

Exploring Online Community Participation

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1. Executive Summary

Firm-hosted online brand communities, in which consumers interact regarding brand-centric topics, represent a fascinating context to study the motives of participation within the community. Theories of social capital and collective action are extended to begin understanding why individuals contribute, as they receive no immediate benefit, and "lurkers" have the same access to that contributed knowledge as everyone else. Building on the concept of means-end chain, that is we seek out certain attributes as a means to achieve a desired end state, the linkage between online brand community attributes, individual need, and personal values is ethnographically examined. By way of in-depth laddering interviews, why individuals participate will be answered through understanding how that participation fulfils individual need and enhances personal value.

The main study comprises two approaches – participant observation in the community, and individual in-depth interviews with 32 community members. Over 2222 data points and 750 ladders were discovered and analysed using the laddering technique. Seven themes emerged as to why individuals actively participate in an online brand community – belonging, recognition, helping others, knowledge, professional advancement, personal development, and entertainment.

2. Introduction

Although there is a direct and significant link, the study of online community behaviour within the marketing literature is often fragmented. It is argued that as society becomes more individualistically driven, consumers are more likely to involve themselves in “less conventional” social orders (Moore et al. 1996). This viewpoint is consistent with the observation that individuals participate in consumption communities to gain a sense of connection with their peers (Boorstin 1975). The desire for communal connectedness drives consumption behaviour, thus making the connection of community to consumption highly significant. These links between community and consumption can take many forms and are dependent on interests, behaviour and beliefs (Thompson and Holt 1996).

2.1. Background

The relationship between community and consumption is the key variable that relates community to marketing and to consumer behaviour. People long to be part of a group, and the consumption of certain brands is a means of belonging that consumers are coming to rely on, thereby filling a set of human needs (Glynn 1981). Further, consumption behaviour was traditionally influenced by advice from family and friends, but consumers are now looking to various online communities for product advice (Muniz 1998). This reliance on online community provides a lens for which behaviour and social construction of consumption practices can be studied, and that community and consumption have reciprocal influences (Fischer et al. 1996). This view is similar to research on how brand communities can enhance brand awareness, loyalty and purchase behaviour (McAlexander et al. 2002, Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Muniz 1998). It is suggested that since consumers are socially investing in brands, the study of brand community offers insights into the behaviour within those communities.

From a Relationship Marketing perspective, the facilitation of customer-firm relationships is of paramount importance in virtual brand communities (Schau, et al., 2009; Tilton and Woodside 2002; Hagel and Armstrong 1997). In an effort to increase customer loyalty (Mathwick 2002), firms focus on creating an enjoyable experience for consumers to enhance their desire to participate within the community (Bagozzi, Dholakia and Pearo 2004). As a community member’s desire to participate increases, their intention of community visitation can be stimulated, thus providing a platform from which customer-firm relationships can begin developing (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002).

Brand communities are communities in which the brand serves as the central construct for which all activity transpires – both physically (eg., Schau, et al., 2009; Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Algesheimer et al. 2005) and virtually (eg., Andersen, 2005; Muniz and Schau, 2005). Within the spectrum of sociological research, the idea of community is prevalent and has an extensive history (Dewey 1927; Gusfield 1975). Even though studying consumption from a group perspective (rather than individualistically) provides valuable insight in understanding consumer behaviour (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003; Bagozzi 2000; Holt 1997; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), there has been little research done within the consumer behaviour literature to understand how personal values influence this behaviour. The value of this group perspective is evident in that, the act of consumption has become a central force for which consumers fulfil their need for affiliation with others, transforming a typically individualized activity into a group activity (Cova and Cova, 2002). Brands can be highly

capable of linking individuals to one another, as these consumers can often feel a psychological connection to each other and the community (Cova and Pace, 2006).

Firm-hosted online brand communities, in which consumers interact regarding brand-centric topics, represent a fascinating context to study the behaviour of the most active participants in a community and whether or not that behaviour accounts for the fulfilment of personal values. Personal values have long been associated with individual decision-making behaviour; however, little has been done to explore the role personal values play in motivating an individual to participate within an online brand community. Value has been described as “a conception either explicit or implicit of the desirable which influences selection from available modes, means, and ends of action” (Kluckhohn 1951). Values have been linked to the core of someone’s personality (Posner and Schmidt, 1982) that influences individual choice and the way people invest their time. Building on the concept of means-end, the linkage between online brand community attributes, individual need and personal values is ethnographically examined. By means of in-depth laddering interviews, why individuals participate will be answered through understanding how that participation fulfils individual need and enhances personal value.

Means-end theory is widely utilized to understand the way in which consumers perceive products or communities, and how these functional properties form meaning in their life (Kaminski & Prado, 2005; Lin, 2002; Dibley & Baker, 2001; Grunert et al., 1995; Perkins & Reynolds, 1988; Reynolds & Perkins, 1987; Reynolds and Gutman, 1984). Means-end theory attests that these “meanings” can be represented and understood on a hierachal structure of three interconnected levels – attributes, consequences, and values (Gutman, 1981).

The theory is based on the assumption that individual behaviour is motivated by a means to a desired endpoint – cognition is organized in the minds of consumers as mental/associative links between means (attributes) and ends (goals). Grunnert and Grunnert (1995) propose looking at means-end from the view of a cognitive structure, “means-end chains are a model of consumers’ consumption-relevant cognitive structure, i.e. the way consumption-relevant knowledge is stored and organized in human memory”. However, it was later reasoned that means-end chains are more of “an excerpt of consumers’ cognitive structure, concentrating on aspects of it that are regarded as relevant from a specific angle” (Grunert, Beckman, and Sorensen, 2001, p. 68).

Means-end is at the centre of modern conceptualization of motivation (Atkinson, 1964, Lewin 1951), which provides an appropriate fit with this study, as the phenomena in question is individual motivation for participation in online communities. Hence, the use of means-end provides the argument that entities have value because they provide desirable consequences (Atkinson, 1964) – stressing the importance of a community’s role in the fulfilment of consequences and satisfaction of values.

2.2. Research Context

The online environment provides the context for this research, as online brand communities represent a significant platform from which organizations are able to facilitate consumer-to-consumer, and firm-to-consumer relationships. These communities are made up of evangelical consumers who organize themselves around the lifestyle, activity and ethos of a brand. In today’s world, consumers seek a sense of connection; yet, in lean economic times

this can be a trying endeavour that is much more easily satisfied with the presence of an online community.

