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Understanding influences on the critical-to-success factors in online brand communities

Stephanie A. Meek
Edith Cowan University

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Understanding Influences on the
Critical-to-Success Factors in Online Brand
Communities

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Stephanie Meek

Edith Cowan University
School of Business and Law

2016

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Edith Cowan University

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Abstract

In an internationally competitive market a company's brand is its most valuable asset, and increasing and retaining loyal customers is key to long-term success. Forging binding relationships between consumers and their brand is therefore of critical importance to most organisations (Lhotáková, 2012). Previous studies indicate that online brand communities (OBCs) effectively facilitate such relationships (Backhaus, Steiner & Lugger, 2011; Madupu & Cooley, 2010) and provide companies with reliable marketing intelligence to potentially gain a competitive advantage.

OBCs are online forums dedicated to a specific brand, where consumers gather and exchange information and socialise. Today they are more prevalent than ever before, yet research in this area is still limited. From a marketing perspective, research indicates that creating bonds between the consumer and the brand offers stability to the brand, and consumers who involve themselves with brand communities' exhibit higher levels of brand loyalty (Brodie et al, 2013; Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). Therefore it is essential that marketers understand the culture of OBC's, in order to retain existing members, and to develop strategies to encourage new members to join.

The objective of this study was to identify and examine both individual and community level attributes that influence members' *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* (SOB) to OBCs, as these factors are critical for retaining members and sustaining the community. In addition, the strength of each relationship was measured, based on whether members were socialisers or information seekers, as this has been the subject of significant discourse in the online community literature.

The investigation employed a mixed methods approach and two-stage process. The first stage involved netnography and focus groups (qualitative research) in order to provide depth and clarity to the study and structure to the questionnaire (quantitative research) used in stage two. The sample for this study consisted of 659 OBC members from around the world; however the majority of respondents (455) were from one specific community with an affiliation to the LEGO® brand. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to determine if items loaded on their respective constructs, Cronbach's alpha was performed to check the internal consistency of the items for reliability, and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to determine the convergent and discriminant validity of the

model. Finally, structural equation modelling (SEM), in the form of path analysis, was used to test the hypotheses.

Key findings from the research indicate that the strongest individual level influence on *participative behaviour* in an OBC is the *network ties* that develop between members in the community. This suggests that friendships between community members have the capacity to increase the time they spend in the community and the number of posts they contribute. The level of *perceived anonymity* is another individual level factor found to have a significantly negative effect on *participative behaviour*, and a *sense of belonging*, therefore as members become more recognisable in the community the more they actively participate, and the greater attachment they develop to the community. From a community perspective *social capital* represented by a *shared language*, *shared vision*, *social trust* and *reciprocity* has the most significant influence on the *sense of belonging* members develop in the community. This suggests that the quality and structure of the relationships in an OBC, and the culture of the environment has a strong effect on the strength of the connection members cultivate with an OBC. Interestingly when the data is separated between subgroups of information seekers and socialisers *network ties* only increase *participative behaviour* for information seekers, and *perceived anonymity* only has an influence on *participative behaviour* for socialisers.

The results of this study support the proposed conceptual model and offer insights into the different influences on consumer behaviour in OBCs, and how the purpose for participation affects the composition and strength of those influences. Implications for marketers, organisations and OBC administrators include a greater understanding of the factors that encourage and support participative behaviour and sense of belonging to the community. Consequently, stakeholders can use this information to develop strategies that will ensure the ongoing success of their OBCs. Theoretical contributions include bridging the gap between the literature related to online communities in general and the unique characteristics of OBC's, developing a valid measurement scale for social capital in an OBC context, and establishing a structural framework of consumer behaviour specific to OBC's.

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Acknowledgements

Undertaking a PhD is like going on a very long, arduous, life-changing journey. Prior to the start of the trip a great deal of planning takes place, you know where you are starting from and where you plan to end up, and you have a general idea of the route you expect to take. What is a complete surprise is how you will get sidetracked; you will find yourself going completely off the beaten track, only to be dragged back to civilisation by your support crew. You will also be caught unawares by the loneliness and isolation you will feel on occasions, and the help that will come from surprising sources. Mostly though, you will be amazed at how much you will learn, how many interesting people and places you will become familiar with, and how the point of your whole trip will make much more sense the more ground you have covered. Finally, exhausted, you will reach the end of your journey and can look back and consider how far you have travelled and how much you have accomplished.

Now that my PhD journey is over I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the people who made this exciting voyage possible, and without whom I would not have completed the whole trip let alone survived to tell the tale.

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Table of Contents

Use of Thesis.....	i
Abstract	ii
Declaration	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Tables.....	xii
List of Figures	xiii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.0 Background	1
1.1 Statement of the Problem	5
1.2 Research Purpose	7
1.3 Research Questions	8
1.4 Significance of the Study	8
1.5 Research Design Overview	10
1.6 Structure of the Thesis.....	12
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	13
2.0 Introduction	13
Section One	14
2.1 The Community Aspect of Online Brand Communities (OBCs).....	14
2.1.1 Sense of Community	17
2.1.2 Markers of a Genuine Community	23
2.1.2.1 Consciousness of Kind	24
2.1.2.2 Rituals and Traditions.....	25
2.1.2.3 Moral Responsibility	25
2.1.3 Social Capital	26
2.1.4 Summary of the Community Literature Related to OBCs	31
2.2 Online Community Literature	33
2.2.1 Types of Online Communities.....	34
2.2.2 Sense of Virtual Community	37
2.2.3 Social Capital	39
2.2.3.1 Social Trust.....	41
2.2.3.2 Reciprocity	42

2.2.3.3	Shared Language	43
2.2.3.4	Shared Vision	44
2.2.4	Uses and Gratifications Theory	44
2.2.5	The Technology Acceptance Model.....	48
2.2.6	The Usability and Sociability Framework.....	50
2.2.7	Summary of the Online Aspect of OBCs	53
2.3	The Brand Aspect of Online Brand Communities	55
2.3.1	The Brand Concept.....	55
2.3.2	Brand Value – The Corporate Perspective	57
2.3.3	Brand Value Co-creation.....	59
2.3.4	The Consumer – Brand Perspective	62
2.3.5	Brand Communities.....	64
2.3.6	Summary of the the Brand Aspect of OBCs	65
2.3.7	Summary of the Fundamental Structural Dimensions of OBCs	66
Section Two		69
2.4	Factors Critical to the Success and Sustainability of OBCs.....	69
2.4.1	Participative Behaviour	70
2.4.2	Sense of Belonging (SOB)	73
2.5	Influences on the Critical Success Factors in OBCs	76
2.5.1	Member-based Benefits.....	76
2.5.1.1	Information versus Social-based Benefits.....	77
2.5.2	Individual-Level Influences on the Critical Success Factors in OBCs	79
2.5.2.1	Perceived Enjoyment.....	80
2.5.2.2	Perceived Ease of Use	81
2.5.2.3	Network Ties	81
2.5.2.4	Anonymity.....	82
2.5.3	Community Level Influences in OBCs	85
2.5.3.1	Social Capital	85
2.5.4	Summary of Influences on Critical Success Factors in OBCs	87
2.6	Marketing Implications of Successful and Sustainable OBCs	87
2.6.1	Market Research.....	87
2.6.2	Brand Loyalty.....	89
2.6.3	Positive Brand Image	91
2.6.4	Positive Word-of-Mouth (WOM)	92
2.6.5	Brand Building	94
2.7	Summary of the Literature Review	95
2.8	Summary Model.....	96

CHAPTER THREE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	99
3.0 Introduction	99
3.1 Research Outline	99
3.2 Selecting the Method of Inquiry	100
3.3 Mixed Method Typologies	101
3.4 Stage One (A): Netnographic Observations	102
3.4.1 Introduction	102
3.4.2 Netnographic Procedure	105
3.4.3 Identifying and Selecting the Online Communities	105
3.4.4 Data Collection and Analysis	107
3.4.5 Results and Discussion	108
3.4.6 Community Characteristics	109
3.4.6.1 The Vogue Form	109
3.4.6.2 The Bodybuilding Forum	111
3.4.6.3 The Avon Forum	112
3.4.7 Findings and Insights.....	113
3.4.8 Community Level Influences	114
3.4.8.1 Community Type.....	114
3.4.8.2 Social Capital	117
3.4.8.3 Sense of Belonging.....	125
3.4.9 Individual Level Influences.....	128
3.4.9.1 Perceived Ease of Use	128
3.4.9.2 Perceived Enjoyment	129
3.4.9.3 Network Ties	130
3.4.9.4 Anonymity.....	132
3.4.9.5 Information Gathering versus Socialising	134
3.4.10 Summary of Netnographic Findings	137
3.5 Stage One (B) – Focus Groups.....	139
3.5.1 Focus Group Design.....	139
3.5.2 Focus Group Participants	139
3.5.3 Focus Group Data Analysis.....	141
3.5.4 Focus Group Findings and Discussion	142
3.5.5 Individual Level Concepts.....	143
3.5.5.1 Perceived Ease of Use	143
3.5.5.2 Perceived Enjoyment.....	145
3.5.5.3 Network Ties	146
3.5.5.4 Anonymity.....	149

3.5.5.5 Social Capital	152
3.5.6 Focus Group Summary.....	156
3.6 Enhancing Trustworthiness	158
3.7 Qualitative Research Summary	158
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES	160
4.0 Introduction	160
4.1 Proposed Model and Hypothesised Relationships	160
4.2 Critical Success Factors in Online Brand Communities	162
4.2.1 Participative Behaviour	162
4.2.2 Sense of Belonging.....	163
4.3 Hypothesised Relationships	163
4.3.1 Perceived Ease of Use	163
4.3.2 Perceived Enjoyment.....	165
4.3.3 Network Ties	167
4.3.4 Anonymity.....	169
4.3.5 Social Capital	173
4.3.5.1 Shared Language	175
4.3.5.2 Shared Vision	177
4.3.5.3 Social Trust	178
4.3.5.4 Reciprocity	179
4.4 Summary	181
CHAPTER FIVE: QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY	183
5.0 Introduction	183
5.1 Questionnaire Design	184
5.2 Scale Development.....	185
5.2.1 Participative Behaviour	185
5.2.2 Sense of Belonging.....	186
5.2.3 Perceived Enjoyment.....	187
5.2.4 Perceived Ease of Use	187
5.2.5 Network Ties	187
5.2.6 Anonymity.....	188
5.2.7 Social Capital	188
5.2.8 Demographic Items	189
5.3 Data Collection.....	190
5.4 Sample.....	191
5.5 Data Screening	191
5.6 Data Analysis	191

5.6.1	Descriptive Analysis.....	192
5.6.2	Exploratory Factor Analysis.....	192
5.6.2.1	Data Assessment for Factor Analysis.....	193
5.6.2.2	Extraction	193
5.6.3	Confirmatory Factor Analysis	194
5.6.4	Structural Equation Modelling	194
5.7	Summary	196
CHAPTER SIX: QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS		197
6.0	Introduction	197
6.1	Participant Sample.....	197
6.2	Communities	199
6.3	Sample Demographics.....	199
6.4	Exploratory Factor Analysis.....	199
6.5	Congeneric Models.....	201
6.5.1	Perceived Ease of Use	202
6.5.2	Perceived Enjoyment.....	203
6.5.3	Network Ties	204
6.5.4	Member Anonymity	205
6.5.5	Sense of Belonging.....	206
6.5.6	Social Capital	207
6.6	Measurement Model Results	212
6.6.1	Confirmatory Factor Analysis	212
6.6.1.1	Measurement Model Fit	212
6.6.1.2	Convergent and Discriminant Validity.....	212
6.7	Testing the Structural Model.....	214
6.8	Hypothesised Relationships	214
6.8.1	Information Searchers Versus Socialisers	217
6.8.2	Parsimonious Modelling.....	217
6.9	Summary	222
CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION		223
7.0	Introduction	223
7.1	Demographic Profile of OBC Members	224
7.2	Characteristics of OBC Members	225
7.3	Relationships Between Constructs	226
7.3.1	The Influence of Perceived Ease of Use.....	226
7.3.2	The Influence of Perceived Enjoyment	229
7.3.3	The Influence of Network Ties.....	230

7.3.4	The Influence of Perceived Anonymity	232
7.3.5	The Influence of Social Capital.....	234
7.3.6	Summary of the Influences on Critical Success Factors	237
7.4	Theoretical Contribution	238
7.5	Practical Implications.....	239
	References.....	242
	Appendices.....	271
	Appendix A: OBC Netnography screen shots.....	271
	Appendix B: Focus Group Questions.....	272
	Appendix C: Focus group forms	273
	Appendix D: Questionnaire, consent form and Information letter.....	276
	Appendix E: OBC characteristics	277
	Appendix F: OBC questionnaire screen shots.....	278
	Appendix G: Descriptive Analysis of Questionnaire Constructs.....	284
	Appendix H: Full Structural Model	290
	Appendix I: Social Capital Studies	291

List of Tables

Table 1: Brand Elements and Associated Benefits. Adapted from Ghauri (2014)	57
Table 2: Evolution and Transformation of Customers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004)	60
Table 3: Focus Group Sample Characteristics	142
Table 4: Sense of Belonging Scale.....	186
Table 5: Perceived Enjoyment Scale.....	187
Table 6: Perceived Ease of Use Scale	187
Table 7: Network Ties Scale	188
Table 8: Perceived Anonymity Scale	188
Table 9: Social Capital Scale	189
Table 10: Recommended Fit Indices for Measurement Model Evaluation (Gaskin, 2012; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Sarapaivanich & Kotey, 2006).....	196
Table 11: Online Brand Community Sample.....	198
Table 12: Demographics: Frequency and Percentage Distribution.....	200
Table 13: Exploratory Factor Analysis Findings	202
Table 14: Perceived Ease of Use – Goodness of Fit	203
Table 15: Perceived Enjoyment – Goodness of Fit.....	204
Table 16: Network Ties – Goodness of Fit	205
Table 17: Anonymity – Goodness of Fit.....	206
Table 18: Sense of Belonging – Goodness of Fit.....	207
Table 19: Shared Vision – Goodness of Fit	209
Table 20: Social Trust – Goodness of Fit.....	210
Table 21: Reciprocity – Goodness of Fit	210
Table 22: Social Capital – Goodness of Fit.....	212
Table 23: Average Variance Extracted	213
Table 24: Model Parameter Estimates	215
Table 25: Comparison between Information Seekers and Socialisers	218

List of Figures

Figure 1: Overview of Research Design	11
Figure 2: Sense of Community Dynamics. Adapted from McMillan & Chavis (1986) .	19
Figure 3: Summary of Community Research	32
Figure 4: Online Brand Community Placement	36
Figure 5: Uses and Gratifications Model (Li, Lu, Xu, Heikkila, van der Heijden, 2015, p. 269).....	46
Figure 6: Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis et al. 1989)	49
Figure 7: The Usability and Sociability Framework (Preece, 2001)	52
Figure 8: Online Aspects of OBCs	56
Figure 9: Summary Model.....	98
Figure 10: Bridging the Gap. Adapted from Leech & Onwuegbuzie (2009, p. 272).....	101
Figure 11: Typology for Mixed Methods Research Design. Adapted from Leech & Onwuegbuzi (2009, p. 273)	103
Figure 12: Vogue Magazines July 2012 (http://www.designscene.net)	110
Figure 13: Concepts Guiding Netnography.....	114
Figure 14: Bodybuilding Forum Snapshot (Bodybuilding, 2012).....	136
Figure 15: Vogue Forum Snapshot (Vogue, 2012)	136
Figure 16: Proposed Conceptual Model – Influences on Critical Success Factors in OBCs	161
Figure 17: Perceived Ease of Use – Hypothesises Paths.....	164
Figure 18: Perceived Enjoyment – Hypothesised Paths.....	166
Figure 19: Network Ties – Hypothesised Paths	167
Figure 20: Perceived Anonymity – Hypothesised Paths	169
Figure 21: Social Capital – Hypothesised Paths.....	173
Figure 22: Perceived Ease of Use – Items with Standardised Coefficients	203
Figure 23: Perceived Enjoyment – Items with Standardised Coefficients	204
Figure 24: Network Ties – Items with Standardised Coefficients	205
Figure 25: Member Anonymity – Items with Standardised Coefficients.....	206
Figure 26: Sense of Belonging – Items with Standardised Coefficients	207
Figure 27: Shared Language – Items with Standardised Coefficients.....	208
Figure 28: Shared Vision – Items with Standardised Coefficients.....	208

Figure 29: Social Trust – Items with Standardised Coefficients.....	209
Figure 30: Reciprocity – Items with Standardised Coefficients	210
Figure 31: Social Capital.....	211
Figure 32: Path Analysis Model – full data set	216
Figure 33: Information Seekers Path Analysis Model	219
Figure 34: Socialisers Path Analysis Model	220
Figure 35: Full Structural Model.....	221

Chapter One

Introduction

1.0 Background

The last three decades have seen exponential growth in the number of internet users (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005). Statistics show that more than forty percent of the world's population today has an internet connection (Internet World Stats, 2015) or access to Wi-Fi (Wireless Fidelity). Furthermore, with technological advancements in products such as Smart phones, iPads and laptops, access to information through the World Wide Web is now faster, easier, and more accessible (Savic, 2013). This has led to a significant increase in its marketing and communications applications (Ko et al., 2005).

From a business and marketing perspective, a major consequence of the internet's popularity and convenience is the effect it has had on consumer behaviour (Merz & Vargo, 2009; Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006). Today consumers have access to an international market and wider range of goods and services than ever before. They also have greater power with regard to purchasing decisions, due to the global plethora of brand and product information available to them (Cunniffe & Sng, 2012; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Consumers are also experiencing a new opportunity as more organisations recognise the benefits of using the internet to develop mutual affiliations, rather than a more traditional top-down approach (McWilliam, 2000). Skålén and Cova claimed: "marketing theory and practice is increasingly moving away from understanding value as produced by firms in isolation from their consumers, toward perceiving value as something that firms, consumers and other stakeholders co-create in collaboration" (2015, p. 597). This view was shared by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), who argued brands are no longer considered a firm-owned commodity; rather their value is based on an ongoing alliance between customers and brand owners. The marketing literature also widely acknowledges online brand communities (OBCs) as effective facilitators of such relationships (Backhaus, Steiner, & Lügger, 2011; Madupu & Cooley, 2010).

Online brand communities (OBCs) are online forums dedicated to a specific brand, created by either the brand owner or a group of brand admirers, to enable the exchange of information and social interaction between members of the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Koh & Kim, 2004; Kozinets, 2002). OBCs provide consumers with a

platform to share their knowledge and opinions about branded products. They offer members a place to socialise with likeminded individuals, and allow them to play a more proactive role in their relationship with the company (Skålén & Cova, 2015). For brand owners, OBCs provide valuable insights into what their consumers are saying about their products and the brand in general. They also act as an intermediary for cultivating long-term relationships with consumers by encouraging brand value co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

A review of the literature regarding OBCs highlights two key factors as critical to the ongoing success of online communities. These are a) having active members who participate regularly (participative behaviour) and b) having members who have developed a sense of belonging (SOB) to the community (Liaw, 2011; Koh & Kim, 2004; Lu et al., 2011). This is based on the reasoning that a thriving community with a substantial number of active participants is more likely to generate interesting and informational discourse, which will attract new members and retain existing ones (Madupu, 2006; Preece, 2000). In addition, a sustainable community relies on members who identify with each other and the community as a whole. This *sense of belonging* (SOB) strengthens members' attachment to the brand and increases their brand loyalty behaviours (Andersen, 2005; Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010; Kuo & Feng 2013).

OBCs differ from the majority of generic online groups or forums in that they are built on a structured set of social relationships and a collaborative attitude between members and the community as a whole (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Ridings, et al., 2002). Not only are individual OBC members committed to a specific brand, they also possess what is referred to as a *sense of virtual community*, signifying a perception of similarity with the group, common goals and values (Blanchard & Markus, 2008; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In OBCs the community in its entirety has an accrued a level of *social capital* (Chi, Chan, Seow, & Tam, 2009; Wasko & Faraj, 2000), meaning that the culture is built on mutual trust between members who share the same language and vision and exhibit reciprocal behaviours (Field, 2003; Liao & Chou, 2011). OBCs also possess characteristics referred to as *markers of a genuine community*, demonstrated by a fierce brand loyalty amongst members, along with a collective distrust of other brands. Members indulge in a shared history of the brand and have a sense of duty to uphold the moral compass of the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

The brand loyalty traits of OBCs and the substance of the connections between members not only differentiate them from online communities in general, but also highlight their significance to organisations and marketing practitioners who aim to develop brand value co-creative relationships with their consumers. According to Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005), facilitation of OBCs is critical for brands to succeed in today's cluttered, competitive marketing environments. Brands need to stand out amongst the many alternatives available; they need to be at the top of consumers' evoked set of products (Huang, 1999). Building a solid relationship between the customer and the brand through the provision and support of OBCs and increasing brand loyalty behaviours therefore gives companies a higher chance of success over the long term (Algesheimer et al, 2005; Lhotakova, 2012).

The value of successful OBCs is reflected in the substantial growth in the number of organisations that provide advice on how to develop them and the positive results they are seeing for their clients. Business Wire (2007) published a report on "Lithium Technologies" (Lithium), an organisation with many successful clients such as Dell, Nintendo and Comcast, and one of many businesses established to provide companies with solutions for building effective online communities. In a recent post (Feb, 2015) on the Lithium Technologies website, the company claimed approximately a 50% increase in new business since 2007 and "a record number of clients" by 2013. This emphasises the benefits for organisations of developing OBCs for their consumers (Lithium, 2015). In a press release posted on Lithium's website, the results from a recent study of Sony's "PlayStation Community" not only indicated that their online community attracted more than three million unique visitors per month, they also showed a high percentage of their members had developed a deeper engagement with the brand, contributing to an increase in online sales (Lithium, 2015).

It is not always a company or brand owner that initiates an OBC. Studies have shown that some of the most successful online communities were established by people who were not aligned to the company in any way, but had created a community based purely on their "love of the brand" (McWilliam, 2000). These self-initiated online communities don't always have the rights to use the brand name, so they fabricate a name for the group but are nevertheless considered a brand community due to their common interest in a specific brand. For example, one of the OBCs in this study is a very successful

community devoted to Lego®¹ who call themselves “The Brickset Community”. Other unofficial OBCs include the BMW®² devoted group known as “Bimmerfest”, and the Rolex®³ community referred to as “New Turfers”. These communities are of significant benefit to organisations as the majority of members are loyal purchasers and regular users of the brand. Discussions in fan-based OBCs are open and honest with regard to the company’s products or services (Hayward & Leader, 2013; Kim & Jin, 2006; Mathwick, 2006), and members tend to be knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the brand. This not only keeps existing members interested, but also attracts new visitors to the site who are seeking information (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2011).

The importance of providing a platform for consumers to glean product and brand information from a credible source was substantiated by the 2013 Nielson Global Online Consumer Survey (Nielson, 2014), which found that recommendations by friends and opinions posted online were the most trusted forms of advertising globally. Seven out of ten consumers surveyed put their trust in the opinions of other customers who posted information online. Research also indicates that consumers are more trusting of information from customers who have had personal experience with a product, rather than information offered by the brand owner (Christodoulidas, 2008). These findings were supported by Cunniffe and Sng (2012), who suggested that more than half the population in the US conducted a thorough online search prior to making a purchasing decision (Shopper Sciences, 2011).

Corporate websites that supply product or brand information are not enough to motivate customers to return or develop relationships with other consumers, whereas a community built around a brand encourages continued interaction (participative behaviour) and builds long-lasting bonds between community members and the brand community (sense of belonging) (Cova & Pace, 2006; Mathwick, 2006). Furthermore, the collaborative nature of OBCs and the knowledgeability of their members provides an ideal environment for converting information seekers into more active participants (socialisers), thereby ensuring the continued success of the community (Li, 2011; Casaló et al., 2007; McAlexander et al., 2002; Thompson & Sinha, 2008; Tsai et al., 2011; Woisetschläger et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2010).

¹ Lego is a brand of plastic bricks that are used mainly by children to build different structures.

² BMW is a well-regarded brand of automobile.

³ Rolex is a prestigious watch brand.

Whether an OBC is created by the company or by fans of the brand, there is substantial empirical research to suggest that brand-loyal consumers are an organisation's most valuable asset (Junjun, 2010; Madupu, 2006; Mao, 2010; Sasmita & Suki, 2014) and social interaction between members of OBCs fosters long-term relationships that co-create brand value and stimulate brand loyalty behaviours (Brodie et al., 2011; Casaló et al., 2007; Cova & Pace, 2007; Mathwick, 2006; McAlexander et al., 2002; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008; Shang et al., 2006). For example, the emotional attachment that members acquire through their commitment to an OBC has the capacity to:

- Strengthen positive corporate feeling among members of the community (McAlexander et al., 2002; Rosenbaum, Ostrom, & Kuntze, 2005);
- Augment new product acceptance (Simoes-Brown, Juhasz & Schuch, 2014);
- Encourage brand recommendation (Algesheimer et al., 2005);
- Increase positive word-of-mouth advertising (Algesheimer et al, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Shang & Liao, 2006); and
- Promote continued purchase and use of the branded product (Koh & Kim, 2004).

Successful OBCs not only provide customers and organisations with invaluable information regarding consumer usage of the brand, they also inspire brand loyalty behaviours which contribute to the long-term success of the brand (Chung, Lee, & Heath, 2013; Emari, Jafari, & Mogaddam, 2012; Sasmita & Suki, 2014).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Increased global competition has led to companies competing for market share more fiercely than ever before (Casalo et al., 2008; Royo, Vela, & Casamassima, 2009), and traditional marketing approaches have proved to be inadequate in today's internet-driven environment (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2006). Previous research indicates that companies need to develop and sustain long-term, co-creative relationships with their consumers in order to compete with rival brands and increase brand value, (Casalo et al., 2008; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Royo, Vela, & Casamassima, 2009; Skålén & Cova, 2015). Studies also show that OBCs are effective marketing tools in helping to achieve this outcome (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

The extent to which companies are creating and supporting OBCs across all product categories is an indication that this is a growing trend, as companies realise the significant competitive advantage OBCs are able to offer their brand (Madupu, 2006; Junjun, 2010). This view has been endorsed by Skålén & Cova (2015) and Ganley and Lampe, who claimed that “this form of online organisation is creating a large impact in the business community” (2009, p. 268). However, one of the biggest challenges organisations and marketing practitioners face today is creating an ongoing and successful OBC (Lhotakova, 2012). This study addresses that gap and provides organisations with a deeper understanding of the critical success factors in OBCs by identifying the variables that influence them.

The literature identified a number of online community-related studies with incorporated theories to understand consumer attitudes and their effect on participative behaviour, such as the “Technology Acceptance Model” (Heijden, 2004; Hsu & Lu, 2007), the “Useability and Sociability Framework” (Preece, 2001), and the “Uses and Gratifications Paradigm” (Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). However, findings differ depending on the field of inquiry (psychology, marketing, business) and the type of online community being examined (professional, open-source, commercial). There is little consistency in the literature, and while some aspects of each of these theories can be applied to OBCs, not all the elements are pertinent.

Orientation of the community is another factor that has an effect on the results of online community research. For example, Sicilia and Palazon (2008) who based their study on members in a soft drink community found that OBCs rely on social interaction to be successful. In direct contrast Shang, Chen, & Liao (2006) conducted research on a community of computer enthusiasts and claimed that providing information is the key to a successful community. Disparities in these findings indicate that, despite the same type of community (both were OBCs), the nature of the community (hedonistic or utilitarian) has a significant effect on the outcome of the research.

There is a preponderance of research relating to Asian online communities in countries such as Taiwan (Chen & Liao, 2006; Lin, 2009; Ming, 2009; Shih, Hu, & Farn, 2010; Shang et al., 2006), China (Li, 2011; Lu, Phang, & Yu, 2011; Zhou, 2011), and Korea (Koh, Kim, Butler, & Bock, 2007), but a significant lack of studies from a western perspective or incorporating a worldwide sample. Organisations today operate in a global

marketplace and it is therefore critical to understand how consumers of different cultures and backgrounds behave. Furthermore, given that OBCs are hosted on the internet, are accessible to consumers worldwide and gaining in numbers, deeper examination of global consumers will produce insightful data.

Existing research on OBCs focuses predominantly on brand-related benefits and outcomes associated with success, such as brand loyalty, strong brand image and positive word of mouth (WOM) (Kuo & Feng, 2013; Casalo et al., 2007; Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006), the structure of OBCs (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010) and the characteristics of OBCs (Brogi, 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Research with regard to developing a SOB in OBCs or the influences on participative behaviour is lacking. OBCs are a relatively new field of study and due to their online aspect are constantly evolving, signifying the need to update existing research in order to meet the changing needs of consumers.

1.2 Research Purpose

The literature widely acknowledges *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* as critical factors to the success and sustainability of OBCs (Casalo et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2008; Woisetschläger et al., 2008; Koh & Kim, 2004). Despite increasing numbers of companies hosting and supporting OBCs, there is still a significant lack of consistent empirical research into the influences on these constructs. Gaining an understanding of the attributes that influence members to actively engage over the long-term (participative behaviour) and experience a sense of belonging (SOB) to the community will therefore make a substantial contribution to this field of study. This research also provides organisations and marketers with an understanding of consumer behaviour in OBCs and knowledge to develop successful OBCs in the future (Algesheimer et al., 2010; Casalo et al., 2007; Anderson, 2005; Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to identify both individual- and community-level influences on *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* (SOB) in an online brand community environment, and to determine the strength of the inter-relationships between these constructs. The scope of the study is based on the theories evident from the literature, validated in the qualitative research and tested in the quantitative research. Differentiation between individual and community-type influences was based on the assumption that, although members of OBCs are motivated by factors related

to their own personal experience of the community, such as network ties or how easily they can navigate the site, their behaviour is also influenced by the relational structure of the community as a whole, represented by the level of social capital accrued.

This study also explored variances in the strength of the inter-relationships between constructs when comparing members who visit sites predominantly to gather information (information seekers) and those who actively participate (socialisers). Additionally, a global, cross-cultural sample was engaged for this research to address issues associated with homogenous samples, to counter the predominance of Asian research and the lack of worldwide studies in this field as outlined in the statement of the problem.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: What are the individual-level factors that influence *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* to online brand communities?

RQ2: What are the community-level factors that influence *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* to an online brand community?

RQ3: Does the strength of the influences on *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* to online brand communities differ depending on whether the member visits the community to gather information or to socialise?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This research examined influences on members' *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* (SOB) to online brand communities (OBCs) from both an individual and community perspective. The study sought to identify the influences on the critical success factors in OBCs, and examine the strength of significant relationships between information seekers and socialisers. The results will give stakeholders insights into the factors that affect their members individually and as a community, and adds a new element to existing research with a more comprehensive investigation into consumer behaviour in OBCs. There are several areas of significance associated with this research:

- The findings will provide marketers, brand owners and OBC administrators with information about the factors most likely to increase member participation and sense of belonging (SOB) to the community. This will enable stakeholders to more effectively design communities to meet the needs of their members; encourage existing members to continue their relationship with the community, and attract new members to join. According to Anderson (2005), not everyone who visits an online brand community is necessarily a fan of the brand. Some visitors may be information seekers or simply curious about the brand. Nevertheless, over time there is potential for them to become involved in the community and form an attachment to the brand if their needs are being met by the OBC.
- The results from this study contribute to research on consumer behaviour in online brand communities where few studies currently exist. The research was scoped on a global scale to provide new and more exhaustive perspectives, since the majority of previous online community research focused on only one country and on an Asian cultural perspective, in some cases not specific to OBCs (Koh, Kim, Butler, & Bock, 2007; Li, 2011; Lin, 2009; Lu, Phang, & Yu, 2011; Ming, 2009; Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006; Shih, Hu, & Farn, 2010; Zhou, 2011).
- The findings make a valid contribution to the current literature with regard to co-creation of brand value through conversations with consumers and brand owners, with OBCs effectively facilitating this conversational space (Brodie et al., 2009; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Skålén & Cova, 2015). The increasing relevance of this field of research is mirrored by the influx of more recent research examining the role of online brand communities as a strategic element of brand value co-creation (Pirc, 2015; Skålén & Cova, 2014; Zhang & He, 2013). Empirical evidence relating to participative behaviour and developing a sense of belonging in OBCs therefore forms an important component of the study.
- Studies have shown the prevalence of online product information has prompted consumers to make most of their purchasing decisions prior to reaching the shops (Cunniffe & Sng, 2012). There is also evidence to suggest that brand choice is established even before the online search is undertaken, due to an emotional attachment consumers develop with specific brands. The strength of the

relationship between the consumer and the brand is therefore fundamental to their purchasing behaviour (Cunniffe & Sng, 2012; Park et al., 2008). This study provides a framework for understanding the influences on *sense of belonging* (SOB), a construct that represents the attachment consumers develop with a brand through OBCs.

1.5 Research Design Overview

A mixed methods approach was considered most appropriate for this study in order to gather both exploratory and statistical data to address the research questions, test the hypotheses, add depth to the investigation and consequently the research framework (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The research was undertaken in two stages. Stage one was of a qualitative nature and involved a netnography study (stage one, part A), and focus groups (stage one, part B). Stage two involved a quantitative online survey of consumers who used OBCs. The two-stage method of research was used to build a solid foundation of knowledge from both the literature review and the qualitative research (stage one, A and B), which in turn was used to develop the conceptual model and research hypotheses. This process also ensured the questionnaire used in stage two was not only relevant to the sample, but also based on solid theory (Davis, Golicic, & Boerstler, 2010).

The netnography study in stage one involved observation of members in several OBCs as an effective method of gaining insights into the topics members were predominantly discussing online. It also allowed for gathering data related to member numbers and levels of participation across different communities which was important for comparative analysis (Kozinets, 1999). Focus groups were used because they are ideal for generating open discussion between members of different OBCs in an environment conducive to sharing information (Breen, 2007). In this study, the focus groups provided a platform for members to offer first-hand opinions regarding the influences on their participation and the factors that strengthen the ability of members to identify with OBCs. This information was used to increase the validity of the constructs measured in the questionnaire, and subsequently the relationships between factors in the structural model (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Stewart, 2009). Chapter three provides a detailed discussion of the qualitative methodology and approach undertaken in this research.

The questionnaire used in the second stage of the study was used to explore the influences on critical success factors in OBCs, and was drawn from the findings of the literature review and the qualitative research. The questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics (Qualtrics Labs, 2014), a robust software package designed specifically for online surveys. Existing scales were adopted and modified where needed to suit the current study, and the instrument was posted on a number of successful online brand community forums. Data from the surveys were analysed using SPSS (version 22) for exploratory factor analysis, followed by confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling (Holmes-Smith, 2010) using AMOS (version 22). A brief summary of the methodology is provided in Figure 1, and a full description in chapter five, Quantitative Findings.

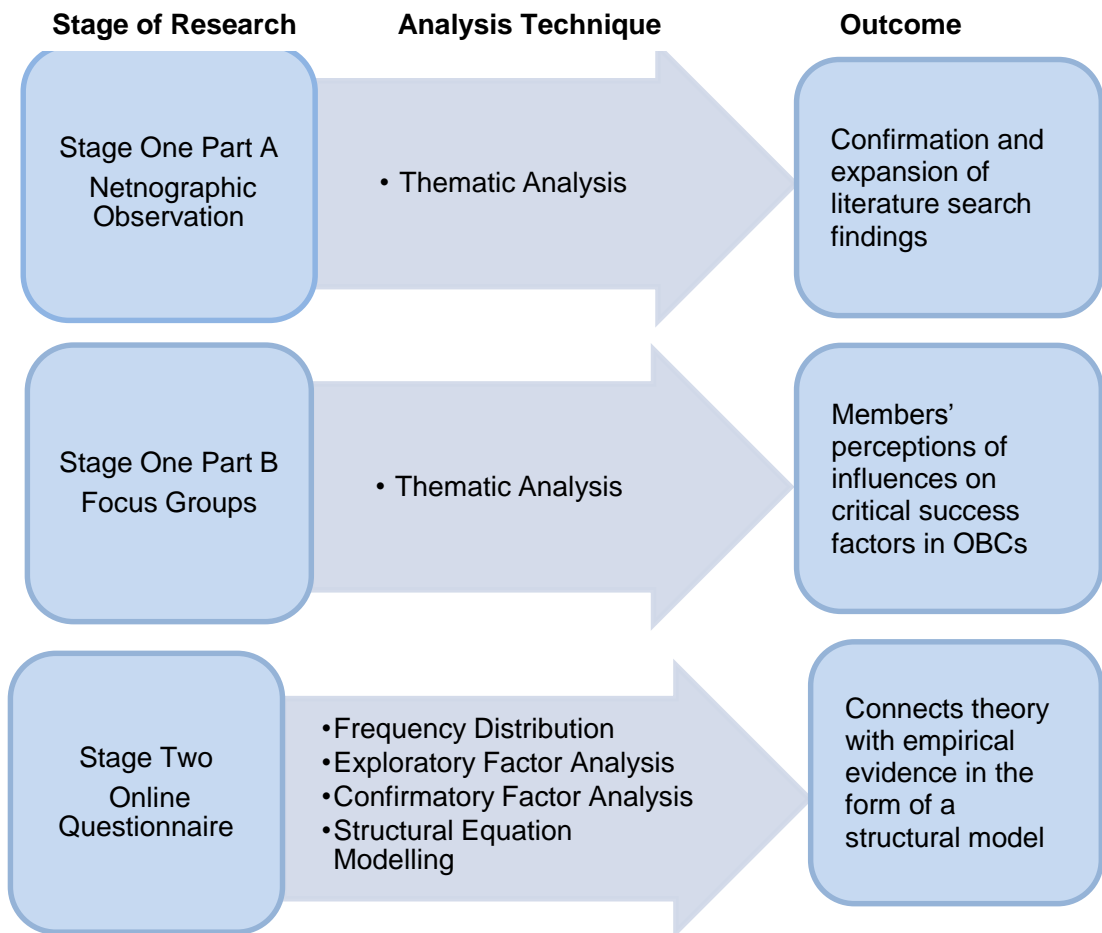


Figure 1 *Overview of Research Design*

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. Chapter one provides a brief outline of the importance of the research and how it was conducted, and states the research questions. Chapter two presents a review of the literature on online brand communities. Chapter three covers the research methodology and findings from the qualitative stage of the research. Chapter four highlights the hypotheses for this study and provides an overview of each construct measured. Chapter five discusses the quantitative methodology including the questionnaire design, scale development, and sample. Chapter six provides a summary of the results of the data analysis from the online survey. Chapter seven includes a discussion of the results and chapter eight provides the concluding comments for the thesis. The following chapter will provide a review of the literature to date summarising the research relevant to OBC's.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature to build a theoretical foundation with regard to consumer behaviour in online brand communities (OBCs). It provides a theoretical background, whilst also identifying attributes and factors that are critical to the ongoing success of OBCs. The results from the literature search were used in conjunction with the findings from a preliminary qualitative study, to build a conceptual framework model illustrating the influences on the critical factors for the ongoing success of OBCs. The model was then tested using quantitative research.

In general terms an OBC is a group of people who voluntarily associate online to share an interest in a specific brand. However, as the title implies, there are three fundamental contextual elements to online brand communities. Firstly they are a community; secondly they are accessed via the internet; and thirdly and most significantly, they are focused around a specific brand (Nambisan & Baron, 2009). Consequently, when building a theoretical base from which to address the research objectives, and in order to understand the characteristics of OBCs, all these dimensions need to be taken into consideration as core elements of the structural background to the study.

To identify the factors critical to the ongoing success of OBCs it is necessary to have an in-depth understanding of the concept of community and how it has changed to meet the needs and lifestyles of people today. Additionally, the use of the internet as the means of communication impacts greatly on the interactive experiences of members. It is therefore logical to conclude that theories related to online communities in general will reveal the types of variables that impact critical success and sustainability factors in OBCs. Furthermore, the brand is integral to the existence of OBCs and likely to have a considerable influence on members' decisions to involve themselves in brand-affiliated communities. The literature on branding can therefore provide insights into the relationships between consumers and brands and their effects on the survival of OBCs.

The literature review has been separated into two main sections. Section one provides a comprehensive discussion of the literature pertaining to the concept of

“community” from an historical and contemporary perspective. The online community literature is then explored, drawing on theories used in online community research related to the motivations and benefits of member involvement. This is followed by an examination of the branding literature which ties together the three structural aspects of the OBC construct and emphasises the commercial opportunities associated with OBCs.

Section two discusses the factors identified in the literature as critical to the success and sustainability of OBCs, as well as the proposed influences on these factors when applied specifically to OBCs. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive discussion of the marketing implications of successful and sustainable OBCs.

Section One

2.1. The Community Aspect of Online Brand Communities (OBCs)

Historically there has been theoretical disagreement regarding a universal definition of the term “community”. Despite more accord in recent research, there is still some debate about using the word when referring to any group of people or settlement, rather than groups that exhibit specific characteristics that bond people together in a genuine community environment (Brogi, 2013; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009; Obst & Smith, 2002; Jones, 1997).

An exploration of all the community literature since the late nineteenth century generally indicates two main schools of thought with regard to the definition of a genuine community (Brint, 2001; Carlson, Suter, Brown, 2008; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2002). The more traditional view is that community refers to a group of people with an association or commonality to a social structure within a specific location or neighbourhood, typically rural (Gusfield, 1975; Memmi, 2006). The more contemporary view is that the concept of community is not a grouping of people restricted to a specific location or place, but a psychological state where people are connected by their identification with each other and their sense of belonging (SOB) to a group of people who have something in common (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Obst & Smith, 2002; Jones, 1997; Weinreich, 1997).

The community literature also indicates that most supporters of the former view are of the opinion that the characteristics found in communities of place embody what is good in society, and that modernisation has destroyed the essence of what a close-knit traditional community represents (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Obst & Smith, 2002). Conversely, proponents of the latter perspective suggest, as the feeling of being in a community is a state of mind not reliant on people being in one place, modernisation has not caused its downfall, but rather enabled it to flourish (Jones, 1995). Such differing viewpoints appear to stem mainly from the works of Tönnies ([1887] 1957) and Durkheim ([1893] 1984), whose opposing ideas are often referred to in community research (Brogi, 2013; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Brint, 2001).

In 1887 German sociologist Tönnies wrote several essays on the complexities of communities and attempted to differentiate between what he referred to as community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*). The premise of his work was based on the idea that living in a village was superior to an urban way of life; a theory he attempted to illustrate by making distinctions between the two concepts. Tönnies ([1887] 1957) suggested that people who live in a community enjoy close social relationships that connect each other and the group as a whole, whereas people living in urban societies have looser relationships, are less intimate and disconnected (Brint, 2001; Means & Evans, 2012). He was convinced that the traditional culture of community living was being destroyed by the rise of mass marketing, limited liability, and commerce (Tönnies, [1887] 1957). Tönnies also suggested that the breakdown of traditional community living was responsible for increasing social instability (Means & Evans, 2012; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Brint, 2001).

Durkheim ([1897] 1951), a well-renowned French sociologist who penned several books in the late nineteenth century on the subject of socialism and community living (Brint, 2001; Means & Evans, 2012) was of the opinion that Tönnies' ([1887] 1957) theory was irrational and questionable. Durkheim ([1893] 1984) pointed out that the distinctions used by Tönnies ([1887] 1957) to differentiate community from society were too narrow, didn't take into account all communities of place, did not exhibit similar characteristics, and some were less communal than urban groups and vice versa.

Although Durkheim ([1893] 1984) agreed with Tönnies' ([1887] 1957) view of the important role played by communities in providing social support and moral guidance to community members, he also believed that the concept of community should be based on a set of variable properties guided by human interaction, found in both rural and urban living (Brint, 2001). This view was reinforced by Forster (2004) who argued that rural neighbourhoods could be considered “accidental communities”, whereas communities built around an interest rather than a place are more “intentional” and therefore more likely to include people who exhibit a feeling of community with one another. Royal and Rossi (1996, p. 395) further supported this theory and observed “the significance of community as a territorial phenomenon has declined, while the significance of community as a relational phenomenon has grown”.

The work of both Tönnies ([1887] 1957) and Durkheim ([1893] 1984) feature extensively in the community literature throughout the latter part of the twentieth century. Both views have been the subject of continued discussion and debate. For instance, in his paper “Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement”, Hillery (1955) pointed out that he had come across at least 94 different definitions of the word “community” in the literature, most of which still tended to reflect the opposing views of either Tönnies ([1887] 1957) or Durkheim ([1893] 1984). This suggests there were still advocates for a community based on territory and for the notion of a community made up of social networks of relationships not restricted to a neighbourhood. Durkheim's ([1893] 1984) approach appears to be more prominent in the subsequent literature and holds more relevance for the OBCs in this study, which by their very nature are unrestricted by place and have embraced modernisation as a means to interact more easily (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Weinreich, 1997). An overview of research since the 1970s indicates that the emphasis has shifted from the former to the latter. For example, Pahl (1970) suggested all communities are imagined and geographical restrictions do not apply to the basic concept of what a community represents. Bernard (1973) intimated that people are involved in relationships that overcome locale; they are in communities based on a shared social mentality. Anderson (1983) added to this assumption by suggesting all communities larger than a village are only viable through imagination around a shared cultural practice and geography is not an issue. This view was reiterated by Hampton and Wellman (2003, p. 278) who suggested “communities consist of far-flung kinship, workplace, friendship,

interest group, and neighbourhood ties that concatenate to form networks providing sociability, aid, support, and social control”.

To add to the theory that communities are not place-restricted, Wellman (1999) proposed people have “personal communities”; groups they are associated with outside of their neighbourhood or settlement, and there is a difference between groups of people; whether place-based or interest-based, and genuine communities. This belief is based on members having a “psychological sense of community” which defines whether a neighbourhood, interest group or settlement can be considered a genuine community.

2.1.1 Sense of Community

Sarason (1974) was one of the earlier psychologists to address the concept of psychological sense of community (PSOC) within the field of community research. He argued that when people are part of a network of dependable relationships in close-knit neighbourhoods they are less likely to experience feelings of loneliness and alienation. They have a sense of belonging (SOB) to a group and exhibit what they refer to as PSOC, which in turn affects their participative behaviour within the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). Newborough and Chavis (1986) acknowledged this theory with their own findings which confirmed that members with PSOC are critical to the success of a genuine community.

