AN EXLORATION OF MEMBER INVOLVEMENT WITH ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES (OBCs)

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ABSTRACT

Despite growth in research investigating online consumer behaviour there appears to be a lack of study focusing specifically on how consumers are involved within online settings. Involvement is defined as the perceived relevance of a stimulus object such as a product to the individual consumer (Zaichkowsky, 1984). The study of consumer involvement is valuable as it is believed to be important mediator of consumer behaviour in the extant literature (e.g. Slater and Armstrong, 2010; Knox, Walker and Marshall, 1994). Involvement is thought to consist of two forms namely enduring involvement and situational involvement which respectively denote long-term and temporary interest in the stimulus object (Houston and Rothschild, 1978). Components such as personal interest, sign value, hedonic value and perceived risk have been conceptualised as evoking involvement (Kapferer and Laurent, 1993). However, less is known about the forms and components that constitute online consumer involvement. This study explores member involvement with Online Brand Communities (OBCs) focusing specifically on two questions: (1) What is involving about OBCs? (2) How are members involved with OBCs?

The study employs a netnographic methodology consisting of participant observation of two OBCs over a nine month period. Based on the findings from the observation data two conceptual models relating to the characteristics and development of member involvement with the OBC are presented. The 'Typology of Online Community Involvement' model identifies four distinct types of member involvement with the OBC: (1) utilitarian involvement, (2) social involvement, (3) ego-related involvement, and (4) affective involvement. The 'Journey of Member Involvement with the OBC' model charts the different pathways that members who are involved with the OBC may undertake during their membership and develops the idea of situational involvement to include an extended form called repeat situational involvement which relates to member involvement with OBC on an intermittent basis due mainly to product or purchase queries. The findings provide deeper insights into online consumer behaviour such as triggers that prompt members' initial and continued involvement with OBCs. Recommendations for management focus on developing tools and strategies that help cultivate and sustain member involvement with the OBC.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research topic and present the research questions and objectives that direct this study. The chapter provides a background to the research which identifies member involvement with Online Brand Communities (OBCs) as a current gap in the extant literature. The research seeks to gain insight into the characteristics of, and motivations for, member involvement with OBCs. This leads to the development of two research questions: (1) What is involving about OBCs for members? (2) How are members involved with OBCs? The latter part of the chapter provides an overview of the thesis and explains the relevance of each chapter towards gaining insights into consumer involvement in online settings.

1.2 Background to the Research

Following years of debate regarding the definition and conceptualisation of consumer involvement there is consensus in the literature that consumer involvement essentially refers to the personal relevance of a stimulus object such as a product to the individual consumer (e.g. Shobeiri, Mazaheri and Laroche, 2014; Huang, 2006; Reinecke Flynn and Goldsmith, 1993; Zaichkowsky, 1985; Houston and Rothschild, 1978). Involvement is described as an important mediator of consumer behaviour in the marketing field (e.g. Slater and Armstrong, 2010; Knox, Walker and Marshall, 1994; Mittal and Lee, 1989). For example, Im and Ha (2011) found that the level of product involvement with the fashion category influenced online shopping behaviour on a clothes website in terms of enjoyment derived from browsing the fashion web site, cognitive effort to examine clothes on the web site and intention to purchase clothes from the website. Similarly, Jiang *et al.* (2010) found that an increase in website involvement, defined as the perceived relevance of the website based on the inherent needs, values and

interests of the consumer, leads to higher purchase intentions. Hence, the study of consumer involvement is significant in the marketing field as depending on whether the consumer experiences low or high involvement towards a stimulus object will have implications for how they behave in a particular setting.

The empirical study of involvement is mainly quantitative in nature and to a large extent employs Kapferer and Laurent's (1985) Consumer Involvement Profile (CIP) or Zaichkowsky's (1985) Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) scales to measure consumer involvement. Apart from Bloch, Commuri and Todd (2009) and Feick, Coulter and Price (2003) there appears to be limited research that employs qualitative methods to explore consumer involvement. This research argues that the use of questionnaire and interview methods to study involvement provides insight into consumers' perceptions of involvement rather than the actual manifestation of involvement. The tendency to employ quantitative methods such as questionnaires to study involvement, in part, may be linked to the nature of involvement which is described as psychological in nature and therefore "unobservable" (Rothschild, 1984, p. 217). This research proposes that consumer use of the Internet generates opportunities for the study of consumer involvement. Of particular interest are online communities, defined in their most basic form as, "groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism" (Ridings, Gefen and Arinze, 2002, p. 273). This is because it is possible to monitor the online behaviours of posters in such settings and in so doing it is argued in this study to observe the display and manifestation of consumer involvement. In addition information sources such as the individual's posting history and length of membership of the online community provide the opportunity to gain insights into the development of consumer involvement, a subject area that thus far has not been possible to

observe off-line. Hence, it is proposed that online community settings represent a fertile ground for consumer involvement research. To provide context to the research setting the section proceeds with an outline of the concept of community in the sociology literature followed by a review of the different types of communities identified in consumer research.

Postmodernity was initially perceived as an era of extreme individualism in society but later sociologists such as Bauman (1992) started to observe a reverse movement whereby individuals were in search of social connectedness. Maffesoli (1993) coined the term postmodern community to describe social groupings held together by shared emotions, ways of life, different moral beliefs and senses of injustice. Such postmodern communities were described as constantly in a state of development brought into existence by the repetitive symbolic rituals of their members (Bauman, 1992, pp. 157-158). Cova (1997, p.297) made the connection between community and consumption through the "linking value" of products and services. He explains that in postmodernity the product or service does not "isolate" but is like the "totem for primitive tribes: it serves as a pole of attraction for postmodern tribes" (Cova, 1997, p.307). The postmodern individual in the field of marketing is not only looking for products or services that facilitate them to be "freer" but also product and services that "link them to others, to a community, to a tribe" (Cova, 1997, p. 311).

Goulding, Shankar and Canniford (2013) distinguish between three types of consumption communities: (1) Subcultures of Consumption, (2) Brand Communities, and (3) Tribes. Early studies described subcultures of consumption as exhibiting a "shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity" that structured the community (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p.43). The enduring nature of social order and strong interpersonal bonds between members means subcultures of consumption are cohesive

(Canniford, 2011). Furthermore, authority figures tend to police such consumer groups and maintain social hierarchies (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Subcultures of consumption are dedicated in that membership for the individual may consist of partaking in irreversible rituals and showing displays of long-term commitment (Celsi *et al.*, 1993). Studies of subcultures of consumption are replete with reference to the resistant status of members and include for example anecdotes of self-reliance (Canniford, 2011). Brand communities, similar to subcultures, signify a cohesive and dedicated type of community but rather than a "resistant and marginalised form of shared social activity" it is the "shared consumption of brands" that is central to community membership (Canniford, 2011, p. 61). The shared use of the brand's products and services forms the basis for creating enduring connections amongst members as well as making distinction with non-users of the principle brand. Moral responsibility and religious zeal typify the relationships that brand communities exhibit towards focal products and services (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Brand communities engage with business and this is demonstrated by Schau, Muñiz and Arnould's (2009) study which identified various value creating practices that take place within such settings including impression management and brand use.

The final type of consumer community is a tribe. Cova (1997) describes tribes as furnishing social links through the shared use of products or services. Tribes are multiple in that membership of one type of tribe does not preclude membership of another type of tribe. Tribes are playful rarely exhibiting the "long-term moral responsibility or religious zeal towards a brand" found in brand communities or sharing the reverence afforded to core products reproduced in subcultures of consumption (Canniford, 2011, p. 63). Linked to features of multiple identity and play tribes are transient in that they emerge and disappear as "combinations of people and resources alter" (Goulding, Shankar and Canniford, 2013, p. 814).

Tribes are also described as entrepreneurial as they regularly produce or customise market offerings (Goulding and Saren, 2007). The majority of research dedicated to consumer communities focuses on brand communities. Yet despite this gaps in knowledge about these particular type of consumer communities still remain. This research is positioned within the brand community field as it seeks to explore a topic that does not yet appear to have been studied specifically member involvement with brand communities that manifest online, referred to as Online Brand Communities (OBCs).

1.3 Justification for the Research

It is proposed that consumer involvement with stimulus objects that manifest online such as OBCs represents an emerging research domain as foci of involvement not yet studied in the marketing field. There is a growing base of literature investigating various topics connected to consumer behaviour in OBCs such as knowledge sharing (e.g. Sloan, Bodey and Gyrd-Jones, 2015), consumer bonding (e.g. Szmigin, Canning and Reppel, 2005), co-constructing brand culture (e.g. Schembri and Latimer, 2016) and value-creating practices (e.g. Schau, Muñiz and Arnould, 2009). It is proposed that consumers are involved with OBCs and this is exemplified by various behaviours in these online settings such as talking about the product and/or brand, displays of product and/or brand knowledge and partaking in product and/or brand related information search that are classified in the literature as demonstrative of consumer involvement (e.g. DeMeyer and Petzer, 2014; Reinecke Flynn and Goldsmith, 1997; Zaichkowsky, 1985). However, there appears to be a gap in the extant literature with respect to the topic of consumer involvement with OBCs. In this study involvement is defined as the perceived relevance of the OBC to the individual member. For reasons of clarification it is important at this point to distinguish between involvement and related concepts of commitment and engagement. Commitment can be understood as the individual's long-standing orientation

toward a relationship (Rusbult, 1983). The fundamental difference between involvement and commitment is that an individual may become involved with a stimulus object such as an OBC without taking a position that requires commitment to a particular relationship with the OBC. It is more difficult to draw distinctions between engagement and involvement as definitions of the former for all intents and purposes borrow heavily from involvement. For example, Brodie *et al.* (2011) define consumer engagement as "specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand" and a "psychological state characterized by fluctuating intensity levels" which is similar to early conceptualisations of involvement as consisting of two dimensions, namely, "direction" that is consumers become involved with a particular stimulus object and "intensity" in terms of levels of arousal, interest or drive evoked may vary from low to high (Mitchell, 1979, p. 194). This research takes the viewpoint that conceptualisations of engagement appear to be drawn from involvement theory and as of yet it is not clear how engagement is different, if at all, from involvement. This is noted but deemed outside the scope of this research which focuses on adding to knowledge in relation to the under researched topic of online consumer involvement.

It is envisioned that findings from this study of member involvement with OBCs will contribute to the online consumer behaviour literature by shedding insight into the characteristics and development of a stimulus object of involvement not yet studied that is online community involvement. It is also believed that the study will contribute to online consumer behaviour literature by identifying drivers that appear to prompt consumers to sign-up to and continue to participate in OBCs and by providing deeper insight into underlying reasons that trigger particular online behaviours. It is hoped that the study of member involvement with OBCs will facilitate a more holistic understanding of the concept of brand community as it entails looking at member involvement from different viewpoints namely the individual and the community

group. Finally, it is anticipated that findings from the study will also contribute to practice by providing managers of online communities with insights on how to activate and sustain member involvement with OBCs over their membership.

1.4 Research Context, Questions and Objectives

This research employs online ethnography or netnography (Kozinets, 1998) to investigate member involvement with OBCs. Online ethnography or netnography originates from the cultural anthropology field and adapts ethnographic research methods to investigate consumer behaviours and cultures in virtual communities (Kozinets, 1998). As part of the netnographic research methodology two OBC sites called 'MacRumors' and 'the Purse Forum' were observed. MacRumors was established in 2000 and currently consists of 950,000 members. It is dedicated to the Apple brand which is part of the technology product category. The Purse Forum was established in 2005 and currently consists of 400,000 members. It is dedicated to the luxury handbag product category and at the moment 32 luxury brands such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Chanel have individual sub-forums in the community.

This research is exploratory in nature in that it seeks to understand aspects of involvement that are under-researched in the marketing field, specifically the characteristics and development of consumer involvement in online settings. Kozinets (2010, p. 81) provides guidelines on how to formulate questions for netnographic research and recommends asking questions with the words "what" and "how" to communicate the open-ended nature of the research. Hence, the two main research questions that direct this study are:

1. What is involving about OBCs for members?

2. How are members involved with OBCs?

To answer the first research question 'what is involving about OBCs for members?' the following research objectives are pursued:

- To explore the underlying drivers of initial and continued member involvement with OBCs.

- To investigate how members perceive their involvement with the OBC.

In answering the second research question 'how are members involved with OBCs?' the following research objectives are pursued:

- To investigate the characteristics of member involvement.

- To examine if member involvement differs across member types within the OBC.

- To explore if member involvement is similar or different between two distinct OBCs.

The next section provides an outline of the content of the eight chapters that constitute this thesis and in so doing details how each chapter contributes towards facilitating an understanding of the research topic that is an exploration of member involvement with OBCs.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

- Chapter One provides a background to the research and identifies consumer involvement in online settings as an area that is under-researched in the marketing field. The study of member involvement with OBCs is justified as it is anticipated that it will facilitate better understanding of online consumer behaviour namely drivers that appear to prompt consumers to sign-up to and participate in OBCs. Furthermore, it is envisioned that the exploration of online consumer behaviour through the lens of involvement will provide deeper insight into underlying reasons for particular member behaviours in OBC settings.

- Chapter Two introduces and reviews the research setting under exploration in this study that is OBCs. The chapter explains that online communities may be classified, among other

ways, as firm-created or member-initiated which may have important implications for how members behave in the community. The chapter reviews seminal research in relation to OBCs and identifies a gap in the literature with respect to the research topic that is member involvement with OBCs.

- Chapter Three provides a review of the involvement literature. The chapter identifies situational and enduring forms of involvement (Houston and Rothschild, 1978) as a comprehensive means of understanding involvement and identifies hedonic pleasure (Guthrie and Kim, 2009; McQuarrie and Munson, 1987), product importance (Michaelidou and Dibb, 2006; Traylor, 1981), sign value (Kapferer and Laurent, 1993; Mittal and Lee, 1988), personal relevance (Huang, 2006; Mittal and Lee, 1989), perceived risk (Chaudhuri, 2000; Smith and Bristor, 1994) and personal interest (Guthrie and Kim, 2009; Bloch, 1981) as components that are believed to constitute involvement. However, the chapter makes it clear that less is known about forms and components of consumer involvement in online settings such as OBCs. Finally, the chapter proposes that OBCs denote a more recent object of involvement and that many members demonstrate what is termed in this study as online community involvement.

- Chapter Four details the research methodology of this study. The research employs a netnographic methodology to explore member involvement with OBCs. This is a novel methodology to adopt to study involvement as the majority of empirical research employs the survey method to evaluate levels of involvement and their subsequent influence on various consumer behaviours. It is argued that the netnographic methodology is fitting to study involvement as it is possible to observe the behaviours exemplified by members who appear to be involved with OBCs and in so doing gain insight into the display and manifestation of involvement.

- Chapters Five and Six present the analysis of the findings. Findings from the observation data reveal four patterns of behaviour exemplified by members involved in the two OBC sites: (1) seeking and providing functional help in relation to product and/or brand queries, (2) seeking and providing social support in relation to product and/or brand queries, (3) sharing product and/or brand narratives, (4) partaking in the customs and rituals of the OBC. These behaviours are categorised as denoting different types of member involvement that consist of utilitarian, social, ego-related and affective components.

- Chapter seven presents two conceptual models namely the 'Typology of Online Community Involvement' and the 'Journey of Member Involvement with the OBC' which are discussed with the extant literature. The Typology of Online Community Involvement helps to provide insight into the characteristics of member involvement by identifying four components that is utilitarian involvement, social involvement, ego involvement and affective involvement that constitute online community involvement. The different types of member involvement are similar to components of involvement identified but named variously in the existing literature (e.g. Bloch, 1981; Kapferer and Laurent, 1985; Mittal and Lee, 1989; Smith and Bristor, 1994; Guthrie and Kim, 2009). However, the Typology of Online Community Involvement adds to knowledge by providing insight into what constitutes consumer involvement in online settings. The Journey of Member Involvement facilitates understanding into the initiation and development of member involvement with the OBC. This model supports existing literature in terms of the existence of situational and enduring forms of involvement (e.g. Houston and Rothschild) and the influential role of involvement on member behaviour (e.g. Im and Ha, 2011; Yun Yoo, 2011) but adds to the literature by outlining the different pathways that members may follow during their involvement with the OBC.

- Chapter Eight sets out the conclusions and recommendations of the study. The key contribution of the research is the development of the Typology of Online Community Involvement model which provides insight into what constitutes consumer involvement in online settings, an area that is currently under-researched. The model also contributes by facilitating better understanding as to the underlying drivers of consumer behaviour in OBC settings. The chapter also makes recommendations for management focusing in particular on ways of developing and sustaining member involvement with the OBC that is long-term in nature.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter identifies the topic of member involvement with OBCs as a gap in the extant literature. The chapter also shows that the majority of empirical study of involvement to-date has been quantitative in nature. The emphasis on quantitative methods to study involvement may be linked to involvement being described as an unobservable concept (Rothschild, 1984). However, this chapter argues that the emergence of online entities such as OBCs wherein consumers talk about their products and/or brands, seek product and/or brand information make it possible for researchers to observe the display and manifestation of involvement through user generated content and posting history. There is an emerging stream of research investigating member behaviour in online settings but this study is different to previous research to the extent that it explores member behaviour within OBCs through the lens of involvement theory. This research argues that by studying how involvement shapes member behaviour within OBCs deeper insights will be garnered into online consumer behaviour in general. This is because the study of involvement necessitates asking questions such as how is the OBC personally relevant or involving for the individual member in the acting out of particular behaviours and therefore

provides a more developed understanding of the deep-seated factors that prompt online

consumer behaviour in such settings.

CHAPTER TWO – INTRODUCTION TO ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the concept of Online Brand Communities (OBCs) which are the social entities under investigation in this study. The first part of the chapter provides an overview of online communities from initial reservations among researchers to more general acceptance that community may exist through mediated communications that occur in online space. The second part of the chapter reviews the categories for classifying online communities which among other factors may be firm-created or member-initiated. This is important as existing research suggests that depending on if an online community is initiated by a corporate entity or individual consumer may have implications for how members behave within the online community. The third part of the chapter investigates motivations for participating in online communities which based on the extant literature are classified into four types consisting of instrumental value, social value, hedonic value and altruistic value. The final part of the chapter looks at OBCs in particular, the research setting in this study, focusing on extant research in relation to OBCs in order to clarify what is known and where persistent gaps remain with respect to consumer behaviour in such contexts.

2.2 An Overview of Online Communities

In 1993 Howard Rheingold coined the term virtual community to describe "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1993, p.5). The idea that people by partaking in social interactions in virtual space could form communal relationships akin to those of an off-line community was radical at the time. However, by the late 1990s the proliferation of virtual communities was prompted by various components such as: (1) Technological factors in terms of the emergence of networked

computers and an increase in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). (2) Social factors such as the evolving trend for people to gather together in online groups based on a diverse range of interests, referred to by Kozinets (1999, p.253) as "retribalizing". (3) Business-related factors in terms of the growing base of popular management literature expounding the potential of internet communities as a source of economic value for organisations (e.g. Hof, Browder and Elstrom, 1997; Armstrong and Hagel, 1996).

During the early stages of virtual community research the notion that community may exist through mediated communications that take place in a virtual space was intensely debated. Weinreich (1997, Paragraph 1) for instance prompted such debate describing the idea of virtual communities as "wrong" because communities depend on face-to-face interaction and individuals may not get to know one another through mediated social interactions. A similar viewpoint was maintained in the discussion paper 'Utopian Promises – Net Realities' in which the authors argue that though the Internet makes possible a broader range of information exchange this in itself does not constitute community. The authors define community as "a collective of kinship networks which share a common geographic territory, a common history, and a shared valued system, usually rooted in a common religion" (Utopian Promises – Net Realities, 1995, Section 3). Hence, critics of virtual communities seemed to reject the concept due to the remoteness of social interactions and the lack of a physical location.

Supporters of virtual communities on the other hand argued that not all definitions of community in the sociology literature exclude the possibility of virtual community as a new form of community. For example, Jones (1997) contends that sociologists such as Bernard

(1973) guided the way to understanding virtual community when liberating the concept of community from physical space:

> *The distribution of people in dispersed social systems is not only spatial but mental. Some people are in a planetary community; some are in a national community; still others are in a community bounded by their limited interests. The bodies of people might be in one spatial area, but not their social worlds. The concept of locale has little meaning in this context.* (Bernard, 1973 cited by Jones, 1997).

Kendall (2011, p.314) explains that such debate could be reduced down to whether virtual communities constitute "real" or "pseudo" communities and resulted in a "degree of wheel spinning" in the literature as researchers believed it necessary again and again to show that online communities could indeed exist. Subsequently a stream of research emerged that focused on establishing a formal definition of virtual community (e.g. Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Ridings, Gefen and Arinze, 2002; Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999).

Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) combine perspectives from sociology and computer science to identify the metaphysical characteristics that denote virtual community. They emphasize the importance of six factors to virtual community formation: (1) access (ability to communicate with other members), (2) interpersonal knowledge (identifying information in relation to other members), (3) interactive broadcasting (many-to-many communications), (4) breakout and reassemble (discussion of community topics at sub-group and community levels to facilitate bonding in large scale groups), (5) cooling-off mechanisms and civility (time intervals between receiving a message and sending a response to promote politeness), (6) memory (archival of posts to establish a shared culture). This viewpoint attempts to pin down the more abstract factors, facilitated through design of the virtual space, that cultivate community. From a marketing perspective Kozinets (1999) studies the strategic benefits of virtual communities for organisations in terms of, for example, the potential to develop customer relationships with

products and brands. He identifies a specific type of online group called a virtual community of consumption, and defines these as, "affiliate groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity" (Kozinets, 1999, p. 245). This viewpoint champions the idea that virtual communities form around shared interests and in some instances these may be consumption-related.

Ridings, Gefen and Arinze (2002) explore virtual communities from a business information systems viewpoint, specifically investigating how trust effects member intentions to offer and receive information. They define virtual communities as "groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism" (Ridings, Gefen and Arinze, 2002, p. 273). This viewpoint emphasizes the importance of location of the virtual community as it is where members come together to meet and may include chat rooms, bulletin boards, or listserv email programs[1]. In the social psychology field Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) study virtual communities from a motivations perspective, specifically examining reasons for individual and group participation in such online groups. They define virtual communities as "mediated social spaces in the digital environment that allow groups to form and be sustained primarily through ongoing communication processes" (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002, p. 3). This viewpoint stresses social interaction as key to the initiation and continuation of virtual communities. Evidently definitions of virtual community vary but it seems that components related to the design of the virtual community, shared interest of members in the community

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[1] Recent research expands the location of virtual community by including spaces dedicated to "content-sites such as Flickr and YouTube" and "social interaction platforms such as Facebook" (Nov, Naaman and Ye, 2010, p. 555).

topic, development of a communal virtual space and member interaction are central to the manifestation of community through the Internet.

By the early 2000s the term online started to replace virtual as a prefix to describe community that forms in online settings (Warnick, 2010). It is possible that this change in terminology was activated by researchers such as Watson (1997, p.129) who argued that labelling online communities as virtual is misleading as it suggests that they are somehow "unreal" that is "what happens online is *like* a community, but isn't *really* a community". Given growing agreement from the mid 2000s that community may exist online research emphasis started to focus on investigating member motivations for joining online communities, (e.g. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008; Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007) and member behaviours within such online collectives (e.g. Jayanti and Singh, 2010; Füller, Jawecki and Mühlbacher, 2007). Research focus in the marketing field concentrates on investigating various aspects of consumer behaviour in online consumption communities. Breitsohl, Kunz and Dowell (2015) classify online consumption communities as either dedicated to a singular brand, such as, Sloan, Bodey and Gyrd-Jones's (2015) study of knowledge sharing in OBCs that form through Facebook Pages dedicated to the cruise-liner brand P&O, or a more generic consumption activity, such as, Kozinets *et al.* (2010) study of word-of-mouth marketing in blog forums dedicated to fashion and sports. The next section reviews how online communities, in general, are classified in the literature.

2.3 Classification of Online Communities

Online communities may be classified, among other types, into those that are hosted by commercial firms and those that are member-initiated. Teichmann *et al.* (2015, p. 341) explain

that online communities hosted by commercial firms have been described variously as "company-hosted", "firm-sponsored" or "company-initiated". Adjei, Noble and Noble (2010) found that enabling customers to get to know the firm more fully through peer-to-peer interactions within the online community benefits the firm through the development of customer relationships even if negative information is disseminated. Pagani, Hofacker and Goldsmith (2011) explain that firms also derive value from customer-to-customer processes that take place in online communities. For example, Hewlett-Packard provides technical support to customers through its online community and in so doing creates value for the firm by reducing support costs. Microsoft, on the other hand, allows customers to test product prototypes in its online community and as a result creates value for the firm by increasing customer input in product development and minimising market research costs. In some cases firms initiate online communities that are not directly related to the brand and instead focus on facilitating "peer-to-peer problem solving for consumption related experiences" (Teichmann *et al.*, 2015, p. 341). For example, Lonely Planet hosts an online community called Thorn Tree in which members exchange travel information and advice.

However, in the greater number of instances online communities come about when individual members come together to discuss shared interests and develop social networks (Ridings, Gefen and Arinze, 2006). Teichmann *et al.* (2015, p. 342) explain that these have been described in different ways such as "consumer-hosted" or "member-initiated" online communities. One such example is iLounge[2], an online community dedicated to Apple products which was founded by a fan of the Apple brand and currently consists of almost a quarter of a million members and receives 20 million page visits per month. Another example

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[2] http://www.ilounge.com/index.php/ilounge/aboutus

of a member-initiated online community is Chef Talk[3] which was founded by a cooking hobbyist and currently consists of a membership of just over 65,000 members and contains a repository of half a million posts. In comparing company-initiated to member-initiated online communities Fournier and Avery (2011, p.195) explain that a challenge for the former is relinquishing "brand control" to members. For example, company-initiated online communities often monitor the site and remove posts about product weaknesses or negative comments about the brand (Jang *et al.*, 2008). Hence, member-initiated online communities are perceived by many consumers to be more credible (Shang, Chen and Liao, 2006).

2.4 Motivations for Participation in Online Communities

The concept of value is important to digital marketing strategy as it is perceived as a prerequisite to satisfaction, loyalty and increased time spent in online communities (Seraj, 2012). Hence, over the last few years there has been an increase in research studying value derived from online communities, specifically by focusing on motivations for joining, and participating in, such groups (e.g. Teichmann *et al.*, 2015; Yen, Hsu and Huang, 2011; Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007). Based on a review of the literature Table 2.1 classifies motivations to participate in online communities into four value-related categories: (1) instrumental value, (2) social value, (3) hedonic value, (4) altruistic value. These four value-related categories as to why members sign-up to and contribute in online communities are next reviewed.

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[3] http://www.cheftalk.com/

Table 2.1 Motivations for Participation in Online Communities

Author / Year	Instrumental Value	Social Value	Hedonic Value	Altruistic Value
Teichmann *et al.* (2015)	Opinion leadership	Self-Presentation	Enjoyment	Altruism
Tsai and Bagozzi (2014)		Social identity		
Seraj (2012)	Intellectual value	Social value	Emotional entertainment	
Yen, Hsu and Huang (2011)	Self-Enhancement, Rewards, Problem-Solving Support			Co-operative norms
Nov, Naaman and Ye (2010)	Self-development	Reputation building	Enjoyment	Commitment to the online community
Dholakia *et al.* (2009)	Functional benefits	Social benefits		
Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008)	Reassurance for quality of products, High involvement with the branded product category	Opportunity for joint consumption, Brand's symbolic function	Opportunity for joint consumption, High involvement with the branded product category	
Woisetschläger, Hartleb, Blut (2008)	Community satisfaction	Social identity		
Wiertz and de Ruyter (2007)	Informational value			Commitment to the online community
Algesheimer, Dholakia and Hermann (2005)		Brand community identification		

Source: Adapted from Teichmann *et al.*, 2015, p. 344

1. **Instrumental Value**

Instrumental value refers to functional benefits gained from participating in online communities. Functional benefits arise as a result of the exchange of information and knowledge that takes place between members in the online community. In some instances this is associated with information-based support (Dholakia *et al.*, 2009) or problem-solving support (Yen, Hsu and Huang, 2011) in which members receive help with queries such as pre-purchase decision making or product related problems. For many members achieving an instrumental goal such as receiving help with a purchase or product query is posited as a primary motive for signing-up to, and continued participation in, an online community (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007; Dholakia, Bagozzi and Klein Pearo, 2004).

Functional benefits may also refer to the intellectual value of the collective (Seraj, 2012), arising from the varying degrees of expertise of members. For example, co-created knowledge, such as members' interpretation and discussion of news related to the community topic, and quality of user-generated content, facilitated by screening of posts by moderators and the removal of duplicated or irrelevant content, are examples of ways that an online community may provide intellectual value (Seraj, 2012). Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) are more specific with respect to motives for participation. To be exact they posit "reassurance of quality for products" and "high involvement with the branded product category" as motives for participation (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder 2008, p. 574) which to a large extent are fulfilled by product information available through brand communities and therefore may be categorised as instrumental value provided by such collectives.

Teichmann *et al.* (2015) and Nov, Naaman and Ye (2010) consider motives for participation in online communities from the viewpoint of why members share information and knowledge in such collectives. Nov, Naaman and Ye (2010, p. 558) identify self-development which refers to "expected rewards in the form of learning and improvement of skills" as motives for information sharing in an online photo-sharing community. However, they found that even though self-development motivated experienced users to contribute more in photo-sharing online communities it had the reverse effect on new users. They propose this is because new users are more cautious when contributing content and make recommendations for community managers to try to encourage "tentative contributions" that are labelled, in the case of photo-sharing online communities, as "work in progress" (Nov, Naaman and Ye, 2010, p.565). Teichmann *et al.* (2015), on the other hand, identify opinion leadership as a motive for participating in leisure-related online communities. They explain that as opinion leaders are "experts in the focal community topic" they attempt to "spread their knowledge to influence others" in the community in order to achieve some self-related benefits such as self-enhancement (Teichmann *et al.*, 2015, p. 343). Finally, Woisetschläger, Hartleb and Blut (2008) propose a more general concept that is community satisfaction as an antecedent for participating in online brand communities. This may be categorised as instrumental value as it relates to the fulfilment of the member's needs which in part may be satisfied by functional benefits arising from the exchange of information and knowledge between members in the online community.

2. Social Value

Social value refers to social benefits derived from participating in online communities. Membership of an online community enables social benefits in terms of the opportunity for members to interact and connect with others. In studies of virtual communities social identity is conceptualised as a driver of participation (Woisetschläger, Hartleb and Blut, 2008). Social identity is defined as "the perception of belonging to a group with the result that the person identifies with that group" (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn, 1995, p. 47). Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann (2005, p. 20) describe identification as a categorisation process in which the consumer "formulates and maintains a self-awareness of his or her membership within the community, emphasizing the perceived similarities with other community members and dissimilarities with non-members". Members of brand communities are prompted to identify with the community due to the "brands symbolic function" or brand identity (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008, p. 574). This identification process helps foster "consciousness-of-kind" that is the shared connection that members of the community feel towards one another and is characterised as a necessary condition for community (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 413). It is likely that social value is derived from a psychological sense of community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) that is the feeling of belonging to the group which in this context arises as a result of identifying with the online community.

Other studies emphasize the importance of social interactivity between members of the collective, labelled variously as social benefits (Dholakia *et al.*, 2009) or social value (Seraj, 2012), as a reason for continued participation in online communities. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008, p. 574) allude to social interaction when they identify "opportunity for joint consumption", referring to products that are consumed jointly, such as board games

and sports contests, as a motive to join a brand community. Social interaction lays the foundation for the formation of social ties between members of the online community (Gordon, 2010). Social value is created as social ties between members develop, for example, via joint problem solving and content sharing, and help not only foster friendships between members but also loyalty towards the online community (Seraj, 2012).

Finally, self-presentation (Teichmann *et al.*, 2015) and reputation building (Nov, Naaman and Ye, 2010) are also identified as motives for participation in online communities. Such displays of self-identity are often driven by attempts at seeking favourable responses from others and therefore provide social value as members may gain status within the collective. Dholakia *et al.* (2009) found that the ability for individual members in peer-to-peer problem solving communities to build and share their reputation, through user titles and post ratings, had a positive impact on identification with the community. They explain this is because members are likely to feel a strong sense of belonging to an online community in which they are respected.

3. Hedonic Value

Hedonic value refers to hedonic benefits, such as enjoyment, fun and entertainment, derived from participating in online communities. Existing research posits enjoyment as a motivating reason for information-sharing in open-content projects such as Wikipedia (e.g. Nov, 2007) and online photo-sharing communities such as Flickr (e.g. Nov, Naaman and Ye, 2010). Wasko and Faraj (2000) describe participation in online communities as fun in general and note that many individuals participate because they enjoy learning and sharing with others. Hence, it can be argued that motives such as "opportunity for joint consumption" (Ouwersloot and

Odekerken-Schröder, 2008, p. 574) which is associated with social value, may also provide members with hedonic value, in terms of enjoyment gained from experiencing products jointly with others. Similarly, motives such as "high involvement with the branded product category" (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008, p. 574), which is linked to instrumental value in terms of information derived from the online community, may also be a source of hedonic value, as members derive pleasure from learning new product information about the product category.

Seraj's (2012) study of an online aviation community found that some interactions exhibit characteristics of interaction rituals. Collins (2004) describes interactions rituals as social encounters wherein individuals are subject to collective effervescence that is they experience the same feeling or partake in the same action. He identifies four conditions necessary for interaction rituals to occur that include: (1) group assembly, (2) barriers to outsiders, (3) focus of attention, and (4) shared mood. Seraj (2012) explains that collective effervescence in the online community is apparent among other things by the use of emoticons to pass on feelings in threads or the shared energy of conversations in threads. She proposes that hedonic value is derived from interactions in online communities that cultivate this form of emotional entertainment. In addition to being a trigger for heightened interactivity within online communities emotional entertainment is also hypothesized as a motive for continued participation in such collectives (Seraj, 2012). Finally, Teichmann *et al.* (2015) suggest that members who derive enjoyment from participating in the online community try to contribute more content to the social collective in an attempt to achieve exchange equity.

4. Altruistic Value

Altruistic value refers to altruistic benefits derived from participating in online communities. Three factors relating to "ethnocentrism" (the propensity for people to prefer their own group over others), "cognitive moral development" (the manner in which individuals, over time, gain an understanding of their moral obligations) and "altruistic behaviour" (behaviour enacted to benefit another without expectation of external rewards) establish the basis for understanding altruistic motivations (Powers and Hopkins, 2013, p. 96). Incidents of absolute altruism (lack of self-concern motivating altruistic behaviours) are infrequent and relative altruism (small degree of self-concern motivating altruistic behaviours) are more common (Smith, 1981). In the study of online communities altruism is understood to be a motivating factor for participation (e.g. Teichmann *et al.*, 2015; Breitsohl, Dowell and Kunz, 2013; Yen, Hsu and Huang, 2011; Wang and Lai, 2006) and members derive altruistic benefits that is internal rewards for the sake of the activity itself (Wasko and Faraj, 2005), such as enjoyment from helping others (Kankanhalli, Tan and Wei, 2005). In some studies altruism appears to be synonymous with commitment to the online community as it is described as "the desire to help others" and found to be a motive for member participation (Nov, Naaman and Ye, 2010, p. 558; Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007).

Findings in relation to the influence of altruism on posting behaviour in online communities is not clear-cut. For example, Teichmann *et al.* (2015) found altruism had a negative effect on content contribution in leisure-related online communities. However, through further qualitative research they found that this was linked to the research context as the focus of the community topic was leisure-related and therefore altruism, in this instance, not only included helping others but also consciously not providing information. For example, displays of

altruism in this case entailed withholding information about "dangerous personal achievements" in order to "prevent mimicry" or creating a "negative atmosphere in the community" (Teichmann *et al.*, 2015, p. 351). Moreover, altruistic motives appear to differ between company-hosted and member-initiated online communities as member recognition of the benefits the firm gains from their participation seems to lead to weaker altruistic motives (Lee, Kim and Kim, 2011). Finally, Teichmann *et al.* (2015, p. 347) hypothesize that in online communities when one party in the "exchange relationship benefits more than the other" the effect of an "altruistic orientation" could lessen.

Teichmann *et al.* (2015, p. 343) adapt Holbrook's (1996) framework of customer value to understand the "motivational drivers of content contribution" in online communities. In so doing Teichmann *et al.*'s (2015) typology for participation in online communities consists of two dimensions: (1) self- versus other-oriented value, and (2) extrinsic versus intrinsic drivers. Self-oriented value refers to community participation that is directed at self, such as, self-development through learning from community content. Other-oriented value, on the other hand, refers to community participation that is directed at others, such as, sharing information in order to help others in the community. Extrinsic drivers are concerned with achieving some "higher end purpose", such as, utilitarian or functional benefits from participating in the online community whereas intrinsic drivers are "ends in themselves", such as, pleasure derived simply from participating in the online community (Teichmann *et al.*, 2015, p. 342).

By adopting Teichmann *et al.*' s (2015) classification system it is possible to classify the four types of community value identified in Table 2.1 that is instrumental value, social value, hedonic value and altruistic value. It appears that instrumental value is self-oriented and

extrinsic as members seek functional benefits in the form of information and advice from the community which facilitates learning from expertise provided by the community. Social value is other-oriented and extrinsic as members use the community to interact and connect with others and through social ties formed with others gain a sense of belonging to the community. Hedonic value is self-oriented and intrinsic as members participate in the community because it is fun and entertaining to do so which is an end in itself. Altruistic value is other-orientated and intrinsic as members participate to help others and gain enjoyment from doing so. It is noteworthy that existing studies also consider individual attributes such as technology readiness (Yen, Hsu and Huang, 2011) and online interaction propensity (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007) as important factors to understanding the individual's general predisposition to participate in web environments such as an online community. The remaining part of the chapter focuses in particular on understanding Online Brand Communities (OBCs) as they are the research context under investigation in this study.

2.5 Understanding Online Brand Communities

In 2001 Muñiz and O'Guinn introduced the concept of brand community. This was a novel idea at the time because up to this point community had rarely been studied from a consumer behaviour perspective. They defined brand community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). In this instance community is described as specialized because it is dedicated to a particular branded good or service and non-geographic because in addition to not being restricted to a physical place it can also manifest itself through web-mediated environments, thereby including a multitude of consumer members. They propose that brand communities are inclined to form around brands with a strong image, an extensive

history, and active competitors. Moving forward studies that are seminal to developing an understanding of the concept of OBCs are reviewed and current gaps that remain in the literature with respect to consumer behaviour in such entities are identified.

Through study of off-line and online brand communities Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 413) found evidence of three markers of community that is "consciousness of kind", "rituals and traditions" and "'moral responsibility". However, they noted differences in the expression of the three markers of community due to particularities of being a community dedicated to a brand. They describe consciousness of kind as "we-ness" (Bender, 1978 cited by Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 418) that is a deep-rooted connection members feel towards one another. In the brand community context Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) propose that consciousness of kind is apparent by, for instance, displays of oppositional brand loyalty through which members make clear the brand's values and what they attach importance to as devotees to the brand.

Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) refer to rituals and traditions as social practices that maintain the community's culture and consciousness. With respect to brand communities they found that rituals and traditions may include sharing brand stories that essentially endow the brand with meaning and foster connections between members of the community. Lastly, they describe moral responsibility as the sense of duty or obligation that members feel to the community as whole and to individual members in the community. Moral responsibility in a brand community context they found manifests itself by assisting other members in the use of the brand by, for example, sharing specialist knowledge to provide help with product repair. This study is significant as it grounded both off-line and web mediated brand communities as a

representation of a particular type of community and, in so doing, establishes the characteristics of brand community.

McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) extended the concept of brand community by investigating the different types of relationships that exist in such collectives. Through ethnographic study of Jeep and Harley-Davidson brandfests[4] they proposed a customer-centric model of brand community that identifies four types of relationships that emerge in such settings to include: customer-product, customer-brand, customer-company and customer-customer. Findings from the study reveal that perceptions of the customer-product relationship vary depending on the individual member's experience with their vehicle. For instance, brandfest participation for neophytes appeared to foster positive feelings toward their vehicle as they learn new capabilities about their vehicle or have their first off-road driving experience with their vehicle. By contrast, brandfest participation for experienced owners appeared to arouse feelings of dissatisfaction with their vehicle as they learn new information about engineering improvements of new models which seemed to make them want to upgrade their vehicle.

McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) found that brandfest participation lead to strengthening of the customer-brand relationship apparent, for example, by members' enthusiasm to purchase branded vehicle accessories at such events. Brandfest participation was also found to lead to a more positive relationship with the brand's corporate entity with

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[4] A brandfest is a corporate sponsored brand event such as Jeep Jamboree which is a brand event organised by the American division of the Jeep brand that is made up of regional rallies that focus on off-road driving (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002, p. 41).

members impressed, for instance, that Jeep could host brand events such as Jeep 101[5] without attempting to use sales tactics. Finally, brandfest participation was shown to lead to more positive relationships with fellow brand owners. The customer-centric community model is significant as it expands the concept of brand community from a social gathering of brand users to a more complex web of relationships that may exist between customer-product, customer-brand, customer-company and customer-customer.

Schau and Muñiz's (2002) investigation of brand community focused on the individual member, specifically identity expression in computer-mediated brand communities. Sample selection consisted of web pages created by individual users and clubs only that is no commercial brand sites were included possibly to ensure that expressions of brand devotion were self-directed rather than influenced by the brand corporation. Findings from the study revealed four different relationships between individual identity and community membership: (1) subsumed identity, (2) super member, (3) community membership as identity component, (4) multiple memberships. Subsumed identity refers to instances in which the individual member totally subsumes their identity in the community apparent for example by greater frequency and prominence of references to the brand rather than reference to individual self. Super membership refers to instances in which the individual member is legitimate in his/her appreciation of the brand and shows authority that is demonstrates brand-related expertise. Community membership as identity component refers to cases in which the individual member's identity overshadows membership of the community, apparent by inferring ownership over the brand, evident by the example, "Mark's Macs" which is a web page created by a fan of the Macintosh brand (Schau and Muñiz, 2002, p. 347). Multiple memberships refers

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[5] Jeep 101 is an off-road driving course (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002, p. 41).

to cases when individual members are members of multiple brand communities. This study is significant as it not only demonstrates the central role of the brand to identity expression in web-mediated brand communities but also shows that members do not simply appropriate the values of the community when self-presenting and that different types of fan identity may exist in such brand related entities.

Up to the early 2000's research focused on the positives of membership of brand communities for individual members (e.g. Muñiz and Schau, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002). Hence, Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann's (2005) study is significant because it identified both positive and negative outcomes arising as a result of brand community identification. They found that normative pressure, an extrinsic obligation to conform to the brand community's norms and rituals lead to reactance, a motivational state of resistance, and that both factors negatively influenced individual member's intentions to participate. They propose that perceptions of normative pressure and reactance arise from "conspicuous public behaviours" and therefore something that members who are highly engaged with the community may experience (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005, p. 31). For example, if an individual member takes on a leadership role in an OBC it is likely that their self-expectations heighten as they become more aware of what other members think they should do in order to fulfil their role duties. This study is significant as it suggests that participation in brand communities may not be as clear-cut as expected and it emphasizes the influence of the social aspect of such brand communities on member behaviour.

To an extent members of a brand community are homogenous as they are admirers of the brand. However, Ouwersloot and Odererken-Schröder (2008) argue that members of such collectives

are heterogeneous based on their consumption-related reasons to join the brand community. They identify four types of members consisting of "enthusiasts", "users", "behind-the-scenes" and "not-me" (Ouwersloot and Odererken-Schröder, 2008, p. 578) and find support for McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig's (2002) customer-centric model of brand community as each member type varies depending on their relationship with the product, the brand, the company behind the brand and other members in the brand community. This study is significant for two reasons. First, the presence of a not-me cohort in the brand communities, who scored lowed across all four constructs in terms of their relationship with the product, the brand, the brand's management and other customers, is somewhat unexpected. The presence of such a cohort who seem not interested in the brand community suggests that member involvement in such settings is not as straightforward as expected and therefore warrants further research (Ouwersloot and Odererken-Schröder, 2008). Second, in the two brand communities under investigation, relationships with the product and the brand rated the highest scores across respondents. It is surprising that despite the concept of community being a social aggregation that the brand communities studied in this instance emphasized the significance of brand-related elements, not social-related factors, such as the company or other customers, and this also merits further investigation.

By the mid 2000's there was agreement that value is co-created in brand communities but there remained a dearth of research that attempted to generalise value creating activities across such brand gatherings. Based on a netnographic study of nine brand communities Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009) identified 4 value-creating categories that include: (1) social networking, (2) impression management, (3) community engagement, (4) brand use. Social networking refers to practices that concentrate on creating, enhancing and sustaining ties among members of the brand community. These practices include "welcoming" which refers to greeting new

members, "empathising" or offering emotional support to others and "governing" that is making clear behavioural expectations within the brand community (Schau, Muñiz and Arnould, 2009, p. 36). Impression management is associated with practices that have an "outward focus on creating a favourable impression of the brand, brand enthusiasts, and brand community in the social universe" (Schau, Muñiz and Arnould, 2009, p.34). Such practices include "evangelizing" that is speaking well of the brand and "justifying" or providing reasons for devoting time and effort to the brand (Schau, Muñiz and Arnould, 2009, p. 36).

Community engagement refers to practices that reinforce members' heightened engagement with the brand community. These include "staking" that is making distinctions regarding members specific domain of participation, "milestoning" or noting important events in brand ownership or consumption, "badging" that is transforming milestones into symbols by, for example, uploading photos of milestone events, and "documenting" or noting events in the brand relationship through narrative (Schau, Muñiz and Arnould, 2009, p. 36). Finally, brand use is connected with practices that focus on improved or enhanced use of the brand. Such practices include "grooming" that is caring for the brand, "customising" or modifying the brand and "commoditising" that is moving the brand towards or away from the marketplace (Schau, Muñiz and Arnould, 2009, p. 36). Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009) conceptualise that the different practices create value by engendering brand use and fostering deeper community engagement. They suggest that practices operate like apprenticeships and through "progressive appropriation of practices" newcomers to the community are moulded into members (Schau, Muñiz and Arnould, 2009, p. 41). This study is significant as it provides a generalised framework for understanding value-creating practices within brand community settings.

2.6   Gap in Online Brand Community Literature

In this study member involvement is defined as the perceived relevance of the OBC to the individual member. It is argued that extant research infers that members perceive OBCs as personally relevant or involving apparent by, for instance, the range of motivations for participation (e.g. Teichmann *et al.*, 2015), and value-creating practices (e.g. Schau, Muñiz, Arnould, 2009), in such settings. Despite the continued stream of research that investigates various aspects of member participation in OBC settings (e.g. Agag and El-Masry, 2016; Casaló, Flavián and Guinalíu, 2013; Bateman, Gray and Butler, 2011) there appears to be a lack of research specifically exploring member involvement within such contexts. Essentially, this entails seeking to find out, what is involving about OBCs for members and how are members involved with OBCs.

Existing research identifies the web of relationships that exist in brand communities that is customer-product,   customer-brand,   customer-company   and   customer-customer (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002) but it is not clear the role that different forms of involvement such as brand involvement or product involvement impart on such interactions in OBC settings. Other studies shed insight into different aspects of participation in brand communities such as identity expression (Schau and Muñiz, 2002) and normative community pressure (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Hermann, 2005) but as of yet it seems no link has been made between such concepts and member involvement, for example, it is possible that identity expression could be understood as representing a particular type of member involvement in the OBC? Finally, Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) identification of a not-me member cohort, who appear not interested in the brand community, suggests that involvement in such collectives may not be clear-cut and they recommend further research, looking specifically at

the role of involvement, to provide a deeper understanding of member cohorts in such brand collectives.

2.7 Conclusion

Despite the growing base of literature in the marketing field dedicated to OBCs there still remains much to investigate about consumer behaviour in these online settings. Specifically there is a lack of research investigating member involvement with OBCs which is surprising especially as existing research seems to hint at the central role of different objects of involvement such as the brand, the product category and the community group itself to participation in such settings. This study argues that member involvement drives participation within OBC settings as it is mainly during instances in which the individual member finds the OBC personally relevant or involving to them that they prompted to participate in the brand community. It is proposed that by exploring member behaviour within OBCs through the lens of member involvement deeper insights will be gained into why individual members sign-up and continue to participate within OBC settings. The following chapter conducts a theoretical review of the concept of consumer involvement which is the lens through which member behaviour in OBC settings is explored in this research.

CHAPTER THREE - LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the concept of Online Brand Community (OBC) which is the research setting under investigation in this study. It also identified member involvement with OBCs as an area that appears not yet researched in the consumer behaviour literature. The purpose of this chapter is to conduct a theoretical review of the concept of involvement. This is important as involvement theory is the lens through which member behaviour in OBCs is explored in this study. The first part of the chapter provides an overview of the development of involvement research in the marketing field and in so doing identifies gaps that persist in the literature. Following on from this the chapter reviews two forms of involvement identified in the literature, enduring involvement and situational involvement, and considers how these may be exemplified by members in OBC settings. The next part of the chapter reviews the components that are believed to denote involvement, namely hedonic pleasure, product importance, sign value, personal relevance, perceived risk and personal interest, and examines how they may rouse member involvement in OBC settings. Following on from this the chapter takes a closer examination of concepts that are perceived to be related to involvement, specifically commitment and engagement in order to add clarity about the distinctiveness of involvement. The final part of the chapter explains how involvement is applied in this study to explore member behaviour in OBC settings.

3.2 Evolution of Involvement Research

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of how involvement research has evolved since its initial application to the field of marketing in the mid 1960s. This is important not only to provide understanding as to how involvement has been defined and operationalised to

gain insight into consumer behaviour but also to show persistent gaps that remain with respect to the study of involvement within the marketing field. The concept of involvement was first applied to the marketing field by Krugman (1965) to better understand the effects of advertising on consumers. He identified two different ways of experiencing and being influenced by advertising typified by a lack of personal involvement and a high degree of personal involvement. The condition of high personal involvement is defined as "the number of conscious bridging experiences, connections, or personal references per minute that the viewer makes between his own life and the stimulus" (Krugman, 1965, p. 355). He hypothesized that information processes followed different routes depending on high or low involvement with the advertisement. Krugman's (1965) study was significant for two reasons: firstly, it signalled the potential of involvement as an important mediator of consumer behaviour and thereby established the foundation for a new domain of study in the marketing field, and secondly, the notion of low personal involvement seriously challenged the cognitive viewpoint of consumer decision-making research prevalent at the time.