The success of these communities relies on minute but significant social elements that hold the members together and keep them engaged. The process of establishing and maintaining an online brand community requires an understanding of the most active group of community members (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005, p. 19). The Pareto Principle is relevant in understanding the importance of these active members – 20% of the “population” or the “vital few” (of the community) is responsible for 80% of the phenomenon (community contribution). It is suggested that companies with succeeding online brand communities can enjoy significant market advantage and a more loyal customer base (Thompson and Sinha, 2008). To create a sustainable online community environment that returns these benefits, it is necessary to understand the cognitive processes that motivate the behaviour of the most active group of community members to participate (Brodie et al., 2011)

2.3. Objectives

This paper sets out to explore why the active members of an online community participate in the community. This was carried out through understanding the role that personal values play in motivating behaviour. Therefore, the main objective in providing this understanding was to identify how these personal values are satisfied. Due to the nature of this study, the findings were consequently generated and informed by the respondents.

Based on the means-end model and laddering technique (Gutman, 1982), building up an understanding of the respondents’ personal values was carried out through in-depth interviewing and participant observations. Utilizing this approach reveals deep insight on how the respondents of this study translate the attributes of the community into meaningful associations with themselves (Gutman, 1988). It is reasoned that these associations are embedded within the individual’s cognition and through conceptualizing this cognitive interpretation, influential insight into individual-level behaviour can be obtained. The data was generated through an inductive approach rather than a deductive approach.

2.4. Main Contribution

This paper seeks to make a contribution to theory by furthering the argument on the role of theory in ethnographic research. Furthermore, it is hoped to extend the use of means-end chain theory to the study of the “vital few” in online brand communities, through which, also adding a list of personal values that are satisfied through the behaviour of active contribution in online environments. Insight is provided into what motivates the active members of an online community, the most valuable group in achieving sustainability. By understanding what motivates this group, organizations will be more equipped to create an appropriate, satisfying environment where the members are inspired to contribute.

3. Literature Review

Online brand communities most often form around products or services that elicit significant involvement from the consumer: Apple (Muniz and Schau, 2005), Saab (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), Jeep (Algesheimer et al., 2005), and Harley Davidson (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006) provide excellent examples. However, this can be found problematic and challenging for low involvement brands looking to develop communities. It was concluded that low involvement products do not generally provide the framework for a sustainable community (McWilliam 2000); however, Cova and Pace (2006) provided an exception to this in their study of a Nutella brand community and provide the basis for community formation around similar, "low involvement" brands. Yet, it is still widely accepted within the literature that convenience products, such as food (Nutella), do not generally elicit enough emotion from consumers to provide a basis for the development of a brand community (McWilliam, 2000).

The development of an online brand community relies on the brand-related interactions of the consumers (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). It is these interactions that allow the brand community to define the brand meaning and to identify what the brand's consumer looks like (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Community members are empowered through this process, as they are able to mediate the message of the host-firm, and gain control over the true meaning of the brand (Cova and Pace 2006, Muniz, 1997). It is this empowerment and consumer opportunity that makes the study of brand community very attractive from a marketing perspective.

3.1. Benefits of Brand Community

Marketers have become increasingly aware of the advantages of online brand communities (Flandez 2008):

- Favorable brand association (Algesheimer et al., 2005)
- Consumer repurchase intentions (McAlexander et al., 2002)
- Enhanced brand commitment (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006)
- Brand awareness (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001)
- Brand loyalty (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001)

Together through third party credibility and communal brand acceptance, brand communities enhance a brand's image and the sense of trust evoked within consumers, which is a building block of brand and relationship development (Aaker, 1996; Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Although the host-firm considerably benefits from an online brand community, members do not engage for purely altruistic reasons and receive significant benefit from their participation (Atkin, 2004). On an individual level, community members participating within these mutually beneficial environments are provided social interaction, valuable brand information and highly desired affiliation with others (Kozinets 1999).

The relationships online brand community members develop with one another are often very strong, even though much of their interaction occurs in a virtual manner (Muniz and Schau, 2005) and have a significant impact on brand image (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). It is these relationships that drive the strength and longevity of a community and the power the members have in influencing brand meaning (Muniz and Schau, 2005; Muniz, 1997).

3.2. Firm-Hosted Brand Communities

Traditionally, we see that brand communities are organized and managed by a supplier to further the objectives of a marketing campaign (Andersen, 2005). However, not all brand communities are firm-hosted; we see that these communities are also being hosted by groups of “fans” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) who congregate out of admiration for a brand and exist to further that brand’s exposure (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Both firm-hosted, and non-firm-hosted brand communities are similar in that the involved members all have a relationship with the central brand, which makes the idea of brand community a very loose concept. Wiertz and Ruyter (2007) define a firm-hosted online brand community as “firm hosted online aggregations of customers who collectively co-produce and consume content about a commercial activity that is central to their interest by exchanging intangible resources”.

For this study, it seems useful to make a distinction between these two types of communities. Firm-hosted communities have a clear and established link with the noted brand (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008), the relationship the community members have with the brand is explicit in nature. This form of community can be seen in Algesheimer et al.’s (2005) study of European car clubs, showing that this explicit relationship is most clearly seen within firm-hosted communities. Alternatively, there are brand communities that do not have an explicit relationship with the central brand, as can be seen in the study of the Newton club by Muniz and Schau (2005). As with most studies done on brand communities (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008), except that of Muniz and Schau (2006), this research will focus solely on firm-hosted communities.

3.3. Community Participation

Participation is a key factor in the success of a community, indicating whether or not members are truly satisfied within the community (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). Therefore, without the participation of members, a community would be unsustainable (Fischer et al. 1996). Thus, from an academic and a practitioner perspective, it is imperative to understand the factors that motivate an individual to participate in an online brand community. There have been studies done on what motivates a member to participate in various types of communities:

- Online travel community (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004)
- Nonprofit and profit communities (Yoo, Suh and Lee, 2002)
- Virtual games, bulletin boards, email lists, chat rooms (Dholakia et al., 2004)

While scholars have studied the factors motivating member participation in virtual communities, little has been done to study these factors as they relate to online brand communities. Based on the differences in characteristics and motivations to join between virtual communities and online brand communities (Kozinets 1999, 1998, 1997), there is reason to believe that the motivations for participation will vary as well (Kozinets, 1999).

It is suggested throughout the literature that the most common drivers of community participation are intrinsic motivators (Teo, 2001). The internal value that members receive from participation can be found through the enjoyment received from involvement in community activities – discussion, chatting and information retrieval (Bagozzi and Dholakia,

2002). This enjoyment found through participation also increases a member's intention to continue participating (Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo, 2004).