Following on from the work of Sarason (1974), Doolittle and MacDonald (1978) developed a forty-item sense of community scale (SCS) based on 5 factors associated with living in neighbourhood communities. The scale was used to differentiate between neighbourhoods of people who exhibited low, medium and high levels of PSOC. The results of their study indicate that anonymity or privacy, also referred to as pro-urbanism, had an inverse effect on conversing with neighbours. They also found a direct relationship between SOB to the community and regular interaction with neighbours, and a link between reduced levels of anonymity when people feel safe and at home. The findings from Doolittle and MacDonald’s (1978) study, although specific to communities of place, provide an interesting supposition when applied to OBCs where members are predominantly anonymous. For example, when people in communities interact with one another, according to Doolittle and MacDonald (1978) they develop a feeling of safety and belonging that reduces their perceived anonymity. This feeling of being recognised by the

group encourages continued participation in the community. Colombo, Mosso, & DePiccoli, (2001), and Chavis and Wandersman (1990) also found participative behaviour decreased alienation and anonymity in communities. However, all these studies focused on communities of place which limits the breadth of the findings.

Glynn (1981) created a different measure of psychological sense of community (PSC) to compare the findings from two different types of communities; residents from an Israeli kibbutz and two Maryland neighbourhoods. The results of Glynn's (1981) study show that members exhibited higher levels of PSC in the kibbutz than in the Maryland suburbs, supporting his theory that different levels of PSC are found in communities with dissimilar characteristics. For example, the Maryland neighbourhoods differed from the kibbutz in that people were members of neighbourhood communities mainly due to circumstance, whereas individuals who joined a kibbutz did so purposefully (Forster, 2004). As with Doolittle and MacDonald (1978), Glynn (1981) also found the ability to function well in a community positively related to PSC, indicating that the easier it is to participate in a community and interact with members, the more individuals can relate to the community.

In order to expand and improve on the work of Sarason (1974), Doolittle and Macdonald (1978), Glynn (1981), and McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed a theoretical framework to describe the elements that comprise a sense of community (SOC) based on four distinct dimensions. McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 19) claimed their model "can provide a framework for comparing and contrasting various communities". Figure 2 is a theoretical model (adapted by the researcher) and illustrates the four dimensions and relevant criteria of SOC theory, as proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986).

1. **Membership** is the feeling that members have a sense of belonging (SOB) to the community, share a sense of personal relatedness with other members and are bound by the perceived norms of the community.

2. **Influence** refers to the influence a member feels they have on the community and vice versa. Members need to feel they have status in the group.

3. **Integration and fulfilment of needs** represents the expectation of members that their requirements will be met through membership to the community and they will be rewarded in some way for their participation.

4. **Shared emotional connection** is the shared history or experiences members develop through their membership to the community, which creates an emotional attachment to the community and its members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

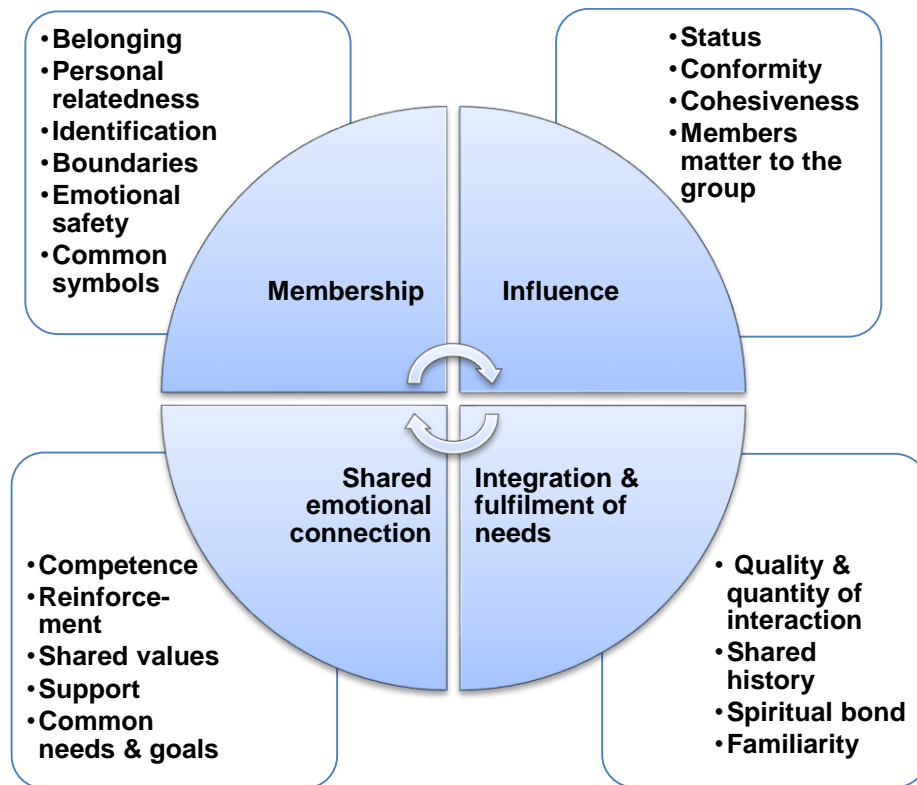


Figure 2 *Sense of Community Dynamics*. Adapted from McMillan and Chavis (1986)

Although there is continued support for the multi-dimensional aspects of SOC proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), there is some debate about the components presented in their model. For example, a number of studies (Long & Perkins, 2003; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009; Obst et al., 2001, 2002a, 2002b) found that the proposed elements in McMillan and Chavis's (1986) SOC framework not only converge, but relate to one another differently depending on the type of community or type of participation members engage in, therefore supporting the suggestion that community type influences the outcomes of SOC research (Glynn, 1981).

To test the impact of type of community on the dimensions and strength of SOC, Obst et al. (2002b) conducted research using identical multiple scales and the same sample to measure SOC in an interest based community as compared with a neighbourhood

community. Their results confirmed the relevance of all the elements in McMillan and Chavis's (1986) SOC framework to both groups, and also found the constructs were interrelated and held different meanings. Furthermore, it was apparent that a new dimension, referred to as "conscious identification" was needed to gauge how well members identify with others in a community (Obst et al., 2001, 2002a, 2002b). In their comparative analyses of community types, these authors found participants had a significantly higher level of SOC with their interest group than with their neighbourhood, and sense of belonging had the highest relevance for the interest community members (Obst et al., 2002b). The lowest predictor of SOC in the interest community was the influence factor, while in the neighbourhood community, conscious identification had the least relevance (Obst et al., 2002b).

The findings from Obst et al.'s (2002b) study were substantiated by further research (Obst et al., 2005), where "sense of community index" (SCI) (Obst & White, 2005; Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman, & Chavis, 1990) and the three-dimensional strength of group identification scale (Cameron, 2004) were employed to measure the levels of SOC in three different communities to which a sample of students were affiliated. The results revealed the lowest SOC in the neighbourhood group, mid-level SOC in the student community and the highest level of SOC in the chosen interest group. These results support the work of Forster (2004) who suggested that communities of interest are more intentional than neighbourhoods, and people develop a stronger sense of identification with the groups they join voluntarily. This view was also reiterated by Obst et al. (2002b, p. 115) who stated "this may be seen as evidence for Durkheim's observation that modern society tends to develop community around interest rather than locality".

The findings of Obst et al. (2002b) were based on the premise that people in a geographic community require more tangible types of support, and similarity with members is not as important as safety and security. However, more than a quarter of the participants in Obst et al.'s (2001) interest community study used the internet to participate in the community and had never met their fellow members face-to-face, so there may be a link between the characteristics of OBCs, such as members' anonymity, and the importance of identifying with other community members in order to be recognised (Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978; Forster, 2004).

Further expansion on prior research into SOC theory was provided by Mannarini and Fedi (2009) who designed a questionnaire using the Italian sense of community index (SCI) developed by Davidson and Cotter (1989), also with participants from several different types of community groups, including political parties, volunteer groups, cultural associations and neighbourhoods. The results of their research show that, although all the components in McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model were present in their study, they are indistinguishable from one another and have different connotations. Mannarini and Fedi (2009) concluded that the concept of SOC is more complex than McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed. For example, Mannarini & Fedi (2009) found links between the reasons why members participate in a group environment and their feelings of belonging and attachment to the community, both of which have an effect on the authenticity of the community. The respondents who admitted they didn't participate a great deal with other members in the community scored low on the SOC scale, and were inclined to have a negative perception of the community, whereas respondents who had a higher score on the SOC scale indicated they were more satisfied with the community and had positive feelings about being part of a neighbourly group, suggesting "the way individuals perceive community affects both *sense of community* and *participation*" (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009, p. 224).

A review of the SOC literature consistently suggests a positive relationship between elements of SOC and participation in community groups (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Levine & Perkins, 1987; Obst et al., 2002; Peterson & Reid, 2003; Speer, 2000; Taló, Mannarini, & Rochira, 2014; Wenger, 1998). According to Mannarini and Fedi (2009, p. 218) "the concept of participation seems to be intertwined with the concept of community", further emphasised by a quote from one of their participants who said: "you can't do anything without participation.....if more individuals participate, then they become a community, but if they don't they're not a community" (Interview # 51). Chavis and Wandersman (1990) acknowledged SOC as a catalyst for participation, and Taló et al. (2014) concluded both community participation and SOC stand out as interrelated key factors that promote community development, whether through civic forms of community participation (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990) or political participation (Anderson, 2009).

Although the significance of participative behaviour in communities and SOC is evident in the literature, the direction of the relationship is often unclear (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009). For example, Levine and Perkins (1987) proposed that SOC and participative

behaviour develop in parallel. Members interact with each other in a community, over time they develop an attachment to the community and this in turn encourages continued participation. Regardless of the type of community there is general agreement that participative behaviour and elements of SOC have a positive effect on the community as a whole and the individuals who actively involve themselves in the community (Long & Perkins, 2007).

Advantages to the community and their members have been recognised in several studies, once again suggesting that community type has an influence on outcomes associated with SOC. For example, in an organisational environment such as a community of practice, the benefits of a community with members with high levels of SOC include increased job satisfaction and loyalty (Burroughs & Eby, 1998), while in place-based communities higher levels of helping behaviour is expected (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The outcomes most relevant to this study suggest that, in brand communities, members' SOC manifests itself as increased brand loyalty behaviours (Koh & Kim, 2003; Marzocchi, Morandin, & Bergami, 2011) and SOC is key to the sustainability of online brand communities (Sutanto, Kankanhalli, & Tan, 2011).

Sense of community is clearly a context-dependent concept (Talo et al., 2014) and its broad application, as revealed in the literature, highlights both the adaptability of the construct and its significance in community-based research. The literature identifies multiple elements in the conceptualisation of SOC and thought to define the concept, depending on the setting of the research (Perkins et al., 1990; Peterson, 2008; Taló, Mannarini, & Rochira (2014) and consequently, several measures have been used to assess SOC across a range of different settings. For example, although the Sense of Community Index (SCI) derived from McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model appears to be the most widely used measure (Long & Perkins, 2003; Perkins et al., 1990; Taló et al., 2014) there are numerous versions of the scale and it is often used in conjunction with other measures depending on the focus of the study. For example, different variations have been applied to the workplace (Pretty & McCarthy, 1991; Pretty, McCarthy, & Catano, 1992), religious communities (Miers & Fisher, 2002), neighbourhoods (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Obst et al., 2002), and interest based communities (Obst et al., 2001, 2002b).

The significance of SOC with regard to the success and sustainability of all types of communities is evident in the literature. For example, Taló et al. (2014, p. 1) observed "the

literature generally agrees that SOC signifies a healthy community and exhibits an extra-individual quality of emotional interconnectedness observed in collective lives”. This view was also supported by Obst and White (2005, p. 2) who suggested that “from a psychological framework, the concept of psychological sense of community (PSOC) is the defining element of any healthy community”. Furthermore, SOC is gaining interest in online community research, where it is referred to as a “sense of virtual community” (SOVC) and has been adapted to reflect the traits of an online environment (Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, & Tarkiainen, 2011; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Blanchard, 2007; 2008). The online community literature section of this thesis therefore explores the application of SOC in an internet based environment.

Another theory associated with the concept of community, referred to as “markers of a genuine community” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), relates predominantly to communities of interest affiliated with a brand.

2.1.2 Markers of a genuine Community

In their work related to the dissolution of traditional communities, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) argued that the introduction of railroads, communication technology, and mass commerce meant people were no longer restricted by geography; they could live and work in different locations and still be in touch with each other to share common interests. They were of the opinion that these changes had successfully widened the concept of communities from more traditional communities of place, to include communities of interest, without losing the core attributes of a genuine community. This view was substantiated by Algesheimer et al (2005), and Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006), who suggested that brand-focused interest groups specifically exhibit what Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) referred to as “markers of genuine communities”, thereby supporting the theory that modernisation had not caused the breakdown of community, but rather extended it.

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) drew an interesting conclusion about marketing and consumer culture having followed a similar developmental trajectory as advances in communication technology. They claimed media sources such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and more recently the internet, have brought news, information and commercial advertising to people simultaneously on a national and international level, thereby allowing the media to surpass any geographical restrictions. Geographical

community boundaries have become global, and consumer-related communities of interest have proliferated. Mass media has popularised global marketing communities and encouraged consumer research (Algesheimer et al, 2005; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

In a review of sociology literature, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) proposed certain traits differentiate a collection of people in a group setting from a “community”, and without these essential attributes a group could not call itself a genuine community. Although this supposition is akin to SOC theory, sense of community comes from an individual perspective, whereas markers of a community include *consciousness of kind*, *shared rituals and traditions*, and *moral responsibility* and relate to the characteristics of the community as a whole (Algesheimer et al, 2005; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

The concept of identifiable markers of a genuine community is widely accepted in the literature, predominantly in relation to brand communities of interest (Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Since the focus of this study was to build a foundation of knowledge about OBCs, Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) research is of great relevance.

2.1.2.1 Consciousness of Kind

Consciousness of kind refers to the similarity community members feel they have with each other, along with a collective sense of exclusion from non-members (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). This is a distinct characteristic of a traditional community where members are grouped together according to geographical location, such as a village community or tribe. They live in a close knit group, have SOB to the community, and a general dislike or distrust of people from outside their immediate circle. In a more modern community setting such as a brand community or internet-based group, there is still a feeling of kinship amongst members as the shared interest of the group ties them together (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). This is illustrated by brand communities such as Ford or Holden, and sporting communities such as The Raiders, or The 49’ers, as there is often a shared dislike for the opposing brands or teams and a solidarity between members (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Thompson and Sinha (2008) found evidence of consciousness of kind in several OBCs, with members publicly acknowledging enthusiasm for their favourite brand by posting messages on the company’s online forums. Consciousness of kind also

appears to relate to the membership element of SOC which suggests members have a sense of belonging to a specific group, and boundaries exist that not only include members but also exclude those not considered part of the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

2.1.2.2 Rituals and Traditions

The rituals and traditions in a community structure refer to the history of the community and the members' shared values and behaviours. In traditional groups this is demonstrated by a shared understanding of the roots of the community, shared cultural beliefs, and the use of language specific to the group (Algesheimer et al., 2005). In non-traditional communities, members have come together due to a shared interest, and although they are from diverse cultural backgrounds, they've established their own rituals and traditions related to the focus of their group (Algesheimer, et al., 2005; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). For example, Saab brand community members have a ritual of beeping, flashing their lights, or waving at other Saab owners they pass on the road to show their kinship with the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2000). Additionally, the history of the brand is fondly celebrated by members who tell stories about the origins of products that have now become obsolete (Thompson & Sinha, 2008). The integration and fulfilment aspect of SOC theory suggests members who develop SOC do so based on a shared history with other members and a feeling of familiarity (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This appears to replicate the rituals and traditions found in genuine communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

2.1.2.3 Moral Responsibility

Moral responsibility is defined as the ethical behaviour towards individuals in the group and the community population as a whole (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and is related to both traditional and modern communities. McAlexander et al. (2002) found evidence of this in their ethnographic study of Jeep owners when they attended a Jeep jamboree and witnessed the event sponsors promoting non-destructive driving as a fundamental value of Jeep owners. This behaviour supports Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) theory that members feel a sense of duty to the community as a whole, which generates collective action. In the OBCs of Thompson and Sinha's (2008) study, members spent a great deal of their time helping other members with technical issues related to the brand, again reinforcing the view that communities of all types exhibit a form of moral responsibility. It is the shared

values and reinforcement elements of SOC, found in the integration and fulfilment of needs dimension of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) SOC framework that closely resemble this marker of a community. The basis of Muniz & O'Guinn's (2001) seminal work on markers of genuine communities which has been widely accepted in subsequent research, is that the concept of community is still very much in existence, specifically in the context of brand-focused communities. This suggests that the characteristics of brand communities set them apart from communities in general because of their brand affiliation, an assumption supported by Amine and Sitz (2004, p. 4) who defined a brand community as "a self-selected, hierarchical and non-geographically bound group of consumers that share values, norms and social representations and recognize a strong feeling of membership with other members and with the group as a whole on the basis of a common attachment to a particular brand."

Social capital is another community-level theory featured prominently in the literature. This is a multidimensional construct related to the structural characteristics of the relationships between members in a community environment (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1992; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

2.1.3 Social Capital

Social capital theory is based on the premise that the relational structure of a social group has the potential to provide benefits of social value to both the individuals in the group and the group as a whole (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Fundamentally social capital exists in the pattern of links between people in a group, their shared values and understandings, and their social trust, all of which enable them to work together more efficiently (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1992; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Watson & Papamarcos, 2002). Putnam (2000) defined social capital as "the features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable people to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives".

From a social perspective this means the capital accrued through the strength of the connections that people make and nurture within an online community is inevitably what enables them to achieve more as a whole than individually (Field, 2003). This theory was corroborated by Portes (1998, p. 7) who suggested that "people must relate to one another in order to create social capital, and the advantages come from these relations rather than

oneself". In this respect social capital is no different than economic-based forms of capital such as financial capital and human capital. The higher the level of investment the better the projected return (Field, 2003).

The term "social capital" was popularised mainly by the works of Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1988, 1990) and is now widely acknowledged in the social sciences and humanities literature. Although definitions vary between scholars, there does seem to be general understanding that social capital is derived from the structure of the relationships between people in a social environment, which creates collective productivity (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Field, 2003; Granovetter, 1992; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Watson & Papamarcos, 2002). This view was supported by Coleman (1988, p S101) who suggested the social structure of a group functions as a resource for the community as a whole:

The value of the concept of social capital lies first in the fact that it identifies certain aspects of social structure by their functions, just as the concept "chair" identifies certain physical objects by their function, despite differences in form, appearance, and construction. The function identified by the concept of "social capital" is the value of these aspects of social structure to actors as resources that they can use to achieve their interests.

Opinions as to whether social capital is an asset from an individual perspective (Burt, 1997), a collective level (Wasko & Faraj, 2000) or both (Mathwick et al., 2008), and the beneficial outcomes it provides has caused much debate in the literature depending on the researcher's frame of reference. For example, from an organisational perspective the research suggests that an accrued level of social capital in business communities enhances career success (Adler & Kwon, 2001; Burt, 1992), lowers turnover rates (Burt, 1992), reduces transaction costs (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Watson & Paparmarcos, 2002), and strengthens supplier relations (Baker, 1990). Furthermore, Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998, p. 260) attributed social capital to the overall success of organisational communities.

Misra, Grimes, and Rogers (2012, p. 107) concluded positive relationships exists in an educational environment between social capital and the "connectedness between child, family member, community member, and school", which enhance academic achievement

and improve student retention. This view was supported by both Coleman (1988) and Putman (2000).

In neighbourhood communities, Kleinhans, Priemus, and Engbersen (2007) found that social capital prompts collective action, encourages long-term commitment and stronger place attachment, while Narayan and Pritchett (1997) utilised data from the Tanzania Social Capital and Poverty Survey (SCPS) and found that social capital increases the activity levels of members in rural communities of place.

With regard to communities in general, Coleman (1988, p. S108) claimed: “sometimes, the resource is merely information”, an observation of particular significance to OBCs where gathering information is often the prime objective (Liao & Chou, 2011). Despite several different views on the subject, there is general agreement that social capital theory is founded on the principle of “by making connections with one another and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things that they either could not achieve by themselves, or could only achieve with great difficulty” (Field, 2003, p. 1).

Another subject of discourse in the community literature is related to the elements that represent the construct of social capital. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) and Tsai and Ghoshal (1998) argued that conceptualisation can be achieved more effectively by separating the facets of social capital into three clusters. For example, social capital embodies three dimensions: structural, relational and cognitive, all of which relate to a number of different aspects of the construct.

- The relational dimension refers to the type of association based on a history of interactions. This includes the closeness of the individuals, the trust they share, their obligations and expectations, and how committed they are to the relationship (Granovetter, 1992; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Throughout the literature there appears to be general agreement that social trust and reciprocity are a good representation of this aspect of social capital (De Filippis, 2001; Huysman & Wulf, 2007; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Watson & Paparmarcos, 2002). In brand communities, reciprocity is likened to moral responsibility (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) and is one of the core attributes of a genuine community as opposed to a generic group.

- The cognitive dimension relates to the norms of the community or the values that members share and the common language they use with each other (Granovetter, 1992; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). These elements of social capital are predominantly referred to in the literature as a shared language and a shared vision (Huysman & Wulf, 2007; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Watson & Paparmarcos, 2002). Furthermore, in brand-affiliated communities a shared vision relates to the consciousness of kind that members exhibit (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), while a shared language is akin to the shared rituals and traditions demonstrated by members, both of which are indications of a genuine community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).
- The structural dimension represents the impersonal configuration of linkages between members of a group (Granovetter, 1992); the ties that bind their relationships, the strength of their ties, and the frequency of their interactions (Jones, Taylor, 2012; Liao & Chou, 2011; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In an organisational environment, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) referred to the structural dimension of social capital as *network ties*, however in an OBC context, social capital is embedded in the structural network of weak ties on a community level. Network ties therefore represent stronger individual-level relationships that are an outcome of relational and cognitive social capital (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Shah, Kwak, & Hobert, 2010).

Theorists suggest that in a community environment, accumulation of social capital is affected by the strength of interpersonal ties within the community (Coffé & Geys, 2007; Granovetter, 1973; Shah et al., 2001; Jones & Taylor, 2012). An additional dynamic has subsequently been identified in the social capital construct which refers to either *bridging social capital* or *bonding social capital* (Coffé & Geys, 2007; Granovetter, 1973; Pinho, 2013; Williams, 2006). Bridging social capital relates to social groups where relationships are common between individuals from very different backgrounds, such as the weak ties found in brand communities (Granovetter, 1973; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Shah, Kwak, & Hobert, 2010), while bonding social capital refers to relationships between close friends or family, known as strong ties (Granovetter, 1973).

Social groups based predominantly on weak ties provide more opportunities for individuals to widen their social networks, and therefore the number of people they grow to trust and engage with (Granovetter, 1973). This hypothesis was supported by Putnam (2000) who concluded that members of heterogeneous communities have higher levels of general trust than members of a homogenous group, a phenomenon explained by the diversity of a heterogeneous group who interact with people from a wide range of cultures and demographics and therefore learn to trust a variety of different people (Granovetter, 1973; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1989). In contrast, people with strong ties tend to have the same ideologies or interests and are therefore homogenous, a trait that makes trusting outsiders difficult and inhibits the accumulation of social capital (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). A more compromising view is that in practice, many groups include both bridging and bonding functions, but the structural dimension of social capital leans toward either one or the other (Norris, 2002).

As previously mentioned, Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) viewed brand communities as examples of heterogeneous communities, because they represent a "form of human association situated within a consumption context" (p. 426), where members from diverse backgrounds with weak ties are brought together by a shared interest in a specific brand. The structure of the relationships in brand communities encourages interaction between members, which represents the bridging function of social capital (Coffé & Geys, 2007; Granovetter, 1992). Through active participation in the community some members develop strong network ties with others as they discover commonalities between them over and above a shared interest in a particular brand. This indicates the bonding function of social capital also applies in brand communities (Coffé & Geys, 2007; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Although there are multiple competing definitions and measures of social capital in the literature, there appears to be general accord that social capital is a multidimensional community-level construct that underlies the relational base of a community and affects the quality of the interaction between members (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1992; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Watson & Papamarcos, 2002). The literature also suggests an accrued level of social capital fosters an attachment to the community, prompts collective action between members, increases participation in the community, and encourages long-term commitment (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1992; Jones & Taylor,

2012; Kleinhans, Priemus, & Engbersen, 2007). In addition, Best and Kreuger (2006, p. 404) suggested “social capital relates similarly to both online interactions and traditional face-to-face interactions”, signalling the relevance to OBCs of community-based research.

2.1.4 Summary of the Community Literature Related to OBCs

To summarise the community literature, it appears that sense of community (SOC) has an impact on members’ perception of their community, and is critical to the success and sustainability of communities. Previous research indicates that markers of a genuine community and social capital are interrelated, and that both constructs have an impact on the relational structure of the community. Key findings from the community literature are summarised as follows:

- *Identification* and *sense of belonging* are interchangeable concepts and consistently reflect SOC. Both have the highest relevance to communities of interest as opposed to neighbourhood groups.
- Communities to which members have a sense of belonging, can identify with the community and are active participants are more likely to be successful and sustainable.
- Members’ perception of their community has an effect on both their feelings of belonging and their participation in the community.
- Brand-affiliated communities exhibit markers of a genuine community and the relational structure associated with social capital, which sets them apart from generic groups.
- Communities with a culture built on shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity are more collaborative by nature, encourage active participation, and their members develop close network ties (bridging social capital) and attachment to the community.
- People feel less anonymous the more they participate. The less anonymous they feel, the stronger is their sense of belonging to the community.

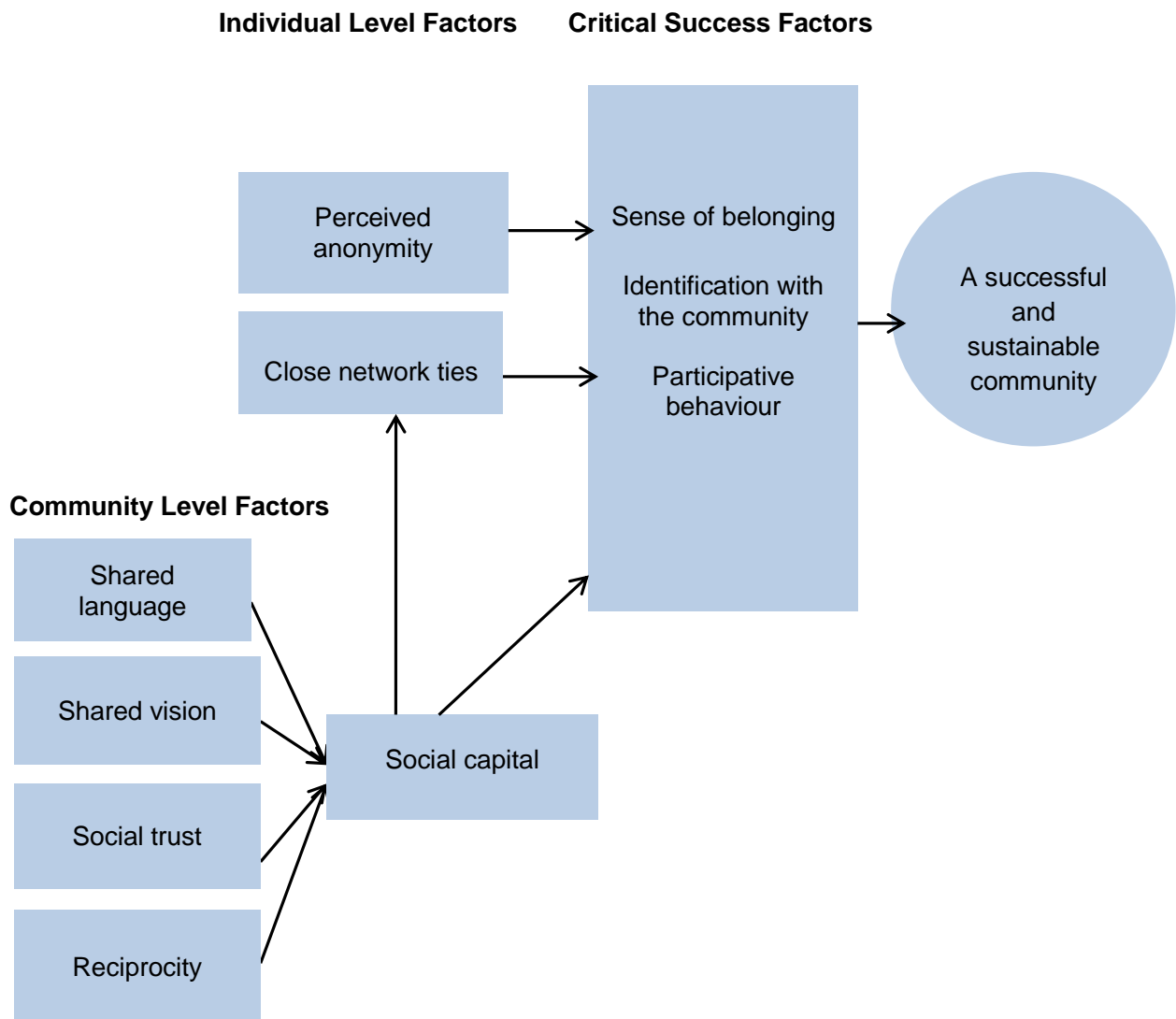


Figure 3 *Summary of Community Research*

As illustrated in a summary of the key findings in Figure 3, the concepts that appear to be significant throughout the community literature regarding the success and sustainability of communities in general are participative behaviour, sense of belonging, and identification with the community. Anonymity and network ties appear to be individual-level influences on the critical success factors, whereas social capital is a community-level construct representing the relational structure of the community and exerts an influence on network ties and the critical success factors.

The relationships between some of the constructs are multi-directional. Therefore, although there is evidence to suggest that OBCs can be categorised as genuine communities of interest based on their lack of geographical boundaries and brand affiliation (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), further research is needed to clarify and support these findings.

Having explored the historical aspects of communities and the theories related to their characteristics and structure, the next section explores the online community literature as a specific sub-category of communities of interest.

2.2 Online Community Literature

As a prime sub-category of communities of interest, online communities have similar characteristics to communities in general, but also several attributes that differentiate them from their offline equivalents (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Ridings et al., 2002; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; 2007; 2008). These include:

- Engagement in online communities is through an online platform, so no physical location is required. People can go online at any time of the day or night, and in any location, as long as they have the apparatus and an internet connection. This has spurred the growth of global online communities across geographical boundaries and where time restrictions no longer apply (Zhou, 2011).
- Many communities allow people to join without having to provide any personal details, so they remain anonymous to the extent that they use a pseudonym and their true identity remains hidden. This is an important aspect for many people who find it difficult to express themselves confidently in a face-to-face environment. Studies have shown the anonymity of online groups can bridge traditional social divides such as race, gender and socioeconomic status, and give members a feeling of freedom to say what they feel without judgement or recourse (Norris, 2002).
- Online communities are open environments where membership is predominantly free of charge. This means that members can choose to share their knowledge and socialise, therefore by the same token they can choose to leave the community at any given time. Consequently, online communities must provide value to members in order to ensure continued membership (Abouzahra & Tan, 2014).

- Costs are generally lower than participation in face-to-face social environments, making them a popular means of getting together people with a shared interest, without the expense associated with offline communities (Shang, Chen, & Liao).

2.2.1 Types of Online Communities

Online communities, also referred to as e-communities, virtual communities, or cyber communities, are recognised as a sub-category of communities of interest, as there are no geographical restrictions and people join them voluntarily due to a shared interest. However, as with communities in general, there is also diversity within the online community category. A brief overview of the different types of online communities featured most prominently in the literature is presented below:

- Online communities of practice, whose members share a profession or vocation and seek answers to problems related to their profession (Preece, 2001; Wasko & Faraj, 2000).
- Open-source online communities that provide access to communal technologies in order to advance innovation (Lakhani & Von Hippel, 2003)
- Online communities of transaction where interaction is required for the buying or selling of products (Algesheimer, Borle, Dholakia, & Singh, 2010)
- Online brand communities, which refers to groups of members who socialise and share information about a specific brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008).

Each of these different categories of online communities is represented in the literature, however, even when a similar research focus is applied, the purpose of the community impacts greatly on the outcome of each study (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004; Preece, 2001). For example, Hann, Roberts, & Slaughter (2013) found that participative behaviour in open-source online communities results in an increase in financial rewards, whereas in online communities of transaction, participation leads to purchase intention (Albert, Aggarwal, & Hill, 2014). Vavasour (2006) found participation has a positive impact on professional development in online communities of practice, while Shang, Chen, and Liao (2006) and Casalo, Flavian, and Guinalú (2008) discovered brand loyalty was an outcome associated with active participation in OBCs. Online communities also facilitate different needs depending on the type of community and the individuals' objectives (Wasko &

Faraj, 2000). For example, communities of practice provide support and work-related knowledge for practitioners in specific fields (Wasko & Faraj, 2000), whereas OBCs are shown to fulfil both social and informational needs, providing a platform for both informal discussion and product reviews (Sicilia & Palazon (2008). The placement of online brand communities within the spectrum of communities in general is illustrated in Figure 4.

Throughout the literature there is strong evidence to suggest the core elements and principles of a genuine community can also be applied to online communities (Madupu & Cooley, 2011; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Wang, Butt, & Wei, 2011). It is interesting to note that while membership in traditional communities of place is in decline, participation in online communities is rapidly increasing (Scott & Johnson, 2005).

Rheingold (1993) defined a virtual community as “a social aggregation of people carrying out public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” The word “community” therefore no longer refers only to social groups bound together by geography (Shang, Chen, & Liaw 2010).

Memmi (2006) suggested online communities are different to offline communities due to their impersonality, and only exist as communities because of a common interest or means to gather information, and not through personal relationships. Memmi, (2006) argued that several characteristics not found in traditional rural communities of place, such as casual or anonymous participants, flexible membership, a loose group structure, and often the large size of a community, are what hinders the development of any meaningful relationships within virtual social groups. He also advocated that people today are members of several online communities simultaneously and therefore not capable of being totally committed to any one group in order to exhibit a genuine sense of community, as would be required in the traditional sense. Memmi's (2006) view was challenged by several studies which found strong network ties within online communities, considered to be a significant factor in motivating member participation and retention in the community (Dholakia et al 2004; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). The attachment formed by members to the community was referred to as a “sense of virtual community” (SOVC), which is very much in evidence in online environments (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Blanchard, 2007, 2008; Koh & Kim, 2003; Sutanto et al., 2011; Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, & Tarkiainen, 2011; Tsai et al., 2011).

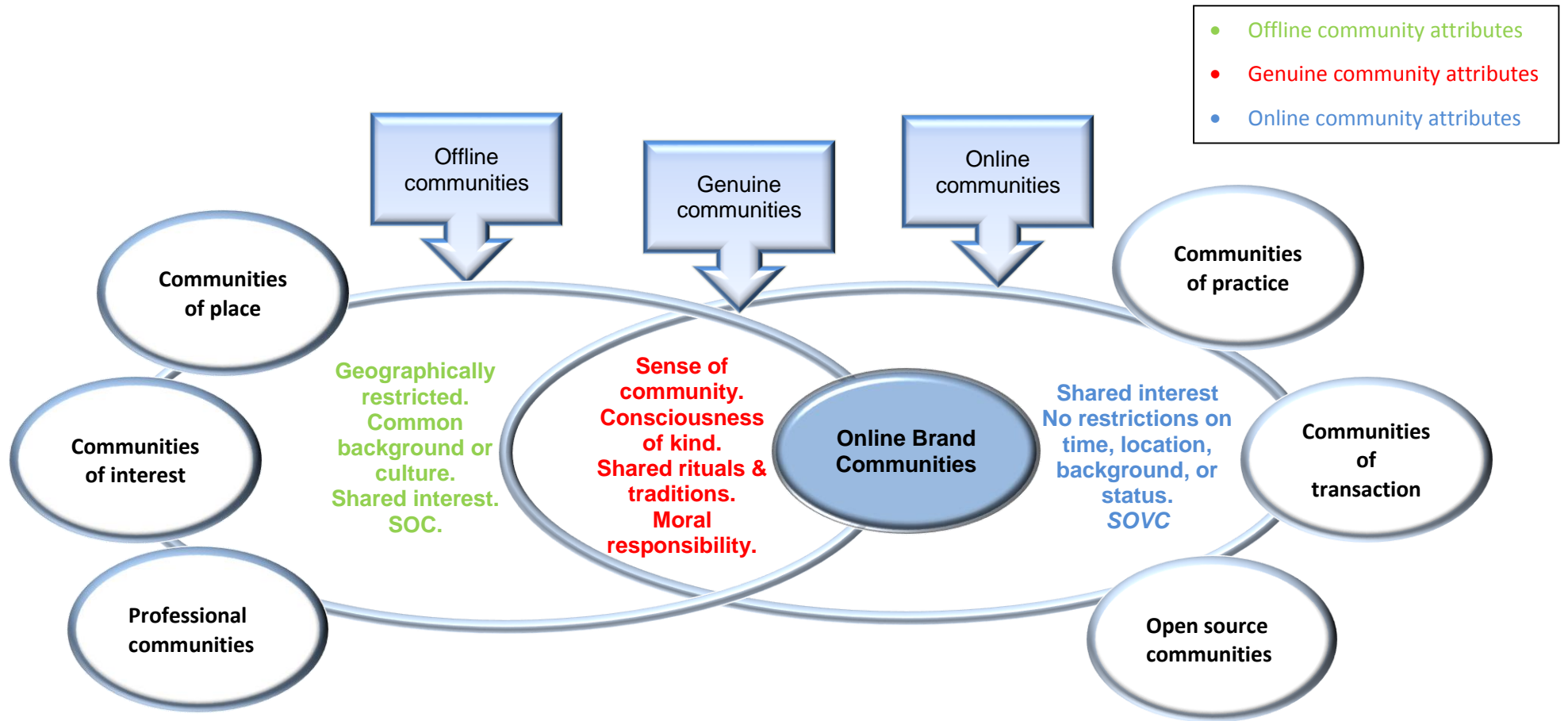


Figure 4 *Online Brand Community Placement*

2.2.2 Sense of Virtual Community

The online community literature suggests that despite the differences between online and offline communities, members nevertheless experience a sense of community (SOC), referred to in an online environment as a sense of virtual community (SOVC) (Blanchard, 2007; Blanchard et al., 2008; Koh & Kim, 2003; Sutanto et al., 2011; Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, & Tarkiainen, 2011; Tsai et al., 2011). According to Tonteri et al. (2011, p. 2215) “SOVC reflects the feeling that individual members have of belonging to an online social group”. Blanchard (2007, p. 827) defined a sense of virtual community as “members’ feelings of membership, identity, belonging and attachment to a group that interacts primarily through electronic communication”. Blanchard (2007) also implied that SOVC distinguishes online communities from generic virtual groups, a view supported by Tsai et al. (2011, p. 1094) who advocated for SOVC as “an important component of successful online communities”.

According to Blanchard and Markus (2004) the close network ties people develop in online communities is one of the factors that differentiate them from other generic virtual groups. These authors claimed the expression “community” is only relevant when aspects of SOVC exist. Obst et al. (2002) asserted that recognising other members in the community, referred to as “conscious identification”, and developing relationships with fellow members are more applicable to SOVC than SOC due to the anonymity aspect of online communities, with its lack of social cues and face-to-face identification. Members use pseudonyms, so they can only get to know each other and build mutual trust through regular social interactions (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Obst et al., 2002b). F

Although the research is generally in agreement about the need for SOVC for the ongoing survival of online communities (Blanchard, 2007, 2008; Koh & Kim, 2003; Sutanto et al., 2011), as with offline SOC there appear to be inconsistencies regarding the elements that underlie the concept of SOVC and the validity of the scales used to measure the construct. Also in accordance with SOC research, there appear to be variances between the types of online communities used for the research. For example, Blanchard (2007) suggested that the sense of community index (SCI), predominantly used in SOC research, is problematic when applied to SOVC in communities of interest, as there are items in the scale that have little or no relevance to online communities.

In a study of the Usenet Newsgroup, MSN, Blanchard and Markus (2004) found although the original elements of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) SOC framework, such as *membership*, *integration and fulfilment of needs* and *shared emotional connection* were observed in the community, *feelings of influence* did not figure prominently. Blanchard (2007) put forward a probable explanation for this finding: online communities tend to be non-hierarchical; therefore members place less emphasis on their status in the community and have "less pronounced feelings of influence" (p. 828). *Influence* was also found to be less important for the online communities in Obst et al.'s (2002b) study, which compared an online interest community and a community of place.

Koh and Kim (2003) proposed three key dimensions represent SOVC in online communities in general, including both the *membership* and *influence* elements found in McMillan and Chavis's (1986) SOC model, with the addition of *immersion*, a construct designed to reflect the involvement of members in online communities. Additionally, Koh and Kim (2003) questioned the relevance of *integration and fulfilment of needs* as a component of SOVC, proposing it was an antecedent of the construct. This view aligns with the study by Tonteri et al. (2011), who found that *integration and fulfilment of needs* is a community-level concept related to the level of mutual support found within the relational structure of online communities of interest. For example, Tonteri et al. (2011) argued that processes and feelings work in tandem to create SOC in an offline environment, whereas in online communities, members' supportive behaviour comes first, followed by the development of SOVC. This results in members feeling a sense of belonging and being motivated to repeat the behaviour that created SOVC (Blanchard & Markus, 2008). Furthermore, whereas SOVC is an individual-level concept related to members' feelings of belonging to a community, needs fulfilment mainly reflects members' expectations which precede the development of SOVC, rather than reflecting a component of the construct (Koh & Kim, 2003; Tonteri et al., 2011).

The assumption that SOVC primarily reflects SOB, identification, and the emotional attachment of members to an online community is a generally accepted view in the literature (Blanchard, 2007; Blanchard et al., 2008; Koh & Kim, 2003; Sutanto et al., 2011; Tonteri et al., 2011; Tsai et al., 2011). Moreover, according to Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, & Tarkiainen (2011), spending time participating in an online community increases members' attachment to the group and has a positive influence on SOVC.

Evidence suggests that the sense of belonging members develop has a direct effect on their long-term commitment to the community (Royo-Vela & Casamassima (2010), an essential ingredient for the ongoing survival of online communities (Blanchard, 2007; Blanchard et al., 2008; Koh & Kim, 2003; Sutanto et al., 2011; Tonteri et al., 2011; Tsai et al., 2011).

2.2.3 Social Capital

This section presents an overview of the literature related to social capital in an online community context. Social capital in an online community is a multi-dimensional concept comprised of two categories: the network structure and its content. This is based on the assumption that network structure refers to how members are linked together or the nature of their relationships within the community, while content of the network refers to how that information flows through the community (Lee & Lee, 2006). For example, online communities with an accrued level of social capital have norms of behaviour that govern the exchange of information. Boundaries are based on the members' vision for the community, and they develop a sense of social trust through reciprocity and mutual commitment (Chu, 2009; Lee & Lee, 2006; Liao & Choi, 2011; Mathwick et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2012).

The fundamental aspects of social capital theory previously outlined can also be applied, for the most part, to social capital in online communities. Any dissimilarity is related to factors representing the differing social capital constructs in the literature, dependent on the field of enquiry rather than whether the community is online or offline (Field, 2003). The online community literature on the subject also indicates positive outcomes, such as helping behaviours (Chu, 2009), information sharing (Maksl & Young, 2013; Li, Clark, & Wheeler, 2013) loyalty (Jones & Taylor, 2012), purchase intention (Kim et al., 2006), and SOB (Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau, Zhang, 2012) are more achievable in communities with high levels of social capital.

As previously discussed, previous studies suggest social capital has a bridging or bonding function depending on the characteristics of the community. Putnam (2000) claimed one of the benefits of bridging and bonding social capital is that it brings members with weak ties together, and over time and with regular interaction, stronger network ties

can potentially develop. In online community environments this is especially relevant as the majority of members are anonymous, and in many cases merely visiting the site for information (Dholakia et al., 2004; Hampton, 2003; Shang et al., 2006; Williams, 2006). Putnam (2000) reasoned that in online communities with an accrued level of social capital, members who are considered transient will be encouraged to develop an emotional attachment to the community through bridging social capital, followed by the development of strong personal ties through bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000). This view concurs with Norris (2002, p. 11) who argued that accrued social capital in online communities influences member participation, as it “widens their experience of community by helping them to connect to others with different beliefs or backgrounds” and “deepens their experience by reinforcing and strengthening existing social networks”. Additionally, although members are anonymous in many online communities, bridging social capital alleviates uncertainty by creating a community culture built on a shared language, shared vision, trust and reciprocity (Ci et al., 2009; Liao & Chou, 2011).

Insofar as the variables representing the social capital construct are concerned, a review of the online community literature revealed inconsistencies related to the proposed indicators of the construct. For instance, Mathwick, Wertz, and Ruyter (2008) considered *voluntarism*, *norms of reciprocity*, and *norms of social trust* the determinants of social capital, while Best and Krueger (2006) cited *generalised trust*, *reciprocity* and *integrity*, and Lee and Lee (2010) considered *sociability*, *trust*, *generalised norm* and *life contentment* as key factors associated with social capital. Nevertheless, a summary of these findings are provided in Appendix I, and indicates *social trust*, *reciprocity*, *shared language*, and *shared vision* stand out most as indicators of social capital in online communities; an assumption supported by the community-based literature (Granovetter, 1973; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1989).

Furthermore, although *network ties* appears to represent an element of social capital in some studies, the majority of research uses the term in reference to the entire structural network of relationships rather than an element representing a facet of social capital (Lee & Lee, 2010; Li, Clark, & Wheeler, 2013). For example, the Collins English Dictionary defines social capital as “the network of social connections that exists between people, and their shared values and norms of behaviour, which enable and encourage mutually advantageous social cooperation” (dictionary.com, 2014). In this study *network ties* refers

to the strong personal relationships that develop between individuals through the bonding function of the social capital construct as a whole.

The following section provides an outline of each of the elements of social capital predominant in the online literature with regard to participative behaviour and sense of belonging (SOB) in online communities.