The 1970s and 1980s represented a period of heightened interest in the concept of involvement in the marketing field with studies mainly conceptual in nature and focused on defining and operationalising involvement. During that era involvement was defined or conceptualised in numerous ways, for instance, as a trait demonstrated by the price conscious consumer's interest in a product category (e.g. Kassarjian, 1981), as an internal state variable expressed by the amount of arousal or interest evoked by a stimulus or situation (e.g. Mitchell, 1979), as a process shown by the amount of effort expended during information processing (e.g. Petty and Cacioppo, 1981), and as personal relevance demonstrated by the importance of an object based on inherent needs, values and interests (e.g. Zaichkowsky, 1985). Involvement was also applied to study various stimulus objects and different aspects of behaviour, such as, product

involvement (e.g. Mittal and Lee, 1989), personal involvement (e.g. Zaichkowsky, 1985), advertising involvement (e.g. Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984), task involvement (e.g. Tyebjee, 1979), purchase involvement (e.g. Antil, 1984), and purchase-decision involvement (Mittal, 1989). Michaelidou and Dibb (2008) explain that the diversity of conceptualisations and measurements of involvement during this era exacerbated the confusion in understanding involvement in the marketing field.

In 1978 Houston and Rothschild distinguished between three different forms of involvement that include enduring involvement, situational involvement and response involvement. Enduring involvement refers to the strength of the "pre-existing relationship" between the individual and the stimulus object such as a product (Houston and Rothschild, 1978, p. 183). Situational involvement describes the "ability of a situation" such as the purchase decision to elicit concern from the individual in relation to their behaviour during that situation (Houston and Rothschild, 1978, p. 184). Response involvement describes involvement in terms of the individual's "response pattern" to the stimulus object such as information processing during an advertisement (Houston and Rothschild, 1978, p. 184). This paper made a significant contribution to the study of involvement as Houston and Rothschild (1978) essentially developed a holistic system for classifying involvement. Though initial application of the three forms of involvement was gradual, over time, it generally was accepted and eventually formed the basis for Laaksonen's (1994) classification of consumer involvement as consisting of cognitive-based definitions, individual-state definitions and response-based definitions.

By the mid 1980's research attention started to focus on developing a standardised measure of involvement. There are two main scales that attempt to measure involvement in the marketing

field, specifically the Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) developed by Zaichkowsky (1985) and the Consumer Involvement Profile (CIP) developed by Laurent and Kapferer (1985). Zaichkowsky (1984, p. 342) conceptualises involvement as the "person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests". This conceptualisation of involvement corresponds with the social psychology field, from which involvement originates, as it constitutes factors that are related to the individual's ego. The initial PII measurement used a semantic differential scale consisting of 20 items such as important-unimportant and irrelevant-relevant to represent personal relevance, and levels of involvement were measured, ranging from low to medium to high, depending on the total score of the semantic differential scale. Later Zaichkowsky (1994) revised the PII scale to remove items that were connected to measuring attitudes, such as beneficial-not beneficial and valuable-worthless, and adopted Park and Young's (1986) conceptualisation of cognitive and affective involvement to develop the operationalisation of personal relevance.

Kapferer and Laurent (1985, p.49), on the other hand, employed a different approach to studying involvement and argued that involvement is a "hypothetical construct" and therefore cannot be directly measured but only implied by the "presence or absence, and intensity" of its proposed antecedents. For this reason they suggest it is more useful to think of involvement as an arousal or motivational state that is prompted by one or more of the following antecedents: "interest", "perceived risk" (consisting of two components of risk importance and risk probability), "perceived pleasure value" and "perceived sign value" (Kapferer and Laurent, 1985, p.50). Kapferer and Laurent's (1985) CIP scale helped provide insight into the nature of involvement, specifically in terms of how it may vary across product categories. For example, in testing the scale Kapferer and Laurent (1985) found perfume and vacuum cleaners rated as high involving due to pleasure value and perceived risk respectively. The CIP scale provided a

means of segmenting customers within a particular product category based on their ratings of the different antecedents of involvement. The PII and CIP scales made a significant contribution to the study of involvement in two ways; firstly, they provided a tool to segment consumers based on their level of involvement with a particular stimulus object and secondly, they provided insight into the content of involvement, specifically factors, such as, personal relevance, perceived risk, that were hypothesized as stimulating involvement. Following the development of the PII and CIP scales there was growth in research dedicated to testing, refining and applying scales to measure consumers level of involvement with various stimulus objects (e.g. Reinecke Flynn and Goldsmith, 1993; Jensen, Carlson and Tripp, 1989; Mittal and Lee, 1988; McQuarrie and Munson, 1987).

Extant empirical research dedicated to involvement is primarily quantitative in nature and focuses on investigating the impact of involvement at different levels of generality, such as, the product category or the purchase of a product on various consumer behaviours in off-line and online settings. For example, Sanchez-Franco and Rondan-Cataluña (2010) investigate the moderating role of purchase involvement on the relationship between design variables and user satisfaction in virtual travel communities. Results of the study found that low purchase involved users did not exert effort performing goal-oriented tasks, such as, searching for specific information linked to a purchase query but rather expended time undertaking lurking activities, such as, cursory analysis of content and therefore the visual aesthetics of the site proved important in understanding such users satisfaction with the virtual travel community. High purchase involved users, on the other hand, search for cues linked to their purchase decision in order to make the appropriate destination choice and therefore seek and share travel related information and tips. Hence, the usability of the site in terms of enabling high purchase involved users to achieve their goals is likely to lead to increased satisfaction and ultimately

heighten the perceived benefit of long-term relations with the virtual travel community. In this case the concept of high and low purchase involvement is helpful towards providing insight into how users participate and derive satisfaction within a virtual travel community setting.

Despite the extensive amount of research in the marketing field investigating the impact of involvement on various consumer behaviours questions still remain with respect to fundamental aspects of involvement. For example, there appears to be a sizable gap in understanding with respect to what creates and nurtures enduring involvement (Bloch, Commuri, Arnold, 2009). This study endeavours to address this gap by employing a qualitative methodology through the use of netnography to study involvement and by seeking to understand the manifestation and development of involvement within an online setting. It is envisioned that the employment of an observational method to study involvement along with the specific research focus on gaining insight into deep-seated aspects of involvement will contribute to understanding of involvement in the marketing field.

3.3 Forms of Involvement

Much of the empirical study of involvement in the marketing field investigates enduring and situational forms of involvement only (e.g. Slater and Armstrong, 2010; Kyle *et al.*¸2007; Knox, Walker and Marshall, 1994; Mittal and Lee, 1989; Richins and Bloch, 1986; Kassarjian, 1981). There are reservations about the suitability of the response form of involvement to study consumer behaviour and this is because it treats involvement as a mental or behavioural response pattern (Laaksonen, 1994). To be precise response involvement may be understood as the complexity or extensiveness of cognitive and behavioural processes during information search and decision-making processes (Muncy and Hunt, 1984). High response involvement represents situations where the individual is highly active and searches for information to make

the optimum product choice; low response involvement on the other hand reflects relatively passive choice situations where the individual expends minimal physical and psychological effort (Muncy and Hunt, 1984). Laaksonen (1994, p.63) explains that according to the response-based definitions "involvement is not seen as a mediating variable influencing the predisposition to respond or the response directly, but rather involvement is viewed as an actualized response in itself". This causes serious issues for the study of involvement as it is not possible under this viewpoint of involvement to determine if certain behaviours such as minimal information search or repetitive purchasing behaviour are for reasons of low response involvement or simply due to the consumer's familiarity with purchasing what they perceive as a high involvement product. For example, a consumer's weekly purchase of a particular type of breakfast cereal may be classified as low response involvement; however, if the particular type of breakfast cereal is unavailable in the store the consumer may dedicate a greater amount of time and effort to finding a substitute or visit another store to find the particular breakfast cereal, types of behaviours that would be classified as high response involvement. Hence, this viewpoint of involvement as a mental or behavioural response pattern is misleading, especially if there are changes in the purchase environment which more clearly demonstrate the personal meaning of the product to the consumer.

Given this study explores behaviours exemplified by members involved within OBC settings it could be argued that it constitutes a study of the response form of involvement. This is not the case for two reasons. First, the researcher takes the position that involvement is a mediator of consumer behaviour and makes the argument that due to consumer usage of online platforms such as OBCs it is possible nowadays to study involvement using different methods and sources of information in this case by observing the behaviours displayed by members involved within OBCs settings. Second, the focus of this research is to explore the general behaviours

of members involved within OBCs settings in order to gain insight into the characteristics of member involvement rather than, for instance, seeking to classify members into levels of response involvement based on the identification of a set of response patterns during specific behaviours such as seeking product related information. The following sub-sections review in more detail the enduring and situational forms of involvement as they are employed in this study to explore member involvement within OBC settings.

3.3.1 Enduring Involvement

Enduring involvement refers to the individual's ongoing interest in the stimulus object such as a product (Bloch, Commuri and Arnold, 2009; Higie and Feick, 1989; Richins and Bloch, 1986). Houston and Rothschild (1978) explain that enduring involvement is shaped by two factors: (1) the personal relevance of the stimulus object to the individual, and (2) the individual's prior experience with the stimulus object. Personal relevance refers to the psychological link between the individual's centrally held values and the stimulus object. The notion of personal relevance closely corresponds with Sherif and Cantril's (1947) conceptualisation of ego-involvement in the social psychology field. They describe ego-involvement as the extent to which a social issue is important to the individual's self-concept. Laaksonen (1994, pp. 26-28) explains that in the consumer behaviour literature the psychological tie between the individual and stimulus object has been described in different ways including: (1) the "object-related cognitive structure"[6] whereby involvement represents the "strength or extent of the cognitive structure" (e.g. Zaichkowsky, 1985; Bloch, 1981), (2) the "object-related attitude structure" in which involvement is viewed as "the intensity with which an attitude is held" (e.g. Day, 1970; Hupfer and Gardner, 1971), and (3) the "product-

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[6] In this case cognitive structure essentially describes the mental processes the individual uses to make sense of a stimulus object such as a product.

knowledge structure" whereby involvement is the degree to which "object-related consequences" are important to the individual (e.g. Celsi and Olson, 1988; Peter and Olson, 1987). Different cognitive elements, such as self-concept, values, motives and/or needs, have been used to refer to the psychological tie between the individual and the stimulus object.

Laaksonen (1994, p. 29) makes light of the diversity of such cognitive elements explaining that they all, to some extent, refer to the more "enduring elements" that form "one's identity and direct behaviours" and therefore are fitting to measure levels of enduring involvement. Laaksonen (1994, p. 29) defines involvement as "the degree to which an object-related cognitive structure (usually treated as an attitude structure, but also a product-knowledge structure) is embedded in and connected to a higher-order mental structure of self-knowledge (e.g. a value-structure) of the individual."[7] This emphasizes the intrinsic nature of enduring involvement which relates to the stimulus object's relationship with deep-seated elements within the individual. It is proposed that motivations to participate in online communities, discussed in Section 2.4 of Chapter Two, which include instrumental value, social value, hedonic value and altruistic value may be insightful towards understanding the psychological tie that evokes member involvement that is the personal relevance of the OBC to the individual member.

The second factor proposed by Houston and Rothschild (1978) that shapes enduring involvement is the individual's past experience with the product. They propose that experience can be divided into "prior usage or consumption experience" and "prior purchase experience"

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[7] Laaksonen's (1994) definition of involvement may be classified as enduring involvement as it relates to the cognitive link between the individual and the stimulus object which is thought to be long-term or enduring in nature.

and differences between individuals in the amount of experience possessed gives rise to varying levels of enduring involvement (Houston and Rothschild, 1978, p.184). For instance, if an individual realises that use of a particular product causes admiration and social acceptance, his/her level of enduring involvement towards the product is likely to increase. The influence of prior usage or consumption experience on levels of enduring involvement is accepted in the extant literature. This is implied by existing research which conceptualises involvement as the centrality, dimensionality and relatedness of the stimulus object to the individual which it is argued are factors that are built on the consumer's prior experience with the stimulus object. However, the influence of prior purchase experience on levels of enduring involvement is discounted in the literature. This is because prior purchase experience is thought to only affect the individual's response in terms of fostering brand loyalty or "simplifying choice heuristics" for future purchase situations without causing a change in the "product-related attitude" and therefore the level of enduring involvement remains unchanged (Laaksonen, 1994, p. 33).

Despite belief that objects of involvement may be analysed at different levels of abstraction such as product class, brand, product attribute (e.g. Peter and Olson, 1987; DeBruicker, 1979) the majority of empirical studies in relation to enduring involvement tend to focus on involvement at the product level (e.g. Bloch, Commuri, Arnold, 2009; Bloch, 1982). Hence, in the literature the terms enduring involvement and product involvement are often used interchangeably. Consumers are likely to experience low enduring involvement for most products, however, for a limited number of products consumers may experience high enduring involvement on a continual basis, as is the case, for example, with movie buffs, wine connoisseurs, or technophiles (Bloch, Commuri and Arnold, 2009; Richins and Bloch, 1986). High enduring involved consumers "care passionately" about the product of interest (Bloch, Commuri and Arnold, 2009, p.50) and spend time thinking, learning and talking about the

product (Richins and Bloch, 1986). This is evidenced by the existence of speciality magazines dedicated to particular product interests and the growing number of online communities serving the needs of product enthusiasts.

Thorne and Bruner (2006, p.53) describe high enduring involved consumers as focusing "time, energy, and resources intently on a specific area of interest". For these consumers pleasure is gained from not only using the product but also from product-related search or discussions (Richins and Bloch, 1986; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Hoffman and Novak (1996, p.62) propose that experiential behaviours such as searching for product information in computer-mediated environments is a characteristic of enduring involvement. It is proposed that the potential of OBCs to facilitate product-related search and discussions is likely to be an attractive offering for product enthusiasts. Hence, it is likely that for some members' high enduring involvement with the product category that the OBC belongs to is a primary motive for signing-up to the OBC.

For the most part the empirical study of involvement only appears to investigate involvement at the brand level with respect to the consumer's interest in the brand decision, known as brand-decision involvement (e.g. Mittal and Lee, 1989) which corresponds with the situational form of involvement as it refers to the consumer's temporary concern with the brand due to the purchase decision. An exception to this is Morris and Martin's (2000) study which investigates the characteristics of brands that appear to be involvement-prone, in this case, the Beanie Babies brand which at the time of their research had a large fan gathering interested in collecting the brand's different toys. The limited amount of research investigating enduring involvement at the brand level is surprising especially given increasing popularity of platforms

such as OBCs wherein one motive for signing-up to the brand gathering appears to be linked to high brand involvement in so far as individuals who are fans of the brand wish to express their devotion to the brand (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). There are two possible reason why there is limited research to-date dealing more comprehensibly with the concept of enduring involvement with brands: (1) displays of brand involvement only became more evident from the early 2000's with the identification of the concept of brand community (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001) and subsequent insight into customer-brand interactions in such settings, (2) empirical research on brand communities that develop online has identified brand engagement as crucial to understanding customer-brand interactions, a concept that seems to borrow heavily from involvement theory, specifically with respect to its conceptual foundation, and thereby appears to have superseded the development of brand involvement study, particularly in online contexts[8]. Hence, this research will help fill a gap in the extant literature by studying the concept of enduring involvement with brands in OBC settings, investigating not only the expression of brand involvement but also examining how brand involvement appears to mediate member behaviour in such settings.

3.3.2 Situational Involvement

Situational involvement denotes a mind set (Michaelidou and Dibb, 2008) or mental state (Laaksonen, 1994) that represents the consumer's short-term concern with a stimulus object such as brand choice aroused by a specific stimulus situation such as perceived risk before purchase (Dholakia, 1997). There are two main perspectives on the activation of situational involvement: (1) the stimulus-centred viewpoint, (2) the temporary-state viewpoint (Laaksonen, 1994). Houston and Rothschild (1978) support the stimulus-centred viewpoint

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[8] The relationship between involvement and other concepts such as engagement is discussed in greater depth in Section 3.5 of this Chapter.

believing that object-related factors such as product cost and complexity, and social psychological stimuli such as the presence or absence of relevant others during the usage occasion cause situational involvement. This means that products such as computers and automobiles would arouse similar levels of involvement for most consumers facing the purchase situation because of their high cost and complexity. Houston and Rothschild (1978, p.184) describe this as a "between-products" perspective for involvement in that it is the characteristics of the product that elicit concern in the consumer for their behaviour. However, the main issue with this approach to understanding situational involvement is it does not take into account the individual consumer's characteristics or degree of learning (Laaksonen, 1994). For example, in an OBC dedicated to technology products the level of situational involvement felt by members before purchasing a tablet computer is likely to vary depending on their respective degree of product knowledge and experience. Hence, it is argued that individuals "consider different products […] to be differentially involving" (O'Cass, 1996, p.100) and therefore it is individuals not products that are involving (Antil, 1984).

Researchers such as Antil (1984), Cohen (1983) and Mitchell (1979) are proponents of the temporary-state view of situational involvement. According to this perspective situational involvement is essentially viewed as "a matter of intensity" (Michaelidou and Dibb, 2008, p.86), ranging from low to high according to the consumer's level of arousal, interest or drive evoked during a particular situation (O'Cass, 1996). Previous experience with the stimulus object and learning from past stimulus situations are thought to affect the level of situational involvement, for example, if a consumer faces a similar situation such as repurchase of a known brand then the amount of arousal evoked during the purchase situation, in this case, with respect to the brand decision is unlikely to be as high as the first purchase occasion. The temporary-state view of situational involvement is applied in this study to explore this form of involvement

within OBC settings. It is argued that by employing a netnographic methodology to study involvement it will be possible to witness the enactment of states of involvement as they occur in real-time, for example, during instances when members seek purchase advice from the OBC.

Situational involvement is most often experienced during the purchase of high-risk products (Richins and Bloch, 1986). Behaviours such as information search, brand evaluations and word-of-mouth activity are motivated by desires to maximise the outcome of high-risk purchases. Situational involvement is thought to decline following the purchase decision and involvement responses go back to being influenced by enduring involvement only (Richins, Bloch and McQuarrie, 1992). For example, involvement with the refrigerator product category is high pre-purchase; however on achievement of the task objective (purchase of a refrigerator) involvement with the product category is likely to reduce and over time diminish. This is because the majority of consumers do not exhibit high enduring involvement with the refrigerator product category, thus on purchase of a refrigerator (situational involvement) interest in the product category returns to the base-line level of enduring involvement which in this instance is low.

It is possible that outcomes associated with situational involvement may not be as straightforward in an OBC context and this is may be due to the multiple stimuli objects that exist in such settings[9]. For example, it is possible that some members sign-up to an OBC due to a particular stimulus situation such as heightened interest in the product as a result of product breakdown. On receiving functional help from the OBC in the form of advice with product repair it is suggested under the temporary-state view of situational involvement that such

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[9] Please see Section 3.6 for more information about the multiple stimuli objects that exist in OBC settings.

members would revert back to their base-line level of enduring involvement with the OBC which if made up of low product involvement in terms of lessening concern for product due to product repair it would imply that they do not revisit the OBC. However, it is possible that other stimuli objects such as the community group in terms of the appeal of social benefits in the form of interacting with similar others may trigger the member's base-line level of enduring involvement with the OBC and as a result they proceed to participate in the community group. Hence, further research is warranted to investigate outcomes of situational involvement in online settings such as OBCs which consist of multiple stimuli objects.

3.4 Components of Involvement

Table 3.1 provides an overview of components or dimensions that are either conceptualised to constitute involvement (e.g. Slater and Armstrong, 2010; Laurent and Kapferer, 1985) or empirically tested to measure involvement (e.g. Drichoutis, Lazaridis and Nayga, 2007; McQuarrie and Munson, 1987). Involvement is conceptualised in different ways in the extant literature with some researchers perceiving it as uni-dimensional consisting of one component only such as personal relevance (e.g. Von Riesen and Herndon, 2011; Chen and Wang, 2010) and other researchers perceiving it as multi-dimensional made-up of numerous components ranging from personal interest to centrality (e.g. Slater and Armstrong, 2010; Guthrie and Kim, 2009). Such divided views regarding the dimensionality of involvement appear to stem from the practice in the marketing field of replicating and validating early scales, namely Zaichkowsky's (1985) Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) or Kapferer and Laurent's (1985) Consumer Involvement Profile (CIP), which respectively perceive involvement as uni- and multi- dimensional in nature. For example, Shobeiri, Mazaheri and Laroche (2014), Chen and Wang (2010) and Reinecke Flynn and Goldsmith (1993) measure involvement at different

levels of generality from product involvement, service involvement and website involvement by employing scales that originate for all intents and purposes from Zaichkowsky's PII measure. By contrast, Mittal and Lee (1989) adapt, and Guthrie and Kim (2009) and Huang (2006) apply, Kapferer and Laurent's CIP to, in turn, conceptualise and measure involvement.

Yet despite such differences the majority of existing research, evidenced by Table 3.1, treats involvement as a multi-dimensional concept (Michaelidou and Dibb, 2008) with the prevailing tenet in the marketing field that "no single construct can individually [and] satisfactorily describe, explain or predict involvement" (Rothschild, 1979, p. 78). Table 3.1 presents the main components of involvement identified in the literature and categorises them in order of frequency of citation in the literature. The section proceeds with a review of the six main components of involvement identified in Table 3.1 that include: hedonic pleasure, product importance, sign value, personal relevance, perceived risk and personal interest.

Table 3.1 Components of Involvement

Author(s)	Year	Hedonic pleasure	Product importance	Sign Value	Personal relevance	Perceived risk	Personal interest	Risk probability	Risk importance	Self-expression	Perceived Importance	Normative Importance	Commitment	Attachment	WoM Activity	Cognitive Personal Relevnace	Affective Personal Relevance	Self-Relevance	Attention Focus	Affective Involvement	Cognitive Involvement	Centrality and Pleasure	Desire to learn	Escapism	Sense of belonging & Prestige	Physical	Drivers of Involvement
Lastovicka and Gardner	1979											*	*														
Bloch	1981	*					*			*				*	*												
Traylor	1981		*																								
Park and Young	1983																			*	*						
Laurent and Kapferer	1985	*	*	*				*	*																		
Zaichkowsky	1986				*																						
McQuarrie & Munson	1987	*	*				*																				
Ratchford	1987		*																								
Mittal and Lee	1988	*		*			*				*																
Higie and Feick	1989	*									*																
Mittal and Lee	1989	*		*			*																				
Jain and Srinivasan	1990	*	*	*				*	*																		
Flynn and Goldsmith	1993				*																						
Kapferer and Laurent	1993	*		*			*	*	*																		
Smith and Bristor	1994	*	*				*																				
Zaichkowsky	1994															*	*										
Chaudhuri	2000	*	*				*																				
Huang	2006	*			*	*	*													*	*						
Michaelidou and Dibb	2006		*				*																				
Drichoutis, Lazaridis and Nayga	2007										*																
Guthrie and Kim	2009	*		*				*	*	*																	
Chen and Wang	2010				*																						
Slater and Armstrong	2010																					*	*	*	*	*	*
VonRiesen and Herndon	2011				*																						
Shobeiri, Mazaheri and Laroche	2014				*																						

Source: Developed by the Author

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1. Hedonic Value

The terms hedonic pleasure and hedonic value are used interchangeably in the consumer involvement literature. Hedonic value is posited as a component of involvement as it may be connected with arousal, the condition necessary for a state of involvement to exist (McQuarrie and Munson, 1987). For example, hedonic value as a source of product involvement describes the product's "emotional appeal" and ability to "provide pleasure and affect" (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985, p.43). Existing involvement research suggests that consumers derive hedonic value from both the attainment and usage of products (Mittal and Lee, 1989; Bloch, 1981). Recently there has been growing interest in consumption-related aspects of participation in online communities (e.g. Hartmann, Wiertz and Arnould, 2015; Möhlmann, 2015; Steinmann, Mau and Schramm-Klein, 2015). For instance, Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2013, p.1564) coined the term "Digital Virtual Consumption" (DVC) to describe the activity whereby objects of consumption are "experienced as owned and used within the parameters of digital virtual spaces". For example, consumers may perceive they own items saved in wish lists on shopping sites or have used products they read reviews about on blog sites.

Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008, p. 575), on the other hand, suggest that some members join OBCs to "intensify or elongate" first-hand consumption experiences. For example, Rolex Forums, an OBC dedicated to luxury watches, enables its members to re-live their consumption experiences through the ritual of sharing consumption-related content, in this case, photos of their new Rolex watches with the community group. It is possible that the potential of OBCs to enable members to derive hedonic pleasure through either vicarious or first-hand consumption experiences may make the OBC involving. It is also suggested that members derive hedonic pleasure from various other behaviours in online communities, such as information-sharing, (e.g. Wasko and Faraj, 2000), partaking in interaction rituals (e.g. Seraj, 2012), and

content contribution (e.g. Teichmann *et al.*, 2015), discussed in Section 2.4 of Chapter 2, which may also stimulate member involvement with the OBC.

2. Product Importance

Early measures of involvement included product importance as a component of involvement (e.g. Ratchford, 1987; Laurent and Kapferer, 1985; Traylor, 1981). However, there are questions regarding the suitability of product importance as a measure of involvement namely because a stimulus object, such as a refrigerator may be perceived as important but may not arouse interest that is be involving (Mittal and Lee, 1989). Higie and Feick (1989) contend that the inappropriateness of importance as a measure of involvement is evidenced by Zaichkowsky's (1985)[10] study in which she found laundry detergent (more than likely only functionally important) to be the third most involving product among the 14 she examined. However, researchers such as Michaelidou and Dibb (2006, p. 448) appear to circumvent issues associated with product importance as a measure of involvement by evaluating it in terms of the personal meaning, in this case, of clothing products, evidenced by scale items, such as, "I attach great importance to the way people are dressed" and "I rate my dress sense as being of high importance to me". Nonetheless Kapferer and Laurent (1985, p. 50; 1993, p. 349) replace product importance with personal interest in their CIP but this change is minor as scale items for the new component not only factor in elements linked to personal interest but also include elements connected to product importance with statements, such as, "I attach a great importance to _____" and "What _____ I buy is extremely important to me".

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[10] Zaichkowsky's (1985) PII includes the item 'Important…Not at all Important' as a measure of involvement.

3. Sign Value

Sign value refers to the symbolic value the consumer attributes to "the product, its purchase, or its consumption" (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985, p. 43). Sign value evokes arousal the condition necessary for involvement to exist (McQuarrie and Munson, 1987) as the consumer perceives a stimulus object such as clothing products as a means of expressing their identity. Hence, the sign value component of involvement is synonymous with self-expression (Kapferer and Laurent, 1993; Higie and Feick, 1989). In online settings consumers have "greater freedom" to express their identity through "digital association rather than ownership or proximity" (Schau and Gilly, 2003, p.387). Digital association is a significant phenomenon for brand communities, especially since such off-line gatherings often require product ownership (e.g. Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), whereas similar online assemblies may express affinity to the brand without product purchase, a phenomenon described by Belk (2013, p.493) as "conspicuous virtual consumption". However, differentiating between "real aficionados" and "poseurs" in OBCs still necessitates cultural capital in the form of extensive brand knowledge (Belk, 2013, p.493) which can be understood as a characteristic of brand involvement.

It is interesting that researchers in the leisure field suggest that the operationalisation of the sign value component of involvement may be "overly superficial" (Kyle *et al.*, 2007, p. 404; Dimanche and Samdahl, 1994). This is because involvement with leisure activities not only provides individuals the opportunity to express their identities to others but also the chance to affirm their identities to themselves. It is possible that subtle nuances in the manifestation of the sign value component of involvement also exist in OBC settings. For instance, as members of OBCs participate in a social setting the sign value component of involvement may be aroused out of concern with being evaluated by others. For example, a member may attempt to self-express through his/her product knowledge when providing advice to others in order to self-

verify as having the qualifications, in this case, to answer product or purchase related queries in the OBC. Since members of OBCs are anonymous they may be involvement prone to the extent that participation in the community group may in certain circumstances necessitate self-expression. It appears that sign value may not only be related to self-expression but may also be prompted by other self-related factors such as self-verification within the community group and therefore requires further investigation.

4. Personal Relevance

Personal relevance refers to the relatedness of the stimulus object to the consumer's personal needs and values (Zaichkowsky, 1985). McQuarrie and Munson (1987) suggest that the personal relevance component of involvement may be scaled as multi-faceted. This is because personal relevance can be understood to mean a variety of things. For example, a stimulus object such as a car may be perceived as personally relevant and thereby involving due either to the pleasure the individual feels from driving the car or self-expression gained from owning an attention-grabbing car. Hence, the personal relevance component of involvement due to its encompassing conceptualisation seems to be interchangeable with several components of involvement in Table 3.1, such as, hedonic value and sign value.

5. Perceived Risk

Perceived risk due to stimulus occasions such as product purchase or brand choice is suggested to arouse involvement as the consumer spends time thinking about the product category or brand selection. Kapferer and Laurent (1985, p.50) suggest that perceived risk has two facets consisting of "risk importance" which relates to "the perceived importance of negative consequences of making a poor choice" and "risk probability" which refers to the perceived likelihood of "making

a mis-purchase". Dholakia (1997) adds to understanding by classifying the specific risks in relation to product purchase and consumption. His risk taxonomy, adapted from Stone and Grønhaug (1993), consists of six elements: (1) financial loss (risk of losing money due to product fault or repair costs), (2) performance loss ("risk of unsatisfactory product performance"), (3) physical loss ("risk associated with physical danger" arising from product usage), (4) psychological loss (risk connected to "non-congruence between product and buyer self-image"), (5) social loss (risk relating to "unfavourable opinions" of relevant others due to the product), and (6) time loss (risk associated with "inefficient use of time" because of the product) (Dholakia, 1997, p. 160). Dholakia (1997, p. 161) explains that "risk dimensions" play a central role in understanding product importance. For example, social risk is suggested as more useful in understanding the importance of designer clothes whereas physical risk may be more helpful in understanding the importance of chainsaws.

Members join online communities to seek product information and gain product assurances (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013). This is especially the case when purchasing experience or credence products, such as a holiday or medical treatment, or purchasing high cost or complex products such as luxury items or technology products. Hence, perceived risk appears to make the OBC involving as members seek information and advice in relation to the purchase decision or brand choice from the community group. For example, the online community Real Self is dedicated to the community topic of cosmetic surgery which can be classified as a high cost credence product. Perceived risk in this case in relation to product performance appears to evoke member involvement with Real Self as they search for information of before and after photos of different cosmetic surgeries and seek advice on choosing a surgeon before product purchase. It is possible that perceived risk causes a form of member involvement that is situational in nature as the member's interest in the OBC may be temporary due, for instance, to the pending purchase

decision and on buying the product their interest in the community group may slowly dissipate and as a result they do not revisit the OBC.

6. Personal Interest

Personal interest is described as the ''centrality or ego-importance'' (Kapferer and Laurent, 1985, p.50) of a stimulus object such as a product to the consumer. It is hypothesized that interest in the stimulus object denotes involvement proper as it represents the individual's actualised state of involvement in contrast to other components, such as, sign value which are thought to be antecedents or sources that evoke involvement (Mittal and Lee, 1989). It is possible that personal interest in the community topic that the OBC is dedicated to may be a source of member involvement. Bloch (1986) suggests that strong product interest, as exemplified by product enthusiasts, results in active and continuous information search with respect to the product. Prior research posits information value as a primary reason for participation in online communities (e.g. Jang *et al.*, 2008; Porter and Donthu, 2008; Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007). For example, an aspiring wine enthusiast may be motivated to participate in a wine-related online community due to access to product-related information, such as, wine reviews, podcasts from wine connoisseurs and videos of wine tasting events.

Chan and Li (2010) argue that members develop psychological bonds with online communities that are a rich source of information which encourages member retention and cultivates reciprocity. Hence, it is possible that the member's personal interest in the OBC may evolve over their membership, for instance, the opportunity for social bonding with similar others may become more appealing if members begin to feel a sense of belonging to the OBC. However, it is noteworthy that researchers in the leisure field (e.g. Kyle and Chick, 2004) argue that social

aspects of centrality[11] should be considered a unique component of leisure involvement. Kyle *et al.* (2007) argue that involvement may be driven by social ties with others during leisure experiences and recommend the inclusion of social bonding as a unique component of leisure involvement. Hence, further research is necessary to investigate if personal interest and social bonding represent unique components of involvement in particular with respect to OBCs which consist of a social collective who come together due to a shared interest in a branded product category.

3.5 Involvement and Related Concepts

Having reviewed the components that constitute involvement this section takes a closer look at concepts that are perceived as related to involvement in the extant literature namely commitment and engagement. This is important as it helps to clarify how involvement is distinct in the consumer behaviour literature. Initial uncertainty regarding the relationship between involvement and commitment seemed to arise from early conceptualisations of involvement, specifically the use of commitment and involvement as interchangeable terms (e.g. Robertson, 1976) and the inclusion of commitment as one of two fundamental components of involvement (e.g. Lastovicka and Gardner, 1979). However, Muncy and Hunt (1984, p. 193) clarify that while involvement and commitment may be related they are "not isomorphic" concepts and overlap appears to stem from applying measures of ego-involvement from the social psychology field to study consumer involvement. This is because definitions of ego-involvement in the social psychology field do not appear to clarify between the individual's involvement with a particular position or stance with respect to a social issue (which essentially can be thought to denote commitment) and involvement with the social issue itself (Freedman, 1964). The fundamental

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[11] The component 'centrality' in the leisure field is similar to 'personal interest' in the marketing field and essentially refers to the centrality of leisure activities to the individual's lifestyle.

difference between involvement and commitment is that an individual may become involved with an issue without taking a stand that requires commitment to a particular position (Crosby and Taylor, 1983).

Debate exists with respect to the impact of involvement at different levels of generality such as purchase involvement or product involvement on commitment. For instance, Beatty, Kahle and Homer (1988, p. 154) suggest that purchase involvement has a positive effect on brand commitment based on the premise that when consumers are concerned about purchases within a product category they are likely to establish product preferences and accordingly develop brand loyalty. By contrast, Dholakia (1997) found that greater levels of enduring importance for a product class, also known as product involvement, negatively relates to the degree of brand commitment felt for the product class as such consumers who are informed about product options factor a larger amount of brands into their consideration-set prior to purchase. However, these different propositions in relation to the impact of involvement on commitment seem somewhat simplistic especially as consumers may experience varying levels of involvement and commitment.

Cushing and Douglas-Tate's (1985) four-quadrant model which was empirically validated by Warrington and Shim (2000) appears to take into account such nuances that may arise due to varying combinations of involvement and commitment. They identify four categories to segment consumers that include: "involved brand loyalists", "involved information seekers", "uninvolved brand switchers" and "routine brand buyers" (Cushing and Douglas-Tate, 1985, p. 243). The first Cushing and Douglas-Tate category (1985) called involved brand loyalists consists of consumers who display high involvement with the product category and express strong commitment to a

particular brand. Their continued interest in product and brand information is prompted by the desire to confirm their brand preference as the best choice in the product category rather than interest in competitor brands. The second Cushing and Douglas-Tate (1985) category called involved information seekers consists of consumers who exhibit a strong interest in the product category in general but are not committed to a particular brand. Their interest in product and brand information is to ensure they make an informed brand choice and they are willing to switch brands if a competitor offering is perceived as better. The third Douglas-Tate (1985) category called uninvolved brand switchers consists of consumers who show minimal interest in the product category or choice of brands. Instead price is a key factor under consideration for these consumers when choosing a brand and they do not exhibit interest in product and brand information or pay attention to advertising. The final Cushing and Douglas-Tate (1985) category called routine brand buyers consists of individuals who are not particularly interested in the product category but exhibit commitment to a preferred brand. Such consumers do not seek product and brand information and are somewhat uninformed about the product category.

Recently there has been growing research attention dedicated to investigating the concept of commitment in online community settings. Wook Kim *et al.* (2008, p. 413) build on commitment theory to define online community commitment as the degree of the member's psychological attachment to the community and their faith in the value of the relationship with the community. Their study suggests positive consequences for firms as a result of online community membership in so far as active and non-active users were found to exhibit enhanced brand commitment. Zhang *et al.* (2013) shed light on how online community commitment influences brand commitment. Results of their study found that affective community commitment influences brand commitment as members transfer emotions derived from participating in the

online community onto the brand, for example, fun and enjoyment derived from community discussions leads to positive sentiment towards the brand.

To-date there does not appear to have been research that investigates the impact of member involvement on online community commitment or brand commitment. This is important, particularly as existing research (e.g. Warrington and Shim, 2000; Cushing and Douglas-Tate, 1985) elucidates the impact of varying combinations of involvement and commitment on consumer behaviour. It is recognised that research investigating the impact of involvement on commitment in OBC settings is worthwhile. For instance, a member may perceive an OBC as involving due to personal relevance of being part of a community group. However, normative pressure to conform to community norms may ultimately lead to reactance, a state of resistance, and impact membership intentions negatively (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Hermann, 2005). Hence, member involvement with the OBC may not always result in online community commitment. However, before attempting to investigate the impact of member involvement on online community commitment it is first of all necessary to develop understanding in relation to the concept of member involvement itself which is the focus of this research.

The second concept identified as related to involvement through review of the extant literature is engagement. There has been a significant increase in research dedicated to the subject of consumer engagement in the last few years (e.g. Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2016; Hollebeek, Conduit and Brodie, 2016; Marbach, Lages and Nunan, 2016; Demangeot and Broderick, 2016; Claffey and Brady, 2014; Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012). Claffey and Brady (2014, pp. 327-328) propose that, despite no accepted definition of engagement, there are three factors that appear to denote the concept; firstly, consumer engagement is a "mental state of

readiness concerned with fulfilling experiential value and instrumental value", secondly, engaged consumers partake in "active and sustained processing of information", and thirdly, consumer engagement can be understood as an "emotional response or affective state" occurring as a result of the "engagement experience". To-date comparisons of involvement and engagement concepts in the extant literature have been sparse (e.g. Hollebeek, 2009). In part, this may be due the focus of attention of early engagement studies which in many cases looked at consumer engagement with the brand and therefore was at a different level of specificity than much of the involvement research which focused on consumer involvement with the product category. However, more recently there has been a growing base of engagement literature that looks at different foci of engagement such as an online brand community (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013), a communication medium (Calder, Malthouse and Schaedel, 2009) and an advertisement (Philips and McQuarrie, 2010). Regardless of the different stimulus objects studied the conceptual foundations of consumer engagement appear to borrow heavily from consumer involvement theory. For instance, Brodie *et al.* (2011) define consumer engagement as "specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand" and a "psychological state characterized by fluctuating intensity levels" which is similar to early conceptualisations of involvement as consisting of two dimensions, namely, "direction" that is consumers become involved with a particular stimulus object and "intensity" in terms of levels of arousal, interest or drive evoked may vary from low to high (Mitchell, 1979, p. 194). Furthermore consumer engagement is described as multi-dimensional consisting of cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2016; Patterson, Yu and De Ruyter, 2006). This seems to mirror Laaksonen's (1994) classification which is based on an extensive review of involvement definitions as cognitive-based, individual-state and response-based respectively.

Given the relative newness of engagement to the marketing field it has not undergone the same extent of critical analysis as involvement when it comes to operationalising the concept. This research argues that due to consumer usage of online entities such as OBCs it is possible nowadays through the observation of online consumer behaviour to study the display and manifestation of concepts such as involvement that were traditionally perceived as psychological in nature. This, coupled with conceptual overlap between involvement and engagement causes some confusion as it is less clear for instance if and how behaviours exemplified by members who are involved within OBCs are similar or different to those demonstrated by members who are engaged in such settings. Based on the review of the extant literature it appears that further attention needs to be directed to clarifying the conceptual foundations of engagement.

3.6 The Role of Involvement in this Study

Extant research has studied involvement with respect to different stimulus objects such as an advertisement, the product category, and the purchase decision. The study of online involvement is at the early stages and though there is research that investigates the impact of different objects of involvement, such as, website involvement, product involvement and purchase involvement on various online behaviours such as website navigation, search behaviour, online shopping it is largely quantitative in nature (e.g. Im and Ha, 2011; Yun Yoo, 2011; Jiang *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, the notion of consumer involvement with an entity such as an OBC does not yet appear to have been researched in the marketing field. This research proposes that OBCs represent an emerging object of involvement and that many members demonstrate, what is termed in this study, 'online community involvement'. It is argued that members perceive OBCs as personally relevant or involving for various reasons and that this is inferred by existing research that identifies a range of motives, needs and values that prompt participation in OBCs (e.g. Teichmann *et al.*, 2015; Tsai and Bagozzi, 2014; Seraj, 2012). It is proposed that in many

instances it is a mixture of two or more stimuli within the OBC setting that influences the manifestation of online community involvement. For example, the perception of online community involvement for a member seeking purchase advice from an OBC may be affected by the product, brand, community group, and purchase situation. Figure 3.1 adapts Antil's (1984) conceptualisation of involvement which identified the different inter-relationships between involvement stimuli in advertising settings to understand online community involvement. The inter-relationship between the different stimulus objects of involvement in OBC settings that is the community group, product category, brand, and purchase situation is represented by the dotted line in Figure 3.1. It is proposed that it is the member's interpretation of the various stimuli objects (shown by the straight line in Figure 3.1) that evokes their involvement with the OBC.

Figure 3.1 Interrelationship between Involvement Stimuli in OBC Settings
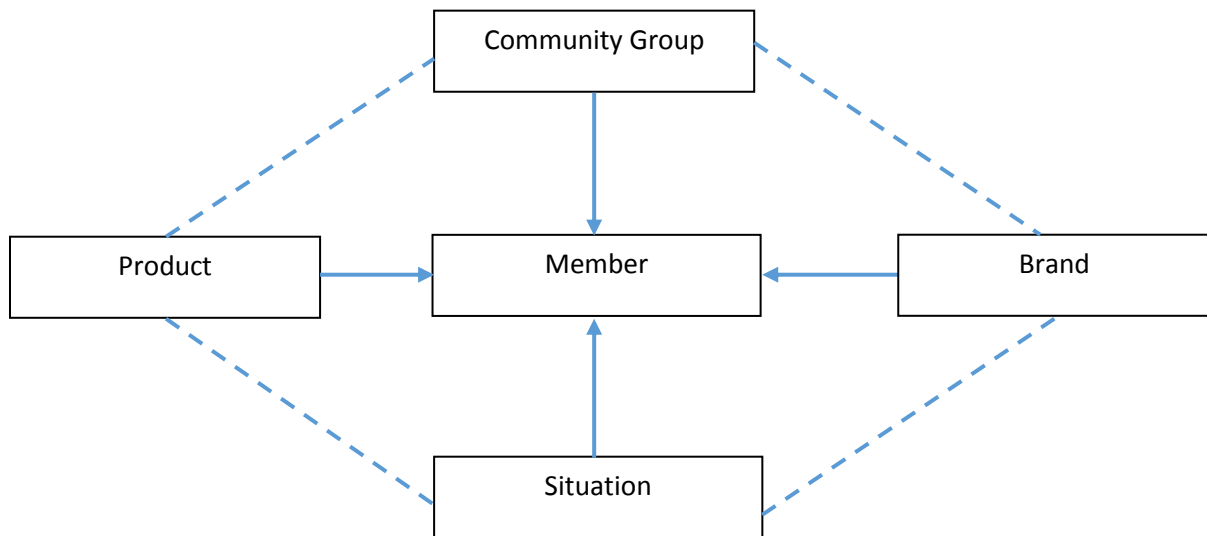
Adapted: Antil (1984, p. 204)

The identification of multiple objects of involvement within OBC settings is significant as it suggests that the study of online community involvement provides an opportunity to study how and in what ways various involvement stimuli that previously in many instances were studied separately may interact with one another.

It appears that perceived challenges of studying involvement due to its psychological nature, specifically the notion that involvement is "unobservable" (Rothschild, 1984, p. 217) as it refers to the individual's mental activation, and/or cognitive or affective connection, with the stimulus object are mitigated when studying the concept in online contexts such as OBCs as it is possible to observe the behaviours of individuals who are involved in such settings. It is argued that many members in most OBCs experience and display involvement and this is apparent by their behaviours such as talking about the product/brand, displays of product/brand knowledge, partaking in active information search and perceived differences in product attributes which in existing research are classified as characteristics of involvement (e.g. DeMeyer and Petzer, 2014;

Reinecke Flynn and Goldsmith, 1997; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Furthermore, Shang, Chen and Liao (2006, p.400) suggest that involvement can be seen as the "ultimate motivation" for participating in OBCs because of the pervasiveness of information search activity in such settings, a behaviour associated with high product involvement. Hence, it is argued that by employing an observation method it is possible to observe the display and manifestation of involvement as it is acted out in real time by members in the OBC. Furthermore, it is envisioned that use of an observation method may help provide insight into aspects of involvement that may be difficult for consumers to convey. For example, what members think and feel about the product category, the brand and the community group itself. It is also proposed that information sources in OBCs such as the member's history of posts, length of membership and post content make it possible to make inferences about the development of involvement that hitherto was not possible to observe in off-line settings due to its psychological nature.

However, a counter argument to this study is that not all members in OBC settings experience involvement and some may participate, for instance, simply out of habit rather than the perception of personal relevance of the OBC. This is acknowledged but thought not to be a valid reason to prohibit the study of involvement within OBC settings especially given the acceptance in the extant literature of the importance of involvement as a mediator of consumer behaviour (e.g. Slater and Armstrong, 2010; Kyle *et al.*¸2007; Knox, Walker and Marshall, 1994; Mittal and Lee, 1989). Hence, it is proposed that in studying member behaviour through the lens of involvement better understanding will be gained into online consumer behaviour in OBC settings. Given the increasing amount of time people are spending online of which a large part is dedicated to social media usage which includes OBCs, for example a study by Mediakix (2017) revealed that the average person spends nearly two hours per day on social media, an exploration into consumer involvement in online settings is an important research endeavour.

Despite the diversity of involvement definitions the notion that involvement consists of two forms, namely, enduring involvement that is the cognitive or affective connection between the individual and the stimulus object such as a product and situational involvement that is the individual's state of arousal due to a particular situation such as the purchase decision is pervasive in the literature (e.g. Im and Ha, 2011; Laaksonen, 1994; Houston and Rothschild, 1978). This research adopts the viewpoint that online community involvement may be either enduring or situational in nature and as a result signifies the individual member's ongoing or temporal interest in the OBC respectively. In undertaking an exploration of member involvement with OBCs this study seeks to understand the characteristics and development of online community involvement by observing member behaviour within two OBC sites called the Purse Forum and MacRumors over an extended period.

3.7 Conclusion

Involvement is accepted as an important mediator of consumer behaviour in the extant literature shown to influence various behaviours such as information-search, website navigation and online shopping (e.g. Yun Yoo, 2011; Sanchez-Franco and Rondan-Cataluña, 2010; Park, Lee and Han, 2007). Review of the involvement literature reveals that a considerable amount of research has been dedicated to conceptualising involvement and subsequently there appears to be general consensus that enduring and situational involvement represent the two main forms of involvement. The majority of empirical involvement research is quantitative in nature and in many instances utilises, or adapts, either Zaichkowsky's (1985) Personal Involvement Inventory (PII), or Kapferer and Laurent's (1985) Consumer Involvement Profile (CIP), to measure levels of involvement. The predominance of quantitative methods to study levels of involvement has resulted in a gap in knowledge, in particular, with respect to themes linked to the manifestation and development of involvement. The trend of mainly using quantitative methods to study involvement may be linked to the psychological nature of the concept which is described as

"unobservable" (Rothschild, 1984, p. 217) since it refers to the individual's mental activation, and/or cognitive or affective connection, with the stimulus object. However, this research argues that many members in OBCs experience involvement and this is exemplified by behaviours such as product and brand related information search or interest in talking about the product and brand which are classified in the extant literature as characteristics of involvement (e.g. DeMeyer and Petzer, 2014; Reinecke Flynn and Goldsmith, 1997). Based on the premise that many members in OBCs experience involvement and given that members express themselves through their post content this research argues that it is possible to observe the manifestation and display of involvement in OBC settings. It is proposed that OBCs represent an object of involvement that appears not yet researched in the marketing field. Hence, it is the purpose of this research to employ what appears to be a novel methodology in the study of involvement, that is netnography, to explore a theme that remains relatively under-researched that is the manifestation and development of, what appears to be a new object of involvement referred to in this study as, online community involvement.

CHAPTER FOUR - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter conducted a theoretical review of involvement which is the lens through which member behaviour in OBC settings is explored. The theoretical review identified online community involvement as an object of involvement that has emerged from consumer interactions with OBCs that does not yet appear to be researched in the marketing field. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research methodology of this study. The first part of the chapter reviews the two dominant research philosophies in the social sciences that is positivism and interpretivism. Carson *et al.* (2001, p.1) describe choosing a philosophy as "staking a research position" as it concerns how the researcher views the social world and approaches fieldwork. Choice of research philosophy influences the research approach with positivism lending itself to a deductive approach wherein theory is tested through hypotheses development, while interpretivism, on the other hand, lends itself to an inductive approach in which theory is developed as an outcome of data analysis (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). The researcher is guided by the interpretivist approach to inquiry as the focus of this study is to explore and gain insights into what seems to be the relatively under-research concept, online community involvement. Fitting with the interpretivist philosophy, and the researcher's interest in observing the display and manifestation of member involvement, the research employs a netnographic research methodology. Kozinets (2010) sets out five stages in the netnographic research process that include: (1) planning and entrée, (2) data collection, (3) data analysis and interpretation, (4) ensuring ethical procedures, and (5) research representation. The chapter explains how the researcher undertook the different stages in the netnographic research process to explore member involvement with OBCs.

4.2 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy or paradigm refers to "a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016, p. 124). To be more precise a paradigm has been described as the "basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). Choice of research philosophy is significant because it has important implications for the researcher in terms of how they shape the research question, decide on what research methods to employ and choose how the data will be interpreted (Crotty, 1998). Research philosophy comprises of three components consisting of ontology, epistemology and methodology. Ontology relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics, epistemology concerns the relationship between reality and the researcher, and methodology relates to the technique(s) used by the researcher to discover such reality (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Perry, Riege and Brown, 1999). The two dominant paradigms in the social science literature are positivism and interpretivism and these are next reviewed with respect to their ontological, epistemological and methodological characteristics.