3.4. Non-interactive and Interactive Member Behaviour

On a very fundamental level, behaviour within a community can be classified as one of two types (Burnett, 2000):

1. Non-interactive behaviour
2. Interactive behaviour

While all members of a community exhibit some form of activity, their actions are not necessarily classified as interactions. Ricoeur (1976) has concluded that for interaction to occur, there must be "interlocution", which simply means that both a speaker and listener are present. As applied to the context of virtual communities this philosophy requires that members of a community must be willing to take the role as both the reader and contributor, as contribution is the means by which a community can remain "viable, ongoing, and self-sustaining" in the long run (Burnett, 2000).

Non-interactive, passive members, or "lurkers", limit their participation to the act of reading, rather than writing and contributing (Burnett, 2000). The lurkers within a community derive value and benefits from the community, yet do not actively contribute anything to the community as a collective. Opposite to lurkers, active participants sustain a community's existence by actively participating in various brand activities (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Pham and Avnet, 2009; Burnett, 2000). These activities vary based on the structure of the online brand community but can include:

- Posting messages
- Information sharing
- Idea generation
- Responding to queries
- Assisting other members
- Responding to emails/requests/surveys from the host brand
- Participating in brand-hosted/community-hosted events

Although there is little statistical work done on the exact ratio of active participants to passive participants, it has been speculated that the ratio could be as high as 100:1 (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). In a 1992 study, it is identified that lurkers account for the largest definable element of a community's population, reporting that in this particular study, 50% of all messages were written by just 1% of the community's total membership (Smith, 1992).

3.5. Community Member Typology

Furthering the concept of typologies within an online brand community, Kozinets' (1999) classification system identifies members as being tourists, minglers, devotees or insiders. Kozinets' typologies are often found in the marketing literature and will therefore be utilized, in correlation with Burnett's distinction of active and passive members, in this research as a means to identify a research sample.

It is argued that members of online communities go through stages of progression from initially just browsing information to full assimilation into the community (Walther 1992, 1995). As relational activity begins, members develop strong ties to the community and an increased “self-centrality of consumption activity” (Kozinets, 1999) (See figure 1 below). Kozinets (1999) goes on to denote insiders as representing “the most important targets for marketing”. The reason for this belief can be found in a theory commonly used within consumer marketing, the ‘Pareto’ rule of 80-20. In most product/service categories, approximately 80 percent of all goods are consumed by 20 percent of the consumer base (Kozinets, 1999), making that 20% an attractive and lucrative group to pay attention to. Within Jeppesen and Frederiksen’s (2006) exploration of virtual community participation, it was found that active participants are an important subset to study as they most significantly enhance the value of the community. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the active members of a community will be studied.

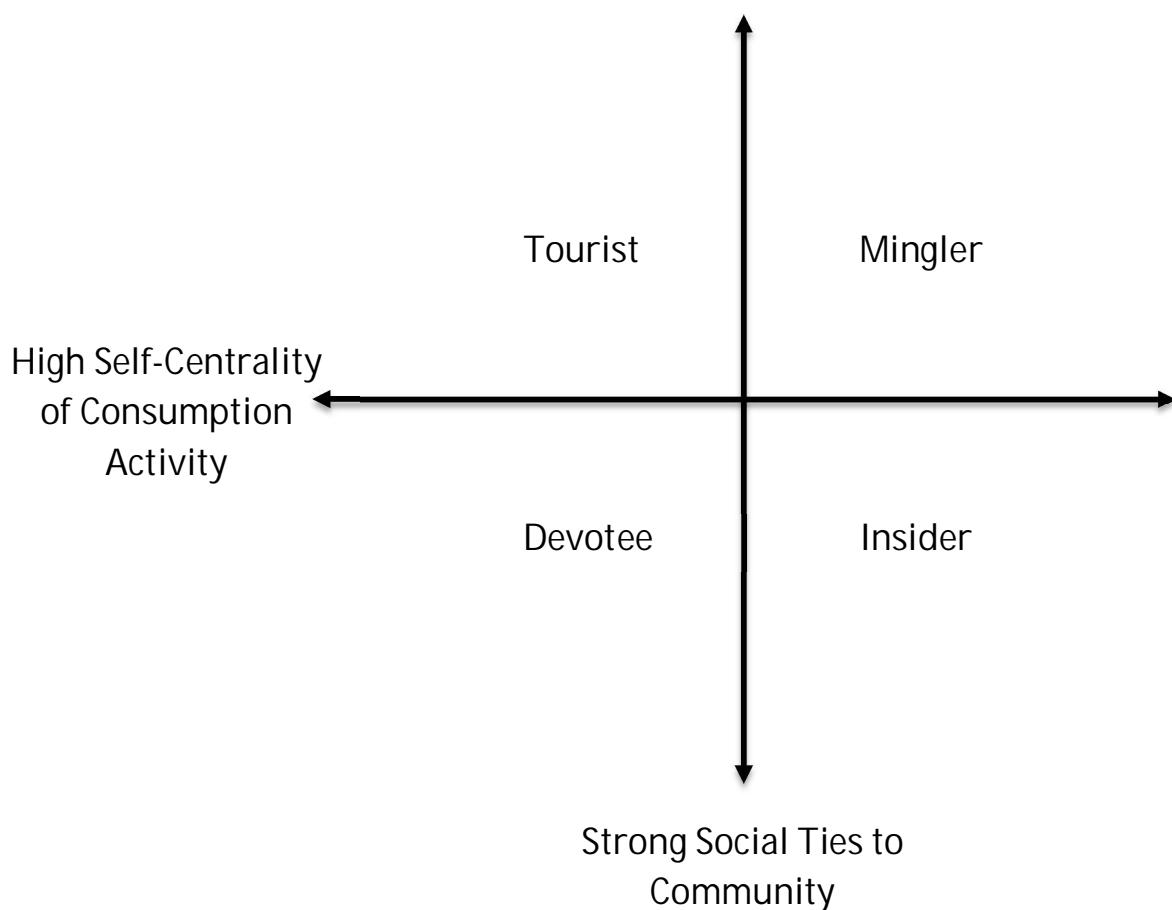


Figure 1: Member Typology (Kozinets 1999)

3.6. Models of Participation

The literature that focuses on understanding an individual's motivations to actively participate within a community is very fragmented and still in its infancy (Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier, 2002). Therefore, to begin identifying the factors that motivate participant

behaviour, various frameworks are discussed. Combined, these frameworks will serve as a platform for which this study will begin identifying the motivational factors of participants as they relate to firm-hosted online brand communities.