2.2.3.1 Social Trust

Trust was found to be the most appropriate norm for social capital in the literature and a key component of the relational dimension of social capital, as it facilitates the flow of interactions between members when the information being shared is considered reliable (Lee & Lee, 2006; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Liao & Chou, 2011; Li et al., 2013; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Social trust is also associated with the quality of social relationships and participative behaviour, and can be compared to the sociability factor in Preece's (2001) Usability and Sociability framework (discussed in more detail in section 2.2.6 of this chapter) that influences members' continuous participation and sense of belonging to the community (Preece, 2001). In online communities of practice it is essential for members to be able to trust the information they receive from others in order to be confident about contributing to the community (Mathwick, Wiertz, & Ruyter, 2008; Zhao et al., 2012). This also applies in OBCs where sharing behaviours include advice regarding product usage and technical issues, and where credibility is affected by the degree of trust one feels towards other members and the community (Liao & Chou, 2011; Zhao et al., 2012).

Research indicates that members who have developed relationships with a high level of social capital within a community environment develop closer, more trusting relationships over time (Best & Kreuger, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, the degree of trust between members influences the level of participative behaviour in online communities as members develop stronger ties through the bonding function of social capital (Best & Kreuger, 2006; Chi et al., 2009; Liao & Chou, 2011; Norris, 2002; Putnam, 2000).

As previously mentioned, social trust has the capacity to reduce the perceived risk associated with relying on advice and information from anonymous strangers (Hampton, 2003; Shang et al., 2006; Williams, 2006). This perspective was shared by Lee and Lee (2006) who argued that elements such as sociability and trust determine the credibility of

information being shared in the community. Various other measures have been used to represent the relational aspects of social capital in the literature, including *relationship strength* (strong and weak ties), *commitment* and *identification* (Adler & Kwon, 2000; Granovetter, 1985; Watson & Paparmarcos, 2002), however social trust has consistently been identified as a key factor in social capital research, and is directly associated with the level of reciprocity exhibited by members in a community (Mathwick et al., 2008).

2.2.3.2 Reciprocity

Reciprocity is considered to be an important normative influence, along with social trust and voluntarism, all of which are integral to the ongoing participation of members in the community (Best & Kreuger, 2006; Mathwick et al., 2008). According to Putnam (2000), everyone in an online community is expected to participate, and reciprocity is the norm that governs online interaction. This hypothesis was reinforced by Rheingold (1993), who suggested online community culture is built on collaboration and a willingness to participate and share information.

According to Wasko and Faraj (2000) people contribute to electronic communities of practice for a variety of reasons, including to help each other and keep up-to-date with current initiatives, but mainly because “it’s the right thing to do” (p. 168). Giving back to the community for help previously received has been shown to be a valid reason for participation in online communities in general, and one which relies on reciprocal relationships with other members (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). For example, evidence suggests that members of online communities are more likely to participate if they know information and advice will be forthcoming from other members when needed (Best & Krueger, 2006; Liao & Chou, 2011; Mathwick et al., 2008). Previous studies also indicate that members with weak ties to the community often strengthen their ties through reciprocation and over time develop stronger, more enduring relationships (Granovetter, 1992; Mathwick et al., 2008; Putnam, 2000).

2.2.3.3 Shared Language

In an online environment, shared language is a cognitive element of social capital related to the vocabulary members use to indicate they are part of a community with the same shared interest or focus (Chi et al., 2009; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). According to Liao

and Chou (2011), “when participants adopt common language or codes within a virtual community it indicates that members share a similar perspective” (p. 446). Using the same language facilitates knowledge exchange in online communities and reduces misunderstandings that can arise when sharing information (Abouzahra & Tan, 2014; Chi et al., 2009). In online communities of interest the language members share sets them apart from other groups and gives them a sense of belonging to a specific group (Liao & Chou, 2011; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). As with offline communities, this aspect of the social capital construct is closely related to consciousness of kind; one of the markers of genuine communities (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). When applied to brand-affiliated online communities, shared codes and common understandings have been shown to facilitate solidarity within the community (Chi et al., 2009; Li, Clark & Wheeler, 2013; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

Shared language also bridges the gap between members with weak ties, as it allows those who have not developed close relationships with others due to a lack of regular communication to still feel included in the community through a shared vocabulary with the majority of the group (Chi et al., 2009; Liao & Chou, 2011; Williams, 2006). Moreover, weak ties can be strengthened by ongoing interaction between members who share common codes and language, thus facilitating stronger network ties between members (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Pinho, 2013; Williams, 2006).

2.2.3.4 Shared Vision

Another cognitive element of social capital, referred to as *shared vision*, represents the common ground of members with regard to the social norms or basic rules governing their behaviour in online communities (Jones & Taylor, 2012; Li et al., 2013; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Shared vision represents the purpose of the community in relation to its sociability and is a reflection of the shared beliefs and norms upon which the community is built (Field, 2003). Online communities generally expect their members to adhere to certain standards if they wish to be part of the community, and a shared vision provides members with a basis from which to develop mutually acceptable relationships (Jones & Taylor, 2012). In knowledge-sharing online communities, a shared vision allows for common ground in the exchange of information and the freedom to easily exchange ideas (Liao & Chou, 2011; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998).

In summary, the research literature related to social capital in online environments points to cogent theoretical and empirical support for the elements of the social capital construct, encompassing social trust, reciprocity, a shared language and a shared vision (Best & Kreuger, 2006; Chi et al., 2009; Lee & Lee, 2010; Li et al., 2013; Liao & Chou, 2011; Mathwick et al., 2008; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). This supports the findings in the literature on communities in general (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). There is also sufficient evidence to suggest social capital has a positive influence on *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* (SOB) in online communities (Li et al., 2013).

All these studies have made a substantial contribution to the literature regarding the positive attributes of social capital in online social networks, communities of practice, and online communities in general. However, only one study to date has explored the effect of the social capital construct in an OBC environment, and no multidimensional model of social capital has yet been subjected to analysis within and across different OBCs. These deficiencies have been addressed by this study.

A review of existing community and online community literature indicates that sense of belonging (SOB) and ongoing participation are critical to the success of communities in general. The following section explores some of the predominant theories in the literature related to the motivations and benefits associated with members' participative behaviour and sense of belonging in online communities, and provides an overview of the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) paradigm, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Usability and Sociability Framework.

2.2.4 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications paradigm was originally employed by media researchers to understand why people use different types of traditional media to satisfy their needs, based on a gratification-sought-to-gratification-obtained formula (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004). For example, the U&G approach suggests that people use traditional media either for its content, such as information or entertainment, or for the psychological experience of the usage process, i.e. watching television or listening to the radio (Stafford et al., 2004). The type of media used fulfils different needs depending on the gratification sought. This theory implies that different forms of media compete against one another for viewer satisfaction (Katz, Gurevitch, & Haas, 1973).

With the introduction of the internet as a source of entertainment and information, Stafford et al. (2004) developed an empirically-tested adaptation of the original U&G model, specifically designed for internet usage. These authors not only included a third element, social gratification, to the original U&G model, they also modified the indicators to measure each construct more appropriately in an internet environment. For example, content gratification is fulfilled by factors such as learning, information and knowledge; process gratification is achieved through the enjoyment of using different internet resources such as search engines and websites; and the added factor, social gratification, is accomplished by chatting, making friends, and interacting with people online (Stafford et al., 2004). The significance of adding a social element to the U&G model to reflect internet usage was clarified by Ko, Cho, and Roberts (2005, p. 58) who stated: “the rapid growth of the Internet has strengthened the potency of the Uses and Gratifications theory because this medium requires a higher level of interactivity from its users in comparison with other traditional media”.

Subsequently U&G theory has been applied extensively in online communication research to identify consumer motivations behind a number of different online media (Lim & Ting, 2012; Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004). For example, Li, Liu, Heikkila, and Van der Heijden (2015) utilised the U&G paradigm to examine continuance intention in online gaming communities. Luo (2002) developed a U&G model to investigate attitudes towards web usage in general, which Lim & Ting (2012) subsequently applied to internet use for online shopping. Florenthal (2015) looked at motivations for using the online social networking site “LinkedIn”, and Ko et al. (2005) explored antecedents to purchase intention through advertising on marketing websites. Previous studies have used U&G theory in online brand communities (OBCs) as an effective means of understanding members’ participative behaviour (Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008).

Each of the abovementioned studies followed a U&G approach based on the Stafford et al.’s (2004) model, yet the motivation categories differ depending on the type of online website under examination. For instance, Li et al., (2015) examined a social network gaming (SNG) website and found individuals were motivated to continue their involvement with the website based on *hedonic gratifications* which include enjoyment, fantasy and escapism, *social gratifications* which relate to social interaction and social presence, and *utilitarian gratifications* in the form of achievement and self-presentation.

The results of their research indicate that all the hedonic gratifications had a significant effect on intention to continue participating in the community. Social presence, which refers to the “psychological sense of interacting and establishing personal connections with others” (p. 265), was the strongest motivator for continued participation. Self-presentation or “the extent to which playing a SNG will help the player to generate a particular image of self and thereby influence how others perceive and treat the player” (p. 264) had no significance for member involvement. These finding align with SOVC research (Blanchard, 2007) and social capital theory (Putnam, 2000) where developing close relationships with members in the community was a significant motivator for continued participation, whereas influence or status in the community had no impact on continued involvement. Figure 5 illustrates Li et al.’s (2015) version of the Uses and Gratifications model.

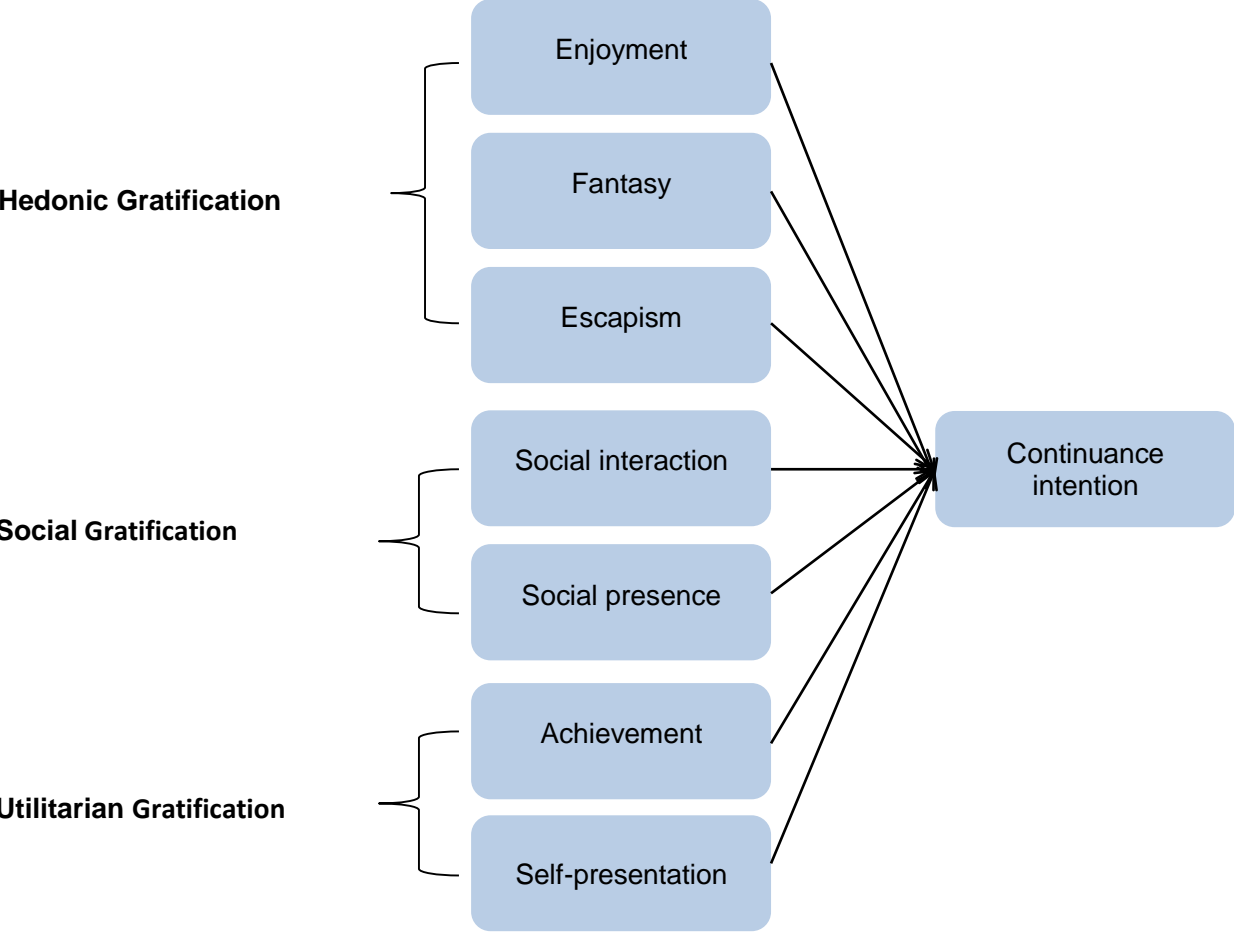


Figure 5 *Uses and Gratifications Model* (Li, Liu, Xu, Heikkila, Van der Heijden, 2015, p. 269)

Lim and Ting (2012) utilised Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory to investigate the effects of *entertainment*, *information* and *web irritation* on consumer attitudes to online shopping. These authors included the same gratification categories and similar measures used by Luo (2002), however the results from the two studies differed slightly, suggesting the type of website has an impact on the relevance of gratifications sought. Lim and Ting (2012) found the extent to which the shopping community is perceived to be entertaining and fun had the strongest influence on members' attitudes towards online shopping.

The degree to which a website fulfils customers' information expectations also had a positive impact on their attitude to online shopping (Lim & Ting, 2012). Evidence suggests consumers who perceive shopping sites to be irritating (hard to use, bombarded with advertisements) are inclined to have a negative attitude towards online shopping (Lim & Ting, 2012). These findings concur with Luo (2002), who found the irritation factor much higher when applied to internet use in general, explaining it thus (2002, p. 39) "by irritating web users, online businesses will find it notoriously difficult to get consumers back to their websites in the future".

Other research based on the U&G framework examined motivations for using the internet in communities of transaction (Ko et al., 2005). The gratification categories in this study were *information*, *entertainment*, *convenience* and *social interaction*, all of which relate to the amount of time spent on the website. The findings of Ko et al. (2005) suggest that consumers with high information, convenience and social interaction motivations stay on the website longer to satisfy their needs. In contrast to Li et al. (2015), Lim and Ting (2012) and Luo (2002), enjoyment was not found to be a motivator for the amount of time consumers spent on the website (Ko et al., 2005). However, the authors claimed enjoyment may not have been a motivating factor in this study due to the utilitarian nature of the website, which was likely to attract information seekers rather than socialisers.

Previous studies that utilised the U&G paradigm in OBC environments found the gratification of individual needs dependent on the members' perceived value of their participation in the community (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). Sicilia and Palazon (2008) went on to categorise the values in online communities as either functional, social or entertainment, depending on the members' requirements. A comparison between Sicilia and Palazon's (2008) model and Stafford et al.'s (2004) work reveals similar concepts despite different labels for the dimensions of the U&G paradigm. For example, *functional*

value in Sicilia and Palazon's (2008) work represents the benefits of acquiring new knowledge or obtaining advice, as does the *content gratification* in Stafford et al.'s (2004) study. In addition, *social value* and *social gratification* both represent the benefits of developing relationships with other members, whereas *entertainment value* and *process gratifications* are both related to the enjoyment members experience through using the internet, encouraging them to continue participating in the community (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008).

2.2.5 The Technology Acceptance Model

The advantages of social and technological change in making interaction in an online environment easier, quicker and more cost effective, have also greatly benefitted business-to-business and business-to-consumer relationships (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2000; McAlexander et al., 2002; Shang, Chen & Liao, 2006). This has stimulated interest in research related to information systems within the business sector and prolific use of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Although TAM is used extensively as a theoretical framework to explain and predict technology acceptance (Davis et al., 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003) from a utilitarian perspective, a study by Wang, Chung, Park, McLaughlin, and Fulk (2011) showed that it is also a useful theoretical foundation for explaining motivations for online community participation of a more hedonistic nature.

In a work environment TAM is based on the premise that, when presented with new technology, certain factors influence the actual use of the system. For instance, according to Davis et al. (1989), a person's intention to use a new computer system (BI) is jointly determined by a belief the system will improve their work performance, i.e. it's perceived usefulness (PU), and the attitude (A) they have already formed towards using it. Attitude (A) is influenced by how easy the system appears to be (PEOU) and how useful it may be (PU). Perceived usefulness (PU) of the system is also dependent on how easy it is to use (PEOU), and both factors (PU and PEOU) are affected by external variables, such as special features of the technology specifically designed to make it easier to use and more useful (Davis, 1989; Bagozzi, Davis, & Warshaw, 1992).

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) presented in Figure 6 was originally adapted from the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and re-designed specifically for model user acceptance of computer information systems (Davis et al., 1986). Since its

creation, TAM has been used extensively as a theoretical framework to explain and predict computer technology acceptance, mainly in the business and work environment (Davis et al., 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Recent studies indicate it is also a useful theoretical foundation for understanding online community participation (Tsai, Cheng, & Chen, 2011; Wang, Chung, Park, McLaughlin, & Fulk, 2011; Hsu & Lu, 2007; Lin, 2006), and is therefore applicable to this study.

As with most theories, TAM is open to interpretation depending on the type of online community being studied. For example, Tsai et al. (2011) claimed that perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness explained some of the motives behind participating in online communities that fulfil other purposes. The authors found that in an online group buying (OGB) community, the quality of the website had a significant impact on how useful members found the site. In turn, the practicality of the website had a positive effect on members' intentions to make group purchases. Therefore, if the intention of the website is to facilitate group buying and visitors to the site feel it is easy to use, whilst useful for the purpose intended they are also more likely to continue participating in the community.

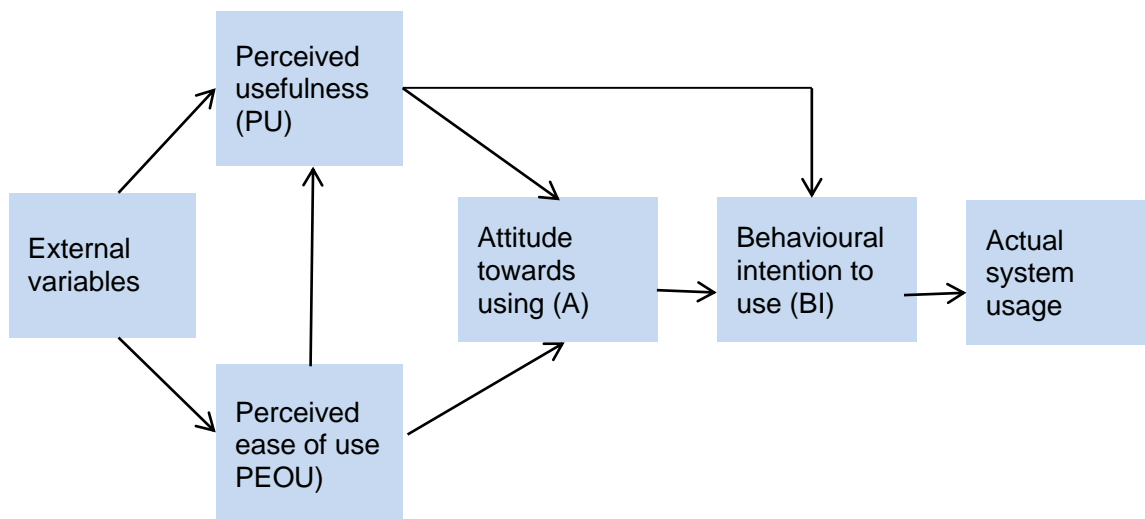


Figure 6 *Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis et al., 1989)*

A common theme in TAM literature is that the model, originally designed to explain user acceptance of information systems in a work environment (Davis et al., 1986),

has undergone a transformation in order to be of more relevance for internet use in general. These changes include intrinsic motivations such as enjoyment (Van der Heijden, 2004; Hsu & Lu, 2007; Teo et al., 1998) or playfulness (Moon & Kim, 2000) and are often stronger than extrinsic motivations (perceived usefulness) in predicting internet use in non-work related online communities (Van der Heijden, 2004; Hsu & Lu, 2007; Teo et al., 1998; Wang et al., 2011). There is also overwhelming evidence to indicate a strong, positive link between perceived ease of use and perceived enjoyment in leisure-based communities (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Van der Heijden, 2004; Teo et al., 1998). However, unlike Davis et al.'s (1989) research which was based on the acceptance of a new system and therefore included intention to use the system as an antecedent to actual usage, these results were based on studies where participants were already using the computer system as members of online communities.

Another theory that incorporates facets of both TAM and the U&G model is the Usability and Sociability (U&S) framework proposed by Preece (2001), which was used to identify the characteristics and measures to ensure success of an online community. This model relates to the social and functional benefits members expect to gain through participation in communities. It includes both sociability and usability attributes (Kim, Park, & Jin, 2007) and measures motivation according to the benefits users are likely to receive.

2.2.6 The Usability and Sociability Framework

The Usability and Sociability framework (U&S) developed by Preece (2001) is based on the assumption that the ease with which a site is navigable or how socially interactive a virtual community is, determines its success. The U&S theory proposes that the perceived level of usability and sociability are positively related to continuous participation in the community; an outcome widely acknowledged as a critical success factor for online communities (Lu, Phang & Yu, 2011).

In a virtual community, usability refers to a structure that enables users to navigate around the site and easily find what they are looking for, with the assistance of tools to make communication stress-free and the presentation of information easy to follow (De Souza, 2004; Preece, 2004). This factor is consistent with the ease of use element found in TAM.

Sociability refers to encouraging reciprocity and the social norms that keep members on topic and less likely to post offensive comments. It is associated with the kind of social environment that motivates interaction between members, as indicated by the social aspect of the Usability and Sociability framework, designed by Preece (2001) to define the characteristics critical to the success of online communities. As shown in Figure 7, these attributes can be distinguished by their functional or hedonistic qualities.

Preece (2001) contended a high level of sociability in online communities is reliant on three main factors:

1. Purpose – the community has a reason for being established in the first place;
2. People – a mixture of different types of members who interact with each other; and
3. Policies – having in place accepted social norms and protocols for members.

Usability of a community site however, depends on a more functional set of factors including:

- Dialogue and social interaction support – ensuring there are suitable prompts and feedback to maintain communication channels;
- Information design – posts, messages and information needs to be understandable and easy to read;
- Navigation – it should be effortless to move around the site; and
- Access – able to download the software required to use the system.

Although usability is closely related to sociability, it is primarily concerned with how members interact with the actual technology, whereas sociability is more concerned with how they communicate with each other using the supporting technology (Lu et al., 2011).

By their very nature theories are open to interpretation and the Usability and Sociability (U&S) framework is no exception. Preece (2001) was herself one of the first to suggest that the attributes of successful online communities, as indicated in the U&S framework differ, depending on the purpose or function of the community. For example, there is likely to be a greater need for the sociability dimension in communities that rely on

social interaction such as OBCs, as compared with communities of practice where the usability attributes that improve functionality will probably be of more importance (Preece, 2001).

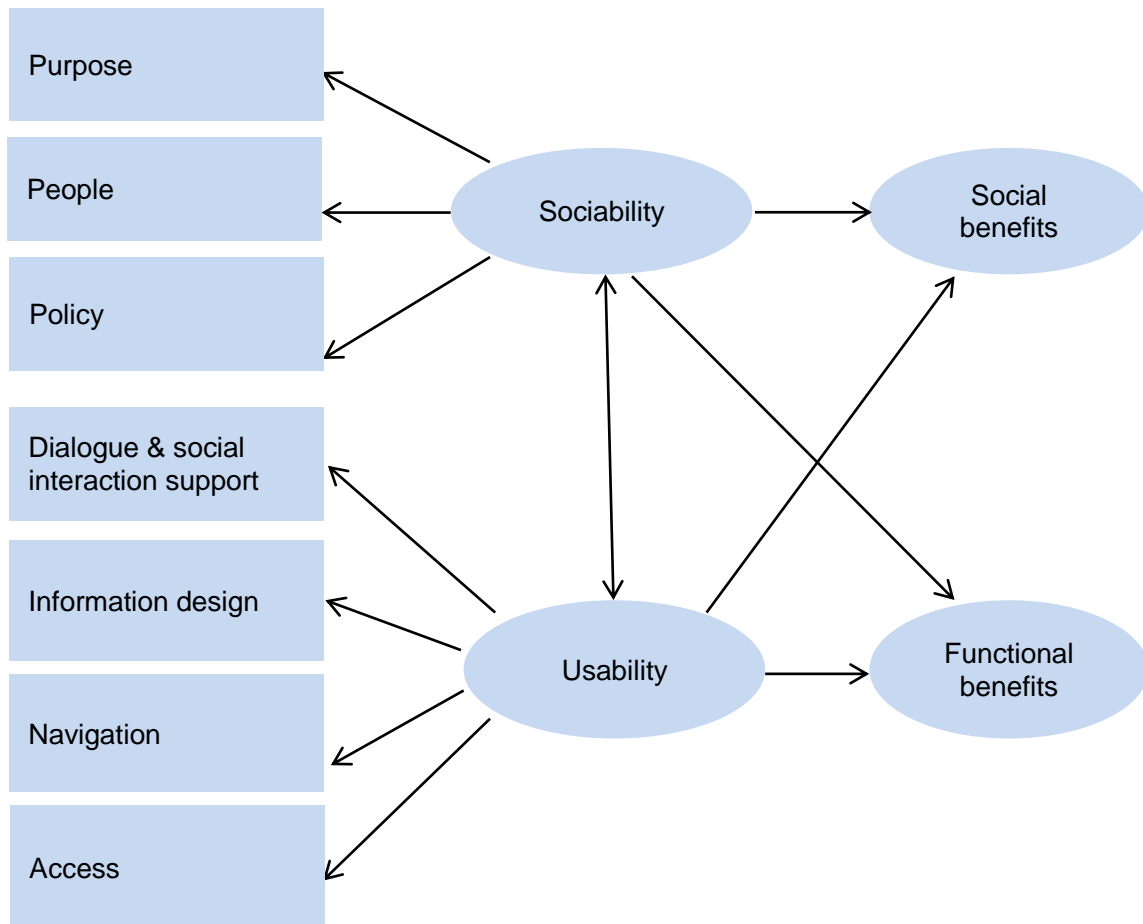


Figure 7 *The Usability and Sociability Framework (Preece, 2001)*

To test the adequacy of Preece’s (2001) Usability and Sociability (U&S) framework in an OBC environment, Kim, Park, and Jin (2007) administered an online survey to members of OBCs either built or hosted by companies based in South Korea. In terms of supporting the sociability aspect of the framework, the results of their research indicate several factors were deemed important. These include size of the community, level of interactive involvement, quality of the conversations, depth of fellow members’ knowledge, and having rules in place to encourage positive behaviour. With regard to the usability of the community, the findings support factors in the framework related to ease of use in message posting and site navigation. However, the information design and access

aspects of usability were not deemed important in Preece's (2001) framework, a finding that Kim et al. (2007) argued was related to the user-friendly design of most internet sites today and the technical ability of most internet users in Korea. The overall results of their research demonstrate the adaptability of the Usability and Sociability Framework to effectively identify influences on participation in the OBC environment.

Based on their research, Sicilia and Palazon (2008) claimed that online communities in general are more valued for their social support and entertainment appeal than the informational benefits they provide. However, these findings may be related to the types of communities in question. For example, an OBC based around a technical product, such as Apple computers (Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006), will attract members who are looking for specific information about technical issues, whereas a leisure-based community is likely to generate more social discussion (Dholakia et al., 2004). Since Sicilia and Palazon (2008) collected data from members of a soft drink forum, their results are skewed towards socially-oriented online users from a social-based community.

Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004) also developed a model which indicated that drivers of participation differed depending on whether the community is network based or small-group based, supporting the influence of community type when comparing participation motivated by informational and social needs. In their study Dholakia et al. (2004) presented empirical evidence of purposive value as a key driver of participation in network-based online communities that are more informational in nature, whereas in small-group based communities centred around leisure activities, social benefits such as building connections and enhancing sociability are significant motives for participation (Dholakia et al., 2004). Additionally, Lu et al. (2011) argued while participation is initially driven by the need to gather information (Shah, 2006), long-term participation is predicated on a combination of hedonic motivations, such as enjoyment and developing strong network ties in addition to the information the community provides (Fang & Neufeld, 2009).

2.2.7 Summary of the Online Aspect of OBCs

In summary, it appears from the literature that online communities who exhibit traits associated with genuine communities and have a relational structure based on an accrued level of social capital, foster SOB and encourage ongoing participative behaviour. Consequently they are also more likely to achieve long-term success for the community

(Blanchard & Markus, 2008; Maksl & Young, 2013). The quantum and range of research related to motivators of participative behaviour and sense of belonging in online communities supports the assumption that active, participative behaviour and sense of belonging are critical to their success and sustainability. Additionally, elements associated with the markers of a genuine community, SOVC and social capital, can effectively be applied to OBCs based on the findings in the community literature identifying them as genuine communities of interest (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Algesheimer et al., 2005). It is also apparent that the motivational theories discussed in this review share common elements with OBCs.

Studies that have used the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) paradigm show gathering information, the enjoyment of being involved in the community, and developing relationships are the benefits members seek and expect to receive through participation in online communities (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Stafford & Schkade, 2004). Studies that employed an adapted version of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) also found easy-to-use and enjoyable online communities encourage participative behaviour (Van der Heijden, 2004; Hsu & Lu, 2007). Furthermore, research based on the Usability and Sociability framework (U&S) emphasised a high level of sociability and usability in online websites as critical to the success of the community (Kim et al., 2007; Preece, 2001). It therefore appears that individual motivators and community-level attributes are associated with both the social aspect of online communities and their functional benefits.

Another common theme in the online community literature suggests the weight given to the influences or benefits associated with participative behaviour are dependent on whether participation is motivated by informational or social gain. This is an interesting view and relates to the content gratification aspect of the U&G paradigm, which to the author's knowledge, has never before been tested in relation to OBCs.

The current study empirically tested whether information seekers and socialisers exist within the same community, and whether the strength of the relationships between influences and outcomes in OBCs differ depending on their reasons for participating. Having explored the characteristics of online communities and the motivational theories for participation, the next section provides a review of the literature related to the brand aspect of online brand communities.

2.3 The Brand Aspect of Online Brand Communities

From a marketing perspective the brand represents the commercial significance of this research, based on the knowledge that online brand communities (OBCs) foster brand loyalty behaviours and facilitate brand value co-creation (Sasmita & Suki, 2014). Organisations rely on attracting and retaining consumers and developing ongoing relationships in order to survive in today's competitive, international marketplace (Lhotáková, 2012), and OBCs are becoming a crucial link between the consumer and the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Therefore, although suppositions and theories can be drawn from virtual community research in general, for studies specific to online brand communities, understanding the relationship between the consumer and the brand is crucial.

2.3.1 The Brand Concept

According to Stern (2006), the term “brand” has been used for centuries in varying contexts before becoming a marketing reference for a proprietary name in 1922 (Oxford English Dictionary, 2004 II9). More recently the American Marketing Association (2012) advised “a brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers”. However, Lhotáková (2012) suggested this description was too narrow and didn't take into account the psychological attachment consumers have with the brand based on personal experience, long-term associations, and the value-based attributes brands possess.

This view was shared by Cunniffe and Sng, (2012) who observed brands that had managed to establish a strong emotional bond with their customers achieved a significant competitive advantage, as consumers chose their preferred brand over alternatives based on their association with the brand. De Ruyck, Schillewaert and Caudron (2008) found it was the consumers' perceptions of a brand that encouraged them to “actively seek out the product in a store”.

Table 1 illustrates how brands consist of a number of elements (Ghuri, 2014), all of which relate to the many functions they perform; indicating the complexity of the brand as a concept.

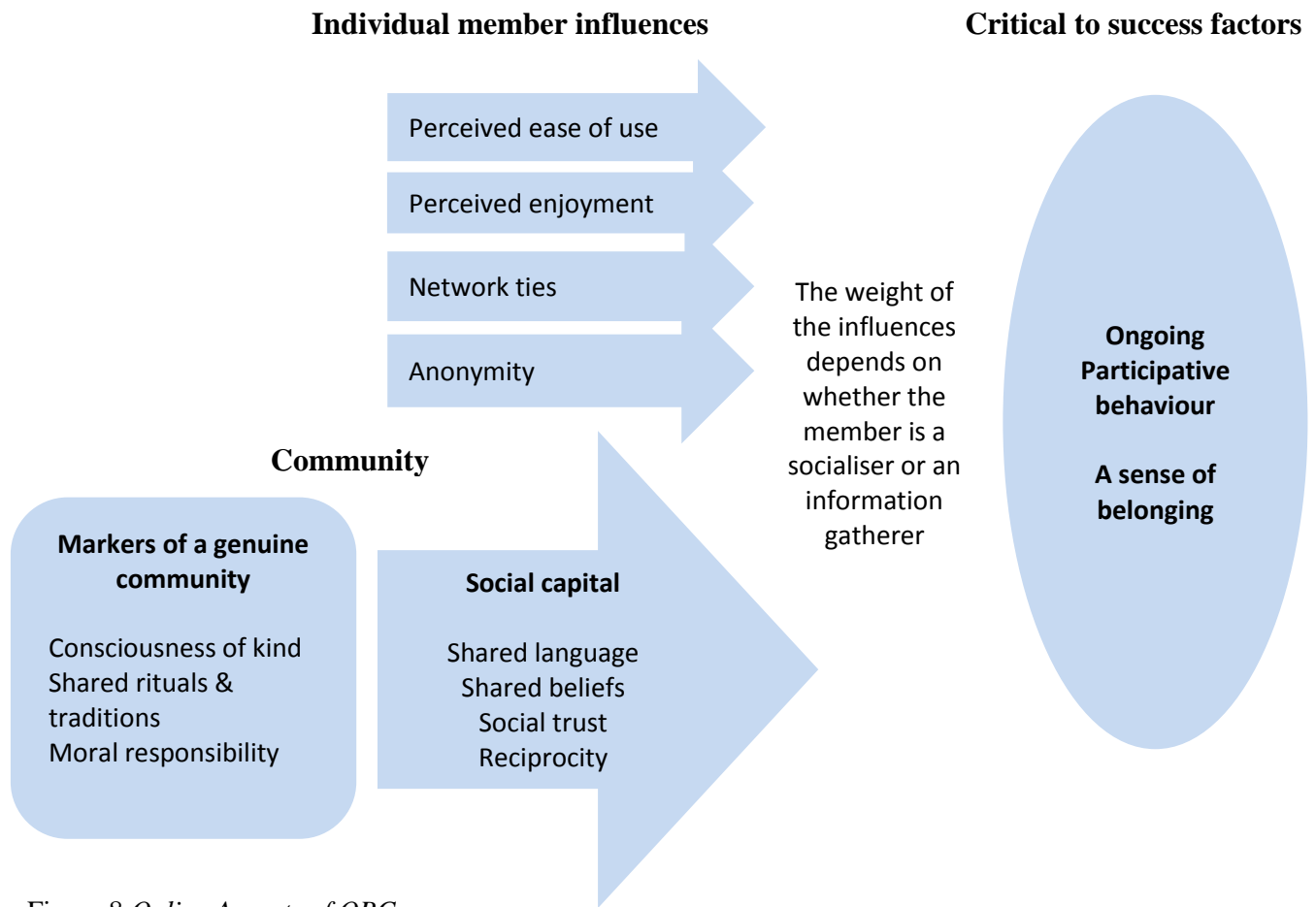


Figure 8 *Online Aspects of OBCs*

Table 1 Brand Elements and Associated Benefits. Adapted from Ghauri (2014)

Brand Elements	Contents	Functions
Legal Instrument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mark of ownership Trademark 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prosecute infringers
Logo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name, term, symbol, design • Product characteristics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify, differentiate through visual identity and name • Quality assurance
Company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognisable corporate name and image • Programs of organisation define corporate personality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product lines benefit from corporate personality • Convey consistent message to stakeholders • Differentiation – establish relationship
Image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer centred • Image in consumers' minds is brand reality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback of image to change identity • Market research • Manage brand concept over time
Value System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer relevant values imbue the brand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand values match relevant consumer value
Personality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological values, communicated through advertising and packaging define brand's personality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiation from symbolism – human values projected • Stress added values beyond functional
Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer has attitude to brand • Brand as person has attitude to consumer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition and respect for personality • Develop relationship
Adding Value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-functional extras • Value satisfier • Consumers imbue brand with subjective meaning • Aesthetics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiate from competing products • Charge price premium • Consumer experience • Belief in performance

2.3.2 Brand Value – The Corporate Perspective

Most companies would regard a successful brand as their most valuable asset (Junjun, 2010; Mao, 2010; Zhang & He, 2013) as brands are a means of evoking a differentiated value proposition for consumers and securing a competitive edge in the marketplace (Chadhauri & Holbrook, 2001; Junjun, 2010; Ling, 2013). Branding also adds considerable value to a company's share price. Junjun (2010) advocated a brand's value is reliant on strong enduring relationships and in turn, consumer brand loyalty. The value of a

brand is therefore based on the number of loyal customers it attracts, as they are more willing to pay a price premium for their brand of choice (Chadhauri & Holbrook, 2001). Loyal consumers are also more resistant to alternative brands, and more inclined to spread positive word of mouth (WOM) (Sasmita & Suki, 2014); all of which imply a guarantee of future income for an organisation and adds value to the brand (Fournier & Lee, 2009). In today's global marketplace, brand-loyal consumers are essential to an organisation's survival (Junjun, 2010), and enhancing loyalty by building customer relationships has become an important issue for both researchers and marketers (Kuo & Feng, 2013).

Marketing efforts have evolved from focusing on immediate exchange (Anderson, 2004) to building mutually beneficial, long-term relationships between customers and brand owners (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Therefore the objective of a brand manager or marketer is to cultivate a relationship between the consumer and the brand (Irimies, 2012; Dajar, 2004). Moreover, as the connection between customers and brands is constantly evolving (Irimies, 2012), marketers must develop strategies to ensure the sustainability of the relationship in order to “create and maintain brand loyalty” (Irimies, 2012, p. 112). This is where OBCs can contribute.

Over the last forty years the relationship between consumers and businesses has evolved. Customers have moved away from a passive role in the relationship to a much more active position (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Access to the internet has given consumers more information about products, prices and supply channels (Lhotáková, 2012) and a new level of transparency to organisations' business practices (Kozinets, 2002). Traditional marketing techniques have had to adapt in order to be effective in the new environment where consumers are more empowered than ever before (Lhotáková, 2012; Madupu & Cooley, 2010). According to Lhotáková (2012) “leading brands use new and traditional ways of communication to build consumer trust. OBCs are one example”. Understanding the attributes that contribute to developing successful and sustainable OBCs is therefore essential.

Table 2 illustrates how the customer-to-company relationship has evolved in line with business strategies over a forty year period (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), and highlights the pro-active role consumers have acquired as companies encourage a more co-creative relationship with them (Fournier & Lee, 2009; Hatch & Shultz, 2010). Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) evolutionary timeline illustrates how corporate management in

the 1970s and early 1980s viewed the customer as a statistic with no personality. Over the next ten years the customer became an individual statistic in a transaction, and by the 1990s the customer was considered a person – the managerial emphasis had shifted to cultivating trust and developing relationships. In the 2000s organisations began to see the customer not only as an individual, but also as “part of an emergent social and cultural fabric”. Communication between the company and the consumer has also evolved from being one-directional in the 1970s to one of active communication between all stakeholders (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Research indicates that an increasing number of organisations are adopting a more customer-centric approach and embracing opportunities provided by the internet to create and support online brand communities (OBCs) (Lhotáková, 2012). Studies also show that OBCs are an ideal forum to foster consumer-to-brand and consumer-to-organisation relationships, adding value to the brand through co-creative interaction (Hatch & Shultz, 2010; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2008; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

2.3.3 Brand Value Co-creation

According to Skålén, Pace, and Cova (2014), marketing theory and practice have only recently acknowledged brand value co-creation is a collaborative relationship between companies, their customers and other stakeholders. These authors implied this was prompted by the success of OBCs such as LEGO’s “Lego Factory” and Starbucks’ “My Starbucks Ideas”, which were specifically established to co-create value with their consumers. Ind et al. (2013, p. 9) supported this view with their description of co-creation between a company and a brand community as “an active, creative and social process based on collaboration between organisations and participants that generates benefits for all and creates value for stakeholders”.

The concept of increasing value through co-creation in product innovation is well documented in the literature, whereas, as previously stated, brand value co-creation (BVCC) is still a relatively new theory (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Skålén, Pace, & Cova, 2014).

Table 2 The Evolution and Transformation of Customers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004)

	Persuading predetermined groups of buyers	Transacting with individual buyers	Lifetime bonds with individual customers	Customers as co-creators of value
Time frame	1970s, early 1980s	Late 1980s, early 1990s	1990s	Beyond 2000
Nature of business exchange and role of customer	Customers are seen as passive buyers with a predetermined role of consumption			Customers are part of an enhanced network; they co-create and extract business value. They are collaborators, co-developers and competitors.
Managerial mind-set	The customer is an average statistic; groups of buyers are predetermined by the company.	The customer is an individual statistic in a transaction.	The customer is a person; cultivate trust and relationships.	The customer is not only an individual but also part of an emergent social and cultural fabric.
Company's interaction with customers, and development of products and services	Traditional market research and inquiries; products and services are created without much feedback.	Shift from selling to helping customers via help desks, call centres and customer service programs; then redesign products and services based on that feedback.	Providing for customers through observation of users; identify solutions from lead users and reconfigure products and services based on understanding customers.	Customers are co-developers of personalised experiences. Companies and lead customers have joint roles in educating, shaping expectations and co-creating market acceptance for products and services.
Purpose and flow of communication	Gain access to and target predetermined groups of buyers; one-way communication.	Database marketing; two-way communication.	Relationship marketing; two-way communication and access.	Active dialogue with customers to shape expectations and create a buzz. Multilevel access and communication.

In Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) study, the process of co-creation is described as encompassing four key building blocks, identified as *dialogue*, *access*, *risk* and *transparency* (DART). Although originally designed to relate to new product innovation, Hatch and Schultz (2010) evolved the theory for application to brand communities, claiming the process of co-creation works effectively and can be explained by the following building blocks:

- Dialogue – members in brand communities share information with one another and with visitors to the community. They develop network ties, and through regular interaction, a bond with the community and the brand. In co-creative environments dialogue between stakeholders provides a high level of constructive feedback.
- Access – brand communities provide members and visitors with access to product information, technical advice, and the introduction of new product lines. Details related to the brand and brand-owner are also accessible, and this openness enables co-creation between all stakeholders.
- Risk – sharing of information and accessibility to business practices can present risks, such as negative feedback and a lack of confidentiality regarding new product design.
- Transparency – the more information there is available about a company, the brand and products that carry the name, and the more members and visitors communicate with one another, the more transparent the organisation is.
- The four building blocks are interrelated, and brand value co-creation is a continuous and highly dynamic, interactive process between them and all the stakeholders in a brand community (Hatch & Shultz, 2010; Merz & Vargo, 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Shultz and Hatch (2010) proposed the required level of self-disclosure in co-creative environments poses the risk of the company losing some control over its brand, and in due course the organisation. On the other hand, Carlson, Suter, and Brown (2008) and Zaglia (2013) argued that co-creation practices strengthen the interactions among members of a brand community, which helps to bring them closer together and increases their commitment to the brand. In the same vein, Zhang (2014) and Skålén, Pace and Cova (2015) contended that the characteristics of brand communities successfully cultivate the development of strong relationships between consumers and the brand, thereby encouraging the co-

creation of brand value. Although previous research regarding brand value co-creation focuses on brand communities in general, it is clearly applicable to OBCs and highlights not only the advantages of co-creative OBCs for the brand owner, but also for OBC members.

Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) cited an example of the effectiveness of co-creative partnerships for both the consumer and the company in an interesting account of Microsoft's use of more than 650,000 customers to voluntarily beta test a new version of Microsoft Windows 2000. Consumers were able to share their ideas regarding features of the product they felt needed alteration or improvement, and Microsoft was able to resolve any glitches in the software prior to its launch. This co-creative relationship saved the company "over \$500 million in time, effort and fees" (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and consumers gained the experience of being personally involved with the brand.

2.3.4 The Consumer – Brand Perspective

According to Park, MacInnis and Priester (2006) consumers develop an attachment to a brand based on the hedonic, symbolic or functional associative links they impart, and the stronger each link or the more associations there are, the greater the attachment.

Research also shows that since the majority of members in OBCs are lead users of the brand, they are vocal in their evaluation of products carrying the same brand name, due to their personal attachment (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). For example, a tasty, pleasant aroma of fresh coffee that Starbucks® brings to mind is an example of a hedonic association from a combination of sensory features associated with the brand. The symbolic association of a brand refers to the meaning the symbol evokes, such as nostalgia, philanthropy or prestige. The Body Shop® for instance, is known for its human rights activism and high ethical standards (Bodyshop.com, 2015), so many consumers have a philanthropic association with the brand and a connection with other consumers who share the same values (Kozinets, 2001).

On the other hand, functional associations relate to the reliability of the brand, and create a sense of self-efficacy or belief that the brand is fundamental to achieving one's goals (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002).

It has also been proposed that developing a brand attachment is fundamentally reliant on consistent product performance and trust that the brand will provide the relevant resources, without which associations lack substance (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002). Furthermore, trust influences consumers' desire to maintain an enduring relationship with a brand, underpinned by a belief that changing brands risks exposure to uncertainties (Morgan & Hunt, 1995). Liu, Li, Mizerski, and Soh (2011) argued brand loyalty is based on the degree of attachment a consumer develops with a brand. Possessions play an important role in most people's lives and are thought to form part of one's extended identity, so the more consumers invest in possessions and the more effort they put into accumulating objects, the more those items become a part of who they are (Belk, 1988).

Another key point is that consumers consider the brand they choose to be representative of their own values and social status. They consider their association a way of expressing themselves and connecting with other like-minded consumers who identify with the same brand (Fieldstein, 2007). Brand community research indicates that some consumers in OBCs have developed such strong relationships with other community members that "being associated with the brand has become a way for members to assert their personal identity" (Wirtz et al., 2013, p. 231). According to Sadhna (2009) there are four main categories of brand types:

- Being brands – emotionally confirm the consumer is somebody;
- Becoming brands – represent what the consumer aspires to be;
- Doing brands – functionally enable the consumer to achieve something; and
- Belonging brands – connect the consumer with other likeminded consumers.