4.2.1 Positivism

The positivist paradigm is sometimes referred to as the quantitative (Hussey and Hussey, 1997), the scientific (Carson *et al.*, 2001), the experimentalist (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998), the traditional (Hawkesworth, 2006), or the objective paradigm (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). Positivism assumes that only knowledge claims based on directly observable experience are legitimate (Hawkesworth, 2006). The positivist ontology assumes that "the subject of study is objectively real in the world" and is "capable of being found, collected and reflected in theoretical writings" (Yanow, 2006, p. 6). The positivist ontology maintains that the world is external and objective, thus its epistemology is founded on the belief that the researcher is independent (Carson *et al.*,

2001). The notion of researcher independence means that the researcher neither affects nor is affected by the subject of the study (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998). As a result positivist researchers try to remain detached or "emotionally neutral" from the object of the study by for instance distinguishing between facts and value judgements (Carson *et al.*, 2001, p. 5). It is for these reasons that positivism perceives social science research as value-free (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill¸ 2009). Positivist research focuses on description and explanation whereby thought is governed by "explicitly stated theories and hypotheses" (Carson *et al.,* 2001, p. 5). It does this by the hypothetico-deductive method whereby existing theory is used to test hypotheses resulting in either the confirmation or falsification of such theory (Gill and Johnson, 1997). Quantitative processing using statistics and mathematical techniques is a central part of the research methods adopted by positivist researchers (Carson *et al.*, 2001). In the study of consumer behaviour, positivist researchers assume that consumers are mainly "rational, stable¸ and knowable entities" and that phenomenon can be objectively measured (Pachauri, 2002, p. 338). Given the structured nature of quantitative techniques positivist research is thought "not very effective in understanding the significance people attach to action" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1991, p. 32).

4.2.2 Interpretivism

Interpretivism assumes that individuals do not have "direct access to the real world but that their knowledge of this perceived world (or worlds) is meaningful in its own terms" (Carson *et al.*, 2001, p. 4). The interpretivist paradigm is oftentimes referred to as the qualitative (Hussey and Hussey, 1997), the phenomenological (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998), the humanistic (Hirschman, 1986), the hermeneutic (Yanow, 2006) or the subjective paradigm (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). Interpretive philosophers argue that the application of conventions from the natural and physical sciences to the social sciences is inappropriate. They argue that as individuals act, have intentions

about their actions, interpret others' actions, attempt to make sense of the world and therefore are essentially "meaning-making creatures" (Yanow, 2006, p. 9). Thus, interpretivists perceive objects of study such as policies, institutions or even language as human creations and not, as positivists would argue, objects independent of us (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). Thus, the interpretivist ontology rejects the existence of an objective social reality and instead supports the existence of multiple social realities which are subjective in nature based on individuals' perceptions (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009).

Interpretivists believe that understanding what is meaningful to human actors is central to social science research. First developed in the 1800s the concept of *verstehen* (understanding) was elaborated in the late-nineteenth century by Weber to mean understanding the research subject's experience that is his or her "subjective sense making" (Yanow, 2006, p. 10). In this approach, the individual is seen as being part of a "community of meaning" wherein subjective perception and understanding are based on a collection of meanings created and sanctioned by the community and shared among its members (Yanow, 2006, p. 10). In an offer to understand individuals meanings the interpretivist researcher acts as the research instrument spending lengths of time in field observing individuals, asking questions and following up on perceptions (Carson *et al.*, 2006). Thus, the interpretivist epistemology perceives the researcher as part of the research process. Hirschman (1986, p. 238) explains that the researcher and phenomenon under study are "mutually interactive" in so far as the researcher cannot distance "the self" from the phenomenon as they bring their prior experience and knowledge to the research nor can the phenomenon be understood without the "personal involvement" of the researcher as they act as research instrument, choosing the questions to ask and responses to follow up on. Thus, knowledge in the interpretive paradigm is considered socially constructed and can only be apprehended by researcher interpretation (Yanow, 2006). Qualitative methods such as semi-

structured interviews and focus groups are central to the techniques employed by interpretivist researchers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1991). From the late 1980s interpretivism emerged as an alternative approach to inquiry into consumer behaviour (Goulding, 1999). In studying consumer behaviour interpretivist inquiry focuses not only on the process of buying but also on the experiential aspects which underline the act of consumption such as feelings of fun and enjoyment that emanate from consuming (Pachauri, 2002).

To fully understand the differences between positivism and interpretivism they have been contrasted across several dimensions in the literature (Carson *et al.*, 2001; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe*,* 1994; Guba and Lincoln, 1988; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Although these differences are a heuristic device, they make it possible to compare and contrast the two paradigms based on ontological, epistemological and methodological characteristics (Patton, 1988). Table 4.1 is helpful as it outlines the differences between positivism and interpretivism not only in terms of philosophical issues but also with regards to the practical implications of how research is conducted.

Table 4.1 Differences between Positivist and Interpretivist Paradigms

	Positivism	Interpretivism
Ontology Nature of being/ Nature of the world	Have direct access to real world	No direct access to real world
Reality	Single external reality	No single external reality
Epistemology Grounds of knowledge/ Relationship between reality and research	Possible to obtain hard, secure objective knowledge	Understood through "perceived" knowledge
	Research focuses on generalisation and abstraction	Research focuses on the specific and the concrete
	Thought governed by hypotheses and stated theories	Seeking to understand specific context
Methodology Focus of Research	Concentrates on description and explanation	Concentrates on understanding and interpretation
Role of Researcher	Detached, external observer	Researchers want to experience what they are studying
	Clear distinction between reason and feeling	Allow feelings and reason to govern actions
	Aim to discover external reality rather than creating the object of the study	Partially create what is studied, the meaning of the phenomena
	Strive to use rational, consistent verbal, logical approach	Use of pre-understanding is important
	Seek to maintain clear distinction between facts and value judgements	Distinction between facts and value judgements less clear
	Distinction between science and personal experience	Accept influence from both science and personal experience
Techniques used by Researcher	Formalised statistical and mathematical methods predominantly	Primarily non-quantitative

Source: Carson *et al.* (2001, p. 6)

In comparing differences between the two paradigms, opponents of positivism have been thought to largely misrepresent and misunderstand its basic assumptions. For example, Ozanne and Hudson's (1989) interpretation of the basic assumptions of positivism is criticised by Hunt (1989) as caricaturing the empiricist approach. Ozanne and Hudson (1989) claim that the fundamental premises of positivism are "immutable social reality" (1989, p. 2) and that human behaviour is "entirely deterministic" (1989, p. 7). Hunt (1989) argues that the term "immutable" is very strong suggesting that social reality is "totally unchanging" (1989, p.186). He believes that it is impracticable to suggest that positivist researchers believe that "relationships among attitudes, intentions and behaviours" of consumers (1989, p. 186) are totally unchanging. Hunt (1989) also argues that the notion of human behaviour as deterministic in positivist research is inaccurate, rather instead explaining that human behaviour is "indeterministic", guided by "tendency laws" (1989, p. 186). It is because of these misrepresentations that some believe that positivism has become "a generalised term of abuse" (Phillips, 1992, p. 95).

Phillips (1992) challenges researchers such as Guba and Lincoln (1988) who position themselves at poles to positivism, suggesting instead that alternative perspectives should be seen as complementary rather than conflicting with positivism. As a result there is growing support to move away from the dominant paradigms debate (positivism versus interpretivism) and instead concentrate on more fully understanding each perspective and their particular contributions (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000; Fisher, 1990; Belk, 1986). Fisher (1990, p. 19) explains that even though the research traditions of positivism and interpretivism are "incommensurable" they are not necessarily "incomparable or contradictory". For instance, it is thought that similarities exist between the "causal regularities" sought in positivist research and the "hermeneutic rules" sought in interpretivist research (Fisher, 1990, p. 19). In studying consumer behaviour some argue for an "inclusive rather than an exclusive approach" whereby the existence of different paradigms

is accepted and the particular contributions each paradigm can make is understood (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000, p. 187).

4.2.3 Choosing a Philosophical Paradigm: Interpretivism

The researcher's philosophical position is interpretivism and this is explained with respect to the ontological, epistemological and methodological characteristics of this study. The aim of this study is to explore member involvement with OBCs. In undertaking this study two different OBC sites called MacRumors and the Purse Forum were observed details of which are outlined in Section 5.2 of Chapter Five. The ontological assumptions of the researcher fit with interpretivism in taking the position that no one reality exists. It is believed that members of the OBC perceive reality in this case their involvement with the OBC in different ways and therefore it is accepted that multiple realities exist that is different versions of member involvement are experienced by members of various experience levels with the product, the brand and the community. It is for this reason that the researcher studies the context in detail investigating the posting history, content of posts and social interactions of a cross-section of members from the two OBC sites under observation and exploring the opinions of ten individuals who are members of different types of online communities in order to understand how reality that is member involvement is perceived and experienced.

The epistemological assumptions of the research fit with interpretivism in that knowledge that is what is understood about member involvement with OBCs is thought to be socially constructed. It is believed that OBCs the social entities being studied are formed by the perceptions and actions of their members. Despite MacRumors and the Purse Forum having site specific rules these mainly focus on the operation of the site, for instance, prohibiting against the use of profanity, soliciting or trolling when posting but do not specify how members should participate

in terms of what product or brand related topics members should talk about. Participation in each of the OBCs is voluntary in that members may decide on the product or brand related topics they wish to talk about by initiating a discussion thread and they may also pick and choose the particular discussion threads they want to contribute to by submitting a post. Through their participation in the OBC members seem to enact what they perceive to be the norms, customs and rituals of the community. It is believed that members display and express their involvement with the OBC through their posting behaviour in terms of history and content of posts submitted to the OBC. Hence, the researcher's interpretation of textual data in terms of post archives and visual data such as posts that include product related photos that display, for example, computer or handbag collections are considered legitimate knowledge in this study.

The methodological assumptions of this study fit with interpretivism in that a qualitative approach that seeks to gain rich insights into aspects of consumer involvement that appear under-researched in the marketing field is pursued. Specifically, the focus of this research is to explore the characteristics of what is argued a new object of involvement that is online community involvement and to understand what prompts initial and continued member involvement with the OBC. Carson *et al.* (2001) explain that in order for the interpretivist researcher to understand the subjects of the study he/she must act as the research instrument. Towards understanding how the individual member perceives and experiences their involvement with the OBC the researcher signed-up to two different OBCs (details of which are provided in Section 5.2 of Chapter Five) and assumed the role of a participant observer wherein she observed the behaviours exemplified by members involved with the community and participated in some of the customs and rituals of the community. In so doing the researcher purchased what can be understood as community related products, specifically, an iPhone 6 and Coach handbag which facilitated understanding of what it felt like to be involved with each OBC as it enabled the researcher to participate in different ways in each community, for instance, seeking pre-purchase advice with regards to the

iPhone 6 and sharing her new handbag purchase with the Coach sub-forum. The researcher immersed herself in the two different OBCs, spending between two to eight hours per day on site, over a nine month period from April to December 2013. The extended engagement with field during the observation phase of research which facilitated the opportunity to observe members who were involved to varying extents with the two OBCs was important as it helped the researcher gain insight into what it meant to be involved with the OBC and in so doing assisted with the interpretation of the observation data. Finally, a fieldnote diary was maintained during the research which assisted the researcher in becoming aware of her own values and to reflect on and question how these may shape her interpretation of the observation data. Having established the researcher's philosophical position as interpretivism and considered its implications on the focus of this study on consumer involvement in online settings the next section sets out the research methodology.

4.3 Towards a Methodology: Netnography

Towards fully understanding the characteristics of netnography it is important to explain the methodology of ethnography from which it originates. The purpose of ethnography is to understand the social world of research participants and to present it in a way that reflects how they might describe it (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009; Crang and Cook, 2007). Ethnography was traditionally associated with investigating cultures and indigenous peoples from distant faraway lands. This usually entailed an "armchair" approach to fieldwork whereby local representatives of the colonial powers were used as fieldworkers to gather data that was transmitted home for analysis (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 15). However, this approach to fieldwork changed when the anthropologist Malinowski was forced due to the outbreak of the First World War to remain in close living proximity with the natives of the Trobriand Islands in the South Pacific (Van Maanen, 1988). Burgess (1984) explains how Malinowski's experience changed

the emphasis of ethnography to concentrate on first-hand contact rather than second-hand accounts:

> *Before the 1920s many anthropologists relied on explorers, traders, missionaries and government officials for accounts of the people they studied. [...] Malinowski exhorted his colleagues to go into the villages to see the natives at work, to sail with them on their ventures with other tribes and to observe them fishing, trading and working. The data that would be obtained would then be based on first-hand observations rather than second-hand accounts that had been squeezed out of reluctant informants.* (Burgess, 1984, pp.12-13).

Hence, ethnography research from the late 1920s emphasised the importance of gaining first-hand contact in order to obtain deep insights and understanding into the research context. Fielding (1993, p. 157) describes this as "getting the seat of your pants dirty […] in the real world" and emphasizes the necessity of ethnographic research to visit a physical field site location. Further development in ethnographic research occurred in the 1930s when sociologists from the Chicago School began to explore local contexts as if they were foreign lands. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 9) explain that at that time the growing city of Chicago and the influx of immigrants provided a rich setting for sociologists to explore the lives of the city's inhabitants, from "the high society of the so-called gold coast to slum ghettos such as Little Sicily". The Chicago School marked a turning point in ethnography research, shifting focus from foreign and exotic lands to the everyday life of ordinary individuals in local contexts. In recent years the growth of consumer uptake of social media and subsequent user-generated content sparked researcher interest in the marketing field on online consumer behaviours. Subsequently, there has been a significant increase in the number of studies that employ online ethnography or netnography to study online consumer behaviour (e.g. Boateng, 2016; Seraj, 2013; Cronin and McCarthy, 2011; Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010).

Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003, p. 216) explain that understanding of behaviour in ethnographic research can only be acquired by "the emphatic process of verstehen" that is seeing the world through the subject's eyes. This involves learning the language in use by subjects in the field site, such as, "dialect, jargon, special use of words, neologisms" (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003, p. 216). For example, Kozinets (2002) study of online coffee culture found that literary devices such as sacred metaphors were often employed to recount coffee preparation and consumption experiences. He explains that coffee consumption is not an actual religion but that for "coffeephiles" it takes on religious elements such as "search", "passion" and "transcendence" reflected in their language (Kozinets, 2002, p. 69). Thus, the role of the ethnographer is to become familiar with the language of the local cultural site and to consider how language is used by participants to illustrate both self and group membership and to reinforce community practices.

Ethnographic research usually requires a prolonged presence in field to ensure thorough understanding of the fieldwork site. Netnographic studies that disclose length of fieldwork vary from, for instance, Cronin and McCarthy's (2011) study which consisted of 65 hours of immersion across 8 research sites to Kozinets (2002) study which entailed 33 months of observation of one research site. However, Kozinets (2002) limited his data set to 179 posts downloaded over a five month period in order to keep the amount of data collected manageable. Hence, the length of fieldwork in online ethnography research may vary and as long as the researcher gains an in-depth understanding of the online consumer behaviours or cultures under observation shortened fieldwork periods may be justified.

As part of the ethnographic methodology the researcher is required to participate in the cultural life of the group under observation in order to develop an understanding of their "cultural/symbolic meanings and local rules" (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003, p. 216). In general this takes the form of either participant or non-participant observation techniques which are discussed in further detail in Section 4.4 of this chapter. The type of observation technique employed may affect the length of fieldwork period with non-participant observation usually entailing longer fieldwork periods than participant observation (e.g. Langer and Beckman, 2005; Mũniz and Schau, 2005).

Ethnographers seek to develop a "thick description" of social behaviour (Geertz, 1973, p.10). This means that the observer not only explains social behaviour of the cultural group but also the context wherein the behaviour unfolds. Hence, in this way the observed social behaviour becomes meaningful to an outsider. Geertz (1973, p. 10) explains the complexity of this task:

> *What the ethnographer is indeed faced with [...] is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.*

When endeavouring to reveal the complexity of social behaviour the ethnographer must aim for depth not breadth of understanding (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). As a result ethnography usually entails small scale sample sizes. Usually ethnographers employ judgement sampling techniques seeking informants with expert knowledge levels (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). Since the ethnographer has to build a rapport with each informant large scale sampling techniques are unfitting for this type of research (Agar, 1996).

Besides location of field site one of the more noticeable differences between traditional and online ethnography relates to the content of the observation act. In traditional ethnography spoken discourse and behaviours are observed whereas in online ethnography textual discourse is the primary source of information (Kozinets, 2002). Participants of an online ethnography cannot be seen, their physical self, home and place of work are not visible. They express themselves through computer-mediated-communications (CMCs) which involve text, emoticons and visual images. Hence, informants may be thought to represent a more "carefully cultivated and controlled self-image" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 64). This raises challenges for online ethnography research as it is possible that an informant may present a self-image which is not real, thus diminishing the trustworthiness of research findings. There is debate about the trustworthiness of informant identity in the online context with some arguing that individuals can take on multiple identities simultaneously when interacting in online spaces (Turkle, 1997; Stone, 1995) whereas others contend that identity deception is not common (Baym, 1998; Park and Roberts, 1998) and that the anonymity of online interactions actually allows informants to be more open and honest in self-disclosure than they would normally be in face-to-face interactions (McKenna and Bargh, 2000).

It is important to note that when conducting online ethnography research it is the communication act not the individual that is the unit of analysis (Kozinets, 2002). Kozinets (2002) explains that the transfer of attention from the individual to the communication act in netnography is in line with Mead's (1938) research approach wherein the ultimate unit of analysis is "not the person but the behaviour or the act" (2002: 64). The change in attention from the individual to the textual act is fitting in the online domain as off-line identifiers such as gender, age, and ethnic background are generally not visible. Hence, it seems appropriate that the behavioural act which is expressed through textual communications is the unit of analysis and not the individual. Given

an understanding of the basic assumptions of ethnography and how they apply to online ethnography or netnography has been reviewed the next section outlines the steps in the netnography research process and explains how they were enacted with respect to this study.

4.4 The Netnographic Research Process

Taking an overview of the ethnography research process Kozinets (2010) identifies three main differences between off-line and online techniques. Firstly, face-to-face entrée is very different to entering an online community in terms of approach, participation and observation. Secondly, the availability of data in digital format means less emphasis is placed on the "inscription of fieldnotes" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 5). Digital format also has implications for the amount of data that can be collected and the analysis techniques employed. Finally, there are few ethical procedures for off-line ethnography that smoothly translate to online ethnography. For these reasons Kozinets (2010) developed specific guidelines for conducting netnography research. He identified five stages in the netnographic research process that consist of: (1) planning and entrée, (2) data collection, (3) data analysis and interpretation (4) ensuring ethical procedures, and (5) research representation. The review proceeds by explaining how this study undertook the different stages in the netnographic research process to explore member involvement with OBCs.

4.4.1   Planning and Entrée

Though not clearly demarcated planning and entrée represent two different stages in the netnographic research process. The planning stage relates to the development of the research focus in particular the research question and finding an appropriate field site (Kozinets, 2010). Entrée, on the other hand, relates to the fundamental basics of getting started with netnography research and as such provides guidelines for site choice and entrée (Kozinets, 2010). The purpose

of this research is to explore member involvement with OBCs. Specifically, the research is interested in understanding: (1) What is involving about OBCs for members? (2) How are members involved with OBCs? Despite reports that show individuals are now spending an increasing amount of time using social media (e.g. Chaffey, 2016) there does not yet appear to be research that investigates consumer involvement with online entities such as OBCs. This is important because consumer involvement is perceived as an important mediator of behaviour in the extant literature and therefore it is hoped insight into online community involvement will provide deeper insight into member behaviours and online consumption within OBC settings.

The next phase of the netnographic planning process is to identify a relevant OBC sample. In so doing the researcher used Google and Yahoo! groups to search for potential OBCs. To start search terms such as 'online community', 'brand community' and 'consumer community' were used. However, it was found that these search terms usually lead to information and articles about online communities in general rather than identifying actual OBC sites and therefore the search terms were refined. This process was like working backwards as the researcher firstly searched online for popular brands using information sources such as Forbes list of the world's most popular brands and then checked if these brands had an online community presence. For example, Nike is a popular sports brand so the researcher searched to see if Nike had an online community which it does called 'NRC' an abbreviation for 'Nike + Run Club'. The process of searching for an OBC sample was time consuming because at that time there was no list of popular OBC sites so the researcher had to do the groundwork. By the end of this process a sample of 50 potential online community sites were identified. These online communities could be classified as communities of interest according to Armstrong and Hagel's (1996) classification system as they were dedicated to a special interest topic but they were consumption-related in that members talked about brands and products within community discussions. It is noteworthy

that only consumer-created online communities that were independent of firms were included in the sample. This was to ensure that member involvement with the product and/or brand was self-motivated and not influenced for example by promotions carried out by the firm such as the opportunity to win prizes based on 'liking' a product advertisement.

The entrée stage of the netnographic research process focuses on site selection and commencing fieldwork. Kozinets (2010, p. 89) recommends looking for online communities that are: (a) "relevant" to the research question(s), (b) "active" that is contain recent communications, (c) "interactive" in terms of consisting of a flow of communications between members, (d) "substantial" that is have a critical mass of communicators, (e) "heterogeneous" or have a number of different members, and (f) "data-rich" that is contain detailed or descriptively rich data. The researcher spent two months reviewing the 50 OBC sites identified to see if content and interactions fulfilled the requirements as set out by Kozinets (2010) guidelines for site selection. Out of the 50 online communities identified, two sites called the 'Purse Forum' and 'MacRumors' were selected as they satisfied all six of Kozinets (2010) guidelines for field site selection in so far as the community topics are consumption-related and therefore relevant to the research question, the communities consist of recent communications and plentiful interactions among members, both communities have a large number of members with varying degrees of interest in the community topic thus forming heterogeneous groups and both OBCs consist of detailed communications.

Kozinets (2010) outlines a series of questions that should be considered when becoming familiar with an online community site. These include the following: "Who are the most active members? What are some of the most popular topics? What is the history of the group? Have there been

major conflicts in the past? What can you tell about the characteristics (demographics, interests, opinions, values) of the message posters and commentators? What are some of the concepts and precepts that they hold dear? Do they have any particular rituals or activities? What are some of their common practices?" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 90). He explains that by understanding the general workings of the online community (e.g. its members, its topics, its language and how it works) the researcher will feel informed when making first contact with the online community. The two OBCs that constituted the field sites of this study are introduced in Section 5.2 of Chapter Five.

4.4.2   Data Collection

There are differences of opinion with regards to the role of the researcher in undertaking netnographic research. Kozinets (2010) believes that researcher participation is an integral part of the data collection process. Opponents, on the other hand, advocate purely observational or lurking techniques because of the possible influence an outsider may have on the community (e.g. Brownlie and Hewer, 2007; Füller, Jawecki and Mühlbacher, 2007). However, Kozinets (2010, p. 75) argues that totally removing the participatory role of the researcher from netnographic research eliminates the opportunity to experience "embedded cultural understanding". He argues that without cultural understanding interpretation is greatly impaired and may yield "shallow and cursory […] understanding" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 97). In assuming a participant-observer role the degree of researcher participation may vary from submitting short or long posts, partaking in community activities and even become an organiser of community events (Kozinets, 2010). In undertaking this study the researcher assumed a participant-observer role but the degree of researcher participation was minimal in that it consisted of only submitting short posts to a cross section of threads in the two OBCs. This assisted the researcher to understand each community and its members as only an insider would understand them. For example, the researcher participated in interaction rituals in the Purse Forum which entailed

submitting short posts that were supportive in nature such as offering words of encouragement when others revealed their new handbag purchases to the community. It was only by participating did the researcher come to fully understand the enjoyment that could be derived from involvement with the OBC in this case through vicariously consuming handbags with others. However, the researcher was careful throughout the data collection process and did not attempt to lead discussions in the two OBCs and continuously reflected on observed behaviours.

In capturing online data there are two main options: save the data as a computer-readable file or as a visual image as it appears on the forum (Kozinets, 2010). It seems that choice of data capture technique depends on the type of data being collected. For community interactions that are mainly textual in nature as with bulletin boards, forums and newsgroups saving the information as a computer readable file is most fitting (Kozinets, 2010). In cases when community interactions consist mainly of visuals as well as text such as virtual worlds, blogs and visual sharing sites then screen capture software such as Snagit, Shutter or Snapa are appropriate (Kozinets, 2010). The data in this study consisted mainly of text but in some cases wherein members talked about, for example, new handbag purchases in the Purse Forum the thread was made up of large number of visuals, in this instance, photos of the new handbag.

To capture data the researcher copied and pasted text and visuals into a Microsoft Word document, a technique supported by Kozinets (2010). To speed up the data capture process the researcher used the Windows shortcuts of ctrl a, ctrl c and ctrl p (select all, copy and paste). The researcher also used the 'Comments' feature in Microsoft Word to add any additional notes or information to each thread copied. Figure 4.1 provides an example of the additional information that was noted for each thread which included: start date of the thread and the location of the

thread in the forum. For example in Figure 4.1 the thread called "*If someone asks you if your LV (Louis Vuitton) is real…*" is from the Louis Vuitton sub-forum which is part of the premier designers section of the Purse Forum. Other information noted was the number of pages in the thread (as the researcher did not always download every page in a thread), number of replies and views, and date of last post.

Figure 4.1 Thread Information

Dec 20, 2012, 5:19am   #1

Thread Starter
SophieChic
Member
Joined: Oct 2011
Location: Sierra Nevada
Mountains CA
Posts: 454

What do you say? I know there are lots of threads about comments people get while carrying LV, but do any of you guys have any clever, kinda, 'none a yo business' kind of comebacks that you just use as a standard answer? Or just any comeback that would discourage further conversation, like if you say the bag is real, the next question is the price, blah blah.

Basically I just want to know how do all you LV gals and guys just nip that question in the bud, and put a stop to any further questions, preferably without being rude (though personally I think the question itself is totally rude). TIA

Comment [m4]: Start Date: 20/11/12
Home – Premier Designers – Louis Vuitton – If someone asks you if your LV is real…..
Page 1 of 5
Replies: 64
Views: 2144
Last Post: 22/12/12

Comment [m4]: Start Date: 20/11/12
Home – Premier Designers – Louis Vuitton – If someone asks you if your LV is real…..
Page 1 of 5
Replies: 64
Views: 2144
Last Post: 22/12/12

Source: Researcher notes on archival data from the Purse Forum

The information in the comment box in Figure 4.1 provided the researcher with an overview of each individual thread and highlighted the popularity of threads in terms of replies and viewership rates. Moreover, if the researcher needed to re-visit a thread for further information

she could follow the path directions taken note of in comment box and find the thread's exact location in the forum.

4.4.2.1 Sources of Netnographic Data

Kozinets (2010) categorises sources of data in netnographic research into three types: archival data, elicited data and fieldnote data. Archival data consists of communications between members stored on the forum site. The researcher is not involved in "creating or prompting" this type of data (Kozinets, 2010, p. 98) and it is often used to inform the researcher at the initial stages of netnography. Elicited data consists of personal and communal interactions between the researcher and group members. Common forms of elicited data are researcher postings and comments, emails and instant messaging interviews. Finally, fieldnote data are inscriptions taken down by the researcher during their observations of the community, its members, their interactions and the researcher's experience as a member of the group. Kozinets (2010) suggests that the three types of data in netnography reflect Miles and Huberman's (1994) categories of documents, interviews and observations in ethnography research. The researcher collected all three types of netnographic data during the fieldwork period of this study which are next explained.

Archival and Elicited Netnographic Data

The researcher reviewed archival data that is a repertoire of thread discussions submitted to the Purse Forum and MacRumors from 2009 to 2013 in order to become familiar with the customs and rituals of the two OBCs. Following the initial period of lurking in the archives of the Purse Forum and MacRumors the researcher started to collect elicited data by observing and partaking in the day-to-day thread discussions of each OBC. During the nine month field work period the

researcher downloaded 300 threads in total which consisted of 142 threads collected from MacRumors and 158 threads collected from the Purse Forum. It was hoped that elicited data could also be derived from conducting interviews with members from the two OBCs in order to gain insight into their perceptions and experiences of involvement with each community. However, this was not possible as soliciting, in this instance, referring to attempts at recruiting members to participate in surveys, was against the rules of each OBC. The researcher tried to overcome this barrier by contacting management of the two OBCs but only a moderator from MacRumors replied and explained that contacting members to request an interview may lead to negative perceptions of the community in terms of members being observed by researchers and therefore the request could not be permitted. The research also conducted a series of mini case studies in which the posting history of a sample of members from the two OBCs was analysed. This data helped the researcher to reflect on member involvement over their membership and subsequently to consider how member involvement may evolve over time.

Netnographic Fieldnote Data

Fieldnotes are more than recorded observations and play a fundamental role in ethnography. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995, p. 16) state:

> *They constitute a way of life through the very writing choices the ethnographer makes and the stories she tells; for, through her writing she conveys her understandings and insights to future readers unacquainted with these lives, people, and events. In writing a fieldnote, then, the ethnographer does not simply put happenings into words. Rather, such writing is an interpretive process: it is the very first act of textualising. Indeed, this often 'invisible' work – writing ethnographic fieldnotes – is the primordial textualisation that creates a world on the page and ultimately shapes the final ethnographic, published text.*

The content of fieldnotes in netnographic data collection is different to traditional ethnography as it is not necessary to write down social discourse and physical descriptions which can be

captured respectively from downloaded discussion threads in Microsoft Word. However, the role of fieldnotes remains the same as it concentrates on helping the researcher to "catalogue, describe, and develop theories from their observations, and to record their reactions and subjective experiences" (Garcia *et al.*, 2009, p. 65). The researcher maintained a fieldnote diary throughout the observation fieldwork. The fieldnote diary evolved over the netnographic research process from noting the researcher's reaction and experience of customs and rituals in the two OBCs during the initial stages of fieldwork to more in-depth reflections on the underlying meaning of observed behaviours with respect to member involvement during the latter stages of fieldwork. Figure 4.2 presents an extract taken from a reflection in the researcher's fieldnote diary during the latter stages of data collection:

Figure 4.2 Extract from the Researcher's Fieldnote Diary

10th December 2014

Based on my analysis of newbies first posts to MacRumors last night there appears to be differences in terms of the degree of product/brand experience of this group of participants and their reasons for initial online community involvement. Some newbies in first posts to the community identify with the group through self-group congruity where they talk about their strong preference for the brand's product (display of brand involvement) and deride competitor brands (in the case of 'galstaph' he appears inexperienced as he is a non-brand owner). Other newbies also identify with the community group but this is prompted by their interest in technology and they exhibit expertise through length of experience using technology products and ownership of different Apple products (display product/brand involvement). This provides insight into how some newbies are involved with MacRumors but it does not answer why? Why do some new members attempt to identify with the community group? I think for some this is prompted by affiliate needs that is desire to be part of the community group and they demonstrate this by their strong enthusiasm for the community brand or interest in technology. How is this similar or different to newbies first posts in the Purse Forum?

Figure 4.2 helps show the importance of reflective fieldnotes in netnographic research that attempt to capture the researcher's subjective impression of observed behaviours, in this example, with respect to how new members appear to first participate in MacRumors and in so doing try to answer the "all-important why questions as they arise" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 115).

4.4.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation are two different activities although oftentimes the terms are used interchangeably in the literature. Spiggle (1994, pp. 492-497) differentiates between the two terms explaining that analysis "breaks down or divides some complex whole into constitute parts" whereas interpretation represents an "illuminating grasp of meaning, as in deciphering a code". As part of the analysis process researchers "dissect, reduce, sort, and reconstitute data", activities that are collectively associated with manipulating data, whereas interpretation, on the other hand, concentrates on understanding the intentions, inferences, experiences and behaviours of those being studied, thus making sense of the data (Spiggle, 1994, p. 492). Drawing inferences from qualitative data requires some combination of analysis and interpretation activities.

Netnographic data usually consists of two elements: data gathered directly from textual communications and data recorded by the researcher from his/her observations of the community, its members and their interactions (Kozinets, 2002; 2010). For the most part there is a reduced transcription process in preparing netnographic data for analysis as it can be copied directly from the online site into a data analysis package such as NVivo. Though automatic downloads have significant time-saving benefits, netnographers have to be careful of data overload. Given the volume of data available online, Kozinets (2002; 2010) recommends that netnographers classify posts as primarily social or informational in nature and primarily on-topic

or off-topic to simplify the data collection process. He explains that usually researchers include all data in a "grand tour" interpretation but that it is mainly informational and on-topic data that is included in the more in-depth analysis phase (Kozinets, 2002, p. 64). Kozinets (2010) recommends the use of qualitative analytic techniques and hermeneutics as part of netnography data analysis and interpretation process. Data captured and collected during this research included downloaded discussion threads and as such is qualitative in nature. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) there are common analytic techniques used across qualitative research. Kozinets (2010, p. 119) identifies common analytic techniques used in qualitative research and adapts them specifically to the needs of the netnographer the explanation of which is reproduced in full below:

- "*Coding*: affixing codes or categories to data drawn from fieldnotes, interviews, documents, or, in the case of netnographic data, other cultural material such as newsgroup or blog postings […] drawn from online sources, during coding, codes, classifications, names or labels are assigned to particular units of data; these codes label the data as belonging to or being an example of some more general phenomenon: categories for coding usually emerge inductively through a close reading of the data, rather than being imposed by prescribed categories.

- *Noting*: reflections on the data or other remarks are noted in the margins of the data; this form of annotation is also commonly known as memoing.

- *Abstracting and Comparing*: the materials are sorted and sifted to identify similar phrases, shared sequences, relationships, and distinct differences; this abstracting process builds the categorised codes into higher-order, or more general, conceptual constructs, patterns or processes; comparing looks at the similarities and differences across data incidents.

- *Checking and Refinement*: returns to the field for the next wave of data collection in order to isolate, check, and refine the understanding of patterns, processes, commonalities, and differences.

- *Generalizing*: elaborates a small set of generalisations that cover or explain the consistencies in the dataset.

- *Theorising*: confronting the generalisations gathered from the data with a formalised body of knowledge that uses constructs or theories; constructing new theory in close coordination both with the analysis of data as well as the existing relevant body of knowledge" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 119).

These qualitative analysis techniques have been employed by existing netnographic research (Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2011; Tikkanen *et al.,* 2009; Cova and Pace, 2006; Langer and Beckman, 2005). Following data analysis the next stage focuses on interpreting or making sense of the data. Kozinets (2010) suggests adopting the hermeneutic process to interpret qualitative data. The hermeneutics process is described as "an iterative one in which a part of the qualitative data (or text) is interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to the developing sense of the whole" (Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994, p. 433). As such the hermeneutics process involves iterative reading of the data with interpretations emerging from comparing sections of the data to the overall findings. Hermeneutics has been employed by existing netnography studies to interpret qualitative findings (Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2011; Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). This research employed qualitative analytic techniques and hermeneutics as prescribed by Kozinets (2010) to analyse and make sense of the data.

The researcher uploaded the observation data consisting of 300 discussion threads to Nvivo 10 for Windows. The researcher read through the observation data several times and as per Kozinets

(2010) guidelines discussion threads that were primarily social in nature (23 in total) were removed from the dataset. The remaining number of discussion threads was 277 made up of 126 discussion threads from MacRumors and 151 discussion threads from the Purse Forum. The first two rounds of coding were conducted using Nvivo but the researcher felt distanced from the data using the computer package and overwhelmed by the number of nodes that continued to grow with each round of coding. The researcher decided to print out the discussion threads and code them by hand. The total data set of 277 threads when printed out consisted of 4155 pages approximately. It is not surprising that the researcher felt lost in data for several months and after many iterations of reading the threads the decision was made to reduce the data set down to 55 seminal threads. A further three rounds of coding were undertaken and the final coding frame consisted of 99 codes, 30 categories and six themes.

Figures 4.3 and 4.4 provide a screenshot of posts analysed by the researcher. The posts in this instance are an example of responses submitted by members wherein they provide purchase advice in the two OBCs. In accordance with the analytical guidelines set out by Kozinets (2010) the researcher assigned labels to units of the data and wrote notes and questions in the margin of the page when coding the data.

Figure 4.3 Sample of Coded Data from the two OBCs – Development of Node 'Basic level of expertise when providing advice'
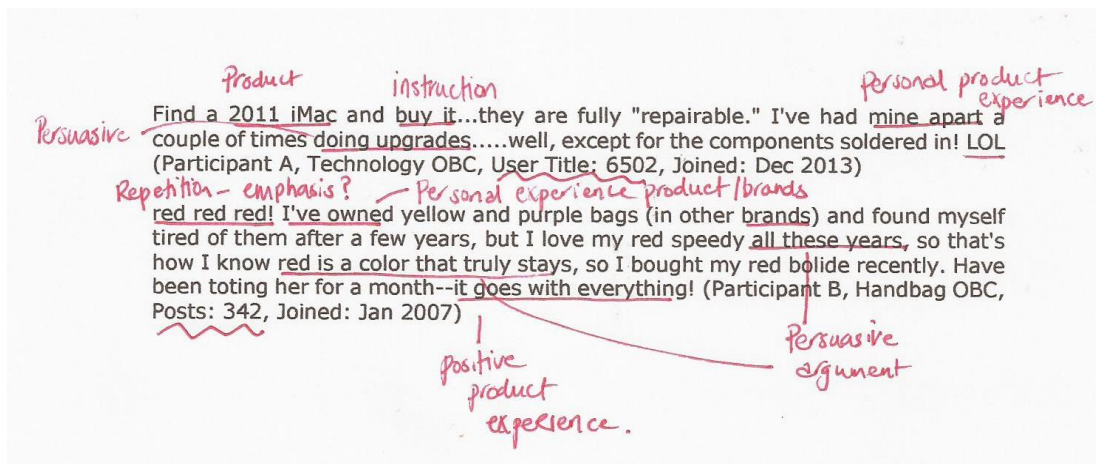
Figure 4.4 Sample of Coded Data from the two OBCs – Development of Node 'Advanced level of expertise when providing Advice'
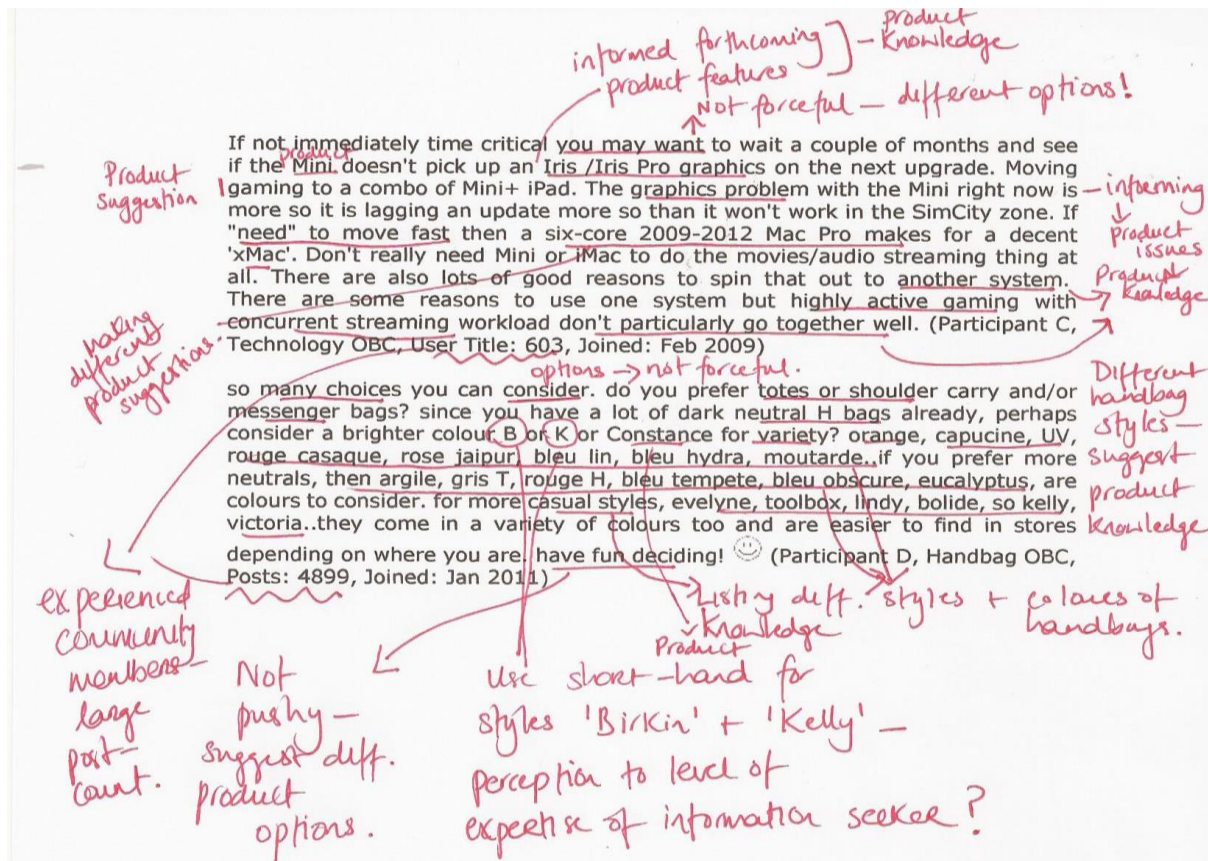
On coding the data by hand the researcher proceeded to input the codes into the Nvivo software package. This was a lengthy process as it entailed reviewing each discussion thread in Nvivo and assigning nodes to specific units of data by highlighting the text. However, the ability of Nvivo

to allow the researcher to compare and contrast the entire data set for a single node was valuable to the analysis process.

4.4.4   Ensuring Ethical Procedures

Given the ease of access to online content it is important that Internet research is conducted in an ethical manner. The Association of Internet Researchers' (2002, p.4) state that before undertaking Internet research it is important to establish the "ethical expectations" of the venue. Ethical expectations are influenced by whether the online community is perceived as a public or private space. Information about the public or private nature of an online community is usually detailed in the privacy policy or the terms of use section of the site. The Association of Internet Researchers (2002, p. 5) explain that generally "the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent". The European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) set stricter guidelines for classifying the public versus private orientation of online communities. ESOMAR (2009) stipulates online communities that do not require members to register and allow anyone to post a comment are classified as public online communities with content similar to off-line publications such as a newspaper. Online communities, on the other hand, that require members to register or apply for membership are classified as "semi-public forums" or "walled gardens" with posts viewed as private communications (ESOMAR, 2009, p.7). ESOMAR (2009) recommends that when researching "semi-public forums" the researcher makes their presence known and seeks informed consent from the moderator or group members (2009, p.11).

After spending significant time browsing a number of online communities the researcher noted that some online communities that are classified as semi-public under ESOMAR's guidelines

(i.e. members have to register) have elements of the website that are open to the public in so far as visitors may view posts and archives. For example, the Purse Forum requires members to register their personal details however it is possible for a visitor to view threads submitted to the forum without signing in. Thus, forum content in the Purse Forum is viewable in the public domain. Moreover, the privacy policy of the Purse Blog, the online fashion magazine that hosts the Purse Forum states:

> *You should be aware that if you voluntarily disclose personal information in comment areas or on the bulletin board within Purse Blog, that information might be collected and disseminated by third-parties, and result in, among other things, unsolicited inquiries, messages, and offers from third-parties. Please understand that any information that is disclosed in these areas becomes public information and this third-party conduct is out of the control of Midley, Inc. Please exercise caution when deciding to disclose your personal information.* (http://www.purseblog.com/privacy/)

It seems that, in this instance, even though the Purse Forum requires individuals to apply for membership and accordingly is classified as semi-public under ESOMAR's guidelines, the actual content of the forum, in particular what the researcher is interested in observing, is considered public communications. As such, there are fewer obligations to seek informed consent as the content is thought public according to the Association of Internet Researchers' guidelines. Similarly, even though MacRumors requires members to apply for membership it is possible for non-members to view threads and content on the forum, thus such communications are considered public in nature. MacRumors "Registration Agreement" which members read and agree to abide by when applying for membership also explains that forum posts are public in nature:

> *that you understand that your posts and the user name you select will be visible to the Internet and to search engines, that you are responsible for your own privacy in deciding what to post, and that your posts will remain visible even if you leave MacRumors or your account is closed for any reason.*
>
> (http://guides.macrumors.com/Help:Registration_Agreement)

Walther (2002, p.207) notes that participants "expectation of privacy […] is extremely misplaced" in "publicly-available communication systems". The researcher hoped that disclosures by both the Purse Forum and MacRumors about the public nature of community discussions meant that members were less likely to think their posts were private communications.

Procedures for Ethical Netnography

Kozinets (2010) outlines guidelines on how to conduct ethical netnography. In so doing he discusses the importance of five issues: (a) identifying and explaining the researcher's role, (b) asking permission, (c) using commercial sites for netnography, (d) gaining informed consent, and, (e) citing, anonymising, or crediting research participants (Kozinets, 2010, pp.147-156). The section proceeds with a discussion outlining the ethical issues associated with netnography and considers the implications for this study. The first ethical consideration relates to disclosing the researcher's role and explaining the purpose of the study. Bruckman (2002) explains that researchers should openly describe themselves as such and make information about their research publically available on their profile page. The researcher explained on her personal profile page in MacRumors and the Purse Forum that she was a PhD candidate interested in exploring member behaviour in OBCs. Some researchers may disclose their role in their personal signature of their profile, with this information appearing every time the researcher submits a post to the forum (Bruckman, 2002). The researcher refrained from including her role as researcher in her personal signature as she felt this could potentially be disruptive to the normal behaviour on the site as members would be reminded that they were being observed.

The second ethical consideration is whether to seek permission or not to conduct the research. This largely depends on the public versus private nature of the online site (Kozinets, 2010). Although the chosen forums in this study are public in nature the researcher decided for ethical reasons to approach forum moderators and seek permission to conduct the research. In so doing the researcher emailed group moderators of both the Purse Forum and MacRumors seeking permission to conduct the research. The Purse Forum did not respond to the three email requests sent by the researcher. MacRumors on the other hand, granted permission to conduct the observation research and thanked the researcher for seeking access before commencing the fieldwork. In granting research access MacRumors asked that the researcher follow the forum rules in so far as any posts she submitted during thread discussions should be on-topic.

The third ethical consideration is whether to use commercial sites such as Facebook and Pinterest to conduct netnographic research. Kozinets (2010) explains that generally these sites have stricter terms of service limiting the amount of third party access to online content. As explained in Section 4.4 of this chapter only consumer-created online communities that were independent of firms were included in the research sample. This was to ensure that member involvement with the product and/or brand was primarily driven by the individual consumer rather than influenced by promotions carried out by the firm.

The fourth ethical consideration relates to gaining informed consent and largely depends on whether the study involves human subjects. The Code of Federal Regulations Title 45, Part 46, Protection of Human Subjects (2009, p. 132) defines human subject research as data gathered through "intervention or interaction" between the researcher and the individual, or information gathered that is "individually identifiable" that is the identity of the research subject is or may

be determined by the researcher or linked to the information. Walther (2002, p. 207) suggests that the analysis of Internet archives does not constitute human subject research if the "researcher does not record the identity of the message poster and if the researcher can legally and easily access such archives". Similarly, Kozinets (2010, p. 151) states that archival research and downloads of existing posts do not "strictly qualify as human subjects research". These guidelines depend on the "risk to the research participant" and the "level of identification of participants in the research" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 151). Under the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Committee's Standard Operating Procedures (2007) the research is classified as low risk as the topic is non-sensitive in nature. Moreover, the level of identification of participants in the research is minimal. For instance, personal information such as name, age, gender of members is not usually disclosed in the chosen forums and even if this information was available it is outside the scope of the research. Member characteristics that are important to the research include length of OBC membership and total number of posts submitted to the online community which relate to the members online profile rather than their personal identity.

Since forum content is publically available on the Internet it is possible to link quotes taken from the two OBCs to the direct source. In an effort to heighten anonymity of forum members the researcher will change pseudonyms of cited members and withhold the names of the forums in research publications. However, even if quotes are linked back to the direct source it is thought that since the research is non-sensitive in nature it is unlikely that this would cause harm or embarrassment to informants. Given the minimal level of risk of the research and the public nature of community communications the research is thought to fall into the category of being exempt from informed consent which is the case for many "participative netnographic studies" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 151). Although in conducting this netnographic study, the researcher

interacted with members in the forum and recorded notes of their experiences, Kozinets (2010, p. 151) maintains that there is no need to seek informed consent for these types of interactions.

The fifth ethical consideration concerns citing research participants. The netnographic researcher needs to decide if they should keep research participants anonymous or attribute responses to them. The majority of participants use a pseudonym or made-up user name when participating in online forums. Oftentimes pseudonyms contain part of the participant's real name or other personal information such as year of birth. Over time participants may build up a reputation for their pseudonym and use the same pseudonym on a number of sites (Bruckman, 2002). Moreover, participants may disclose personal information in community posts, if the forum is archived this information may help identify the individual (Bruckman, 2002). For these reasons pseudonyms often function like real names (Frankel and Siang, 1999), and as a result the researcher's decision to either cite the pseudonym or keep it anonymous merits serious consideration. Kozinets (2010, p. 153) explains that a "motivated person" can easily trace a direct quote to its "original online posting" by using a search engine. It is also important to note that some online content may be considered "semi-published" such as blog sites and accordingly the creators of such material may desire credit (Kozinets, 2010, p. 153).

The decision to attribute data to informants or keep it anonymous mainly depends on the degree of potential risk and harm to the participant (Kozinets, 2010). As explained under the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Committee's Standard Operating Procedures (2007) this research is classified as low risk. Generally in low risk netnography studies it is considered acceptable to cite pseudonyms (Kozinets, 2010). In practice, however, observers of what can be categorised as low risk netnographic studies appear to withhold the name of the forums in

publications and in-text citations only disclose general information such as type of the forum (e.g. UK or US site) and date of post (Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010). Even though the current research is low risk in nature, the researcher will follow existing practice and keep participants anonymous by assigning a title, such as, 'Member A' to them. Additional information that will be noted in-text citations will not cause harm and is only included because it is relevant to understanding differences in member involvement between members and this includes information about their length of membership of the OBC and number of posts submitted to or user title in the OBC.

4.4.5   Representation and Evaluation

The final stage of the netnographic research process focuses on verifying the data. Kozinets (2010) lists ten criteria that may be used to evaluate netnography findings, outlined in Table 4.2. The netnographic evaluative criteria are explained as follows: coherence concentrates on a unified argument free from internal contradictions and uses techniques such as negative case analysis. Rigour is the extent to which the netnography has followed "principled protocols" of entrée, data collection, analysis, interpretation, research ethics and representation (Kozinets, 2010, p. 164). Literacy emphasises the importance of the netnographer's detailed understanding of the relevant literature and research approaches. Groundedness focuses on the reliability of empirical data and the provision of substantial supporting evidence to back up research claims. Innovation is the extent to which netnography findings provide new ways of understanding things. Resonance is about bringing feeling to netnographic narratives and providing a personal understanding of the online community's culture.

Verisimilitude is similar to the criteria of groundedness and maintains that on reading the netnography narrative the reader should feel as if they have been in contact with the community, its culture and members. Reflexivity is about acknowledging the role of the researcher captured through fieldnotes and online interactions. Kozinets (2010) explains that sometimes the most interesting occurrences in netnography emerge from tensions between the researcher and the cultural member's resistance to being observed. He states that as the netnographic text is reflexive about these occurrences its ability to "speak with authority" about cultural membership is affirmed (Kozinets, 2010, p. 169). Praxis refers to the extent to which "the text inspires and empowers social action" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 171). As such it is the responsibility of netnographers to consider the social implications of phenomenon under observation (Kozinets, 2010). Finally, intermix requires netnographers to take account of both online and off-line interactions, if relevant, to the cultural members daily lives and to present such social interactions in the netnographic account. Kozinets (2010) suggests that the evaluative criteria for individual netnographic researchers is likely to be different.