It is suggested throughout the literature that the most common drivers of community participation are intrinsic motivators (Teo 2001). The internal value that members receive from participation can be found through the enjoyment received from involvement in community activities – discussion, chatting and information retrieval (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). This enjoyment found through participation also increases a member's intention to continue participating (Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo 2004).

Further, a number of researchers have considered the consequences of community participation and uncovered concepts of trust (Hollebeek, 2011; Casalo et al., 2007), satisfaction (Bowden, 2009), commitment, emotional connection/attachment (Chan and Li, 2010), empowerment, consumer value (Schau et al., 2009; Gruen et al., 2006) and loyalty (Bowden, 2009). Among these the concepts of loyalty (Casalo et al., 2007; Schouten et al., 2007; Andersen, 2005), commitment (e.g. Chan and Li, 2010) and empowerment (Füller et al., 2009; Cova and Pace, 2006; Zimmerman and Warschausky, 1998) are prominent in online brand community contexts (Brodie et al., 2011).

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) found there to be eight factors that motivated members of an online community to participate, including: venting negative feelings, concern for other consumers, self-enhancement, advice-seeking, social benefits, economic benefits, platform assistance and helping the company.

In an examination of firm-hosted online communities that consumers interact with to help solve problems for one another, it was found that the members of the community act primarily out of commitment to the community as a whole (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007). Further, other motivating factors included members' online interaction propensity and the act of receiving informational value from these interactions. Similarly, Mathwick et al. (2008) found that community members were driven to participate out of volunteerism and reciprocity. Trust was also identified within this study to be a predominate construct of member participation.

Nolan et al. (2007) found through their three-year study that members engage in the online community when their level of interest and utility value are offset by the perceived risk of involvement and effort exerted. When individuals feel as though they are *getting* more than they are *giving* to the community, engagement flourishes (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). Ultimately, members of an online community acknowledge that the community is a collaborative effort and the value they receive is co-created by themselves, the organization and their peers (Schau et al., 2009; Porter and Donthu, 2008).

While the majority of research addressing consumer behaviour in online brand communities fails to conceptualize active community participation explicitly, the literature provides a foundation on which to base this study. The following two studies have been identified and further explored, as they have similar alignment with the theoretical background and objectives of this paper.

3.7. Wang & Fesenmaier's (2004) Framework of Virtual Community Participation

In a comprehensive study, Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) researched virtual community participation and groups the needs of members found throughout the literature into four categories: functional; psychological; social; and hedonic. Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2002) developed a framework of the first three needs, but Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) later went on to include the fourth need, hedonic, through the study of an online travel community (See figure 2).

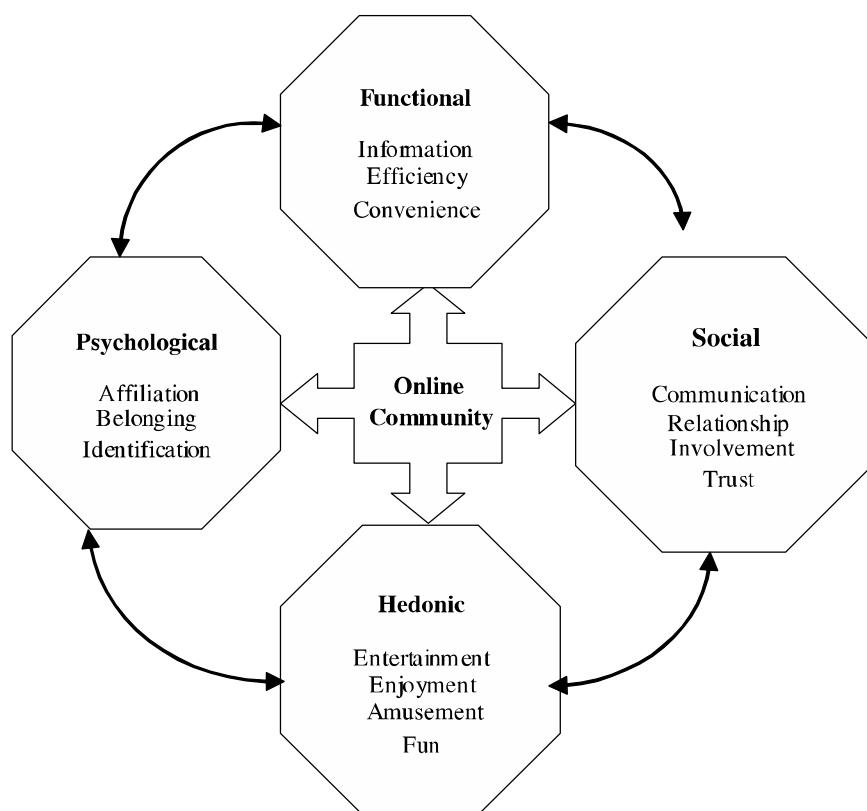


Figure 2: Wang and Fesenmaier's (2004) Framework

Functional needs

Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) argue that members choose to join online communities to serve a functional need. This need most often is seen in the form of knowledge seeking (Hagel and Armstrong 1997) or other consumption activities. One of the main modes of consumption is through the exchange of information and resources found within the community (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). The existence of communities online has made information sharing and seeking more efficient. Therefore, individuals are more likely to participate as this function is more easily serviced in an online environment (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004).

Social needs

From the study of online travel communities, it was discovered that communities are structurally social, have social meaning and meet the social needs of its members (Wang, Yu, Fesenmaier, 2002). The social needs of a community vary, as the community purpose and environment vary. However, based on the tasks and level of knowledge sharing members engage in, it is possible to begin defining the social needs for an individual community. The driver of these functions is trust, and it is argued that where there is trust, relationships will flourish (Preece, 2000). Therefore, trust is an essential component of community, and without it, there would be little to no member participation.

In particular, the social needs of an individual are met by the formation of relationships developed within a community, as online communities function to bring people with similar interests together in one space (Kozinets, 2002). It has been argued that the most important factor for people who participate in online communities is friendship (Coon, 1998). Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) also argue that part of an individual's social need is the element of trust, which then goes on to foster communication and interactivity.

Psychological needs

Psychological needs can include the expression of self/identity, feeling a sense of belonging, as well as feeling affiliated with the community as a collective (Wang and Fesenmaier 2004). By meeting these needs, a community becomes part of who someone is, and how that person defines himself (Rheingold 1993). For this reason, communities are particularly attractive to the world of commerce as an organizing force.

Not all members have their psychological needs met within a community, as this need is most generally met when a member feels a sense of connection to a community, which is developed through community participation. However, for some, the primary act of simply searching for information within a community is transformed into a source of community and understanding (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). Through this process, it is possible that a member will feel a sense of identification to not just the community collective (Walther, 1996), but to individual members as well.