Brands also have extended product value that customers associate with their goods or services, such as quality assurance, stylish features or technical superiority, which persuades them to purchase one brand over another (Fieldstein, 2007). Brand acquisition becomes a reflection of individuals' personal achievements; their possessions enhance their identity in the eyes of their peers (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, & Holbrook, 1988), and the constant procurement of brand-related products shapes their lives as they endeavour to better their status in society through ownership (Hunt, Kernan, & Mitchell, 1996). Furthermore, studies indicate the relationship members have with a brand has a significant

impact on their motivation for participating in the community and why they develop such a strong sense of belonging (SOB) to the group (Kuo & Feng, 2013; McWilliams, 2000).

2.3.5 Brand Communities

Studies show that members of communities with a brand focus exhibit greater social identification with the brand community as compared with consumers of the product category in general (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). An explanation for this is people view a brand as a reflection of who they are, an extension of self, and is therefore considered an integral part of their personal identity (Belk, 1988). For example, online communities of transaction are groups of individuals who come together around a shared interest in a product category such as motor vehicles rather than a specific brand such as SAAB, Ford, or Jaguar®. Therefore they share information and chat about issues related to the product type in general, which might include several different brands. These communities are considered too generic for individuals devoted to a specific brand, because they want to engage with others who identify with the attributes associated with the brand of their choice (Fournier & Lee, 2009).

Although OBCs are reliant on the internet to function, putting them in the same category as online communities in general, it is the relationship of members with the brand that sets them apart from other online communities and aligns with the perception of a genuine community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Algesheimer et al., 2005). For example, members of brand communities have strong ties to their brand of choice and are known to discriminate against other alternative brands, a characteristic that falls into the consciousness-of-kind category in relation to genuine communities and is referred to in the marketing literature as opposition brand loyalty (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Shared rituals and traditions, as well as a moral responsibility also show up as characteristics associated with OBCs, as demonstrated by the communities of Apple® enthusiasts, PlayStation gamers, and Ford® owners. These attributes are all markers of a genuine community, as previously discussed in this chapter.

Members of Apple communities are notorious for having an intense aversion to Microsoft (Feldstein, 2007); PlayStation® gamers dismiss Xbox® players as inferior, and people who drive Ford motorcars customarily loathe Holden® owners, thus exhibiting a consciousness of kind (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Rituals and traditions are demonstrated

through shared stories regarding the innovation and history of the brand, such as SAAB owners who reminisce about the design of the car based on its association with airplanes and fighter jets, giving credence to SAAB's superior engineering (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Members in all the aforementioned communities share a moral responsibility to one another, indicated by their willingness to offer help and advice about where to purchase brand-related products, or provide free technical information when needed (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

In online communities of transaction, open source communities, and communities of practice, such traits are not as common due to the generic nature of the focus of interest. These are all online communities, open to suggestions about whichever brand or product suits members' needs at any one time, rather than devotees of one specific brand to the exclusion of all others. In communities of practice for example, people contribute their knowledge in order to establish themselves as experts and improve their status in the community (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003), thus the driver is not so much a moral obligation to help other members, but rather personal advancement. According to Algesheimer et al. (2005), a strong consumer relationship with the brand has a significant influence on consumers developing a personal identity with the community. Royo-Vela and Casamassima (2010) also argued that the feelings of belonging and kinship members feel towards the brand community have a direct effect on how committed they are to the actual brand. Additionally, Algesheimer et al (2005) suggest that brand affiliated communities can foster a relationship between the customer and the whole company rather than a specific brand offered by the firm. This would suggest that an OBC has the potential to nurture the relationship between not only the customer and a PlayStation (a Sony brand) but also the "Sony" corporation as a single entity, and subsequently all of the brands that come under that umbrella company.

2.3.6 Summary of the Brand Aspect of OBCs

In summary, from a consumer perspective, the literature related to the brand aspect of OBCs appears to represent the status of individuals in society, the image they have of themselves and their lifestyle (Lhotáková, 2012; Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, & Holbrook, 1988). Consumers form psychological attachments to brands based on their experiences, associations and the benefits they provide, which they in turn express through brand loyalty (Andersen, 2005; Kuo & Feng 2013; Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010).

Consequently it is the bonding nature of the relationship that consumers have with a brand (Kozinets, 2001) and therefore the brand community that makes OBCs unique from other online communities.

There appears to be general consensus amongst scholars, from a corporate point of view, that a successful brand is a company's most valuable asset, and brand-loyal consumers are critical to the brand's ongoing success (Lhotáková, 2012; Junjun, 2012). In today's competitive marketplace it is therefore a priority to nurture strong, enduring relationships between consumers and brands to ensure successful, sustainable organisations (Skålén, Pace, & Cova, 2014). OBCs are proving to be an effective link between customers and brand owners/organisations (Zhang, 2014; Skålén, Pace, & Cova, 2015). Research indicates that OBCs encourage co-creative relationships in companies; cultivate loyalty towards the brand around which the community is based, and ultimately increase the value of the brand (Lhotáková, 2012; Junjun, 2012). Moreover, brand-related discussions between members of OBCs provide marketers and brand-owners with vital information about consumer behaviour towards their brand and the products carrying their brand name (McWilliam, 2000).

2.3.7 Summary of the Fundamental Structural Dimensions of OBCs

A summary of the findings from the literature regarding each aspect or contextual dimension of OBCs is provided below:

The Community Aspect of OBCs

- There are several underlying differences between a group of people and a genuine community (Brogi, 2013; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009; Obst & Smith, 2002; Sarason, 1974).
- Characteristics of genuine communities include members who exhibit a consciousness of kind, demonstrate a moral responsibility and share in the rituals and traditions associated with the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).
- Brand communities can be categorised as genuine communities based on Muniz & O'Guinn's 2001 markers of a genuine community theory.
- Brand communities exhibit traits associated with an accrued level of social capital which align with markers of a genuine community (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1989; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

- Successful and sustainable communities have an accrued level of social capital in the form of a shared language between members, a shared vision for the community, and a culture based on trust and reciprocity (Liao & Chou, 2011; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Jones & Taylor, 2012).
- Social capital has a positive relationship with network ties in brand communities, SOB and participation in communities in general (Kleinhans et al., 2007; Misra et al., 2012; Putnam, 2000).
- Network ties have an individual-level influence on participative behaviour and SOB in communities (Putnam, 2000).
- Anonymity is an individual-level influence on participative behaviour and SOB in communities (Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978; Omernick & Sood, 2012).
- Sustainable communities not only exhibit the traits associated with a genuine community, they also have members who demonstrate SOC, evident from the strength of their attachment and positive view of the community (Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sutanto, Kankanhalli, & Tan, 2011).
- SOC is predominantly represented by the concept of SOB and identification with a community (Obst et al., 2002b; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009).
- The characteristics of a genuine community, the traits associated with SOC, and an accrued level of social capital are factors that contribute to the success and sustainability of communities (Zhao et al., 2011).

The Online Aspect of OBCs

- Online communities that exhibit the markers of a genuine community and a high level of social capital foster the development of strong relationships, SOB, and an increase in participative behaviour (Liao & Chou, 2011; Lu et al., 2011).
- Both the type of community and the strength of members' attachment to the community affect influential factors such as how enjoyable the community is to be a part of (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Van der Heijden, 2004), how useful it is (Tsai et al., 2011), how easy it is to navigate around the site (Tsai et al., 2011; Davis, 1989), and the network ties members develop (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Dholakia et al., 2004).
- Depending on the field of research, the influential elements in online communities are based on motivational theories, such as the Uses and Gratifications (U&G)

paradigm (Stafford et al., 2004), the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis et al., 1989), and the Usability and Sociability (U&S) framework (Preece, 2001).

The Brand Aspect of OBCs

- A brand is a company's most valuable asset (Zhang & He, 2013; Mao, 2010; Junjun, 2010).
- Consumers form attachments to specific brands based on the tangible and intangible benefits they provide, which over time develops into brand loyalty (Park et al., 2006).
- Brand loyal customers are key to the success and sustainability of the brand and therefore to the company that owns the brand.
- Organisations are recognising the benefits of developing long-term co-creative relationships with consumers in order to instil loyalty towards their brands.
- OBCs facilitate communication between brand admirers, and strengthen the bonds between consumers and the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Hatch & Shultz, 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) thereby nurturing brand loyalty behaviours.

The findings of this study signal the relevance of successful OBCs as an asset to organisations due to their strong association with specific brands and the advantages these associations provide. Companies rely on strong relationships between their customers and their brand to compete in the marketplace, and OBCs have been shown to cultivate and enhance those relationships. Research also indicates that successful and sustainable OBCs are reliant on members who are active in the community and have developed a sense of belonging to the community (Zhao et al., 2011). Gaining an understanding of the influences on these factors will therefore provide organisations and marketing practitioners with vital information to ensure the creation of successful OBCs.

There is also a strong indication in the literature that communities with a brand focus are considered "genuine communities". As such, they exhibit the traits associated with markers of a genuine community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and the relational structure associated with an accrued level of social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Liao & Chou, 2011). Furthermore, online community research has consistently shown a valid relationship between social capital in online communities and participative behaviour and SOB (Jones & Taylor, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2006; Li et al., 2013; Liao & Chou, 2011).

However, to date only one study has linked the influence of social capital on consumer behaviour specifically in an OBC environment (Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau, & Zhang, 2012). The current study addressed this gap in the literature by examining social capital as a community-level construct, integral to the success and sustainability of OBCs.

Section one has explored the community, online community and brand community literature and touched on the importance of member participation and developing SOB in OBCs. Clarity is required regarding these concepts as factors critical to the success and sustainability of OBCs, and accordingly, section two commences with a more detailed description of each construct. This is followed by the influences of the critical success factors applicable to OBCs as identified in the literature, and finally, a discussion of the marketing implications of OBCs.

Section Two

2.4 Factors Critical to the Success and Sustainability of OBCs

Measuring the success of OBCs depends on the perspective of the stakeholder. From a member's standpoint, successful communities have been linked to sociability and usability of the website (Preece, 2001), and from a corporate or marketing perspective, success and sustainability have been associated with brand loyalty behaviour (Kim et al., 2008). The latter view was corroborated by Woisetschläger et al. (2008), who argued that ongoing participation and SOB are both key to the long term success of communities, and brand loyalty, positive word of mouth, and a positive brand image are all achievable outcomes of successful and sustainable OBCs.

From a theoretical standpoint, critical success factors are the variables essential to the success of a business or project, and are related to the organisation's strategic goals ("Critical Success Factors" n.d.). By identifying the critical success factors for different marketing strategies, companies are able to focus on what needs to be done to achieve their objectives and ultimately success. The same theory can be ascribed to OBCs. It is imperative for brand owners and marketers to recognise the factors associated with membership in an OBC essential for its ongoing success, and to identify which variables have an impact on them (Bateman, Gray, & Butler, 2011).

The concept of participative behaviour is prevalent in the literature, and is directly related to successful communities. Casaló et al. (2007) advocated this view with their observation that the interactive nature of OBCs makes ongoing participation one of the most important factors for their development and sustainability. Koh and Kim (2004) reinforced this stance with a recommendation for greater levels of participation in communities to facilitate the dissemination of ideas and assist with knowledge sharing among members, highlighting its importance for the sustainability of OBCs.

2.4.1 Participative Behaviour

According to McWilliams (2000), participative behaviour in OBCs is a two-dimensional process that includes writing posts or threads (mutual production) and reading members' opinions or ideas (consumption). McWilliams suggested while each member is involved in some aspect of consumption, there are fewer members engaged in mutual production. Royo-Vela and Casamassima (2011) confirmed this assumption with the findings from their netnography research, and suggested the different levels of interaction be defined as either "active participation", where the individual makes regular contributions to the community through writing posts and reading messages, or "passive participation", which implies lurking on the site and reading message boards but not posting anything, the most common form of interaction in a community. They also proposed the inclusion of a third dimension, referred to as "non-participative belonging", to describe those who had signed up but never visited the site (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011).

The non-participative belonging aspect of the Royo-Vela and Casamassima (2011) research was based on the idea that some people register as members of online communities in order to be associated with certain groups. In this way they "belong to the community" but never actually read or contribute anything. Royo-Vela and Casamassima (2011) argued this may be due to a need to be affiliated with a specific brand without the need to actually participate in the community. They also concluded that active participation leads to higher levels of effective commitment to the community and brand than non-participative belonging; the act of registering with the community nevertheless gives a sense of ongoing commitment and personal association with the brand (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011).

In a similar vein to McWilliam's (2000) research, Tsai, Huang, and Chiu (2011) recommended measuring participation in OBCs using a combination of level of engagement in community activities and extent of interactions with other members.

Similarly, Casaló et al. (2007) proposed the amount of effort members put into capturing the interest of the virtual community, the usefulness of their posts to other community members, and the enthusiasm of their messages and responses are effective measures of participative behaviour. However, two considerably more basic measures of participation were found in the literature, based on the number of posts members had contributed over an allotted time (Shang et al., 2006) or asking respondents if they had participated in any OBCs, requiring only a simple dichotomous reply of "yes" or "no" (Lee & Lee, 2010; Shih, Hu, & Farn, 2010).

According to Casaló et al., (2007), higher levels of participation in brand communities have a positive effect on how committed members feel towards the brand due to the level of trust they generate and receive from other members. The more posts members contribute to online discussions and the quicker they respond, the more they and the community as a whole are trusted (Ridings et al., 2002, McWilliam, 2000). This increases members' loyalty to the community and subsequently the brand. It also impacts on the likelihood members will recommend the brand through positive word of mouth, predicated on the fact that consumers cannot see or feel the products they purchase online and therefore need to be able to trust other members for dependable advice (Ridings et al., 2002). In addition, having a positive relationship with other members through regular interaction and building a relationship based on trust and mutual respect not only instils loyalty towards the brand, but ultimately generates a higher rate of purchase intent (Kim et al., 2004). The importance of trust and reciprocity in OBCs is very much aligned with creating social capital in online communities (Best & Krueger, 2006; Liao & Chan, 2011; Mathwick et al., 2008) and is discussed in more detail under Influences in section 2.5.

In direct contrast to these studies, Algesheimer et al. (2005) argued active participation in communities can lead to normative pressure or the need to conform to its rituals and traditions, which can cause members to feel their association with the community is too arduous. This results in a negative effect on behavioural intentions such as keeping up one's membership, continuing to participate in the community and brand

recommendations (Algesheimer et al., 2005). While this view is not corroborated by any other studies, it is nevertheless an interesting theory and worthy of mention.

With the exception of Algesheimer et al. (2005) there is general agreement in the literature that any level of participation is unquestionably of benefit to OBCs and therefore the brand owners (Tsai et al., 2011; Li, 2011; Woisetschläger et al., 2008; Casaló et al., 2007; McAlexander et al., 2002; Zhou et al., 2010; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Studies show the more members communicate with each other online the more they feel connected to the community and the brand around which the community revolves (Liaw, 2011; Koh & Kim, 2004). The literature indicates members' levels of affiliation with the community affects how loyal they are to a brand (Algesheimer et al., 2010; Casaló et al., 2007; Anderson, 2005). One explanation is the theory that co-creative relationships strengthen the bond between members and brand owners (Hatch & Shultz, 2010). Another is that key aspects of membership and participation revolve around ongoing purchase and use of the brand. For instance, membership is often contingent on ownership of a branded item, and conversations are predominantly about brand-related topics, signifying to members they have common interests. Participative behaviour therefore creates a strong relationship between members and the community, which impacts on brand loyalty behaviour (Algesheimer et al., 2010; Casaló et al., 2007; Anderson, 2005).

For the purpose of measuring participative behaviour in OBCs in this study, the work of both McWilliam (2000) and Tsai et al. (2011) were appropriate. Not only do OBC members interact through communication with other individual members, they also do so by providing information for others to read and utilise. Members who predominantly visit sites for information only (lurkers) are therefore still participating and were included in this study. Moreover, although information gathering may be the initial objective for many visitors to OBCs, they form an attachment to the community over time and are subsequently converted to active members (Zhou et al., 2013). This connection, bond, or affiliation members develop with a community is referred to as a sense of belonging or feeling of personal identification with the community. It is akin to the membership and emotional connection dimensions of a SOVC and the consciousness-of-kind characteristics found in genuine communities; both of which are associated with community success and sustainability (Lu et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2004).

2.4.2 Sense of Belonging (SOB)

We view sense of belonging as fundamental to the existence of a group. If individuals do not perceive themselves to be members of a group, it is difficult to understand how group norms, values, and other group characteristics are likely to affect them. Indeed, the use of the term "group" implies some minimal sense of belonging on the part of group members, otherwise the collection of individuals is an aggregate (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990, p. 484).

Throughout the literature the sense-of-belonging (SOB) construct appears to have several meanings depending on the researcher's perspective and the field of enquiry. However, there does appear to be agreement in a community environment that the term encompasses feelings of attachment to the community, a sense of identification with the community, and membership of the community (Zhao et al., 2012, p. 574). In this study the term SOB is used to reflect all these attributes.

Lu et al. (2011) proposed SOB has a positive impact on continuous participation intention, vital for the development and maintainability of the community in the long-term. Lin (2008) asserted there would be no member involvement or participative behaviour of any kind without members with a sense of belonging to the community. This opinion was shared by Lu et al. (2011) who claimed SOB "fosters the development of relationships and affects the vitality of the community", implying that without SOB a community is less likely to survive. The findings from Tsai, Huang, and Chiu's (2012) study of Taiwanese and Western car brand users support both studies with empirical evidence of a significant positive link between participation and identification with the community in the form of member interactions and member involvement in activities within the community.

Another perspective in OBC research indicates feelings of belonging and membership to the community is fostered by regular interaction between members (Amine & Sitz, 2004). Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, and Tarkiainen (2011) also found a sense of virtual community (SOVC), which encompasses SOB, was enhanced through the reading and posting of messages in an online community. Therefore, although SOB is considered to be a critical success factor in OBCs, it also appears to be an antecedent to participative behaviour and an outcome of participation. These findings highlight the need for clarity

with regard to the influences on participation and sense of belonging, as well as the direction of the relationship between the two constructs.

Wherever SOB is considered a critical success and sustainability factor in the existing literature, it is ranked of equal importance to participative behaviour in OBCs (Lu et al., 2011). Zhang et al. (2015, p. 84) observed “in an OBC, both emotional attachment and relationship is necessary to produce the elements to make an online brand community successful”. Research suggests individuals in OBCs who feel their membership is salient in the community (Lu et al., 2011) and can identify with their fellow members are more likely to continue contributing and also more likely to develop positive brand loyalty behaviours (Li, 2011; Carlson et al., 2008; Woisetschlager et al., 2008; Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Other studies show members who are affiliated with OBCs through their love of a specific brand share a common bond through ownership or association with the brand. The symbolic meaning or personality of the brand reflects the characteristics consumers associate with it, and consumers use their personal relationship with a brand as a means of self-expression and identity formation (Belk, 1988). Consumers are not committed to a brand purely for its function or benefits (Liaw, 2011); it also represents who they are and what they value. This consumer-brand connection is one of the attributes specific to OBCs, and is directly related to members’ sense of belonging (SOB) (Lu et al., 2011; Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004).

Unlike traditional offline communities that tend to have restrictive membership requirements, online communities are easily accessed by anyone with a computer and an internet connection (Lin, 2008). Successful and sustainable OBCs will therefore be more reliant on the quality of its community than its member numbers, and having members who exhibit positive traits associated with a strong identification with OBCs is therefore critical, as they would otherwise lack any real substance (Lin, 2008).

Another theory previously mentioned in relation to the community literature in section 2.2 is encapsulated in the work of Tonnies (1957) and Durkheim (1954). These authors contended the term “community” should only be applied to online groups that exhibit a sense of community (SOC). For example, some OBCs may be considered successful from an economic standpoint, yet its members have not developed feelings of belonging or emotional attachment to the community, and therefore no sense of

community (Zhao et al., 2012; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). To illustrate, Blanchard and Markus (2004) suggested that Amazon.com, although a successful OBC with a large following, does not exhibit sense-of-community traits such as online connections with other members and exchange of emotional support. In direct contrast some members of MSN, a community for sport enthusiasts, help each other regularly and have bonded with the community. Accordingly, Blanchard and Markus (2004) concluded Amazon.com should be called an “online brand group”, whereas MSN could legitimately be called an “online brand community”.

According to Li (2011), SOB is aligned with “consciousness of kind”, a concept related to the connection members share with each other within the community. It also embodies feelings of disassociation with people outside the community and is considered to be representative of one of the markers of a genuine community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Both these concepts signal a change of thought around measurements of success, from being based on the number of members in a community (quantity) to the strength of the relationships within the community (quality) (Yoo, Suh, & Lee, 2002). This shift in focus highlights the importance of members who participate regularly and exhibit a sense of belonging (SOB) as integral to the community’s longevity and as an evaluative measure of its success (Li, 2011; Pai & Tsai, 2011; Zhou, 2011; Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008; Lu, Phang, & Yu, 2011).

From a commercial aspect, OBCs have the potential to deliver significant benefits to organisations, marketing professionals and scholars, so gaining an understanding of what motivates members to contribute to OBCs and continue their association in the long term is vital. Although general online research has touched on the subject, the findings are inconsistent across different types of communities and theory applied. Furthermore, OBCs have unique qualities that set them apart from general online communities, therefore OBC-specific research is necessary to address their issues effectively.

The following section discusses the literature related to benefit-based motivations associated with participative behaviour and sense of belonging in OBCs, as well as the individual- and community-level influences on participative behaviour and SOB in OBCs. This is followed by the marketing implications for successful and sustainable OBCs.

2.5 Influences on the Critical Success Factors in OBCs

2.5.1 Member-based Benefits

Based on the logic of the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) paradigm, members' motivations to participate in OBCs are contingent on the benefits they expect to gain from their involvement. Although the perceived benefits will naturally differ from person to person, research suggests that most benefits can be categorised as either *learning*, *social*, *personal* or *hedonic* (Wang, Chan, & Yang, 2013; Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). This assumption implies there are a broad set of benefits members expect to receive from their involvement in OBCs, and are more likely to participate if it will provide them with one or all of these benefits depending on their needs (Wang, Chan, & Yang, 2013; Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). The perceived benefits in OBCs are of a slightly different nature than those in general online communities, because OBC members are interested in a specific brand and their needs are therefore brand-related rather than generic. For example:

- **Learning benefits** – also referred to as cognitive benefits, relate to acquiring a better understanding of the branded products, including technical properties, usage advice and general product knowledge (Kuo & Feng (2013; Wang, Chan, & Yang, 2013; Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008).
- **Social integrative benefits** – come from the network ties members develop over time that enhance their sense of belonging or social identity to the community (Kuo & Feng , 2013; Wang, Chan, & Yang, 2013; Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008).
- **Personal integrative benefits** – include the respect members gain through contributions to the community, such as helping other members solve problems or suggesting new products for development, which may also be referred to as *process gratification* (Dholakia et al., 2004; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). Studies show that members can enhance their status in the community through helping behaviours, which in turn increases their self-esteem and encourages continuous participation (Kuo & Feng (2013; Wang, Chan, & Yang, 2013; Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008).
- **Hedonic benefits** or affective benefits (Wang et al., 2013) – relate to the pleasure members experience from being part of a community, and can be likened to

entertainment value or content gratification (Kuo & Feng, 2013; Wang, Chan, & Yang, 2013; Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008).

Based on the outcome of their study, Nambisan and Baron (2009) pointed out that altruistic motives are clearly not the only drivers of participation in OBCs. The expectation that members will gain significant benefits from enhanced product knowledge, network ties, status in the community, and enjoyment, is what ultimately encourages them to participate. The findings from their research also indicate that the greater the member perceives the value of the benefits to be, the more they will participate in the OBC. Furthermore, studies that utilised the U&G framework show the emphasis of each perceived benefit differed depending on the type of interaction the member was likely to be involved in (Wang, Chan, & Yang, 2013; Nambisan & Baron, 2009).

According to Wang et al. (2013), Kuo and Feng (2013), and Nambisan and Baron (2009) interaction factors shape a customer's expected benefits, which can broadly be categorised as either product related (chats about product usage, technical issues, market position), member identity (credibility of the source), or human interactivity (how easily they can interact and the reciprocity between members). In a global study of IBM and Microsoft communities, Nambisan and Baron (2009) found the path between product-related interaction and perceived hedonic benefits the strongest relationship in their model. The findings of Wang et al.'s (2013) research, based on "Mcfans", an OBC frequented by Apple® enthusiasts in China, showed product-related conversation had the highest effect on cognitive benefits. Kuo and Feng (2013) also found product-related interaction strengthened the value of cognitive benefits in their study of Taiwanese automobile OBCs. Wang et al.'s (2013) explanation for these findings was that OBCs had changed over the years, with (especially) Chinese consumers using the internet predominantly to search for product information and therefore they attached more importance to the learning benefits of OBCs rather than the social, personal or hedonic benefits.

2.5.1.1 Information versus Social-based Benefits

Whether functional or social benefits are more likely to encourage member participation in OBCs is a topic of disagreement in the literature, and relates to both the U&G paradigm and the U&S framework. For example, although Sicilia and Palazon's (2008) research was undertaken prior to Wang et al.'s (2013) study, they also utilised the

U&G framework in their study of a successful online Coca-Cola® community in Spain, and concluded that although OBCs are of great informational value, functional benefits are not sufficient to encourage long-term participation. They reasoned that successful communities relied on members developing a sense of belonging to the group which only occurs through regular social interaction, implying OBCs are more important for their sociability and entertainment value and consequently, motivations to participate in OBCs are more likely to be based on social and hedonic benefits (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008).

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) also suggested social benefits are most likely to motivate consumers to contribute to OBCs, as social engagement with other members not only promotes a feeling of belonging but instils a deeper connection with the brand, a view supported by Casalo et al. (2008) and Lu et al. (2011). In direct contrast, Shang et al. (2006) and Brodie et al. (2011) argued that information searches are the most likely reasons for active online participation; this was supported by Wasko and Faraj (2000) who found participation in the form of information gathering to be the driving force behind the majority of motivational factors in OBCs. Mathwick et al. (2008) claimed “the community experience is not defined exclusively by information resource exchange. Problem solving is augmented by the “linking value inherent in the community’s social support system”. This implies the social aspects of the website encourage ongoing participation, despite information searches being the primary reason for visiting an online community. Mathwick et al.’s (2008) observations are congruent with the work of Zhou, Wu, Zhang, and Xu (2013), who found viewing posts provide both informational and social value for visitors to OBCs, and increases their intention to participate in the community. Zhou et al. (2013) also discovered that visitors to brand communities who had consumed the brand found informational and social value equally important with regard to intention to participate, whereas members who had not consumed the brand found social value more important. They (2013, p. 5) concluded “the vitality of an online brand community lies in its ability to attract visitors and transform them into community members. The informational content and social relationships revealed in the community are two important factors that *influence* visitors' intentions to join the community”.

The online community literature also suggests that brand type has a great deal to do with the variance in research findings, as the more technical the product, the more likely participation relates to the functionality of the OBC. For example, Shang et al. (2006)

conducted a survey of Apple® computer users and found passive participation (lurking), rather than active participation, had the most significant impact on members' brand loyalty. Since the primary reason for lurking is usually to obtain product information, not to satisfy social needs, it is logical to conclude that where the brand is of a functional nature, members feel connected to the brand through the informational benefits they gain (Shang et al., 2006). The same hypothesis can be applied to Brodie et al. (2011) who examined users of "Vibratrain" exercise equipment, also a product that stimulates technically-related discussion. In contrast to both studies, Lu, Phang, & Yu (2011) found *perceived enjoyment* and *sense of belonging* the factors with the most impact on members' continued participation in OBC's. This result appears to be related to the hedonic nature of the community as Lu et al.'s (2011) data were collected from popular leisure-oriented OBCs.

This area of research clearly attracts considerable disagreement depending on the focus of the study and the type of community on which the research is centred. To date no research has empirically measured the significance of information- and social-based values with regard to members' behaviours across a diverse range of OBCs. A comparison between information seekers and socialisers was therefore included in the research framework of the current study to address this gap in the literature. Moreover, as the findings from the existing literature indicate, members' participative behaviour in OBCs is influenced by the benefits they expect to receive, and the nature of the benefits depends largely on the type of community or brand around which the community is focused (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010; Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2011). Broader research will therefore provide a clearer understanding of consumer behaviour in OBCs, regardless of community type. This study is the first examination of both socially- and technically-oriented OBC communities, and extends the body of knowledge by investigating their similarities and differences.

2.5.2 Individual-level Influences on the Critical Success Factors in OBCs

In this study the influences on *participation* and *sense of belonging* in OBCs were categorised as either individual-level or community-level influences. Individual-level influences refer to the factors that relate directly to members' personal experiences with the community, whereas community-level influences are associated with the relational structure of the community as a whole.

2.5.2.1 Perceived Enjoyment

Perceived enjoyment in the context of OBCs is an individual-level factor referring to the pleasure members personally experience from their membership to the community. Where modified versions of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) have been used in previous studies, the findings indicate that, in OBCs, members' perceived enjoyment has a positive influence on their level of participation (Van der Heijden, 2004) and their sense of belonging to the community (Lin, Fan, & Wallace, 2013). *Usefulness* featured prominently in the original version of the TAM framework (Davis et al., 1989), yet in subsequent research *usefulness* has more relevance in work-related communities than entertainment-based communities (Hsu & Lu, 2011; Van der Heijden, 2004; Moon & Kim, 2000). *Enjoyment* therefore appears more likely to have a significant influence on participation in OBCs than *usefulness*.

There is some debate in the literature about the significance of type of community on the outcome of studies utilising TAM. For example, Heijden's (2004) research indicates the intention to use an online information system is more likely, in a utilitarian, work-related community, to be influenced by the usefulness of the technology rather than the members' perceived enjoyment. On the other hand, in a hedonic-type community, enjoyment and ease of use have a stronger influence than usefulness.

In an earlier study, Moon and Kim (2000) compared members of an entertainment-purpose community with members of a work-purpose community to test the relevance of community type on TAM theory. The results of their research showed that *playfulness* (enjoyment, fun) has a more significant effect on behavioural intention in entertainment-purpose groups as opposed to work-purpose communities, whereas *usefulness* is only significant in work-purpose groups. This indicates that even though enjoyment is a stronger motivator for participation in hedonic-type communities, in utilitarian-type communities, having fun and the enjoyment of being involved increases members' motivation to participate. Hsu and Lu (2011) confirmed this with their findings of OBC members less likely to participate when their enjoyment levels were low or they didn't find the system easy to use, even if the site was useful to them, leading one to conclude that members choose to participate because they are interested in the brand, but stay because they enjoy being involved with the community (Amine & Sitz, 2004).

Research has also shown a link between perceived enjoyment and the sense of belonging members develop in online communities (Lin et al., 2013). This conclusion is based on the idea that when members experience satisfaction from their involvement in a community and feel they can identify with the other members, they subsequently develop a stronger sense of belonging to the community as a whole (Lin et al., 2013; Lin, 2008). Although Lin et al. (2013) focused on members of a knowledge-sharing community, the research can be applied to OBCs as both have similar characteristics. In both community types users came together of their own volition to share information with fellow members; there were guidelines in place to ensure members were treated with respect; and reliability of the information provided by members of the community conferred a trustworthy reputation on the community itself.

2.5.2.2 Perceived Ease of Use

Another individual-level construct predominantly associated with the use of TAM also shown to influence participation in OBCs is *perceived ease of use*. In an OBC environment this relates to the ease with which members can navigate the community site, post messages and communicate with other members (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Van der Heijden, 2004). In their modified TAM framework, *perceived ease of use* had a positive relationship with *enjoyment* and *participative behaviour* (Hsu & Lu, 2011), indicating members who found the community site enjoyable and easy to use became more involved, with the result both factors affected their level of participation.

Based on Preece's (2001) Usability and Sociability (U&S) framework, the ongoing success of online communities is reliant on them being both sociable and usable, so although members consider *enjoyment* important with regard to perception of the community, they also place a great deal of value on the usability aspects of the community, such as how effortlessly they can interact with other members (Stafford et al., 2004).

2.5.2.3 Network Ties

In OBCs *network ties* refer to the friendships or personal relationships members develop with each other in the community. Although initially based on a shared interest in the brand, over time and with regular interaction, they develop into strong connections

between members (Dholakia et al, 2004). Wirtz et al. (2012) observed in OBCs even discussions of a technical nature tend to be interspersed with social conversation, and it is the social aspect of these interactions that promotes bonding between members of OBCs, thereby increasing individuals' identity with the community. This is especially relevant in OBCs as the relational structure of the community makes it easier to connect with like-minded people and form solid relationships (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chan, & Zhang (2012) supported this argument and provided evidence of members in OBCs who familiarise with others through knowledge sharing more inclined to develop a sense of belonging to the community.

Dholakia et al., (2009) concluded maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity in OBCs implies members gain "social support, friendship and intimacy", all of which equate to fulfilling the social gratification aspect of the U&G paradigm (Stafford et al., 2004) and have been shown to encourage participation in OBCs (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). Developing network ties in OBCs is also associated with the "people" component of the U&S framework (Preece, 2001) which, according to the author, is a key contributor to the sociability of online communities, and consequently impacts on members' sense of belonging and continued participation.

2.5.2.4 Anonymity

Members of OBCs are generally perceived to be anonymous. They use pseudonyms or user names to identify themselves and communicate with other members. The literature search identified a number of theories and assumptions related to perceived anonymity in online communities, however there are inconsistencies about whether perceived anonymity is likely to have a positive or negative effect on critical success factors in OBCs. For example, anonymity-related research indicates that perceived anonymity increases participation in groups where evaluation apprehension causes reticence to contribute to the community (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). A number of studies also found that the less anonymous members are, the more they contribute to the community, the more network ties they develop and the higher their level of SOB to the community (Blanchard, 2008). Additionally, Yoon and Roland (2012) found that perceived anonymity encourages antisocial behaviour in online communities, thereby impeding participation by other members. The following section discusses each theory in relation to OBCs in more detail.

The Social Identity of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) model suggests in a community environment, where anonymity is the norm and individuals know little about each other, they immerse themselves in the group (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Blanchard, 2008; Haines, Hough, Cao, & Haines, 2012; Kim & Park, 2011; McCloud, 2000; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). This increases the relevance of their identity with the group and produces favourable outcomes, such as cohesion with the group or increased sense of community (Blanchard, 2008; Kim & Park, 2011; Spears & Lea, 1994; Walther, 1992). SIDE also proposes when names are made available in a group setting the group's social identity becomes less important, since the emphasis has shifted to the individual developing a personal identity within the community (Blanchard, 2008; Kim & Park, 2011). Based on this premise, members in the community start off by identifying closely with the community, however by contributing they form network ties with other members and a stronger sense of belonging to the group (Blanchard, 2008; Chang, 2008). This suggests that as their perceived anonymity lessens, network ties and SOB increases. Over time and through active participation, members become recognisable and their identity becomes related to their individual contributions to the community (Blanchard, 2008; Chang, 2008).

Social Information Processing theory (SIP) is another interpersonal communication theory used to explain how people in anonymous online environments effectively relate to each other (Mathwick et al., 2008; Walther, 1992). SIP proposes relationships in an online environment have the same basic structure as traditional face-to-face relationships even though they take longer to develop initially, therefore although it takes longer to establish close friendships in an online community, the less anonymous members become the more their network ties increase (Blanchard, 2008). Previous studies also suggests network ties are established between people from diverse backgrounds in online communities due to the lack of physical or verbal cues, which is less likely to occur in face-to-face settings (Mathwick et al., 2008; Walther, 1992). This theory aligns with the proposed bridging function of social capital from a community perspective, as a catalyst for changing weak ties between strangers into strong network ties (Granovetter, 1973; Pinho, 2013; Williams, 2006), and implies the development of network ties is more likely to be influenced at an individual level by members' perceived anonymity.

OBCs with an accrued level of social capital, the Hyperpersonal Model of Relationship Development, builds on the SIDE and SIP models and presupposes people develop more network ties in online communities than in face-to-face situations because computer-mediated communication allows them to portray themselves any way they like (Blanchard, 2008; Walther, 1992). Members of OBCs can choose what information they share and edit what they write before posting (Blanchard, 2008; Walther, 1992). Therefore, although network ties take longer to establish, they result in stronger, more lasting relationships (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1992). Alternately, self-disclosure and posts of a personal nature have been linked to the development of close friendships in online communities, based on the theory that perceived anonymity and the absence of non-verbal social cues encourages members to share experiences of a more personal nature (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Spears and Lea (1994) suggested anonymity in a virtual community increases member participation by reducing social barriers, thus improving knowledge contribution, as group members feel more comfortable to share their ideas and opinions without fear of criticism (McLeod, 1997). This concurs with Best and Kreuger (2006, p. 397) who claimed the invisibility which anonymity provides “helps level perceived stereotypes and hierarchies, as well as moderates the uneasiness that occurs when interacting with strangers”.

On the other hand, empirical studies have also shown that anonymity has a negative effect on group activities and decision-making, as it increases conflict during discussions and encourages social loafing (Christopherson, 2007). This view was supported by Yoon and Roland (2012), who discovered that anonymity had a negative connection with *autonomy* and *relatedness* in an online setting, based on the premise that people who remain anonymous feel free to attack others without fear of consequences and could potentially deter others from sharing their opinions, consequently reducing their perceived autonomy.

All these studies indicate that different theories can be applied to *perceived anonymity* and *network ties*, *participative behaviour*, and *sense of belonging* (Blanchard, 2008; Christopherson, 2007; Spears & Lea, 1994; Walther, 1992; Yoon & Roland, 2012). There is also consensus in the literature that either a negative or positive relationship exists. Inconsistencies arise over whether anonymity in OBCs increases members' identity

with the community (SIDE) or facilitates the development of network ties (SIP), makes participation easier (hyper-personal relationships), reduces the fear of criticism or increases conflict. Not only does the research on this subject lack consistency, the relationship between perceived anonymity and the critical success factors in OBCs has never before been explored. Conflicting views highlight areas of much-needed research, as the success of OBCs has been shown to rely on members' feelings of belonging to a community and desire to continue participating in the community, and perceived anonymity is a significant characteristic of most OBCs. This study initiates the investigation by measuring the strength of the association between *perceived anonymity* and *network ties*, *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* across a range of OBCs. The findings give marketing practitioners, organisations and OBC creators an indication of whether the anonymity factor in OBCs impedes or enhances the success of the community.

2.5.3 Community Level Influences in OBCs

One of the characteristics of OBCs that differentiates them from other online communities is members collectively identify with a specific brand. They invest their time and energy in an OBC, based on their affinity with the brand and the community. Therefore although a member's participative behaviour and sense of belonging (SOB) is influenced by individual-level factors (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Van der Heijden, 2004; Blanchard & Markus, 2004), it has been suggested that the relational culture of OBCs, reflected in the amount of social capital accrued, is an integral community-level influence (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Lee & Lee, 2006; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Li, Clark, & Wheeler, 2013).

2.5.3.1 Social Capital

Social capital is an intangible construct that exists within the relationships or patterns of connectedness in a social unit. In this study it is considered a community-level construct that relates to the quality or characteristics of the relationships in a community (Chi et al., 2009; Liao & Chou, 2011; Zhao et al., 2012). Furthermore, the community and online community literature indicates that social capital consists of a shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity that exists in the interactions between members of a community (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Lee & Lee, 2006; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Li, Clark, & Wheeler, 2013). The literature also indicates that social capital has a positive impact on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in online communities (Liao &

Chou, 2011), suggesting that social capital has a community-level influence on the factors critical to the success and sustainability of online communities (Maksl & Young, 2013).

Although the findings in the literature cover social capital in offline and online communities, research shows OBCs are a unique type of online community with distinct features that differentiate them from online groups in general (Lu et al., 2011). Members of OBCs exhibit a consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility based on their affinity with a specific brand (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). They also have a psychological attachment and strong emotional bond with the brand that shapes their behaviour in the community (Cunniffe & Sng, 2012; Lhotáková, 2012). Only one previous study has explored the influence of social capital from an OBC perspective (Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chauc, & Zhang, 2012), highlighting a significant gap in the literature.

Previous studies have consistently shown brand-affiliated communities exhibit the traits of a genuine community, which align with a shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity, all of which represent social capital (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1989). A relationship between social capital and critical success factors in online communities has also been established in a number of studies (Lia & Chou, 2011; Maksl & Young, 2013; Pinho, 2013; Williams, 2006). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest social capital has a positive effect on the development of strong network ties in an online environment, based on the bridging function of the construct (Putnam, 2000). These findings suggest social capital is clearly pertinent to OBC environments and concur with Li et al., (2013, p. 139), who stated “the role of consumers’ experiences and the social aspects of OBCs have not been given enough attention in the empirical research” and “OBCs can be understood from a social science perspective by introducing the theory of social capital”. Subsequent findings from Zhao et al.’s (2012) study of the Chinese OBC “Taobao” (Alexa, 2014) further support this argument and provide evidence that social capital is not only applicable to OBCs, but have also been shown to have a significant positive effect on members’ participative behaviour and sense of belonging to the community.

This study addresses the lack of OBC-specific research with regard to social capital by developing and testing a social capital framework specific to OBCs, represented by shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity. In addition, this study tests the effects of the *social capital* construct as a community-level influence on *participative*

behaviour, sense of belonging and *network ties* in OBCs, in accordance with the findings of earlier research.

2.5.4 Summary of Influences on Critical Success Factors in OBCs

In summary, the research indicates there are benefits associated with membership to online communities that motivate participative behaviour, such as the perceived informational or social value derived from participation in a community. Factors such as *perceived enjoyment, perceived ease of use, network ties, and anonymity* also influence the level of members' participation and sense of belonging on an individual level. On a collective level, *social capital*, represented by *shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity*, is also thought to have a significant impact on participative behaviour and SOB in online communities. This research was aimed at addressing the significance of these influences on critical success factors in the specific context of OBCs. To date the literature on consumer behaviour in OBCs focuses almost exclusively on the outcomes of OBCs rather than the factors that influence ongoing participation and a sense of belonging. There is also a major gap in the literature with regard to social capital in OBC environments, and this study provides value by advancing our understanding of the effects of social capital on consumer behaviour, specifically in OBCs.

2.6 Marketing Implications of Successful and Sustainable OBCs

Ongoing, successful OBCs appear to be linked to a number of positive outcomes for marketers and organisations, such as access to market research, increased brand loyalty, positive brand image, and positive word of mouth (WOM). Research also suggests the characteristics and structure of successful OBCs play a strategic role in organisations' brand-building process. The contribution of the current study will assist marketing practitioners and organisations to develop and support successful and sustainable OBCs as an additional source of feedback from and channel of communication with their consumers.

2.6.1 Market Research

Sindhav (2011) recommended marketers understand the power of consumer-to-consumer interaction within OBCs and encourage online dialogue. Studies have shown

regardless of whether online comments and opinions are negative or positive, they nevertheless give credence to the brand (Sindhav, 2011) and increase customer loyalty (Casaló et al., 2007). OBCs provide companies with an effective marketing communication channel by enabling brand owners to establish links with the users of their products through discussion boards and brand-related activities (Mathwick, 2002). By providing forums for their consumers, companies have access to reliable and unbiased market research, including information about popular and unpopular features and how members view their competitors' offerings (McWilliam, 2000). This allows them to position their product in the marketplace and take action accordingly (Sindhav, 2011). By connecting consumers with the brand site and encouraging participation in the community, marketers have essentially created a new and effective marketing tool (McWilliam, 2000).

The need for information related to OBC consumer behaviour is apparent from the lengths organisations are willing to go to obtain it, and the number of new mechanisms and devices on the market to help achieve it. According to McWilliam (2000), companies have been known to install "moderators" in community sites, who pose as members in order to manipulate and monitor online discussions. Their affiliation with the brand is kept hidden so that impartial information can be obtained. These tactics, although considered by some to be unethical, are a more and more commonly-used form of market research (Heinze & Ferneley, 2013).

There are also a number of software products on the market designed specifically to analyse online discussions and give brand owners and marketers a better understanding of what their customers are saying. For example, Artificial Life's Alife-Logator™ and the Alife-Webguide™ are just some of the robots designed to analyse the conversations that take place between consumers in online settings and visualise trends in the dialogue. This is another example of the value of the information available from OBCs that brand owners are keen to explore. The growing number of companies providing professional advice on how to build communities around a brand and how to ensure their ongoing success, is a further indication of the important role OBCs are playing in the marketing plans of many organisations, and underscores the importance of this research (Lithium, 2015).

2.6.2 Brand Loyalty

As revealed in the literature, member participation is one of the most important factors for the success and sustainability of OBCs. Through participative behaviours, such as reading and writing posts and replying to threads, members can share information and experiences related to their chosen brand, and are given the opportunity to provide both technical and emotional support to their fellow members (Casalo et al., 2008; Koh & Kim, 2004). A result of these regular interactions on brand-related topics is the development of strong emotional ties to the brand, expressed through an increase in brand loyalty (Casalo et al., 2008).

Brand loyalty can be described as comprising two distinct elements: behavioural and attitudinal. The behavioural element is related to actual behaviour, such as the number of visits to the store or repeat purchases, whereas the attitudinal element comes from a more psychological perspective, and is based on the feelings the consumer has towards the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Casaló et al., 2007). Brand loyalty has the propensity to influence market performance aspects, such as greater market share and relative price. For example, brand loyal customers are more likely to spend more on their favourite brand as they see it as having unique value to them and as a result, companies can charge a premium for their products. Other market-related advantages linked to brand loyalty include positive word of mouth, higher levels of resistance to competitors (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), repurchasing, cross selling (Hur, Ahn, & Kim, 2011) and brand sustainability (Casaló et al., 2007).

Anderson (2005) argued consumers who take the time and effort to participate in community-run activities or share information through posts are more likely to build long-term relationships amongst themselves and with the company. This leads to an increase in their brand loyalty. For example, several well-known and respected organisations such as Apple (Muniz & Schau 2005), Harley-Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), Jeep (Alexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002), and Saab (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), have successfully increased the number of loyal advocates to their brands through relationship-building activities via their online communities (Hur et al., 2011). Their success gives credence to the notion that OBCs have the propensity to provide genuine opportunities for companies to influence members and increase the number of loyal consumers of their particular brand (Andersen, 2005; Kuo & Feng 2013; Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010).