Table 4.2 Netnographic Criteria

Criterion Name	Definition ('the extent to which…')
Coherence	Each recognisably different interpretation is free from internal contradictions and presents a unified pattern
Rigour	The text recognises and adheres to the procedural standards of netnographic research
Literacy	The text recognises and is knowledgeable of relevant literature and research approaches
Groundedness	The theoretical representation is supported by data, and the links between the data and theory are clear and convincing
Innovation	The constructs, ideas, frameworks and narrative form provide new and creative ways of understanding systems, structures, experience or actions
Resonance	A personalised and sensitising connection with the cultural phenomenon is gained
Verisimilitude	A believable and lifelike sense of cultural and communal contact is achieved
Reflexivity	The text acknowledges the role of the researcher and is open to alternative interpretations
Praxis	The text inspires and empowers social action
Intermix	The representation takes account of the interconnection of the various modes of social interaction – online and off – in the culture member's daily lived experiences, as well as in its own representation

Source: Kozinets, 2010, p. 162

The evaluative criteria in Table 4.2 that were applicable to this netnographic study are now explained. The researcher ensured the findings were free from internal contradiction and thereby represented a coherent pattern by employing both hermeneutics, whereby interpretation stemmed from comparing sections of the data to the overall findings and negative case analysis, wherein the researcher searched for data that appeared to contradict interpretations that were emerging from the data. The use of these two techniques helped develop the researcher's interpretation of the data and lead to the identification of four overarching themes linked to different types of online community involvement. Research rigour was ensured by following and providing a detailed account of the standard protocols for netnographic research as set out by Kozinets (2010): planning, entrée, data collection, analysis and interpretation, research ethics and representation. The literacy of this study was ensured by the researcher's theoretical review of

online community and involvement concepts the outcome of which was the identification of online community involvement as an object of involvement that as of yet had not been researched in the marketing field.

Groundedness of the findings was ensured by the inclusion of a large number of quotes from the observation data, screenshots of different forum pages from MacRumors and the Purse Forum, and details regarding the posting history of members from the two OBCs which collectively helped support the typology of online community involvement. Finally, the researcher reflected on her role in knowledge construction, known as reflexivity, throughout the research process. For example, in writing her interpretations of observed behaviours in the fieldnote diary the researcher questioned whether alternative interpretations were possible. The researcher also conducted member checks with five members from each OBC wherein the researcher's understanding of the customs and rituals of each OBC, interpretations of observed behaviours and theories regarding different types of online community involvement were shared. For the most part feedback from the member checks was confirmatory and in cases where members had slight differences of opinion it helped further develop the researcher's understanding of the findings. Taken together these techniques helped ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings.

4.5 Conclusion

The chapter outlines the philosophical underpinnings and the research methodology of this study. The chapter concludes that positivism and interpretivism are not only two different ways of viewing social reality but also two distinct ways of finding out things. The researcher agrees with Szmigin and Foxall (2000) in that researchers should move away from the dominant

paradigm debate and rather focus on understanding each viewpoint and its particular contributions. The theoretical review identified online community involvement as an object of involvement that does not yet appear to be researched in the marketing field. Hence, as the research topic is exploratory the researcher adopts an interpretivist epistemology seeking to gain insight into what is involving about OBCs and how members are involved with OBCs. The netnographic methodology is deemed fitting to conducting this research as it is inherently interpretivist and facilitates the researcher's interest in observing the manifestation and display of member involvement in OBC settings. The online community sample is based in the public domain and therefore according to the Association of Internet Researchers there are fewer obligations to gain informed consent. Towards protecting the anonymity of research subjects the researcher will assign titles to members and withhold the names of the OBC sites in future publications. Having identified a gap in the involvement literature and outlined the research approach the proceeding chapters presents the research findings arising from the analysis of the observation data.

CHAPTER FIVE – ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS PART I

5.1   Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the research strategy of this study which employed netnography to undertake an exploration of member involvement with Online Brand Communities (OBCs). The netnographic research strategy consisted of an exploration of the manifestation and display of online community involvement based on the observation of member involvement in two OBCs that is MacRumors and the Purse Forum over a nine month period. The findings from the observation data identified four patterns of behaviour exemplified by members involved within the two OBC sites. These four behaviours include: (1) seeking and providing functional help, (2) seeking and providing social support, (3) sharing product and/or brand narratives, (4) partaking in the customs and rituals of the OBC. The aim of this chapter is to present the findings in relation to member behaviours that relate to seeking and providing either functional help or social support in the two OBCs. This is because seeking functional help or social support with product and/or brand related issues were the initial reasons in some instances for members to sign-up and become involved with the OBC. The chapter begins by providing an overview of the two OBC sites that were under observation in this study. Following this the chapter explains the types of product and purchase related queries that members seek functional help with. The chapter proceeds to present the findings in relation to how members seek and provide functional help in the two OBCs. The chapter next defines the meaning of social support in this study and identifies three particular triggers that prompt members to seek social support in the two OBCs. The latter part of the chapter presents the findings in relation to how members seek and provide social support in the two OBCs.

5.2 Profile of the OBC Sites under Observation

Introduced in Chapter One the two OBC sites under observation in this study are called the 'Purse Forum' and 'MacRumors'. The Purse Forum was founded by Meaghan Mahoney Dusil and Vlad Dusil in 2005 who had a passion for luxury handbags and blogging. The Purse Forum consists of multiple sub-forums each dedicated to a particular luxury brand. Figure 5.1 provides a screenshot of the home page of the Purse Forum site.

Figure 5.1 Screenshot of the Purse Forum OBC Site

Source: http://forum.purseblog.com
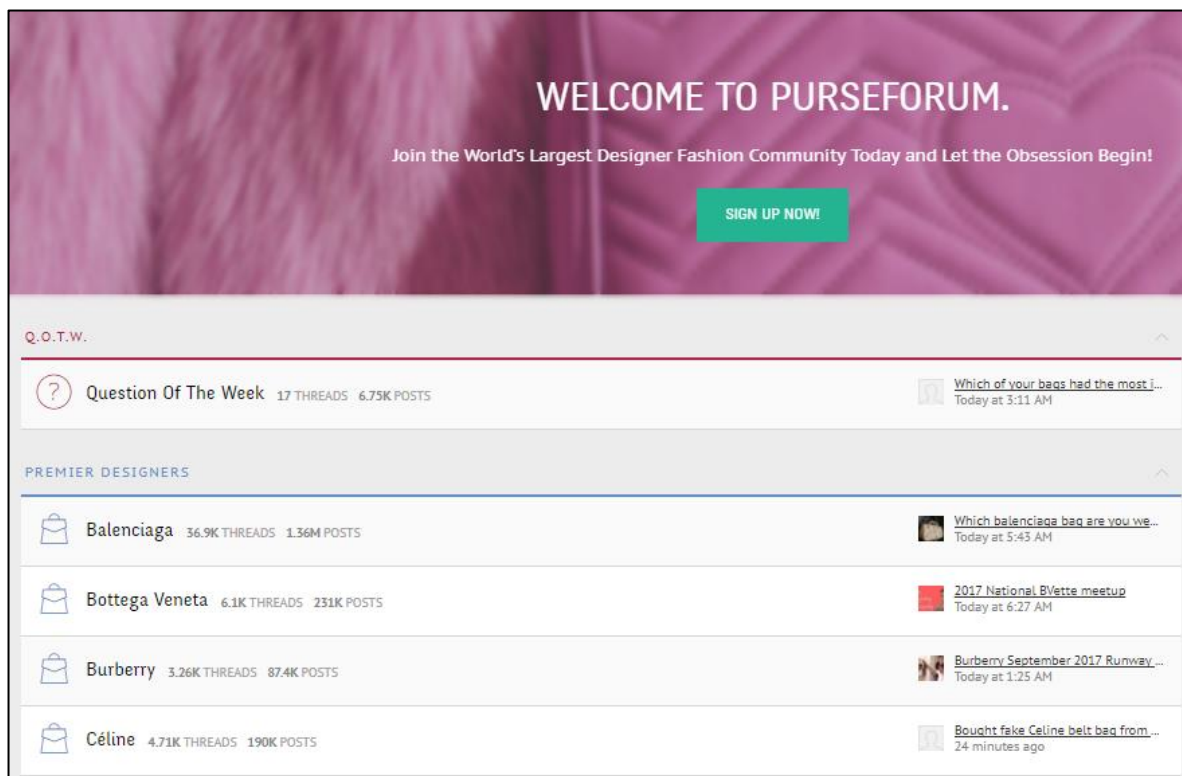
Many members in the Purse Forum display an enthusiasm for the handbag product category and this is apparent by their interest in product and/or brand information in relation to handbag maintenance tips, handbag purchase queries, and handbag repair and restoration. Distinct customs and rituals in the Purse Forum include modelling shots wherein members share photos of themselves modelling their handbags and purchase reveals wherein members share new

handbag purchases with the community. The Purse Forum does not have an established classification system for categorising users based on number of posts submitted to the site. Instead information on each individual member in terms of their length of membership and post contribution is shown on their personal profile.

MacRumors was founded in 2000 by Arnold Kim who was an Apple enthusiast. MacRumors is dedicated to the Apple brand only. Figure 5.2 provides a screenshot of a section of the home page of the MacRumors OBC site.

Figure 5.2 Screenshot of the MacRumors OBC Site

Source: http://forums.macrumors.com/
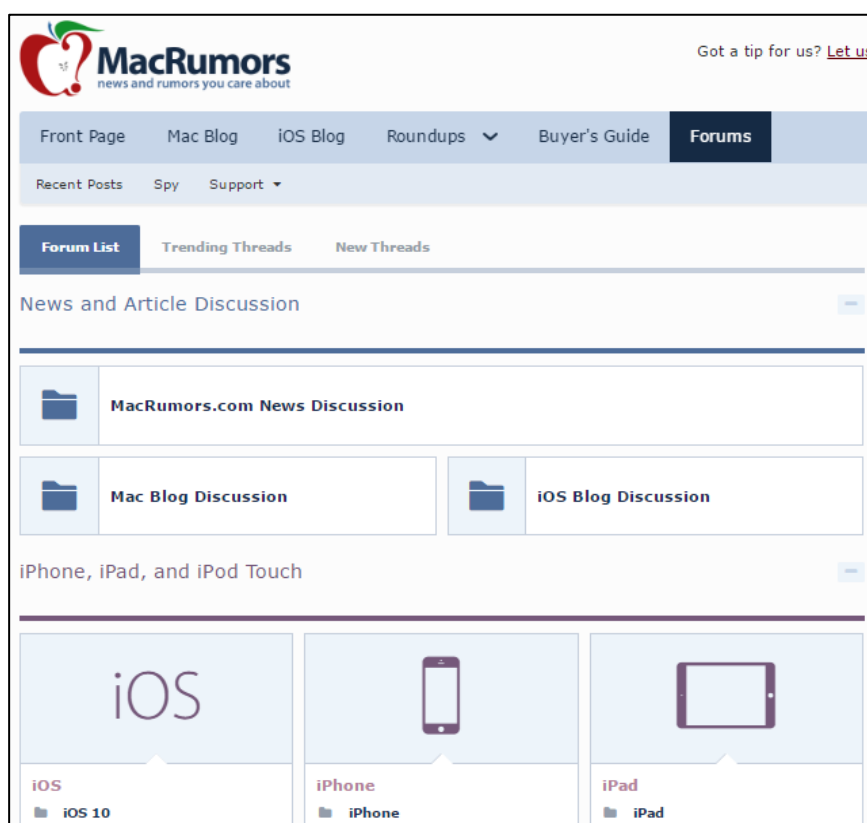
Members in MacRumors display an enthusiasm for the Apple brand and the technology product category and this is apparent by their interest in product and/or brand information in relation to

new Apple products, product functioning, product repair and restoration. A common custom in MacRumors is to analyse news and rumours in relation to the technology industry and Apple product developments; hence, the inclusion of the term 'rumors' in the OBC name. Members in MacRumors are assigned a user title based on the number of posts they submit to the OBC. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the user title classification system used in MacRumors. The user titles listed from '6502' to 'G5' in Table 5.1 represent different strengths of computer processors, ranging from low to high, that have been used in Apple Macs over the years. Details regarding each individual member's user title and length of membership is outlined on their personal profile.

Table 5.1 User Title Classification System in MacRumors

User Title	Number of Posts
Newbie	≥0-29
Member	≥30
Regular	≥100
6502	≥250
6502a	≥500
65816	≥1000
65832	≥1500
68000	≥1505
68010	≥2000
68020	≥2005
68030	≥2500
68040	≥3000
601	≥4000
603	≥5000
604	≥6500
G3	≥8000
G4	≥10000
G5	≥12000

Source: https://macrumors.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/201624413-How-do-user-titles-work-

The two observation sites in this study can be classified as member-initiated OBCs as they were started by fans of the product category and brand respectively. The reason for selecting member-initiated rather than company-initiated OBCs was to protect against member involvement with

the brand being manipulated by the company through for instance marketing promotions or the removal of negative content about the brand.

In presenting the findings from the observation data in Chapters Five and Six of this thesis a total of 137 members from the two OBCs are cited, selected for various reasons such as length of membership, post contribution and online behaviour. Details of these members that effectively constitute the observation sample are outlined in Appendix 5.1. Moving forward findings in relation to member involvement that consists of seeking and providing functional help is presented and analysed.

5.3   Seeking and Providing Functional Help

A large proportion of behaviour in the two OBCs may be categorised as information exchange wherein members seek and provide functional help with product and purchase related issues. Members of all experience levels seek functional help in the two OBCs and only in some instances are there differences between the types of queries asked with newcomers in contrast to experienced members more likely to ask basic product or purchase-related questions. The content of posts providing functional help may also vary from brief sentences recommending a particular product, to lengthy posts explaining the pros and cons of different product options, or detailed prescriptive instructions on how to repair products. Seeking functional help with product and purchase queries occurs most often in MacRumors. Differences between the two OBCs appears to be linked to the primary purpose of the OBC. The underlying purpose of MacRumors is to provide functional help and this is evidenced by the existence of sub-forums dedicated to trouble-shooting with respect to specific Apple products. For example, Figure 5.3 provides a screenshot of the Mac sub-forum in MacRumors which consists primarily of threads seeking and providing functional help with Mac computer queries.

Figure 5.3 Screenshot of Mac sub-forum in MacRumors
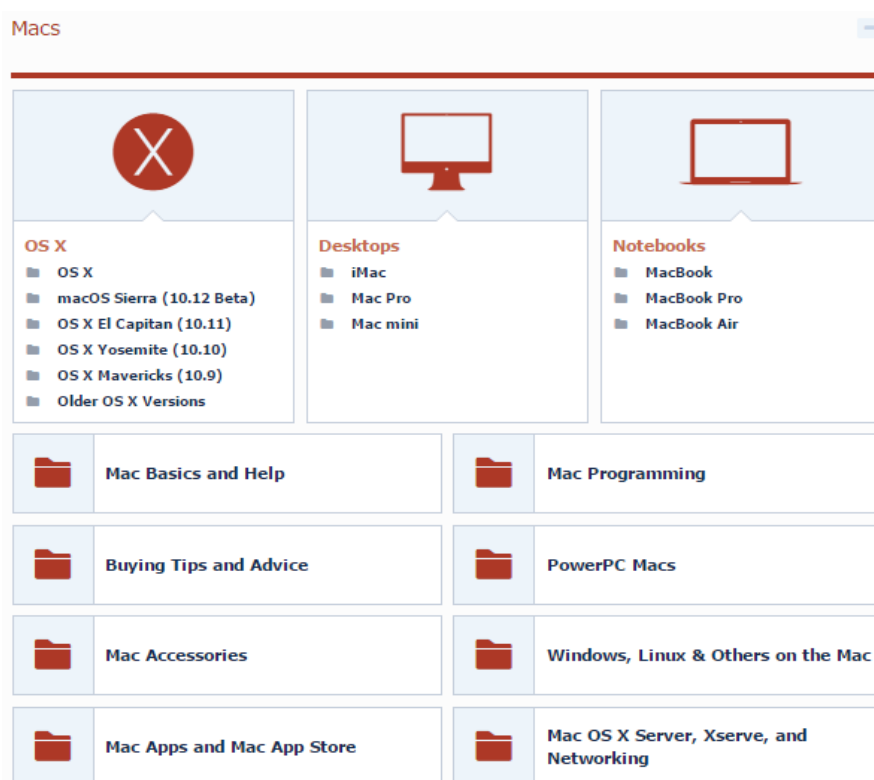
Even though the Purse Forum has some threads dedicated to product and purchase queries such as "*Authenticate this Gucci*[12]" and "*Chloé Shopping*" it is not the primary purpose of the OBC to offer functional help with handbag products. The chapter next analyses and presents the findings in relation to the different product and purchase related issues that members seek functional help with in the two OBCs.

5.3.1   Situational Involvement with the Product as Basis for Seeking Functional Help

Situational involvement which in this instance refers to the member's temporary concern with the product due to a stimulus situation such as product repair or product purchase appears to be the basis for seeking functional help in the two OBCs. Table 5.1 provides a sample of the types of product and purchase related queries that members seek functional help with. Situational involvement in this instance may be classified into two main categories that is task involvement

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[12] This thread is dedicated to product queries in relation to the authenticity of handbags for sale through third party websites like eBay.

with the product and purchase involvement. Seeking functional help with task involvement is suggested by thread titles such as "*Internal Mic not working on MacBook*" and "*Help oil stain on my Miu Miu*" in Table 5.2 which focus on applied problems with the product such as a broken-down Mac or damaged handbag. Seeking functional help with purchase involvement is suggested by thread titles such as "*Help nMP vs MP vs iMac*" and "*Help me choose…Bolide 31 or Jypsiere 31*" in Table 5.2 which focus on purchase related issues specifically trying to optimise the purchase decision.

Table 5.2 Sample of Thread Titles Seeking Functional Help

Thread Title	Type of Involvement	OBC Site
Internal Mic not working on MacBook	Task Involvement	MacRumors
MacBook Pro wont boot showing prohibitory sign Plz help!!!	Task Involvement	MacRumors
2013 MacPro Wait or Buy Now?	Purchase Involvement	MacRumors
Help nMP vs MP vs iMac	Purchase Involvement	MacRumors
Help oil stain on my Miu Miu	Task Involvement	The Purse Forum
Is this just cracking dry leather or..gasp..Mold?!?	Task Involvement	The Purse Forum
Help me choose…Bolide 31 or Jypsiere 31	Purchase Involvement	The Purse Forum
OK.. NEED MAJOR HELP DECIDING ON MY NEW CHANEL!! PIX INCLUDED!	Purchase Involvement	The Purse Forum

The following posts were submitted by newcomers to the two OBCs in which they seek functional help with the purchase decision that is choice of Mac computer and Hermès handbag respectively:

#1

Hi Folks,

Long time lurker here, but am currently facing a dilemma that (finally) forced me to register. Like many people I am considering buying a nMP [new Mac Pro]... but probably for the wrong reasons. […]

Now:
I currently own a late 2012 27" iMac, my first desktop after having used many MacBooks. I enjoy the screen, the overall speed and design. On the other hand,

it bothers me that it is an <u>all-in-one</u> deal... the idea that when 'something' might break (e.g. screen, Fusion drive, GPU [Graphics Processing Unit]) the entire computer would become virtually useless and/or I would lose my computer for a longer period of time for repairs scares the **** out of me

Uses:
First off, I am *not* a video editor. I use my iMac as the main media-server for the entire house (movies/audio), email, pages/word, some Xcode, regular photoshop and the occasional game (simcity, diablo, no FPS [Frames Per Second]). I suppose I'm your typical iMac user.

Needs:
- need for a computer that I can 'fix', iMac is unacceptably unfixable.
- need ample storage (internally or externally, doesn't matter much).
- need good GPU [Graphics Processing Unit] (bye bye - Mac mini).

The dilemma:
I am actually willing to spend some serious money. My computer is important to me: I work from home and use the same computer for home-use quite intensively so I am willing to pay good money, for good stuff. A custom built windows PC [Personal Computer] is not a road I am willing to take.

So the only thing I can come up with is buying a nMP [new Mac Pro] (far to powerful, no need for many cores - but somewhat repairable/upgradeable), an old MP [Mac Pro] (lots of storage/upgradeability - but also bulky and power hungry) or just stick with the iMac and pray nothing goes wrong over time. Please help? Am I missing an option? (Member A, MacRumors Newbie[13], Joined: Feb 2014)

#1

Hi Ladies! I am so excited to go see my wonderful SA [Sales Assistant] this weekend. I am looking to buy my next H [Hermès] bag and would love some advice on what your favorites are and what you think would be an ideal choice for my collection.

Currently I own: Black 30cm Togo Birkin with GHW [Gold Hard Ware], Gold 35cm Birkin GHW, Brown croc Kelly 32cm, Black croc kelly cut, Black MM [Moyden Model] Picotin. I recently turned down an Etain Kelly as many people thought the color made me look sick. I thought it was a great neutral, but maybe not as flattering as other colors on my fair skin.
My wardrobe tends to be smart casual and consists of mostly black, ivory and navy. I want to be smart with my purchases as I own far too many gorgeous designer bags that stay sleeping in the closet. Any and all advice would be greatly appreciated! Thanks in advance for your thoughtful guidance! (Member B, Posts 2675, Joined: Sept 2012)

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[13] Please see Table 5.1 for explanation of the user title classification system in MacRumors.

Both members behave in a similar way in terms of presenting themselves to others based on their product involvement that is experience of using "*many MacBooks*" and status as an owner of a large amount of Hermès handbags: "*ideal choice for my collection*". Perhaps this is because at the time of posting they were both newcomers to the OBC and so they attempt to establish their credibility as experienced product owners despite their newbie status in this case in order to be taken serious in their quest for functional help. They employ a highly utilitarian approach to seeking functional help in that they stipulate their product needs and wants it seems to optimise the value of product advice provided by the community. For instance, Member A sets out his product preferences and needs by reviewing his likes and dislikes of the iMac, talking about his current iMac usage and listing his functional product needs. Similarly, Member B lists the handbags in her collection and makes known her physical appearance and personal style to communicate her individual taste and product preferences. The posting style of the two members is very different. Member A's posting style is more structured than Member B's and this is evidenced by his use of headings and bullet points to organise his request for functional help. Furthermore, Member A appears to have done some research on the problem situation and makes an effort to come up with a solution to his purchase query. Differences in the posting style of members when seeking functional help seems to be linked to the ethos of the community defined in this study as the underlying spirit of how individual members participate in the OBC in terms of norms in relation to how members talk and the customs and rituals of the community. The custom in MacRumors when seeking functional help is that the information seeker should put some work into resolving the problem situation perhaps due to the large proportion of participation that consists of this type of behaviour in the OBC.

Seeking functional help with product or purchase queries in some cases represents the member's initial interaction with the OBC. This type of member involvement with the OBC may be situational in nature in terms of denoting the individual member's temporary interest in the OBC

due to information needs. For example, in the case of Member A he signs-up to MacRumors specifically to seek information with regards to his purchase query and does not post again to the community after starting this thread. Though some members sign-up to the Purse Forum specifically to seek information with product or purchase queries it is less inclined to be situational in nature and instead represents the start of what is termed in this study the member's journey of involvement with the OBC. For example, Table 5.2 shows a sample of the threads that Member B submits posts to during the first month of her membership of the Purse Forum.

Table 5.3 Sample of Threads Member B submits posts to during first month of membership of the Purse Forum

Thread Title	Sub-Forum	Post Content
Come inside and outside and view my New Garden	Hermès	View new handbag being revealed by other member
Socialites and their Hermès	Hermès	Talk about Hermès handbags owned by famous people
My first reveal + mod pic [term for uploading photos modelling handbag]	Hermès	View new handbag being revealed by other member
CDC buckle [type of Hermès braclet] gold or silver	Hermès	Provide purchase advice
Kelly wallet club [style of Hermès handbag]	Hermès	Share product information
Carrying two H bags for travel weird?	Hermès	Provide social support
Need help on Kelly! [style of Hermès handbag]	Hermès	Provide purchase advice
Socialites and their Hermès	Hermès	Talk about Hermès handbags owned by famous people
Bolide 31cm or Lindy 30cm??? [Different styles and sizes of Hermès handbags]	Hermès	Seek purchase advice
Quick reveal for bolide lovers [Style of Hermès handbag]	Hermès	View new handbag being revealed by other member
My first H bag…Bi-Color Cabag	Hermès	View new handbag being revealed by other member
Your Hermès in action!!	Hermès	Admire product of other member
Chanel 3 in grey dilemma	Hermès	Provide social support
Stars/Public figures and their Hermès	Hermès	Talk about Hermès handbags owned by famous people
First reveal ever lucky steal!	Hermès	View new handbag being revealed by other member
Did anyone buy a black caviar flap this year? [Style of Chanel handbag]	Chanel	Share product information
My Jypsiere [style of Hermès handbag] + a year of bags	Hermès	View new handbags being revealed by other member

Table 5.3 suggests Member B's initial involvement with the Purse Forum mainly consists of partaking in the customs of the community, demonstrated by thread titles such as "*Socialites and their Hermès*" and "*Your Hermès in action!!*" wherein she praises the Hermès handbags owned by others, and partaking in the rituals of the community, exemplified by thread titles such as,

"*Quick reveal for bolide lovers*" and "*First reveal ever lucky steal!*" wherein she views new Hermès handbag purchases being unwrapped by others[14]. It seems that Member B's involvement with the Purse Forum is enduring in nature and this evidenced by her length of membership and post contribution which at the time of observation fieldwork was five years and approximately 4000 posts.

5.3.2 Types of Functional Help Provided

There is a high degree of reciprocity within the two OBCs as members of all experience levels provide functional help with product and purchase queries. However, members vary in their degree of product knowledge and therefore demonstrate different levels of expertise. Some members base advice on personal experiences of using the product or product preferences and therefore demonstrate a basic level of expertise. Other members appear to exhibit a greater degree of experience with the product and as a result a more advanced level of expertise, demonstrated by informing advice seekers of the technical specifications of the product or range of product options that may suit their needs. The section proceeds by looking at posts submitted by the community in response to Member A who seeks advice on what Mac computer to buy and Member B who seeks advice on her next Hermès handbag purchase.

Purchase advice provided in the following posts is based on the members' personal experiences and product preferences only and therefore demonstrates a more basic level of expertise:

#10

Find a 2011 iMac and buy it...they are fully "repairable." I've had mine apart a couple of times doing upgrades.....well, except for the components soldered in! LOL (Member C, MacRumors 6502, Joined: Dec 2013)

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[14] This is referred to as a purchase reveal and it is an established ritual in the Purse Forum wherein members share and view new handbag purchases through photos and text.

red red red! I've owned yellow and purple bags (in other brands) and found myself tired of them after a few years, but I love my red speedy all these years, so that's how I know red is a color that truly stays, so I bought my red bolide recently. Have been toting her for a month--it goes with everything! (Member D, Posts: 342, Joined: Jan 2007)

In providing functional help the two members put forward definitive advice illustrated by suggesting one purchase recommendation only. Both members attempt to persuade with their purchase recommendations by referring, in MacRumors to their positive product experiences of taking apart and successfully upgrading the iMac and, in the Purse Forum, of owning different colour handbags that did not prove as desirable as red colour handbags. Both members display certainty in their purchase recommendation, illustrated in the first post by the imperative "*buy it*" and in the second post by the repetition of the word "*red*" used to emphasise the recommendation. The following posts were also submitted in response to the initial purchase query submitted by Member A and Member B and demonstrate a more advance level of expertise as both members propose different product options to consider:

#13

If not immediately time critical you may want to wait a couple of months and see if the Mini doesn't pick up an Iris /Iris Pro graphics on the next upgrade. Moving gaming to a combo of Mini+ iPad. The graphics problem with the Mini right now is more so it is lagging an update more so than it won't work in the SimCity zone. If "need" to move fast then a six-core 2009-2012 Mac Pro makes for a decent 'xMac'. Don't really need Mini or iMac to do the movies/audio streaming thing at all. There are also lots of good reasons to spin that out to another system.

There are some reasons to use one system but highly active gaming with concurrent streaming workload don't particularly go together well. (Member E, MacRumors 603, Joined: Sept 2009)

#2

so many choices you can consider. do you prefer totes or shoulder carry and/or messenger bags? since you have a lot of dark neutral H bags already, perhaps consider a brighter colour B or K or Constance for variety? orange, capucine, UV, rouge casaque, rose jaipur, bleu lin, bleu hydra, moutarde..if you prefer more neutrals, then argile, gris T, rouge H, bleu tempete, bleu obscure, eucalyptus, are colours to consider. for more casual styles, evelyne, toolbox, lindy, bolide, so kelly, victoria..they come in a variety of colours too and are easier to find in stores

In providing functional help the two members propose and compare the different product options that the advice seeker should consider in order to help make the most appropriate purchase decision. Both members display extensive product knowledge, in the first instance of key product features connected with the Mini and the iMac, and in the second case of the range of Hermès handbag colours and styles. The members appear to be perceptive to the information seekers experience level. For example, Member E shares information about the potential features on the next Mini upgrade but does not explain its relevance assuming it seems that an experienced product owner like Member A will understand the significance to product function. Similarly, Member F uses short-hand "*B or K*[15]" to refer to different styles of Hermès handbag and lists an array of colour options for Hermès handbags, believing it appears that such terms and information will make sense to Member B who is an experienced Hermès owner. In these cases, the members are pragmatic in providing functional help, trying to link the advice seeker's product needs to the most fitting product option.

The different approaches to providing functional help in the OBCs vary from the apparent preferential in making one particular purchase recommendation to the pragmatic in attempting to help the advice seeker make the optimum purchase decision based on their product needs. In these two cases the advice seekers respond to those providing advice and explain why recommended products suit, or not, their particular product needs. Functional help provided by members is beneficial to advice seekers as they appear more certain about their forthcoming product purchases and consider different product options not part of original pre-purchase

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[15] In this case 'B' and 'K' are shorthand for Birkin and Kelly style of Hermès handbags respectively.

deliberation. For example, Member A comments in his final post to the thread in MacRumors, "*I'm considering the MP 4.1 or 5.1 route more and more – had not expected this*".

Members vary in the extent that they provide functional help in the two OBCs. Some members offer functional help occasionally on specific product topics they seem informed about, whereas other members provide functional help on a more regular basis and across a wider range of product related topics. It seems that for some members providing functional help is a central part of their involvement with the OBC. This is evident by the post history of Member G in the Purse Forum, with a post count of over 4000 of which is mainly dedicated to providing purchase advice in the Hermès sub-group, and Member H in MacRumors, with a 'MacRumors P6' user title which signifies a post count of over 15,000, a large proportion of which is concerned with answering technical product queries. In some cases members whose involvement with the OBC mainly consists of providing functional help can over time evolve as they accept greater responsibility in the community by for instance taking on a formal role such as a moderator. For example, Member I who at the time of observation fieldwork held a 'MacRumors P6' user title, with a post contribution that mainly consisted of providing advice on technical queries, has since become a moderator. Although Member I continues to provide advice on technical queries his involvement in MacRumors has evolved in terms of now taking on greater responsibility for managing the community by for example removing off-topic posts from threads, cautioning others on their behaviour and placing similar topics in discussion threads together.

The findings suggest that the individual member's product involvement in terms of depth of knowledge of the brand's products and the product class appears to shape their level of expertise that is if it is basic or advanced and this subsequently influences the type of functional help they provide. The co-development of brand and/or product knowledge arising from information exchange that takes place between members in sharing brand and/or product knowledge is the

main outcome of providing functional help in the two OBCs. It appears that information exchange that occurs as a result of seeking and providing functional help in the two OBCs helps fosters the formation of a knowledge bank in the community with respect to a range of product and/or brand related topics.

The opportunity for the member to find solutions to product or purchase related queries from the community is likely to make the OBC involving. Member involvement with the OBC that consists of seeking functional help may be characterised as utilitarian in nature as it relates to trying to find information or gain advice from others in order to resolve product and purchase related issues. Since members are anonymous in OBC settings in some cases when seeking functional help from the OBC they exhibit self-expressive behaviours in that they attempt to present a certain identity to others such as being an experienced product owner. It is proposed that the presence of others in the social setting makes OBCs inherently involving. Subsequently, member involvement with the OBC that consists of seeking functional help may in part be characterised as ego-related in nature as in some cases the individual member presents who they are to the community possibly to gain credibility as an information seeker and in so doing benefit from the goodwill of others.

The chance to offer functional help to others that will resolve product or purchase related queries is also likely to make the OBC involving. Member involvement with the OBC that entails providing functional help may be characterised as social or ego-related in nature. This type of member involvement may be social in nature in that providing functional help essentially entails assisting others with their product and/or brand involvement. It is possible that this is prompted by a sense of moral responsibility to help others in the community and may be inferred by the participation of long-standing members of the two OBCs whose posting history consists mainly of providing functional help with product or purchase queries. Member involvement that consists

of providing functional help may also be ego-related in nature as it provides the individual member with an opportunity to showcase their expertise in the community. For example, when providing functional help with a product related issue in the Purse Forum one member employs her user title to take ownership of her advice calling it "*Paper Tiger's rules for python*" in this case it seems to project her identity as an expert on how to care for python handbags. In this example member involvement that is ego-related may be concerned with self-enhancement in terms of an attempt by the individual member to build a reputation as a knowledgeable expert or focused on self-verification in terms of the individual member showing their credentials that is product knowledge when providing functional help in order to endorse advice. The chapter proceeds to present and analyse findings in relation to the second behaviour of members involved in the two OBCs that is seeking and/or providing social support.

5.4   Seeking and Providing Social Support

Social support is defined in this study as the individual member's belief that they are cared for in the community and that emotional support is available from others. Table 5.4 provides a sample of the product and brand related issues that members seek social support with. Based on the analysis of the data three triggers are identified in prompting members to seek social support: (1) Cognitive dissonance (2) Product desire (3) Product and/or brand complaints. Members seek social support in two ways by either asking a question of the community wherein they seek a solution to their product and/or brand issue or seeking others with similar feelings or experiences of the product and/or brand issue. Members seek social support with cognitive dissonance in thread titles such as "*Regretting not getting a desktop*" and "*And here comes the guilt (and doubt)*" in Table 5.4 wherein they look for reassurance in relation to uncertainty about choice of Apple product and feelings of guilt due to spending on designer handbags. Members seek social support with product desire in thread titles such as "*I can't wait for the new MBA [Mac Book Air]*" and "*What LV [Louis Vuitton] bag are you lusting over right now?*" in Table 5.3 wherein

they look for others with similar feelings of desire for the forthcoming Mac product or feelings of appreciation for the Bolide style of Hermès handbag. Finally, members seek social support with product and/or brand complaints in thread titles such as "*Has Apple changed or is this industry spent?*" and "*Has LV [Louis Vuitton] lost its lustre?*" in Table 5.4 wherein they look for reassurance from others with respect to perceived changes for the worse in the Apple and Louis Vuitton brands respectively. Members of all experience levels seek social support in the Purse Forum whereas in MacRumors it is mainly newcomers to the OBC who do so.

Table 5.4   Sample of Thread Titles Seeking Social Support

Thread Title	Basis for Seeking Social Support	OBC Site
Regretting not getting a desktop	Cognitive Dissonance	MacRumors
Feel bad about having a rMBP [retina Mac Book Pro]	Cognitive Dissonance	MacRumors
I can't wait for the new MBA [Mac Book Air]	Product Desire	MacRumors
Guys I can't wait ☺	Product Desire	MacRumors
Has Apple changed or is this industry spent?	Product and/or Brand Complaints	MacRumors
Reflecting on why I'm honestly upset	Product and/or Brand Complaints	MacRumors
And here comes the guilt (and doubt)	Cognitive Dissonance	The Purse Forum
Regretting my purchase	Cognitive Dissonance	The Purse Forum
Ode to the Bolide	Product Desire	The Purse Forum
What LV [Louis Vuitton] bag are you lusting over right now?	Product Desire	The Purse Forum
Has LV lost its lustre?	Product and/or Brand Complaints	The Purse Forum
Has anyone else thought about giving up on d?	Product and/or Brand Complaints	The Purse Forum

In the following subsections findings in relation to seeking and providing social support with different aspects of product and/or brand involvement are presented and analysed.

5.4.1 Cognitive Dissonance as a Basis for Seeking or Providing Social Support

Members seek and provide social support with cognitive dissonance arising from guilt following product purchase or uncertainty about the purchase decision. Members in MacRumors are less likely than those in the Purse Forum to seek social support with cognitive dissonance due to purchase guilt. It is possible this difference is linked to the underlying purpose of MacRumors which is to provide functional help with product and purchase related queries. As explained in Section 5.2 this is evidenced by the existence of sub-forums in MacRumors dedicated specifically to trouble-shooting with respect to different Apple products (shown in Figure 5.1). It is possible that the practical nature of product and purchase queries in MacRumors means that members are more likely to seek functional help rather than social support with their product and/or brand involvement.

The first post is taken from the thread entitled "*Arghh…the guilt*!" in the Purse Forum wherein Member J seeks social support with feelings of guilt following the purchase of an expensive Mulberry handbag:

#1

I just came across a bag that I have lusted after for ages but by the time I had talked myself into it, they were very hard to find.

The bag in question is the regular ink Alexa. I never thought I would see one again in the shops (apparently they are only restocking black and oak) and when I did see this one, I looked at myself in the mirror for ages, had a coffee, considered how broke I would be if I bought it, then returned to the till to pay for my gorgeous new bag!!!!!

The problem now is the guilt that is keeping me from enjoying my new baby. You see this month I have already bought 2 Marc by Marc Jacobs bags, a new Orla Kiely Rosemary bag and the Alexa small wallet in peony leopard. That is well over a grand on bags...and let's not mention my Russell and Bromley splurge....!!!

How can I lose the guilt and whip out my new bag with pride? Right now she is hiding in my wardrobe until I can find the words to tell me lovely dh [dear husband]. It seems silly because I do work and I can afford it. The problem is we were only just talking about how we haven't had a proper holiday for ages. We have had a terrible year financially and things are looking rosy now, but I should have learned how precarious financial situations can be.

I wasn't thinking that in the shop, instead I was thinking "oooh, this looks great with my jeans!"

Member J seeks social support by attempting to induce empathy and sympathy in others about her personal situation by explaining the personal meaning of the Alexa handbag and her pre-purchase deliberation. Cognitive dissonance is portrayed by her feelings of guilt that detract from her enjoyment of the handbag and her state of anxiety about excessive spending on designer handbags and personal struggles with finances. Perhaps she makes such personal disclosures about spending and finances due to the anonymity of the online setting. However, it is also possible that the intimacy or close relationship she feels towards the community due to her length of experience participating in the community is another reason for doing so. There is a sense of shame to telling her husband about the purchase evidenced by the way she keeps the handbag out of sight in her wardrobe and likens sharing the news of the purchase to a transgression or wrongdoing. In the Purse Forum it is the custom for members to liken family or friends to members of the out-group who do not understand their involvement with designer handbags and perhaps this explains her reaction in having to tell her husband about the purchase. Despite Member J's financial situation appearing to improve she reprimands herself for not learning from past lessons in an attempt to seek affirmation from the community about her purchase decision.

Below are some of the responses Member J receives from the community:

#2

I am so sorry that you have to feel that way when you just got your favourite bag. But I understand it all too well as I think many of us do here. Just to think of all nice things we could do if not spending so much on our precious bags. But then again it is a choice we do and hopefully it makes us feel good, it should do. So I _____ you can get rid of the guilt and really enjoy your Alexa, the way it deserves

Look forwards to see pics of her!

#3

Well congratulations on buying a bag you love! If you can afford it (i.e. it is not on a credit card to be paid off in a slow fashion) then I say you should forgive

yourself and enjoy it to the max. It is a gorgeous bag and it deserves to be on your arm getting out and about. Maybe you could ebay a MJ [Marc Jacobs] or another older bag that you do not love as much? perhaps this would pave the way for breaking it to dh [dear husband]? xx (Member L, Posts: 5780, Joined: Jan 2010)

#14

Great choice Lady C [shorthand for Member J's user title] - ink Alexa is the perfect bag imo [in my opinion].

When I have to come clean to my DH [Dear Husband] I take the take the strong positive stance. I just walk in flash the bag and say - "yes its another bag, yes it was expensive and I just love it". Then I flounce out leaving him bemused. When I reappear a while later nothing more is said.
I am lucky though as DH is very supportive of my addiction (perhaps because he knows it could well be LV [Louise Vuitton] or some other more expensive brand) (Member M, Posts: 630, Joined: June 2009)

#16

Oh [refer to Member J by her user title] i think we all feel abit guilty when we spend hundreds on our mulberry addiction - your DH [Dear Husband] will probably grump abit (like they do) and realise that you work very hard and deserve a hobby. So you enjoy your gorgeous new bag (Member N, Posts: 179, Joined: Apr 2009)

Not surprisingly the post receives a lot of support from likeminded individuals. Most of them are sympathetic of her situation comparing her dilemma with their own experiences. There is some potential admonition in the suggestion that it is not a good idea to pay interest on a credit card but most are giving support and encouragement. The way they do it varies, with one suggesting a humorous approach to dealing with telling her husband. Member J seems to work through her cognitive dissonance as a result of receiving support from others and this is demonstrated by her follow-up post:

#25

I just spent half an hour admiring her in the mirror of my bedroom and it is true love!!!!
I was worried that it might be too young for me, but I really do think she suits me perfectly. The smaller size also suits me because I just bought the Marc by MJ [Marc Jacobs] Sasha, which is my "big bag".

The colour is amazing and really comes alive with the sun shining on her. Oak would have been silly as I already have an oak Bays.

Wow! What a lovely bag!

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> Now I can stop being so jealous every time I see someone with their gorgeous Alexa bag!
>
> And dh [dear husband] is dealt with....well, in the fact that I have told him I am **planning** to buy it, not that I actually **have**! he seems cool wit   so I feel much better! Now I have to arrange a phantom "shopping trip"!!!   Member J, Posts: 1062, Joined: Dec 2008)

Social support provided by the community seems to bring about a change in her product involvement in that feelings of guilt due to cognitive dissonance dissipate to be replaced by feelings of delight and pleasure at owning the new handbag. Member J is also more assured about her product choice apparent by justifying the size and colour of her new Alexa handbag. Social support in terms of affirmation and reassurance provided by the community seem to bring about a subtle change in Member J's behaviour as she attempts to enhance herself towards the latter part of the post for owning such a beautiful handbag. What is most significant is that the exchange of social support provides an opportunity for the development of social ties between members in the community. This is apparent when Member J seems to connect with others through experiences of product involvement in this case dealing with members of the out-group as she shares a white lie she told her husband about the intended purchase of the handbag.

Members in MacRumors are more likely to seek social support with cognitive dissonance due to uncertainty about the purchase decision. This is a more functional problem as it is concerned with selecting the most fitting product specifications based on the member's product needs. In the following post Member O seeks social support with feelings of regret due to his choice of Mac computer:

> **#1**
>
> About a month ago I purchased a 13" MacBook Pro with Retina display. I love the laptop and I think it works great however I sort of regret that I didn't get an iMac instead and my 14 days are well over.
>
> I just want to know what I can do to feel less bad about my choice. I got it thinking I'd like the portability but I have yet to take it out of the house. When I

play WoW it gets hot and I can't find a comfortable set up for it. I've tried external displays and it is cumbersome and none of mine are good. I can't afford a Thunderbolt Display right now and All this money on accessories I should have just bought an iMac. Don't get me wrong it is an AMAZING computer the best I have ever owned but I want to be more happy about my purchase... (Member O, MacRumors Newbie, Joined: May 2013)

His cognitive dissonance is portrayed as feelings of regret and a state of uncertainty about his choice of Mac. He behaves in a similar way to Member J in the Purse Forum when seeking social support by attempting to induce empathy and sympathy in others about his particular product related issue. However, the content of the post is very different to Member J's post as it is far more functional in nature detailing performance issues with the Mac and attempting to find a practical solution to the problem. Despite experiencing cognitive dissonance with the purchase decision he praises the Mac calling it "*AMAZING*" and the "*best I have ever owner*" possibly because he is a newcomer to the community and does not want to cause offence. This is part of how members talk in MacRumors in that newcomers to the OBC are careful not to say anything negative about Apple perhaps due to the preconceived notion that what is defined in this study as brand talk that is brand related discussions are positive in the fan site. Member O makes a plea to the community towards the end of the post, "*I want to be more happy about my purchase*" possibly as a last effort to seek affirmation from others about his choice of Mac.

The following is an example of responses Member O elicits from the community:

#2

Stating you play WoW, would the 15inch have been a better choice? Also, if you truly regret the purchase I would personally sell it ASAP and take a small loss then purchase an iMac. It sounds like you would be happier.

If you don't want to go that route and want to feel better about the MBP. Take it out, go play WoW at a cafe. Bring it places. I'm sure you won't regret it then. (Member P, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Aug 2012)

#3

I regret getting a 27" and not buying the 17". Can't bring a desktop to Starbucks now can ya! (Member Q, MacRumors Regular, Joined: Jan 2008)

Advice provided is hard-hitting and functional for instance suggesting a more fitting product option and offering a practical solution to the problem situation. Despite one attempt to provide social support that is reassurance about his choice of Mac computer the responses from the community are in general much less supportive in contrast to the Purse Forum. This may be due in part to Member O's product related query which is more functional in nature. This lack of social support seems to only intensify Member O's state of cognitive dissonance evidenced by his follow-up posts in which he seems to exhibit heightened neediness to the point of mild desperation to receive affirmation from others about his choice of Mac computer:

#13

So all in all is it worth it to sell it and get an iMac or do you think in time I won't regret it and I'll be happy with the MacBook Pro? Another thing is this is the first notebook I've ever had my whole life up to this point I've only had desktops so I think another part of it is not being used to notebooks. (Member O, MacRumors Newbie, Joined: May 2013)

#21

So should I feel bad about getting the MacBook instead of the iMac? Or did I make a good choice? (Member O, MacRumors Newbie, Joined: May 2013)

The following response puts an end to Member O's attempt at seeking social support from the community:

#23

Honestly we can't tell you how to feel. We can only offer our opinions (which we have). It's ultimately up to you to determine whether or not it was a good purchase.

If you are unhappy with the MacBook, just sell it and get an iMac. You have experienced the MacBook for a while now, so the decision shouldn't be hard. (Member P, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Aug 2012)

Member P speaks on behalf of the community and in so doing provides insight into the position of MacRumors in relation to requests seeking social support with product and/or brand related issues. The response is the opposite to the Purse Forum and seems to denote tough love wherein the onus is on the individual member to bear responsibility for their product choices and not on the community to make them feel better. Based on the observation of member behaviour in

MacRumors Member P seems to enact the ethos of the community wherein the custom is to provide functional help rather than offer social support in response to product or purchase related queries.

The findings provide insight into the nature of product involvement in that it not only consists of positive feelings such as enjoyment derived from product ownership but also may be made up of negative feelings such as anxiety about spending on the product category. The findings show that through the provision, or absence, of social support the community has the potential to influence the individual member's state of involvement with the product. For example, Member J's state of involvement after receiving social support appears to transition from feelings of guilt about product purchase to feelings of delight about product acquisition. Member O's state of involvement on the other hand seems to intensify from feelings of regret about product choice to feelings of desperation due to the lack of social support in MacRumors.

The very different responses from each OBC appear to be due to the ethos of the community in terms of norms around how members talk and customs around providing social support. Variations in how members talk between the two OBCs seems to be linked to gender as the Purse Forum appears to consist mainly of females and MacRumors seems to be made up largely of males. Corresponding with a female communication style members of the Purse Forum make personal disclosures about their product involvement in this case experiences linked to cognitive dissonance due to purchase guilt and this lends itself to the custom of providing social support by offering reassurance about purchase decisions and showing empathy by sharing similar experiences of product involvement. It is not fitting with a male communication style to make personal disclosures and therefore the subject matter of thread discussions in MacRumors is in many instances more functional in nature and therefore does not generally lend itself to the

custom of providing social support demonstrated by the hard-hitting and solution-focused nature of advice.

5.4.2 Product Desire as Basis for Seeking or Providing Social Support

Members seek social support with product desire during instances in which they are either unable to acquire wished for items due to product cost or try to resist acquiring desired for products. Threads in which members seek support with their product desires are less prevalent in MacRumors. This seems to be due to the ethos of the community in that it is the norm to talk about feelings associated with product involvement in the Purse Forum and this seems to manifest itself in the custom wherein members start threads to talk about their product desires. For example, the thread entitled "*Ode to the Bolide*" in Table 5.3 was started by a non-owner in the Purse Forum and consists mainly of close-up photos she uploads of different colour bolide handbags to express her strong desire for this particular style of Hermès handbag. Variations in how members talk between the two OBCs seems to linked to gendered communication styles as females in contrast to males are more inclined to talk about their emotions which in this instance manifests itself in threads with subject matters connected to deep feelings for the product and the brand.

Moving forward in the first case Member R attempts to start a support group for fans of the Hermès brand who she explains in the thread title have to "*wait or save to get your dream bag*". The analogy of addiction is used to communicate product desire in the Purse Forum demonstrated in this case by Member R's play on an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to initiate the post and talk about her desire for a Birkin handbag:

#1

> Hi! My name is S, and I'm an Hermès-a-holic. I was very close to getting my dream Birkin with money from an inheritance from my grandmother, but I'm also house-hunting, and that money should go towards a down payment, really. I'm having to be responsible here, and though I think it's the right decision, it's so hard!

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My dream bags: 30cm Birkins, in Clemence or Togo, Blue Jean and Black, with Palladium hardware :)

Who are you? How are you saving? What are your obstacles? What's your dream bag? (Member R, Posts: 7176, Joined: Mar 2007)

Member R frames the acquisition of her "*dream Birkin*" as an inappropriate pursuit possibly as a way of curbing her product desire because she is trying to save for a house deposit. She constructs a wish list to express her desire for different Hermes handbags and seeks social support by looking for others with similar experiences of product involvement that is not being able to acquire desired for handbags.

Member R's quest to seek social support with product desire elicits the following responses:

#5

Ok. I'll go.
Hi, I'm Karen and it will be YEARS before I purchase a Birkin. I have bangles, scarves and a Jige [type of Hermès purse] and hope to add other bags (Bombay, Lindy, Herbag) as time goes by. I put money in a bank that you have to break to open; so once it goes in, it is NOT coming out, lol. I have set my goal on walking in and ordering or somehow getting one the day I have earned my PhD. I can't think of anything more appropriate for all my hard work. In the meantime, I read, look and admire all the gorgeous bags that the wonderful ladies here have. I live through them. I am thrilled when someone adds a new bag to their family, when a coveted scarf or piece of jewellery is found.