Hedonic needs

While Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2002) did not perceive hedonic needs to be relevant as to why individuals seek out community, Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) thought that to neglect this would be to neglect equally important experiential elements of consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). It is argued, in this study, that individuals will join travel communities for the sole purpose of entertainment and enjoyment (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). The hedonic perspective is an important aspect of consumer information searching behaviour (Vogt and Fesenmaier, 1998), and views members as "pleasure seekers" (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). The affect this has on participation is that, hedonic consumption stimulates positive emotions and is closely affiliated to feeling a sense of enjoyment, happiness and enthusiasm (Hoffman and Novak, 1996), thus possibly acting as a motivator for participation in all forms of community.

3.8. Dholakia et al.'s (2004) Social Influence Model of Participation

Although the fulfillment of need was expansively conceptualized, there are various values that individuals gain from their participation in a community, and these are comprehensively outlined by Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo (2004) through their social influence model of consumer participation. The basis for this study was to investigate two group-level determinants of participation in virtual communities – group norms and social identity. Alternatively to the Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) framework that was applied to only one community, Dholakia et al.'s (2004) study considered a broad range of virtual communities, and relied on the uses and gratifications theory. The uses and gratifications perspective is most often used to understand why people are motivated to use various media outlets (McQuail, 1983; McGuire, 1974). Through this study, Dholakia et al. (2004) identified five values derived from participation within virtual communities: purposive value, self-discovery, maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity, social enhancement and entertainment.

Purposive value

The purposive value an individual may hope to achieve from participating within a community can include both informational and instrumental value. That is, “the value derived from accomplishing some pre-determined instrumental purpose” (Dholakia et al., 2004). Participants see purposive value when they engage in the act of giving or sharing information. These objectives of knowledge sharing are generally predefined prior to participation, therefore facilitating achievement of a set of end-state goals (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 1999).

Contributing and gathering information also provides an opportunity where the individual is able to learn more about the central brand and the consumption aspects of that brand. In this exchange of information, the members are collectively generating a rich sense of brand meaning and online identity (Dholakia et al. 2004). Aside from the co-creation of information, community members also participate to fulfill a specific task – problem solving, idea generation and solicitation of a service/talent.

Self-discovery

The value of self-discovery is highly dependent upon a person's perception of self and the value they find through social interaction (Dholakia et al. 2004). However, a person can use interactions with others as a way to gain access to the social resources needed to attain one's future goals (McKenna and Bargh 1999). Not only can participation aid an individual's quest for their goals, but this interaction with others can also help an individual more clearly define their preferences and values (Dholakia et al. 2004).

Furthermore, members can also identify other valued individuals and their models of behaviour within the community for reinforcement of their own personal values (McQuail 1987). The ability to remain anonymous in an online community also provides members with the comfort to express themselves freely, which enables them to discover and expand on various personal traits.

Specifically within brand communities, members are able to explore their talents or interests with a large audience of other similar-minded individuals. Additionally, this also provides opportunity to extend one's professional network for the sake of advancement. For example,

the Nikon camera community lets photographers upload their work and interact with other professionals. Likewise, this also allows individuals to gain expertise or skills in a specific hobby (Dholakia and Bagozzi 2004). It is suggested that people often participate in online brand communities to gain access to information that is otherwise obscure or inaccessible in which they are personally interested (Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler 1998).

Maintaining Interpersonal Interconnectivity

The value of maintaining interpersonal connectivity comes in the form of the benefit an individual finds from establishing and maintaining contact with fellow participants; these benefits can include friendship, social support and intimacy (Dholakia et al., 2004). Wellman and Gulia (1999) argue that most individuals join communities so that they meet others who are similar to them, receive companionship and dispel their loneliness.

Communicating through discussion boards, and private outside messaging, allows participants to meet and interact with people who are similarly minded. These interactions can be leveraged to establish friendships, but also to gain support within and without the community. As a member's lifetime within the community increases alongside their peers, these relations become more intimate and personal (Walther, 1995). Baym (2000) notes that member friendliness is one of the paramount reasons for an individual continuing participation within a community. Furthermore, Preece (2000) found that relationships with other members are the primary reason that members stay committed to a community.

Social Enhancement

Both social enhancement and maintaining interpersonal connectivity are group referent, meaning that these values concern the self in relation to the collective (Dholakia et al., 2004). The value of social enhancement is what an individual gains through the acceptance and approval of other group members – achieved through contribution to the group. Social enhancement also relates to an individual's social status within the group.

Interaction within the community also acts to achieve a level of peer recognition, and by this virtue also increases an individual's status within the group. Through active participation one's social status will significantly increase, as it is directly related to the degree of contribution and involvement (Fuller, 2006). A high level of involvement yields more visibility and recognition for sharing individual expertise, which contributes to a greater sense of self-esteem. Hars and Ou (2002) attest that social enhancement and peer recognition comes from the desire for superior self-image, providing the grounds to motivate an individual to participate within an online brand community. Essentially, people are more willing to share if they feel as though it will have a positive impact on their status.

Entertainment

Entertainment value is derived from the interaction an individual has with others, that results in feelings of enjoyment and relaxation (Dholakia et al., 2004). Specifically, it has been found that participants find enjoyment in activities such as adapting various fictional identities and communicating with others with similar interests (McKenna and Bargh, 1999). Moderators of online communities, knowing this, organize events, host workshops and raffles and host parties – all of which are intended to create an enjoyable experience for the community

members, so that they are entertained and feel compelled to continue their engagement with the community.

3.9. Summary of the Literature

The informing literature can be summarized in Figure 3.