There is a plethora of research to support the view that active participation in OBCs has a significant and positive effect on brand loyalty (Anderson, 2005; Brodie et al., 2013; Casaló et al., 2007, 2008; Kim et al., 2014; Kuo & Feng, 2013; Shultz & Hatch, 2010; Wirtz et al., 2013). Nevertheless, findings from a study of Apple computer enthusiasts (frostyplace.com) indicate that active participation (posting messages) only relates to community loyalty, whereas passive participation (lurking) has a significant and positive impact on brand loyalty (Shang, Chen, & Liaw, 2010). These results not only indicate the effects of active and passive participation differ, but also that members discriminate between loyalty towards the community and loyalty towards the brand.

The concept of two dimensions in the relationship between an individual and a community is not however, a new theory; Kozinets (1999) came to the same conclusion over fifteen years ago. It is clear the type of community used in Shang et al.'s (2012) research had an impact on their results, as the community they investigated was focused around computers, a high-involvement product with a utilitarian function. The emphasis in the community was on technical information about brand-related products rather than social interaction, and members were therefore more likely to spend time reading about their brand of choice rather than chatting about it. Shang et al. (2012, p. 413) themselves concluded "the impact of product type is an issue that should be further investigated".

In order to cultivate member loyalty to a community and the brand around which the community operates, studies have shown that not only is encouraging member participation important, but increasing their sense of belonging is essential (Marzocchi, Morandin, & Bergami, 2011; Woisetschläger et al., 2008). Furthermore, a finding from Marzocchi et al.'s (2011) research suggests that members' identification with OBCs has a much stronger impact on their loyalty to the brand than their identity with the company that produces the brand. This emphasises the value of OBCs as an effective way of developing a stronger connection between the customer and the brand.

Another benefit associated with successful OBCs relates to creating and sustaining a positive brand image. According to Drucker and Maciariello (2008), a primary objective of marketing is branding, as it is the strength of the brand's image that differentiates one product from another.

2.6.3 Positive Brand Image

The definition of brand image in the literature appears to vary depending on whether the emphasis of the research is on the symbolism or the cognitive elements, or has purely a blanket meaning (Lee, James, & Kim, 2014). Lee et al. (2014) put together a chronological transition of the many different terms used in the literature starting from the 1950s through to today, and based on their findings developed a succinct definition that encompasses the most relevant aspects of the concept. According to these authors (Lee et al., 2014, p. 1) brand image can be described as “the sum of a customer’s perceptions about a brand generated by the interaction of the cognitive, affective, and evaluative processes in a customer’s mind”. Their interpretation of brand image is based on the assumption that the image a consumer has of a specific brand is based on several integrated elements, all of which contribute to their perception of what that brand represents, in no sequential order. For example, consumers have an idea in their minds (cognitive) about a particular brand such as Rolex®, and based on past experiences such as trial, ownership, and advertising (evaluative), they come to associate certain qualities with the brand, such as quality, reliability, style, or snobbish and over-priced (affective). In synergy, all of these processes create a brand image in the consumer’s mind. Organisations and marketers strive to develop a favourable image for their brand, especially when products and services are in competition or have very similar attributes. Research indicates that purchase intention is directly affected by the image of the brand in the eyes of the consumer (Belch et al., 2012, p. 8). Subsequently, companies invest a great deal of time and money designing marketing strategies to enhance and promote the positive qualities consumers associate with their brands (Lee et al., 2014).

According to Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut (2008), brand-related communities are made up of people who have already formed an attachment to a specific brand, therefore they already view the brand in a favourable light. They also suggested regular interaction between like-minded people in an environment focused on a specific brand enhances that brand’s image. It is therefore logical to conclude that the more actively members participate in OBCs, the more positively they view the brand, reducing the likelihood of recommending or choosing other brands. Woisetschläger et al. (2008) also found a strong relationship between members who had formed a sense of belonging to the community and their participation levels, reiterating the importance of both constructs as critical success factors.

Another advantage of having active members with a positive image of the brand in OBCs is they are more likely to act as brand advocates by spreading positive word of mouth (WOM) (Shang et al., 2006; Woisetschläger et al., 2008; Raies & Gavard-Perret, 2011; Belch et al., 2012, p. 137; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2010). This is clearly another advantage that successful OBCs provide to brand owners.

2.6.4 Positive Word of Mouth (WOM)

Studies have shown that OBCs are now one of the main sources of information for numerous products and services. Members of brand-related communities tend to be knowledgeable about the usage and technical aspects of the brand, and are happy to give advice and share their opinions (Yoon & Rolland, 2012). OBCs provide a platform for consumers to discuss whether products or services meet their expectations, share brand-related experiences, and to seek reassurance they have made the right product choice. The outcome of this brand-related interaction is the spread of WOM; also referred to as word of mouse, or eWOM in an internet setting.

Positive WOM in OBCs is a loyalty behaviour of benefit to brand owners and organisations, as it increases the likelihood of members and visitors to the forum being influenced by the opinions of people who are not only knowledgeable about the brand, but also brand advocates. According to Royo-Vela and Casamassima (2010), members who are committed to a brand community behave much like satisfied customers; they spread positive word-of-mouth advertising about the products, the company and the brand around which the community is based. Although WOM in OBCs is usually anonymous, as previously noted members in OBCs develop identities recognisable to others in the community. Although the dialogue is often between complete strangers, there is a degree of trust based on members' previous interactions (Lee & Yoon, 2009). The usability aspects of some OBCs also mean they can facilitate conversation and word of mouth between any number of members at any one time, allowing for open discussion and wider spread of WOM.

In OBCs members use WOM to impart their views about the brand's products and services through member interactions or posts on their community forums (Gopinath, Thomas, & Krishnamurthi, 2014). Despite sometimes negative feedback, organisations gain valuable information and insights from the conversations they are able to access, as

they are uncensored and a significant source of consumer information. The value of the market research brand owners have access to by listening to their customers' likes and dislikes about their products and services has prompted an increase in the number of commercial websites, as brand owners recognise the many benefits they provide (Akyuz, 2013).

According to Lee and Yoon (2009), the level of trust potential consumers place in the opinions of fellow members does not appear to be linked to communities associated with a specific brand. The credibility of the source is what determines how much effect word of mouth has on the recipients of the information (Park & Lee, 2009; Chen, Chen, Hsu, & Xing, 2011; Akyuz, 2013). As previously mentioned, members in online communities create personal identities in order to differentiate between one another, and the level of trust they engender is based on their contributions to the community and the reputation they have built. This view was supported by the 2013 Nielson Global Online Consumer Survey (nielson.com) which reported 84% of consumers trusted the information they received via word of mouth from other online users over any other traditional advertising medium (Nielsen, 2013). The report also indicated trust in online reviews had grown by over nine percentage points over the past eight years (Nielsen, 2013). Other studies also identified advice through person-to-person contact as a primary factor in between 20 to 50% of all purchasing decisions (Akyuz, 2013).

An observation made by Park and Lee (2009) was the greater effect of negative WOM than positive WOM on purchase influence, and a greater effect for goods with "experience" rather than "search" qualities. For example, a mobile phone has visible qualities or attributes and can be investigated prior to purchase, whereas the taste of a frozen meal can only be evaluated once it has been experienced (Nelson, 1974). The effect of eWOM on a product or brand has been known to increase as users develop more knowledge regarding its usage (Gopinath et al., 2014), meaning when a new product is released its effect changes as more users add their opinions to online discussions and product knowledge increases. In OBCs this aspect of word of mouth is of great benefit to brand owners and marketers, because it is a reputable source of insights into consumers thoughts and feelings about their brand and brand offerings (Gopinath et al., 2014).

These findings support the theory that the role played by consumers in brand-related communities is considered less as a "passive recipient" and more as a "co-creator"

or “value co-producer” (Nambisan & Baron, 2009). Members of OBCs have close relationships with the community based on their commitment to the brand, as illustrated by the number of OBCs initiated by consumers. Consumers also feel a sense of ownership of the brand which lends authority to their opinions and advice (Dawar, 2004).

2.6.5 Brand Building

The contribution OBCs make to building a strong brand is another marketing benefit of successful OBCs. Irimien (2012) suggested communication strategies designed to build a successful brand should focus on ensuring the brand possesses five main attributes, all of which can be linked to the benefits of OBCs to organisations.

- Recognition – brands achieve recognition through conversations between members and sharing information. As members are loyal advocates of the brand they are more likely to spread positive WOM and recommend the brand to others.
- Reputation – the reputation of the brand is dependent on the image consumers have of the brand. In OBCs, consumers generally think of the brand in a positive light.
- Relevance – members in brand communities share personal experiences of the brand’s functionality or unique qualities to which everybody has access. Hence they provide marketers with information about consumers’ likes and dislikes for their different product lines, so their goods can be adjusted accordingly to meet the needs of their customers.
- Relationship – in OBCs consumers have a strong bond or relationship with the brand the community is focused around. Brand owners have the opportunity to develop co-creative relationships with their consumers through the brand community.
- Recruitment – research indicates members of OBCs are advocates of the brand the community is focused around and spread positive WOM about branded product lines, thereby encouraging new consumers to the brand.

There is considerable research to indicate OBCs increase brand loyalty, positive WOM and the brand's image, all of which highlight the significant marketing implications of successful OBCs (Andersen, 2005; Kuo & Feng 2013; Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010). Additionally, researchers have identified participative behaviour and sense of belonging as the factors critical to successful OBCs (Li, 2011; Pai & Tsai, 2011; Zhou, 2011; Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008; Lu, Phang, & Yu, 2011).

Although prior research has provided valuable insights into the critical success factors of OBCs and the beneficial outcomes of successful and sustainable communities, this study sought to identify the individual- and community-level attributes that influence those factors. It examined the relationships between constructs with a significant effect on members' continued participation, and the factors that contribute to an increased sense of belonging to the community. This information will significantly broaden our understanding of consumer behaviour in OBCs and provide marketing practitioners and organisations with the knowledge required to develop and support successful and sustainable OBCs.

2.7 Summary of the Literature Review

The literature shows the economic and brand-related benefits of successful OBCs to organisations and brand owners is what differentiates them from traditional communities of place and the majority of other online communities. Positive outcomes, such as the co-creation of brand value and increased brand- loyalty behaviours have been identified as achievable advantages of successful and sustainable OBCs (Woisetschläger et al., 2008; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Casalo et al., 2007; Li, 2011).

Research also indicates the success of OBCs is reliant on members who actively participate in the community and develop a sense of belonging (SOB) to the community (Li, 2011; Pai & Tsai, 2011; Zhou, 2011; Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008; Lu, Phang, & Yu, 2011). Although previous research encompasses a number of theories related to the influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in communities in general, there is a paucity of literature on the influence of these critical success factors in OBCs, which forms the focus of the current study.

In the literature, the influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in online communities have been categorised as either individual-level or community-level

factors. Individual-level elements are *enjoyment, ease of use, network ties* and *anonymity*, whereas *social capital* has been categorised as a community-level influence, represented by *shared language, a shared vision, reciprocity* and *social trust*. These assumptions are based on a combination of findings from the community-based literature and online community research, predominantly involving the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) paradigm (Stafford et al., 2004), the Technology Acceptance model (TAM) (Van der Heijden, 2004) and the Usability and Sociability (U&S) framework (Preece, 2001).

There is evidence in the online community research literature to suggest type of community has a significant impact on members' participative behaviour and sense of belonging. This study used the findings from the literature to develop a research framework to measure the influences on critical success factors in OBCs. Previous research also suggests the reason members become involved in OBCs impacts on the influences of participative behaviour and sense of belonging. This study tested the strength of influences on critical success factors depending on whether members were primarily information seekers or socialisers, an area of research that has never been investigated before and will augment the consumer behaviour literature related to OBCs.

2.8 Summary Model

The summary model in Figure 9 was developed by integrating the online community literature with the findings from the OBC literature. The model reflects the predominant influences on the critical success factors in online communities and the beneficial outcomes of those factors. The variables identified as the benefits of successful OBCs were brand loyalty, positive WOM and positive brand image (Casaló et al., 2007; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008; McAlexander et al., 2002). Two primary factors had a direct impact on these outcomes - continuous participation (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Woisetschläger et al., 2008) and sense of belonging to the community (Liaw, 2011), referred to in this study as *critical success factors*. The influences on these constructs, (inside the frame in Figure 9) were the primary focus of this study, as the relationships between them and the critical success factors themselves needed further clarification for OBC environments.

Drawing on the findings from the literature search, qualitative research in the form of netnography and focus groups were conducted prior to the development of the conceptual framework and hypotheses for this study in order to more clearly define the findings from the literature. Chapter three, Qualitative Methodology and Findings, provides a comprehensive outline of the procedures and outcomes of the qualitative component of the research.

Community level influences Individual level influences Critical to success factors

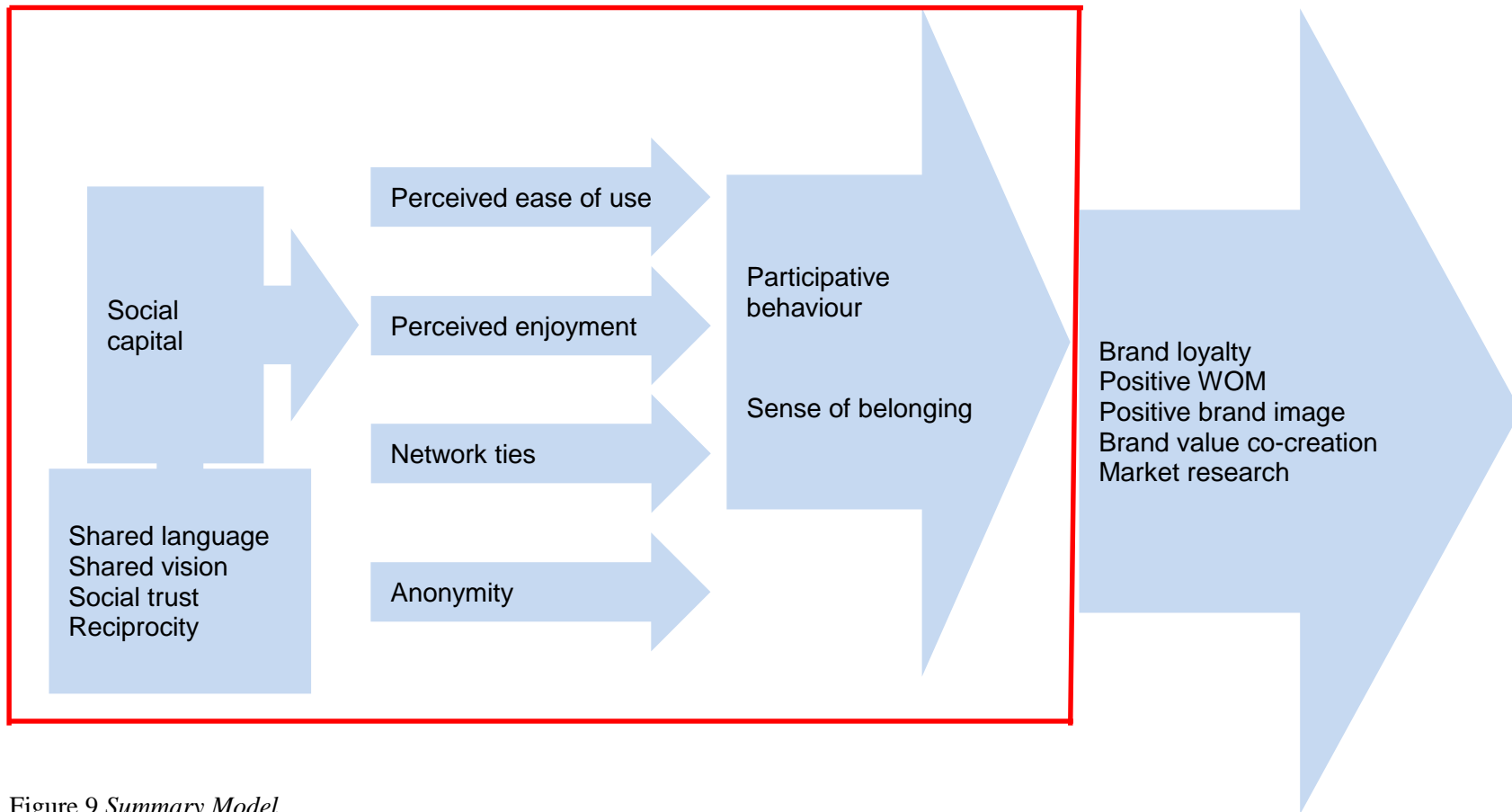


Figure 9 *Summary Model*

Chapter Three

Qualitative Research

3.0 Introduction

This study was conducted over two stages and was designed to provide a comprehensive insight into the influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging (SOB) in online brand communities (OBCs). Chapter 3 outlines the research design of the study and the procedures involved. It begins with a brief outline of the stages of the study, followed by a more in-depth discussion of the rationale behind the methodology selected to effectively address the research problem. It concludes with a detailed discussion of the methodology and findings of the qualitative stage (parts A and B) of the research.

3.1 Research Outline

Stage 1 of the study consisted of two parts. Part A involved qualitative research in the form of observation of several online communities using a netnographic approach. Part B was comprised of a series of focus groups designed to support the observational data and gain further insights into individual members' behaviour in the present online environment. Stage 2 covers the quantitative research, consisting of an online questionnaire administered to registered members of OBCs. The initial scoping of the online environment through the netnography and the data gained from the focus groups were deemed necessary given the constantly evolving nature of internet-based communities. Although the literature identifies a number of influences on critical success factors in the digital environment, there is currently a lack of information on brand-affiliated online communities. By combining these varied data sources across multiple forums, richer insights were gained into the influences on participation and sense of belonging in OBCs (Adjei, Noble & Noble, 2010).

The qualitative stages of this research (Stages one A and B) were designed to clarify and expand on the findings from the literature review, and provide primary data to substantiate the research framework and hypotheses. They also aided in the development of appropriate scale items for the questionnaire in Stage 2 (Hand, Riley, Harris, Singh, & Rettie, 2008). The primary purpose of Stage 1 was to ensure the robustness of the overall

study through deeper investigation and primary as well as secondary research prior to developing the hypotheses. It also ensured the constructs were relevant to the problem being addressed (Harrison & Reilly, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2009). The use of both qualitative and quantitative research within the same study is referred to as mixed methods research (Harrison & Reilly, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009). For this study, a sequential exploratory design was employed (Harrison & Reilly, 2011).

3.2 Selecting the Method of Enquiry

Today, the primary philosophy of mixed research is that of pragmatism. Mixed methods research is, generally speaking, an approach to knowledge (theory and practice) that attempts to consider multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions, and standpoints (always including the standpoints of qualitative and quantitative research) (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007, p. 113).

In the social sciences there has traditionally been a division between quantitative and qualitative research methodologies based on the researcher's philosophical approach. For example, quantitative research is aligned with a positivist paradigm, whereas qualitative research methodologies are based on a constructivist philosophy (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). A positivist paradigm is founded on the ideas of French philosopher August Comte, who posited that observation and reason are means of understanding human behaviour when the objective of the research is to measure and analyse causal relationships between different factors (Kidd, 2002). On the other hand, a constructivist or idealist paradigm guides the investigator based on the belief that meaning has more value than measurement, and perception is in fact reality (Fielzer, 2010).

More recent studies suggest different paradigms can be complementary in research involving human behaviour, and recommend a more pragmatic approach to bridge the gap between positivist and constructivist ontologies as shown in Figure 10 (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). By using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies within the same study, referred to as a mixed methods approach, investigators can draw on the strengths of each method and minimise the weaknesses associated with using only one research paradigm (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009).



Figure 10 *Bridging the Gap*. Adapted from Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009, p. 272)

3.3 Mixed Method Typologies

Depending on the field of inquiry, different labels are ascribed to the purpose or justification for combining qualitative and quantitative data in research (Bryman, 2007; Davis et al., 2011; Harrison & Reilly, 2011), and although the names differ, the descriptions follow a similar theme. For this study, the rationale comes under the heading of “development”, as the results from one method are used to develop another method (Davis et al., 2011). Although there are several reasons for undertaking mixed methods research, the main drivers for this study were to design the research framework and develop an instrument. The term “mixed methods research” infers both qualitative and quantitative data strands are employed within one study, however, the order in which the two strands are used, referred to as the timing or sequence, and the priority or weight placed on each strand differs depending on the design type (Harrison & Reilly, 2011). For example, the design of a study in mixed methods research is based on the rationale or purpose of the study, such as development or initiation, with the added elements of timing and weight assigned to each stage.

The literature regarding the use of mixed methodologies revealed a number of typologies, each categorising mixed methods research designs as a logical mix of the elements considered central to the design of the study (Harrison & Reilly, 2011, Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007, Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005). The design utilised in this study is classified as a sequential exploratory design (Hanson et al., 2005), and initially involved the collection and analysis of qualitative data, followed by the

collection and analysis of quantitative data at a later stage, and with more weight (priority) given to the second stage of the study or quantitative data (Hanson et al., 2005). This is illustrated in Figure 11, where the research design for this study is illustrated in red.

Predominantly used in the social sciences, mixed methods research enriches an overall study by strengthening quantitative data with field-based information of an exploratory nature (Tashakkovi & Teddlie, 1998, Greene et al., 1997). With a sequential exploratory research design, the qualitative stage of the study has the propensity to add depth to the quantitative analysis by gaining a deeper understanding of the subject prior to embarking on comparative analysis (Hanson et al., 2005). This approach produces more robust results (Davis et al., 2011). For this project, building from a solid base of background information gained through netnographic observation and focus groups was critical to the development of a valid research framework upon which to base the quantitative research.

3.4 Stage One (A): Netnographic Observation

3.4.1 Introduction

For the first part of the qualitative stage (Part A) a netnographic methodology was employed, congruent with Kozinets's (2002) procedural guidelines. Although Kozinets recommended an immersive combination of participation and observation, this study used a non-participative approach, in line with a number of more current netnographic studies (Avery, 2007; Brodie et al., 2013; Chan, 2010; Cova & Pace, 2006; Mathwick et al., 2008; Skålén & Cova, 2015).

Netnography is considered to be a relatively new research methodology, often referred to as digital ethnography or virtual ethnography, but faster and more efficient, in most cases less expensive than traditional ethnography, and specifically designed to study online consumer behaviour (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2007; Alavi et al., 2011; Avery, 2007; Brodie et al., 2013; Chan, 2010; Cova & Pace, 2006; Kozinets, 2002; Mathwick et al., 2008; Pongsakornrunsilp, 2013). Netnography provides researchers with a comprehensive insight into member interaction in a virtual environment (Medberg & Heinonen, 2014; Baryl & Jawecki, 2011) and is therefore considered an appropriate, effective and unobtrusive means of gaining rich, insightful information regarding online brand communities (OBCs).

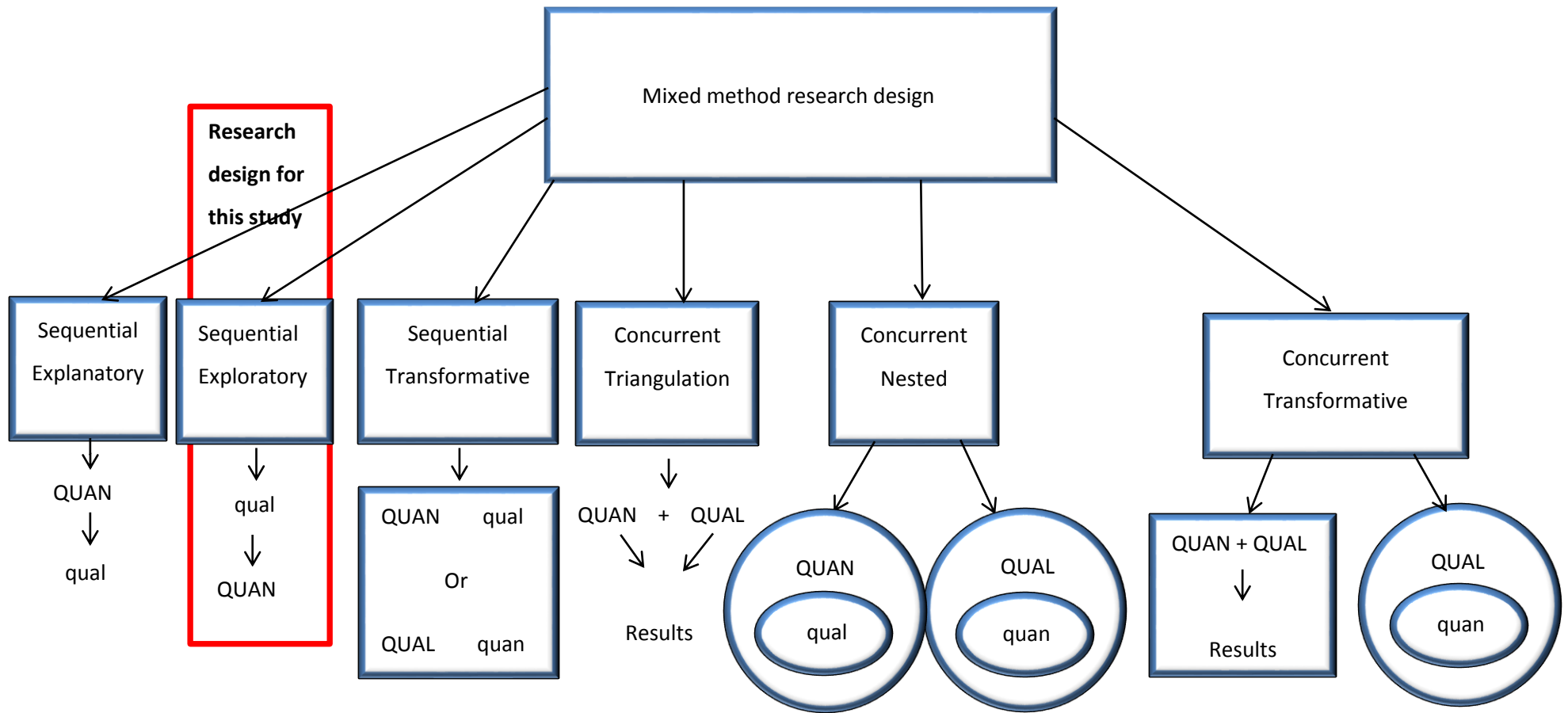


Figure 11 Typology for Mixed Methods Research Designs. Adapted from Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009, p. 273).

Considered a contemporary interpretive research technique, netnography involves passively monitoring an online community and integrating the gathered information to make informed assumptions (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2007; Alavi et al., 2011; Avery, 2007; Brodie et al., 2013; Chan, 2010; Cova & Pace, 2006; Kozinets, 2002; Mathwick et al., 2008; Pongsakornrungsilp, 2013). This methodology is an effective way of gaining insights into the structure of online communities and how members within OBCs converse with each other without actively involving them in the study (Kozinets, 2006; Medburg & Heinonen, 2014). For example, information regarding the number of members in a community, their posting activities and their profiles are publicly available, allowing for “the study of consumer behaviour in its social context” (Avery, 2007, p. 55). For in-depth analysis of OBCs, this approach allows the researcher to become immersed in the community and follow conversations and interactions between members without becoming personally involved (Huck, Jonas, Grunhagen, & Lichter, 2010). It means that data can be collected to familiarise the researcher with the machinations of OBCs and the online behaviour of their members in a discreet, cost-effective and less time-consuming manner than other methodologies (Catterall & Maclaran, 2002; Kozinets, 2006; Puri, 2007).

As this field of research is dynamic and changing rapidly, there is a need to ensure information accurately reflects the current state of OBCs. The literature in this area requires frequent updating, and qualitative data provides a snapshot of contemporary practices within these communities. This view has been substantiated by Kozinets (2002, p. 61), who proposed “marketers recognise the increasing importance of the internet and of consumers who are active in online communities”. Gaining a window into naturally occurring behaviour involving information searches and interactive communication between consumers is of great significance to researchers in this field (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2007; Alavi et al., 2011; Avery, 2007; Brodie et al., 2013; Chan, 2010; Cova & Pace, 2006; Kozinets, 2002; Mathwick et al., 2008; Pongsakornrungsilp, 2013).

Netnography is a flexible research methodology with adaptable processes and procedures depending on the objectives guiding the research (Kozinets, 2002). For example, some researchers conduct purely observational research (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2007; Avery, 2007; Chan, 2010; Cova & Pace, 2006; Mathwick et al., 2008; Skálén & Cova, 2015); whereas others make observations in conjunction with active participation in the community (Amine & Sitz, 2004; Pongsakornrungsilp, 2013). In this study, a non-participative approach was used, as observation of member interactions is more

unobtrusive. The advantages of a covert approach are (a) it is not necessary to get the subjects' cooperation (Kozinets, 2010); (b) it provides rich, unbiased data, uncontaminated by the presence of the researcher (Alavi et al., 2011; Avery, 2007; Kozinets, 2010); and (c) it allows the researcher to gather textual information in its natural form (Avery, 2007).

One of the benefits of netnography is individuals have a tendency to be more open about their views and opinions in an online setting due to their anonymity (Norris, 2002), thus providing researchers with relatively easy access to in-depth information of an archival nature (Catterall & Maclaran, 2002). Community members who post online leave a trail of communication which is digitally diarised, in the public domain and therefore quotable (Kozinets, 2002). The online environment has further improved the opportunity for marketers to collect consumption-related data, as more consumers discuss product preferences and brand experiences in OBCs (Medberg & Heinonen, 2014; Catterall & Maclaran, 2002). For this study, data collection was related to the aesthetics of online communities, the differences in general content between forums, and how brands are represented within each community; critical information for understanding online consumer behaviour, made possible through netnographic observation.

3.4.2 Netnographic Procedure

The methodological procedure for the netnography in this study included (a) identifying appropriate online communities based on the objectives of the study; (b) familiarising with the culture of each community; (c) data collection and analysis; and (d) interpretation of the data (Amine & Sitz, 2004; Avery, 2007; Brodie et al., 2013; Chan, 2010; Cova & Pace, 2006; Kozinets, 2002; Mathwick et al., 2008; Skålén & Cova, 2015). This procedure was approved by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee. To give a more thorough account of each stage of the process in this study, further details are provided in the following sections.

3.4.3 Identifying and Selecting the Online Communities

In order to identify the online communities suitable for this study, the researcher initially conducted a broad and thorough computer search of the World Wide Web, using the research questions to guide the choice of appropriate online communities for further

investigation (Amine & Sitz, 2004; Kozinets, 2002). For this project, the research questions were related to identifying the influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging (SOB) in online brand communities, so the most suitable online communities for analysis were those with a consumer orientation towards a brand, product type or lifestyle. More than one hundred communities were initially identified and then assessed for appropriateness for further analysis based on recommended criteria, such as their topic focus, accessibility, popularity, and diversity from each other (Amine & Sitz, 2004; Chan, 2010; Kozinets, 2002). This process gave the researcher an understanding of the vastness of both the number and range of online communities available to consumers, and provided insights into their popularity and the diversity of individuals who use them. This was beneficial in selecting the following three OBC's.

Three global communities were selected for netnographic investigation based on the objectives of the study. They were:

- **Vogue.com.au (Vogue)** - a fashion and lifestyle magazine brand community;
- **Avonfriendsforum.co.uk (Avon)** - a cosmetics brand forum; and
- **Bodybuilding.com (bodybuilding)** - a fitness and health community.

The three sites were chosen for further analysis based on recommendations by Kozinets (2002), that careful selection of one or very few sites are sufficient for netnography data collection purposes. Netnography typically focuses on a small number of subjects, which despite apparent limitations, has the ability to give the research a more personal and detailed quality (Kozinets, 2002). Three communities were included in this study to allow for comparative analysis (Adjei et al., 2010). The sites were chosen because they were very different from one another, both in population size and product type, had a specific topic focus (a magazine brand, a cosmetics company and body-building respectively), were easily accessible and well-populated, therefore fitting the criteria previously outlined. For example, the Avon community, although popular, was relatively small compared to Vogue and Bodybuilding who both had substantial member bases. Each community attracted very different types of people, negating any consistencies that may arise from observing communities with similar member profiles (Zikmund, Ward, Lowe, & Winzar, 2007, p. 322). Furthermore, membership to these communities did not

require ownership or proof of purchase of a brand or product, thereby allowing for easy access.

Having identified suitable online communities for further analysis, the researcher registered as a member of each community; *vogue.com* (Vogue), *avonfriendsforum.co.uk.com* (Avon), and *Bodybuilding.com* (Bodybuilding). While community statistics are generally available to non-members, registration was deemed necessary in order to gain full access to member profiles and archival posts and threads. The next stage of the netnographic process involved familiarisation with each of the communities (Kozinets, 2002). This involved gathering data related to membership numbers, posting frequencies, and general topics of interest within each of the communities; an important procedure, since variances between the general structures and cultural environments of each community has a significant effect on members' social behaviour (Amine & Sitz, 2004; Kozinets, 2002). This initial fieldwork provided background information about each community, and could be drawn upon for inferences regarding participative behaviour across a selection of different online communities.

3.4.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process involved observation of members in each community and drawing upon the findings in the literature to guide the collection of relevant data (Brodie et al., 2013; Neuman, 2006). The core of the data collection process constituted the interactions between members (Amine & Sitz, 2004); thousands of conversation threads in the three communities were observed and recorded over a four-month period. The researcher logged on daily to keep up to date with new posts and observe community participation. Member activity was recorded after each login, along with field notes of interesting conversation threads and recurring themes. In line with the recommendations of Kozinets (2002), recording reflective field notes for each community was undertaken to ensure sub-texts, pretexts and emotional nuances were not missed, as they can be used to contextualise the data during analysis. The researcher also revisited the communities after a two-year period in order to provide comparative data relating to growth in member populations, postings and any updates to the site. Open coding was then performed on the collected data (Neuman, 2006).

Some researchers suggest coding themes are generated whilst reading the data notes. For this study, coding commenced with a list of concepts identified from the literature search. This allowed the researcher to recognise emerging themes related to each concept more easily, thereby prompting further attention to detail, (Neuman, 2006, p. 462). The open coding process involved reading through the data and grouping statements from the individual communities related to each concept. Threads were identified, reflective of a range of discussion topics relevant to the conceptual framework outlined in Figure 9, and based on the findings from the literature search in Chapter 2. Although a deductive categorisation approach was utilised in this study, emergent categories were also taken into consideration (inductive categorisation) when deemed relevant to the research (Cova & Pace (2006; Spriggle, 1994). Axial coding was used to review and examine coded groups, and through an iterative process, ideas and themes were organised to identify the key concepts found in the data. Selective coding then involved scanning through the field notes and selecting cases to illustrate the different themes in the context of each online community (Neuman, 2006, p. 463).

The information gathered from the communities (Vogue, Avon and Bodybuilding) over the four-month period was subsequently drawn together to identify patterns and relationships between the data from each community. Information was added at a later stage to indicate the rate of growth of each community over an extended period of time. The key objective of this stage (Part A) of the study was to gather information from discussion threads in a range of brand-related online communities in order to contextualise the concepts outlined in the literature search and explore any new themes that may emerge.

3.4.5 Results and Discussion

Observation of the three online communities indicates although there are unique characteristics in the creative design and primary topics of focus in each community, similar operational elements are generally applicable to all online communities:

- Forums – Accessed through a link provided within the mainframe of a specific website (Vogue) or directly through an internet search (Bodybuilding, Avon).
- Forum categories – Each forum includes a list of categories representing the main topics of interest.

- Topics – Topics of interest in the form of headings refer to the different topics of discussion in individual members' posts (messages) to the forum (Amine & Sitz, 2004).
- Threads – Discussion threads are the replies to the initial posts and any comments or statements subsequently added to the conversation.

3.4.6 Community Characteristics

The following section provides information about the characteristics of each individual community, and the researcher's interpretation and insights into the data collected from the three online communities. To address any ethical issues and protect the identity of members in this study, all names and pseudonyms have been replaced with the name of the community to which the member belonged and a coding reference number (Kozinets, 2002).

3.4.6.1 The Vogue Forum

Vogue is a widely recognised brand owned by the Condé Nest media company. A review in The New York Times described Vogue as "the world's most influential fashion magazine" (Weber, 2006). The Vogue online forum (vogue.com, 2012) is located within the international Vogue website (Vogue, 2012). This community is dedicated to the iconic Vogue magazine; a brand synonymous with glamorous pictorials and high-end advertising. In their own words, "since launching in October 2000, Vogue.com.au has produced an engaging online experience by combining the latest digital technology with Vogue Australia's renowned editorial authority" (*About us*, 2012).

Forum content includes a large image of the cover of the latest edition of the magazine (illustrated in Figure 12). Below this image are prompts for purchasing the magazine, and links to other social media tools members can use to connect online with Vogue. The inclusion of such prominent brand advertising and purchasing stimuli accentuate the commercial aspect of the forum. The stylish design of the site and comprehensive list of terms and conditions members have to abide by represent the brand image the company wants to portray. This shows effective use of their online community to reinforce the company's brand image, important to Vogue, as a reputation for quality is

their unique selling proposition. Research also indicates that enhancing the positive qualities consumers associate with brands has a direct effect on purchase intention (Belch et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2014). Although products and brands are advertised on the forum by the administrative team, there is a strict policy restricting members from advertising unless they have been invited to give a product review. This is illustrated by the following line in the community's terms and conditions: "Contributions that seek to endorse commercial products or activities or solicit business will not be accepted" (Vogue #Admin). The reason for strict policing of advertising material on this site is in all likelihood to reduce conflict between messages posted on the site and allegiances with companies who advertise in Vogue magazine.

VOGUE TÜRKİYE
TEMİZ • 2012

Gelecek sezona
İNDİRİMDEN
yatırım

Saat saat
PLAİ STİLİ

SÜPER
İNSAN
E-deriyle yenilenme
Çiğ altı uyarıcıları
Kişiyeye özel hormon kokteyli

Romantik
İLİŞKİ
SÖZLEŞMESİ

BÜSTİYER
GİYME
ŞİFRELERİ

Jennifer
LOPEZ
Vücut ölçüleri
kariyeriyle yansır

8 ALTIN
KURAL
Cünesle
mesafeni kuru

L'WREN SCOTT VE
MICK JAGGER'İN
MUHTEŞEM EVİ

MODAYLA
SERİNLE

Sonbahar trendlerinin galası
2012 Pre-Fall koleksiyonları
Özel efektli kumaşlarla
sezona dinamik başlıyorsunuz

CONNECT WITH VOGUE

f Twitter YouTube g+ p

✉ SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER

Figure 12 Vogue Magazines July 2012 (<http://www.designscene.net/>)

The Vogue forum offers members a choice of eight topical categories, including Fashion, Shopping, Beauty, Brides, General, Lookbooks, Home & Lifestyle, Forum Notices, Technical Queries, What's Going On and Vogue Stats. Members and guests to the site can contribute posts and threads related to any of the suggested topics and comments and replies to any existing discussion threads. Conversations between members of the forum are predominantly related to fashion, shopping and cosmetics, with a few discussion threads around current affairs, careers and education. There appears to be an equal split between social and informational posts, as although members share a great deal of product/brand knowledge, they also indulge in lengthy discussions about their lives in general. A screen shot of the Vogue forum is provided in Appendix A. Although netnography is considered a qualitative methodology, numerical data related to the number of members in the community and the number of posts contributed, were also included in this study to provide perspective with regard to members' participative behaviour in each online community over different periods of time.

At the start of the netnographic study, the Vogue community had 79,890 members contributing 5,912,088 posts. At the end of the four-month period there were 80,190 members and nearly 6 million posts. This shows that over the four-month study period the number of members increased by approximately 75 per month, and posts went up by an average of 5617 per month. When the site was revisited two years later, there were 81,714 members and 6,046,907 posts, showing an increase of 1,562 new members and 112,350 new posts over the two-year period. This is the equivalent of 65 members and 4,681 posts per month. The researcher also revisited the community prior to finalising this thesis and noted the site was still active.

3.4.6.2 The Bodybuilding Forum

The Bodybuilding community is located via a link on the official Bodybuilding.com website. Bodybuilding .com was founded in 1999 as primarily a fitness site encompassing an e-retailing service and successful online community. The company promotes itself as “the #1 sports nutrition e-retailer and most visited fitness site in the world” (Bodybuilding.com, 2012). The online community provides bodybuilders and general fitness enthusiasts with information about health, nutrition and fitness, and a place

to socialise with likeminded individuals (Amine & Sitz, 2004; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This online community has a comprehensive list of forum categories, including Supplements, Exercise, BodySpace Profiles, Workout Programs and Nutrition. In addition, there are specific forums for Teens, Over 35's, Females and Personal Trainers, plus a number of general and support-related categories. Topics related to each category are located under different headings, and this is where members can share information and interact socially about numerous subjects. Although the overriding topics of conversation are related to body-building workout programs and supplements (informational), there is also a great deal of interaction of a more personal nature (social). The site incorporates an openly commercial aspect, as members are encouraged to promote brands they have used on the forum, and their product reviews become part of their personal profile for other members to refer to, as illustrated by this post from the administrative team:

If you had to pick just ONE energy product, what would be the best one? Please pick product and include the brand. Give your reasons. The best answers will be displayed on the mainB.com site for millions of people to see!

(Note: This is not a discussion about how or when to take energy products, if you should take energy products, or why some energy products are NOT good. Just list your absolute favorite energy product and give your detailed reason.) (BB #Admin).

Inviting members to discuss products online is an effective marketing strategy on the part of Bodybuilding.com, as the research consistently shows consumers put more trust in the opinions of other consumers than those of the company selling the product (Christodoulidas, 2008; Cunniffe & Sng, 2012). This view was also supported by the 2013 Nielson Global Online Consumer Survey (nielson.com, 2015).

At the outset of this study, the Bodybuilding forum had 4,752,326 members and 81,787,577 posts. After four months there was an increase of almost 317 000 members and over 3.6 million posts, equal to nearly 80 000 new members and over 920 000 new posts per month. After two years member numbers had grown by another 2.9 million, bringing the total number of members to 8,000,100. Posts had increased by 27 million, raising the total number to 112, 200 200, a growth of more than 122 000 members and over one million posts per month. To date the site is still active.

3.4.6.3 *The Avon Forum*

Avon is a global manufacturer and direct selling company in beauty, household and personal care product categories (Avon, 2012). Avon is sold through independent sales representatives on an international scale. The Avon forum is accessed via the internet at avonfriendsforum.co.uk, and is open to Avon employees and members of the public as a place to share Avon-related information and socialise. However, the site is primarily visited by Avon employees who share work-related information rather than socialising. The forum is divided into several categories related to Cosmetics, Skincare, Fragrance, Fashion & Home, Hair Care, and General Discussion. Initial observation of this community gave the impression the site was relatively active with 1,243 registered members and more than 26 000 posts. However, over the four-month period there was minimal interaction between existing members and very few new members joined the community.

When the community was first visited, there were 1 243 registered users and 26 222 posted articles. By month four there were 1 276 users and 26 357 posts, an average of 9 new members and 34 new posts per month. After a 2-year period the site had 1 351 members and 26 396 posts, equating to 3 new members and 1.6 new posts per month.

At the start of the netnographic observation the Bodybuilding forum had over 5 million members and more than 85 million posts. By 2014, when the researcher re-visited the community, the forum had in excess of 8 000 000 members and 112 000 000 postings, an increase of more than 24% over two years, indications of an ongoing successful community. The Vogue community also had an increase over the same two-year period, and although on a different scale with over 81 000 members and more than 6 million posts, is also considered successful. However, the Avon community had only 108 new members and 174 new posts, indicating less impressive gains over the same period of time. On revisiting the site a year later the community was no longer in operation.

3.4.7 Findings and Insights

Netnographic observation of posts and discussion threads contributed by members of the Vogue, Bodybuilding and Avon communities produced an abundance of insightful

data related to member behaviour in these OBCs. Analysis of the data indicates that the influences on the critical success factors outlined in Chapter 2 can effectively be applied to the OBCs featured in the netnography. Comparative analysis of the three communities also indicates that regardless of the focus of the community, members are driven to participate in forums based on both the need for information and a desire to socialise. The findings from the netnographic study are presented using contextualised examples of the concepts outlined in the literature and depicted in Figure 13. Insights into consumer behaviour of members in each of the online communities are also provided.

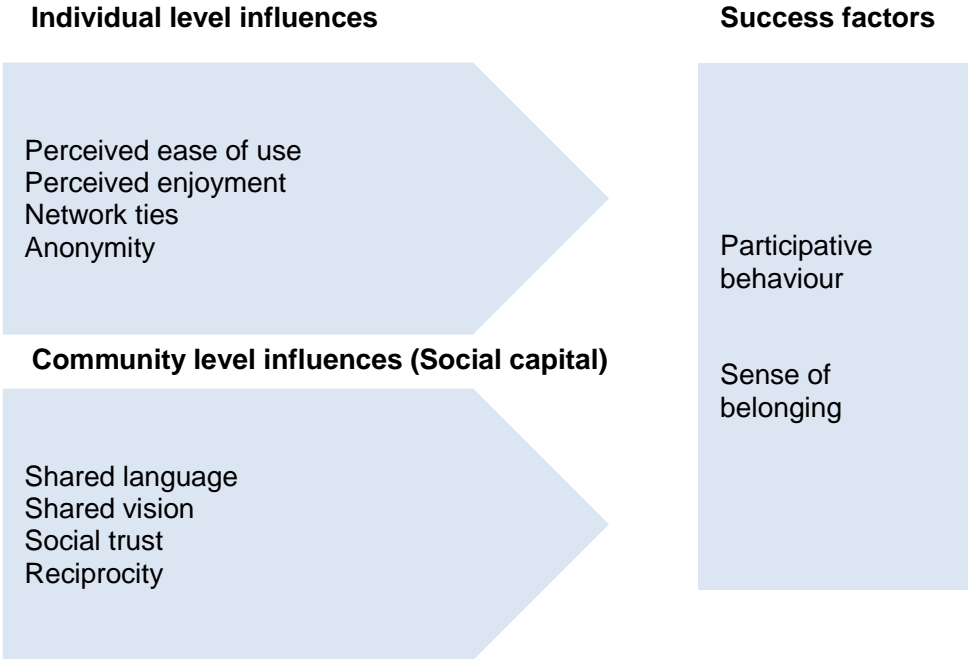


Figure 13 *Concepts Guiding Netnography*

3.4.8 Community Level Influences

3.4.8.1 Community Type

Observation of the three OBCs indicated the focus of each community had a direct effect on the type of people the community attracted and the manner in which they conversed with each other. Although each community had terms and conditions in place member behaviour differed between communities. These variances relate to the brand the

community represents. For example, the following conversations taken from the Bodybuilding site are examples of the anti-social contingent in this forum. The posts include colloquial slang and derogatory statements, and although not representative of the whole community, they were prolific enough to be considered significant. The moderator's post is a reflection of the extent of this issue.