So, until it's my turn to post a "She's HERE" thread, I will enjoy sharing everyone else's wonderful new

#8

How fun, our own little club.. (Member T, Posts: 11,437, Joined: Nov 2006)

#9

Hehe, the "I can't afford what I want right now but I'm still so awesome" club. I dig it! (Member R, Posts: 7176, Joined: Mar 2007)

#11

I'm Candace, I'm 24 and have loved Hermes since I was 7, when I first saw that famous picture of Grace Kelly with her Kelly bag...
I would be 100% happy owning a raisin Lindy and a graphite JPG Birkin (or vice versa on the colors) if those were the only bags I could ever have for the rest of my life. If I had money I would collect all of the Egyptian scarves I could get my hands on (to date Tutankhamun and Tresors du Nil are my favorites). I also am

attracted to a few types of bracelet and smaller leather items like a Jige in rose shocking and Ulysses agendas in blue jean or turquoise.

Unfortunately I will only be able to afford Hermes bags by deploying to Iraq or going on other missions with my unit to where I will have nothing to do but save my money. I am of India's perspective that tpf [the Purse Forum] is like a great art museum and I am happy just to experience Hermes in such a large volume by viewing everyone else's treasures. It makes me feel happy and I am genuinely excited by each new reveal that occurs [...] (Member U, Posts: 9629, Joined: Nov 2007)

The coming together of similar others to talk about their product desires cultivates the formation of a sub-group who connect through the shared social bond of being non-owners who cannot afford to purchase their desired Hermès handbag. The existence of such a sub-group is explicitly recognised by some members who describe themselves as a "*club*" and implicitly suggested by the behaviour of Member S and Member U who appear to identify with the sub-group through shared appreciation of the Hermès brand. Members of the sub-group provide support in various ways. Member S empathises with Member R in relation to length of time she has to wait before being able to purchase her desired handbag and shares what is akin to a positive affirmation by visualising the day she will acquire her desired Birkin handbag on completion of her PhD. Members express their product desires by constructing wish lists or explaining in detail the style, colour and hardware of their desired for handbags. Hence, the community provides members an outlet to talk about their product desires which in itself seems to be a means of providing support with product desire.

Existing research explains that website features such as wish lists act as proxies for material real things and enable consumers to experience new forms of "almost owning" things (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2013, p.1563). The actualisation of product desires through the purchase of designer handbags may not be possible for some members due to product cost. However, it appears that participation in rituals such as purchase reveals enables members to vicariously

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experience desired for handbags inferred by the analogy of the community as akin to an "*art museum*". This, together with the custom of talking about product desires may act as a way for members to own by proxy desired for handbags. It is this aspect of the community that is likely to make the OBC involving for non-owners and to sustain their enduring involvement with the product, brand and community itself.

Cases during which members seek social support with product desire in MacRumors in many instances relate to waiting for or trying to resist upgraded Apple products. In the following post Member V seeks social support with respect to feelings of desire to upgrade his existing iPhone:

<div style="border:1px solid">

#1

arrrgh!!! My iPhone 4S is pretty much perfect, so why do I feel the need to upgrade?

Anyone else feel this way?

The iPhone 4S is pretty much perfect for me. Good size, speed, screen quality, jailbroken w/ [with] gaming emulators, will get apple maps navigation in iOS 6... So why do I feel this compelling need to upgrade to the new iPhone coming ??? (Member V, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Jun 2012)

</div>

He rationalises his product needs in an attempt to reduce his urge for the product upgrade and seeks support by looking for others with similar experiences of product desire for the Apple iPhone upgrade. He elicits the following responses from the community:

<div style="border:1px solid">

#2

Because it's a new model and we haven't gotten a new model in 2 years. (Member W, MacRumors 65816, Joined: Mar 2011)

#4

because you're a spoiled first world consumer. (Member X, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Jan 2011)

#5

I feel the same way, but I have the $ to buy the new iPhone, so why not (Member Y, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Apr 2011)

</div>

#12

I'm happy with my 4 and for once not that excited to upgrade. (Member Z, MacRumors 68020, Joined: Aug 2008)

#18

You'll be inferior, frowned upon, and be put in the lower caste by your friends and co-workers. How can you sit at starbucks and pull out a 4s? The horror!!! (Member AA, MacRumors Member, Joined: Oct 2011)

#21

The ugly need of having everything up-to-date. I feel you bro! Apple will do that to you! (Member BA, MacRumors Newbie, Joined: Mar 2012)

The responses of the community are divided in that some attempt to provide social support to the thread starter whereas others are critical of his post. Of those who attempt to provide social support it is not psychological in nature in that they do make efforts to relieve the thread starter's personal dilemma and instead are quite practical in terms of either justifying the decision to upgrade or rationalising their product desires. Though one member seems to empathise with the thread starter this is tinged with criticism about upgrading Apple products: "*The ugly need of having everything up-to-date*". Other members are critical of the thread starter and either insult him by calling him names, "*you're a spoiled first world consumer*" or deride the seriousness of his problem situation. It is significant that such different viewpoints among members does not lead to a dispute and this seems to be linked to the ethos of MacRumors in that it is an acceptable part of how members talk to criticise and challenge one another.

Differences in the responses of the community to requests for social support with product desire may be due to the ownership status of the support seeker and the ethos of the community. It is possible that the status of the Member R as a non-owner in the Purse Forum makes the community more sympathetic to her problem situation and therefore conducive to providing a supportive response. The status of Member V as an existing Apple owner in MacRumors who simply longs for the latest Apple product may mean the community is less receptive to providing social support and even questions the legitimacy of his problem situation. The ethos of the

community in terms of norms around how members talk and customs linked to providing social support as explained in Section 5.4.1 may also explain differences in the responses of the two OBCs.

5.4.3 Product and/or Brand Complaints as Basis for Seeking or Providing Social Support

Members seek social support with product and/or brand complaints for a variety of reasons such as dissatisfaction with the brand's product offerings, frustration with the brand's management due to product release delays and perceived changes for the worse in the brand's values and traditions. The two OBCs are similar to the extent that social support with product and/or brand complaints is sought on an infrequent basis.

In the first case Member CA seeks social support in relation to perceived changes for the worse in the Chanel brand's product offering:

> **#1**
> I am in love with Chanel, however every time I see one or think about it, I get sad :0 !! I own a lot of Chanel, from cosmetics to shoes and bags and everything in between and I have been satisfied with mostly everything but even if i wasnt I overlooked it until now.
>
> I guess I was in denial of what Chanel has become until I paid a visit to my store on monday and had a long talk with my SA [Sales Assistant] who is wonderful. 5300 for a caviar jumbo is crazy, and I just avoided thinking about it until it was staring me in the face. Ive always though Chanel was a little overpriced in the past few years but it's out of hand now. The caviar now looks and feels like plastic. 3000 for GST, that also feels like plastic. I just dont understand and it upsets me, bad. Its not about the money really, dropping 5300 dollars on handbags is something I know a lot of us have done, however I can get 3 lv's for 5300! And the quality going down just makes it worse. Im sorry, I just can't justify Chanel bags anymore!! It breaks my heart though!!!
> Does anyone else feel as strongly as I do? (Member CA, Posts: 73, Joined: Aug 2012)

The analogy of a romantic relationship is used in the Purse Forum to express strong feelings for the brand. The thread starter declares her strong feelings and experience with Chanel possibly to vindicate what is to follow that is a critique of the sub-forum brand. Her dissatisfaction with the

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brand seems to be due to a perceived increase in product prices and decrease in product quality. In this case it seems that her product involvement works against her brand commitment. This is because her product involvement exemplified by her knowledge and experience with the brand's products seems to result in dissatisfaction with the brand which subsequently brings about a change in her brand commitment suggested by her intention to stop purchasing Chanel handbags. However, this is not an easy decision for Member CA and though she attempts to rationalise her decision not to purchase Chanel she appears to struggle due to her strong feelings for the brand: "*I just can't justify Chanel Bags anymore!! It breaks my heart though!!!*". She seeks support from the community by looking for others with a similar view about the Chanel brand.

The majority of responses are similar to the following in that they provide social support by sharing a similar view about the Chanel brand in terms of perceived changes for the worse in product quality:

#2

I do, I usually get all excited when DH [Dear Husband] travels to Europe and offers to get something from Chanel. Nowadays I have a hard time deciding what to get. The leather and workmanship just don't feel luxurious anymore.

Even if a colour/design gets me excited, I would be anxious whether DH knows what to look out for when doing quality checks. I simply do not buy the reasoning that they are handmade and hence any inconsistencies.

And so often when i checked out new designs at our local store, the difference between what we see on pics and how they feel in our hands is so great. The display piece shows you what the bag will look like in a while. They seems more fragile nowadays, deflated quilting, creases on the leather, and dye issues on the 12A red... The thought of DH might come back with a lemon is awful! (Member DA, Posts: 705, Joined: Feb 2009)

Member DA builds on the product related issue by going into greater detail about specific product shortcomings. Feelings of dissatisfaction seem to detract from her enjoyment of the brand as she shares concerns about her husband being duped when purchasing a handbag due to his lack of product knowledge. It is significant that she is not willing to accept the reasoning that

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product variation is due to products being handmade and this together with her growing feelings of disillusionment about the quality of Chanel handbags hints at a possible change in her brand commitment. Due to the social nature of complaining in the OBC setting support provided by others in this case serves to magnify the gravity of product and/or brand related issue.

In this case only one member does not support Member CA and expresses an oppositional viewpoint about the Chanel brand:

#4

> I will definitely not give up on Chanel. I got my first Chanel just this year in July, a really lovely 227, and become addicted to Chanel. I got my second one right after, a GST and loving it as well, and purse and accessories. I think I will never stop buying Chanel. I used to love bags less expensive, and always spend my money for other bags before saving up a bit. However, after getting the first one of my Chanel, I found that no other brands can offer the elegance that you get from Chanel design. As for comparing Chanel to LV, almost all LV bags priced lower than 2k+ are not even leather! Thinking of leather bags, Chanel's price are quite reasonable. Dior, Celine's prices are also going sky high, and they never offer as many designs of bags as Chanel. I just can't regard 3 LV bags the same as one Chanel. (Member EA, Posts: 93, Joined: Mar 2012)

Member EA is a new customer to Chanel who makes clear her strong preference for the brand. However, the reasoning for her preference for Chanel over rival brands is not very developed in that she appears to attribute it to superficial factors such as product aesthetics rather than more sophisticated factors like product materials or craftsmanship. She tries to defend the brand by ridiculing the main competitor Louis Vuitton and justifying the price of Chanel handbags as similar to other high-end brands. Unlike Member CA her product involvement seems to contribute towards her brand commitment. This is because her product knowledge which is a characteristic of product involvement is based on first-hand experiences with the brand's products which have been positive and therefore results in satisfaction with the brand and the cultivation of brand commitment. It is testament to her brand commitment that she is willing to take a social risk and go against the majority of others in the thread and express a different viewpoint about the Chanel brand in order to defend it from negative commentators.

Member EA's strong defence of the Chanel brand summons the following response from

Member CA:

> Congrats on your first Chanel! However since it is your first you cannot see the quality issue going downhill, especially the caviar. And something about the fact that we were all paying half the price for better quality in the near past is what gets a lot of us. I already have all my flaps, GST (Grand Shopping Tote), and accessories that I love, but continuing on seems redundant to me. You are so right on Chanels elegance, no one can quite get that and a lot of that elegance comes from Chanels rich heritage. Most LV's [Louis Vuitton's] under 2k are not made of leather, your right but LV's history is canvas, and it is much much much more versatile than leather, especially lambskin. But if you go through the threads, you read things about GST's becoming limp and slouchy after being carried a few months, color issues, screws randomly falling off, repair issues, and people should not have these issues with bags these prices. I have to agree with OP [Other Poster], Chanel is not Hermes, not even close. My SA [Sales Assistant] said she has lost far more than half her regular clientele, some of who have been buying Chanel for 50+ years. We live in an area with a lot of wealthy people and I know a lot will understand this, but for those who still can affordChanel, its not about the $$ at all, its about justifying the fact that quality is going far down and price doubling. When you put that plain and simple, it all makes no sense. (Member CA, Posts: 73, Joined: Aug 2012)

Member CA speaks on behalf of the community in order to strengthen her position in taking on

the other poster. She uses different approaches to support her counter-argument. First, she calls

the other poster out on her lack of experience with the brand. Second, she refers to threads in the

community that support her viewpoint about changes for the worse in Chanel. Third, she shares

information from an informed source that is her SA about the decline in Chanel customer base

to emphasise the gravity of the brand related issue. Even though there may be differences of

opinion about the sub-forum brand in the Purse Forum which lead to disagreements between

members the custom is to talk through such issues in a polite albeit sometimes condescending

manner. The findings show the importance of product involvement in terms of experience and

knowledge of the brand's products as a way of showing authority over others in the OBC. In this

case Member EA does not respond and perhaps this is due to her apparent lack of product

knowledge or the fact that she is outnumbered in the thread. Disputes occur between members

in the Purse Forum and to an extent this is permitted by the management of the OBC possibly because it helps foster participation in the community as others join in to share their viewpoint. However, such disputes are closely monitored by the management of the OBC in order to ensure they do not result in protracted conflict between members as to do so would detract from the sense of community in the OBC. The custom in the Purse Forum is during occasions when arguments between members become more heated a moderator or experienced member will step in and call for calm as a way of bringing an end to such disputes.

Member CA stopped participating in the Purse Forum a short time after starting this thread. It is possible that this is because of her feelings of dissatisfaction with the Chanel brand but cannot be known for certain. Despite Member DA showing support for Member CA in terms of agreeing about changes for the worse in the Chanel brand she continues to purchase Chanel handbags and participate in the Chanel sub-forum evidenced by her history of posts submitted to the OBC. This infers the complexity of the relationship between product involvement and brand commitment in that for some members' perceived changes for the worse in the brand's products has the potential to result in the dissolution of their brand commitment whereas for other members despite grievances with the brand's products they remain committed to the brand.

In the next case Member FA starts a thread entitled "*Losing my patience waiting for new Mac Book Pro*" in order to seek social support with feelings of frustration due to the delayed release of Apple's new Mac Pro:

#1

> I really am losing my patience!
>
> Since i´ve returned my late 2013 iMac, i just can´t wait anymore for the nMP [new Mac Pro].
> I´m even thinking about building a custom and powerful PC [Personal Computer] myself, so i won´t have to wait anymore.
> The biggest problem is that i´m living my life using a 11 macbook air, so i really miss the power and the bigger screen of a desktop.

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How are you guys dealing with this long wait? Which day of December do you think the sales will start? Maybe still in November?
Best wishes (Member FA, MacRumors Newbie, Joined: May 2012)

The nature of his brand complaint is very different to the example from the Purse Forum as he is frustrated with the brand due primarily to unmet functional product needs rather than more deep-rooted problems such as perceived changes for the worse in Apple. Member FA's consideration of building a custom PC seems to be a way for him to cope with his frustration with the Apple brand. His strong preference for the brand is inferred by his willingness to wait for the product release. Member FA seeks support not only by looking for similar others who are also waiting for the upgraded Mac but also by seeking reassurance about the likely date of the product release.

The following posts are a sample of responses Member FA elicits from the community:

#2

Well if you plan on getting a new MP [Mac Pro] you are gonna need to get a big desktop display anyway no? There is nothing stopping you from buying a bigger screen now to work with the MBA [Mac Book Air] and using it on the new machine when you get it. This assumes you aren't hoping they are releasing any new lower cost displays alongside the new MP when it ships but if you want to wait for that too then you are stuck using the MBA by choice.
(Member GA, MacRumors Regular, Joined: Jul 2004)

#3

I would just buy the current Thunderbolt Display, use it with the Air, and use it with the Pro when it comes out in December. (Member HA, MacRumors Regular, Joined: Feb 2011)

#5

Like a normal person would.
I don't get these threads. When there was no news people were posting that Apple should at least post some info whether there will be a new Mac Pro. So they did. Now people complain that they cannot wait?
#firstworldproblems (Member IA, MacRumors 603, Joined: Aug 2010)

I just went out and bought a 09' MP [Mac Pro] and started modding[16] it until the NMP [New Mac Pro] drops in. (Member JA, MacRumors Regular, Joined: May 2008)

The majority of members provide functional help that is unsympathetic and matter-of-factly in nature focused on solving the problem situation. For example, some members make recommendations for product accessories that may help with Member FA's functional product needs. It is significant that none of the responses offer reassurance about the likely product release date. Member IA is highly critical of Member FA and exhibits what appears to be a lack of tolerance for such posts inferred by his derision of the seriousness of the product related issue. Member IA's oppositional response is possibly due to his brand commitment as he seems to defend Apple by analysing the situation in a way that makes the brand look good.

The findings shed insight into the nature of brand involvement in that it may not only consist of positive emotions such as feelings of desire for the brand's products but also is made up of negative emotions such as feelings of sadness due to perceived changes for the worse in the brand or feelings of frustration with the brand due to product release delays. However, it is argued that such negative emotions arise out of the member's love for the brand in that they are primarily upset with the brand because it appears to be changing or frustrated due to unfulfilled desires to use the brand's latest products.

The type of product and/or brand complaint that members seek social support with appears to have different outcomes on the community. In the case of the Purse Forum the thread starter seeks social support with a brand issue that is deep-seated in nature in that it relates to perceived changes in the brand's product offering. This type of brand complaint seems to incite others to

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[16] The term 'modding' is used in MacRumors to describe the process of customising Mac computers.

reflect more deeply on their brand involvement in terms of the quality and price of Chanel handbags. In the case of MacRumors the thread starter seeks social support with a brand issue that is functional in nature in that it relates to unmet functional needs due to the brand management's delay in releasing product upgrades. This type of brand complaint does not prompt members to think more deeply about their brand involvement but rather responses from the community concentrate on providing functional help that is solution-focused.

The findings reveal differences in the responses of the two OBCs to requests for social support with product and/or brand complaints. Such differences appear to be due to the ethos of the community in terms of norms around how members talk and customs around providing social support with product and/or brand involvement. Similar to previous findings it is the custom in the Purse Forum to offer social support demonstrated in this case by expressing a similar view about changes for the worse in the Chanel brand. This is not the case in MacRumors and the custom is to provide functional help with product and/or brand involvement and this is evidenced by responses of the community that focus on offering practical help which is solution-focused with respect to the delayed released of the upgraded Mac.

It is likely that the opportunity for the individual member to seek social support with respect to varying aspects of their product and/or brand involvement makes the OBC involving. Member involvement that entails seeking social support from the community may be characterised as utilitarian or social in nature. This type of member involvement may be characterised as utilitarian in nature as the individual member seeks to derive something from the community in this case social support in order to alleviate product and/or brand issues. It is also possible that such member involvement is social in nature as in some cases it entails the individual member reaching out to and seeking to connect with others who have experienced similar product and/or brand issues. The chance for the individual member to offer social support with respect to their

product and/or brand involvement is also likely to make the OBC involving. This type of member involvement may be characterised as social in nature. This is because offering social support essentially entails assisting others in the community with their product and/or brand involvement.

5.5 Conclusion

The findings shed light into aspects of consumer involvement that limited research exists that is how consumers perceive and experience their product and/or brand involvement. For instance, brand involvement seems to not only consist of positive perceptions such as Member EA's strong preference for the Chanel brand but also is made up of negative perceptions such as Member CA's dissatisfaction with Chanel due to perceived changes for the worse in the brand or Member FA's frustration with Apple due to product release delays. Similarly, product involvement seems to not only consist of positive feelings such as Member B's excitement due to the forthcoming purchase of a Hermès handbag but also may be made up of negative feelings such as Member J's anxiety about spending on luxury handbags or Member O's regret about choice of Mac computer. The findings show that product and/or brand involvement is the basis for member involvement with the OBC as the individual member seeks functional help or social support from others in relation to their product and/or brand related issues.

Through the provision of functional help members pass on their product knowledge to others. This is likely to assist information seekers with their product involvement in terms of resolving functional product issues or optimising the purchase decision. The findings suggest that it is not part of the ethos of MacRumors to provide social support with product and/or brand related issues. Through the provision of social support in the Purse Forum members empathise and connect with others based on similar perceptions or experiences of product and/or brand involvement. The findings show that mutual product and/or brand involvement among members

provides an opportunity for social ties to develop such as non-owners in the Hermès sub-forum who connect through their brand involvement that is being fans of the Hermès brand who cannot afford to purchase Hermès handbags. This makes inferences about the social nature of product and/or brand involvement in that individuals who exhibit an interest in luxury handbags in this case seem motivated to reach out and connect with likeminded others. The findings also provide insight into the characteristics of product and/or brand involvement for non-owners in terms of their interest in talking about product desires in the Purse Forum. It seems that member involvement with the Purse Forum provides a means of facilitating and sustaining product and/or brand involvement for non-owners by being able talk about and vicariously experience desired for handbags.

The findings reveal that involvement with the OBC has the potential to shape the individual member's perceptions and experiences of their product and/or brand involvement. For instance, Member J's state of involvement with the product seems to transition from feelings of guilt due to product purchase to feelings of delight at product acquisition as a result of receiving social support from the community with cognitive dissonance. Similarly, Member DA seems to think more deeply about her brand involvement after reflecting on Member CA's brand complaint about perceived changes for the worse in the Chanel brand. Finally, the findings in relation to the different behaviours exemplified by members involved within the two OBCs help to provide insight into the characteristics of what is described in this study as online community involvement. Member involvement with the OBC that consists of seeking functional help or social support from the community may be characterised as utilitarian in nature as it relates to trying to either find out information or derive support from others in order to alleviate product or brand related issues. However, in some cases member involvement that relates to seeking social support from the community may also be characterised as social in nature as the individual member attempts to reach out to and connect with others who have experienced similar product

and/or brand issues. Member involvement with the OBC that consists of providing functional help or social support may be characterised as social in nature as it is concerned with assisting others in the community with their product and/or brand involvement. The findings also show that in some cases members present their identity when participating in the OBC. This type of member involvement may be characterised as ego-related in nature and could in part be a consequence of participating in an anonymous setting such as an OBC. For example, in the case of the member called 'Paper Tiger' in the Purse Forum she projects her identity as an expert on leather handbags when providing functional help possibly to gain self-verification in terms of establishing her credentials in order to endorse her advice or to gain self-enhancement in terms of building a reputation as an expert in the community.

CHAPTER SIX – ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS PART II

6.1   Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the findings in relation to the two remaining behaviours exemplified by members involved within MacRumors and the Purse Forum that is sharing product and/or brand narratives, and partaking in the customs and rituals of the community. The chapter begins by defining the meaning of narratives in this study and provides an explanation of the composition of product and/or brand narratives in the two OBCs. The chapter presents the findings in relation to the underlying plot and response of the community to three narratives in particular that recur in MacRumors and the Purse Forum. Details are also provided as to how such narratives facilitate insight into various aspects of the individual member's product and/or brand involvement. The role that such narratives play in communicating the values and sustaining the traditions of the OBC are also made clear. The chapter next explains the different types of customs and rituals that exist in the two OBCs. The findings are presented in relation to three specific triggers that prompt member involvement in the customs and rituals of their respective OBC.

6.2   Sharing Product and/or Brand Narratives

Members in the two OBCs share product and/or brand narratives. A narrative is defined in this study as the member's account of connected events in relation to the product and/or brand. Table 6.1 provides a sample of product and/or brand narratives shared by members in the two OBCs which may be classified into three types: (1) success against the odds for the product owner, (2) exploits of the customiser, and (3) lessons learned by the enthusiast. Product narratives that relate to the product owner's success against the odds are suggested by thread titles such as "*I just got an unbelievable iMac G4 deal!!!!*" and "*A story almost too good to be true! (Reveal!)*" in Table 6.1 which focus respectively on the individual member's chance find of an iMac on craigslist for a bargain price and acquisition of a desired for Hermès handbag after a short period of waiting.

Product narratives that are dedicated to exploits of the customiser are inferred by thread titles such as "*My Crazy Sawtooth (Now Gigabit Ethernet) Project*" and "*My Newest DIY Project: Explorer Carry On/Rock Music*" in Table 6.1 which concentrate respectively on the individual member's customisation of the operating system of a Power Mac and the exterior design of the Explorer style of Coach handbag. Finally, product narratives that relate to lessons learned by the enthusiast are suggested by thread titles such as "*Learning from – or repeating – my mistakes?*" and "*The pursuit of perfection – does it make you happy?*" in Table 6.1 which focus respectively on the individual member passing on their knowledge in relation to the optimum use of the Apple watch and the problem with seeking a flawless handbag.

Table 6.1   Sample of Thread Titles that consist of Product and/or Brand Narratives

Thread Title	Type of Narrative	OBC Site
I just got an unbelievable iMac G4 deal!!!!	Success against the Odds for the Product Owner	MacRumors
I *LOVE* Power Macs!	Success against the Odds for the Product Owner	MacRumors
My Crazy Sawtooth (Now Gigabit Ethernet) Project	Exploits of the Customiser	MacRumors
From Hackintosh to Turbo Mac Pro	Exploits of the Customiser	MacRumors
My frustration as a true Apple fanboy	Lessons Learned by the Enthusiast	MacRumors
Learning from – or repeating – my mistakes?	Lessons Learned by the Enthusiast	MacRumors
Rehab success! Pics of my new (old) Court Bag!	Success against the Odds for the Product Owner	The Purse Forum
A story almost too good to be true! (Reveal!)	Success against the Odds for the Product Owner	The Purse Forum
*Dyeing an old Alma and bringing her back to life as a **custom** Macassar beauty!*	Exploits of the Customiser	The Purse Forum
My Newest DIY Project: Explorer Carry On/Rock Music	Exploits of the Customiser	The Purse Forum
Sick of Spending consumerism shiny pretty things	Lessons Learned by the Enthusiast	The Purse Forum
The pursuit of perfection – does it make you happy?	Lessons Learned by the Enthusiast	The Purse Forum

Narratives may consist of text only or a mixture of text and photos. Narratives that include photos show different types of product related images such as a newly acquired handbag or a Mac computer being customised. Members employ different devices when sharing narratives and these include: backstory (e.g. provide a history of the product to add meaning to the story), analogy (e.g. liken the search for a product to a quest or adventure), metaphor (e.g. use imagery of a rare treasure to symbolise an exclusive product) and rebus (e.g. use photos instead of text to tell a product related story). The length of narratives may vary from average posts that consist of a number of short paragraphs to lengthy posts that are made up of a greater number and/or longer paragraphs. Members may narrate their product and/or brand story in one post or over a sequence of posts submitted to the same thread. To share a product and/or brand narrative the member either initiates a thread or submits a post to an existing thread. Members of all experience levels engage in sharing product and/or brand narratives. In the next subsections the findings in relation to the three different types of product and/or brand narratives are presented and analysed.

6.2.1 Success against the Odds for the Product Owner

The underlying plot of this product narrative is about the individual member's personal success overcoming a product related challenge. Types of product related success stories that members narrate about include: the acquisition of rare products, repair or restoration of broken or damaged product and the accumulation of a distinct product collection. Such product narratives are most often seen in the Purse Forum. There are two possible reasons for this difference between the two OBCs. First, the Purse Forum has a ritual called a purchase reveal which as explained in Section 5.3.2 of Chapter Five consists of members sharing new handbag purchases with the community. It seems that the existence of such a ritual cultivates the use of story-telling techniques in the Purse Forum. Second, it is the norm for individual members in the Purse Forum to talk about themselves in a way that may be described as self-enhancing which is conducive to product narratives of personal success. Hence, it appears the ethos of the community in this case

rituals around product acquisition and norms in relation to how members talk about themselves

account for differences in the prevalence of such stories between the two OBCs.

In the first case Member KA who is a newcomer to MacRumors shares a product narrative about

his successful restoration of a vintage Mac:

#306

I've always been a PC [Personal Computer] guy, but lately I've gathered up some Macs for fun, for the sake of playing some games, expanding my knowledge, and just the good old tinkering I love so much. The specs for most of them are in my sig[17], and there's not too much to say about them, so instead I'll share the mildly interesting story of my LC550.

I actually got it years ago, sometime in the early 2000s, when I was around 10-12. It was originally used in an elementary school classroom, and at some point when the school retired it, it fell into the hands of my awesome elderly neighbor, Max (whom I named the system after). I recall him playing solitaire and poker games on it, as you might expect an older guy with little computer experience to do. One day I noticed it sitting out on his driveway by the trash and asked him about it. Turns out he was sick of the computer beating him at poker :) I convinced him to let me rescue it and brought it home with me.

Being a curious little kid, I opened it up and messed around with it a bit. I looked through my dad's old PC parts and swapped a stick of RAM [Random Access Memory] into it assuming it would be an upgrade (as it turns out it was; I had unwittingly maxed it out at 36MB [Megabyte] :). Unfortunately I had no keyboard or mouse, so I was not able to even turn the thing on for years, until a few months ago, when I bought a nice ADB [Apple Desktop Bus] keyboard and mouse set on eBay. The thing still works perfectly, and after cleaning up around 200 Untitled Folders throughout the system (I'm serious) I've been having fun playing some of the old educational titles like Number Munchers and a neat Hangman game. It's a cool little system, and I'm quite pleased with it so far. I recently added an ethernet adapter to it, so that will be my next adventure. (Member KA, MacRumors Newbie, Joined: Sept 2012)

The newcomer introduces himself through his brand involvement in terms of being a recent

convert to Apple and his product involvement evident among other things by his interest in

developing product knowledge and working amateurishly on Macs. Member KA employs the

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[17] The term 'sig' is shorthand for 'signature' which refers to a posting option that allows the member to share information about themselves at the bottom of their forum posts. For example, some members in the two OBCs list their product collections in their signature.

narrative device of a backstory whereby he provides a detailed history of the vintage Mac. He develops a connection to the product which could be construed as personal in nature, demonstrated by assigning it a name that is calling it "*Max*" after his neighbour. Member KA appears to take on the character of the accidental hero and the product narrative becomes a story of adventure whereby he is prompted to "*rescue*" the LC550 computer from possible ruin by an outside force in this case his elderly neighbour's decision to throw the Mac out in the trash. Responding to the call of adventure he experiments with the product, "*I opened it up and messed around with it a bit*"; however, there are twists and turns in his journey towards product restoration and he is faced with a series of challenges along the way due to his lack of product knowledge and other trials in the form of missing product parts.

In the end the accidental hero is rewarded for making the effort to restore the Mac and talks of enjoyment gained from playing retro games. He congratulates himself on the achievement of restoring the product by praising the Mac, "*It's a cool little system, and I'm quite pleased with it so far*". Member KA appears to become committed to the adventure of product restoration and shares plans for future projects on the Mac. There are no direct responses from others in the community to Member KA's product narrative. This is possibly because he submits the post to a thread dedicated to Apple Mac collectors that consists mainly of one-off posts in which members list the details in terms of the model and specifications of their Mac collection. There are mainly low levels of interaction between members in such threads. For example, in the case of the Apple Mac collectors thread members only interact with others who have accumulated a sizable or distinct Mac collection. This infers that forms of product involvement that are unique in the community in this case the possession of a large or distinct Mac collection are a potential means of gaining attention from others.

Even though members in the Purse Forum also share product narratives that tell of their personal success in dealing with product challenges the subject matter of such narratives is different and in many instances relates to trials associated with product acquisition. For example, in the following case Member LA shares a product narrative about her successful acquisition of an exclusive Chanel handbag:

[…] There has been one bag on my mind for the longest time, and it is a bag that has become so sought after that even celebrities are going on wait lists (according to an SA [Sales Assistant] in London). The Chanel Classic Jumbo Handbag is probably one of the, if not the most classic handbag of all time.
I first started properly pursuing this handbag in July this year, as my parents wanted to get it for me as a 21st Birthday Present, but it had become so rare that it was impossible to find at the time of my birthday. I decided to get in contact with my Chanel SA Bettina in Florida, who had previously sold me and my mum a few Chanel goodies including my PST [Petite Shopping Tote]. Bettina made me aware of how exclusive these handbags were especially with the Gold Hardware, which is exactly what I wanted. However, I kept in regular contact with Chanel, and Bettina assured me she would do her very best to get me my dream jumbo. Anyway, it came to the time to finally get on the plane to Florida and see if I had been lucky enough to get the handbag. The day before I had been given some not so great news, as it seemed that the bags might have become unavailable for purchase. As you can imagine I was quite upset, but at the same time I was so so grateful to be having such an amazing time in Florida with my family and boyfriend.

The next day I decided to venture into Chanel anyway to see Bettina and also to have a look around the boutique. I can honestly say that when Bettina revealed she did have a Jumbo for me I was actually speechless and I was totally surprised. However! the drama didn't end there as Bettina told me that they had maxed out the amount of Gold Hardware Jumbo's that they could sell, but they still had a Silver Hardware Jumbo available (which was lovely) but I had my heart set on the Gold Hardware as it is truly classic and goes with everything in my wardrobe haha. The next thing I knew another SA come over and said that she hadn't actually received the official paperwork to say that they weren't allowed to sell me the last GHW [Gold Hardware] Jumbo. So as you can imagine we rushed the payment through and moments after the paper work came down to say that they weren't allowed to sell another handbag! OMG [Oh My God] talk about having luck on my side :O […] If that wasn't enough two girls came into the store asking about a Black Caviar Jumbo with GHW and I had just brought it.. so I felt totally blessed to actually own such an exclusive handbag. (Member LA, Posts: 964, Joined: May 2010)

To begin the product narrative Member LA emphasises the exclusivity of the handbag by presenting it as something that even affluent others find difficult to attain. She corroborates this

claim by attributing it to an informed source that is her Sales Assistant. She proceeds to make a strong declarative statement about the status of the handbag describing it as, "*one of the, if not the most classic handbag[s] of all time*". This introduction appears to be a hook to draw the reader in and leave them wanting to know more about her search for the exclusive handbag. The analogy of a hunter on a quest to find an elusive treasure can be used to understand her pursuit to acquire the handbag. For example, the handbag being sought after is rare like a treasure that is difficult to locate, "*it was impossible to find at the time of my birthday*", help is sought from her Chanel contact who given her knowledge and network is akin to a treasure hunter looking for clues and effort is made to travel to a location where the handbag may be available or the treasure is hidden. She uses the word "*venture*" to describe her visit to the Chanel boutique. Hence, it seems that the quest to acquire the product is akin to a daring journey of which the outcome is uncertain.

Despite a number of twists and turns in Member LA's quest to acquire the handbag she perseveres and does not settle for second best: "*they still had a Silver Hardware Jumbo available (which was lovely) but I had my heart set on the Gold Hardware*". In the end she achieves success due to the Sales Assistant's willingness to bend the rules in relation to restrictions on handbag sales. She congratulates herself about possessing the handbag that others are searching for. Responses from others in the community confirm that Member LA's story telling is positively received and infer feelings of anticipation generated by the possibility of viewing photos of the new handbag: "*Fabulous post - Bring on the pics* Feb 2007), "*So pleased for you! Can't wait to see pics* Aug 2011) and "*What a lovely story, congratulations on your jumbo...nd now we want pics* (Member OA, Posts: 514, Joined: Feb 2013).

The findings provide insight into what members think about their product involvement. Both Member KA and Member LA use the plot of an adventure to craft the product narrative about their success against the odds. It is possible that this is simply a device used to stimulate interest in others to review and comment on their product narrative. However, it may also be the case that members who are involved with the product during restoration projects or the search for exclusive products perceive their involvement as an adventure or experience that is exciting. The findings also provide insight into what members feel about their products in terms of the attachment they experience which reflects a deep level of product involvement. For instance, Member KA appears to have a relationship with the product and this is evidenced when he seems to anthropomorphise the Mac by calling it "*Max*". Member LA on the other hand seems to perceive the product as an object of desire, "*my dream jumbo*", something that she longs for particularly because it is difficult to attain. These feelings for the product in terms of close relationship to the Mac or sense of longing for the Jumbo can be interpreted as product involvement that is emotional in nature.

The findings provide insight into the nature of product involvement in the two OBCs. For instance, members in the Purse Forum display an interest in sharing and reviewing narratives of product acquisition which is not mirrored as a norm in MacRumors. There are two possible reasons for this difference. Firstly, as some luxury handbags are exclusively distributed they may be difficult to acquire and this may explain why some members are interested in narratives of product acquisition. For example, luxury handbag brands such as Chanel, Hermès and Louis Vuitton are not available in every retail location and members may have to visit a flagship store to access stock or search through their personal network of Sales Assistants. Secondly, since luxury handbags are worn on the body it is possible that some product owners perceive their handbags as an extension of self and their individuality and this may explain why some members are interested in showing off their new handbag purchases. Hence, the characteristics of luxury

handbags as rare and expressive items seems to shape the nature of product involvement in the Purse Forum.

6.2.2 Exploits of the Customiser

The underlying plot of this product narrative is about the individual member's endeavours at product customisation. Such product narratives are more pervasive in MacRumors. This is because it is an accepted custom in MacRumors that members engage in the customisation of their Apple products. This is evidenced by the existence of a sub-forum called "*Alternatives to Mac Hardware*" which is dedicated to the customisation of Mac computers. It is not usual for members in the Purse Forum to engage in the customisation of their handbags which is hardly surprising given that these are expensive items which would in many people's eyes be spoiled by customisation.

In the first case Member PA shares a product narrative wherein he provides a step-by-step guide to the custom build of his Mac computer:

> **#1**
> So as some may or may not know my 2.3 DP [Data Processing] G5 [Type of Mac] power supply fried itself to death, Upon looking at prices of power supplies/ Being annoyed at how this once epic machine is now un supported by most useful applications (i.e Flash runs like crap even with a 6800 Ultra) I decided it was time to make a Hackintosh!
> Now the first revision of Hardware is not what final build will use, The Motherboard, CPU [Central Processing Unit] and HD [High Definition] and Graphics card will be updated to something I can only assume will be a Micro ATX [Advanced Technology eXtended] form factor and a nice intel i5 quad.
>
> [...] So in my build I have gone for an older 250 watt psu [power supply unit] which I had lying around, If I find it is too under powered for my final build I will try to upgrade it.
>
> So I gutted out the PSU and slapped the donor components into the psu cage to see if it would fit, Thankfully this being the second PSU I tried the heat sinks were just small enough to go in...Great success!

[…] Next it was bye bye old SATA [Serial AT Attachment] and molex connectors as I wanted to wire in the stock set up for the G5 as I will be using the hard drive and optical drive bays in the same set up as they came from Apple.
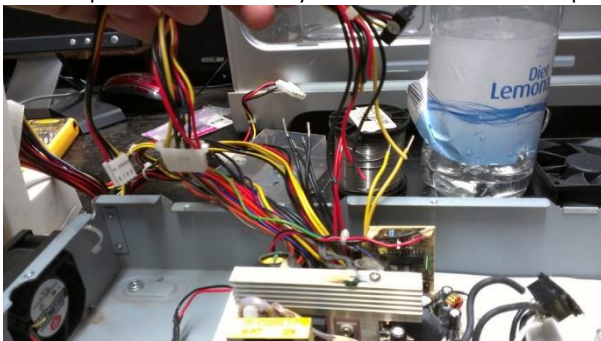
[…] Plugged in and test on the donor parts for the engineering stage of the build and...

Hoorah it works and powers up, Now the PSU has a temp sensor on the heat sinks so I will have to see if it shuts itself down/ how warm things get. More updates when the MOBO [Motherboard] tray arrives ▊ (Member PA, MacRumors Member, Joined: Nov 2008)

There is a high degree of experimentation to his Hackintosh build implied by Member PA's guesswork in predicting the parts to be included in the "*final build*" and his overall approach to the project which seems to be one of trial and error. For instance, he seems to learn as he progresses through the build by testing various parts and attempting different things to find out what works. This seems to be about sharing his experience of product involvement with others in this case the successes and challenges of undertaking a custom Mac build. He congratulates himself and celebrates during the custom build possibly to show his sense of achievement at making spare parts work and ultimately causing the Mac to power up.

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His post elicits responses from similar others in that they demonstrate a shared enthusiasm

for customising Mac computers:

Honestly there's very few feeling that can compare to build your custom rigs
nd i love these kind of thread were people share the adventure PLUS
might make people consider these route (Member QA, MacRumors 6502a,
Joined: Nov 2012)

Awesome progress! Have always thought G5's are the best cases for a
Hackintosh. Maybe it'll make an appearance on TheTechPlank one day?
(Member RA, MacRumors 65816, Joined: May 2011)

That's looking brilliant! I'm so tempted at doing this for my next computer.
Once my g3 [Type of Mac] is done. Thinking about buying a pro case and
starting from there. Looking very very good mate! Looking forward to seeing
the end result and will keep an eye on progress :-) (Member SA, MacRumors
6502a, Joined: Mar 2011)

They support this form of product involvement by providing positive feedback to praise Member

PA's progress on the Mac build and encouraging others to engage in this product related activity.

This seems to be about cultivating a sub-group within the OBC around this aspect of product

involvement that entails customising products to the owner's specific functional needs. Member

SA seems to be influenced by the custom build thread, "*I'm so tempted at doing this for my next

computer*" and expresses future intentions of undertaking a computer build. It is possible that for

some members custom build threads are akin to a workshop to the extent that they provide a

how-to guide on adapting products to specific functional needs.

Instances where members in the Purse Forum share such product narratives mainly relate to the

customisation of the design of their handbags. This is evidenced by the following post in which

Member TA shares a product narrative detailing how she customises her Louis Vuitton purse by painting her initials on it:

Well, last night I was doodling

Did a thread...and most people liked this one

Well, today I went to the mall and came home with this
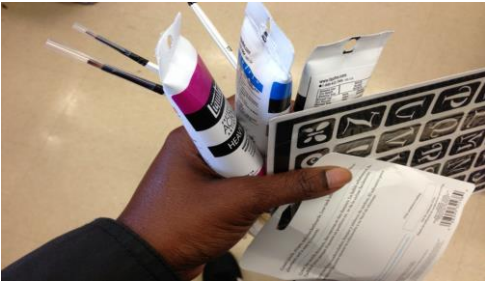
And this

And came up with this

And here are a few modelling pics

I think it went well. Have to work on some edging. I could just get more of these and different color paint and have a set to match my entire wardrobe. Enjoy :) (Member TA, Posts: 8057, Joined: Feb 2009)

Product customisation is a service that is offered by Louis Vuitton whereby they heat stamp a handbag with the owner's initials. However, the practice of members customising their product

in this way themselves is rare in the Purse Forum. She experiments with various colours on different Louis Vuitton purses and seems to conduct a public vote on which product customisation to undertake, "*Did a thread…and most people liked this one*". Her decision to choose the style most popular with the community infers the value she places on the opinion of others and possibly the closeness she feels towards the community. The product narrative consists of a combination of short sentences that use non-technical language and rebus. For example, she uploads a photo of art supplies and a stencil rather than explaining the tools used to customise the purse it is likely to make reading the product narrative fun and entertaining. She uploads a photo of herself modelling the customised purse which is referred to as a modelling shot and is a custom in the Purse Forum. She also uploads close-up photos of the customised purse adorning her different Louis Vuitton handbags. These photos together with her positive remark, "*I think it went well*", seem to infer her sense of achievement at successfully undertaking the product customisation. The following posts are a sample of responses from the community:

#4

OMG!!!!! YOU DID THIS YOURSELF!!??? AMAZING!! I'm so envious of creative people. (Member UA, Posts: 2047, Joined: July 2012)

#7

You are so brave! I would not trust myself to do this, but I think it looks great! Go you! (Member VA, Posts: 4196, Joined: Feb 2010)

#9

You are so creative.!!!.You did a great job, the cles turned out really pretty and I love the colors! (Member WA, Posts: 2564, Joined: July 2012)

The three members support the product customisation by complimenting her purse. They praise her ability to customise the purse by using capitalisation and exclamation marks to suggest surprise that she carried out the product customisation herself and attribute special skills to her, "*You are so creative.!!!.*". However, despite the positive responses they do not seem to engage in this form of product involvement, for example, they fail to share similar experiences related

to customising their handbags. Furthermore, Member VA describes her as "*brave*" due it seems to the perceived risk of customising a product like a Louis Vuitton purse which others infer they would not trust themselves to attempt. Hence, the outcome is very different to MacRumors as the responses do not cultivate a sub-group in the OBC around engaging in this form of product involvement.

Both technology and luxury handbag product categories demonstrate high tractability in so far as they can both be customised. However, there are differences in the degree of product customisation that it is possible to undertake due to the characteristics of each product category. For example, technology products such as Mac computers can be built from the ground up whereas luxury handbag products such as Louis Vuitton handbags can only be personalised with custom designs or modified with handbag accessories. Hence, the finding that product narratives of customisation vary between the two OBCs is not surprising. In MacRumors product narratives of customisation focus on building Mac computers which lends itself to narrative style that provides detailed descriptions of the technical process involved in a custom build. By contrast, in the Purse Forum product narratives of customisation focus on showing off the aesthetics of the personalised handbag and correspond with a narrative style that consists mainly of photo uploads of modelling shots and close-ups of the handbag. Hence, the findings suggest that the adaptability of the product that is the extent it can be modified seems to shape the type of product customisation undertaken which in turn determines the narrative content and style evident in the two OBCs.

The findings reveal differences between the two OBCs specifically the willingness of members to engage in customising products. In MacRumors it seems that custom-build threads attract others who have also engaged in this form of product involvement apparent among other things by displays of knowledge about fitting parts for Hackintosh builds. This suggests that mutual

forms of product involvement among members in this case shared interest in customising Mac computers helps form the basis for sub-groups in MacRumors. It is possible that such threads influence others in the development of their product involvement. For example, Member SA who seemed to be tempted by the Hackintosh build proceeds to undertake his own custom-build a few months later and shares details of this in the thread, "*Power Mac Gi5 (Hackintosh Build Diary)*". Despite positive responses of members in The Purse Forum to the personalised Louis Vuitton they do not engage in this form of product involvement. This difference clearly relates to the characteristics of the product where for a Mac product customisation has a functional value while customising an expensive handbag may reduce its value and even spoil the look of it. Hence, perceived risk may influence member willingness to engage in product customisation in the two OBCs.

6.2.3   Lessons learned by the Enthusiast

The underlying plot of this product narrative is about the individual member passing on their product and/or brand knowledge to the community. Members share lessons learned in relation to a variety of subjects such as: view of the brand's values over the duration of their brand involvement and outlook on the brand's product offering and firm strategy. The two OBCs are similar to the extent that such narratives are shared on an intermittent basis.

In the first case Member XA who at the time of posting was relatively new to MacRumors shares a brand related narrative in which he talks about his changing perception of the Apple brand:

Fanboyism

I got my first Mac in 03 and have loved every second of it. I love Apple's products. Steve Jobs is on my short list of people I consider truly great. I consider myself a huge fan of Apple and I am proud to be a part of the "Apple Culture." Though I'm still relatively new to this whole scene.

About a year ago I started reading comments in the News and Article Discussion Forum of *MacRumors*. I love it. I read for hours all the comments and criticisms. All these different points of view from people all over the world. It still is such a pleasure to read. I spend most of my time on the net here, for that reason.

The thing that I just wasn't expecting is the fairly large amount of Apple hatred. (So naive, I know). Sure, I expected some, but it seemed excessive to me. After all, this is a Mac fan site. Anyway, when I joined MR and started joining in the conversations and discussions, I pretty much knew what to expect. Still, I didn't fully realize what the connotation "fanboy" meant. To blindly defend Apple. To dismiss the notion that Apple can do a wrong. Well, it undoubtedly goes both ways. Not all, but a lot of that anti-Apple or anti-Microsoft attitude that we see around here is fanboyism. I too admittedly am biased in favor of Apple. Still, I wouldn't call myself a fan boy (any more). I love these forums. I've learned many things here. Not just about tech, but about perspectives. I'm a wiser man for it. And now, instead of being bothered by anti-Apple statements or blindly agreeing pro-Apple fanboyism, I observe it and even learn a thing or two from it.

So, would you consider yourself an Apple "fanboy or fangirl?" Did you at one point?

Below is a good article on the subject that I pretty much agree with. It's pro-Apple, of course, since it's from [TUAW](#)[18].

BTW, These cliches won't die out any time soon.
(Member XA, MacRumors 68000, Joined: Jan 2010)

He begins the post by making clear his strong preference for the Apple brand possibly because the subject that is "***Fanboyism***" is a controversial topic in MacRumors and could be mistaken as an attempt by a troll to start an argument in the OBC. Member XA exhibits enthusiasm for Apple by his strong interest in keeping up-to-date on product and/or brand related information available

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[18] TUAM is an abbreviation for The Unofficial Apple Weblog which is a news site dedicated to Apple.

from the OBC. He makes observations about forum behaviours and refers to his personal experience of participating in MacRumors in an attempt to share lessons learned about the brand in this case with respect to the full meaning of the term "*fanboy*" to also include "*anti-Apple or anti-Microsoft*" sentiment. He appears to undergo a transformation during the development of his expertise and consequently his relationship with the Apple brand evolves: "*I wouldn't call myself a fan boy (any more)*". Member XA attempts to cultivate self-reflection in others with respect to their brand involvement by asking them to consider their "*fanboy or fangirl*" status. To support his position he ends the post by sharing information from an article on the Apple news website TUAW that makes similar arguments about the term fanboy. His post elicits the following mixed responses from the community:

#2

My Apple is perfect days are over, but Mac OS X is still my preferred platform over Windows or Linux. Apple's finish is really trendy and prime - it's hard to switch to a lesser finish.

It could all be so much better though - especially in the mobile dept. It's locked down and restrictive, really awful stuff for 2010. I don't know how people think this stuff is cutting edge.. (Member YA, MacRumors 68020, Joined: Mar 2009)

#11

To be honest, I might be an Apple fanboy, but I don't care what anyone else thinks. I love the company and their ideas. I have completely switched from the PC and I'm never going back (Member ZA, MacRumors 68020, Joined: May 2010)

The two members are different to the extent that lessons learned by others seems to influence their brand involvement as Member YA distances himself from the fanboy status whereas Member ZA identifies as an unapologetic "*Apple fanboy*" and professes strong feelings for the firm "*love the company*". Member involvement with the OBC may help explain such differences. At the time of posting Member YA was a member of MacRumors for one year and two months whereas Member ZA had only signed up to MacRumors and was a member for one day. It is possible that due to Member ZA's lack of experience in terms of participating in the OBC and perhaps preconceived beliefs about expected behaviour in a fan site such as MacRumors is

possibly why he expresses strong devotion to the Apple brand. It is also likely that differences between the two members in terms of their willingness to take on board lessons learned by others is linked to their brand involvement. Member YA seems to have experience with the brand hinting at a change in his relationship with Apple over time and therefore he is receptive to lessons learned by others about the brand. Member ZA is a convert to Apple having switched from PC and it is perhaps because of his relative newness to the brand that he rejects lessons learned by others about the brand possibly perceiving them as criticism of the brand and instead shows a strong display of loyalty to Apple, "*I'm never going back*". Irrespective of this it significant that brand talk, defined in this study as how members talk about the brand, may consist of positive and negative viewpoints of the Apple brand in MacRumors.