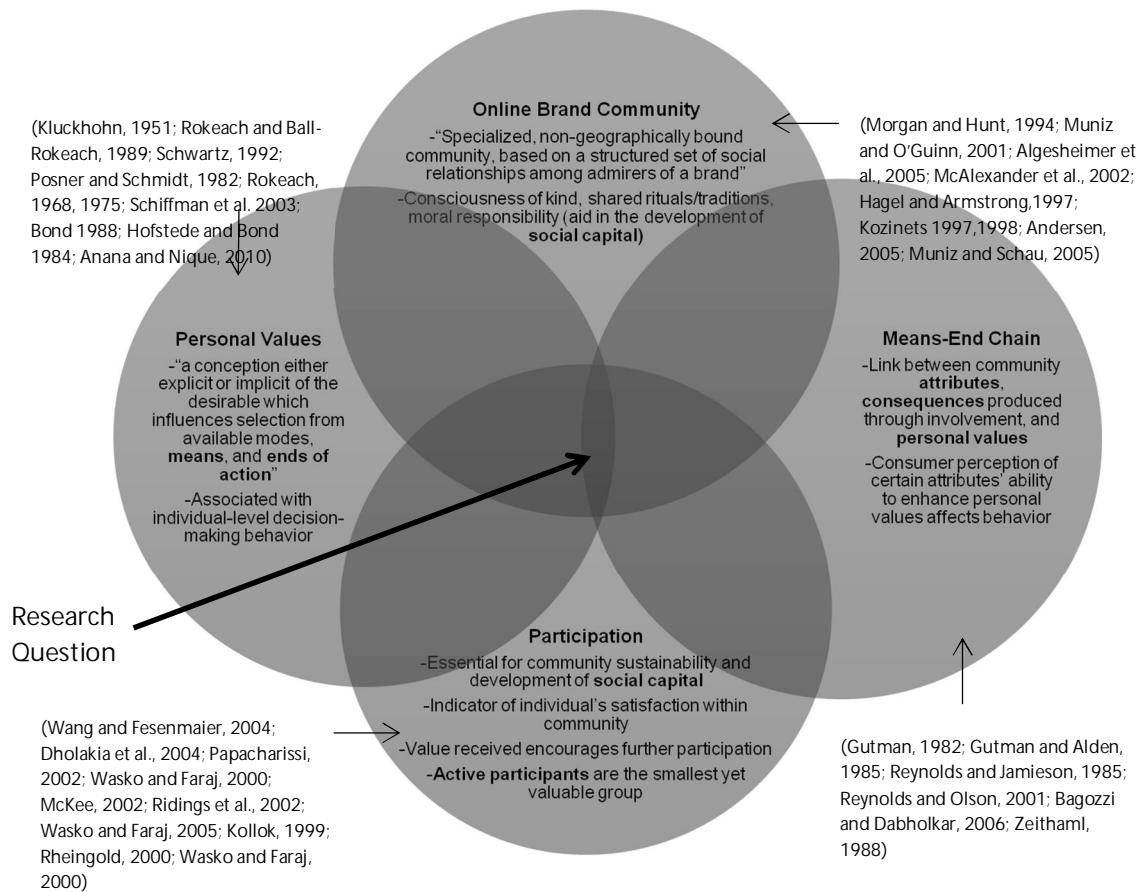


Figure 3: Representation of the Four Informing Bodies of Literature

4. Research Process

The research process can be broken down into five main categories: research planning; wider community interview and observation; in-depth laddering interviews; analysis of the in-depth laddering interviews; and discussion of community findings. As with most ethnographic accounts, the findings of the research are returned back to the respondents for confirmation and further perspective. This is often seen as an act of protocol and would be found as a step within the data analysis phase. However, as a way of addressing the limited amount of conversation during the community interview, the researcher added in an entirely separate stage of research where the respondents could converse and comment regarding the findings; it was similar in design to that of the original community interview, it just so happened that the respondents were more motivated to actually discuss the topic *after* the individual interviews, rather than *before*. This was found to provide an entirely new and deep layer of understanding of the community. Ethnography is adaptive in nature (Miriamplski, 1999) and requires the researcher to be responsive to any unexpected situations – the additional stage of having a conversation as a follow-up to the individual interview is how the researcher addressed this particular unexpected situation and an example of how to be adaptive mid-process.

4.1. Research Planning

The selection of an appropriate community to study began by identifying a list of characteristics that would most benefit the aim of the research:

1. Active community (regular, daily postings)
2. A community centred around a strong brand (the initial interest of this research is rooted in the study of brand community, specifically)
3. Firm-hosted (as this is one of elements that informed the research questions)
4. A community that has a distinct group of evangelical members

Once the community was selected (the subject community is hosted by a Multi National Software Company and will be referred to as MNSC), a plan to access the community was outlined and a representative introduced the researcher to the community and familiarized them with the research aims and the ethical guidelines agreed upon by MNSC and the researcher.

4.2. Community Interview and Observation

The community interview begins by following up the introduction made by the MNSC representative with a self-introduction further explaining the research. An initial set of questions is posed to the community for discussion and the researcher spends time observing the general behaviour of the community.

4.3. In-depth Laddering Interviews

On behalf of the researcher, the MNSC representative, with access to a complete email list of community members, made contact requesting participation in the in-depth interviews. Within ten hours, 35 community members had sent verification that they were interested in participating in the study's interviews. Once 35 community members had expressed their

interest in the study, they were each sent further information regarding the interviews and specific ethical guidelines that would be followed. They were informed the laddering interviews would take over an hour and asked to confirm that they could provide that time – this served as a way to ensure the individuals were committed to the study and would be forthcoming with their responses. 32 of the 35 community members responded and were secured for the interviews.

The 32 respondents were interviewed using Skype and the transcripts were then logged and input into the qualitative research package NVIVO to be broken down into ladders and further analysed to uncover the links between community attributes, consequences, and personal values.

4.4. Analysis of In-depth Laddering Interviews

After the 32 laddering interviews were completed and the transcripts imported into NVIVO, the community attributes were identified and summarized into primary codes, along with the consequences and personal values noted in every interview. An interview schedule and findings can be seen in table 1.

Table 1: Interview Schedule

Respondent	Ladders	% of Values Reached	Data Points	Interview Time (hours)
R1	18	94	53	2.35
R2	21	76	57	1.55
R3	10	90	29	2.27
R4	16	88	46	2.01
R5	15	93	43	1.32
R6	12	100	33	1.51
R7	15	87	40	2.11
R8	14	86	40	2.34
R9	14	93	40	1.56
R10	13	92	38	2.45
R11	22	86	61	2.06
R12	18	83	49	1.27
R13	12	83	34	1.45
R14	11	91	32	1.34
R15	25	76	65	2.01
R16	17	88	47	2.17
R17	12	92	33	2.11
R18	16	94	45	2.33

R19	21	95	58	1.25
R20	14	93	42	1.46
R21	14	86	42	1.55
R22	13	85	35	1.5
R23	16	69	41	2.34
R24	14	86	39	2.29
R25	15	87	40	2.45
R26	13	92	36	2.11
R27	11	72	29	2.19
R28	20	75	51	2.56
R29	18	72	48	2.58
R30	17	82	45	2.11
R31	15	80	41	1.49
R32	19	95	49	1.56
TOTAL	501	85.82%	1381	61.65

These elements were then organized into ladders to uncover how personal values were satisfied through the fulfilment of consequences through participation in the MNSC community. The process of analysis and coding can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of Community Interview Analysis

Community Interview		
Data Reduction	Data Display	Data Conclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Coding</i> • <i>Key words in context</i> • <i>Content analysis/word count</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Node importation (Nvivo)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Thematic Analysis</i> • <i>Content Analysis</i> • <i>Conceptual Analysis</i>
In-depth Laddering Interviews		
Construct Identification	Laddering of Constructs	Laddering Interview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>(Looking to the literature and the data collected through the community observation)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>(In order to move participant up and down the means-end chain)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salient attributes – uncovered: "what is it about the community that gives you that benefit". • Attributes are linked to higher level constructs (consequences and values): "why is that important to you," "how does that help you,"

5. Findings

The following section displays the findings of this paper, which sought to understand why members of an online firm-hosted brand community participated so actively.