Phaggots downstairs having a party and screaming at the top of their lungs at one am. Knock there and ask politely to keep it down. They keep doing it. If it were just a bit of loud music it wouldn't bother me so much but these phaggots must be taught a lesson. *phuck that* (BB #22).

What a kunt... (BB #24).

BB #22 is a phaggot (BB #43).

Canada appointed a Sikh kunt as defense minister. DAMN! (BB #49)

I would absolutely protest against ANY wahhabbi muslim being given any position of power let alone a military position. But Sikh's are mad chill and even if this is political he'll be dope (BB #53).

****Please Read**Forum Rule re-emphasis** moderators will be cracking down on hate speech, general bashing and illegal activity discussion such as •Racist, sexist, or bigoted comments or slurs in any form (including images). •Offensive, disgusting, aggressive, lewd, profane, or derogatory language, posts, pictures, or PM's •E-fighting, excessive arguing, or harassment of other users. Discussion of illegal activities (United States laws apply). This includes theft, paedophilia, rape, incest, murder. I know you all have the ability to discuss these issues without the hate talk, help us out by nixing it please (BB #11).

There are also a great many threads that start off as a conversation and degenerate into a full blown argument:

Legit regret that I didn't discover this site early enough to see the rivers of tears when Obama got in twice (BB #4).

Honestly hoping some democrat wins just to see the mental breakdowns on the misc lol (BB #5).

If you knew anything about the Clintons then you would change your tune but seeing as you're an idiot (BB #6).

I'd hang u with that phaggot scarf IRL u limp wristed 147lb beta (BB #5).

Doubt you would even be able to reach my scarf, manlet (BB #6)

The general nature of the posts contributed by community moderators in the Bodybuilding forum reflect the issues dominating negative interactions. Although the administrative team in the Bodybuilding forum attempted to manage the site efficiently, there was such a vast number of members who contributed thousands of posts every day, it became almost impossible to manage member behaviour effectively. Furthermore, the image portrayed by the Bodybuilding community is based on a culture associated with masculine, anti-authoritative characteristics, which attracts a small number of people who display a level of anti-social behaviour (Lhotakova, 2012).

In direct contrast the Vogue community had a very strict and efficient moderating team in place. In line with the reputation of their brand, they ensure conversations are strictly limited to friendly discussions related only to the sub-categories provided, and when interactions stray, moderators interject with a reminder of the rules, as demonstrated by the following posts:

Please read the forum rules pertaining to the Beauty section (applicable to all of the sections on Vogue forum, but they are specific to issues in Beauty sections, including Hair, Skincare & Fragrance and Makeup). Please ensure that you read other forum rules as well, because no topic that is prohibited in one section can be discussed anywhere on Vogue forum (Vogue #1).

No medical contents whatsoever is permitted anywhere on Vogue forum
Solariums, sun-tanning, sunbeds, non-fake tanning tattoos, smoking, piercings, control of BO are NOT skincare and therefore are not permitted to be discussed. Benefit/harm of anything you ingest (water, food, tea, supplements, etc) are also not to be discussed. **No celebrity gossip.** No non-constructive topics, chatty topics, or mere rants (e.g. "I have a pimple! It's the end of the world!"). Please also

remember that you are bound by forum rules posted in other sections and Vogue forum Terms of Use (Vogue #2).

The tone and subject matter contained in the Vogue messages are illustrative of the standards expected of members in the Vogue community. Rigid terms and conditions, and consistent moderation of the forum are factors designed to ensure strict adherence to the rules. This strategy is clearly aligned with upholding the organisation's respectable brand image.

Examination of the posts, threads and discussions on the Avon forum revealed a significant percentage of members were Avon representatives. Accordingly, the majority of messages were contributed by Avon representatives, illustrated by only one moderator comment over the four-month period, and explains the lack of examples to demonstrate participative consumer behaviour in relation to the brand type:

Just a quick reminder to say that The Lounge is for both Representatives **and** customers. It is a board where we can go off-topic, catch up on gossip, share latest news, and discuss recent trends If Reps want help or want to talk about an Avon Rep related issue - please post this in Representative Talk (Avon #3).

Well said! 😊 (Avon #25).

I cannot find Representatives Talk???(Avon #26).

From a community perspective, both the Vogue and Bodybuilding forums attracted very different members based on the type of brand they represent. However, the majority of posts exhibited compliance with the rules put in place by the administrative team. This implies the members of these communities shared the same vision for the community as a whole (Liao & Chou, 2011). Furthermore, in the Bodybuilding community, the common use of expletives illustrates a shared language between members, which gives them a sense of assimilation with the community. Both these traits are indicative of a community culture with an accrued level of social capital

3.4.8.2 Social Capital

Social capital is a community-level construct which guides relational behaviour (Sutanto, 2013). It has also been shown to encourage member participation and increase members' sense of belonging (SOB) in online communities (Li, Clark, & Wheeler, 2013). In the literature, the factors that predominantly represent the social capital construct in online communities include a shared vision, shared language, social trust and reciprocity (Liao & Chou, 2011; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). There is however, a lack of research on social capital in OBC environments.

Observation of posts and discussion threads between members in the Vogue forum, the Bodybuilding community and to a lesser degree the Avon forum, provide strong support for the theory that the elements associated with social capital can effectively be applied to a range of OBCs. These findings are further discussed below.

Shared Language. An important aspect associated with being part of an online community is having a shared language, as this gives members a sense of belonging to the community and sets them apart from outsiders (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). There is also evidence in the literature to suggest a shared language increases the efficiency of communication among members with similar knowledge (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In OBCs, knowledge sharing often involves sharing brand-related information (Liao & Chou, 2011), and the following messages are a representation of thousands of similar posts and threads contributed by members to each forum, indicating a shared language with regard to designer brands and products:

I love my Ferragamos! I have both the Varinas and a pair of vintage loafers, which I both purchased from eBay. If you go down this route, you have to be aware of fakes - there's plenty of them on eBay! (Vogue #31).

Great minds think alike! They're comfy, look great and last a very long time! The likes of Saks and Neiman Marcus stock Ferragamo. They deliver internationally and are cheaper than Ferragamo shoes at full price at David Jones or Ferragamo boutiques (Vogue #32).

I desperately need a new pair of ballet flats (or two!) - are ferragamo really that good? my problem with ballet flats is that my big toes always end up wearing holes in the top at the toe end of the shoe!!! (Vogue #35).

A customer of mine asked if Avon still sell a perfume she used to like called 'Occur' and if not, is there anything similar? (Avon #4).

Sadly no, it was one of my Mum's favourite perfumes. Although two alternatives would be Timeless and Luxe (Avon #3).

I like the taste of Iss Research's ProM3. It's thinner than most proteins in my opinion, which gives the least amount of the dreaded chalk taste. Really tastes like chocolate, with a hint of protein (BB #16).

I like ast's VP2 chocolate flavor. It has a very mild taste compared to the other protein powders that I have tried, and you can barely even taste it when mixed in milk (BB #13).

Another aspect associated with a shared language is the use of specific terms related to either a brand type or interest. The Bodybuilding forum provided a raft of evidence to support the use of a shared language between members, demonstrating their collective knowledge of the body-building culture. These excerpts from a number of conversation threads support the literature, where the use of common vocabulary in online communities has been shown to make the exchange of information more possible (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Liao & Chou, 2011).

I'd repeat three weeks before **deloading** to ensure it wasn't a case of poor diet/rest this past week but it requires checking to make sure your diet and sleep are in order for next week else you'll just trap yourself in this cycle (BB#4).

Thanks for the response, weird thing is that last week i actually did a **deload** where i decreased the weight for each exercise by 55% hoping that it would rest my body and allow me to lift the weights easier but that wasn't the case, this week i felt like the weight was heavier and i had a harder time (BB#3).

I think your underestimating how much your **biceps** and **triceps** will grow from just **compound** exercises, but if you prefer working biceps and triceps directly 2x a week you can definitely do so, have.(BB #5).

Too heavy a **deload**. And I would try to **bust the plateau** two or three weeks before dropping the 10% just to make sure it just wasn't a weak week (BB #6).

Just trying to get some info on the differences between the EFS racks (collegiate) and the racks purchased through Williams Strength (BB #75).

At the risk of becoming the RC skill...if you are leaning towards the EFS, you might want to look at the Rae Crowther Pro Gold half rack (if you haven't already) (BB#76).

Shared Vision. With regard to online community behaviour, shared vision refers to the beliefs and norms members share with regard to the purpose of the community and reflects what members consider the forum represents (Field, 2003; Liao & Chou, 2011; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). The significance of a shared vision in an online community is its ability to bring members together and encourage ongoing participation and sense of belonging (Best & Kreuger, 2006; Chi et al., 2009; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Liao & Chou, 2011). The following conversation threads from the Vogue and Bodybuilding forums provide evidence of members' shared vision for the community. The conversations also demonstrate their voluntary compliance with the rules enforced by moderators, which as previously mentioned, emphasises their shared vision.

Vogue IS about what is beautiful and fantastic. It's a magazine that has made millions selling a dream/aspirations to people around the world. Open up any magazine and it's about fashion, beauty and lifestyle (Vogue #8).

I agree, it's what a fashion magazine is supposed to be about (Vogue #9).

I wouldn't want the board bogged down with people's relationship issues - this isn't Cosmopolitan or Seventeen or the Australian equivalent (Vogue #10).

As long as they don't raise my taxes or infringe on my constitutional rights I'm happy to obey the rules of a private business (BB #54).

I second this. Keep us safe mods and thanks for the time you put into the forum (BB #55).

I for one welcome this (BB #16).

I am glad to hear that the rules will be better enforced. As President of the R/P, I believe it is critically important that members choose to respect one another regardless of age, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. We should discuss politics and religion in a mature and humble manner that's what this forum is about (BB #18).

Social Trust. Social trust is an integral element of social capital, and is especially relevant to OBCs as it removes feelings of uncertainty and suspicion related to posting messages in an online environment (Chi et al., 2009). A culture of social trust encourages open discussion and reduces concerns members have about sharing information about themselves (Mathwick et al., 2008). The level of social trust accrued in a community is based on a history of positive interactions and reciprocal behaviour and develops over time through regular interaction with others in the community (Best & Kreuger, 2006). The following discussion between members of the Vogue community provides clear evidence of social trust in this community. It also highlights the relationship between trust and sense of belonging to a community of people who care about each other.

Apologies if this topic is not allowed, but do any voguettes have any tips on moving forward from the loss of a loved one? Not looking for suggestions to speak to counsellors/psychologist/psychiatrist etc.. Just after things or resources which have helped (Vogue #30).

Mindfulness may help- especially if the grief starts to cause depression or anxiety. There are lots of books out there on this as well as short courses 😊(Vogue #31).

One of the resource sites, such as Grieflink, offers invaluable information on grief and bereavement (Vogue #32).

Thank you ladies. My mum has just died and I am feeling so sad (Vogue #30).

Oh Vogue #30 I am so so sorry. I don't have any advice, but I hope you find what you need to move forward. Sending you lots of love and hugs xx (Vogue #33).

Thank you Vogue # 33 that is really nice of you. Mum was sick for only four months before she passed and was only sixty. I feel so devastated xx (Vogue #30).

Vogue #30 I'm so sorry to hear about your loss. Grief is a strange thing. My mum died very suddenly when I was 12. I'm in my late twenties now so a lot time has passed and it does get easier. But even now, there will be times where I am thinking of her or someone will say something and it will just hit me so hard that she isn't here anymore. This is cliché and I'm sure you've heard it before, but people deal with grief in different ways - some might want to surround themselves in memories of their loved one, others might want to get away from all of that in order to begin to heal. I'm sorry I can't give better/more articulate advice but please feel free to PM me if you'd like to talk xx (Vogue #34).

Dear Vogue #30 I am so sorry for your loss. Big hugs to you xx (Vogue #35).

Vogue #30 I am so sorry for the loss of your mum. Take care xx (Vogue #36).

A more commercial aspect of trust in online communities is related to the trust people place in product reviews provided by individual members as opposed to the company's advertising of its product or brand (Nielson, 2013). Research indicates it is important for companies in today's competitive environment to provide a platform where customers can access product knowledge from a credible source (Christodoulidas, 2008; Cunniffe & Sng, 2012; Shopper Science, 2011). Findings from the 2013 Nielson Global Online Consumer Survey suggest recommendations by friends and opinions posted online are the most trusted forms of advertising globally, with seven out of ten consumers surveyed putting their trust in the opinions of other customers who post information online (Nielson, 2013). Bodybuilding.com takes advantage of this trend by encouraging members in the Bodybuilding community to promote the brands they sell on their website. This encourages a co-creative culture within the community that brings members closer together (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; Shultz & Hatch, 2010; Zaglia, 2013). At the end of the four-month observational period, over 400 000 product reviews had been contributed to the forum. The following are examples of how product reviews are displayed in the forum and within members' profiles.

Rating **10/10**

My main purpose in using Hydra-Charge was for staying properly hydrated and avoiding muscle cramps from intense sweating. During the summer months, I like to do cardiovascular activity at outside temperatures (no AC) and get an intense sweat going. At first, I just used water to re-hydrate but I noticed that the bottoms of my feet started cramping up. It is a very uncomfortable feeling and forces you to stop the workout and stretch out the muscle cramps. Went to the store and started drinking... (BB #31).

Rating **9/10**

I have tried a lot of the Kaged Muscle product line (L-Citrulline, L-Carnitine, Hydra-Charge, BCAA powder, etc.), so it was great to see them release their own pre-workout. Very surprised at the giant scoop size and the amount of water required to mix up Pre-Kaged. The fruit punch flavoring is fine if you use enough water, otherwise it will be too strong tasting for most. Shortly after taking Pre-Kaged, my energy and focus picked up at work. I headed home and my workouts were met with a good... (BB #32).

Reciprocity. Members of the Vogue and Bodybuilding forums regularly posted requests for help or advice. The reliability and consistency of members' replies indicate that these communities have a reciprocal culture. In contrast, the Avon community exhibited little reciprocity, as evidenced by the lack of replies to a number of posts. The bearing this has on participative behaviour and sense of belonging is reflected in the increased number of members to the Vogue and Bodybuilding forums over the four months of observation, and the low level of participative behaviour demonstrated in the Avon community over the same period. These findings support the hypothesis that members in online communities are more likely to participate when they know members are happy to provide help and advice when needed (Best & Krueger, 2006; Liao & Chou, 2011; Mathwick et al., 2008). Reciprocity is a key factor for enhancing the sociability of online communities and fundamental to their ongoing sustainability (Preece, 2001). The following messages are some examples of members' keenness to offer advice and support in the Vogue and Bodybuilding communities, and the absence of a reciprocal culture in the Avon forum.

I am on the market for a new purse (either a Prada wallet or ysl wallet) and was wondering the best place to buy (Vogue #20).

Check out bluefly.com! They have some great deals on their website (Vogue #21).

I buy a lot of my designer brands from Saks. They have a good range of Prada wallets and YSL wallets.(Vogue #22).

If you can hold off for a couple of months, the mid-year sales start late may/early June. I would jump onto Saks as soon as they start (Vogue #32).

Thanks for the replies girls (Vogue #20).

The Bodybuilding forum also provides evidence of a reciprocal culture. In this community, posts frequently requested advice on buying exercise equipment or the use of supplements. Replies were timely and often quite technical and complicated, demonstrating a high level of support between members.

Hey guys. Can anyone tell me if the bar with the skinny sleeves is an older 125ampton bar? Seller said there is a rubber cap at the end of it. I googled around and saw that some 125ampton bars have a similar design...if so, is it worth picking up to replace the cap OB68? Sorry for the small pictures, it was what was provided to me thanks for your time (BB #1).

The construction appears to be consistent with Hampton's bars, both new and old. They're generally large in shaft diameter (30mm+, iirc) with rather mediocre max weight ratings, so I'd pass unless it's a smoking deal...especially with the missing rubber rings. It looks like it's been used/abused, and poorly maintained. The one with the bolt looks like a cheapo. (BB #2).

Thanks stash, exactly what i wanted to know, will pass, cheers (BB #1).

Guys can you increase your 1rm for DL without training super heavy? I mean can you train with high reps of 225lbs and still increase my 1rm (396lbs at the moment)?? Any ideas (BB #48).

It is that stress that you are looking for. That is the stimulus that prompts adaptation (growth.) In short, no, you have to lift heavy to go heavy. Is that really even a question? I could be wrong, but that is just my 2c's (BB #49).

Get on the hudson deadlift program sir (BB #50).

What I'm hoping for is I could train with 225 for more and more reps and then only max out heavy deads once every couple of months. If my lifts go from 12 reps @ 225 to 15-16 reps @ 225 that must have a difference on my 1 rep max? (BB #48).

I think that suggested weight of less than 60% of your 1RM is too little. You don't have to go to near max levels all the time but I think 70-80% of your 1RM is a much better weight range to train in if you want to increase your 1RM (BB #53).

Members of the Avon community displayed a lack of reciprocity, which over time appears to have affected levels of participative behaviour in the community. For example, observation of the Avon community identified a member (Avon #6) who, over a period of

six weeks, became so disillusioned with the site that she left the company and advertised her product in the community forum.

I started doing avon because I wanted to start getting xmas stuff i am only on my 2nd book only have 5 customers have tried other ppl but not much luck but I know it will take time could do with some tips to get the word out (Avon #6).

I'm with Avon few weeks now and it doesn't seem to get any better! I tried to give brochures to my friends, family I even did door to door. I have no customers! (Avon #6).

What did you do to make your connections and find more customers? (Avon #6).

After receiving no response to her messages, the member (Avon #6) listed a number of items for sale, including an Avon starter pack of cosmetics, and a week later she was no longer listed as a member. This indicates a lack of accrued social capital in this forum, demonstrated by a lack of reciprocity between members and the absence of a shared vision. While the community did exhibit signs of a shared language related to product knowledge, this can be attributed to a shared interest in the Avon brand rather than the culture of the community.

3.4.8.3 Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging has been identified as one of the critical success factors in OBCs, based on the theory that members who develop a sense of belonging (SOB) to a community are more likely to stay and exhibit brand loyalty behaviours (Kim et al., 2004; Lu et al., 2011). The discussion thread below illustrates how the use of words such as “we” and “us” suggest members of the Vogue forum felt a sense of belonging to the community that excluded non-members (Mathwick et al., 2008; Park et al., 2006). Members who replied referred to themselves in the plural, implying they spoke for the group and inferring the guest was unaware of the interests of the community. This behaviour is indicative of consciousness of kind, a trait well documented as one of the markers of a genuine community and closely related to sense of belonging (Algesheimer et al, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

So sorry for trampling on your delicate feelings. It just struck me as strange that I would have to do a search to find this topic being discussed. I would think it ought to be at the top of the current/world affairs section of the forum since it's the definitive news item of our era. And I'm not trying to start a mini war... discussion is not war (Vogue # Guest)

There's only so much you can discuss one issue. On this forum the news mostly discussed is breaking news, and when breaking news about Iraq comes up **we** discuss that too. But if you want to discuss Iraq because it concerns you feel free (Vogue #11).

How do you feel about it other than the fact that none of **us** can be bothered to discuss it? (Vogue #12).

Haha I was thinking that. Vogue # Guest may have got her wish (Vogue #11).

rolls eyes. If you think it's imperative that this discussion be at the top of the list, go on....i don't see you discussing it yet. what are your thoughts? enlighten us? (Vogue #12).

The following is a discussion thread from the Bodybuilding forum, which also suggests members had a collective understanding that excludes people with differing views:

It seems like online on a lot of videos or articles Atheist or religious people specifically attack one another. Who cares if people worship or don't? (BB #217).

If one day religious fanatics stop preaching their absurd views onto others, especially kids, then yeah (BB #218).

Because I can show you a sh!t ton of proof you will spit in my face about through not resharing / saving / remembering cause you're a wishy-washy coward. Failure to act means you betray your people, you betray civic duty, you betray the Ten Commandments to NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS. YOU FAIL to learn about the world. YOU FAIL to teach about the real world. Then you will be held accountable (BB #223).

What the actual fuk are you going on about? (BB #217).

Yeah it is pretty cringe (BB #218).

BB #223 the guy that doesn't believe in dinosaurs enters thread (BB #220).

LOL. You think it's just dialogue, words, and debates when the elites convene at Bilderberg Club & Bohemian Grove meetings to send our drones to "die for our freedoms" in Syria, Ukraine, Iraq, Yemen, Nigeria, and Afghanistan?? (BB #223).

I also have no idea wtf you are talking about. Read through your post twice and still can't comprehend that chit (BB #225).

Are you just flipping through your thesaurus randomly and picking words?

You're literally insane lmao (BB #220).

You're actually crazy. As in mentally unstable crazy (BB #217).

*I am now exiting this thread because you have decided to take it to a place I have No Desire To Go (BB #223).

Can you believe that guy, he doesn't belong on here he bat shit crazy (BB#220).

These conversation threads indicate that the traits associated with Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) markers of a genuine community apply to both the Vogue and Bodybuilding forums, and indicates they are genuine OBCs. Members of both forums exhibited a sense of belonging to the community and the number of members and number of posts contributed over the four-month study period increased significantly. In line with the literature (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008) this suggests a link between OBCs that have members who have developed a sense of belonging to the community and a successful and sustainable OBC.

3.4.9 Individual Level Influences

3.4.9.1 Perceived Ease of Use

In online environments interaction between members is reliant on the capabilities of the site hosting the brand community. Previous studies that utilised the Technology

Acceptance Model (TAM), indicates the level of ease required to navigate a website has a significant influence on users' continued participation in the community (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Van der Heijden, 2004). This theory was supported by Preece (2001), who argued research using the Usability and Sociability framework shows that successful online communities rely on the functionality of the website to ensure ongoing participation. Factors such as flow of communication, level of feedback and how effortlessly members can navigate the site are crucial to the success of an online community (Preece, 2001). Congruent with the literature, posts and discussion threads between members of the Vogue, Bodybuilding and Avon forums also indicate perceived ease of use is associated with usability, and this can influence participative behaviour in OBCs. The following posts provide evidence of the frustration members feel when they experience technical issues:

I am trying to change my appearance, which i played with this morning and now i cant find it!!!! FRUSTRATING if i cant do new posts i dont think its a usable forum anymore (Vogue #12).

A lot of times when I boot up my computer the taskbar will completely freeze, so I'm unable to access minimized windows unless I bring up the task manager. Wut do? Bout to give up (BB #20).

What are you using? Mozilla? IE? How many tabs do you usually have open? (BB #21).

Over it (BB #20).

Has this website lost tons of traffic due to layout problems? Sure seems like it. Don't understand why the problems were never resolved. See my sig for a mobile solution (BB #42).

Why cant I change my profile? Why is this site so glitchy? Where are you when we need you admin ? (Avon #12).

Never mind moving on (Avon #12).

When i track a workout "build as you go" the date gets messed up! Two days in a row it says i worked out December 31, 1969!!! After an exhausting search i simply wrote one down and created a NEW tracked workout and redid it. But thats too much work. Is there a way to change the date on the workout history tracked workouts? And if not there should be! (BB #92).

Yup... having this same extremely irritating problem

- Started on Bodyspace, tracked workouts for a week; noticed I started Day 1 on the calender a day earlier than it should have been.
- Deleted EVERY tracked, re-entered late at night, adding last entry AGAIN and noticed too late that I tracked my last day on the same day as my second last days track entry. Deleted all entries.
- After a month, I started "Kris Gethin's Building Muscle", got through week one.
- Figured since I had a free night to relax, I would track the first week and start doing it every day from here on out.
- Double checked my tracked workouts. Tracked on 27th 27th 28th 30th 1st..... Another mistake. NO WAY am I spending 30 mins+ to transfer my logs (BB #93).

3.4.9.2 Perceived Enjoyment

Participation in online communities is also influenced by the level of enjoyment members experience through their involvement (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Van der Heijden, 2004). This concept relates to the sociability aspect of online communities and is critical to their ongoing success (Preece, 2001). Thematic analysis of posts from the Vogue forum revealed a number of conversations suggesting members' perceived enjoyment of the forum is directly affected by the community's level of usability, or the members' perceived ease of use. This finding corroborates research based on an adapted version of the technology acceptance model (TAM) (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Van der Heijden, 2004) and the Usability and Sociability framework (Preece, 2001). Evidence of this concept in the Vogue and Bodybuilding forums suggest the link between *perceived ease of use, enjoyment* and *participative behaviour* can also be applied in an OBC environment. Several posts on the Vogue community site were comprised of complaints from members experiencing

technical problems, coupled with inferences that such issues affected their enjoyment and subsequently their motivation to continue participating in the community.

We can now bold (yay!), but whenever I italicise something it doesn't work when my posts show up, I'm so beyond all this it takes too long and it's too hard, I'm not enjoying myself anymore, anyone else having the same problem? (Vogue #4)

Me too - having so many problems loading the forums. I keep getting all the ads on the sides, but no text in the middle. My fan is going flat out too which is unusual. I end up just giving up THIS IS NOT FUN!!!! (Vogue #5).

This will be the last time I ever post here, this is not fun anymore. I'm going to go out with a bang: Vogue - you suck. Whoever is responsible for these forums should be fired (Vogue #24).

On page loads, the header (gray part) expands about 800 px worth vertically and won't go away until you scroll up against it a few times or load the page 3-5 times so it doesn't happen (BB #103).

Can confirm this is a (pretty annoying) thing, takes the fun out of it! (BB #104).

These posts clearly support the hypothesis that *perceived ease of use* and *perceived enjoyment* are linked, and that both concepts have an influence on participative behaviour in OBCs.

3.4.9.3 Network Ties

Network ties in an online environment refer to the friendships or personal relationships that members develop with one another in the community (Dholakia et al., 2009; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Stafford et al., 2004). Research shows that they are initially based on a shared interest, but over time and with regular interaction, develop into strong connections between members (Dholakia et al, 2004). Wirtz et al. (2012) observed in OBCs, even discussions of a technical nature tend to be dispersed with social conversation, and it is the social aspect of these interactions that encourages ongoing participation and sense of belonging. The relevance of network ties in brand-affiliated communities can be evidenced from the thousands of posts found in both the Vogue community and

Bodybuilding forum. The following examples of conversations between members clearly demonstrate the presence of friendship in both communities, and consequently their sense of belonging:

Had a really good interview this morning! Am proud of how I went, I know I did the best I could regardless of if I get offered it or not. Now to start the waiting game 🎲 😊 UPDATE: I got offered the job! Woohoo!! I got offered the senior role, so am over the moon about that! Start on Monday, so am going to enjoy the rest of my week off knowing that I have a job to go to on Monday! Yay!! (Vogue #86).

Congrats on the job offer! You must be so relieved - how is the job going?
I just had a screening call from a job I was really after but kinda lost hope in as applications closed over a week ago! Formal interviews in the next couple of days so fingers crossed 🤞 He sounded positive! (Vogue #87).

Good luck with your formal interview Vogue #87 – we're all rooting for you hope all goes well! (Vogue #88).

I am sure something will come along soon Vogue #87 (Vogue #86).

Congrats Vogue #86 - that's great news (Vogue #88).

Oh that's great news Vogue #86 🤞 (Vogue #89).

The job didn't work out, wasn't how they explained it to be in the interview and not really what I'm looking for. So left yesterday. Back to square one girls 😞 Am going to put job searching on hold for this year I think, just relax for the rest of the year and then get back to it next year (Vogue #86).

Oh no, what a waste of your time 😞 Enjoy your rest, hopefully you will find something quickly in the new year (Vogue #87).

This will be my first log and my first bulk. I am open to critiques and inputs/advice. I was obese when i was in my early teens, i weigh about 130-150lbs back then. Hated how i look, started to hate food and dropped to around 90lbs. I hope by making this log it will keep me on track with my bulk and can apply what i have

learned in this forum for the past few months. I'll be using Kilograms, as that's what we use here (BB #22).

Log looks good so far, and I wish you the best of luck (BB #23).

Will do my best to follow along, but I maintain a very active life, so will mostly lurk, but I'll be around (BB #24).

Yup still not feeling good today. Gonna just take the rest of the week off and restart the cycle (BB# 22).

The key thing to remember is patience just give the process time bro and it'll work out (BB #27).

I can relate a lot to what you have been through. We will all make it bro! (BB #29).

Just wanted to tell you guys that sometimes I squat in a Star Trac Max 3D. My gym only has 1 Power rack and it's always full... it's really hard to find a power rack in my city. (BB #22).

Already making progression in areas, great work! (BB #23).

Have you outlined your structured progression for your training? (Weekly/Bi-Weekly increases?) Or at least a rough idea of what you'd like to do with it? (BB #27).

Today will be a busy day as I will be applying for University (BB #22).

Good luck bro (BB #23).

Going to do my LISS today, and as it is Saturday night, will be heading out to a Mexican restaurant tonight (BB #27).

3.4.9.4 Anonymity

Anonymity is another concept identified in the literature as an individual-level influence on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in online communities. However, whether it has a positive effect (Spears & Lea, 1994; Walther, 1992) or a negative consequence (Christopherson, 2007; Yoon & Roland, 2012) is still under debate.

One view is that anonymity gives people the freedom to express themselves without feeling exposed (McLeod, 1997), and a lack of personal identification reduces social barriers (Walther, 1992). The opposing opinion suggests anonymity increases the likelihood of conflict in a community, as people have less fear of being identified (Christopherson, 2007).

The netnographic observations in this study indicate that members' levels of anonymity had a significant influence on their behaviour in a number of ways. For example, in the Bodybuilding forum, members provided a comprehensive profile, including a pseudonym, photograph of themselves, demographic information and their posting history. Due to the bodybuilding focus of the community, members also included their weight, height and body fat. Such an inclusive profile suggests members form impressions of one another based on a combination of their contributions to the community and their personal information. They can therefore categorise each other based not only on the language they use in their posts, but also according to age, gender, occupation and race, and their conversations reflect this:

We're all FA in here. Except most of us are/have been married. Which explains why we're FA (BB #77).

But BB #77 is an anti-semitic Polish

Isn't there a gay Mormon who posts here? BB #92 or something?

I have a perfect meme pic as a reply for this but I don't wanna get banned today (BB #97).

In the Vogue forum, members' profiles consisted of a pseudonym, an image (not of themselves) and their participation record. In a similar fashion, Avon forum members supplied a pseudonym, their occupation and their posting history. The lack of personal information in the Vogue and Avon forums limits the stereotyping of members based on race or appearance, and members' reputations rely solely on their contributions to the community. This encourages them to develop network ties with anyone and everyone and increases their sense of belonging (Preece, 2010; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). As these observations imply, members' levels of anonymity has an effect on their general

participative behaviour, however, it is difficult to assess whether it also has an influence on their level of participation (the number or frequency of posts). Differences in levels of anonymity between members of the Bodybuilding and Vogue forums do not appear to have had an effect on member participation, as both sites are still thriving. Avon community members had a similar level of anonymity as those in Vogue, yet their community was struggling, suggesting that anonymity is not related to levels of participation, but to participative behaviour. This concept was further explored in the focus groups (Stage 1, Part B) and the quantitative research in Stage 2 of the study.

3.4.9.5 Information Gathering versus Socialising

There is some speculation in the literature about the influence of individuals' motivations for becoming involved in online communities; whether for information-gathering purposes or to socialise. Researchers suggest information seeking is prevalent in communities focused on more utilitarian interests (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), whereas socialising predominates in entertainment-based communities (Brodie et al., 2011; Shang et al., 2006; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). Observation of the communities in this study revealed both the Vogue and Bodybuilding forums had equal amounts of information-based and socially-oriented conversations; indicating information seeking and socialising was important to members of the OBCs in this study. This assumption aligns with the study of Dholakia et al. (2004), who found that purposive value in the form of both information retrievers and information providers drives participative behaviour in network-based communities. Posts in the Bodybuilding forum also indicate conversations initiated through a need for information interspersed with social banter, confirming the theory of Wirtz et al. (2014, p. 234) who claimed: "in engaging in an OBC, consumers strive to gain knowledge and increase their social interaction". The following excerpts illustrate:

That body builder pro looks great. I am going for that now, lol. Maybe I'm easily persuaded. Thanks for the tip. Do you know if that lat attachment does rows as well as pull downs? (BB #75).

Yeah, this product looks pretty sweet, too bad plates can't be racked onto it. As long as putting them on the floor isn't a big deal though (BB #76).

Would I really have to bolt them into the floor? I'm putting this in the basement where it's a cement floor (BB #75).

The discussion then changed from talking about gym equipment to discussing their personal lives:

Hey BB#75 cool to chat again and get a better understanding of your background. We kind of had the same path but you got into programming (BB #75).

When I came out of college I worked in an Ad Agency for 10 years as a corporate drone... When the recession hit they showed me the door on my 10 year anniversary and they handed me my \$150 gift card for 10 years of service (BB #76).

In contrast, the posts on the Avon community site were predominantly focused on Avon products and complaints associated with being an Avon representative. The following are indicative of the majority of posts made by members in the Avon forum:

Hi. I would like to get in touch with Lynn Cunningham from area 106. My contact number is xxxxxxxx. Many thanks. (Avon #22).

Hi Avon #22 I would remove your phone number off this post. (Avon #23).

I was an avon rep and now its not letting me log in, it says account number and/or password wrong. Ive tried changing the password to see if that was the problem but i am still unable to log in to my rep account. Ive tried contacting avon twice but im still waiting for a reply almost 2 weeks later, ahhhg (Avon #27).

The lack of interest in socialising on the Avon site was also evident from several posts similar to these from Avon #8 below. There was no response to either of these two posts:

Nothing on telly so listening to some Jethro Tull, it'll be followed by Hawkwind What music are you listening to right now? 😊 (Avon #8).

Also:

Calling all Downton Diehards! What did you think of the opener to the new series? (Avon #8).

After receiving no response to these messages and scant replies to several other similar posts, this member cancelled their membership and left the community.

The following screen shots (Figures 14 and 15), taken from the Bodybuilding and Vogue forums, illustrate the large number of replies and views received by both these forums related to only social posts. This is an indication of the demand for an element of sociability in online forums, and supports the theory behind the Usability and Sociability framework (Preece, 2001) that online communities require both sociability and usability elements in order to achieve ongoing success.

Title / Thread Starter	Last Post By	Replies	Views
 Sticky: What Are You Listening To? Part XX <small>1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | ... | 139</small>	XXXXXXXX Today, 06:50 PM	4,152	458,071
 Sticky: Hip Hop Album of the Day Thread - Pt 3 <small>1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | ... | 238</small>	XXXXXXXX Today, 03:02 AM	7,115	1,024,331

Figure 14 Bodybuilding Forum Snapshot (Bodybuilding, 2012)



 What are you reading at the moment? Page: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 ... Last Page » XXXX	XXXXXXXXXXXX Go to last post	12,263	1,901,689
 Last movie you watched... Page: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 ... Last Page » XXXXX	XXXXXXXXXXXX Go to last post	24,172	2,919,375

Figure 15 Vogue Forum Snapshot (Vogue, 2012)

3.4.10 Summary of Netnographic Findings

Guided by the concepts summarised in Chapter 2, stage one Part A of this study used netnographic observation to obtain data related to consumer behaviour, membership activity and participation levels in the Vogue, Bodybuilding and Avon OBCs. The findings from the netnography, conducted over a four-month period, confirm that the individual- and community-level influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging outlined in the literature can suitably be applied to OBCs. For example, textual evidence suggests that *perceived ease of use* and *perceived enjoyment* are individual-level influences on the participative behaviour of members in all three OBCs. Extracts from member posts and conversations infer problems related to the navigation of the website and the organisation of the content have a detrimental effect on members' enjoyment, and consequently on their continued participation in the community.

Posts and discussion threads contributed to the Vogue and Bodybuilding forums suggest network ties between members exist in both communities and have a positive effect on the sense of belonging members develop with one another and the community. This is evident from the social tone used by respondents, the terms of friendship included in conversations, and their demonstrated interest in each other's circumstances.

The effect of *anonymity* on member participation or sense of belonging was difficult to assess through observation of the interactions between members, since a member's levels of anonymity is subjective to the individual. This problem was addressed by asking members in the focus groups in stage one (part B) whether their anonymity affected their online behaviour, and by measuring perceived levels of anonymity through the quantitative research.

The results of the netnography also suggest elements associated with social capital, such as shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity can effectively be applied to OBCs. For example, members in the Bodybuilding forum used their own jargon to discuss work-out regimes and their muscular development. They had similar views about how they wanted the forum to operate, and spent time offering advice to each other on a number of subjects. There was also a level of trust regarding the brands and products members recommended, and members regularly wrote reviews on products they'd been asked to trial. Their honest opinions and detailed descriptions regarding the use of the product were of significant value to other members and clearly benefited the company.

This practice is considered a form of co-creation between members and the brand owner (Shultz & Hatch, 2010) and strengthens the interactions amongst members of OBCs (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; Zaglia, 2013).

In the Vogue and Avon communities, a shared language was demonstrated through members' knowledge and use of fashion- and beauty-related brand names. Discussions in the Vogue forum also indicated members had embraced the Vogue brand image and what it represents. Members were inclined to offer advice when needed, and exhibited a high level of social trust, as evidenced by some of the more intimate conversations observed. In contrast, the only social capital element identified in the Avon forum was a shared language, which is not surprising given the majority of members were Avon representatives rather than consumers of the brand.

Over the four-month period of the study, both the Vogue and Bodybuilding forums substantially increased their numbers of new members and numbers of new posts contributed. In direct contrast, over the same period, only a small number of new members joined the Avon forum and very few posts were added. Furthermore, when the researcher revisited the forums a year after the conclusion of the netnography, both the Vogue and Bodybuilding forums were experiencing ongoing success, whereas the Avon forum was no longer active.

Observations of all three OBCs in this study indicate all the concepts outlined in the literature can be identified in both Bodybuilding and Vogue forums, and intermittently in the Avon forum. Each concept has been contextualised with examples of conversations that took place between members of each community. These findings strongly support the contention that all the concepts highlighted in this part of the study (Stage 1, Part A) can effectively be applied to OBCs. Furthermore, both the Vogue and Bodybuilding communities were involved in informational exchange whilst also maintaining a high level of sociability, apparent from the technical content of the conversations and the popularity of posts of a more social nature. In the Avon community socialising was not a priority, leading the researcher to conclude that where OBCs exhibit all the elements of social capital, are easy and enjoyable to be involved in, conducive to developing network ties and have an equal share of information seekers and socialisers, they are more likely to achieve ongoing success and sustainability. The netnography gave the researcher an informed insight into member behaviour in OBC environments, and confirmed the influences on

member participation as identified in the literature. The netnography findings also aided the process of selecting suitable topics and items for discussion in the focus groups, ensuring they were not only related to the research question, but also of relevance to the participants.

3.5 Stage One (B) – Focus groups

A series of focus groups was conducted (Stage 1, Part B) to build on the information derived from the literature and netnography, as they provided the opportunity to have a more intimate dialogue with participants of online brand communities (OBCs). This face-to-face communication, through open discussion with members from a range of OBCs, was important to clarify the researcher's interpretation of the observations obtained from the netnography. Focus groups were also an effective means of exploring members' individual perceptions of the concepts outlined in the literature that could not be addressed through netnography.

Focus groups were also included for the researcher to meet members of different OBCs in an environment encouraging of group-based interaction and guided by a moderator; and were aimed at gaining a greater cognitive and emotional understanding of the influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in OBCs. The inclusion of several focus groups in this study was an effective addition to the netnography, which was limited to the textual nature of the observations and forgoes much of the richness of face-to-face communication (Kozinets, 2006).

3.5.1 Focus Group Design

Focus groups were chosen for Stage 1 (Part B) of this study, because they allow for uninhibited discussion amongst a group of people chosen specifically for their knowledge and experience of participating in OBCs. Three focus groups were conducted for the second phase (Part B) in order to generate information that would:

- Clarify the significance of the variables to be analysed;
- Refine the structure of the research model; and
- Aid in the design and development of the questionnaire to be conducted in Stage 2 (Mazur, 2008).

Participants in the focus group sessions were members of different OBCs from a diverse range of demographic and psychographic backgrounds. This allowed for a good representation of the population. The number of people included in each session was kept at between four and ten participants to allow for a high level of participant involvement and plenty of time for each person to discuss their views and experiences (Barfour, 2007; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). A semi-structured group interview approach, using open-ended questions, was employed to draw out rich, informative responses while maintaining a focus on the topics under discussion (Mazur, 2008; Stewart et al., 2007). Open-ended questions were purposefully chosen to stimulate both individual responses and group discussion, and related to the influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in OBCs. A sample of the questions used in the focus groups is provided in Appendix B.

At the start of each session, engagement questions were asked in order to introduce the topic of discussion and create an accepting environment where participants felt comfortable to express their views openly (Barfour, 2007; Stewart et al., 2007). The researcher acted as moderator for all three sessions, and made sure everyone had the opportunity to speak and the conversation stayed on topic (Barfour, 2007, p. 84; Morgan, 1998). Each session was videotaped using a standard video camera on a tripod, so that the researcher was able to visually analyse the dialogue, identify any non-verbal behaviour and recognise the respondents (Stewart et al., 2007).

Previous research suggests well-conducted focus groups not only provide answers to set questions, but also have the capacity to reveal participants' personal opinions through open discussion (Fern, 2001, p. 7). The focus groups in this phase of the study (Part B) were specifically intended to delve deeper into the influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging from the perspective of an OBC member. This was achieved by encouraging participants to share insider knowledge and experiences to clarify and expand on the information gathered from the literature review and netnography. The findings from the focus groups provided detailed explanations of issues commonly associated with membership of OBCs, and examples of conversations to demonstrate members' perceptions of the issues. This rich data was imperative for the structure of the research framework and aided in the design of the survey instrument (Mazur, 2008).

One of the advantages of using an exploratory methodology prior to undertaking quantitative research is it allows the researcher to gain a thorough understanding of the subject under examination from several different viewpoints (Kitzinger, 1999). This knowledge can be used as a foundation to build upon, and has the propensity to add substantial weight to the overall research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Focus groups are also considered an appropriate research methodology when ideas generation is required in a more relaxed, social setting (Breen, 2007). Informal group discussions encourage participants to vocalise not only their opinions about a specific topic, but also to explain why they've formed that opinion, thereby providing a depth of understanding to the subject under analysis (Kitzinger, 1995; Stewart et al., 2007). Furthermore, the structure of the focus groups encouraged participants to openly discuss issues of interest and relevance to the group, with other members of the group able to interject and contribute their opinions to the topic under discussion (Stewart et al., 2007). This free-flowing style of conversation replicates the interactive dialogue used by members in OBCs, an added advantage of using a focus group setting.

3.5.2 Focus Group Participants

Volunteers for the focus groups were recruited from posters, flyers, email and word of mouth at West Australian universities. An incentive was offered in the form of a \$30 gift card to encourage participation in the study. The criteria for participation were they had to be over eighteen years of age and registered members of an online brand community (OBC). Each focus group consisted of a mix of males and females aged between 18 and 44 years old and all participants were registered members of an OBC, as shown in Table 3. Any potential ethical concerns were mitigated by the age-restriction for participants, and confirmation they had read and understood an informational letter and signed a consent form before joining the group discussion. The focus group procedure was covered by ECU Ethics Committee approval.

Prior to commencement of each focus group, participants were asked to fill in a half-page form providing basic demographic information including their name, age, gender, occupation, and the OBC they belonged to. The information letter, consent form and demographics form are provided in Appendix C. Each focus group ran for approximately 90 minutes, during which time open-ended questions were asked of the

participants in an informal manner. This allowed for a more relaxed and open discussion to stimulate the thinking and sharing of information (Stewart et al., 2007). As previously mentioned, the sessions were videotaped so that both audio and video records were captured. The recordings were analysed and transcribed into written data, and the emergent themes added to the findings in the literature and the netnography to guide the development of the questionnaire.

Table 3 Focus Group Sample Characteristics

Respondent	Age	Gender	Occupation	Community type
Focus Group 1				
R#1	25-40	Male	Student	Cameras (Canon)
R#2	25-40	Male	Lecturer	Automobiles (Ford)
R#3	25-40	Female	Administrator	Medical (Mennings Disease)
R#4	25-40	Male	Lecturer	Football (Richmond Football Club)
R#5	25-40	Female	Student	Cooking (Jamie Oliver)
R#6	40+	Male	Administrator	Gaming (Castle Age)
Focus group 2				
R#7	18-24	Female	Lecturer	Books (Linda)
R#8	25-40	Male	Scientist	Gaming (Minecraft)
R#9	18-24	Male	Student	Gaming (Battlefield)
R#10	25-40	Male	Student	4 wheel drive vehicles (Hilux)
R#11	40+	Male	Manager	Gaming (PlayStation)
Focus group 3				
R#12	18-24	Female	Student	Medical (Beyond Blue)
R#13	18-24	Female	Student	Gaming (World of Warcraft)
R#14	18-24	Male	Student	Gaming (Magic the Gathering)
R#15	18-24	Male	Student	Entertainment (Sony)
R#16	18-24	Female	Student	Gaming (Grand Theft Auto)
R#17	18-24	Female	Student	Books (Amazon)
R#18	18-24	Male	Student	Gaming (PlayStation)
R#19	18-24	Female	Student	Fashion (LookBook)
R#20	18-24	Male	Student	Gaming (PlayStation)

3.5.3 Focus Group Data Analysis

The first step in analysing the video recordings involved transcribing the audible and visual data into written text. By having the researcher moderate, transcribe and analyse the data meant the dialogue could be put into context in such a way as to reflect the researcher's consistent interpretation (Stewart et al., 2007, p. 110). The researcher manually performed thematic content analysis in order to identify recurrent themes or

constructs throughout the transcribed data from each focus group (Mills, Durepos, Wiebe, 2010). This process involved trawling through the written data and assigning each construct a reference number, a procedure known as open coding. This was followed by identifying and labelling sub-themes relevant to each construct, a process referred to as “axial coding”. Assigning codes to sentences or groups of sentences made it easier to recognise themes that occurred repeatedly on an individual and group scale (Breen, 2007). This then allowed the researcher to uncover the issues represented across the majority of participants’ viewpoints (Parker & Tritter, 2007). A review of the data indicates that saturation point was reached on opinions about relevant topics. The trustworthiness of the data was confirmed via triangulation by supervisor audits (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989).