Some members in the Purse Forum also share narratives about lessons learned from their product and/or brand involvement. For instance, in the following post Member AB shares her experience of being involved with luxury handbags:

#1

[…] I just want to share my story and help put things in perspective. When I got my Trevi, I was a complete LV [Louis Vuitton] noobie(still am) because it was my first. I excitedly picked out the bag from the store, and without turning it over even once, I bought it and left with a happy face. I then discovered and signed up with the purseforum to get more and more excited about my introduction to LV. As I obsessively read tPF [the Purse Forum] everyday and encountered many "my bag is flawed" posts, I became more and more neurotic about my own bag. I began inspecting every corner of my bag, only to notice that 1. the damier print didn't match up by 2mm at the bottom seams 2. the handles were sewn onto unmatched part of the squares and off by 2mm, and 3. worse of all one of my handle patches (the leaf shaped part) is crooked by a whole 20 degrees. I honestly felt so devastated and wanted to return my bag right away, but couldn't because I had already used it and scratched the bottom brass pegs.

I decided at that point that I would either sell this practically new bag at a loss because I can't handle the obsessiveness-fuelled disgust I felt toward it, or I could simply learn to get over it. And get over it is exactly what I did. I showed the bag to my mother and, without telling her first, asked her to identify what's wrong with the bag. She couldn't discover a thing. It made me wonder: would I have noticed anything either unless someone out there TOLD me it was a problem?

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> Would I have cared so much to scrutinize the details if I didn't read other people's opinions?
>
> When yet another person comes on the forums to get a public opinion about their bag's flaws, the common response I see from tPF-ers is "For the amount of money we spend, we deserve perfection." But is that truly realistic? Although LV bags are not handsewn (please stop believing otherwise), they are still assembled by a person running it through a sewing machine. There WILL be variations. Your bag-assembler may have done it crookedly but not so much that it deserved to be thrown out by the factory. And you just happened to purchase that bag. It doesn't necessarily mean you got cursed with bad luck-- not unless you PERSONALLY make yourself feel this way. That crooked handle bag still looks gorgeous to your friends and anyone standing more than 4 inches away from your bag. […]
>
> I'm not trying to tell everyone to lower their standards, but I'm reminding everyone that imperfection does not necessarily equal inferior quality. There are true flaws and there are superficial variations. I'll leave what's what up to you to decide. There's a reason we come to like-minded people on the forums for their opinions-- we want the masses to qualify the value of our possessions and tell us they're great. TPF is a wonderful place to get all sorts of expert opinions, fresh ideas, fascinating stories and general warm camaraderie. But remember that in the end, your bag/wallet/scarf/keychain/etc is YOURS to enjoy so YOUR opinion is always the best

Similar to Member XA in MacRumors she also seems to undergo a transformation during the development of her expertise as she learns to re-evaluate her outlook on the Louis Vuitton handbag with flaws in its design. She draws attention to particular beliefs in the Purse Forum, "*we deserve perfection*" and questions how realistic such product expectations are in an effort it seems to encourage others to self-reflect on their product involvement. Member AB attempts to change the perspective of others in relation to their product involvement by trying to rationalise the purchase of a handbag that is not perfect: "*It doesn't necessarily mean you got cursed with bad luck*". She concludes with words of advice on product ownership possibly to empower others in their product involvement.

Responses from the community mainly consist of short sentences in which others praise and thank Member AB for her contribution: "*Great post!!!*" (Member BB, Posts: 939, Joined: Aug

2011), "*LOVE THIS! :applause:*" (Member UA, Posts: 2027, Joined: July 2012) and "*Thank you for this post! I could not agree more*" (Member CB, Posts: 334, Joined: Mar 2011). However, Member AB also seems to influence some members who appear to reflect more deeply on their product involvement and participation in the community:

#9

> Agree. After I discovered TPF [The Purse Forum], I would check my bags obsessively for any flaws or damage. It does take the joy away of having a brand new bag. I've been trying to tell myself to stop worrying/babying when I take my bags out and just enjoy it! (Member DB, Posts: 3807, Joined: Dec 2008)

#26

> Excellent post! I recently received my HG[19] (Holy Grail) bag and noticed a few flaws on it. I compared these flaws with my first bag and pictures on TPF. I was getting a little sad, but realized that I can't always expect perfection and that I should always count my blessings. Like you, I eventually got over it. (Member EB, Posts: 403, Joined: Mar 2009)

Knowledge and advice shared by members can be valuable in terms of validating experiences of product involvement in this instance checking handbag quality post-purchase. It is interesting that this form of product involvement whereby members check handbag quality appears to be stimulated by information available on the Purse Forum as Member DB only seemed to check her handbags for flaws after she "*discovered TPF*" and Member EB compared her handbag to "*pictures on TPF*". Hence, learning about the product from the community may result in feelings of anxiety about product quality and remove the joy from product acquisition.

The findings arising from product narratives dedicated to lessons learned help provide insights into aspects of product and/or brand involvement that are more deep-seated. For instance, lessons learned by Member XA in MacRumors help to shed insight into how members experience their brand involvement over time which in this instance may evolve from being an avid fan to

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[19] HG is an abbreviation used in the Purse Forum for Holy Grail and refers to a handbag that is either difficult to find or on the member's wish list because it is expensive to purchase.

becoming a more typical fan who despite his preference for the brand is willing to critique it for perceived shortcomings. By contrast, lessons learned by Member AB in the Purse Forum help with understanding the experience of product involvement which in this example is not positive as the joy of product acquisition is overshadowed by feelings of anxiety about the quality of handbags. The main difference between the two OBCs is that members in the Purse Forum are more likely to share lessons learned from experiences of product involvement in comparison to MacRumors. This seems to be linked to the ethos of the community specifically how members talk about their product involvement. It is the norm for members in the Purse Forum to talk about feelings associated with being involved with luxury handbags and this lends itself to narratives of lessons learned that relate to more deep-seated aspects of product involvement. By members sharing their knowledge in the two OBCs they seem to cultivate and validate product and/or brand involvement in others. This is demonstrated by responses of the community to such narratives in which others reflect more deeply on their product and/or brand involvement.

The sharing of product and/or brand narratives has different functions in the two OBCs. First, it provides a way of communicating and reinforcing the values of the community that is what is important to members with respect to their product and/or brand involvement. For example, by reading product and/or brand narratives members gain insight into how to talk about, show appreciation for, and engage with the brand's products. Second, sharing such narratives acts as a way of transmitting and sustaining the traditions of the community as they are a central part to customs like sharing product collections or rituals such as revealing new purchases.

Member involvement with the OBC wherein they share product and/or brand narratives with others may be characterised as ego-related and social in nature. It is likely that the opportunity for the individual member to impress others as a result of their product and/or brand involvement makes the OBC involving. Member involvement that consists of sharing product narratives that

are self-enhancing in that they relate to personal successes such as acquiring rare products or personal achievements such as building custom products may be characterised in part as ego-related in nature. However, it is also possible that the chance for the individual member to talk in general about their product and/or brand involvement with others makes the OBC involving. Member involvement that consists of sharing various product and/or brand narratives that detail how they engage in product related activities such as collecting, acquiring or customising products or focus on passing on product and/or brand knowledge to others by providing unsolicited advice may also be characterised as social in nature. The findings show that members perceive product and/or brand narratives as involving demonstrated by posts submitted in response to such threads. Member involvement with the OBC that consists of commenting on product and/or brand narratives wherein they encourage, connect and praise others for their product and/or brand involvement may be characterised as social in nature.

6.3   Partaking in the Customs and Rituals of the OBC

A custom is defined as an established or accepted way of behaving in a particular place (Oxford Dictionary, 2017). A ritual is defined as a formal behaviour that consists of scripted practices that are performed in a sequenced order (Rook, 1984). Table 6.2 provides a sample of threads dedicated to particular customs and rituals in the two OBCs. Thread titles such as "*Post your Apple/Mac collection!*" and "*Post your Mac Setup Past & Present*" in MacRumors consist of members who are Apple owners partaking in the custom of sharing information or photos of their Apple product collection or Mac setup. Thread titles such as "*You know you're addicted to Hermès when…*" and "*You Valentino in Action!*" in the Purse Forum consist of members who are fans and/or product owners partaking in the custom of expressing strong preference for the Hermès brand or showing photos of their Valentino handbags in everyday use. Such customs primarily appear to be about displaying membership of the community or a particular sub-group within the community such as Hermès fans or Mac collectors. Thread titles such as "*Live*

Coverage of Apple's WWDC [World Wide Developer Conference] 2013 keynote" in Table 6.2 are dedicated to Apple's annual developer conference and consist of members partaking in the ritual wherein they jointly view the brand event. Thread titles such as "*Hermès reveal – there is a possibility that this makes you 'green' with envy…*" and "*Hermès blood orange and delisH!!! Another dream come true…*" in Table 6.2 consist of purchases reveals which as previously explained are a ritual in the Purse Forum wherein the individual member shares new purchases with others by for example showing photos of the handbag being unwrapped.

Table 6.2   Sample of Thread Titles dedicated to Customs and Rituals

Thread Title	Customs and Rituals	OBC Site
Post your Apple/Mac collection!	Custom of sharing information about product collection	MacRumors
Post your Mac Setup Past & Present	Custom of sharing information about product collection	MacRumors
Live Coverage of Apple's WWDC 2013 Keynote	Ritual in relation to viewing brand event	MacRumors
Live Coverage of Apple's WWDC 2015 Keynote	Ritual in relation to viewing brand event	MacRumors
You know you're addicted to Hermès when…	Custom of showing preference for the sub-forum brand	The Purse Forum
You Valentino in Action!	Custom of showing preference for the sub-forum brand	The Purse Forum
Hermès reveal – there is a possibility that this makes you 'green' with envy…	Ritual in relation to viewing new products	The Purse Forum
Hermès blood orange and delisH!!! Another dream come true…	Ritual in relation to viewing new products	The Purse Forum

Based on the analysis of the data three triggers were identified as prompting members to partake in the customs and rituals of the OBC: (1) new member identifying with the community, (2) sustaining and displaying membership of the community, and (3) opportunity to vicariously experience the brand. A large proportion of member involvement in the two OBCs is made up of partaking in the customs and rituals of the community.

6.3.1 New Member Identifying with the Community

It is the custom in the two OBCs that new members introduce themselves to the community. This is practiced to a greater extent in MacRumors than the Purse Forum. It is likely this is because there is an established way for newcomers to introduce themselves in MacRumors by submitting a post to the formal thread, "*Official New Member Welcome Thread*" which has been in existence since 2002. There is no established way for new members to introduce themselves in the Purse Forum and instead the norm is for the new member to start a thread themselves. The findings show that through the process of introducing themselves to the OBC new members identify with the community via displays of their product and/or brand involvement.

The first case provides a sample of posts submitted to the official new member welcome thread in MacRumors:

#11

Hi,
I guess to start off, I will say hello to everyone. I do not quite own a mac yet, i am going to be purchasing a new ibook before i start university again this fall. I've used macs before and i want one because to put it simply: they work. I'm tired of wondering if i will be able to finish a report only to have the windoze crash and leave me stuck. Also i love the great features of Mac OS and how apple seems to respect privacy better than microshaft. So yeah, i am a mac user stuck inside a pc user's body! Screaming to be released, trying to figure out what goodies to get with my ibook next month. BTW this forum is great, lots of good debate and info.
I'll be stickin' around for a while i think. (Member FB, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Jul 2002)

#14

I guess you can call me a newbie, since I've only been an Apple owner since the first Apple][+ came out and a Mac user since the Fat Mac hit the shelves. (Member GB, MacRumors G5, Joined: May 2002)

#1330

Hello Everyone on MacRumors Forum.

I recently signed up to your forum; and I was so pleased to find such a community forum for the discussion of Apple Products. I have a newly acquired (last Saturday) Apple Macbook Pro Retina 13in, now learning how to use it! Although I must admit, so far I'm pleasantly impressed with it. I also have an older Apple iPad 2, and an Apple iPhone 4s. The only problem is; I'm not very savvy when it

comes to anything technical; in fact I'm probably a bit of a numpty when it comes to understanding the techniques of computing.

I hope to become an active member of your community; albeit asking more than contributing, although I like a bit of a discussion on most subjects.

I like swimming , Cycling, Fly Fishing (river & stream) some photography (new Olympus OMD10 Camera) Learning how to use it! Love Ballroom Dancing and of-course spending time on my computer . I look forward to speaking to many of you in the near future. (Member HB, MacRumors Newbie, Joined: Oct 2014)

#1789

Hi, everyone! I'm a 20-year-old guy, and I'm from the Netherlands. I make a living waiting tables and writing about technology. I'm currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in journalism.

I've always been a Windows/Android user. I've owned and loved a 32GB iPod Touch 4g, but that's about it.

Currently, I'm using a $400, two-year-old Windows laptop for the majority of my work, which includes a TON of writing, photo editing in Adobe Lightroom, as well as video editing. It goes without saying that an upgrade is completely justified.

I never really considered Apple computers as a viable option, but when I saw how well FCPX works even on lower end MacBooks, I was sold. I never knew Mac OS was so well-optimized. Now I'm looking into getting an iMac, but I'm having some trouble picking out the model that best suits me. I don't want to spend a ton of money on one and end up regretting it, so I decided to join these forums for help. I'll make a separate thread about that soon.
I hope to see you all around! (Member IB, MacRumors Newbie, Joined: Jul 2017)

The new members identify with the community in various ways. Member FB who is an aspiring product owner tries to identify with the community by making clear his preference for Apple in this case by ridiculing the competition in terms of their product features, "*windoze crash*", and privacy policies, "*microshaft*". However, justification for his brand preference is tenuous in that he offers a non-technical reason that infers his lack of product knowledge: "*great features of Mac OS*". He uses the metaphor of being trapped inside his body to portray his personal dilemma in terms of not being able to use his desired Apple computer. Member IB is a convert to Apple but despite his preference for the Mac he is not yet a product owner. Even though he identifies with the community through his praise of the Mac computer he seems to exhibit a more functional interest in the OBC prompted by information needs due to the purchase decision.

Member HB presents himself as a new Mac owner. He seems to identify with the community through his desire to belong that is become an "*active member*" and interest in learning about the product. Member GB moves past identifying with the community and instead establishes his status as a member of the community based on his extensive experience as a product owner. This seems to be an attempt to distance himself from his user title which at the time of joining the OBC would have been 'MacRumors Newbie'[20]. Despite all four members identifying with the community they vary with respect to their involvement with the OBC. For instance, regardless of Member GB's enthusiasm to become an active member of the community his user title three years after signing-up remains MacRumors Newbie and a review of his posting history shows his participation consists mainly of seeking functional help with product related queries. Even though Member FB has a user title of MacRumors 6502a[21] his posting history is similar in that it primarily consists of seeking functional help with product queries on an intermittent basis. Member GB is the only new comer in this case who goes on to become an established member of the OBC with a user title MacRumors G5[22]. It is likely that aspiring or new product owners are enthusiastic about the product and/or brand and this manifests itself in their desire to be part of community dedicated to the brand's products. However, the findings suggest that a primarily functional interest in the community due to the availability of product related information has the potential to result in involvement with the OBC that is situational in nature.

The following posts provide an example of new members in the Purse Forum who of their own volition start threads in order to introduce themselves to the community:

#1

Hello, I 'm quite embarrassed to say that after several days of signing up I failed to introduce myself, So please forgive me, I'm quite new to all this and to be honest I had no idea how interested I would become after reading and learning so much from this forum! I became interested in this particular handbag when

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[20] MacRumors Newbie title signifies a post count of 0≥29 posts.
[21] MacRumors 6502a title signifies a post count of ≥500 posts.
[22] MacRumors G5 title signifies a post count of ≥12,000 posts.

getting a haircut one day, I notice this girl who walked in with this beautiful bag and immediately fell in love with it……..sigh. It was a Louis Vuitton speedy Damier. It was love at first sight! (the handbag I mean) LOL! I live in Florida and see many of the monogram ones and sad to say, fake one as well, but the Damier, I've only seen once around my area, that is. I am trying my best to save up and to finally treat myself without any guilt of course forward to reading your post and pictures and hope to oneday share mine as well, Thanks!

FlorMaria (Member JB, Posts: 15, Joined: Jan 2009)

#1

Forgive me if this is in the wrong section but I'm new here and wanted to introduce myself! My name is Amy and I'm 33. I've had a handbag obsession since I got my first job when i was 17 and felt so good about making my own money that I went out and bought myself a cute DKNY bag. From there my obsession just got bigger and bigger and now my favorites include Gucci, Burberry, Marc Jacobs and L.A.M.B. just to name a few. I have about 20 bags but only use 4 or 5 on a regular routine. […]

It's nice to see a place I can go where I'm understood. Most of my friends don't "get" the bag thing. They think I'm crazy for spending the money I do on a fabulous bag. I think they're crazy for not understanding how it feels to own a fabulous bag.

Anyway, nice to meet you ladies! (Member KB, Posts: 778, Joined: Feb 2009)

Both members are similar in that they identify with the community through mutual appreciation of designer handbags. Member JB who is an aspiring owner does this by sharing her first memory of seeing a Louis Vuitton handbag to convey the personal meaning of the product. Member KB who is an experienced owner, on the other hand, seems to identify with the community by sharing her history of involvement with designer handbags in terms of her first designer handbag purchase and developing interest in different luxury brands. Member JB uses the analogy of a romantic relationship to denote her feelings of love for her desired Louis Vuitton handbag and expresses feelings of sadness at seeing fake handbags, subjects that are part of brand talk in the OBC and thereby help reinforce her understanding of what the community is about. Member KB states the number of designer handbags she owns in this instance possibly to give her credibility as a newcomer to the OBC. Similar to findings in MacRumors despite the two members identifying with the community they vary with respect to their involvement with the OBC. In the

case of Member JB she submits 15 posts only and her posting history shows these do not relate to product and/or brand involvement but rather refer to topics such as health and beauty. Despite her good intentions it appears that her initial enthusiasm to become an active member due to finding a space dedicated to her interest in designer handbags slowly diminishes. It is possible that a lack of product knowledge or inability to acquire desired for products are the reasons why Member JB fails to become more involved with the OBC. It is significant that the existence of an out-group in terms of family and friends who do not understand or share her enthusiasm for designer handbags is the underlying reason why Member KB signs-up to the OBC. This motive for involvement with the OBC is mainly social in nature in that she seems to crave the company of likeminded others and perhaps explains why she goes on to become an active member in the community.

The findings suggest that the conversion rate from new member to active member is low demonstrated in the cases of Member GB and Member JB who discontinue in their journey of involvement with MacRumors and the Purse Forum respectively. It appears that aspiring and new product owners are enthusiastic about the product and/or brand and this is an apparent motive for signing-up to an OBC dedicated to the brand's products. However, the findings show that for some new members who mainly exhibit functional interest in the OBC such as seeking product and/or brand information it is not conducive to involvement with the community that is enduring in nature. This is especially the case when members seek information with respect to product or purchase queries and results in either situational involvement wherein they only post to find a solution to their query or what is termed in this study as repeat situational involvement whereby they post on an intermittent basis but again it is focused on problem-solving mainly.

The findings show that some existing members demonstrate involvement with the community that is enduring and this is apparent by their long-term membership and extensive post

contribution to the OBC. However, over time some of these long-standing members stop participating and it is less clear what causes the dissolution of their involvement with the community. For example, Member KB was last active on the Purse Forum in 2012. There are many possible reasons for this that require further research. For instance, it is possible she reached what is termed in this study a saturation point of product and/or brand involvement wherein having acquired numerous designer handbags evidenced by her post history her interest in the product category starts to slowly wane and this leads to the dissolution of her involvement with the community. It is also possible that Member KB becomes jaded in her product and/or brand involvement. This is a conceivable especially when consumers are members of a community like the Purse Forum which is very much consumption oriented apparent by the existence of the purchase reveal ritual. It is possible that the arousal of product wants aroused by viewing purchase reveals on a continual basis, evidenced by Member KB's post history, cause feelings of frustration and may be another reason why she brings an end to her involvement with the community.

6.3.2   Sustaining and Displaying Membership of the Community

There are many different customs in the two OBCs that revolve around members' interest in the brand or the brand's products. It is argued that such customs are central to the existence of community that revolves around a branded product category. Participation that consists of partaking in these customs occur to the same extent in the two OBCs.

In the first case Member LB starts a thread in the Purse Forum to share her Balenciaga handbag collection. In the thread title she uses capitals and makes an exaggerated claim about the product collection possibly to gain attention and entice others to click: "*ONE YEAR INTO THE QUEST FOR THE PERFECT BALENCIAGA COLLECTION*".

In one year, I have created a beautiful Balenciaga collection, but I'm still not satisfied. I have recently decided to refine it a bit, and I continue to look for older colors, styles, and leathers. I love the new colors, hardware, and styles that Balenciaga continues to introduce. Here are photos of my dressing room, which has now been taken over by Balenciaga – the Louis Vuittons and Chloes now occupy a tiny section. All of my other bags, Pradas, Isabella Fiore, et al, are heaped on the floor in an extra room, or lined up on the top shelves of extra bedroom closets. I have taken loads of my handbags to our local consignment shop – ridding myself of LVs and Chloes that way so that I didn't have to deal with Ebay. The Louis Vuittons that I have kept are ones that I really love, and to me they are classic pieces. Balenciaga is my main focus, and specifically in the area of handbags. […] I only own a few Balenciaga pieces of clothing – the handbags are what have captured my heart. So, on with the show! First, I'll show an overview of what my dressing room looks like now - in the past, during the winter season, I would have all of my sweaters on the shelves - I had them categorized by color and designer - the sweaters are now shoved wherever I can find the space - LOL! […]

(Member LB, Posts: 6194, Joined: Nov 2006)

She praises her achievement in orchestrating the "*beautiful*" product collection and appears to be in control of the process in terms of setting the specifications for handbags to be included in her product collection. Hence, it is possible for members to differentiate themselves through the creation of distinct product collections and accordingly such member activity wherein they share product collections with others may be a means of gaining enhancement in the community. It is interesting that she appears to copyright the photos of her product collection by writing her user name on them. This may be to protect against her content being used by third parties or perhaps to convey her identity as a product collector. She emphasizes the amount of Balenciaga handbags in her possession as a possible means of boasting about her product collection. For example, the imagery of her dressing room as akin to a territory that has been seized can be used to understand the increase of Balenciaga handbags over competitor brands. She also jokes about the reduction in space allocated to her clothes in order to make room for her handbags. It is interesting that she uses a phrase associated with entertainment "*So, on with the show!*" to start sharing her product collection which infers that she enjoys sharing such product related content with others.

Her post is popular in that it receives 34,927 views in the Balenciaga sub-forum and thereby suggests that such product related content is also something that others are interested in viewing. The following is a sample of responses she elicits from the community:

#4

OH GOODNESS! LOVE EVER

can we please trade lives   ..so prettty and i love how diverse your collection is! (Member MB, Posts: 3397, Joined: Jan 2006)

#5

I'm speechless! (Member NB, Posts: 1280, Joined: Apr 2007)

#8

Oh My Freaking GOD!!!! (Member OB, Posts: 1460, Joined: Jul 2007)

Responses include expressions of shock and surprise it seems to suggest that viewers are impressed with the large collection of Balenciaga handbags. Member MB praises the product collection as "*diverse*" and in so doing seems to assign credit to Member LB as owner of a distinct product collection. Member LB proceeds to submit several more posts such as the following wherein she appears to catalogue the Balenciaga handbags in her collection by season, style and colour:

Next are the different sections - I'll show the works [style of Balenciaga handbag] first -

(Member LB, Posts: 6194, Joined: Nov 2006)

It is proposed that the degree of effort she exerts in taking photos and sharing details of the different styles of handbags in her collection displays her membership of the OBC in this case motivation to share product related information that others are likely to find interesting.

In the following case Member PB starts a thread to share details of his Apple product collection:

Apple has come along way! Its fun to see what computers people have used and loved. These are all of mine let me see what is in your collection.

Apple //-C *Incl. Green/Black Two Tone Original Monitor*
Macintosh Performa 550
Power Macintosh G3 (Beige) Desktop *Original Monitor*
iMac G3 First Gen (Disc Tray) *Lime*
iMac G3 Second Gen (Slot Load DVD) Special etd. *Graphite*
iMac G3 Fourth Gen (Slot Load CD) *Indigo*

iBook G3 Second Gen. (Dual USB) 12.1"
Power Mac G4 Second Gen "Quicksilver" *Incl. Original 17" Studio Display*
Power Mac G4 Third Gen "MDD"
iMac G4 Third Gen 15"
eMac G4 First Gen 17"
PowerBook G4 Fourth Gen (Aluminum etd.) 12.1"
iMac G5 First Gen 17"
Mac Mini G4 Second Gen
iMac Intel Core 2 duo Second Gen 24"
MacBook Second Gen *Black* 17"

Other Mac Devices
iPods:
iPod First Gen 5gb
iPod Second Gen (x2) 10GB & 20GB
iPod Mini First Gen (x3) 4GB *Silver*
iPod Shuffle First Gen
iPod Fifth Gen (Video) (x2) *Black* 80GB
iPod Sixth Gen (Classic) *Black* 120GB
iPod Nano Second Gen (x4) *Silver* 2GB
iPod Nano Fourth Gen *Purple* 16GB
iPod Shuffle Second *Light Blue* 2GB
iPod Touch First Gen 16GB
iPod Touch Second Gen 16GB

AirPorts:
AirPort
AirPort Extreme 802.11g
AirPort Express 802.11g
AirPort Extreme 802.11n

+Many Various Other Swag...Shirts, Posters, & Other Peripherals
*All Macs above contain their original software excluding one iMac G3 running OSX
*All Macs have the original keyboard, and mouse.
Update I'll add photos by next week (Member PB, MacRumors Newbie, Joined: Jun 2009)

He appears experienced with the brand inferred by his reference to how Apple has developed over time. Prior to sharing his product collection he extends an invite to other product collectors in the community to share details of their Apple collections which is the custom of such threads in MacRumors. He shares information about his product collection in a methodical manner by categorising his collection according to product type and detailing the technical specifications of each Apple product. He draws attention to the fact that all his Macs contain original software

and parts perhaps as a way of making himself look good as a product collector. It is possible that Member PB who is a new comer to the OBC shares his product collection as a means of distancing himself from the assigned user title of 'MacRumors Newbie' and in so doing attempts to establish his status as a member in terms of possessing a sizable collection of Apple products. Members of all experience levels respond and share details in terms of the type and specification of their Apple product collections:

#2

Broken 14 inch 1.2 GHz iBook G4

1.67 GHz second to last model PowerBook G4 Aluminum, 2 GB RAM, 100 GB 5400 RPM HD, 15 inch 1280x854 screen, Backlit Keyboard, Bluetooth 2.0, PCMCIA SD card reader, Mac OS X Leopard 10.5

3rd gen (fat) iPod nano (Member QB, MacRumors 68020, Joined: Mar 2007)

#3

Powermac G4 dual 450 sawtooth
Powermac G5 2.0
Powermac G4 yikes 450 lol (Member RB, MacRumors 65816, Joined: Jan 2009)

#4

My Macs consist of old and new:
iMac 17" 1.83 GHz Core Duo (early 2006), 1TB HD, 2GB RAM, Mac OS X 10.5 Leopard
Power Mac G4 Sawtooth AGP 500MHz, 1GB RAM, Mac OS 9.2.2
Power Macintosh 4400/200, 40GB HD, 32MB RAM, Mac OS 8.6
Macintosh Performa 6400/200, 40MB RAM, Mac OS 8.6 and BeOS 5
Macintosh LC III, 36MB RAM, System 7.6.1
Macintosh IIci, 8MB RAM, System 7.1
Macintosh Performa 6320, can't remember the specs.
Macintosh SE, not sure of specs...can't get it booted, needs some repairs first.
(Member SB, MacRumors Newbie, Joined: Jun 2009)

The custom of sharing product collections is a potential way of sustaining membership of the OBC as it helps cultivate and maintain a sense of belonging to the community in this case through mutual interest in collecting Apple products.

There is a greater focus on the utilitarian value of product collections in MacRumors than the Purse Forum and this is evidenced by posts that detail the technical specifications of products to

help convey their performance capabilities. Information about product collections in the Purse Forum mainly consist of photos of handbags which is not surprising especially as the aesthetics of a handbag is a key determining factor for the consumer when purchasing a handbag. Hence, the characteristics of the product seem to influence how members talk about their product collections in the two OBCs. Outcomes associated with sharing product collections are similar in the two OBCs in that the custom seems to bring likeminded others together who exhibit mutual appreciation for the brand's products. It appears that the custom of sharing product collections in the two OBCs provides an opportunity for self-enhancement as the individual member gets to express their identity through the products they own and the uniqueness of their collection.

It is significant that in some cases moderators or experienced members who seem to take on informal roles in the community initiate threads wherein they invite others to partake in customs as a way it seems of cultivating and/or sustaining membership of the community. In the first case Member TB who is an experienced member of the Purse Forum with a post count of over 11,000 posts starts a thread in the Valentino sub-forum to invite others to share photos of their handbag in everyday use:

#1

Are you ever out and about - shopping, eating dinner, on a road trip, at the park, at lunch - and look down and say, "*Wow, this is one beautiful bag!*"?

Snap a picture and share it. (and you don't even have to get yourself in the picture!)

Maybe take a picture of it hanging on the chair with beautiful flowers in the background, or sitting in your car seat while going for a ride, whatever. (Member TB, Posts: 11,225, Joined: Jul 2009)

She sets out general guidelines for the product related activity in terms of making suggestions for photos of handbags it is likely to encourage others to participate. The following posts are a sample of responses from the community:

Ohhhh love this idea! It will be fun ▌ (Member UB, Posts: 2348, Joined: Apr 2009)

#4

(Member VB, Posts: 4832, Joined: Mar 2010)

#5

Best co-pilot ever! ▌ (Member UB, Posts: 2348, Joined: Apr 2009)

#19

First day on the jo ▌
(the bag, not me ▌

(Member TB, Posts: 11,225, Joined: Jul 2009)

My glam lock out for a stroll

(Member WB, Posts: 2541, Joined: May 2010)

Out on the town for dinner

(Member XB, Posts: 9581, Joined: Sept 2014)

Members exhibit enthusiasm for this type of product related content apparent by the positive response of Member UB to the proposed activity and the popularity of this thread in the Valentino sub-forum in that it has received 180,204 views and continues to be in existence five years after the thread was started. It is part of the ethos of the Purse Forum in terms of how members talk about their products that they anthropomorphise their handbags in this case demonstrated by inferences to handbags as a new employee starting a job or as a friend accompanying them to dinner. As explained towards the end of Section 5.2.1 in Chapter Five this infers the close relationship that some members feel towards their products and may be interpreted as product involvement that is emotional in nature.

In the following case a moderator initiates a thread in MacRumors to invite members to upload photos of their Mac computer set up:

#1

Post Your Mac Setup: Past & Present (Part 11)
Mod Note: Here is a list of the previous threads

Post Your Mac Setup: Past & Present
Post Your Mac Setup: Past & Present (Part 2)
Post Your Mac Setup: Past & Present (Part 3)
[…]
For large images (over ~800 pixels wide), please use **[timg]** tags rather than plain old [img] tags

We ask that everyone refrains from reposting the same image in multiple threads. That includes the "Under 18" as well as "Post Your Mac Setup" threads.

We do realize that this will still sometimes occur. If/when that happens, please report it by clicking on the "Report Post" icon (⚠) and include a link to both posts. Thank you. (Member YB, MacRumors 604, Joined: Dec 2006)

The custom of sharing photos of the setup of Mac computers is well-established as the thread is a continuation page "*Post your Mac Setup: Past & Present (Part 11)*" and includes links to earlier pages dealing with the same product related activity. The moderator sets out strict

guidelines for submitting product related content to the thread perhaps due to the likelihood of a

large number of post submissions. The following is a sample of responses from the community:

Bedroom setup---
27" iMac
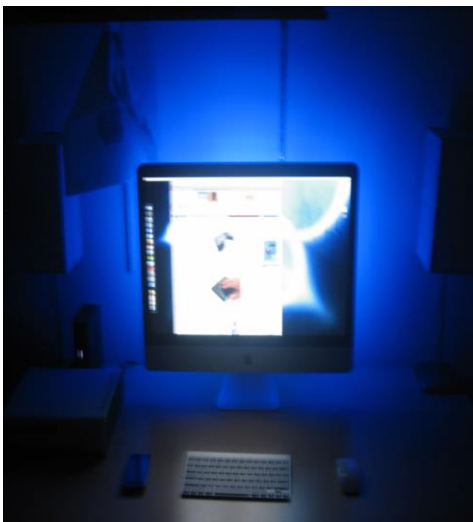
40" LCD & iMac (Member ZB, MacRumors 6502, Joined: Mar 2008)

Nothing much new from this one, a WD 1TB and the MX1100 with a new large mousepad.
I'll post new pics when I get a decent camera 😊 (Member AC, MacRumors Regular, Joined: Jan 2009)

mine

I tidied up.I want to make it even more minimalist but can't think how.... expect for selling the MP 09 for a Imac 😊 (Member BC, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Jan 2008)

My setup:

(Member CC, MacRumors 6502, Joined: May 2009)

mac mini, 23" cinema display

(Member DC, MacRumors Regular, Joined: Jul 2008)

Similar to the Purse Forum members display enthusiasm for this type of product related content demonstrated by the popularity of this specific thread which has received over 1.2 million views and that it has been in existence in the OBC for over a decade. Not surprising in acting out this custom members admire their Mac computers and this is evidenced in various ways. For example, Member ZB uploads several close-up shots of his Mac computer from different angles. Other members exhibit what can be interpreted as a sense of pride in their Macs apparent by the use of a personal pronouns such as "*mine*" and "*My setup*" to express ownership when showing-off their computers. It is noteworthy that this thread not only consists of one-off posts and that some members are repeat posters who submit updates of their Mac setup. Hence, some members appear interested in displaying and recording the development of their product involvement in this case by sharing details of updates to their Mac collection.

It is proposed that customs that motivate such product related activity in the two OBCs help stimulate product involvement as product owners think about and engage with the products they possess. Instances wherein members project an identity that relates to being a fan of the brand or product enthusiast seem to be linked with displaying membership of the OBC. Members appear

to connect through mutual enthusiasm in these cases for Valentino handbags or Mac computers. Hence, this form of member involvement with the OBC not only cultivates and sustains membership of the community through mutual interest in the product but also is the basis for the formation of sub-groups in these particular cases of Valentino or Mac owners within the community.

6.3.3 Opportunity to Vicariously Experience the Brand

Interactions rituals, as explained in Section 2.4 of Chapter 2, are social encounters wherein individuals experience the same feeling or partake in the same action. Collins (2004, p.48) sets out four conditions necessary for interaction rituals to take place that include: (1) group assembly, (2) barriers to outsiders, (3) focus of attention, (4) shared mood. Based on analysis of the data it appears that member behaviours such as partaking in purchase reveals in the Purse Forum or viewing brand events like Apple's World Wide Developer Conference (WWDC) in MacRumors in some instances may be classified as interaction rituals. Group assembly occurs as members submit posts to the thread to show attendance of the product or brand event that occurs in real time. There are barriers to outsiders as only active members who are signed-up to the OBC may submit a post to the thread. Members' mutual focus of attention is on the product or brand related event such as a new handbag being unwrapped or news of Apple's forthcoming product developments. The shared mood is evident by members' expressions of excitement and anticipation to view the new handbag or find out the latest brand news. Interaction rituals take place to a greater extent in the Purse Forum than MacRumors. This is because the practice of sharing new purchases is an accepted rite in the Purse Forum and members of all experience levels engage in such behaviour.

In the following example Member EC seems to take on the role of the entertainer and employs the analogy of a performance to act out a purchase reveal wherein her new Hermès handbag is unwrapped in a striptease-like manner:

hi ladies, n gent =) my 1st H reveal is dedicated to people that has been helping me on the auth forum and all of you that has brighten my "bag" world by making me feel normal to keep on buying bags hehe =)

ok this is the last box that sent by fedex from Italy

(Member EC, Posts: 2604, Joined: Dec 2007)

Oh goodie oh goodie!!!!! I finally get to see a live one" (Member FC, Posts: 25,408, Joined: Aug 2008)

(Member FC, Posts: 25,408, Joined: Aug 2008)

mmm, tantalizing package... (Member GC, Posts: 141, Joined: Mar 2008)

any guess what is it ???

(Member EC, Posts: 2604, Joined: Dec 2007)

Well, it seems like it the week for the Lindy, so.... (Member FC, Posts: 25,408, Joined: Aug 2008)

Strip her!!!! (Member FC, Posts: 25,408, Joined: Aug 2008)

[…] what did you get? (Member HC, Posts: 4935, Joined: Apr 2007)

Can't wait!   (Member IC, Posts: 18,067, Joined: Mar 2006)

haha no lindy!

(Member EC, Posts: 2604, Joined: Dec 2007)

[…] (tapping foot impatiently at [name of thread starter] (Member FC, Posts: 25,408, Joined: Aug 2008)

im sure with this photo u guys can guess already!!

(Member EC, Posts: 2604, Joined: Dec 2007)

Etoupe (Member FC, Posts: 25,408, Joined: Aug 2008)

etoupe birkin w/phw? (Member FC, Posts: 25,408, Joined: Aug 2008)

this is torturous! […] Strip NOW!!! (Member JC, Posts: 2379, Joined: Apr 2008)

hahaha, here u gooo =))

(Member EC, Posts: 2604, Joined: Dec 2007)

WOW!!! What a gorgeous lady! Is she swift [type of leather]? (Member FC, Posts: 25,408, Joined: Aug 2008)

I am wondering too what color this could be? And look at the lock, its covered in leather aghhhh its seriously an added bonus!

(Member EC, Posts: 2604, Joined: Dec 2007)

#19

Could it be gris? Gris touterelle mayber? She's certainly a beauty. CONGRATS! (Member FC, Posts: 25,408, Joined: Aug 2008)

#21

Breathtaking…congratulations!! (Member KC, Posts: 1193, Joined: Sept 2006)

#28

def too light for etoupe, and since you say there's no grey IRL [In Real Life], it wouldn't be gris. I'm guessing poussiere???
Well anyway, loveaddict, congratulations on this lovely Kelly. Wear her in good health! (Member LC, Posts: 3503, Joined: Jul 2008)

#29

She's a beauty! **CONGRATULATIONS!!!**
And thank you for sharing your joy and pics with u   ember MC, Posts: 2640, Joined: Oct 2007)

Those viewing the purchase reveal take on the role of an audience evident by referring to the reveal as a "*live*" event or show to be viewed and use of emojis such as eating popcorn that are associated with entertainment. Member EC is slow in performing the striptease that is revealing her new handbag. She starts off the striptease showing the handbag's outer packaging and includes a tease element in the performance in that she asks the audience to guess the style of handbag as she reveals the tissue paper inside the product box. She attempts to arouse the audience with a close-up photo of part of the handbag peeping out of the interior dust bag. She ends the performance by fully de-robing the product and showing photos of her new Hermès handbag.

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The purchase reveal consists of scripted episodic behaviour that is behaviour that occurs repeatedly and in a fixed sequential pattern (Rook, 1984). Members encourage the thread starter to share her new handbag evident through expressions of desire and excitement to see the product, for instance, employing sexual language and innuendo on viewing the product box, "*mmm, tantalizing package…*" and inferring a state of arousal to see the handbag unwrapped

". The affective intensity of posts creates an atmosphere of stimulation and excitement which is pleasurable to experience. It is proposed that members mutual focus of attention on the product during such phased purchase reveals and the shared mood of excitement as the product is slowly unwrapped make those viewing the purchase reveal more aware of what fellow members are feeling and therefore more likely to feel the shared mood of excitement more intensely; a process Collins (2004, p. 108) refers to as "rhythmic entrainment". This "emotional entrainment" (Collins, 2004, p. 53) is evident by the slow build-up of interest to see the handbag at the start of the purchase reveal which quickly intensifies into a crescendo of excitement as part of the product is exposed: "*this is torturous […] Strip NOW!!!*".

The purchase of a designer handbag in the Purse Forum symbolises a special occasion that merits good wishes from others. Hence, member behaviour during such rituals includes offering congratulations to new product owners. This, coupled with compliments from others about the style of handbag, "*Breathtaking*" and "*She's a beauty!*" is likely to validate Member EC's choice of product and potentially influence her willingness to share future product purchases with others. Member EC uploads several close-up shots of the handbag after completing the purchase reveal perhaps for functional reasons that is to find out about the leather and colour of the handbag. It is also possible however that such behaviour is a way to extend her feelings of joy and satisfaction following product acquisition and this is inferred by her comment on one photo: "*look at the lock, its covered in leather aghhhh its seriously an added bonus!*".

The next example taken from the Purse Forum is different as the thread starter uses a hook to entice others to partake in her purchase reveal. Member NC tries to tempt others to participate in two ways; first, by disclosing information about her personal life that helps her present as a glamourous woman and second, referring to the arrival of a mysterious parcel:

Dear Ladies,

I was having the time of my life in Belgrad with my husband last weekend. As you can see from the picture below. And the weekend got even better when the tracking of certain parcel started showing in Emirates Post track and trace....

Anyone for a reveal?
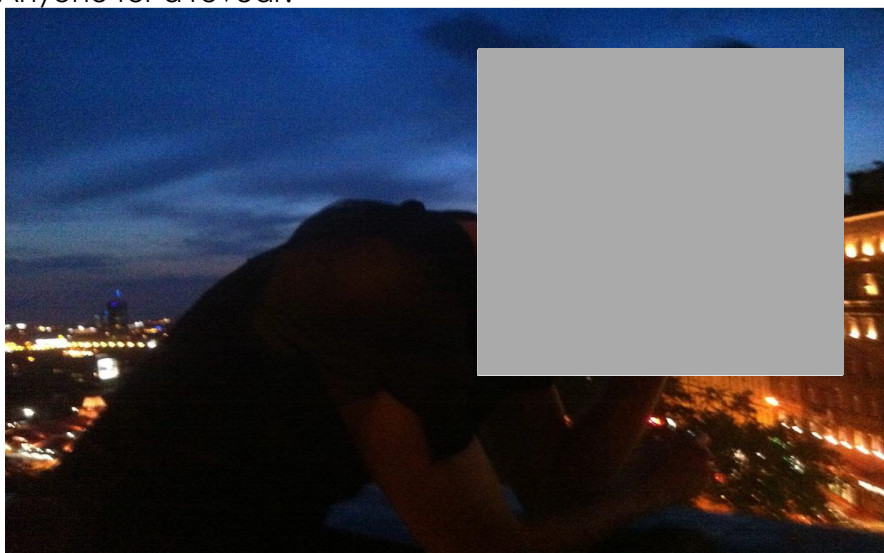
(Member NC, Posts: 1382, Joined: Apr 2008)

Here!!! :) (Member OC, Posts: 612, Joined: Feb 2007)

Front row :) (Member PC, Posts: 44, Joined: Apr 2009)

Waiting! (Member QC, Posts: 92, Joined: Feb 2009)

wow....live reveal, i'm here!! (Member RC, Posts: 25,636, Joined: May 2006)

Great, you guys are awake!

I got back home and picked up my parcel from my husband's office. I think I got a speeding fine while driving back, or my eyes were just blinking out of excitement. Luckily we got home safely. I placed the parcel next to my

Katrantzou, and went downstairs to grab some wine. This has been the most expensive handbag I have ever dared to buy. I exceeded my bag budget so badly, I better be nice to my husband for long time, lol.
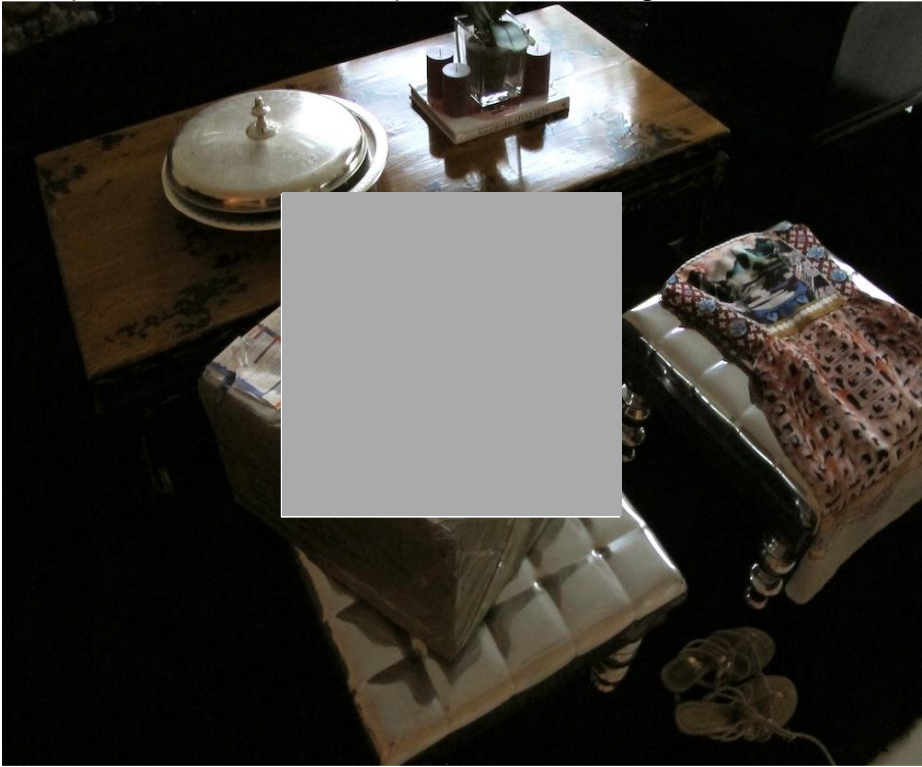
(Member NC, Posts: 1382, Joined: Apr 2008)

#7

strip! strip! (Member SC, Posts: 1670, Joined: Apr 2008)

#8

(Member TC, Posts: 1001, Joined: May 2013)

OH, looks like the big masses might be already GREEN with envy, where are you? Just joking.

Out came the paper.... The beauty was hiding under very careful wrappings, and as promised, in an understated box. Anyone want to guess?

(Member NC, Posts: 1382, Joined: Apr 2008)

Malachite Kelly 32 with gold HW [Hardware]. (Member UC, Posts: 4250, Joined: Sept 2006)

Open, open, open 🏮 (Member VC, Posts: 720, Joined: Dec 2009)

exciting 😄 (Member WC, Posts: 1708, Joined: Dec 2012)

I am present, dear A ▮ (Member XC, Posts: 1348, Joined: Sept 2007)

Woohoo! Waiting.... (Member YC, Posts: 4254, Joined: Nov 2010)

Shall we continue dear Hermes fans […] is the heat raising, or is it just me who is all hot in here 😊

The next layer was so girly that my sweetheart twins could not resist the reveal at home. I got them "erased" by donating this layer for them and they started making paperdolls out of the wrapping. Having two little ladies helping me with the pink wrapping was so much fun. But the best was yet to come....

(Member NC, Posts: 1382, Joined: Apr 2008)

#19

Do show please !!!! (Member ZC, Posts: 5239, Joined: Jan 2009)

#21

I am here. Open.open.open.... (Member AD, Posts: 1689, Joined: Jun 2009)

#22

I cannot contain myself, what is in that package?!!! (Member BD, Posts: 219, Joined: Apr 2012)

#23

Apologies you wonderful ladies, had to put my son to bed. As he is sound as sleep I can go on... Thank you for all for sharing this with me! To avoid any disturbances I locked myself in the only room in the villa that has a key in the lock. My husband's sacred music room. Not the prettiest sight, but I thought maybe the colors of the guitars would complement the next layer.... Not sure of my decision, but the next layer was there. I had no idea which dustbag she arrive in and this was a pleasant surprise. So soft material, I wanted to die already. There is a hint of the bag in there, any guesses? The photo is not exactly perfect in regards of the colors, so this might be misleading....

(Member NC, Posts: 1382, Joined: Apr 2008)

#25

That is not the secret I never tell, XOXO,
Thank you for participating in this.
I am having so much fun here.
(Member NC, Posts: 1382, Joined: Apr 2008)

#26

Awesome, I have a great team of supporters
(Member NC, Posts: 1382, Joined: Apr 2008)

#29

Vert Fonce croc Kelly ghw? (Member CD, Posts:14,913, Joined: May 2009)

My computer is totally heating up and I had to boot it.

So the story continues. I opened the dust bag and was just about start dancing, but her royal highness got shy. She did not want to be photographed. She went camouflage stating she did not want anyone to guess her color straight away....

(Member NC, Posts: 1382, Joined: Apr 2008)

Sweet!!!!! Gorgeous and mysterious! What a beaut   ember BD, Posts: 219, Joined: Apr 2012)

Step by step and with tons of compliments she got out of the shy mood and revealed her true nature. Or natures. As the color varies according to light. Here she comes, The true Chameleon Vert Olive Barenia GHW B35.

(Member NC, Posts: 1382, Joined: Apr 2008)

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You are absolutely right... a true chameleon. Congratulations! (Member DD, Posts: 244, Joined: Aug, 2010)

Gor-geous! Barenia B is a must ! Enjoy! (Member TC, Posts: 1001, Joined: May 2013)

That is truly a breathtaking bag...enjoy!! (Member BD, Posts: 219, Joined: Apr 2012)

Yummy barenia! She is gorgeous. Congratulations on your exquisite bag! (Member ED, Posts: 1924, Joined: Jun 2007)

Post number two, three and four are submitted within seconds of each other and infer a sense of co-presence online as members view the purchase reveal together in real time. Member NC attempts to build suspense about the product to be revealed by hinting at the cost of the handbag: "*I exceeded my bag budget so badly*". The purchase reveal lasts 2 hours and 23 minutes and Member NC seems to employ different tactics to prolong it by for instance waiting several minutes between submitting posts, inviting others to guess the style of handbag, using provocative statements at the end of posts, "*But the best was yet to come....*" and taking breaks during the reveal. Members engage in scripted episodic behaviour of purchase reveals by encouraging the thread starter to share her new purchase evident by the use of emojis such as, " that denote the word 'nuts' to infer feelings of excitement about the product. They also give directives such as "*strip! strip!*" and "*Open, open, open*" which use word repetition and in this case are similar to chants from an audience during a performance and infer their state of arousal to view the handbag.