It became clear at the end of the coding process that a number of reoccurring themes had emerged from the individual interviews. Using categorization tools in NVIVO, the conversations were visually represented to reflect the most widely referenced themes from the ladders. The following themes were indicated with an overwhelmingly high frequency: belonging, entertainment, helping others, professional advancement, personal growth, recognition and knowledge.

Categorizing the ladders into themes was seen as an effective way of organizing over 1,300 constructs into a more meaningful representation of the data. Although these themes are discussed individually, they are not mutually exclusive. So as to not force meaning out of the data, outlying comments or ladders were left uncategorized – although, this group makes up less than 8% of the total responses, which is why the researcher felt it suitable to continue with the seven themes. These themes ended up leading the researcher to a more clear understanding of the community as a whole while also representing the respondents' individual motivation for active community participation.

From within each theme, the most common perceptual pathways are identified and presented below. These pathways represent the most common associations between attributes – consequences – values.

Belonging:

Friendly – Relationship Building – Friendship

Entertainment:

Fun – Have Fun – Enjoyment

Helping Others:

Helpful – Help – Helpfulness

Professional Advancement:

Professional – Professional Development – Professional Value

Personal Growth:

Escape – Alternate Reality – Escape

Recognition:

Appreciative – Appreciated – Recognition

Educational:

Educational – Learning – Knowledge

Table 3 represents the most common personal values represented under each theme. When comparing the values in context, it is evident that the varying uses of the community produce

different associations for the community members. Ultimately, the personal values are unique, which acts to strengthen the argument for the chosen categories, as there is little overlap.

Table 3: Key Values by Theme

Theme	Key Values
Personal Growth	Escape, Reassured, Satisfied, Self-esteem, Self-image, Support, Trust, Feels good, Contentment, Valued, Inspiration
Knowledge	Feeling of intelligence, Informed, Inspiration, Knowledge, Sharing, Fulfilled
Helping Others	Helpfulness, Fulfilment, Enjoyment, Self-esteem, Support, Rewarding
Professional Advancement	Reputation, Professional Value, Fulfilment, Sharing, Feeling of Intelligence
Recognition	Recognition, Appreciated, Attention, Fulfilled, Reward, Trust, Passion
Belonging	Relationship building, Trust, Friendship, Bonding, Socialize, Sense of belonging, Sharing, Happiness, Rewarding
Entertainment	Enjoyment, Fulfilment, Fun, Passion, Satisfaction

Furthermore, the values that are satisfied under each theme have been compared to Rokeach's Value Scale and Kahle's List of Values. Both of these lists were generated under large-scale, macro studies that aimed to create a value classification system for the general population. However, a number of gaps exist when comparing these lists to the personal values uncovered in this particular context. Enjoyment, friendship and self-respect were three values that showed to overlap in all three value systems and in comparing the constructs of this study to Rokeach's Value Scale, the most similarities were seen within the list of terminal values (versus instrumental). All nine of the values from Kahle's List of Values were found to have comparable values to those produced in this study. Although, there was an overlap with the values fun and enjoyment found in this study, as they were combined into one overarching value by Kahle (fun and enjoyment). Self-respect was also found to be comparable with multiple values from this study: self-image and self-esteem. However, within the context of this setting, the research respondents clearly stated a difference between those two elements – giving reason to keep them separate throughout the data analysis and interpretation.

Additionally, the values produced in this study were classified by Dholakia et al.'s (2004) values framework. In doing so, the values lost some of their meaning from being organized under more general categories. When looked at in the context of this study, the framework is far too broad a system to fully understand the complexities of a single, sample-specific case. However, using this frame as a guide and initial point of departure was helpful in understanding community existence as a whole, especially before individual communication began. Upon beginning the individual interviews and analysis, it was more helpful to allow themes to emerge organically, without the pressure of having to fit the constructs into a predetermined framework.

Table 4: Comparable Key Values

Key Values	Comparable Values: Rokeach Value Scale	Comparable Values: Kahle's List of Values	Values Categorized by Dholakia et al.'s Value Framework
Appreciated	n/a	n/a	Social Enhancement
Attention	n/a	n/a	Social Enhancement
Bonding	n/a	n/a	Interpersonal Connectivity
Contentment	n/a	Security	Self-discovery
Enjoyment	Pleasure	Fun and Enjoyment	Entertainment
Escape	n/a	n/a	Self-discovery
Feeling of Intelligence	Intellect	n/a	Purposive
Feels good	n/a	n/a	Self-discovery
Friendship	True Friendship	Warm relationships	Interpersonal Connectivity
Fulfillment	n/a	Self-fulfillment	Self-discovery
Fun	Pleasure	Fun and Enjoyment	Entertainment
Happiness	Happiness	n/a	Self-discovery
Helpfulness	Helpfulness	n/a	Self-discovery
Informed	n/a	n/a	Purposive

Inspiration	Imagination	n/a	Purposive
Knowledge	Wisdom	n/a	Purposive
Passion	n/a	n/a	Entertainment
Professional Value	n/a	n/a	Purposive
Reassured	n/a	n/a	Self-discovery
Recognition	Social Recognition	n/a	Social Enhancement
Relationship building	n/a	Warm relationships	Social Enhancement
Reputation	n/a	Being well Respected	Social Enhancement
Rewarding	n/a	n/a	Purposive
Satisfaction	n/a	n/a	Self-discovery
Self-esteem	Self-respect	Self-respect	Self-discovery
Self-image	Self-respect	Self-respect	Self-discovery
Sense of belonging	n/a	Sense of Belonging	Social Enhancement
Sharing	n/a	n/a	Interpersonal Connectivity
Socialize	n/a	n/a	Social Enhancement
Support	n/a	n/a	Interpersonal Connectivity
Trust	Honesty	n/a	Interpersonal Connectivity
Valued	n/a	n/a	Self-discovery

5.1. Classification of Behavioural Consequences

Based on Wang and Fesenmaier's (2004) Virtual Community Participation model, the consequences identified in this paper can be classified by one of four needs: social,

psychological, functional or hedonic. Initially, this model was used as a tool of guidance through the literature, and a preliminary point of departure. However, this model can now be used as a means to broadly visualize the consequences associated with community attributes – see table 5.