3.5.4 Focus Group Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings from the focus group sessions related to the concepts outlined in the literature review and the outcome of the netnographic observations. Emerging themes and insights are discussed in relation to the questions about individual-level constructs - *perceived ease of use*, *perceived enjoyment*, *network ties* and *anonymity* - as well as the community-level construct of *social capital*.

3.5.5 Individual Level Concepts

3.5.5.1 Perceived Ease of Use

The findings in the literature and the netnography (Stage 1, Part A) indicate perceived ease of use in OBCs has an influence on both the level of enjoyment members experience in a community and their participative behaviour. To further explore this concept, participants in the focus groups were asked how their participation was affected by the usability of the forums they belonged to. Their answers comprised several different responses across all three focus groups, from which the following themes emerged:

Enjoyment. The effect of ease of use on members’ perceived enjoyment and subsequently their participative behaviour, elicited a number of responses. Several focus group participants expressed the view that if sites are not easy to use, they are not enjoyable and therefore not worth participating in. This finding supports the literature and

netnography. The following opinions from members of gaming communities throw further light on their responses:

When it's slow it's crap, sorry! No fun! (R#8).

Yeah! If it's glitchy I won't play, it's definitely not fun when you get shot up cos' of lag (R#9).

Games rely on fast internet access; you can't blame the community for that, but when I want to chat and the servers down it ruins it (R#18).

If it wasn't fun or easy to do I probably wouldn't bother (R#20).

You need to be able to get on the site easily, see if your friends are playing and start up a game without too much effort or it's not going to be enjoyable it's obvious (R#6).

Irrelevance. In direct contrast to the literature and the netnographic observations, several respondents expressed the view that usability of the site had no influence on their enjoyment or participative behaviour. This may be a reflection of the type of community, the reasons why members visit forums, or the quality of the site content. The opinions below are from members of communities of interest, including a camera forum, a football fan site, and a support group for a medical condition. Unlike gaming communities, there is less emphasis on being able to play a game that requires fast internet speeds and technical add-ons, such as microphones or split screen capabilities. It is also likely that the reason for participation is related to information seeking rather than socialising, as indicated by R#12's response. In addition, the time spent on gaming websites is likely to be longer per visit than an enquiry on an interest-related forum, minimising the likelihood of content-related issues.

I haven't had a problem with it so I don't know (R#1).

It's easy so it doesn't matter (R#4).

I don't really go to the forum for fun, it's usually just to have a look for something specific (R#12).

Information. A dominant theme to emerge in regard to perceived ease of use and participative behaviour is related to being able to obtain information easily. Many focus group participants claimed the main reason they spent time on the OBC is to gather information. They also revealed the ease of use with regard to finding information has an influence on their levels of participation. For example, if members are able to find what they are looking for relatively easily or the content meets their needs, they will participate more. Conversely, if it is difficult to find information opinion suggests members are inclined to participate less or not at all.

If I can find a recipe really easily I'll stay on and look for another one, then I start reading and looking at all sorts of things (R#5).

They give you links to other books you might like based on your searches. It's really helpful, and makes it easy to find a new one to get (R#17).

I can just click on a link and see who's written new stuff, then I stay on and chat to people I know (R#10).

I have joined communities and then left because they were so hard to get around (R#14).

Yeah! If it's too hard to add to discussions it's not worth the effort (R#19).

3.5.5.2 Perceived Enjoyment

Perceived enjoyment has been shown to directly affect members' participative behaviour and sense of belonging in online communities (Van der Heijden, 2004; Lin, Fan, & Wallace, 2013). Netnographic observation suggests this theory can also be applied to OBCs. To gain deeper insights into this theory, participants in the focus groups were asked to give an example to indicate how their enjoyment has influenced their participation or sense of belonging to their community. Respondents gave an array of different answers ranging from:

It's not relevant, I only go on to buy or sell stuff (R#2)

to:

I wouldn't bother going on if I didn't like it or have any fun, I'm in the middle of a match with a whole bunch of friends and we meet online all the time, it's what I do for entertainment (R#14).

However, the predominant examples given by participants across all focus groups suggest perceived enjoyment does have a significant effect on participation:

Having fun seems to be a good reason to stay in the community, in GTA we have our own cars that we made, and racing around completing all the tasks is fun, but talking about what we have done in the community is fun too (R#16).

The whole point of being in the forum is to have fun, I like writing posts and getting feedback from other members (R#5).

I stayed on all night last week, I was in a chat with guys from the UK and it was so full on I couldn't leave (R#9).

The effect on members' SOB was not evident from the respondents' views with regard to this topic, so the quantitative research (Stage 2) further addressed this aspect of perceived enjoyment.

3.5.5.3 Network Ties

The literature suggests by maintaining network ties in OBCs members gain social support, friendship and intimacy (Dholakia et al., 2009). There is also evidence to imply strong network ties is crucial to the sociability of OBCs and impacts on members' sense of belonging and continued participation (Preece, 2010; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). With the literature guiding discussion, participants in the focus groups were asked to discuss the importance of friendship in OBCs and how it influences their participative behaviour and sense of belonging. Dominant themes in relation to this topic included developing a strong identity with the community, ongoing participation, and the idea that network ties are built on reciprocal relationships. There was also a strong link between *network ties*, *sense of belonging* and *ongoing participation*, making it difficult to separate each theme.

Ongoing Participation and Sense of Belonging. In the first focus group, one respondent's reply to the question about network ties prompted a full-scale discussion on the topic. The following are short excerpts from that discussion, which suggest the initial motivation to join a community is a shared interest, but over time, members continue to participate due to the network ties they develop. Furthermore, relationships between members have a significant effect on building a sense of belonging to the community. For example, R#3 was a member of a group that suffered from Mennings Disease, and she shared a lot of personal information about herself with the group. She stated she was initially motivated to join the community because her illness was something she had in common with other members. However, by her own admission, she had continued her involvement in the community in order to maintain the relationships she had built over time, and a feeling of belonging she had developed to the community. The following quotes summarise the essence of what she revealed to the group:

You find there are lots of people in the same position, it's a way to find out how to tackle the disease with different treatments, you get ongoing support (R#3)

I have a community I can relate to, it has helped me, we are in it together (R#3).

Some of the people have become quite good friends and we chat online not just about the disease (R#3).

Sharing such personal information prompted open discussion amongst the focus group participants, providing the following additional observations:

The friends I've made keep me involved too (R#2).

It's the people that make me stay; they make me feel part of a special group (R#4).

Since a ripple effect of responses may have led to agreement within the first focus group, the same question was posed during the second and third focus groups, where similar opinions were expressed:

It becomes less about the subject and more about the community of people who all know each other, once you have a group of friends you want to go on more to see what they're doing (R#19).

The best thing is the friends. That's why I'm on it all the time, we have a group thing (R#16).

We all go on at different times but I can always find a thread from someone I know, it's our community, we made it what it is (R#15).

The above responses substantiate the hypothesis that network ties develop members' sense of belonging to the community and encourage active participation (Preece, 2010; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). They also support the netnographic observations and concur with the study of Mathwick et al. (2008, p. 845), who found "long-term members of this community came to regard each other as family, and it is the camaraderie they experience that cements their ongoing commitment to the community".

Reciprocity. One dominant theme in focus group three's discussion on the topic was the idea that network ties are developed through reciprocal behaviour between members. Some respondents stated it was the people who regularly replied when OBC members post, ask for information or make a social comment who eventually become their friends. Furthermore, once they've developed network ties with other members, they are expected to contribute to conversations, therefore perpetuating their participation in the community. The following comments illustrate:

We always chat when we're playing its part of the game, but you know who to rely on for stuff, they become the one's you talk to most (R#14).

I know! Most of my mates on WOW (World of Warcraft) got me set up in the first place and we stayed mates (R#13).

I only got to know most of the guys when they helped me out with some cards I needed, now they ask me for advice (R#14).

The guys in my community are always helping each other out. That's how we got to know each other in the first place (R#20).

Depends on what community you are in, it's actually a good thing the more friends you have in Castle Age. The more people you know the bigger the army you can get. I have this list of people in my friends list that I know so I can get another point. The more friends you have the bigger your ammo is (R#6).

The rich content provided by focus group participants with regard to network ties added substance to the findings, and gave the researcher a deeper understanding of the topic in general. For example, in some gaming communities members appear to foster network ties in order to advance in the game. A more altruistic view is network ties are built on reciprocal behaviour which develops over time into close friendships. Nevertheless, whatever the reason for establishing relationships with the community, the results overwhelmingly indicate that building network ties with other members in OBCs increases participative behaviour and sense of belonging. This is consistent with both the literature (Dholakia et al, 2004; Preece, 2010; Wellman & Gulia, 1999) and the netnographic observations.

3.5.4.4 Anonymity

Another theme that sparked debate in the focus groups is the significance of anonymity whilst posting online. The moderator posed the question: "how does having a pseudonym, which essentially means you're anonymous, affect your participation?" Varying responses were forthcoming, which can be categorised into two opposing themes, a further indication of the difficulty of contextualising anonymity as a construct, as previously discovered from the netnography.

Friendship Development. Several participants commented that although they were anonymous they had become recognisable over time, not only from their pseudonyms but as part of a small network of close friends. This corresponds with the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation (SIDE), and suggests in a group environment, anonymity increases members' identity with the group and produces favourable outcomes,

such as cohesion with the group or an increased sense of community (Walther, 1992; Spears & Lea, 1994).

The following quotes illustrate how anonymity was no longer relevant for several respondents. Their observations imply, they had become well known within the community through active participation and considered themselves part of the group. This seems to suggest the less anonymous members are, the more they participate and the stronger their sense of belonging.

I've been in the Magic (Magic the Gathering) forum for years, I play with the same group I chat with, they know me. I'm going to a tournament next year with some of them (R#14).

It doesn't mean anything. We all know each other, we're in a team, it's just a stupid name, like a...nickname it's what you talk about and how you play the game they know you by (R#13).

I was in a community of people who had mods that had been going on for years, people knew the characters that made those mods, so they were well known by everyone in the community (R#8).

Yeah! You have people who are constantly on the forum and constantly asking questions, they end up with tens of thousands of posts and become forum personalities that everyone knows (R#9).

Reduces Social Cues. It was apparent from respondents' comments that anonymity reduces social or cultural cues, allowing friendships to develop based on people's contributions to the community, rather than their background or status outside the community. This is akin to Social Information Processing theory (SIP), where the lack of physical or verbal cues helps to bridge the cultural divide, resulting in the development of close network ties and increased participative behaviour (Mathwick et al., 2008; Walther, 1992), and is reflected in the following quotes from respondents:

I know people from all over, it doesn't matter where they come from the community is a good place to meet up. Yeah! Now we're friends. (R#9).

I didn't know anyone to start but made friends over time, in fact the people I'm friends with now I probably would never have talked to if I hadn't joined this community (R#15).

Confidence. Other participants suggested using a pseudonym gave them a sense of anonymity, and subsequently the freedom to express themselves without worrying about being recognised outside the forum. For example, one participant in the first focus group offered this explanation when asked how using a pseudonym had affected his participative behaviour:

I don't feel confident to speak face to face all the time, anonymity allows for more open discussion, in front of someone it's harder to say things, but online I can write it (R#1).

We are being judged but there is a disconnection (R#11).

Both observations by R#1 and R#11 correspond with Best and Kreuger (2006) and Lea et al., (2001, p. 528) who argued that being anonymous "decreases attention to others, reduces concerns about being positively evaluated by others, and creates an impersonal, task-oriented focus for group interaction".

Irrelevance. When respondents were asked how anonymity affected their participation, there was at least one respondent in each forum who expressed the view that using a pseudonym had no bearing on their participation at all:

I don't really care if they know me or not (R#5).

It doesn't (R#7).

Doesn't make a difference (R#19).

Despite opposing views on this topic, the majority of opinions suggest where members in OBCs have developed strong network ties, the less anonymous they are the more they participate in the community and the greater their sense of belonging. However,

since the effect of anonymity on participative behaviour and sense of belonging is still debatable, confirmation was obtained through statistical analysis in Stage 2 of this study.

3.5.5.5 Social Capital

According to the literature the relational culture of an online community is reflected in the amount of social capital the community has accrued (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Lee & Lee, 2006; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Li, Clark, & Wheeler, 2013). The social capital construct outlined in Chapter 2 and represented by shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity (Liao & Chou, 2011), is a community-level construct related to online communities in general. The netnography provided strong evidence of the effective application of social capital in OBCs. The focus groups provided further examples to substantiate and expand on the findings from the netnographic observations. For this study social capital was considered a community-level influence, therefore the questions were designed to elicit the respondents' personal views of the social capital elements regarding the community as a single entity.

Shared Language. Respondents were asked to talk about the use of a shared language in their community and whether they thought it impacted on their involvement. The breadth of the topic elicited a variety of observations, yet several similarities emerged across all the focus groups to confirm the overall significance of shared language in OBC environments. A further theme to emerge suggested shared language has a positive impact on the network ties members develop. Several views were articulated about the way in which people converse in OBCs and how language similarities, based on background or culture, drew people together, resulting in the development of friendships.

I'm in a forum for off-road vehicles, most of the members are a lot older than me and their posts are really clunky, they type everything out in longhand, it puts me off (R#10).

In our community we have shortcuts for moves in the game; it's our own language really (R#8).

We are from everywhere, I speak to a lot of Maori's in my community cos' we speak the same language, if they don't get what we're about they go talk to another group like them (R#15).

When you're in a game you don't have time to spell stuff out so you say stuff that's quick, it's the same in the forum we use shorthand when we talk (R#13).

I can tell by the way they talk if they are around my age or not, and the friends I've got are all like me, we like the same clothes, we have stuff in common (R#19).

Shared Vision. Community culture established around a shared vision provides members with a basis from which mutually acceptable relationships can develop (Jones & Taylor, 2012) and where members feel freer to exchange information (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). With this in mind, respondents were asked to give an example of how a shared vision affected their participative behaviour and sense of belonging to their community. Disparate discussion took place around this theme. In the first focus group it became apparent that respondents did not fully understand what a shared vision represented, thereby limiting relevant data from this group. The question was reconfigured for the subsequent groups in order to clarify the concept. Responses from the two remaining focus group sessions revealed the majority of respondents felt their community had a belief system in place which was reassuring for members. This is consistent with the study of Tsai and Ghoshal (1998), who found a shared vision reduces misunderstandings, and with Maksl and Young (2013), who identified an association between social capital and comfort levels with regard to sharing private information.

In our forum everyone's a Tigers fan, so we're on the same team and we all want our team to win! Is that having a shared vision? (R#4).

In the community I'm in now we all seem to want the same thing, we want to talk about the game and share strategies. In the other one I was in everyone was out for what they could get, they were in it for the wrong reasons so I left (R#11).

I like to be in touch with other likeminded people (R#8).

When I go on line I find there are lots of people in the same position as me (R#12).

Social Trust. Discussions on the topic of social trust created much discussion in each of the focus groups, however, the predominant theme across all sessions was the trustworthiness of the information shared between members of the community. This finding concurs with Zhao et al. (2012, p. 576), who found “through repeated interactions between members, and between an individual and the VC, trust in other members of the VC gradually develops”. Evidence from respondents’ statements suggest social trust also relates to network ties, as it appears the more trust members place in the community as a whole, the more likely they are to make friends within the community.

I trust more the word-of-mouth from community members than the advertisers, I trust that person because they’re a community member (R#19).

I know that when I read stuff from people I know it’s going to be legit (R#15).

The community I’m in is very reliable, there’s always new information for us to read, and the books are given honest reviews, they even send me a prompt when a book similar to one I’ve already bought is new on the booklist (R#17).

If you can’t trust the people in the community it puts you off posting comments, you don’t want a whole lot of replies to your threads that are negative (R#14).

I’ve got to know loads of people I now consider as friends, I wouldn’t have even thought about sharing personal stuff with people if I didn’t trust the community not to turn on me (R#19).

Participants also mentioned trust builds up over time, and communities are only as trustworthy as the information they provide. Members who consistently posted information or advice received a raft of positive comments and became well known in the community. As members provided more solid, useful information over time, the more the overall community was considered to be trustworthy:

You can look at the member history and see what sort of comments they get, this gives you a good idea how trustworthy their information is (R#15).

It’s all about what other people say (R#18).

In my community they know I'm not a tool so when I say this is a good way to do something they listen (R#8).

They know you from your input over time (R#20).

My community has a lot of experts on cameras, they know all the new gadgets and what works best, I know I can ask for advice about my Canon and they'll give me good information (R#1).

Respondents also discussed the role of moderators with regard to monitoring discussion threads to ensure members adhered to the rules and didn't post offensive or derogatory comments. Members' compliance with the rules of a community not only relates to the trustworthiness of the community, but also reflects the members' shared vision. Therefore, although the responses obtained were related to a question of social trust, they also apply to a shared vision in the community. One participant revealed cancelling their membership to another community due to the "nasty comments, and foul language" (R#17) of other members. This prompted heated discussion about online etiquette:

If there's an argument online and someone is re-posting someone else's work they are the first to get shut down (R#18).

I don't mind the mods hanging around but when they start removing threads because they don't like the language, or the comments are too negative, that pisses me off (R#20).

They have to be strict or you get a whole load of trolls writing stupid posts (R#16).

Reciprocity. Research indicates members in online communities are more likely to participate if they know other members will provide help or advice when they need it (Best & Krueger, 2006; Liao & Chan, 2011; Mathwick et al., 2008). Focus group participants in this study were asked how they felt about the concept of reciprocity in relation to participation and to give examples. Their observations included both positive and negative examples, with an overall outcome suggesting OBCs are reliant on the reciprocal nature of their members for encouraging ongoing participation. There is also evidence to suggest the

reciprocal nature of the community has an effect on members developing friendships within the community.

What determines why I stay on is the feedback I get (R#10).

It's just a virtual shop really, but I expect there to be at least politeness and a timely response (R#19).

I was on a purely technical site, people go on who are experts, I left because they are always busy and their replies are slow (R#6).

We all know that if we want help someone will give it (R#13).

Here's an example, I ask people what's the best weapon pack to use in my game and they chip in with advice, that's what people do in Battlefield, it's a community we look out for each other (R#9).

You start out helping each other with advice on which cards are better than others and spells and stuff, eventually you become friends it's a natural progression (R#14).

3.5.5 Focus Group Summary

To further explore the concepts outlined in the literature review (Chapter 2) and substantiate the findings from the netnographic observation, Stage 1, Part B of this study involved conducting three focus group sessions. These sessions produced a substantial amount of rich data in relation to the influences on the critical success factors in OBCs, giving the researcher deeper insights into a range of OBCs from the individual members' perspectives. The findings from this stage of the study (Stage 1, Part B) indicate the concepts outlined in the literature review were evident in the communities to which the focus group participants belonged. Furthermore, insights from the focus group analysis corroborated and expanded upon the results of the netnographic observation.

From an individual perspective the focus group analysis revealed that *perceived ease of use* has a direct relationship on members' *perceived enjoyment* and *participative behaviour* on game-related sites. In more generic OBCs, member responses indicate, whether the site is easy to use or not has no effect on members' levels of enjoyment or

participation. However, the dominant theme regarding perceived ease of use as an influence on participative behaviour is related to reliability and usability of the site for conducting information searches.

Based on the views expressed by the focus group participants, there appears to be a positive relationship between members' levels of enjoyment, their involvement in the community and their participative behaviour. Contrary to the findings from the netnography, there was no evidence of a link between enjoyment and sense of belonging in OBCs. With regard to network ties and consistent with prior research (Dholakia, 2004), a number of references suggested friendships are initially based on a shared interest but transforms into a closer relationship over time. A further theme to emerge, based on the number of common responses, suggests network ties are reliant on reciprocity between members in order to develop over a period of time. Since reciprocity has been identified as an element of the social capital construct in the literature (Liao & Chou, 2011; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1989), this supports the hypothesis that social capital can bridge weak ties between members in OBCs over time and develop into strong ties (Putnam, 2000).

The concept of anonymity elicited varying responses; however the strongest views indicated that members of OBCs become known to each other through their contributions to the community rather than being recognised by their pseudonym. Several participants suggested they were not considered anonymous anymore because they all knew each other well based on the history of their interactions and ongoing participation in the community. This finding suggests the less anonymous members of OBCs are, the more they participate.

Consistent with the netnographic observations and as outlined in the literature, elements associated with social capital also have relevance in OBC environments. An interesting theme to emerge from the focus group discussions is the potential relationship between the different aspects of social capital and the development of network ties. A number of respondents expressed the view that members of OBCs are more likely to befriend others who use a similar language to their own. They also mentioned a solid base of social trust and reciprocity is fundamental to developing long-term network ties.

Analysis of the focus group sessions supports the concepts outlined in the literature review (Chapter 2), and indicates the conceptual framework can effectively be applied to OBCs. The findings also imply the existence of a relationship between *social capital* and

network ties, and between *anonymity* and *network ties*. The results from both the netnographic observations and the focus group analysis therefore added substance to the research design guiding the qualitative phase of this study.

3.6 Enhancing Trustworthiness

Triangulation is one of the leading techniques used to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research. In this study, triangulation was utilised through the use of different data-capturing methods, in the form of netnographic observations followed by focus groups. This allowed the researcher to view the concepts from different perspectives and removed any possibility of bias that may arise from using a single data source (Neuman, 2006). The use of different data-capture methods in this study allowed for varying depths of immersion in the subject and a wider perspective on the research problems (Belk & Wallendorf, 1989).

3.7 Qualitative Research Summary

The objective of this study was to develop a research model to reflect the influences on the critical success factors in online brand communities (OBCs). A comprehensive literature search into the participative behaviour of members of OBCs revealed a plethora of information regarding online communities in general, yet there was a lack of research specifically related to brand-affiliated online communities. For this reason exploratory research was conducted prior to developing a research framework for extensive quantitative analysis (Stage 2) in the form of netnographic observation of three very distinct OBCs (Stage 1, Part A) and focus groups with members of a range of different OBCs (Stage 1, Part B). The qualitative phase of this research (Stage 1, Parts A and B) was designed to clarify and expand on the findings in the literature, and provide primary data to substantiate the research framework and hypotheses. The qualitative research generated a substantial amount of rich information, in support of previous theoretical assumptions also effectively applying to OBCs. The findings also revealed relationships between concepts not previously identified, but having significant bearing on the structure of the overall research framework.

The outcome of the qualitative research, combined with the findings from the literature search, led to the formulation of the following hypothetical relationships:

- *Perceived ease of use* has an influence on *perceived enjoyment* and *participative behaviour* in OBCs;
- *Perceived enjoyment* has an influence on *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* in OBCs;
- *Network ties* has an influence on *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* in OBCs;
- *Anonymity* has a negative influence on *network ties* and *participative behaviour* in OBCs; and
- *Social capital* has an influence on *network ties*, *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* in OBCs.

Based on these relationships between the constructs, the ongoing success of OBCs appears to be reliant on an accrued level of social capital and easy-to-use community sites that are enjoyable and conducive to developing network ties, and have active members with a sense of belonging to the community. These insights, along with secondary data obtained from the literature search, helped to develop the hypotheses for this study and the subsequent design of the questionnaire. Chapter 4 outlines the research framework and hypotheses for the qualitative stage of this study (Stage 2).

Chapter Four

Research Framework and Hypotheses

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the conceptual framework and hypothesised relationships that emerged from the literature review in Chapter 2 and the qualitative research in Chapter 3. The conceptual model looks at the influences on the critical success factors in online brand communities (OBCs) and the interrelationships between constructs. This chapter proposes a conceptual model as follows (see Figure 16):

- To test the influence of four individual-level independent variables and one community-level independent variable on *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging (SOB)* in OBCs;
- To test the interrelationships of the independent variables in the model; and
- To test the strength of the relationships between variables when a comparison is made between information-seekers and socialisers.

This chapter also provides a detailed description of each independent and dependent variable in the conceptual model, and justifies the hypothesised relationships between the constructs.

4.1 Proposed Model and Hypothesised Relationships

The conceptual model for this study is presented in Figure 16. The independent variables in the framework are the individual- and community-level influences: *perceived ease of use*, *perceived enjoyment*, *network ties*, *anonymity* and *social capital*. The dependent variables are *participative behaviour* and *SOB*. As the conceptual model indicates, some of these variables are interrelated in addition to the direct relationships in the path model. Furthermore, *social capital* is a second-order construct represented by *shared language*, *shared vision*, *social trust* and *reciprocity*.

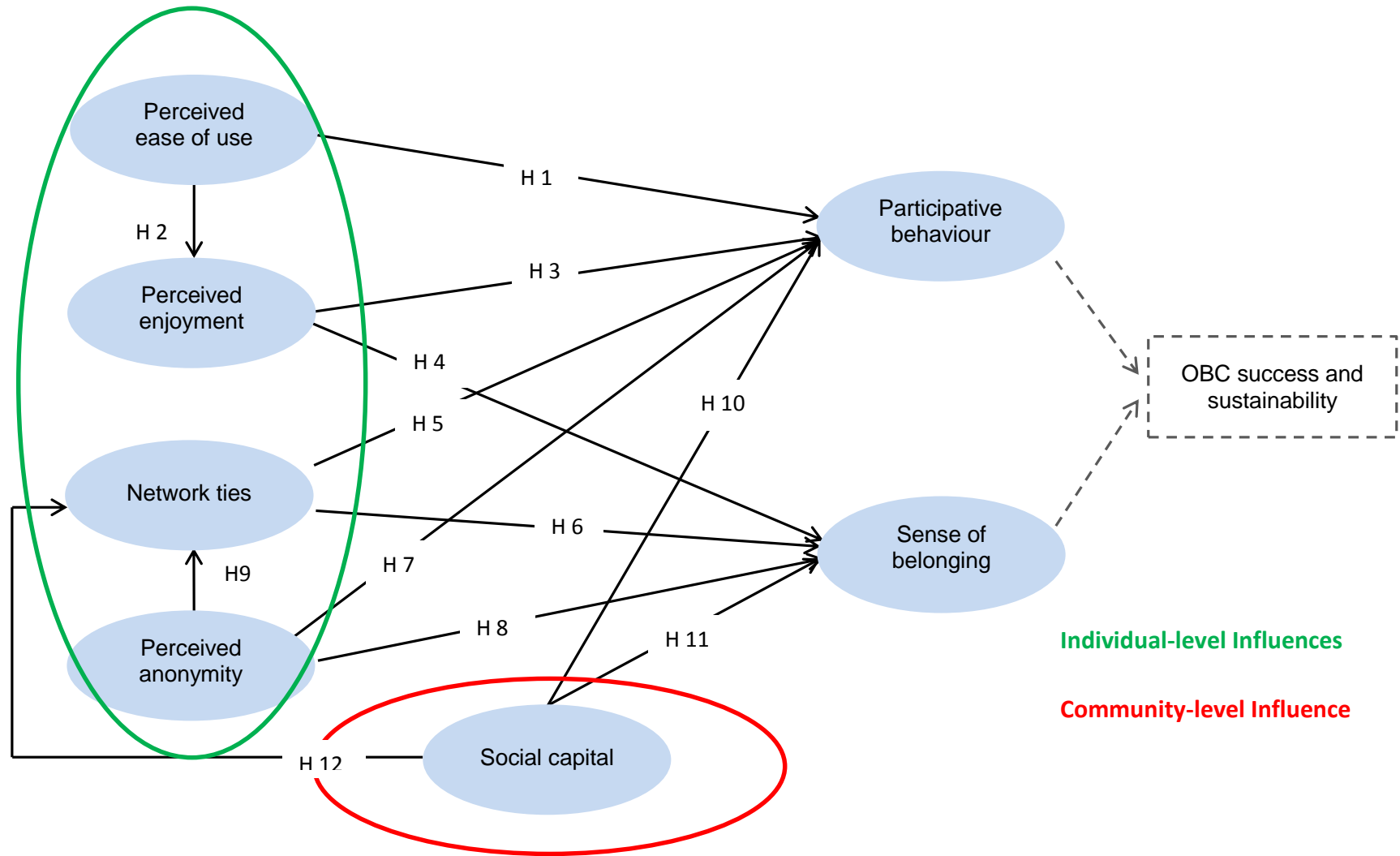


Figure 16 Proposed Conceptual Model – Influences on Critical Success Factors in OBCs

4.2 Critical Success Factors in Online Brand Communities

“The stickiness of a VC, which can be reflected by its members’ sense of belonging and participation, is a vital factor for its success or survival” (Zhao et al., 2012, p. 574). This is one of many quotes throughout the literature that indicates *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* are considered key factors in the ongoing success of OBCs (Woisetschläger et al., 2008; Casalo et al., 2007; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Pai & Tsai, 2011; Zhao et al., 2012). They were therefore selected as the dependent variables for this study.

4.2.1 Participative Behaviour

People join OBCs because of an interest in a specific brand, and to exchange experiences and share information related to the brand (Tsai & Ghoshal, 2011). Interactions in OBCs include posting messages and threads for other members to read and reply to. This is referred to as participative behaviour (De Souza & Preece, 2004). Active participation involves writing posts and replying to posts, whereas “lurking” refers to general observation of activities without actively participating (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011). Because members of OBCs participate voluntarily in a community, they choose their level of participation depending on their objectives and the influences that shape their online experience (Bateman et al., 2011; Tsai & Ghoshal, 2011).

The literature indicates interaction between members is a distinct feature of OBCs, and what differentiates them from other online communities is their collaborative culture (Woisetschläger et al., 2008). OBCs thrive on the relationships members develop through participative behaviour in the community (Li et al., 2013), a view supported by Brogi (2012, p. 386) who claimed “the fundamental peculiarity of the OBC resides in the ability of its members to interact with each other”. Furthermore, Zhou et al. (2011) found in order to encourage new members and retain existing ones, OBCs rely on a number of active participants in the community to share information and socialise with one another. There is also evidence in the literature to suggest high levels of interaction in OBCs increases members’ attachment to the community and strengthens their loyalty to the brand (Casalo et al., 2007; Tsai et al., 2011). Taken together, these observations strongly imply participative behaviour is a critical factor to the ongoing success of OBCs

(Bateman et al., 2011; De Souza & Preece, 2004; Li et al., 2013; Lin, 2008; Zhou et al., 2011).

Congruent with the literature, the findings from the qualitative research (Chapter 3) indicate both Bodybuilding and Vogue OBCs saw an incremental increase in the number of posts on their sites over the four-month study period, as well as substantial growth in the number of new members who joined these communities. These OBCs were still thriving after three years. In direct contrast, the Avon online forum experienced a minimal increase in posts and new members over the four months, and finally ceased to exist after three years. These observations also indicate that participative behaviour is essential to the sustainability of OBCs.

4.2.2 Sense of Belonging

In this study, sense of belonging (SOB) is an established term representing attachment, identification with and membership to a community (Tonteri et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2012). The SOB construct is extremely relevant to OBCs, as members have a strong connection to the brand and an attachment to the brand community (Brogi, 2013). Members of OBCs share feelings of belonging that creates a bond with other members of the community based on their shared association with a specific brand (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2008; Fournier, 1998; Zhao et al., 2012).

Research also indicates SOB is a critical factor associated with successful and sustainable OBCs, as the more members feel they identify with and belong to a community, the more loyal they are to the brand. From an organisational perspective this outcome is indicative of a successful community (Woisetschläger et al., 2008; Casalo et al., 2007; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Pai & Tsai, 2011).

4.3 Hypothesised Relationships

4.3.1 Perceived Ease of Use

Perceived ease of use has been defined as “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort” (Van der Heijden, 2004). Based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Davis (1989) perceived ease of use to be a

factor that influences an individual's decision to use the internet as a form of technology to meet their needs. This theory, although mainly used to study online communities of practice, can also be applied to OBCs, as they have the same basic characteristics as virtual communities in general with regard to their reliance on the internet as a technology (Van der Heijden, 2004). As with online communities, members of OBCs rely on the functional elements of the community's website, such as navigating around the forum and the features that make participation easier (Moon & Kim, 2000; Teo, Lim & Lai, 1998; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000).

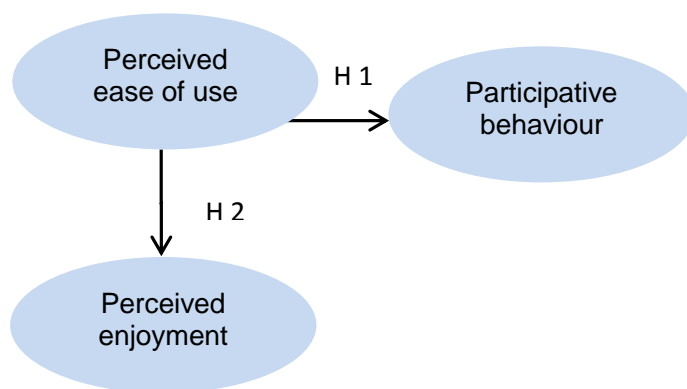


Figure 17 *Perceived Ease of Use – Hypothesised Paths*

The findings from the qualitative research in this study (Chapter 3) align with the literature regarding the influence of *perceived ease of use* on *participative behaviour* in OBCs, from several different points of view. One theme to emerge from the focus groups was information searches have the propensity to evolve into active participation if information is easily accessible. For example, R#5 (Chapter 3) pointed out: “*if I can find a recipe really easily I’ll stay on and look for another one, then I start reading and looking at all sorts of things*” (R#5). It was also apparent from the qualitative analysis (Chapter 3) that the technical aspects of the website appear to influence participative behaviour. Respondents made direct reference to the significant impact of the website’s usability on their continued participation in the community. One member from the Vogue OBC (Chapter 3) stated: “*I am trying to change my appearance, which i played with this morning and now i cant find it!!!! FRUSTRATING if i cant do new posts i dont think its a usable forum anymore*”. Additionally, one focus group respondent (Chapter 3) admitted: “*I have joined communities and then left because they were so hard to get around*”

(R#14). In agreement with the online literature, both these comments imply a relationship exists between *perceived ease of use* and *continued participation* (Van der Heijden, 2004; Moon & Kim, 2000).

TAM has also been adapted to suit online communities of a more hedonistic nature by proposing *perceived enjoyment*, through *perceived ease of use*, is also a predictor of continued internet use (Van der Heijden, 2004; Moon & Kim, 2000). Research that utilised the expanded model indicates *perceived ease of use* not only has a direct positive relationship with internet usage, but also a significant positive influence on *perceived enjoyment* (Van der Heijden, 2004; Hsu & Lu, 2007; Moon & Kim, 2000). This suggests the easier it is to participate in the community, the more enjoyable it becomes (Van der Heijden, 2004). The following post by a member of the Vogue OBC (Chapter 3) highlights the significance of this relationship: “*we can now bold (yay!), but whenever I italicise something it doesn't work when my posts show up, I'm so beyond all this it takes too long and it's too hard, I'm not enjoying myself anymore, anyone else having the same problem?*” (Vogue #4).

As with the qualitative research in this study, the online community literature clearly signals the importance of the functionality of OBCs and the influence of *perceived ease of use* on *continued participation* and *perceived enjoyment*. Based on these findings the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Perceived ease of use has a positive effect on participative behaviour in online brand communities.

H2: Perceived ease of use has a positive effect on perceived enjoyment in online brand communities.

4.3.2 Perceived Enjoyment

Perceived enjoyment is defined as “the extent to which the activity of using the computer is perceived to be enjoyable” (Van der Heijden, 2004, p. 695). In the context of the current study, it is an individual-level factor referring to the personal pleasure members experience from their involvement in the community. This implies members who find participation in the community enjoyable are more likely to want to keep

participating as their interactions give them pleasure (Teo, Lim, & Lai, 1998; Van der Heijden, 2004). This view is reflected in the statement by Teo et al (p 33, 1998) who suggest that “if an activity is enjoyable, it is likely to be indulged in more frequently and for a longer time each day”.

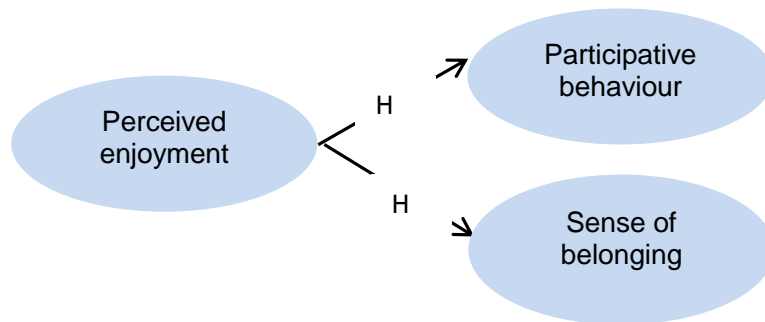


Figure 18: *Perceived Enjoyment – Hypothesised Paths*

Studies that utilised the TAM approach indicate members are motivated to use information technology for both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits (Davis et al., 1992; Van der Heijden, 2004; Moon & Kim, 2000). Intrinsic motivations, such as the pleasure or satisfaction received from participation in virtual communities, appear to dominate extrinsic motivations, such as the goals or rewards that come from using the internet (Davis et al., 1992; Van der Heijden, 2004; Moon & Kim, 2000). This is especially relevant when the technology is used for entertainment purposes (Moon & Kim, 2000), a view supported by Van der Heijden (2004), who argued that intrinsic motivations, such as perceived enjoyment, refer to the fun the user experiences while participating, rather than the extrinsic benefits, such as better job performance, which is more utilitarian and has predominantly been linked to employment-related activities (Davis et al., 1992). The findings also indicate both customer loyalty and members’ positive feelings towards participating in the community are significantly positive outcomes of perceived enjoyment (Hsu & Lu, 2007).

Researchers who used a U&G approach also found the entertainment value gained from involvement in an online community to be a strong motivator for continued participation, as it fulfils the hedonic gratification individuals seek when taking part in an online community (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Nambisan & Baron, 2009). The following

comment from focus group participant R#5 (Chapter 3) illustrates: “*the whole point of being in the forum is to have fun, I like writing posts and getting feedback from other members*”, and suggests whilst the forum is enjoyable, participation will continue because the interactive experience is providing pleasure. Additionally, Lin et al. (2013) proposed when members experience satisfaction from their involvement in online communities, they identify more closely with their fellow members and develop a strong sense of belonging to the community as a whole. These findings support the following hypotheses:

H3: Perceived enjoyment has a positive effect on participative behaviour in an online brand community.

H4: Perceived enjoyment has a positive effect on sense of belonging in an online brand community.

4.3.3 Network Ties

In the literature network ties sometimes refers to the social framework of a community in relation to social capital. However in this study the structural dimension of social capital in OBCs is the community itself, as OBCs are participation-based social units determined by the social relationships that occur within a structural network (Zhao et al., 2012). Network ties are the social relationships that develop between individual members of OBCs, the strength of which depends on how frequently they interact and how emotionally involved the members are with each other (Dholakia et al., 2004; Granovetter, 1973; Wirtz et al., 2012).

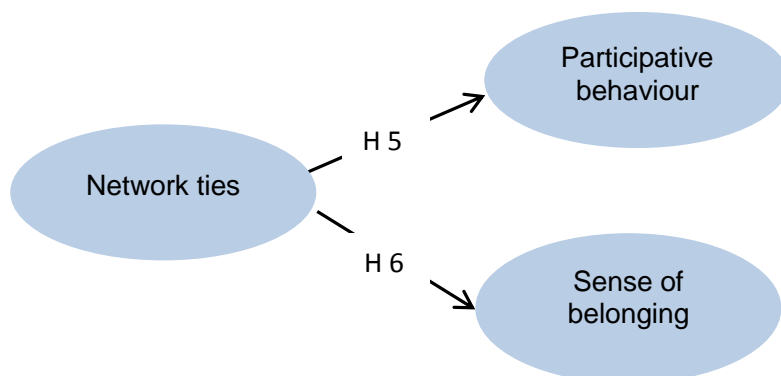


Figure 19: *Network Ties – Hypothesised Paths*

Network ties are an individual-level influence on participation and sense of belonging in online communities, as they are a reflection of members' perceptions of their relationships with other members through their own personal interactions (Sutanto, 2013).

Sutanto et al. (2011, p. 143) argued “each member of a virtual community creates an identity for himself through his postings, and in the meantime, starts to develop an understanding of other members' identities, which enables them to anticipate others' responses to a particular issue or post”. This assumption is supported by the qualitative study (Chapter 3) and the focus group participants' comments.

When questioned about network ties respondents had developed and how their relationships affected their membership, R#4 stated “*it's the people that make me stay; they make me feel part of a special group*”; while R#19 pointed out “*it becomes less about the subject and more about the community of people who all know each other. Once you have a group of friends you want to go on more to see what they're doing*”. Consequently, if members can relate to a number of friends within a community, they will tend to participate more in order to maintain those relationships (Li et al., 2015). The relevance of developing close relationships in an online environment has also been linked to the concept that members exhibit a sense of virtual community (SOVC) (Blanchard, 2007). Li et al. (2015) also alluded to this with their hypothesis that the “psychological sense of interacting and establishing personal connections with others” (p. 265) was the strongest motivator for continued participation. These person-to-person interactions are essential to the development of OBCs, where the exchange of information is crucial to the community's ongoing success (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Dholakia et al., 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2004).

Furthermore, the strength of community members' ties does not appear to matter. In online communities they have been linked to emotional attachment to the community, regardless of whether they are weak or strong (Lee et al., 2011). This is reflected in the following observation from the focus group research (Chapter 3): “*we all go on at different times but I can always find a thread from someone I know, it's our community, we made it what it is*” (R#15). The literature also suggests weak impersonal ties in a community can develop into close network ties over time where a community has an

accrued level of social capital (Putnam, 2000). This view concurs with Norris (2002), who suggested social capital in online communities influences member participation as it “widens their experience of community by helping them to connect to others” (p. 11). Therefore, based on the literature review and the qualitative research the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: Network ties are positively related to participative behaviour in an online brand community.

H6: Network ties are positively related to a sense of belonging in an online brand community.

4.3.4 Anonymity

Throughout the literature there is general consensus that perceived anonymity is an individual-level influence on members’ participative behaviour, their sense of belonging to the community, and the network ties they develop (Blanchard, 2008; Kim & Park, 2011; Spears & Lea, 1994; Walther, 1992). However, the literature revealed inconsistencies regarding the type of association between constructs, and for this reason qualitative research was also conducted in the form of netnographic observation and focus groups, to provide more clarity around the issue.

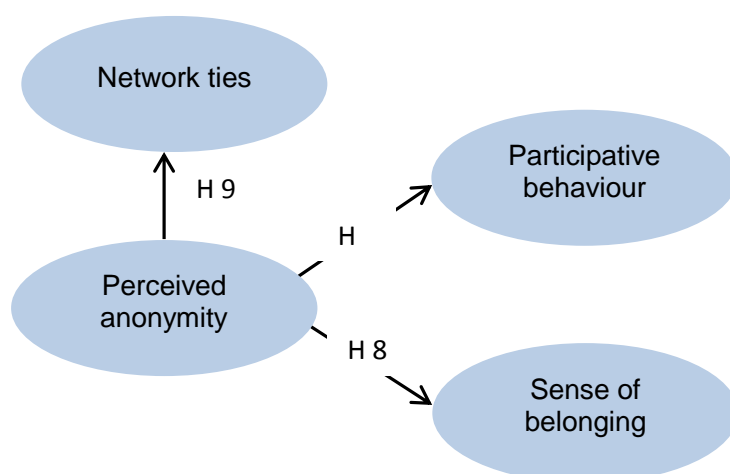


Figure 20: *Perceived Anonymity – Hypothesised Paths*

The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation (SIDE) suggests in a group environment perceived anonymity leads to greater immersion, thereby increasing the relevance of members' identity and creating an increased sense of community (Blanchard, 2008; Chang, 2008; Kim & Park, 2011; Spears & Lea, 1994; Walther, 1992). The supposition in the literature of a relationship between perceived anonymity and sense of belonging is evident from the focus group observations (Chapter 3) in reference to OBCs where the respondents were anonymous. For example, (R#3) stated: *"I have a community I can relate to, it has helped me. We are in it together"* (R#3). R#4 added to this post with: *"it's the people that make me stay; they make me feel part of a special group"* (R#4).

In accordance with SIDE, the qualitative analysis of this study indicates once an individual becomes involved in a specific OBC they develop an individual identity based on their participative behaviour (Blanchard, 2008; Chang, 2008). Members become recognisable through their contributions to the community, suggesting they are no longer anonymous, and this encourages their ongoing participation and increases their sense of belonging to the community (Blanchard, 2008; Chang, 2008). The following quotes from the focus group analysis highlight these findings:

It becomes less about the subject and more about the community of people who all know each other, once you have a group of friends you want to go on more to see what they're doing (R#19).

It doesn't mean anything. We all know each other, we're in a team, it's just a stupid name, like a...nickname it's what you talk about and how you play the game they know you by (R#13).

I've been in the Magic (Magic the Gathering) forum for years, I play with the same group I chat with, they know me. I'm going to a tournament next year with some of them (R#14).

This theory corresponds with the community-based literature where perceived anonymity was found to have an inverse effect on participative behaviour in neighbourhood communities (Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978). For example, members in a

community who make the effort to interact with their neighbours develop a sense of belonging to the community (Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978). They also become recognisable to their neighbours over time and this encourages their ongoing participation in the community (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Colombo et al., 2001; Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978), suggesting perceived anonymity has an inverse relationship with sense of belonging and participative behaviour.

On the other hand, the Social Information Processing (SIP) theory proposes individuals in OBCs are more likely to participate and develop close network ties in communities where members are perceived to be anonymous, because there are no social or visual cues to limit relationships (Mathwick et al., 2008; Walther, 1996). This is based on the idea that anonymity in online communities breaks down social barriers that would otherwise prevent friendships from developing between people from diverse cultural or social backgrounds (Mathwick et al., 2008; Walther, 1992). Comments from R#9 and R#15 who took part in the qualitative research indicate this theory is also relevant to OBCs, and suggest a positive relationship exists between perceived anonymity and network ties.