Similar to the previous example the mutual focus of attention on the product during the phased purchase reveal and shared mood of excitement to view the handbag seems to result in rhythmic entrainment whereby members feel the shared mood of excitement more intensely. Initial

excitement to view the handbag quickly reaches a climax point as the product is removed from its outer packaging and members express peak excitement: "*Do show please !!!!*" and "*I cannot contain myself, what is in that package?!!!*". However, there is a breakdown in emotional entrainment when Member NC leaves the audience waiting 56 minutes before submitting post number 23 which shows the handbag in its dust bag. She goes on to thank others for participating perhaps in an attempt to reignite interest in the purchase reveal and quickly proceeds to reveal her new handbag. Similar to the previous example responses from others are validating as they offer congratulations to the new product owner and compliment the style of handbag. It is significant that Member NC seems to derive pleasure from being watched by others unwrap her new handbag. This is evident by her displays of excitement and pleasure as she progresses through the purchase reveal: "*Is the heat raising, or is it just me who is all hot in here*", "*So soft material, I wanted to die already*" and "*I am having so much fun here*". In these two examples it appears that collective effervescence gained from sharing and vicariously experiencing new products is a source of arousal and pleasure for members.

It is significant that interactions between members during purchase reveals may have a two-way influence on experiences of product involvement. The ritual of product owners sharing their new handbag purchases provides an opportunity for others to vicariously experience the product and thereby offers an experience of product involvement that in some cases due to product cost or rarity may not be possible for others to gain first-hand. It is less clear however what the impact of vicariously experiencing products has on others over time, especially non-owners, as it likely to induce product wants that if not possible to fulfil may end up causing feelings of frustration. For product owners the opportunity of sharing new handbag purchases with others seems to be way of not only extending feelings of joy at the acquisition of desired for products but also of creating new ways of gaining enjoyment from product acquisition as members seem to derive pleasure from being watched by others unwrap their new handbags.

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Some members view Apple's WWDC online and partake in live coverage of the brand event in

MacRumors. The following example relates to Apple's WWDC 2013:

8:50 am: Developers lining up inside the Moscone Center for the WWDC Keynote
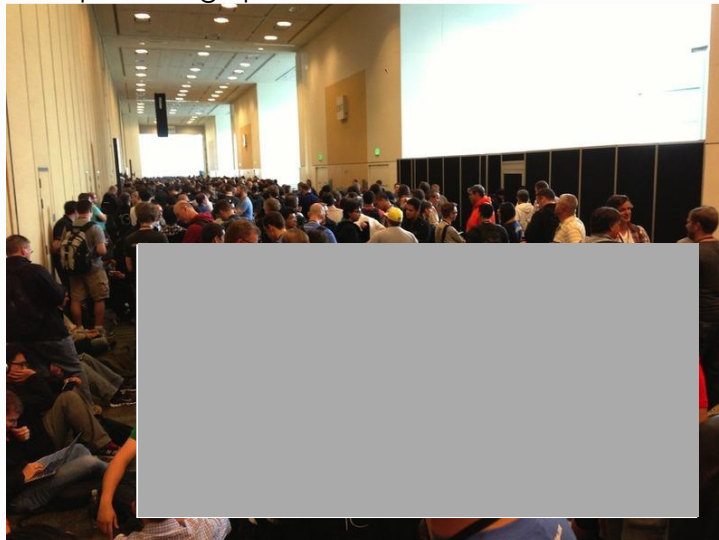
9:19 am: Press have been allowed into the auditorium to get situated.

9:45 am: Fifteen minutes ahead of the keynote, Apple's livestream has begun on Apple's website.

9:46 am: The auditorium is filling up as thousands of developers and press await Tim Cook's presentation.

9:47 am: Apple board member Al Gore and co-founder Steve Wozniak are chatting near the stage.

9:51 am: Laurene Powell-Jobs, Steve Jobs' widow, is in attendance.

10:00 am: "The presentation will begin shortly. Please take this opportunity to switch all electronic devices to silent mode."

10:02 am: The presentation is beginning with a introductory video

10:03 am: The video is focused on design, asking "what do we want people to feel?"

10:04 am: "There are a thousand no's for every yes. We simplify, we perfect... until everything we touch enhances each life it touches."

10:04 am: "Designed by Apple in California
10:04 am: Tim Cook is now on stage
10:05 am: "Welcome to the Worldwide Developers Conference. You're going to have an incredible week." […] (MacRumors Bot)

#3

An iWatch OS!   Member FD, MacRumors Regular, Joined: Jan 2012)

#4

Really hoping we get the iPhone 5S today. Can't wait!!   Member GD, MacRumors Regular, Joined: Oct 2011)

#5

An Apple TV set!   ber HD, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Jun 2007)

#7

Mac Pro! (Member ID, MacRumors 65816, Joined: Jan 2007)

#9

I was wondering when a black covered banner would show up.

I'm guessing it's for the radio service. (Member JD, MacRumors P6, Joined: Apr 2005)

#11

Getting closer.... I'm guessing the banner is for iRadio????? (Member KD, MacRumors 68020, Joined: Sept 2007)

#13

and so it begins! well in an hour and 15 min (Member LD, MacRumors 6502, Joined: Jun 2011)

#15

I might be too excited.
I wish someone at work shared my enthusiasm, I'm stoked! (Member MD, MacRumors Regular, Joined: Oct 2009)

#16

Let's rock. (Member ND, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Jan 2009)

#17

Psyched! (Member OD, MacRumors Member, Joined: Nov 2010)

#19

It's so close I can taste it... (Member PD, MacRumors Regular, Joined: Nov 2010)

#23

This last weekend was hell - the anticipation of WWDC always makes time crawl […] (Member QD, MacRumors 68040, Joined: Nov 2007)

Quote:

> Originally Posted b
> *It's so close I can taste it...*

I can feel it..I can feel it like it's right...IN MY NECK! (Member RD, MacRumors 65816, Joined: Apr 2011)

I bought a i7 - 6 core PC with 64GB Ram and SSD... but I can not enjoy it because it can not run OSX

Biggest mistake of my life, I am so sorry Apple! PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF GOD GIVE ME A MAC PRO AND I WILL TOSS THIS $6000 WINDOWS **** MACHINE OUT THE WINDOW AND DANCE ON IT'S GRAVE!

,I WILL NEVER CHEAT ON YOU AGAIN!

pheeew.. feel better for coming clean. (Member SD, MacRumors Member, Joined: Feb 2011)

I have not been this excited since first human mission to Moon
Just about one hour left........ (Member TD, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Mar 2012)

One hour to go! (Member UD, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Apr 2004)

You guys are getting all excited and all. When/if it doesn't meet your expectations, you'll all be ranting at Apple for not providing it even if they do. Calm down. (Member VD, MacRumors 6502, Joined: Mar 2012)

reports are coming in that 12.000 Samsung employees are watching the keynote live with notepads (actual paper) in their hands.

There will be a frame-by-frame analysis of the keynote at Samsung HQ tonight in the canteen. MANDATORY attendance for product managers and korean visionaries. (Member SD, MacRumors Member, Joined: Feb 2012)

Cook.
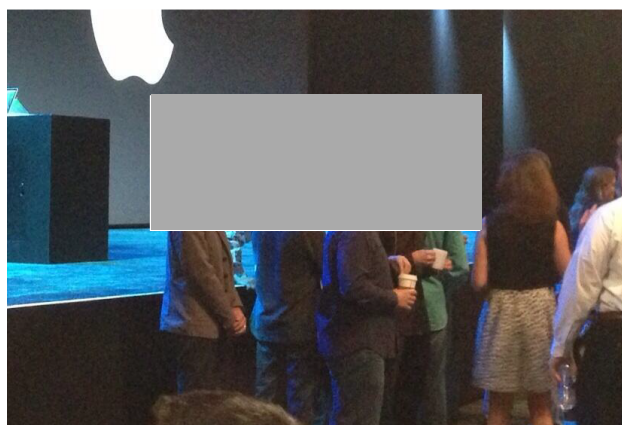
(Member WD, MacRumors 68040, Joined: Oct 2008)

#66

I can't wait for the Keynote, last night felt like christmas eve (Member XD, MacRumors G4, Joined: May 2008)

#141

It's live!!! (Member YD, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Mar 2013)

#142

the stream just started!!!!! (Member ZD, MacRumors Member, Joined: June 2012)

#144

Yay, live-video running!

I cannot believe. The wait has ended!!! (Member AE, MacRumors 6502a, Joined: Feb 2010)

#145

I can't take the anticipation. (Member BE, MacRumors 603, Joined: Jan 2009)

#146

Anyone else's stomach in knots? I don't think I've been this excited/tense/nervous for a keynote in a damn long time. (Member CE, MacRumors 65816, Joined: May 2009)

Post number one provides a segment of the up-to-the-minute coverage of the brand event provided by the MacRumors bot[23]. A sense of co-presence online is created by viewing the brand

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[23] A bot is a term used to describe a computer program that performs repetitive operations such as searching websites for email addresses. The MacRumors Bot performs the repetitive task of searching the Internet for the

event together in real time. Episodic behaviours of the ritual include making predictions about likely product releases, listing product wants and counting down to the brand event going live which together help to cultivate an air of suspense. Members express feelings of excitement in various ways. For example, one member likens waiting for the brand event to Christmas Eve to portray his strong feelings of excitement about the product news to be revealed. In line with the characteristic of interactions rituals (Collins, 2004) it appears that members mutual focus of attention on the brand event going live and shared mood of excitement to find out about the latest Apple products make those vicariously attending the brand event more aware of what others are feeling and therefore more likely to feel the shared mood of excitement more intensely. This emotional entrainment is apparent by the gradual build-up of suspense before the brand event as for example members share gossip about the response of competitors such as Samsung and spot attendees in the crowd such as Apple's CEO Tim Cook who is akin to the star of the show which quickly intensifies into a peak of excitement apparent by emotive displays such as "*I can't take the anticipation*" and "*Anyone else's stomach in knots?*" as the brand event goes live. However, this emotional energy is short-lived and quickly peters out when the brand event goes live as member behaviour changes into a discussion and analysis of the product release news.

For many members the opportunity to attend a brand event such as Apple's WWDC is not possible as access is restricted to technology developers and the media. Hence, the ritual of viewing and commenting on live coverage of Apple's WWDC in MacRumors provides an opportunity for members to vicariously attend the brand event. The purpose of the WWDC event is for the Apple brand to inform its customer base about the latest product upgrades and forthcoming product releases. Hence, coverage of events such as Apple's WWDC in MacRumors may help to stimulate brand involvement by cultivating enthusiasm and desire for

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latest brand and product information about Apple. However, rather than being a computer program it seems to be made up of individuals who are part of the news team in MacRumors.

the brand's products among members of all experience levels in the community. It is interesting that some members attempt to calm the crowd and this appears to be a pre-emptive strike to defend the brand from negative commentators if for instance product related news released by Apple does not meet their expectations.

It is significant that such interaction rituals seem to bolster product and brand involvement by enabling members to vicariously experience the brand's products or remotely attend the brand's events. It is likely that such interaction rituals influence members in terms of arousing their feelings of desire for the brand's products and this may influence the individual member in different ways. For instance, the arousal of product wants may result in increased spending on the product category and the development of what is termed in this study as the member's breadth of product involvement in terms of acquisition of various styles or types of the brand's products. However, as previously explained the stimulation of product wants that cannot be fulfilled for various reasons such as the cost of luxury handbags or Apple products may result in feelings of frustration and is a potential reason for the dissolution of member involvement with the community. Hence, even though interactions rituals seems to be a source of involvement with the OBC their impact on continued member involvement with the community is not clear-cut.

Involvement with the OBC wherein members partake in the customs and rituals of the community may be characterised to varying extents as social, ego-related and/or affective in nature. The chance for the individual member to be part of a community dedicated to their special interest in the brand's products is likely to make the OBC involving. In general member involvement in customs and rituals of the OBC is inherently social in nature as they identify, display membership, and connect with others through mutual appreciation of the brand's products. For instance, due to the characteristics of luxury handbags it may not be possible because of the existence of out-groups such as family or friends to openly talk about the brand's

products. Therefore the Purse Forum may be involving because it provides an opportunity to mix socially with others and display mutual enthusiasm for luxury handbags in this case by partaking in customs and rituals of the community. It is likely that MacRumors is involving for a similar reason in that it enables members to talk with others about their special interest in technology products which may not be possible off-line due to difficulty in finding others with technical knowledge.

Member involvement that consists of partaking in customs that revolve around show-casing product collections or rituals that relate to showing-off new purchases may in some cases be characterised as ego-related in nature as it enables the individual member to express their identity and personal achievements through ownership of the brand's products. Finally, member involvement that consists of partaking in interaction rituals such as sharing and viewing new purchases or attending brand events may in some cases be characterised as affective in nature as members appear to derive pleasure from being watched unwrap products or vicariously experiencing products or brand events together.

6.4 Member Involvement over Membership of the OBC

Towards gaining insight into member involvement over the individual's membership of the OBC this study conducted a series of mini case studies in which the posting history of a sample of members from the two OBCs was analysed. In so doing the posting history of members was classified according to the online behaviour the post appeared to exemplify and the type of online community involvement namely utilitarian, social, ego-related and/or affective it seemed to denote. The findings from the analysis of the posting history of four individuals over membership of their respective OBC are next presented and analysed.

Table 6.3 outlines the posting history of Member DE who has a user title of 'MacRumors 6502'

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signifying a post contribution of approximately 250 posts. Based on the analysis of his posting content it appears that Member DE's initial involvement with MacRumors is utilitarian in nature in this case seeking information on a recurring basis in relation to questions about the functioning of his Mac product, evidenced in Table 6.3 by thread titles such as "*Free Mac Virus Protection?*" and "*MBP boot time: 20 minutes!!! Help!*". Table 6.4 outlines the posting history of Member EE who has a user title of 'MacRumors Newbie' signifying a post contribution of approximately 30 posts. Member EE is similar to Member DE in that his involvement with MacRumors is utilitarian in nature, prompted initially by purchase involvement with the iPhone and subsequently by task involvement with varying questions related to his iPhone, evidenced in Table 6.4 by thread titles seeking information in relation to different types of iPhone cases, "*Lifeproof vs. otterbox?*", and iPhone storage, "*What is GB i5?*".

Table 6.3 Segment of Member DE's Posting History over first six months membership of MacRumors

Thread Date	Thread Title	Online Behaviour	Type of Online Community Involvement
12 Apr 2012	Free Mac Virus Protection	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
16 Apr 2012	New Mac Trojan Found	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
19 Apr 2012	Sybex test engine.exe – a Trojan?	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
13 Jul 2012	iPhoto won't update (OSX Lion)	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
18 Jul 2012	MBP boot time: 20 minutes!!!! Help!	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
05 Sept 2012	Parallels 8 or VMWare 5	Providing Advice	Social
06 Sept 2012	ML 10.8.1 release battery life	Product chat	Social
06 Sept 2012	Keeping an iMac on all day, possibly longer?	Product chat	Social
17 Sept 2012	What is the best browser for Mac?	Providing Advice	Social
17 Sept 2012	What would you do if apple licensed OSX?	Product chat	Social
17 Sept 2012	Apple Releases OS X 10.8.2 with Facebook Integration and Game Center	Product chat	Social
21 Sept 2012	SSDs and Mountain Lion	Product chat	Social
24 Sept 2012	Is the 70% glare reduction on RMBP all that?	Product chat	Social
24 Sept 2012	PC vs Mac	Product chat	Social
27 Sept 2012	Parallels extortion/blackmail !!!	Providing Advice	Social
27 Sept 2012	On my second MacBook Pro Retina, soon to be number 3!	Product chat	Social
27 Sept 2012	Can I get a Mac that does what I want?	Product chat	Social
27 Sept 2012	iPhone 5 Reservation at Apple Store	Product chat	Social
27 Sept 2012	Which iPod should I get	Providing Advice	Social

Table 6.4 Overview of Member EE's Posting History submitted to MacRumors

Thread Date	Thread Title	Participant Behaviour	Type of Online Community Involvement
13 Dec 2012	Newbie question – thinking about getting the iPhone 5	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
14 Dec 2012	Lifeproof vs. otterbox?	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
14 Dec 2012	Lifeproof FR iP5 case	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
18 Dec 2012	What is GB i5?	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
19 Dec 2012	Bluetooth home audio speakers	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
20 Dec 2012	iPhone or Galaxy note 2?	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
08 Jan 2013	What new feature would get you to upgrade from an iPhone 5 to the next one?	Product chat	Social
15 Jan 2013	Lifeproof iPhone 5 Issues	Sharing Information	Social
24 Jan 2013	Incipio Waterproof Case	Product chat	Social
24 Jan 2013	What new product should Tim Cook introduce?	Product chat	Social
25 Jan 2013	Seidio Obex Waterproof iPhone 5 Case	Product chat	Social
02 Feb 2013	Incipio Dual Pro or Otterbox Commuter…iPhone 5?	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
04 Feb 2013	Griffin Survivor + Catalyst (new waterproof case)	Product chat	Social
06 Feb 2013	Next iPhone needs complete redesign	Product chat	Social
06 Feb 2013	Music streaming App	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
17 Jul 2013	iOS 7 – true multi-tasking?	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
05 Dec 2013	App integrated wireless speakers	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
06 Dec 2013	Mini with retina display?	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
07 Dec 2013	Keyboard case	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
12 Dec 2013	Snapchat?	Information Seeking	Utilitarian
31 Jan 2014	Free App for TV mirroring?	Information Seeking	Utilitarian

Member involvement that consists of engaging in product chat is classified as social because it consists of talking to others about shared interest in the product and/or brand. Member DE's involvement with MacRumors seems to transition from utilitarian to social in nature evidenced in Table 6.3 by his change in online behaviour from information seeking to product chat. This seems to be linked to Member DE's product involvement which can be understood as his general interest in talking about the Mac which triggers involvement with the OBC that is social in nature evidenced by thread titles such as "*What is the best browser for Mac?*" and "*What would you do if apple licensed OSX [Mac Operating System]?*" in Table 6.3 wherein he respectively provides

advice and engages in product chat about the Mac. Member EE's involvement with the OBC dissipates as he was "last seen[24]" in MacRumors on the 31st January 2014. This may in part be due to Member EE's product involvement which for the most is situational as his interest in the different Apple products (iPhone and Mac Mini) seems to be prompted by the purchase decision and product tasks that is computer set-up. Even though Member EE displays involvement with the OBC that appears social in nature demonstrated by engaging in product chat in the thread entitled '*What new feature would get you to upgrade from an iPhone 5 to the next one*?' in Table 6.4 this ultimately seems to be motivated by product involvement that is situational as it relates in this case to his purchase query in relation to whether to buy the current iPhone or wait for the upgrade. Member EE seems to exhibit repeat situational involvement with MacRumors in that he submits posts on an intermittent basis that mainly relate to seeking functional help with product or purchase queries but overtime this diminishes evidenced by his posting history as he stops visiting MacRumors. Member DE on the other hand exhibits enduring involvement with MacRumors as he continues to be involved with the community up to the present day. His posting behaviour may be classified for the most part as social in nature as it consists mainly of providing functional help to others and engaging in product chat.

Table 6.5 presents a segment of Member FE's posting history during her first month of membership of the Purse Forum. Her initial involvement with the OBC may be classified as social in nature as it consists of engaging in product chat and providing functional help to others. The content of product chat in threads such as, "****Lagon - Double Reveal: City + Money****" and "*Balenciaga First and Small Paraty*" in Table 6.5 consists of Member FE submitting short posts like "*beautiful*" and "*look gorgeous*" wherein she simply compliments others on photos of their handbags. It is possible that the non-technical nature of product chat in the Purse Forum is

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[24] The term "last seen" is used in MacRumors to refer to when the individual member last signed into the community and includes instances wherein they sign-in to the community but do not submit a post.

conducive to cultivating new member involvement with the OBC as talking about the brand's products does not require functional product knowledge. The ease with which newcomers can partake in the customs and rituals of the Purse Forum may also help to transition members from lurking to participating status during their initial stage of membership. Since joining the Purse Forum in October 2012 Member FE continues to be involved with the OBC and has a post contribution of 626 posts; however the frequency of her posting activity has petered out over the last two years of membership from weekly to monthly post submissions.

Member FE's involvement with the OBC has also changed over that period in that a greater extent of her involvement may be classified as utilitarian in nature in terms of seeking functional help with purchase related queries evidenced by the following threads she recently started: "*what new colors will be available in vernis line for Alma BB this upcoming season?*" and "*Alma BB vs Speedy B?*". Even though she continues to exhibit involvement with the OBC that is social in nature its composition has changed from engaging in product chat to conducting purchase reveals and showing-off her handbags evidenced by her recent post submission to the following threads: "*Some new things from Paris*" and "*Pics of your Louis Vuitton in Action*". Hence, despite Member FE's enduring involvement with the OBC it seems to have transitioned over her membership, prompted to a greater degree by self-related benefits derived from involvement with the community, demonstrated by her posting behaviour in terms of either seeking functional help with purchase queries or showing-off new handbag purchases.

Table 6.5 Segment of Member FE's Posting History over first month membership of the Purse Forum

Thread Date	Thread Title	Sub-Forum	Online Behaviour	Type of Online Community Involvement
05 Oct 2012	***Lagon - Double Reveal: City + Money***	Balenciaga	Product chat	Social
05 Oct 2012	Photos wearing your Bbags ***COMMENTS***	Balenciaga	Product chat	Social
05 Oct 2012	What is the next LV bag you plan to buy...	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
05 Oct 2012	Do you guys get compliment on carrying a louis vuitton?	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
05 Oct 2012	Handbag and Wallet LoVe Combo	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
05 Oct 2012	Balenciaga First and Small Paraty	Chloé	Product chat	Social
06 Oct 2012	S/S 2013 - Bal Intel	Balenciaga	Seeking product information	Utilitarian
06 Oct 2012	My first balenciaga!	Balenciaga	Product chat	Social
11 Oct 2012	= Please help me decide on first bag (I'm in dilemma!!!): newbie for balenciaga =	Balenciaga	Seeking purchase advice	Utilitarian
17 Oct 2012	Review of my first bag.	Balenciaga	Share new handbag purchase	Social
17 Oct 2012	Has this ever happened to anyone else here?? Help!	Balenciaga	Provide advice	Social
18 Oct 2012	Need help deciding which color:) coq or lagon?	Balenciaga	Provide advice	Social
18 Oct 2012	Photos wearing your Balenciaga bags	Balenciaga	Share photos of handbag	Social
18 Oct 2012	Pls help ,The second bag should be RH or G12?	Balenciaga	Seeking purchase advice	Utilitarian
20 Oct 2012	S/S 2013 - Bal Intel	Balenciaga	Seeking product information	Utilitarian
20 Oct 2012	Reveal! My first red bag and my first G12!	Balenciaga	Product chat	Social
24 Oct 2012	Chloe girls , should I Change the marcie bag to paraty again?	Chloé	Seeking purchase advice	Utilitarian
25 Oct 2012	My mod pic of a new paraty :)	Chloé	Share photos of new handbag	Social
28 Oct 2012	What different between MJ stam and mini stam?	Marc Jacobs	Seeking product information	Utilitarian

In the next mini case study Member GE exhibits enduring involvement with the Purse Forum in that she has been a member of the community for over eight years and has a post contribution of 30,356 posts. A segment of Member GE's posting history during her initial six months of membership in 2009 and four years into her membership in 2013 are presented in Table 6.6 and Table 6.7 respectively. Her initial involvement with the OBC may be classified as mainly social in nature as it consists of partaking in product chat and viewing live purchase reveals, wherein she appears to connect with others through mutual appreciation of the brand's products, evidenced by comments such as "*Wow! Congrats* respective threads "*Reveal my first piece of LV (a small one)*" and "*REVEAL! My most recent purchases!*" in Table 6.6.

Member GE's involvement is also characterised as social as it also consists of providing functional help to others with their product involvement. However, she seems to base advice on personal experiences with the product, for example in the thread entitled, "*Why did Louis Vuitton stop treating the vachetta leather?*" in Table 6.6 she shares a photo and provides guidance based on knowledge derived from cleaning her Louis Vuitton handbag: "*Here's my almost three years old Beverly [style of Louis Vuitton handbag], the handles and corners were dirty and I used baby-wipes and Huggies to clean them. They are clean now*". In some instances Member GE's involvement may be classified as affective in nature as she seems to derive pleasure from vicariously experiencing the brand's products evidenced by expressions of excitement during live purchase reveals with comments such as "[25] *Congrats!!*" and "*This is exciting* [26]"

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[25] This emoticon denotes the term 'nuts' and is used in the Purse Forum to express feelings of excitement on the build up to purchase reveals.

[26] This emoticon denotes the activity of eating popcorn and again is used in the Purse Forum to express feelings of excitement on the build up to purchase reveals.

in the respective threads "*My ULTIMATE…flown from across the seas*" and "*Quick 4 item*

reveal" in Table 6.6.

Table 6.6 Segment of Member GE's posting history over initial six months membership of the Purse Forum

Thread Date	Thread Title	Sub-Forum	Online Behaviour	Type of Online Community Involvement
27 Jun 2009	Showcase your LV collection here	Louis Vuitton	Show-off products	Social
01 Jul 2009	Look what I just got today!!!!	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
03 Jul 2009	Reveal my first piece of LV (a small one)	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
04 Jul 2009	Cheapest country to buy LV	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
08 Jul 2009	*Reveal* I finally got my dream shoulder bag	Louis Vuitton	View live purchase reveal	Social + Affective
19 Jul 2009	Quick 4 item reveal	Louis Vuitton	View live purchase reveal	Social + Affective
24 Jul 2009	Sharing MoN MoNoGram JOOOOOY!!!	Louis Vuitton	View live purchase reveal	Social + Affective
01 Aug 2009	My Mon Monogram is here!	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
02 Aug 2009	Need help/advice on storage of my LV Manhattan GM	Louis Vuitton	Provide functional help	Social
04 Aug 2009	My ULTIMATE…flown from across the seas	Louis Vuitton	View live purchase reveal	Social + Affective
07 Aug 2009	Got my birthday present early!! Thank-God-its-Friday-reveal…	Louis Vuitton	View live purchase reveal	Social + Affective
10 Aug 2009	What LV bag should I wish for my 18th birthday?	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
14 Aug 2009	Shiny Happy Alma!	Louis Vuitton	View live purchase reveal	Social + Affective
22 Aug 2009	awhitney's Vegas birthday reveal""	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
06 Sept 2009	First LV, Alexandra wallet	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
14 Sept 2009	Today I carried (fill in the blank with your LV)	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
20 Sept 2009	Pictures of my new Speedy Eclipse	Louis Vuitton	View live purchase reveal	Social + Affective
18 Oct 2009	REVEAL! My most recent purchases!	Louis Vuitton	View live purchase reveal	Social + Affective
28 Oct 2009	No longer a Mono virgin! My first Vernis piece!	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social
01 Nov 2009	Mirage Noir Speedy or Mon Monogram Speedy????	Louis Vuitton	Provide functional help	Social
05 Nov 2009	The MULTIPLES Club!	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social

15 Nov 2009	Why did Louis Vuitton stop treating the vachetta leather?	Louis Vuitton	Provide functional help	Social
21 Nov 2009	So excited my first LV…pocket agenda	Louis Vuitton	Product chat	Social

During her journey of involvement with the Purse Forum Member GE takes on two roles within the community namely moderator and authenticator. The latter role entails providing authentication advice on the legitimacy of handbags for sale through third party websites such as eBay. Table 6.7 shows that despite Member GE's involvement with the OBC continuing to be classified as social in nature it seems to have evolved as she becomes more experienced with the community and focuses to a much greater extent on assisting others with their product involvement. This is demonstrated in Table 6.7 by threads such as "*What do you use to moisturize your bags and repel stains?*" wherein Member GE provides functional help with cleaning a lambskin Chanel handbag and threads such as "*Proenza Schouler Shopping Finds & Intels*" wherein Member GE shares product information about the latest styles and prices of new season Proenza Sshouler handbags.

It appears that Member GE's level of expertise has developed and this is inferred by her taking on an authenticator role in the community as it requires functional product knowledge to assess if different brands of designer handbags are real or fake based on photos of their material, stitching and hardware. Hence, the nature of her involvement seems to have evolved over her membership of the OBC evidenced by the change in posting behaviour from connecting with others through shared enthusiasm for Louis Vuitton handbags and deriving pleasure from vicariously experiencing such handbags to taking on responsibility in the community by the acceptance of official roles wherein she provides functional help on a regular basis with respect to different designer brands and by offering guidance to others on using the OBC wherein she directs participants to specific forums linked to their particular product or purchase queries.

Table 6.7 Segment of Member GE's posting history submitted during fourth year of membership of the Purse Forum in 2013

Thread Date	Thread Title	Sub-Forum	Online Behaviour	Type of Online Community Involvement
08 Jan 2013	Black phamtom croc owners? Need advice…	Célina	Provide functional help	Social
24 Jan 2013	Your favourite obscure brands	Handbags & Purses	Share product information	Social
29 Jan 2013	Does this look real to you?	Authenticate this…	Re-direct poster to Balenciaga sub-forum	Social
02 Feb 2013	What do you use to moisturize your bags and repel stains?	Handbag Care & Maintenance	Provide functional help	Social
09 Feb 2013	Proenza schooler cream/nude/light pink	Proenza Schouler	Provide functional help	Social
17 Feb 2013	Can't sleep so sick over my latest LV purchase	Louis Vuitton	Provide social support	Social
24 Feb 2013	Is this true about DE and DA (types of leather)?	Louis Vuitton	Provide functional help	Social
02 Mar 2013	Trevi GM	Louis Vuitton	Re-direct poster to thread in Louis Vuitton sub-forum	Social
09 Mar 2013	Anyone familiar with Picard brand?	Handbags & Purses	Share product information	Social
17 Mar 2013	Please help identify this handbag	Handbags & Purses	Provide functional help	Social
29 Mar 2013	Help please? Authenticate this LV Damier Ebene Speedy 30	Authenticate this…	Re-direct poster to Louis Vuitton sub-forum	Social
15 Apr 2013	Authenticate this Proenza Schouler	Proenza Schouler	Provide functional help	Social
20 Apr 2013	Could someone please authenticate this bag COACH	Authenticate this…	Re-direct poster to Coach sub-forum	Social
27 Apr 2013	New to PS	Proenza Schouler	Product chat	Social
06 May 2013	Please help identify this handbag!	Handbags & Purses	Provide functional help	Social
21 May 2013	Fall/Winter 2013 Colors!	Proenza Schouler	Share product information	Social
29 May 2013	Proenza Schouler Shopping Finds & Intels	Proenza Schouler	Share product information	Social
09 Jun 2013	Authenticate this PROENZA SCHOULER	Proenza Schouler	Provide authentication advice	Social
14 Jun 2013	Proenza Schouler PS1 Pouch reference thread	Proenza Schouler	Share product information	Social
20 Jun 2013	Show us pics of LV fronts	Louis Vuitton	Initiate product chat	Social
29 Jun 2013	Need help ID'ing this PS1 color	Proenza Schouler	Provide functional help	Social

The findings arising from analysis of the posting history of four members suggest the existence of different temporal forms of online community involvement namely situational involvement, repeat situational involvement and enduring involvement. Based on findings arising from the observation of member behaviours in the two OBCs and tracking the posting history of four individual members it appears that member involvement may be categorised as self-oriented or community-oriented in nature. Member involvement that is self-oriented may be understood as the individual member's pursuit of self-related benefits such as finding out the latest product news or receiving validation in relation to personal issues derived from information and social support provided by the online community. Member involvement that is community-oriented, on the other hand, may be understood as the individual member's attempt to provide other-related benefits such as offering support to others or enforcing the rules of the online community.

6.5 Conclusion

The findings facilitate insight into aspects of consumer involvement that are more deep-seated specifically how members in the two OBCs experience the activation of their product and/or brand involvement. This is demonstrated by the arousal of members during particular stimulus situations in the community such as Member FC's feelings of excitement to view the new Hermès handbag during a purchase reveal in the Purse Forum or Member CE's feelings of anticipation to find out about the latest Apple products during the countdown to the WWDC brand event in MacRumors. Hence, product and/or brand related content provided through the OBC has the potential to stimulate product and/or brand involvement in others in terms of their interest in viewing product and/or brand related information. The findings also add to knowledge as there seems to be limited research that looks specifically at the manifestation of product and/or brand involvement in social settings. For instance, the findings suggest that the arousal of product and/or brand involvement in terms of excitement to view new handbags being revealed or anticipation to find out the latest Apple news is magnified due to the presence of, and interactions

between, members who exhibit similar enthusiasm for the product and/or brand during certain interaction rituals. The findings also show that displays of product and/or brand involvement are central to behaviours exemplified by members involved within the two OBCs. For instance, narratives shared by members in the two OBCs relate to their experiences with the product and/or brand in terms of acquiring rare products or passing on lessons learned from brand involvement. Similarly, the customs and rituals of the two OBCs seem to revolve around the product and/or brand in terms of showing-off product collections or viewing brand events.

Members who partake in the customs and rituals of the OBC in some cases exhibit mutual product and/or brand involvement such as similar interest in collecting Apple computers or shared appreciation for Valentino handbags. This also takes place to a certain extent when members share and respond to product and/or brand narratives in that they may connect through shared interest in customising Mac computers or similar experiences of checking handbag quality post-purchase. The findings suggest that mutual product and/or brand involvement among members facilitates the formation of social ties with the community. The opportunity to vicariously experience the brand is facilitated by the online setting in that central to participation in OBCs is members share product related content that is tangible in nature such as detailed narratives that relive experiences of purchasing handbags, photo uploads that show handbags being unwrapped or live coverage of brand events such as Apple's WWDC. It is proposed that the recording and narrating of product and brand experiences in OBCs makes it possible for consumers to vicariously experience the brand in a way that is difficult to replicate in off-line contexts. It is interesting that vicariously experiencing the brand has the potential overtime to detract from continued involvement with the OBC as the individual member may become frustrated as a result of viewing such product and/or brand content due to the creation of product wants that cannot be fulfilled but this merits further investigation.

Similar to conclusions drawn in Chapter Five the findings point to the potential of involvement with the OBC to shape the individual member's perceptions and experiences of product and/or brand involvement. For instance, both Member YA and Member DB seem to reflect more deeply on their product and/or brand involvement after taking on board lessons learned by the product enthusiast with respect to the meaning of the term Apple fanboy and the practice of checking handbag quality post-purchase respectively. The findings in relation to the particular behaviours demonstrated by members involved with the two OBCs help to provide insight into the characteristics of online community involvement. Member involvement with the OBC wherein they share product and/or brand narratives with others may be characterised as ego-related or social in nature. This type of member involvement may be ego-related in nature as it entails the individual member sharing narratives that detail their personal interactions with the product and/or brand which may be self-enhancing as they relate to personal successes such as acquiring rare handbags or personal achievements like restoring vintage computers. However, this type of member involvement may also be social in nature as sharing product and/or brand narratives may be prompted by the individual member's general interest in talking about the product and/or brand or providing unsolicited product related advice to others. Member involvement with the OBC that consists of commenting on product and/or brand narratives is characterised as social in nature as in many instances it consists of encouraging others with their product and/or brand involvement through the provision of positive feedback.

Member involvement with the OBC wherein they partake in the customs and rituals of the community may be characterised to varying extents as social, ego-related and/or affective in nature. This type of member involvement may be described as social in nature as through the enactment of the customs and rituals of the OBC members identify, display membership and connect with others through mutual appreciation of the brand's products. In some cases such member involvement is characterised as ego-related in nature as certain customs and rituals entail

show-casing product collections or showing-off new purchases which enables the individual member to express their identity and personal achievements through ownership of the brand's products. Finally, this type of member involvement may also be characterised as affective in nature as members appear to derive pleasure from rituals that facilitate vicariously experiencing products or brand events together.

By observing member behaviour in the two OBCs and tracking the posting history of four individuals over membership of their respective community it was possible to identify the different temporary forms that online community involvement may take namely situational involvement (demonstrated by Member A in Chapter Five), repeat situational involvement (demonstrated by Member EE) and enduring involvement (demonstrated by Member DE). Such findings help to provide insight into how member involvement with the OBC initiates, develops and diminishes over time. The findings also show how the individual member may evolve over their involvement with the OBC, namely in the case of Member GE who seems to become more community-oriented during her journey of involvement with the Purse Forum, evidenced by her posting behaviour in terms of taking on greater responsibility in the community by the acceptance of moderator and authenticator roles.

Member involvement that is self-oriented in nature appears to correspond with the utilitarian or ego-related types of member involvement as they are concerned with self-related benefits, such as, learning from product and/or brand information provided by the community or attempting to gain praise and recognition from the community. Member involvement that is community-oriented on the other hand appears to correspond with the social and affective types of member involvement as they are directed at others and exemplified by behaviours, such as, helping others by passing on product and/or brand knowledge or deriving pleasure from the collective effervesce of vicariously experiencing new products with others.

CHAPTER SEVEN – DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

7.1 Introduction

The study explored member involvement with OBCs a topic that does not yet appear to be investigated in the marketing field. Two main research questions direct this study: (1) What is involving about OBCs for members? (2) How are members involved with OBCs? Based on the analysis of the observation data this chapter presents two conceptual models namely a typology of online community involvement and a schematic of the journey of member involvement with the OBC. The typology of online community involvement helps to provide insight into the characteristics of member involvement by identifying four components namely utilitarian involvement, social involvement, ego involvement and affective involvement that constitute online community involvement. The journey of member involvement facilitates understanding into the initiation and development of online community involvement by outlining three different temporal forms of member involvement with the OBC that is situational involvement, repeat situational involvement and enduring involvement. The conceptual models provide insights into the characteristics and development of member involvement and in so doing answer the research questions that direct this study. The chapter discusses the findings with the literature to make clear how this study adds to existing knowledge with regards to online consumer behaviour and the nature of consumer involvement in online communities.

7.2 Nature and Role of Product and/or Brand Involvement in OBC Settings

The use of an observation method to study member involvement within OBC settings helps to facilitate insight into how members display and experience their product and/or brand involvement, a theme that is under-researched in the literature. The findings support existing research in so far as showing in what ways members who are involved with the OBC spend time thinking about and engaging with the product and/or brand (e.g. Bloch, Commuri and Arnold, 2009; Thorne and Bruner, 2006; Richins and Bloch, 1986). However, the findings also add to

the literature by providing insight into aspects of product and/or brand involvement that limited research exists, specifically how members experience their product and/or brand involvement. For instance, the findings suggest that the individual member's experience of being involved with the product and/or brand is not always positive in nature and may consist of negative feelings as seen in the case of Member CA's dissatisfaction with the Chanel brand due to the perceived decrease in product quality or negative experiences as seen in the case of Member J's portrayal of cognitive dissonance following purchase of an expensive Mulberry handbag (see pages 140 and 128 of Chapter Five respectively). This adds to knowledge in that much of the literature focuses on functional benefits in terms of seeking information to resolve product related problems as a driver of participation in online communities (e.g. Yen, Hsu and Huang, 2011; Dholakia *et al.*, 2009). This study particularly highlights the role of social benefits, which entail seeking social support with deep-seated or more psychological aspects of product and/or brand involvement as motivations for signing-up to and participating in OBCs.

The findings also add to knowledge as there seems to be limited research that investigates the manifestation of product and/or brand involvement in social settings. The findings suggest that the arousal of product and/or brand involvement is intensified by the presence of, and interactions between, others who exhibit similar enthusiasm for the product and/or brand. This is demonstrated in Chapter Six, through the process of emotional entrainment that occurs during certain interaction rituals, specifically the build-up of excitement to view Member EC's purchase reveal (see pages 195 to 199) and the increase of anticipation to find out the latest brand news from Apple's 2013 WWDC (see pages 209 to 212). Consumer usage of social media to communicate with products and brands is increasing (Keane, 2017). Hence, the findings of this study are particularly important as they draw attention to the presence of others in online settings such as OBCs who exhibit similar enthusiasm for the product and/or brand and their potential influence on the arousal of product and/or brand involvement.

The findings support existing research to the extent of corroborating the influential role of product and/or brand involvement in motivating members to sign-up to and participate in OBCs (e.g. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008; Shang, Chen and Liao, 2006). This is because factors related to product and/or brand involvement are to varying extents either an underlying driver or central component of the behaviours exemplified by members involved within the two OBCs. This is demonstrated by the findings that show situational involvement with the product, in the case of Member A due to the purchase decision, is the apparent reason for seeking functional help from MacRumors (see page 116-117 of Chapter Five). This is also exemplified by the findings that reveal displays of product and/or brand involvement are central to partaking in the customs and rituals of the OBC. This is evidenced in the case of Member FB who expresses strong preference for the Apple brand when partaking in the MacRumors custom of introducing himself to the community (see page 176 of Chapter Six).

7.3   Typology of Online Community Involvement

There has been a sizable amount of research investigating consumer behaviour in online settings (e.g. Mohlmann, 2015; Seraj, 2012; Yen, Hsu and Huang, 2011; Schau, Muñiz and Arnould, 2009); however, this study is different to previous research in that it explores consumer behaviour within OBCs through the lens of involvement. Table 7.1 identifies six behaviours exemplified by members involved within the two OBCs under observation which are next discussed. The findings show that members seek and provide functional help with respect to product and purchase queries. This is demonstrated in the cases of Member B and Member F who in turn seek and provide advice in relation to the purchase of a Hermès handbag (see page 117 and pages 122-123 of Chapter Five respectively). The findings reveal that members seek and provide social support in relation to product and/or brand related issues. This is evidenced in the cases of Member R and Member S who in turn seek and provide social support in relation to feelings of desire for Hermès handbags they cannot acquire (see page 135-136 and page 136

of Chapter Five respectively). The findings show that members share narratives about different aspects of their product and/or brand involvement. This is demonstrated in the case of Member PA who shares a narrative that details the customisation of his Mac computer (see pages 159-160 of Chapter Six). Finally, the findings reveal that members partake in the customs and rituals of the community which revolve around their product and/or brand involvement. This is evidenced in the case of Member PB who partakes in the MacRumors custom of sharing details of his Apple product collection (see pages 184-185 of Chapter Six).

Table 7.1 Behaviour of Members Involved within the two OBCs

Member Behaviour
Seeking functional help with product or purchase queries
Seeking social support with product and/or brand issues
Providing functional help with product or purchase queries
Providing social support with product and/or brand issues
Sharing product and/or brand narratives
Partaking in the customs and rituals of the community

Building on the literature online community involvement is defined as the perceived personal relevance of the OBC to the individual member. It is argued that members perceive OBCs as personally relevant or involving for various reasons and, as explained in Section 3.6 of Chapter Three, this is inferred by existing research that identifies a range of motives, needs and values that prompt participation in OBCs (e.g. Teichmann *et al.*, 2015; Tsai and Bagozzi, 2014; Seraj, 2012). This research takes the viewpoint that perceived challenges of studying involvement due to its psychological nature are mitigated when studying the concept in online contexts such as OBCs as it is possible to observe the display and manifestation of member involvement through the posting behaviour of members. This is significant as it means the six behaviours exemplified by members involved within the two OBCs, presented in Table 7.1, provide the basis for understanding the characteristics of online community involvement. This sets the foundation for

the development of the typology of online community involvement presented in Figure 7.1 and explained as follows:

(1) Utilitarian involvement is characterised as member involvement with the OBC that is practical in nature such as seeking functional help or social support from the community. This is evidenced in the case of Member A when seeking functional help with the purchase decision (see page 117 of Chapter Five).

(2) Social involvement is characterised as member involvement with the OBC that is social in nature such as partaking in the customs of the community and providing functional help or social support to others. This is demonstrated in the case of Member KB when she identifies with the Purse Forum by showing her appreciation for designer handbags (see page 179 of Chapter Six) and in the case of Member E by passing on his knowledge about the pros and cons of different Mac products when providing functional help with the purchase decision (see page 122 of Chapter Five).

(3) Ego involvement is characterised as member involvement with the OBC that is ego-related in nature such as the individual member presenting their identity or personal achievements to others. This may occur throughout the different member behaviours identified in Table 7.1. For instance, ego-involvement is inferred in the case of Member B when she self-presents as an owner of large Hermès collection when seeking functional help with the purchase decision (see page 117 of Chapter Five) and in the case of Member LA when she talks about her personal success acquiring a rare Chanel handbag when sharing a product narrative (see page 156 of Chapter Six).

(4) Affective involvement is characterised as member involvement with the OBC that is hedonic in nature and may be derived from the different behaviours identified in Table 7.1, for instance, enjoyment gained from partaking in the rituals of the community. This is evidenced in the case of Member NC when sharing her new handbag purchase (see page 201 of Chapter Six) and in the cases of Member ZC and

Member BD when vicariously experiencing new handbags with others (see pages 204-206 of Chapter Six).

Figure 7.1 Typology of Online Community Involvement
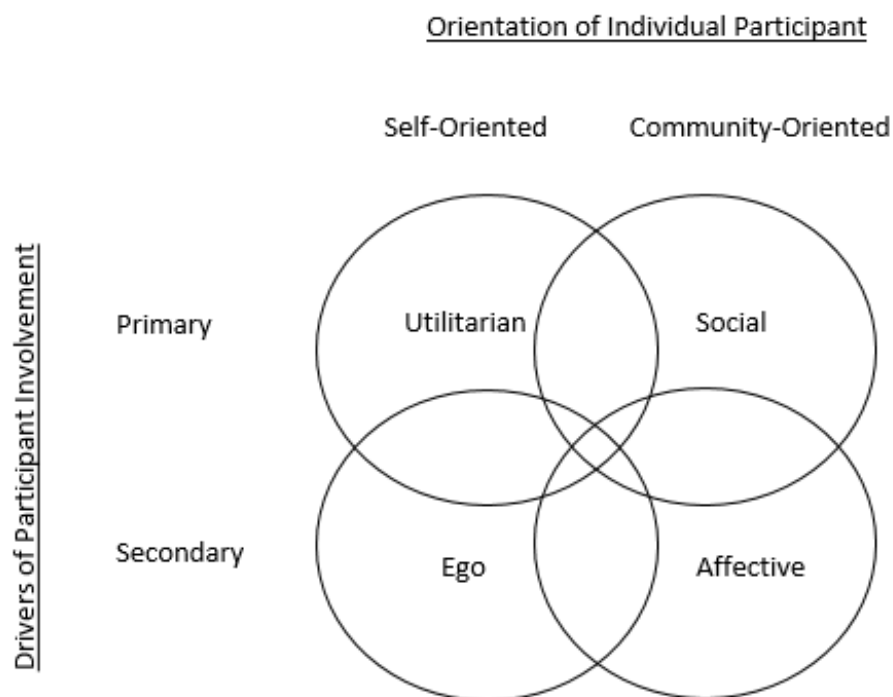
Since the object of involvement, namely the OBC, consists of a social collective dedicated to a special interest topic, that is a branded product category, the orientation of the individual member's involvement with the OBC, shown in Figure 7.1, may be self-oriented that is concerned with self-related benefits or community-oriented that is directed at others. Member involvement that is self-oriented was demonstrated in the case of Member A inferred by his posting behaviour in that he signed-up to MacRumors only to seek functional help with a purchase query and did not post again to the community. Member involvement that is community-oriented was inferred by the posting history of Member H, which was made up of over 15,000 posts, mainly consisting of providing functional help with Mac computer queries (see page 124 of Chapter Five). The notion that consumer involvement in terms of the personal relevance of a stimulus object may be self-oriented or other-oriented is not something that

appears to have been considered in the literature. This is significant especially as greater research attention is dedicated to investigating consumer involvement in online settings which in many instances may be influenced by the social aspect of the online context. The functional and ego-related types of involvement in Figure 7.1 are categorised as self-oriented as the individual member gains self-related benefits through involvement with the OBC. This is demonstrated in the cases of Member A and Member B who reap product information from functional help provided by others (see pages 121 to 123 of Chapter Five) and in the cases of Member KA and Member LA who gain an opportunity to impress others by self-presenting through product involvement specifically personal success in restoring or acquiring products (see page 154 and page 156 of Chapter Six respectively). The social and affective types of involvement in Figure 7.1 are categorised as community-oriented as the individual member's involvement with the OBC is directed at others. This is evidenced in the case of Member AB who attempts to help others by passing on lessons learned from her product involvement specifically questioning the practice of checking handbag quality post-purchase (see pages 170-171 of Chapter Five) and during instances wherein members derive pleasure from jointly experiencing new products or brand events with others (see pages 195-199 and pages 209-212 of Chapter Six respectively).

Primary and secondary drivers in Figure 7.1 refer to sources that prompt the individual member's involvement with the OBC. Primary drivers refer to the practical and social benefits of being a member of an online community dedicated to a branded product category. The utilitarian and social types of involvement in Figure 7.1 are categorised as primary drivers of online community involvement. Utilitarian involvement essentially concerns the member's interest in the OBC due to functional help or social support with product and/or brand related issues and social involvement effectively relates to the member's interest in being a member of an OBC dedicated to the brand's products; factors that based on the observation data act as initial motives for member involvement with the OBC. This is demonstrated in the case of Member KB who

exhibits interest in being part of community that share her passion for designer handbags on signing up to the Purse Forum (see page 179 of Chapter Six).

Secondary drivers refer to ancillary benefits derived from involvement with the OBC that it is proposed only become apparent to the individual member as a result of their experience of participating in the community. Hence, the ego-related and affective types of involvement in Figure 7.1 are categorised as secondary drivers of online community involvement. Ego involvement essentially concerns the member's interest in expressing their identity in the OBC which in many cases is integrated into other types of involvement. For instance, member involvement that consists of partaking in the customs of the community may be prompted on a primary level by social benefits in terms of displaying membership of the community through for example product ownership but on a secondary level may also be prompted by self-expressive benefits in terms of the opportunity to impress others through ownership of distinct products. This is demonstrated in the case of Member PB who seems to not only identify with community but also try to impress others when sharing details of his Apple product collection on signing up to MacRumors (see pages 184-185 of Chapter Six). Affective involvement concerns the member's interest in deriving pleasure from participating in the OBC and may possibly be gained from various factors such as enjoyment derived from helping others with product related or entertainment gained from jointly experiencing product or brand events with others (see posts of members viewing purchase reveal on pages 201 to 207 Chapter Six). It is proposed that the potential of hedonic benefits to be gained from involvement with the OBC only becomes apparent to the individual member after experience of participating in the community.

The overlapping circles in Figure 7.1 indicate that the four different types of online community involvement may to varying extents occur simultaneously. This is because the individual member may be prompted by a combination of utilitarian, social, ego and affective types of

involvement during the manifestation of their online community involvement. This is demonstrated most frequently in cases where members present their credentials when providing functional help possibly to self-verify as informed sources and in so doing exhibit both ego-related and social types of online community involvement. The following sub-sections discuss the four different types of online community involvement with the literature.