From the classification of consequences, it is evident that the two most prevalent needs fulfilled fall under the functional and psychological theme. This aligns well with the personal value findings, as they too can primarily be classified as functional or psychological. Taking for example the seven themes:

Personal Growth - Psychological

Knowledge - Functional

Helping Others – Psychological

Professional Advancement - Functional

Recognition - Psychological

Belonging – Psychological/Social

Entertainment - Hedonic

There is also overlapping of a number of consequences, which is due in part to the change of context from which the original classification system was developed. However, there is a general fit between Wang and Fesenmaier's model and the findings of this study, which acts to further solidify and extend its application.

Table 5: Classification of Behavioural Consequences

Consequence	Classification of Behavioural Consequences (Wang and Fesenmaier)
Acknowledgement	Psychological
Alternate reality	Hedonic/ Psychological
Appreciated	Psychological
Belonging	Psychological
Challenged	Functional/ Psychological
Confidence	Psychological
Connections	Social
Constructive	Functional/ Psychological
Conversation	Social
Diversity	Social

Educate	Functional
Ego	Hedonic/ Psychological
Encouragement	Psychological
Engaging	Functional
Escape	Hedonic/ Psychological
Feedback	Functional
Friendship	Social
Have fun	Hedonic
Help	Psychological
Informed	Functional
Intelligence	Functional
Involved	Functional
Learning	Functional
Networking	Functional
Productive	Functional
Professional development	Functional
Recognition	Psychological
Relationship building	Social
Reputation	Social
Respected	Psychological
Rewarding	Psychological
Satisfaction	Hedonic
Sharing	Social/Functional
Solutions	Functional
Stimulated	Functional

Successful	Functional
Support	Psychological
Useful	Functional
Vent	Functional

5.2. Conceptual Framework

It is evident in Table 5 that there is a connection between the consequence constructs identified by Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) and the consequences identified within this study. Further, Table 4 provided evidence that there is a connection between the value themes identified by Dholakia et al. (2004) and those that were found within this study. Through the ladders that were constructed from the interview data, the connection is made between the consequences and values. Thus, the framework identified in Figure 4 below provides a visual representation of why the active members of an online community are motivated to participate.

Future studies can benefit from using this framework by applying it to other communities to understand a range of community members. Further development of this framework can be made to establish its validity by utilizing quantitative methods and collecting more objective data.

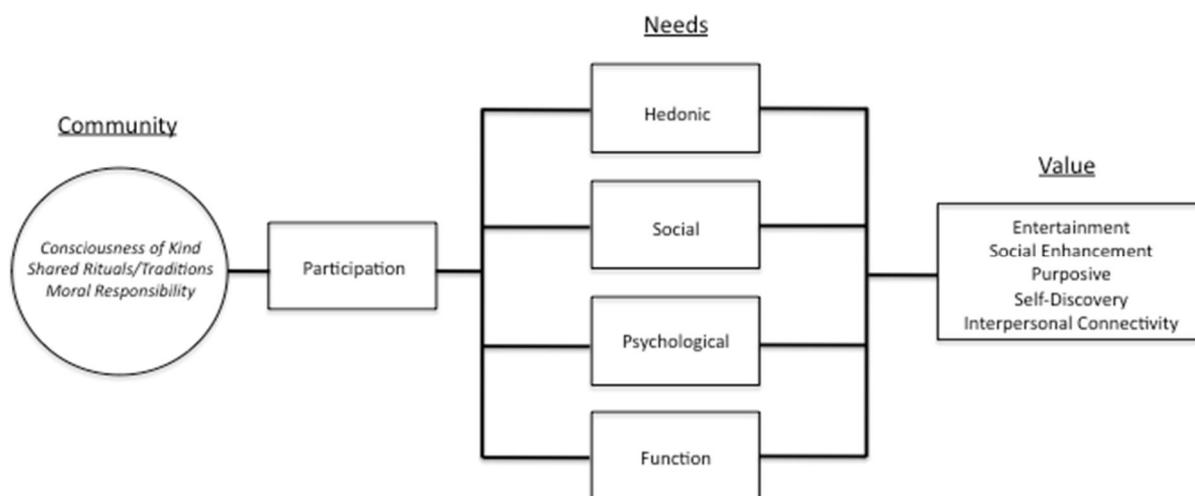


Figure 4: Conceptual Framework

6. Implications for Management

This study makes a contribution by providing insight into what motivates the most active members of an online community, and how connections are made between attributes, consequences and the satisfaction of specific personal values. Through understanding these connections, organizations are equipped with the knowledge necessary to sustain a successful online community.

Organizations are able to craft an appropriate message to reach their online community audience once they have an understanding of who the community members are. Establishing personal relevance with individuals in the community can be achieved through a demonstration of how active involvement in the community leads to the fulfilment of perceived consequences and the satisfaction of personal values – ultimately creating a relevant, satisfying environment where the members are inspired to contribute.

The extensive list of attributes and consequences uncovered in this study also provides host firms with the ability to better understand *how* the community members are using the community space and why. This furthers an organization's capability to design and market a successful online community. Further, understanding the attributes that lead to positive perceived consequences allows for the host firm to manage user-enjoyment and promote these benefits to the wider community, and potential community members.

The list of values identified can be looked at as a mechanism in crafting an out-dated, irrelevant, or inapplicable community mission. It is evident with the seven emergent themes *what* the community members are using the community for. In attempting to better serve the community, a new mission can be created and tailored to carrying out these seven specific themes, rather than using old mission statements that make blanket declarations as to why the community exists.

The principal aim of this research, from a managerial perspective, was to uncover the connections that individuals made between community attributes, consequences and personal values, so that organizations were able to better manage their online communities, and more appropriately serve their membership.

Through understanding the motivating factors of the community's most active participants, the host organization is able to understand the environment that is conducive to this behaviour – enabling the moderators of the community to work towards creating a space that encourages further participation from other members. Additionally, moderators can manage user enjoyment and satisfaction of the community now that a set of measurable constructs have been identified, and promote these benefits to the wider membership.

Finally, the results can also be used to assist in the crafting of a message that articulates the value of the online brand community, by identifying how the community attributes bridge with consumer benefits, and by establishing individual relevance to existing/future users showing how values are satisfied through participation.

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