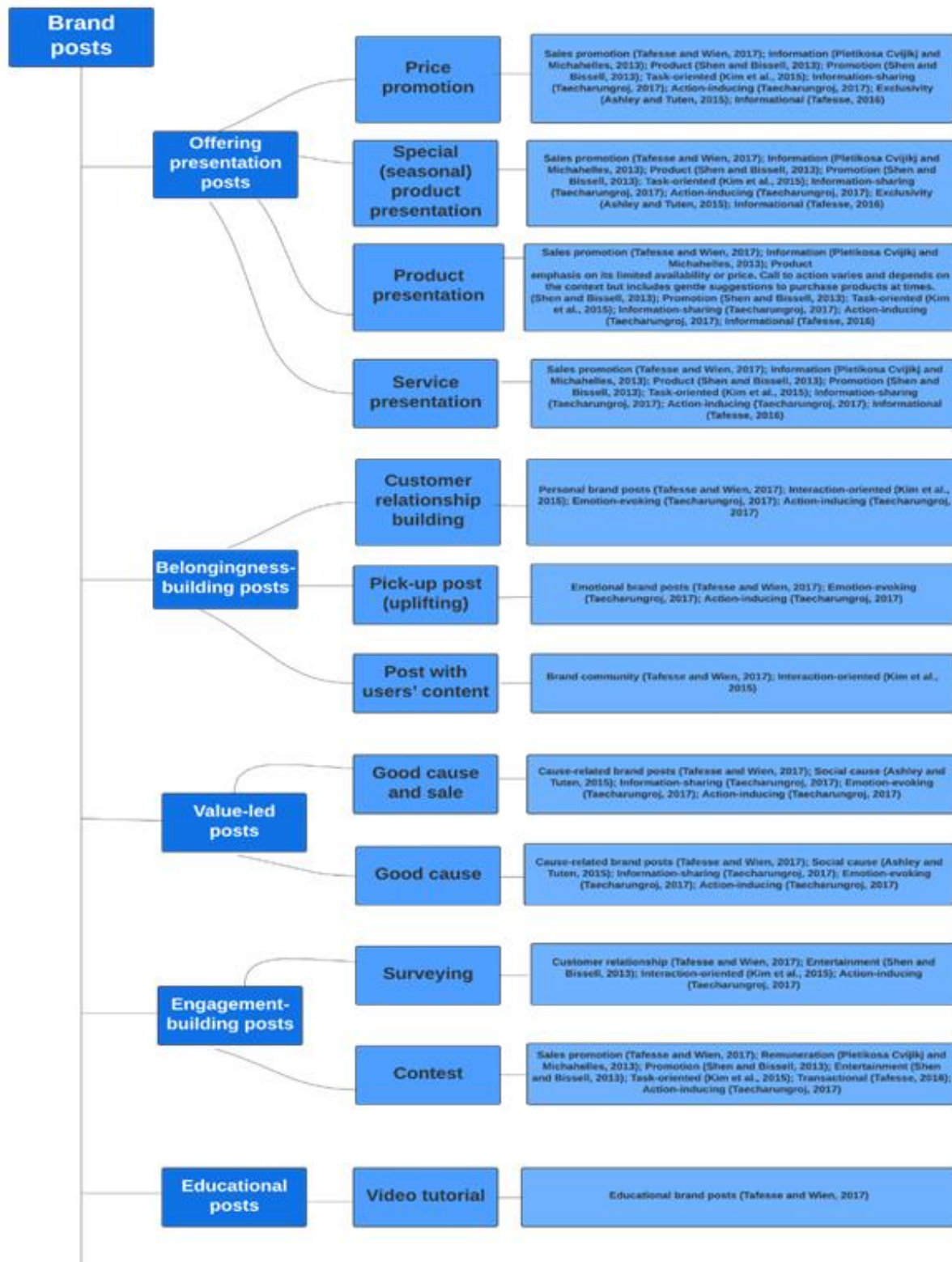
Hi,

My name is Magda Marchowska-Raza. I am a PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University. I am conducting research on brand communities on social media. I am particularly interested in engagement that the communities generate in their members and the source of the engagement. To examine the engagement, I would like to observe the brand community and strands of conversations for 4 months. I have selected your community because it is characterized by a high level of member engagements. Please find the attached information sheet (where you can find all the information regarding my research) and consent form (which I would need you to sign if you decide to take part in my research). Please let me know if you have any questions.

Kind regards,

Magda

Appendix 6 – Outline of brand posts themes and sub-themes



Appendix 7 – Outline of consumer comments themes and sub-themes