7.3.1 Utilitarian Involvement

Utilitarian involvement in this study relates to the individual member's perceived relevance of the OBC due to utilitarian value such as receiving functional help or social support with product and/or brand related issues. It is noted that social benefits derived from receiving social support may also be characterised as the social type of online community involvement. It is possible to make a connection between the literature and the utilitarian type of involvement; specifically, the consumer involvement segment that is identified as functional involvement (Kapferer and Laurent, 1985) or the component of involvement that is conceptualised as personal interest (Bloch, 1986) as both are characterised by the individual consumer's personal interest in product related information and therefore similar to member involvement that is prompted by information needs due to product related issues. The identification of a utilitarian type of involvement corroborates existing research which expounds the potential of online communities as platforms for information-exchange and problem-solving (e.g. Wirtz *et al.*, 2013; Yen, Hsu and Huang, 2011; Dholakia *et al.*, 2009).

The findings also support existing research in that members who are newcomers to the online community are believed in many instances to be driven by a specific task-objective such as information seeking (Mathwick, Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2008). However, the findings add to the literature in two ways. Firstly, the findings reveal that members in OBC may seek social support with product and/or brand involvement that is more deep-seated in nature such as seeking to

alleviate feelings of guilt following product purchase. The practice of seeking social support in online communities is something that has been studied in non-consumption related contexts, such as Rubenstein's (2015) study of the exchange of social support in an online breast cancer community. However, there has been less research attention dedicated to investigating member behaviour that consists of seeking social support with respect to consumption related issues in online communities. Secondly, the findings provide further insight into participation in OBCs that consists of one-off posts only as in many cases it is prompted by the newcomer's temporary concern with the OBC due to information needs arising from product breakdown or product purchase.

7.3.2   Social Involvement

Social involvement in this study refers to the individual member's perceived relevance of the OBC due to social value that is the psychological sense of being part of a community dedicated to the brand's products. The identification of a social type of involvement supports the entreaty by researchers such as Kyle *et al.* (2007) and Kyle and Chick (2004) in the leisure field who propose social bonding in this case involvement that is driven by social ties with others during leisure experiences should be included as a unique component of leisure involvement. The findings reveal that member involvement that consists of partaking in the customs and rituals of the OBC is inherently social in nature as they identify, display membership and connect with others. It is possible to make a connection between such member involvement which essentially entails self-categorising with the community through shared product and/or brand involvement and the concept of social identity in the literature which describes the consumer's awareness of membership of the online community (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn, 1995) and is conceptualised as a driver of participation in online communities (Woisetschläger, Hartleb and Blut, 2008; Algesheimer, Dholakia and Hermann, 2005). The social type of involvement is significant as it is proposed the shared connection that members feel towards one another fosters

pro-social behaviours such as providing functional help or offering social support to others which are important to the existence of the community.

7.3.3 Ego Involvement

Ego involvement was first recognised in the social psychology literature and defined therein as the extent a social issue is important to the individual's self-concept (Sherif and Cantril, 1947). In applying the concept of involvement to study consumer behaviour the meaning of the term was extended, to denote different things such as personal interest (e.g. Kassarjian, 1981) or perceived relevance (Zaichkowsky, 1985), and applied to study various stimulus objects such as product involvement (e.g. Mittal and Lee, 1989) and task involvement (e.g. Tyebjee, 1979). Subsequently, the term involvement was conceptualised in a more rounded way in the consumer behaviour literature in that the psychological tie between the individual and the stimulus object was thought to be evoked by different cognitive elements such as self-concept, values, motives and/or needs. Subsequently, the term ego involvement was used to a much lesser extent in the consumer behaviour literature and instead the ego-related aspect of involvement was more generally investigated via the sign value component of involvement which is synonymous with self-expression (e.g. Laurent and Kapferer, 1985; McQuarrie and Munson, 1987; Kapferer and Laurent, 1993; Guthrie and Kim, 2009). Therefore, the identification of an ego type of involvement is not surprising, especially in online contexts such as OBCs as the literature emphasises the potential of such domains for self-expression (Belk, 2013; Schau and Gilly, 2002).

Ego involvement in this study refers to the individual member's perceived relevance of the OBC due to self-expressive value that is the opportunity for self-enhancement or self-verification through participation. Findings that suggest member involvement that consists of providing functional help in some cases may be characterised as ego-related in nature corroborates existing

literature in so far as self-related benefits in the form of self-enhancement may be a motive for sharing knowledge with others in online communities (e.g. Teichmann *et al.*, 2015). It is proposed that some self-presenting behaviours such as newcomers who establish their status as product owners when seeking functional help or advisors who set out their credentials when providing functional help may be attempts at self-verification. Self-verification is an aspect of self-expression that does not appear to have been identified in research to date. It is likely that this form of ego involvement transpires because members are anonymous in OBC settings and in some cases when participating in such settings it is necessary for the individual member to communicate their identity. However, it is also possible that this form of ego involvement may be roused by perceived social risks of participating in an online setting such as an OBC and therefore can be understood as an ego-defence mechanism (Hartmann, 1964).

7.3.4 Affective Involvement

Park and Young's (1986) study of advertising involvement put forward the concept of affective involvement but in this case it refers to the emotional appeal of an advertisement to express the consumer's actual or ideal self-image and therefore seems more related to ego involvement. Affective involvement in this study refers to the individual member's perceived relevance of the OBC due to hedonic value that is pleasure or affect derived from participating in the OBC. The identification of the affective type of involvement supports existing research such as Laurent and Kapferer (1985) in that they conceptualise hedonic value as a source of involvement and Zaichkowsky (1994) as she includes affective items in her revised involvement scale. The findings support existing literature in that members appear to gain fun and enjoyment from vicariously experiencing products or brand events together (e.g. Seraj, 2012; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010; Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). The findings add to knowledge by providing evidence of the manifestation of hedonic pleasure in the two OBCs, evidenced by the emotional energy expressed by members during interaction rituals, in terms of the slow build-

up of interest to a crescendo of excitement to vicariously experience new products or brand events in the Purse Forum and MacRumors respectively. The findings also contribute towards understanding factors that are a source of enjoyment in OBC settings, in that member involvement that consists of sharing new purchases in many cases is affective in nature, as members appear to derive pleasure from being watched by others unwrap their new products.

7.3.5 Contrasting OBC Profiles

The findings reveal differences in the display and manifestation of member involvement between MacRumors and the Purse Forum. Such differences between the two OBCs appear to transpire as a result of five factors that include: characteristics of the individual member, nature of product involvement, purpose of the OBC, infrastructure of the site and ethos of the community. These factors are classified into two categories: (1) individual and product factors, (2) site specific factors, and are next explained.

7.3.5.1 Individual and Product Factors

Similar to the literature (e.g. Houston and Rothschild, 1978) the findings suggest that the individual member's experience in this case with various stimuli objects that exist in the OBC namely the community group, the product category and the brand shape the display and manifestation of their involvement. For example, the findings suggest that the member's depth of product involvement that is knowledge of the brand's products and product class shapes how they provide functional help in the two OBCs demonstrated in the instance of basic versus advanced expertise exhibited in turn by Member D and Member F when providing purchase advice (see pages 122 to 123 of Chapter Five). Since MacRumors and the Purse Forum are dedicated to distinct product categories, that is technology products and fashion products respectively, differences in the expression of online community involvement due to the nature of product involvement supports existing research to the extent that involvement is a product-

category specific phenomenon (e.g. O'Cass, 2004; Warrington and Shim, 2000; Traylor, 1981). The findings reveal for instance that members emphasize different aspects of the product that they appear to perceive as involving in the two OBCs; specifically, in the Purse Forum members emphasize the symbolic value of their handbags in terms of product exclusivity and product cost and this seems to manifest itself in the sharing of product content that details the successful acquisition of rare handbags (see Member LA's product narrative on page 156) or the uploading of photos that show-off expensive handbags (see Member NC's product description and purchase reveal on pages 201 to 206 of Chapter Six), whereas in MacRumors members stress the utilitarian value of their computers in terms of product performance and this seems to manifest itself in the sharing of product content about the enhancement of product performance (see Member PA's build diary on pages 159-160 of Chapter Six) or the listing of product collections that detail product features (see Member PB's post on pages 184-185 of Chapter Six).

7.3.5.2 Site Specific Factors

The findings add to knowledge specifically by identifying additional factors that influence the expression and manifestation in this case of member involvement with the OBC. These factors are site specific and include the purpose of the OBC, the infrastructure of the site and the ethos of the community. The purpose of the OBC refers to its primary function. The primary purpose of MacRumors is connected with providing the latest news with respect to the Apple brand and the technology industry. By contrast, the primary purpose of the Purse Forum is linked to creating a space where fashionistas can talk about their special interest, inferred by the catch phrase on the sign-up page of the site: "*Join the World's Largest Designer Fashion Community Today and Let the Obsession Begin!*" Such differences with respect to the purpose of MacRumors and the Purse Forum seem to amount to variations in the manifestation of member involvement. Specifically, there is a greater prevalence of member involvement in MacRumors that may be classified as utilitarian in nature in that members exhibit a general interest in product and/or

brand related information. This is evidenced by the existence of a specific sub-forum called "*MacRumors.com News Discussion*" which is dedicated to the latest news in relation to the Apple firm and technology industry.

The infrastructure of the site refers to how the OBC is organised. The Purse Forum consists of 33 luxury brands whereas MacRumors is dedicated to the Apple brand only. The Purse Forum site is organised in a way that each luxury brand has its own sub-forum which essentially is a unique fan gathering, for instance, members in the Coach and Minkoff sub-forums refer to themselves respectively as "Coachies" and "Minkettes". The presence of multiple brands in the Purse Forum means that the expression of the social type of involvement is different in comparison to MacRumors. Specifically, the findings reveal that some customs in the Purse Forum revolve around showing appreciation for and veneration of the brand's products. It is possible that this a means of cultivating a sense of community within individual sub-forums of the Purse Forum. MacRumors in contrast to the Purse Forum is made up of a greater number of sub-forums dedicated to problem-solving in relation to product and/or purchase related queries. Subsequently, there is a greater prevalence of the utilitarian type of member involvement in MacRumors. It is possible that the manifestation of the utilitarian type of member involvement that is mainly situational in nature has the potential to detract from the sense of community as members sign-up only to seek information and do not revisit the OBC. However, it seems that the highly structured nature of MacRumors in that specific sub-forums exist that are dedicated solely to troubleshooting means that the OBC is able to provide functional help on a large-scale while still sustaining a sense of community.

The ethos of the community is defined in this study as the underlying spirit of how individual members participate in the OBC and refers to norms in relation to how members talk and the customs and rituals of the community group. Variations in how members talk between to the two

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OBCs was noted in Chapter Five and Six as potentially linked to gendered communication styles as MacRumors and the Purse Forum consist mainly of male and female members respectively. The view that participation within the OBC is guided by an ethos is similar to the design variable that Wenger *et al.* (2002, p. 38) refer to as practice which describes a "set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain". The findings reveal that to varying extents the ethos of the community shapes the display and manifestation of the four different types of member involvement. For example, the findings reveal it is part of the ethos of the Purse Forum for members to provide social support and this shapes the manifestation of the social type of member involvement in that members are inclined show empathy and provide reassurance with respect to product and/or brand related issues such as cognitive dissonance (see pages 128 to 131 of Chapter Five). By contrast, the findings reveal it is not part of the ethos in MacRumors to provide social support and this in turn means the manifestation of the social type of involvement is generally lacking in that members are more likely to provide functional help with product or purchase related issues evidenced by the hard-hitting and solution-focused nature of Member P's advice with regards to cognitive dissonance (see page 132 of Chapter Five). The findings in relation to three site specific factors add to existing research in relation how usability and design variables influence participation in online communities (Chee Wei, Kankanhalli and Sabhewal, 2009; Hsueh-Hua Chen and Been-Lirn Duh, 2009). The chapter proceeds to present the second conceptual model that is the journey of member involvement with the OBC.

7.4 Journey of Member involvement with the OBC

The employment of a netnographic research strategy to study member involvement with OBCs enabled the researcher to gain insights into the initiation and development of online community involvement. This was based on two sources of data that consisted of observing member involvement within MacRumors and the Purse Forum for an extended period of time and examining the posting history of a cross-section of members who exhibited varying degrees of

experience of participating in the two OBCs. Based on the findings Figure 7.2 puts forward a conceptual model of the journey of member involvement with the OBC which essentially refers to how online community involvement may evolve over the individual member's membership of the OBC. The conceptual model adds to existing research in two ways; firstly, there appears to be limited study in the marketing field dedicated to investigating member behaviour over their membership of the OBC and secondly, there appears to be a lack of study investigating the initiation, development and dissolution of involvement.

Figure 7.2 Journey of Member Involvement with the OBC
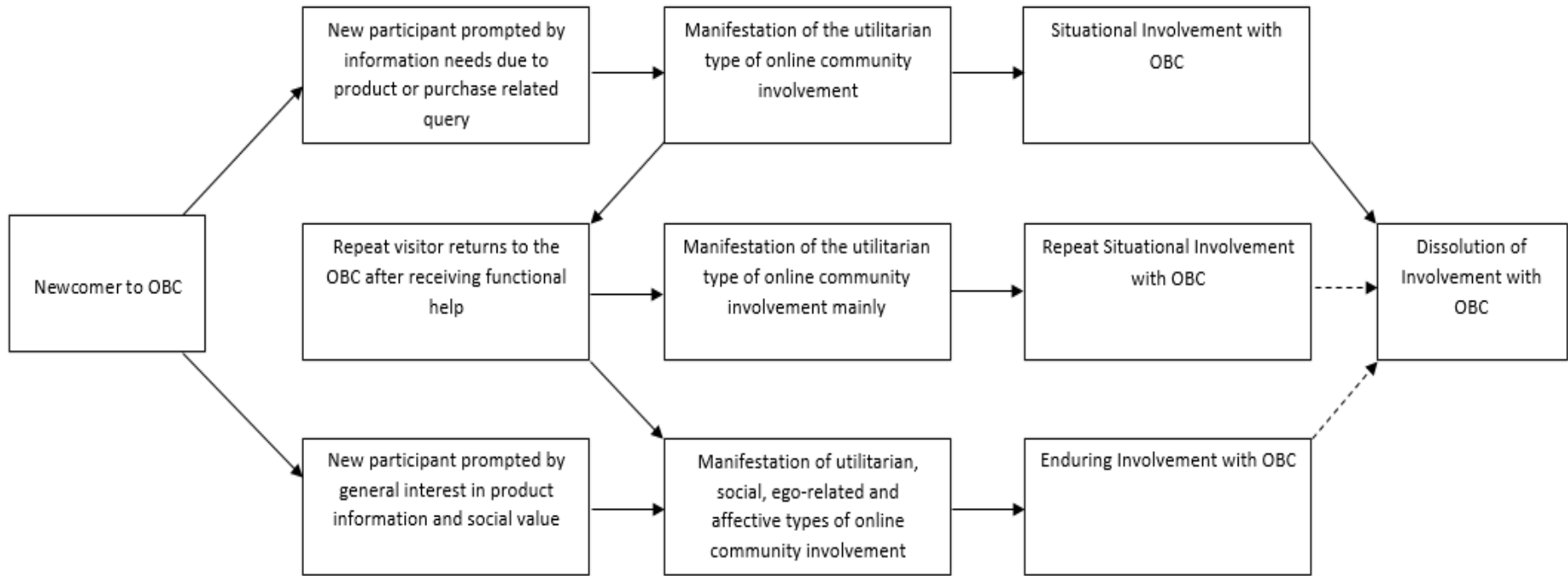
The different paths that the member may follow during their journey of involvement with the OBC are next explained. Figure 7.2 classifies newcomers to the OBC into two categories: (1) new members prompted by information needs due to product or purchase related queries, (2) new members prompted by general interest in product information and/or social value associated with being a member of a community dedicated to the brand. Newcomers prompted by task-related or purchase-related information needs manifest the utilitarian type of member involvement as they seek functional help from the OBC with product or purchase queries. Such newcomers may proceed to follow two different paths as a result of this initial type of online community involvement. In some cases it leads to a form of member involvement with the OBC that is situational in nature as the newcomer's temporary interest in the OBC due to information needs seems to dissipate after finding out product related information. For instance, Member A does not visit MacRumors again after receiving functional help with his purchase query (see page 117 of Chapter Five).

In other cases after the new member receives functional help from the community they make a return visit to the OBC. Some of these repeat visitors to the OBC are prompted mainly by information needs which results in the manifestation of the utilitarian type of involvement. This ultimately leads to what is defined in this study as a repeat situational form of involvement with the OBC wherein the member perceives the OBC involving on an intermittent basis due to product related information needs. This is demonstrated by Member EE's involvement with MacRumors which can be classified as mainly utilitarian in nature as it consists of seeking functional help in relation to different Apple products (see page 218 of Chapter Six). It is possible that the manifestation of repeat situational involvement with the OBC may dissipate over time if for instance such members cease to be prompted by product related information needs (shown by dotted arrow in Figure 7.2). Finally, some repeat visitors may come to identify

with and/or display membership of the OBC and manifest to varying extents the utilitarian, social, ego and affective types of online community involvement which leads to a form of member involvement with the OBC that is enduring in nature. For instance, Member DE revisits MacRumors after receiving functional help with product queries and starts to show an interest in talking to others about the product which ultimately seems to foster his long-term involvement with the OBC (see page 217 of Chapter Six).

The second category of new member presented in Figure 7.2 are those who exhibit a general interest in product information and/or desire for social value derived from being a member of a community dedicated to the brand's products. Such new members' exhibit to varying extents the four different types of online community involvement and as explained this leads to a form of member involvement with the OBC that is enduring in nature. For instance, Member GE's initial involvement with the Purse Forum is prompted it appears by desire to talk to likeminded others about general interest in product information and over time she becomes enduring involved with the OBC (see pages 223 of Chapter Six).

In some cases members who exhibit involvement with the community that is enduring in nature may over time experience the dissolution of their involvement (shown by dotted arrow in Figure 7.2) as in the case of Member KB who after three years membership of the Purse Forum stops participating in the community (see page 179 of Chapter Six). It is possible that this is because some members may reach a saturation point of product and/or brand involvement, for example, after acquiring a unique product collection their interest in the product category may wane and this leads to the dissolution of their involvement with the OBC. It is also possible that some members may perceive the OBC as less involving over time due to the experience

of normative pressure to participate in a certain way in the community. However, the reasons why member involvement with the OBC may dissipate requires further research.

The findings support Houston and Rothschild's (1978) conceptualisation of involvement in that member involvement with the OBC, exemplified by the different paths presented in Figure 7.2, may be situational or enduring in nature. More generally the findings support the literature in so far as corroborating the impact that situational and enduring forms of involvement with stimulus objects that exist online impart on online consumer behaviour (e.g. Im and Ha, 2011; Yun Yoo, 2011; Huang, 2006). Though existing research investigates participation in online communities over time it seems to focus on themes linked to identifying the antecedents that influence continuance intentions (e.g. Zhao, Stylianon and Zheng, 2013) or examining the factors that influence proactive participation (e.g. Tsai and Pai, 2013) rather than investigating how member behaviour may evolve over membership of the community.

The exploration of member behaviour in OBC settings through the lens of involvement adds to knowledge in two ways. First, the findings provide insight into the evolution of member behaviour in OBCs as it reveals differences between newcomers and existing members in terms of how they manifest and display their online community involvement. The findings reveal for example that newcomers exhibit the utilitarian type of involvement to a greater extent than experienced members of the OBC in this case by seeking functional help with product or purchase queries (see posts submitted by new members seeking functional help on pages 116 to 117 of Chapter Five). Differences in the manifestation of the social type of involvement between newcomers and existing members emerged from the findings in that the former are more inclined to partake in customs that entail identifying with the community whereas the latter as established members are more likely to partake in customs that are about displaying

membership of the community (see posts submitted by new and existing members on pages 176 to 177 and page 182 of Chapter Six). The findings also reveal that the behaviour of some long-standing members seems to transition over time whereby they take on formal or informal roles within the OBC and display mainly the social type of involvement whereby they either try to cultivate and/or sustain membership by inviting others to partake in customs dedicated to positive expressions of product and/or brand involvement (as in the case of Member TB who starts a thread to invite others to show their appreciation for Valentino handbags, see page 187 of Chapter Six) or attempt to help others with their product involvement by providing functional help on a regular basis (as in the case of Member GE's who is a moderator and authenticator in the Purse Forum, see pages 223-224 of Chapter Six). It is also important to consider the owners of OBC and how their management of the OBC has evolved over time. The two OBC sites under observation started as fan sites founded by individuals who were enthusiasts. Now over a decade in operation the two OBC sites have become commercial entities earning income from showing advertisements. During that timeframe the two OBCs have developed formal management practices with for instance the establishment of site rules that stipulate how to participate in terms of searching for topics before posting or submitting posts to the appropriate sub-forum. Member-initiated OBCs are perceived as more credible than company-initiated OBCs because it is unlikely that negative commentary about the brand will be removed (Shang, Chen and Liao, 2006). The management of the two OBC sites have been cautious in their choice of companies that they advertise for deciding to select brands in other industries such as travel or education rather than luxury handbags or technology. In this way management of the OBCs are not under pressure from advertising partners to remove content about the focal brand(s) and the extent to which negative commentary takes place varies from a little in the Purse Forum to quite a bit in MacRumors. The changing responsibilities of founding members of the community over the lifecycle of the OBC from

brand enthusiasts to management roles means that responsibility for engendering member involvement is transmitted to some extent to long-standing members who take on formal and informal roles within the community.

Second, the findings provide insight into an extended form of situational involvement that appears not yet identified in the marketing field namely repeat situational involvement which describes member involvement that consists of infrequent visits to the OBC that are prompted by utilitarian needs (as in the case of Member EE seeking functional help on a recurring basis from MacRumors, see page 218 of Chapter Six). The findings also show evidence of the dissolution of involvement whereby an existing member may experience the gradual dissipation of involvement with the OBC and as a result they post less and eventually stop participating in the community (as in the case of Member KB who no longer visits the Purse Forum, see page 179 of Chapter Six).

7.5 Conclusion

This study identifies OBCs as stimulus objects of involvement not yet studied in the marketing field. This is significant as it identifies a gap in the literature specifically with respect to potential objects of involvement that manifest via the Internet such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. It could be argued that such online entities do not represent objects of involvement and consumer usage of certain social media simply denotes product and/or brand involvement. However, it is proposed that the characteristics of such online entities in terms of requiring new members to register, the existence of established customs and rituals around participation and being made-up of a shared online space where members interact with one another make them objects of involvement in their own right. Future research into online consumer involvement

is important especially since recent business reports reveal that consumer usage of social media to communicate with products and brands is increasing (Keane, 2017).

This research argues perceived challenges of studying involvement in that it is a psychological concept are mitigated in online contexts such as OBCs as it possible in these settings to observe the display and manifestation of involvement. The findings reveal that online community involvement consists of four components namely utilitarian involvement, social involvement, ego involvement and affective involvement. The typology of online community involvement adds to knowledge as it provides insights into the characteristics that constitute involvement in online settings. There is limited research investigating consumer involvement over time. This again seems to be connected with perceived challenges of studying the concept and the practice among some researchers to assess levels of involvement using established measurement scales. The journey of member involvement adds to knowledge by providing insight into aspects of involvement that are under researched in the literature specifically sources that prompt involvement and the development of involvement.

CHAPTER EIGHT – CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore member involvement with OBCs by employing a netnographic methodology that consisted of member observation of two OBC sites over a nine month period. The first part of the chapter provides a summary of the findings with respect to the two main research questions that directed this study: (1) What is involving about OBCs for members? (2) How are members involved with OBCs? The chapter next outlines the contributions of the research namely the development of the Typology of Online Community Involvement model which explains what constitutes member involvement with OBCs and the Journey of Member Involvement model which provides insight into the different forms of online community involvement. Following this the chapter puts forward recommendations for management of OBCs that focus on ways of developing and sustaining member involvement with the OBC. Towards the end of the chapter the limitations of the study are outlined and recommendations are put forward for the further study of online consumer involvement.

8.2 Research Findings

This study employed qualitative methods to investigate consumer involvement within an online context. The next subsections provide a summary of the findings. Section 8.2.1 is dedicated to what is involving about OBCs for members and Section 8.2.2 focuses on how are members involved with OBCs.

8.2.1 What is involving about OBCs for members?

The study identified different factors which made the two OBC sites involving for individual members. These include: (1) member interest in seeking functional help or social support in relation to their product and/or brand involvement, (2) member interest in being part of an online community dedicated to the product class and/or brand, (3) member interest in expressing their identity and/or personal achievements through their product and/or brand involvement, (4) member interest in deriving pleasure from participating in an online community dedicated to the product class and/or brand. The first two factors are categorised as primary drivers of online community involvement. This is because the individual member's practical needs or social benefits were in many cases the initial reasons for member involvement with the OBC. The second two factors are categorised as secondary drivers of online community involvement. This is because self-expressive needs in some cases appeared to be a consequence of participating in an anonymous setting such as an OBC or, similar to hedonic needs, seemed to be a source of member involvement as a result of experience gained by the individual member from participating in the community. The findings show that primary and secondary drivers of member involvement act as sources that prompt the four different types of member involvement (presented in Figure 7.1). Primary drivers prompt utilitarian and social types of member involvement and secondary drivers prompt ego and affective types of member involvement.

The social characteristic of OBC settings means that members display their online community involvement in the presence of other members. Subsequently, the findings reveal that the orientation of member involvement with the two OBC sites may be classified as self-oriented or community-oriented. Members who exhibit self-oriented involvement perceive the OBC as involving for self-related benefits. Members who exhibit community-oriented involvement, on

the other hand, perceive the OBC as involving for benefits directed at others. The findings show that the orientation of member involvement has an impact on the types of online community involvement that manifest (shown in Figure 7.1). Member involvement that is self-oriented manifests the functional and ego types of online community involvement as they are connected with self-related benefits such as learning from product information or presenting an impressive identity. Member involvement that is community-oriented manifests the social and affective types of online community involvement as they are concerned with benefits directed at others such as passing on product knowledge to others or enjoyment gained from jointly experiencing products with others.

8.2.2 How are members involved with OBCs?

This study found how members are involved with the two OBC sites varied. The Typology of Online Community Involvement (shown in Figure 7.1) identifies four different types of member involvement: (1) utilitarian involvement, (2) social involvement, (3) ego involvement, (4) affective involvement. The findings reveal that two specific factors shape how members who are involved with the OBC display and manifest their online community involvement: (1) individual and product factors, (2) site specific factors. Individual factors refer to the member's degree of experience with the object of involvement that is the OBC which is made up of various stimuli that members may perceived as involving in terms of the community group, the product category and the brand itself. Product related factors refer to the characteristics of the product that the OBC is dedicated to. The findings show that members find different aspects of technology and fashion products involving demonstrated by differences in how they display their product involvement in the two OBCs in terms of focusing on the utilitarian value of Apple products and the symbolic value of luxury handbags. Site specific factors refer to the purpose of the OBC that is the primary function of the community, the infrastructure of the site

in terms of how the OBC is organised and the ethos of the community in terms of the underlying spirit of how members participate. Hence, how members exemplify their involvement in OBC settings depends on the individual member's degree of experience, the nature of their product involvement and site specific factors.

The Journey of Member Involvement (presented in Figure 7.2) shows how online community involvement initiates and develops over the individual member's membership of the community. The findings show that certain forms of online community involvement in terms of the individual member's temporary interest or long-lasting interest in the OBC support the extant literature that is situational and enduring forms of involvement (Houston and Rothschild, 1978). The findings develop the idea of situational involvement to include an extended version referred to as repeat situational involvement which denotes the individual member's involvement with the OBC on an intermittent basis due to utilitarian needs only. Finally, the findings reveal that in some cases members who are long-standing members of the community may experience the dissolution of their involvement with the OBC. There are many possible reasons for this such as the individual member no longer perceiving the product that the OBC is dedicated to as involving or the individual member's perception of normative pressure to be involved with the OBC in a certain way and further research is merited.

8.3   Research Contributions

The research explored online consumer involvement by observing members who were actually involved within two OBC sites. This study makes several contributions to theory which are next explained.

8.3.1   New Insights into Product and/or Brand Involvement

The empirical study of product and/or brand involvement has been mainly quantitative in nature and focuses on measuring levels of consumer involvement with the product and/or the brand and their impact on different types of consumer behaviours. This study contributes to involvement literature by employing a different approach to the study of product and/or brand involvement in online settings. As well as supporting the extant literature in terms of the important role of product involvement to participation in OBCs (e.g. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008; Shang, Chen and Liao, 2006) the findings add several new insights that help better understand the concepts of product and/or brand involvement. Firstly, the findings reveal that consumers may exhibit brand involvement that is enduring in nature implied in its most basic form by a member's interest in being member of a community dedicated to the brand's products. This adds to the extant literature as brand involvement is mainly investigated with respect to the consumer's interest in the brand decision referred to as brand-decision involvement (e.g. Mittal and Lee, 1989) which essentially relates to the consumer's temporary concern with the brand due to the purchase decision. Secondly, the findings provide insight into how consumers feel about and experience their product and/or the brand involvement. Most notable of this and adding to the literature is product and/or brand involvement is not always positive in nature in that it may consist of negative feelings such as sadness due to perceived changes for the worse in the brand or negative experiences such as cognitive dissonance following product purchase. Finally, the findings enable deeper insights into how exactly product and/or brand involvement mediates certain member behaviours in the two OBCs. For instance, the findings reveal that the member's depth of product and/or brand knowledge shapes how they provide functional help in the two OBCs that is if advice provided is founded on basic or advanced level of expertise respectively.

8.3.2 Development of the Typology of Online Community Involvement Model

This study argues that OBCs represent objects of involvement that manifest via the Internet. It is acknowledged that member involvement with OBCs could be interpreted as simply an expression of product and/or brand involvement; however this study points that the unique characteristics of OBCs in terms of consisting of an online space with an established ethos in terms of customs and rituals around participation makes them objects of involvement in their own right. Subsequently, online community involvement is identified as an object of involvement not yet studied in the marketing literature. Based on nine months observation of members involved in two OBCs the Typology of Online Community Involvement (Figure 7.1) was developed. The Typology of Online Community Involvement consists of four components: (1) utilitarian involvement, (2) social involvement, (3) ego involvement, (4) affective involvement. The Typology of Online Community Involvement adds to the literature in several ways. Firstly, it provides insight into what actually constitutes online involvement in this case in OBC settings. Despite significant researcher attention dedicated to conceptualising involvement (e.g. Laaksonen, 1994) there seems to be limited empirical study investigating the components that denote involvement, especially in online settings.

Secondly, it facilitates insight into drivers that prompt initial and continued online involvement inferred by the content of first and subsequent posts submitted by members of the community. This adds to the literature as there is limited study that investigates sources of involvement based on actual rather than suggested behaviours of informants. Finally, the findings provide insight into the nature of online involvement in that it may be self-oriented or community-oriented. This provides a more rounded understanding of involvement as it explains that the concept in some cases may be directed at, or roused by, others in terms of passing on lessons learned from product involvement or enjoyment derived from jointly experiencing products

and is likely to be important for future research endeavours that study involvement in online settings as they are inherently social in nature. Taken together these different insights into online involvement help to better understand what drives consumer behaviour in OBC settings.

8.3.3   Development of the Journey of Member Involvement Model

The Journey of Member Involvement (Figure 7.2) outlines the different forms of involvement the member may exhibit over their membership of the community. The model was developed based on two sources of data: (1) observing members who were involved in two OBC sites for an extended period of time, (2) examining the posting history of a cross-section of members from the two OBCs. The Journey of Member Involvement model adds to the literature in two ways. Firstly, it provides insight into the initiation, development and dissolution of involvement, aspects of the concept that are under researched in the extant literature. Most notably, the findings develop the idea of situational involvement by identifying an extended form of the concept called repeat situational involvement wherein the member perceives the OBC as involving on an intermittent basis due to utilitarian needs. This form of repeat situational involvement which is triggered in many cases by utilitarian needs due to product and purchase queries may be helpful towards better understanding online consumer behaviour especially as online contexts such as OBCs are lauded for the potential of information-exchange (e.g. Wirtz *et al.*, 2013; Yen, Hsu and Huang, 2011; Dholakia *et al.*, 2009).

Secondly, the model provides insight into how behaviours exemplified in this case by members involved in the two OBCs evolve over their membership of the community. For example, the findings reveal that differences in the manifestation of the social type of involvement between newcomers and existing members in that the former partake in customs linked to identifying with the community whereas the latter engage in customs that are concerned with displaying

membership of the community. The findings also reveal that in some cases long-standing members take on formal or informal roles within the community and display mainly the social type of involvement whereby they try to cultivate or sustain membership of the community or assist others with their product involvement by providing functional help. This adds to understanding of involvement in terms of revealing how the display and manifestation of involvement may vary in this case among members with different degrees of experience of being involved with the OBC.

8.4 Recommendations for Management

Recommendations put forward for management focus on ways of developing and sustaining member involvement with the OBC. The literature suggests that a large proportion of members of online communities are lurkers in that they do not participate in the community (Cranefield, Pak and Huff, 2015). Nonetheless such passive participation may in some cases be classified as member involvement, for instance, a lurker may appear to find the OBC involving if they sign-up and review content submitted to the community. It is recommended that management of OBCs develop strategies to convert lurkers into active members who contribute towards the community. It is proposed the development of a sub-forum especially for newcomers wherein they introduce themselves to the community such as the "Official New Member Welcome Thread" in MacRumors may act as an inviting and secure space for lurkers to make their presence known.

It is likely that participating in the OBC for some newcomers is daunting, especially for those with a limited depth of product and/or brand knowledge. It is recommended that management of OBCs develop ways for members to interact with the community that not only entails posting. For instance, the development of a tool such as the thumbs up button in MacRumors

is a way for newcomers to interact with the community in this case by showing their agreement with posts without actually having to display their product and/or brand knowledge by posting. It is important that firms recognise that there are different segments of users the most obvious being owners and non-owners of the brand's products. Hence, it is recommended that management of OBCs reflect on developing customs and rituals that the individual member can partake in that do not necessitate product ownership. The purchase reveal ritual in the Purse Forum is one such example as members who are owners and non-owners can both partake and as the findings show they seem to derive pleasure and entertainment from vicariously experiencing the brand's products with others. The development of rituals that facilitate vicarious consumption also acts as a way of retaining non-owners over the long-term especially if the OBC is dedicated to a product category such as luxury handbags which some members may not be able to purchase due to product cost.

It is recommended that management of OBCs position customs that focus on product and/or brand involvement as central to participation. For instance, customs such as sharing photos and information of product collections in MacRumors or sharing photos of products in action in the Purse Forum appear to foster social ties among members through shared brand involvement in this case mutual appreciation of the brand's products. It is envisioned that fostering social ties between members sets the foundation for the development of member involvement with the OBC that is enduring in nature. The findings show that in some cases member involvement with the OBC is mainly self-oriented in nature in terms of seeking self-related benefits such as product information from the community.

It is recommended that management of OBCs ensure that the community provides information value in terms of the latest product, brand or industry related news as a means of retaining

members over the long-term especially those who are product enthusiasts. Finally, the findings show that some members dedicate a large amount of their time and effort to providing functional help and/or social support to others in the OBC. This type of member involvement did not seem to be acknowledged by management of the two OBC sites under observation apart from in the post count of the individual member in terms of recording the number of posts they have contributed towards the community. It is recommended that management of OBCs develop more specific ways of rewarding members who make significant contributions to the community. For example, it may be possible to track member behaviour and in cases where an individual provides functional help on a continual basis perhaps the management of the OBC could develop a tool that would contact those in receipt of functional help and ask them to rate the usefulness of advice provided. Subsequently, it may be possible to develop a rating system that would acknowledge and evaluate how much members who provide functional help and/or social support on a continual basis have helped others in the community.

8.5 Limitations of the Study

The study selected a sample of two different OBC sites to explore the topic of online community involvement. The small sample size is a characteristic of a netnographic methodology as the aim for the researcher is to gain depth not breadth of understanding of the online community under observation. An additional characteristic of the netnographic methodology is that off-line identifiers such as age, gender and ethnic background are generally not visible. The small sample size and lack of informant identifiers are considered a limitation of this study as it is not possible to generalise findings to groups outside of the OBC sample. However, despite the supposed lack of off-line identifiers the OBC sample appeared to be gendered as MacRumors consisted mainly of male members and the Purse Forum was made up of largely female members inferred by their forms of salutation and styles of

communication. Though gender differences between the two OBCs provided some interesting insights into online community involvement, for instance, fitting with a female style of communication members of the Purse Forum made personal disclosures about their product involvement which manifested itself in seeking social support from others, it is for the most part considered a limitation of the study. It is believed the selection of OBC sites that were gender balanced would have been provided a more fair representation of the concept of online community involvement.

The data collection method consisted of nine months of participant observation of members in MacRumors and the Purse Forum. It was initially planned that the second phase of research would entail interviewing members from the two sites under observation but permission to contact members via the OBC and request them to partake in an interview was not granted. The inability to achieve research triangulation through the use of semi-structured interviews is considered a limitation of the research. It is believed that the opportunity to personally interview members of the two OBCs under observation would have benefited the study not only by facilitating confirmation of the researcher's interpretation of observed behaviours but also by providing a more comprehensive understanding of aspects of online community involvement that are more speculative such as perceptions and experiences of member involvement.

It is believed that the scope of research to study member involvement with the OBC in an online context only is a limitation of the study. This is because online community involvement is a complex phenomenon consisting of multiple stimuli objects and by deciding to focus on an online context only details are lost with regards to how member involvement with various stimuli such as the product and the brand in off-line settings influences their online community

involvement. There are also more general limitations associated with online research as there is a risk that informant behaviour may be scripted, for example some members carefully choreograph their contributions demonstrated by various purchase reveals in the Purse Forum, and therefore may not be a true representation of what it means to be involved with the OBC.

8.6   Further Research

The findings reveal differences in the expression and manifestation of online community involvement between MacRumors and the Purse Forum. Since the two OBC sites were dedicated to different product categories this seems to be connected, to an extent, with involvement being a product-category specific phenomenon (O'Cass, 2004; Warrington and Shim, 2000). Hence, further research is recommended in which a sample of online communities that are dedicated to the same product category that consist of a mixture of firm-created and member-initiated sites are studied in order to generalise findings with respect to the nature and manifestation of online community involvement.

Due to consumer usage of social media such as OBCs this study argues that it is possible to study the display and manifestation of involvement by observing the behaviours of members who are involved within such entities. The findings also show that information sources in OBCs such as the member's history of posts, length of membership and post content make it possible to make inferences about the development of involvement that hitherto was not possible to observe in off-line settings due to its psychological nature. Hence, given the opportunity to observe the enactment of i-nvolvement in social media settings that are dedicated to consumption-related topics this research recommends further qualitative study, employing observation and interview methods, to investigate aspects of involvement that as of yet have

not been explored in-depth in the marketing field, in particular themes linked to the origins and development of involvement.

The findings reveal that in some cases members may experience the dissolution of their involvement with the OBC. The idea that the individual consumer's involvement may slowly wane is a theme not yet researched in the literature and likely to be significant especially due to the ease with which consumers can stop participating in online settings. Hence, the research recommends further qualitative study that explores online community involvement over a longitudinal timeframe by, for instance, tracking a sample of members as they progress through their membership of the OBC. It is likely that such study would develop understanding around not only factors that sustain member involvement with the OBC over the long-term but also factors that culminate in the dissolution of member involvement with the OBC.

The findings show that visual data plays an important role in understanding member involvement with the OBC. Photo uploads are central to how members frame their identity as for example product owners or product collectors, particularly in the Purse Forum. Photo uploads are also key to enriching interactions within the two OBC as visuals for example of Apple's WWDC help to create real time brand experiences for members to enjoy. The findings reveal differences in the content of visual data between the two OBCs. The focus of photo uploads in MacRumors is on the product with content showing for example home office set ups or close up shots of product builds. The focus of photo uploads in the Purse Forum is in many instances on the individual member and the product with content showing for example modelling shots of either new purchases or product customisations. Granted such differences are likely to be related to the characteristics of the product category as handbags are worn on the body it is not surprising that expressions of product involvement manifest in photo uploads

that show individual members wearing their beloved handbags. However, it is possible that differences in the content of photo uploads between the two OBCs may also be linked to the communication style of members. This is because gender differences exist between the two OBCs with MacRumors consisting of mainly male members and the Purse Forum made up of mainly female members. Study of gender preferred communication styles in online community settings found that males prefer to socialize in large, interconnected, less-intimate groups whereas females prefer fewer and more intimate relationships (Durant, McCray and Safran, 2012). Hence, it is plausible that the content of visual data in the Purse Forum for some members is an effort to build more intimate connections with others as they reveal aspects of their personal identity to others through photo uploads that show them and the product. The research makes recommendations for future research to conduct more focused analysis of visual data in OBC settings. This is important not only to understand how visual data aids to framing the member's identity but also in terms of what visual data adds to the community itself through the enrichment of member interactions and brand related experiences.

8.7 Conclusion

This study identified the topic of online consumer involvement specifically member involvement with OBCs as a knowledge gap in the extant literature. The research objectives focused on exploring the apparent reasons for member involvement with the OBC and gaining insight into how members are involved with the OBC. The key contribution of the research is the development of the Typology of Online Community Involvement model. This is significant as it facilitates better understanding as to the underlying drivers of consumer behaviour in OBC settings. Other contributions of the research include: (1) product and/or brand involvement may be roused by negative feelings or experiences with the product and/or the brand, (2) insight into how product and/or brand involvement mediates certain behaviours in OBC settings, (3)

develop understanding as to how involvement initiates and develops with respect to member involvement with OBCs, (4) insight into how online consumer behaviours may evolve over membership of the OBC, (5) identification of an extended version of situational involvement that is repeat situational involvement which may be helpful towards understanding participation in online settings that is short-term and utilitarian focused, (5) identification of online entities as potential objects of involvement that consumers are likely to perceive as involving. Taking the contributions of the research into account recommendations are proposed for the management of OBCs. These are linked to developing management strategies and online tools to help cultivate and sustain member involvement with the OBC.

Appendix 5.1 Profile of Observation Sample

No.	Identifier	Join Date	Post Count[27]	OBC
1.	Member A	Feb 2014	≥0-29	MacRumors
2.	Member B	Sept 2012	2675	The Purse Forum
3.	Member C	Dec 2013	≥250	MacRumors
4.	Member D	Jan 2007	342	The Purse Forum
5.	Member E	Sept 2009	≥5000	MacRumors
6.	Member F	Jan 2011	4899	The Purse Forum
7.	Member G	Feb 2010	4866	The Purse Forum
8.	Member H	Jan 2010	≥15,100	MacRumors
9.	Member I	Jan 2005	≥15,100	MacRumors
10.	Member J	Dec 2008	1062	The Purse Forum
11.	Member K	Feb 2009	14123	The Purse Forum
12.	Member L	Jan 2010	5780	The Purse Forum
13.	Member M	Jun 2009	630	The Purse Forum
14.	Member N	Apr 2009	179	The Purse Forum
15.	Member O	May 2013	≥0-29	MacRumors
16.	Member P	Aug 2012	≥500	MacRumors
17.	Member Q	Jan 2008	≥100	MacRumors
18.	Member R	Mar 2007	7176	The Purse Forum
19.	Member S	Mar 2007	909	The Purse Forum
20.	Member T	Nov 2006	11,437	The Purse Forum
21.	Member U	Nov 2007	9629	The Purse Forum
22.	Member V	Jun 2012	≥500	MacRumors
23.	Member W	Mar 2011	≥1000	MacRumors
24.	Member X	Jan 2011	≥500	MacRumors
25.	Member Y	Apr 2011	≥500	MacRumors
26.	Member Z	Aug 2008	≥2005	MacRumors
27.	Member AA	Oct 2011	≥30	MacRumors
28.	Member BA	Mar 2012	≥0-29	MacRumors
29.	Member CA	Aug 2012	73	The Purse Forum
30.	Member DA	Feb 2009	705	The Purse Forum

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[27] In the case of MacRumors Members their post count is based on the OBC's user title classification as outlined in Table 5.1 of Chapter Five.

No.	Identifier	Join Date	Post Count[27]	OBC
31.	Member EA	Mar 2012	93	The Purse Forum
32.	Member FA	May 2012	≥0-29	MacRumors
33.	Member GA	Jul 2004	≥100	MacRumors
34.	Member HA	Feb 2011	≥100	MacRumors
35.	Member IA	Aug 2010	≥5000	MacRumors
36.	Member JA	May 2008	≥100	MacRumors
37.	Member KA	Sept 2012	≥0-29	MacRumors
38.	Member LA	May 2010	964	The Purse Forum
39.	Member MA	Feb 2007	7645	The Purse Forum
40.	Member NA	Aug 2011	262	The Purse Forum
41.	Member OA	Feb 2013	574	The Purse Forum
42.	Member PA	Nov 2008	≥30	MacRumors
43.	Member QA	Nov 2012	≥500	MacRumors
44.	Member RA	May 2011	≥1000	MacRumors
45.	Member SA	Mar 2011	≥500	MacRumors
46.	Member TA	Feb 2009	8057	The Purse Forum
47.	Member UA	Jul 2012	2047	The Purse Forum
48.	Member VA	Feb 2010	4196	The Purse Forum
49.	Member WA	Jul 2012	2564	The Purse Forum
50.	Member XA	Jan 2010	≥1505	MacRumors
51.	Member YA	Mar 2009	≥2005	MacRumors
52.	Member ZA	May 2009	≥2005	MacRumors
53.	Member AB	Jun 2012	19	The Purse Forum
54.	Member BB	Aug 2011	939	The Purse Forum
55.	Member CB	Mar 2011	334	The Purse Forum
56.	Member DB	Dec 2008	3807	The Purse Forum
57.	Member EB	Mar 2009	403	The Purse Forum
58.	Member FB	Jul 2002	≥500	MacRumors
59.	Member GB	May 2002	≥12,000	MacRumors
60.	Member HB	Oct 2014	≥0-29	MacRumors
61.	Member IB	Jul 2017	≥0-29	MacRumors
62.	Member JB	Jan 2009	15	The Purse Forum
63.	Member KB	Feb 2009	778	The Purse Forum
64.	Member LB	Nov 2006	6194	The Purse Forum
65.	Member MB	Jan 2006	3397	The Purse Forum

No.	Identifier	Join Date	Post Count[27]	OBC
66.	Member NB	Apr 2007	1280	The Purse Forum
67.	Member OB	Jul 2007	1460	The Purse Forum
68.	Member PB	Jun 2009	≥0-29	MacRumors
69.	Member QB	Mar 2007	≥2005	MacRumors
70.	Member RB	Jan 2009	≥1000	MacRumors
71.	Member SB	Jun 2009	≥0-29	MacRumors
72.	Member TB	Jul 2009	11,225	The Purse Forum
73.	Member UB	Apr 2009	2348	The Purse Forum
74.	Member VB	Mar 2010	4832	The Purse Forum
75.	Member WB	May 2010	2541	The Purse Forum
76.	Member XB	Sept 2014	9581	The Purse Forum
77.	Member YB	Dec 2006	≥6500	MacRumors
78.	Member ZB	Mar 2008	≥250	MacRumors
79.	Member AC	Jan 2009	≥100	MacRumors
80.	Member BC	Jan 2008	≥500	MacRumors
81.	Member CC	May 2009	≥250	MacRumors
82.	Member DC	Jul 2008	≥100	MacRumors
83.	Member EC	Dec 2007	2604	The Purse Forum
84.	Member FC	Aug 2008	25,408	The Purse Forum
85.	Member GC	Mar 2008	141	The Purse Forum
86.	Member HC	Apr 2007	4935	The Purse Forum
87.	Member IC	Mar 2006	18,067	The Purse Forum
88.	Member JC	Apr 2008	2379	The Purse Forum
89.	Member KC	Sept 2006	1193	The Purse Forum
90.	Member LC	Jul 2008	3503	The Purse Forum
91.	Member MC	Oct 2007	2640	The Purse Forum
92.	Member NC	Apr 2008	1382	The Purse Forum
93.	Member OC	Feb 2007	612	The Purse Forum
94.	Member PC	Apr 2009	44	The Purse Forum
95.	Member QC	Feb 2009	92	The Purse Forum
96.	Member RC	May 2006	25,636	The Purse Forum
97.	Member SC	Apr 2008	1670	The Purse Forum

No.	Identifier	Join Date	Post Count[27]	OBC
98.	Member TC	May 2013	1001	The Purse Forum
99.	Member UC	Sept 2006	4250	The Purse Forum
100.	Member VC	Dec 2009	720	The Purse Forum
101.	Member WC	Dec 2012	1708	The Purse Forum
102.	Member XC	Sept 2007	1348	The Purse Forum
103.	Member YC	Nov 2010	4254	The Purse Forum
104.	Member ZC	Jan 2009	5239	The Purse Forum
105.	Member AD	Jun 2009	1689	The Purse Forum
106.	Member BD	Apr 2012	219	The Purse Forum
107.	Member CD	May 2009	14,913	The Purse Forum
108.	Member DD	Aug 2010	244	The Purse Forum
109.	Member ED	Jun 2007	1924	The Purse Forum
110.	Member FD	Jan 2012	≥100	MacRumors
111.	Member GD	Oct 2011	≥100	MacRumors
112.	Member HD	Jun 2007	≥500	MacRumors
113.	Member ID	Jan 2007	≥1000	MacRumors
114.	Member JD	Apr 2005	≥15,100	MacRumors
115.	Member KD	Sept 2007	≥2005	MacRumors
116.	Member LD	Jun 2011	≥250	MacRumors
117.	Member MD	Oct 2009	≥100	MacRumors
118.	Member ND	Jan 2009	≥500	MacRumors
119.	Member OD	Nov 2010	≥30	MacRumors
120.	Member PD	Nov 2010	≥100	MacRumors
121.	Member QD	Nov 2007	≥3000	MacRumors
122.	Member RD	Apr 2011	≥1000	MacRumors
123.	Member SD	Feb 2011	≥30	MacRumors
124.	Member TD	Mar 2012	≥500	MacRumors
125.	Member UD	Apr 2004	≥500	MacRumors
126.	Member VD	Mar 2012	≥250	MacRumors
127.	Member WD	Oct 2008	≥3000	MacRumors
128.	Member XD	May 2008	≥10,000	MacRumors
129.	Member YD	Mar 2013	≥500	MacRumors
130.	Member ZD	Jun 2012	≥30	MacRumors
131.	Member AE	Feb 2010	≥500	MacRumors
132.	Member BE	Jan 2009	≥5000	MacRumors
133.	Member CE	May 2009	≥1000	MacRumors
134.	Member DE	April 2012	≥250	MacRumors
135.	Member EE	April 2014	≥30	MacRumors
136.	Member FE	Oct 2012	626	The Purse Forum
137.	Member GE	Jun 2009	30,356	The Purse Forum

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