I know people from all over, it doesn't matter where they come from the community is a good place to meet up. Yeah! Now we're friends (R#9).

I didn't know anyone to start but made friends over time, in fact the people I'm friends with now I probably would never have talked to if I hadn't joined this community (R#15).

Moreover, in accordance with the literature, the findings of the qualitative research show individuals in OBCs feel confident to participate because anonymity gives them the freedom to share ideas without the risk of misunderstandings or unwanted criticism (Best & Kreuger, 2006; McLeod, 1997). For example, one participant in the first focus group offered the following explanation when asked how a pseudonym affected participative behaviour: *"I don't feel confident to speak face-to-face all the time, anonymity allows for more open discussion, in front of someone it's harder to say things, but online I can write it"* (R#1).

In direct contrast to the aforementioned research, the literature also indicates the more anonymous individuals perceive themselves to be in a group environment, the less they feel accountable for their actions, which can result in destructive behaviour (Christopherson, 2007; Yoon & Rolland, 2012). This in turn discourages active participation from other members in the group for fear of personal attack or ridicule (Christopherson, 2007; Yoon & Rolland, 2012). However, although negative behaviour is evident in some online communities, the qualitative research suggests there are strict guidelines in OBCs to prevent disparaging posts (Chapter 3). Furthermore, the characteristics and relational structure of OBCs suggests social capital elements, such as shared vision and social trust, have the propensity to reduce negative behaviour (Liao & Chou, 2011; Li et al., 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). An excerpt from one OBC featured in the netnographic observation illustrates compliance with rules and a shared vision, which suggests negative comments are unlikely to dissuade community participation in this specific OBC.

I am glad to hear that the rules will be better enforced. As President of the R/P, I believe it is critically important that members choose to respect one another regardless of age, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. We should discuss politics and religion in a mature and humble manner that's what this forum is about (BB #18).

Both the literature and the qualitative research indicate that perceived anonymity is likely to give members the confidence to participate in OBCs, facilitate the development of network ties, and increase members' sense of belonging to the community. However, the qualitative research also indicates once members of OBCs have become involved in the community they are no longer considered anonymous, and it is their lack of anonymity that influences the strength of all the abovementioned relationships and increases ongoing participation in OBCs. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

H7: Perceived anonymity has a negative effect on participative behaviour in an online brand community.

H8: Perceived anonymity has a negative effect on sense of belonging in an online brand community.

H9: Perceived anonymity has a negative effect on network ties in an online brand community.

4.3.5 Social Capital

The literature extensively identifies social capital as a multidimensional construct embedded in the relational structure of a community (Abouzahra & Tan, 2014; Adler & Kwon, 2002; Blanchard & Horan, 1998; Chi et al., 2009; Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1992; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Li et al., 2013; Liao & Chou, 2011; Mathwick et al., 2008; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Pinho, 2013; Williams, 2006; Zhao et al., 2012). There is also general agreement that an accrued level of social capital in an online community has a positive effect on members' participative behaviour, sense of belonging to the community and network ties (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Li et al., 2013; Liao & Chou, 2011; Zhao et al., 2012).

Social Capital Indicators

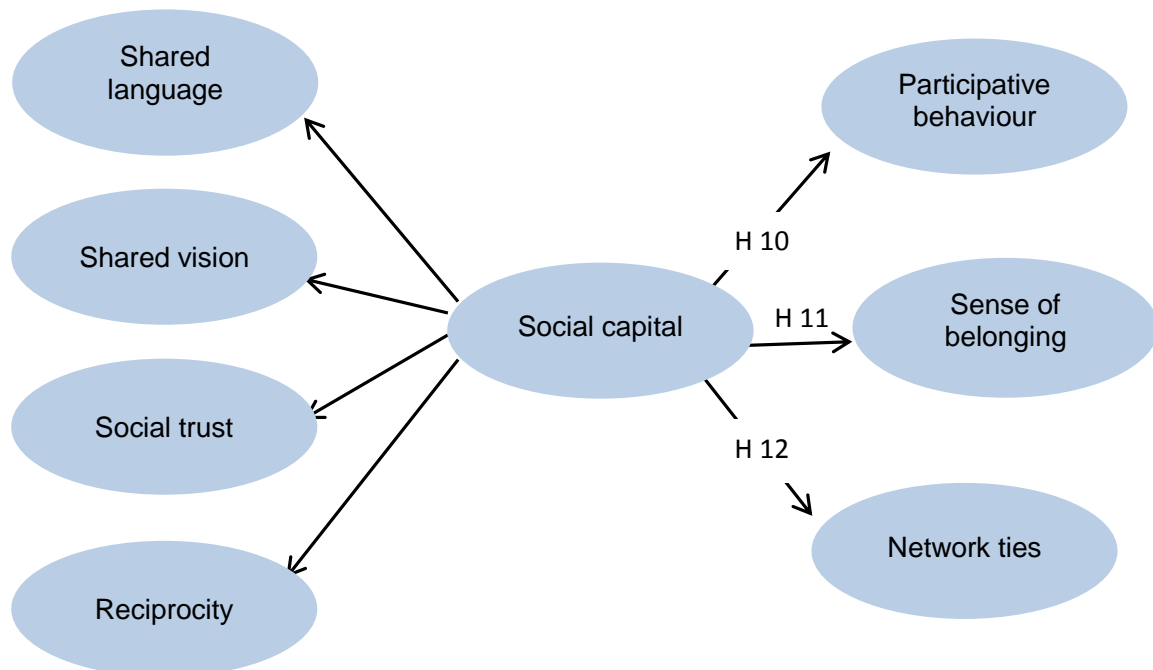


Figure 21 *Social Capital – Hypothesised Paths*

Adler and Kwon (2002) concluded the primary benefit of general communities with an accrued level of social capital is the ability to effectively disperse information between members of the community. This finding is especially relevant in OBCs as they rely on the interaction between members in the form of brand-related knowledge-sharing for their ongoing survival (Bateman et al., 2011; De Souza & Preece, 2004; Kim et al. 2006; Li et al., 2013; Lin, 2008; Zhou et al., 2011). However, as acknowledged by Li et al. (2013), research specifically related to OBCs is extremely limited, so this examination of the effect of social capital on the critical success factors in OBCs will make a substantial contribution to the body of knowledge.

Since one objective of this research was to develop a model of social capital specifically for OBCs, several factors had to be considered when adapting theories from prior research. In OBCs, core members are loyal to a brand around which the community is built; they are members by choice, and the relationships they form are based on a mutual interest, are more consistent and consumer based (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). On the other hand, visitors to virtual communities or online social networks are more transient. They don't have a strong commitment to the community as a whole, so their interests can be completely random (Memmi, 2006).

The literature identified a number of different theories with regard to the elements that represent social capital depending on the perspective of the researcher and the field of enquiry (Li et al., 2013). In an online community of interest, Mathwick et al. (2008) suggested voluntarism, norms of reciprocity, and social trust create value for members. Best and Kreuger (2006) found generalised trust, reciprocity and integrity relevant to internet usage in general, whereas Jones and Taylor (2012) proposed shared values, shared language and norms of behaviour are all indicators of social capital in consumer services environments. Although these studies differ, the extant literature predominantly supports Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) classification of social capital, which proposes three dimensions, including a cognitive dimension that "elucidates common beliefs and desired mental representations in terms of language, codes and vision" (Liao & Chou, 2011, p. 444), a relational dimension representing the trust members share, their obligations and expectations, and how committed they are to the community (Granovetter, 1992; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) also included a structural dimension to represent the impersonal configuration of linkages

between members of an organisational group (Granovetter, 1992). However, as previously mentioned in Chapter 2, social capital is embedded in the structural aspect of OBCs on a community level, whereas network ties is an individual-level concept (Zhao et al., 2012).

Despite a distinct lack of OBC-specific research in relation to social capital, and based mainly on the work of Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) and Liao and Chou (2011), the predominant indicators of the construct appear to be shared language and shared vision (the cognitive element), and social trust and reciprocity (the relational element) (Best & Kreuger, 2006; Chi et al., 2009; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Liao & Chou, 2011; Li et al., 2013; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). To apply these concepts in an OBC environment with regard to participative behaviour and sense of belonging, qualitative research was undertaken.

The following section discusses each of the proposed elements of social capital with regard to the literature and the findings from the qualitative study (Chapter 3) in order to substantiate and support the hypotheses.

4.3.5.1 Shared Language

Shared language has an important function with regard to social relations as it facilitates the means by which individuals' converse (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). With regard to social capital, the literature suggests a shared language is one of the cognitive elements of the construct (Jones & Taylor, 2012; Liao & Chou, 2011; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In an online community environment, a shared language facilitates smoother exchange of information and makes social interaction more exclusive to people with a similar interest (Abouzahra & Tan, 2014; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Liao & Chou, 2011; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). This commonality factor encourages participative behaviour such as knowledge sharing (Abouzahra & Tan, 2014), and increases members' sense of belonging to the community (Liao & Chou, 2011; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

An exclusively shared language was observed in the qualitative study, where members of the Vogue community discussed a number of designer brand names, indicating their shared knowledge of high-end fashion. The following comments illustrate:

I love my Ferragamos! I have both the Varinas and a pair of vintage loafers, which I both purchased from eBay. If you go down this route, you have to be aware of fakes - there's plenty of them on eBay! (Vogue #31).

Great minds think alike! They're comfy, look great and last a very long time! The likes of Saks and Neiman Marcus stock Ferragamo. They deliver internationally and are cheaper than Ferragamo shoes at full price at David Jones or Ferragamo boutiques (Vogue #32).

The following conversation in the Bodybuilding community suggests members of this OBC had a vocabulary other members of the community were familiar with, allowing for easy exchange of information (Liao & Chou, 2011; Zhao et al., 2012). Both the literature and the qualitative research in this study suggest members of brand-related communities often use jargon specific to the focus of their community, as it engenders feelings of belonging to an exclusive group (Jones & Taylor, 2012; Liao & Chou, 2011; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). For example:

I think your underestimating how much your biceps and triceps will grow from just compound exercises, but if you prefer working biceps and triceps directly 2x a week you can definitely do so, have (BB #5).

Too heavy a deload. And I would try to bust the plateau two or three weeks before dropping the 10% just to make sure it just wasn't a weak week (BB #6).

In OBCs, where the majority of members are considered to have weak ties (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), a shared vocabulary bridges the divide between relative strangers (Williams, 2006). The following observation, made by R#19, an anonymous member of a fashion-based OBC, suggests the respondent had made friends with people in the community based on their similar interests and shared vocabulary; thus transforming initially weak ties into strong network ties through the bridging function of social capital.

I can tell by the way they talk if they are around my age or not, and the friends I've got are all like me, we like the same clothes, we have stuff in common (R#19).

Both the literature and the qualitative findings concur that shared language represents a cognitive facet of social capital in OBCs, and as the level of shared language increases, the level of social capital intensifies.

4.3.5.2 Shared Vision

Shared vision is another element associated with the cognitive dimension of social capital, and refers to the values and beliefs shared by community members with regard to the norms of the community (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Liao & Chou, 2011; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Research suggests shared vision can lead to increased levels of participation and sense of belonging to the community (Chi et al., 2009; Jones & Taylor, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2010; Liao & Chou, 2011; Li et al., 2013; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). For instance, having a perceived similarity with other members reduces the level of uncertainty that comes with participating in an online community of strangers (Lee & Lee, 2010; Liao & Chou, 2011). Additionally, a shared vision has been shown to create a sense of being in a collective with other likeminded people, and is integral to the development of social capital in OBCs (Zhao et al., 2012).

All members of a collective group such as OBCs must abide by the same rules to ensure member behaviour aligns with the ideals of the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The findings from the netnographic observations and focus groups indicate members in general appreciate having rules in place, as it ensures everyone has the same overall vision for the community (Zhao et al., 2012). For example, in the netnographic study, Vogue #10 declared: *"I wouldn't want the board bogged down with people's relationship issues - this isn't Cosmopolitan or Seventeen or the Australian equivalent"* (Vogue #10). Furthermore, this comment by R#11, a focus group participant, implies a relationship with a shared vision and ongoing member participation: *"In the community I'm in now we all seem to want the same thing, we want to talk about the game and share*

strategies. In the other one I was in everyone was out for what they could get, they were in it for the wrong reasons, so I left” (R#11).

It is evident from the literature and the findings of the qualitative research that members of communities with a shared vision feel more confident to participate in the knowledge the community will be supportive with regard to information and social exchange (Liao & Chou, 2011; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). These findings identify a shared vision as an essential element of social capital and relates well to OBC environments.

4.3.5.3 Social Trust

Social trust has been identified as a key element of social capital in a number of studies (Mathwick et al., 2008; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Jones & Taylor, 2012). Communities where members regularly share information and give reliable advice build a level of social trust for the community as a whole (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). In a community environment, social trust is essential for members to feel confident about sharing their opinions without the risk of attack or ridicule, and leads to a sense of belonging and affiliation with the community (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). For example, a significant relationship was found to exist between social capital, represented by *familiarity, trust and perceived similarity*, and sense of belonging within a knowledge-sharing context where confidentiality is critical (Zhao et al., 2012). As previously mentioned, it is essential for members of online communities to trust the information they receive from others in order to feel they can contribute to the community with confidence (Mathwick, Wiertz, & Ruyter, 2008; Zhao et al., 2012). This is also relevant in OBCs, where sharing behaviours include giving advice regarding product use and technical issues, and where credibility is affected by the degree of trust one feels towards other members and the community (Liao & Chou, 2011; Zhao et al., 2012).

The findings from the qualitative research revealed two distinct aspects of social trust, both of which have an influence on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in OBCs, and support the relevance of social trust as an essential element of social capital in OBC environments. One instance involved a Vogue online forum discussion, where a member shared some very intimate personal information related to the loss of a parent. The conversation attracted a number of responses from others in the community who

shared their own personal experiences in an attempt to empathise with the writer of the initial post. The level of trust displayed and the number of responses received are suggestive of a relationship between social capital, in the form of social trust, and active participation in the Vogue online community. The assumption social trust has an effect on participative behaviour is further reinforced by the findings of the focus groups where R#19 stated: *“I’ve got to know loads of people I now consider as friends, I wouldn’t have even thought about sharing personal stuff with people if I didn’t trust the community not to turn on me”*. R#14 went on to say: *“If you can’t trust the people in the community it puts you off posting comments, you don’t want a whole lot of replies to your threads that are negative”*.

Another form of social trust indicative of brand-affiliated communities is the exchange of information about the brand itself (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). Reliability of product reviews and technical advice add value to OBCs (Lhotakova, 2012), and it is therefore logical to conclude that trust in relation to quality of the information provided by members is essential to the social capital construct in OBCs. Support for this assumption is reflected in several observations by respondents who also took part in the focus groups. For example, R#19 stated: *“I trust more the word-of-mouth from community members than the advertisers, I trust that person because they’re a community member”*, and R#15 said: *“I know that when I read stuff from people I know it’s going to be legit”*.

Much of the literature is congruent with the findings from the qualitative research and indicates social trust is integral to the social capital construct as it facilitates the exchange of information (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, Jones & Taylor, 2012), provides members with the confidence to participate in communities (Best & Kreuger, 2006), engenders a sense of belonging to the community (Zhao et al., 2012) and gives credibility to OBCs (Lhotakova, 2012).

4.3.7.3 Reciprocity

Reciprocity relates to members’ willingness to help each other in a community environment and is essential for developing trust within the community (Mathwick et al., 2008). The norm of reciprocity regulates online interactions, as it encourages collaboration and results in members feeling committed to the online community (Liao &

Chou, 2011). Building social capital in OBCs is reliant on having members who both give and receive information, and trust that the information received is coming from a credible source (Zhao et al., 2012). Reciprocity in OBCs is considered a moral obligation; it is also regarded as one of the markers of a genuine community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Social capital as a construct represents the nature of the relationships in a community environment, and affects the quality of the interactions between members (Chi et al., 2013; Chu, 2009). Communities with accrued social capital are more collaborative (Zhao et al., 2012) and have members who exhibit a sense of belonging. Maksl and Young (2013) suggested attributes associated with social capital, such as trust and reciprocity, increase members' participative behaviour in online communities as they feel more comfortable to share information if the community is perceived to be trustworthy and members consistently respond to posts. This finding was reinforced by observations from the netnography, where members of the Avon community discontinued their membership based on a lack of reciprocity.

As previously mentioned, members are more likely to participate in online communities if they know members will provide information and advice when they need it (Best & Krueger, 2006; Liao & Chou, 2011; Mathwick et al., 2008). This aligned with the view expressed by one focus group respondent who said: "*we always chat when we're playing. It's part of the game but you know who to rely on for stuff, they become the ones you talk to most*" (R#14). Studies also indicate members considered to have weak ties to the community often strengthen their ties through reciprocation, and over time develop stronger, more enduring relationships (Granovetter, 1992; Mathwick et al., 2008; Putnam, 2000). The findings from the qualitative research in this study also support this assumption, as indicated by R#20 who commented: "*The guys in my community are always helping each other out. That's how we got to know each other in the first place*". Reciprocity is therefore fundamental to the ongoing participation of members in online communities, as they are more likely to continue sharing information and socialising if they consistently receive feedback and acknowledgement (Best & Kreuger, 2006: Liao & Chou, 2011; Mathwick et al., 2008). Reciprocity is also an integral aspect of social capital in OBCs, as it adds value to the relational structure of the community (Li et al., 2013).

Based on the literature and the qualitative research there is significant evidence to support the following hypotheses:

H10: Social capital has a positive influence on participative behaviour in on online brand communities;

H11: Social capital has a positive influence on sense of belonging in online brand communities; and

H12: Social capital has a positive influence on network ties in online brand communities.

4.4 Summary

This chapter reviewed the theory behind the constructs tested in the research model, as shown in the research framework for the second phase of the study. The research model proposes fifteen hypotheses to explain the influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in online brand communities, and the elements that represent social capital in OBCs. Depending on whether the OBC was accessed predominantly for information or socialising, the strength of all the relationships in the research model was measured by comparing the same models across two different samples.

Although there is evidence in the literature to support each of the relationships between constructs on an individual basis, no research to date has incorporated all the concepts in one study. Neither has any research to date applied a model incorporating all the proposed influences on critical success factors in OBC environments. In addition, this study incorporated social capital as a construct, represented by shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity, in an OBC setting for the first time.

The relevance of this research for the marketing industry and academia in general is to bring awareness to the advantages of successful OBCs for many organisations, due to their strong association with specific brands and the advantages the associations provide (Lhotakova, 2012; Shultz & Hatch, 2010). Companies rely on strong relationships between customers and their brand in order to compete successfully in the marketplace, and OBCs have been shown to cultivate and enhance those relationships (Brodie et al., 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013). Research also indicates successful and sustainable OBCs rely on members who actively engage in the community and have developed a sense of belonging (Zhang et al., 2015). Gaining an understanding of the

influences on these factors will therefore provide organisations and marketing practitioners with vital information on creating and maintaining successful OBCs.

Each of the hypotheses included in this study are presented below. Thereafter Chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion of the methodology used for the quantitative research (Stage 2) to test the hypotheses outlined in this chapter.

H1: Perceived ease of use has a positive effect on participative behaviour in online brand communities;

H2: Perceived ease of use has a positive effect on perceived enjoyment in online brand communities;

H3: Perceived enjoyment has a positive effect on participative behaviour in online brand communities;

H4: Perceived enjoyment has a positive effect on SOB in online brand communities;

H5: Network ties have a positive influence on participative behaviour in online brand communities;

H6: Network ties have a positive influence on sense of belonging in online brand communities;

H7: Perceived anonymity has a negative influence on participative behaviour in online brand communities;

H8: Perceived anonymity has a negative influence on sense of belonging in online brand communities;

H9: Social capital has a positive influence on participative behaviour in online brand communities;

H10: Social capital has a positive influence on sense of belonging in online brand communities; and

H11: Social capital has a positive influence on network ties in online brand communities.

Chapter Five

Quantitative Methodology

5.0 Introduction

Chapter 4 outlined the hypotheses to be tested in the quantitative stage of this study and reviewed the quantitative methodology and preliminary analysis. It commenced with the questionnaire design and the source of the scales utilised in the questionnaire, followed by a summary of the data collection methods, the sample selection and data screening requirements. The chapter concluded with an outline and justification for the data analysis methodology, including the goodness of fit measures for the structural equation model.

The first stage of the study utilised a qualitative methodology in order to augment the information gathered in the literature search with primary research, and ensure validity of the relationships as hypothesised in the previous chapter. An online survey with members of online brand communities (OBCs) was considered the most effective way to gather data for empirical measurement (Sue & Ritter, 2007) and for testing the hypothesised relationships and goodness of fit of the proposed research model (Holmes-Smith, 2010). The questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics, a software tool capable of not only building and distributing surveys easily and effectively, but also directly downloading the results into SPSS and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) for further in-depth analysis (Daniel, Shek & Yu, 2014; Holmes-Smith, 2010).

Adult members (over 18 years of age) from a range of OBCs were invited to complete the online questionnaire, which included multiple items designed to effectively measure each construct. Questions were used to analyse the relationships between the independent variables (*anonymity, perceived ease of use, perceived enjoyment, network ties, and social capital*) and the dependent variables (*participative behaviour and sense of belonging*) as shown in the research framework in Figure 16. Demographic questions were included to build a profile of participants. The following section describes the questionnaire design and scale development.

5.1 Questionnaire Design

The use of web-based surveys as a data collection method has advantages and disadvantages, however, when the sample population is internet based as in this study, the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks (Selm & Jankowski, 2006; Sue & Ritter, 2007). Advantages of using an internet survey for this study include the ease with which respondents could access the link to the questionnaire, as it was posted directly on the OBC forum. There were no costs involved with distribution or collection of the surveys and responses could be studied immediately upon opening the link. In this way, a large part of the data entry component of the study was performed by the respondents. Moreover, posting the link in a number of OBCs increased the potential to reach a large sample of the population. Another advantage of posting the survey on online community sites is the predominant anonymity of OBC members, which is known to facilitate the sharing of information (Sills & Song, 2002; Selm & Jankowski, 2006; Sue & Ritter, 2007).

On the other hand, Neuman (2006) highlighted several disadvantages of conducting online questionnaires. One potential problem relates to the protection of privacy. This was addressed in the current study by using Qualtrics software, which assigns a reference number to each participant, thereby eliminating the need to provide personal details such as names and addresses. Concerns about the ease with which the survey can be opened and completed by respondents were overcome by the usability of the Qualtrics website. Lastly, the risk of participants completing the questionnaire more than once was addressed by respondents' providing an email address at the conclusion of the questionnaire, thereby restricting the likelihood of multiple responses from the same individual.

The questionnaire was designed to be easily understandable and relevant to a wide range of participants, and encouraged respondents to complete the whole questionnaire to enhance the reliability and validity of the measures (Sue & Ritter, 2007). In this study, participants came from many different cultural backgrounds; a factor that had to be taken into consideration when wording the questions, so they were kept as simple as possible and used a clear, relevant and easy-to-answer flow (Zikmund, 2011). The questions in the survey were predominantly closed questions and therefore quicker and easier for respondents to answer.

5.3 Scale Development

The questionnaire covered ten constructs outlined in the research framework. These were: *participative behaviour*, *sense of belonging*, *perceived ease of use*, *perceived enjoyment*, *network ties*, *anonymity*, *shared language*, *shared vision*, *social trust*, and *reciprocity*, along with six demographic variables. Nine constructs employed in the questionnaire consisted of multiple items, each was measured using Likert scales from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”, so respondents could signify the intensity of their attitude toward the statement. Likert scales were used in this study as they are an ideal method for summated ratings, appropriate for measuring attitudes in questionnaires (Zikmund, 2011). Each response was assigned a weight from 1 to 5, and each statement represented an aspect of the construct being measured. Questions related to individual-level constructs used the term “I” to indicate respondents’ attitudes from a personal perspective; whereas community-level constructs encompassed questions related to the community as a whole. The remaining construct, *participative behaviour*, was measured via two questions outlined below, according to time spent per week and posts contributed per month to the community.

All the scales were adapted from the existing literature and modified to suit the context of OBCs. The choice of scales for this study was based on: (a) capacity to reflect a similar conceptualisation of the construct in this study; (b) measurement of items for each construct had been previously tested for reliability and validity; and (c) the sample population closely resembled the population for this study. The following section describes the items used to measure each factor included in the questionnaire - refer Appendix D.

5.2.1 Participative Behaviour

Participative behaviour represents the time spent interacting with OBCs (Dholakia et al., 2004; Raies et al., 2011; Wang, Chung, Park, McLaughlin, & Fulk; Zhou, 2011) and how often individuals post messages (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Shang et al., 2006). In addition, respondents in this study were asked about their purpose for accessing OBCs; whether they were searching for information or socialising (Brodie et al., 2013; Wang, Chang, & Yang, 2012; Nambisan & Baron, 2009). Scales adapted from different studies were combined to measure participative behaviour in OBCs. The questionnaire started

with participatory questions as they related to all respondents and was considered a good way to introduce participants to the context of the questionnaire.

- Question 1 related to the amount of time members logged on to the community on an average day, and was measured on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being “30 minutes or less” and 5 being “more than 3 hours”. This item aligns with the scales used by Raies et al. (2011) who measured time spent per visit, and Wang et al. (2011) who measured time spent per week.
- Question 2 related to the frequency with which members contributed posts to the community on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being “once a month or less” and 5 being “once a day or more”. This measure was modelled on Shang et al. (2006).
- Question 3 was designed to determine whether members accessed the community for information only, and was measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree”. This measure was adapted from Stafford et al. (2004) and included because several studies identified information seeking as a primary motive for participation in online communities. Moreover, to the researcher’s knowledge, asking participants if they only accessed the site for information had not been asked in any other studies to date, so this question addressed that gap in the literature.

5.2.2 Sense of Belonging

Five items were used to measure sense of belonging (SOB), based on scales used extensively in the literature (Lu et al., 2011; Matzler et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2012) and reworded to relate to OBCs. Each item was designed to measure a specific facet of SOB: attachment, identification and membership.

Table 4 Sense of Belonging Scale

Sense of Belonging (SOB)
SOB1: My self-image overlaps with the image projected by this brand community
SOB2: I identify myself with the members of this community
SOB3: I feel like I fit in with this community
SOB4: I feel a strong connection to this community
SOB5: I feel like I have a lot in common with the other community members

5.2.3 Perceived Enjoyment

Items used to measure the *perceived enjoyment* construct were adapted and modified to suit the OBC context from scales used to measure the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) developed by Davis et al., (1989) and used by Hsu and Lu (2007) and Luo and Strong (2000).

Table 5 Perceived Enjoyment Scale

Perceived Enjoyment (PE)
PE1: The process of participating in this community is enjoyable
PE2: While participating in this community I experience pleasure
PE3: Overall I believe this community is fun to be a part of
PE4: Using the website provides me with a great deal of enjoyment

5.2.4 Perceived Ease of Use

Items for the construct of *perceived ease of use* were also adapted to suit an OBC context from scales used to measure elements of TAM, developed by Davis et al., (1989) and widely used in subsequent literature (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Luo & Strong, 2000; Mäntymäki & Salo, 2011).

Table 6 Perceived Ease of Use Scale

Perceived Ease of Use (PEU)
PEU1: It is easy for me to become skilled at participating in this community
PEU2: I think it is easy to participate in this community
PEU3: Learning how to participate in this community is easy for me
PEU4: I find it easy to use the community to do what I want to do

5.2.5 Network Ties

The three items used to measure network ties were adapted from Liao and Chou (2011) and have also been used extensively in the literature (Chiu et al., 2006; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1989).

Table 7 Network Ties Scale

Network ties (NT)
NT1: I maintain close social relationships with some members of this community
NT2: I spend a lot of time interacting with some members of this community
NT3: I know some members of this community on a personal level

5.2.6 Anonymity

The four items used to measure the anonymity construct were adapted from Yoon and Rolland (2012) and are listed in the table below.

Table 8 Perceived Anonymity Scale

Perceived anonymity (PA)
PA1: In this community, other members can identify me by my alias or avatar
PA2: If someone sees the comments that I write in this community, he/she would be able to identify me
PA3: When I read comments in this community, I can guess who wrote them
PA4: When I participate in this community, I feel my true identity is exposed

5.2.7 Social Capital

In this study, social capital consisted of *social trust*, *shared language*, *shared vision* and *reciprocity*, all of which were measured with three items per construct. The social trust scale was taken directly from Liao and Chou (2011), also previously used by Chiu et al. (2006) and Ridings et al. (2002). The shared language and shared vision constructs were measured with items previously used by Liao and Chou (2011) and applied by Chui et al. (2006). The reciprocity construct included items adopted from Mathwick et al. (2008), Bock et al. (2005) and Liao and Chou (2011), as all three items were considered representative of the norms of reciprocity found in OBCs.

Table 9 Social Capital Scale

Social Capital
Shared language (SL)
SL1: Members in the community use common term or jargon
SL2: Members of the community use understandable wording in their messages
SL3: Members of the community use understandable language during discussions
Shared vision (SV)
SV1: Members of the community share a vision of helping others to solve each other's problems
SV2: Members of the community share the same goal of learning from each other
SV3: Members of the community share the same idea that helping each other is Pleasant
Social trust (ST)
ST1: Members of the community will not take advantage of others even when the opportunity arises
ST2: Members of the community will always keep the promises they make to one Another
ST3: Members of the community are honest in dealing with one another
Reciprocity (R)
R1: When I receive help, I feel it is only right to give back and help others
R2: Members should return favours when the community is in need
R3: My behaviour will lead to cooperation from other members in the future

5.2.8 Demographic Items

In this study demographic questions were related to participants' age, gender, level of education, marital status, occupational status, household income, nationality, and an optional email address, in order to be included in a prize draw and avoid duplicate questionnaires being submitted (see Appendix D). Demographic items were placed at the end of the survey to increase the likelihood of participants completing the questionnaire (Zikmund, 2011).

Demographic items were important for this study as they measured correlations between *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* to the community. Existing research shows an individual's demographic profile has a significant effect upon their attitudes and opinions (Stoutenborough, 2008). The final draft of the questionnaire was approved by ECU Ethics Committee.

5.3 Data Collection

After the questionnaire was designed using the Qualtrics software, prospective websites were approached for permission to post a link to the survey on their community forums. This involved searching for global online brand communities with a substantial following who appeared to be sustainable, then locating an email address for the administrator or moderator of the site and writing to request approval to post the link. This was a time-consuming process as access to administrators was often limited to members only, so to overcome this hurdle, the researcher joined the relevant communities and again approached the administrators in writing as a valid member seeking assistance.

Few replies were received, prompting constant reminders in an attempt to elicit responses. Those who were happy to post the link were not only interested in the study, but went so far as to offer their endorsement for their members to participate. Seeking administrator approval was an essential process in order to have the link posted on the website by an official, as any unauthorised posts were considered SPAM and removed immediately by the moderators of the forums.

Participating OBCs were provided with a short invitation to take part in the study, along with a link to the survey. Respondents were provided with more detailed information regarding the study when they clicked on the link, and were advised that participating in the survey represented their consent to be a part of the study. A copy of the information letter was included in the email and sent to prospective communities. The consent form is provided in Appendix E.

Gathering questionnaires took place over a five-month period to achieve a sufficient number of respondents. The Qualtrics file was exported into an SPSS data file, ready for analysis. Out of the 1 027 responses collected from all the forums, 59 (6%) had to be discarded as they were incomplete. In order to have a pure set of data, only respondents who supplied their email addresses were included in the final data set, as this ensured the questionnaire was completed once only by each respondent. The result was a total of 659 (64%) useable responses, deemed to be an adequate sample size for this analysis.

5.4 Sample

The target population for this research was adult (over 18 years of age) members of OBCs. It was difficult to gather a substantial number of responses across a range of OBCs, but one particular community was very enthusiastic to be a part of the study and therefore the majority of the sample (n = 455) in the quantitative stage of this study was made up of members from a popular OBC affiliated to the “Lego” brand, calling themselves “The Brickset Community”. The remainder of the sample was from “Magic the Gathering Salvation” (n = 109), a community dedicated to a fantasy card game; “Dr Who” (n = 33), a site for devotees of the popular television series of the same name; and a small number of responses from “Bimmerfest” (n = 5), a BMW car enthusiast site; “FerrariChat” (n = 22), a Ferrari enthusiast forum; “Everquest” (n = 20), a gaming site; and “Newturfers” (n = 15), a forum dedicated to Rolex watches (see Table 11). These were considered to be ideal OBCs for the purpose of this study, as they were affiliated with well-known brands, had structured, well-organised websites, and large contingencies of active global members.

5.5 Data Screening

Once the data from the questionnaires were exported into an SPSS file, the next step was to ensure it was cleaned appropriately. As part of the data-cleaning process and to ensure the quality of the data, the following actions were taken prior to data analysis:

- Little’s MCAR (missing completely at random) test was conducted (Little, 1988; Osborne, 2013). Any missing data were found to be completely random (sig = .183);
- Replacement of missing values was undertaken using expectation maximisation; and
- Checks were made for unengaged responses and outliers, and removed if considered necessary (Osborne, 2013).

5.6 Data Analysis

The following section describes the process undertaken to analyse the data collected from the questionnaire. The first step was to undertake basic descriptive tests for

frequencies using SPSS, followed by exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to determine if items loaded on their respective constructs as anticipated (Gaskin, 2012; Hair et al., 2010). Cronbach's alpha was performed to check the internal consistency of the items for reliability (Bagozzi & Yi, 1998), followed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to determine the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model (Gaskin, 2012; Holmes-Smith, 2010). Lastly, structural equation modelling (SEM) in the form of path analysis was used to test the hypotheses (Holmes-Smith, 2010). The results of the data analysis are discussed in Chapter 6.

5.6.1 Descriptive Analysis

SPSS was used to conduct the initial descriptive analysis in the form of frequency and percentage distributions of the demographic items to determine the characteristics of the population (Field, 2013). This was followed by descriptive analysis of the variables with measures of central tendency, such as the mean and standard deviation values of *participative behaviour*, *SOB*, *perceived enjoyment*, *perceived ease of use*, *network ties*, *anonymity*, *shared language*, *shared vision*, *social trust* and *reciprocity*.

5.6.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

Following descriptive analysis, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed on the whole data set, using maximum likelihood and promax rotation. The results of the analysis are discussed in Chapter 6. EFA is a multivariate statistical procedure with the capacity to reduce a large number of variables into a smaller set of factors, establishing the underlying dimensions between the measured variables (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2010; Holmes-Smith, 2010). EFA is generally performed prior to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) as an exploratory tool, in order to generate a measurement model from the constructs represented by the items in the data set (Holmes-Smith, 2010; Gaskin, 2012). CFA on the other hand, is used to test the measurement model based on the assumptions regarding the factors identified in the EFA, and prior to conducting further analysis with SEM (Holmes-Smith, 2010; Gaskin, 2012).

Although all the scales were adapted from the existing literature, EFA was a means of ensuring the variables were grouped into their corresponding factors based on the context of OBCs in this study (Hair et al., 2010). For data to be suitable for factor

analysis and structural equation modelling (SEM) certain criteria need to be met (Gaskin, 2012; Holmes-Smith, 2010; Hair, 2010) and the first step in conducting the EFA was to assess the data set for suitability prior to any further analysis.

5.6.2.1 Data Assessment for Factor Analysis

Prior to conducting EFA, the sample correlation matrix was examined to determine its suitability for the procedure (Gaskin, 2012; Holmes-Smith, 2010). According to Hair et al. (1995), the minimum score of the correlation coefficients for the data to be considered suitable for EFA is 0.30. Items lower than 0.30 should be removed as they show a low correlation with the other variables (Holmes-Smith, 2010; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007; Nunnally, 1978; Lavrakas, 2008; Hulland, 1999). In addition, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett's test of sphericity were carried out. KMO tests the adequacy of the relationships between the variables and is necessary to support the existence of an underlying factor structure. The KMO index ranges between 0 and 1 and needs to be at least 0.50 to be considered suitable for EFA and between 0.8 and 0.9 to be desirable. The Bartlett's test is used to find out if the correlation matrix is significantly different from the identity matrix, and should be significant at ($p < .05$) for EFA to be conducted (Holmes-Smith, 2010).

5.6.2.2 Extraction

Having determined the appropriateness of the data for EFA, the next step was to extract the factors that adequately described each measure. This was achieved using SPSS to conduct an EFA, employing maximum likelihood extraction with promax rotation. These methods were chosen as they are widely used to simplify interpretation of the output (Holmes-Smith, 2010).

The first output analysed was "total variance explained", which illustrates the factors, their loadings and the variance for each factor, referred to as the "eigenvalue". For the factors to adequately describe the items they are commonly required to have eigenvalues greater than one (1) and a total variance greater than 60% (Holmes-Smith, 2010). Although this is a commonly-used measure, Cattell (1996) recommended the addition of a scree plot of the eigenvalues for each factor and extraction of any components before the scree (Cattell, 1996), therefore this was incorporated in the current study. The pattern matrix was analysed by examining the factor loadings, representing the

correlation between the factor and the variable, to identify and delete any items with low loadings and cross loadings, as well as unexpected negative loadings based on the theory behind the data set. To ensure efficient analysis, items with loadings below 0.3 were removed and the data re-iterated (Allen & Bennett, 2010).

Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) was then conducted on the factors that emerged from the EFA to assess the internal consistency of the scores from each scale. The emerging factors, along with factor-structure loadings, Cronbach's alpha, variances extracted, and eigenvalues, are detailed in Chapter Six.

5.6.3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The next step was to create a measurement model containing all the factors highlighted in the pattern matrix in the EFA, and to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to look at the relationships between the whole set of variables and assess whether the theoretical factor structure could be supported. The measurement model was estimated using the full data set. Its adequacy was assessed by looking at individual item reliabilities against the corresponding factor, the convergent validity of the measures associated with individual constructs, and the discriminant validity between constructs (Fornell & Cha, 1994). Low-loading items were removed at this stage to ensure the reliability of the structural model. A curve estimation was also conducted for all the relationships in the model; all were found to be sufficiently linear for testing using a covariance-based structural equation model (with the exception of *shared vision* which showed a stronger quadratic and cubic equation). No multi-collinearity issues were found for any of the variables (Gaskin, 2012).

5.6.4 Structural Equation Modelling

The next step was to create a structural model in AMOS from the measurement model by removing the covariance arrows and drawing arrows to represent the causal paths between the independent and dependent variables, as outlined in the research framework. At this stage, congeneric models of each of the constructs were also developed and assessed for good model fit prior to path analysis. The results of the congeneric modelling are detailed in Chapter 6.

For this study, structural equation modelling (SEM) was chosen to test the hypotheses as it is a statistical approach with the capacity to explore all possible relationships amongst the dependent variables, can estimate the relationships among latent constructs that underlie the observed variables, and allows for correlation among the measurement errors. For this study SEM followed the process recommended by Holmes-Smith (2010) and substantiated by Gaskin (2012).

The first step of SEM usually involves conceptualising the model to be tested, which involves developing a strong theory regarding the variables to be used in the model, their relationships and their structure. This had already been accomplished through the development of the research framework derived from the literature review and qualitative research, as illustrated in the proposed conceptual model (Figure 16). In accordance with recommendations by Gaskin (2012), and to ensure accurate representation of relationships in the hypothesised model and avoid misspecification when conducting SEM, both the positive and negative influences, as well as the direction of the influences were included in the hypothesis. This ensured that the structural model for this study was founded on a solid theoretical base.

Having drawn the structural model with all the paths representing the hypotheses, the model was run in AMOS and the outputs examined. A set of criteria in SEM is used to assess whether the model fits the data and whether the strength of the relationships or paths between variables is significant. For example, if all the major correlations found in the dataset regarding the variables in the model are accounted for, then a good model fit has been achieved. The specific measures used to calculate and assess the goodness of fit are shown in Table 10. The results of the goodness of fit test in this study are outlined in Chapter 6.

At this stage of the research the conceptual model and findings from the qualitative study represent the theory underpinning the research project. However, the inclusion or exclusion of different paths between variables may reveal new findings not necessarily accounted for in the hypotheses. Therefore, in order to substantiate any modifications made to the original model, the last step of the SEM process was to apply a new set of data to the model to ensure the results were not based on chance relationships within the sample (Holmes-Smith, 2010).

Table 10 Recommended Fit Indices for Measurement Model Evaluation (Gaskin, 2012; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Sarapaivanich & Kotey, 2006)

Statistics	Statistic Property	Recommended Value	Sources
X ² /DF	Minimum discrepancy divided by its degree of Freedom	<3 good; < 5 sometimes permissible	Hu & Bentler, 1995 Joreskog & Sorbom, 1992 Kline, 2005.
p-value	Level of correspondence of the model to the observed data	>0.05	Byrne, 2001 Gefen, 2003 Kline, 2005.
GFI	Proportion of observed covariance explained by the model-implied covariance	>0.90	Gefen, 2003 Hair et al, 1998 Kline, 2005.
CFI	Proportion in the improvement of the overall fit of the model as compared to a null model	>0.90	Byrne, 2001 Chin et al, 2001 Kline, 2005.
TLI	Relative improvement per degree of freedom if the target model over an independence model	>0.90	Byrne, 2001 Kline, 2005
RMSEA	Square root of model's discrepancy per degree of freedom	<0.10	Byrne, 2001 Joreskog & Sorbom, 1992 Hair et al, 2006
PCLOSE	p-value for H0: RMSEA≤0.05	PCLOSE < .05 No fit PCLOSE > 0.5 good fit	Byrne, 2001 Chin et al, 2001 Kline, 2005.

5.7 Summary

In summary, this chapter highlighted the methodology used in the quantitative stage of the study, provided justification for using a web-based survey, reviewed the questionnaire design, sample, data collection and the methods and techniques employed for the data analysis. The following chapter details the results of the descriptive analysis and the structural equation modelling, which tests the proposed conceptual model as shown in Figure 16.

Chapter Six: Quantitative Findings

6.0 Introduction

In the previous chapter the methodology used in the quantitative stage of this research was described. The data collection process and analytical techniques employed to analyse the data from a survey completed by members of online brand communities (OBCs) were also examined. This chapter provides a description of the OBCs featured in this study, including sample characteristics, descriptive statistical data analysed through SPSS related to their size, member participation levels, frequency distributions and demographic profiling. The findings from the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), also run through SPSS to assess the suitability of the items for factor analysis, are then presented (Gaskin, 2012; Holmes-Smith, 2010) as well as the factors extracted for further analysis. This is followed by the results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS (version 22) to determine the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model (Bagozzi & Yi, 1998; Gaskin, 2012; Holmes-Smith, 2010). Lastly, the findings from the structural equation model (SEM), also developed using AMOS (version 22) are presented, including the goodness of fit of the structural model and an analysis of the paths between constructs.

6.1 Participant Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 659 participants from several online brand communities (OBCs). The majority of the sample came from the Brickset community (455 or 69%), with an additional 109 (16.5%) from Magic the Gathering Salvation community, and the remainder from a range of communities as identified in Table 11. The brand types of each community featured in this study were categorised as consumer products (470 respondents), entertainment/gaming (129 respondents), automobiles (27 respondents) and a television series (33 respondents). A more detailed description of community characteristics and screen shots of each community are provided in Appendix F.

Table 11 *Online Brand Community Sample*

Online Brand Community	Category	Website	Number of Participants in Study	Percent	Community Members at Data Collection Stage
Lego	Consumer product	brickset.com	455	69	96,659
Magic cards	Entertainment/game	mtgsalvation.com	109	16.5	206,659
Dr Who	TV series	thedrwhoforum.com	33	5.1	2017
Ferrari motor vehicles	Automobile	ferrarichat.com	22	3.3	152,541
Everquest Gaming site	Entertainment /game	allakhazam.com	20	3	25,000 000
Rolex watches	Consumer product	newturfers.com	15	2.3	Not available
BMW motor vehicles	Automobile	bimmerfest.com	5	1	416,316
Total			659	100	

6.2 Communities

All OBCs attract different participants depending on the type of community or the brand category; however they all share a common trait in the form of “brand community etiquette”, which ensures members adhere to certain rules and regulations when participating in the community. The regulations for each community are set out by the administrators of the site and monitored by other members, referred to as moderators (Usenet.com, 2015). This is one of the aspects of OBCs that differentiates them from online communities in general.

6.3 Sample Demographics

Of the 659 useable responses, 90% of the sample was male, with an age range between 18 to 65 years plus, but the majority (75%) were between 26 and 45 years of age. A little over 44% were university graduates and 20% were postgraduates. The majority of the sample was employed full-time (65%), and more than 60% was married or in a de facto relationship. Household income was fairly evenly spread between \$35,000 and \$95,000 per annum (73%), and the predominant countries of origin were the Americas (47%) and Europe (36%). A full breakdown of each demographic variable is shown in Table 12, and a discussion of the implications of these results presented in Chapter 7. A detailed account of the descriptive analysis of the variables featured in the questionnaire is also provided in Appendix G, with significant results noted in the Discussion section of Chapter 7.

Table 12 Demographics: Frequency and Percentage Distribution

Demographic features	Frequency (N=659)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	591	89.7
Female	68	10.3
Total	659	100.0
Age group		
18 – 25	131	19.9
26 – 35	256	39.0
36 – 45	227	34.4
46 – 64	42	6.4
65 +	3	.5
Total	659	100.0

Education		
Didn't graduate from high school	13	2.0
High school graduate	130	19.7
Trade/technical/vocational training	77	11.7
University graduate	294	44.7
University postgraduate	126	19.1
Other	19	2.9
Total	659	100.0
Marital status		
Single	240	36.5
Married/De-facto	400	60.9
Divorced	15	2.3
Separated but not divorced	2	.3
Widowed	2	.3
Total	659	100.0
Employment status		
Student	89	13.5
Casual employee	11	1.7
Part-time employee	41	6.2
Full-time employee	420	63.8
Retired	9	1.4
Unemployed	22	3.3
Self-employed	51	7.7
Other	16	2.4
Total	659	100.0
Household income		
\$0 - \$15,000		10.3
\$15,001 - \$35,000	6893	14.1
\$35,001 - \$55,000	125	19.1
\$55,001 - \$75,000	128	19.6
\$75,001 - \$95,000	86	13.2
\$95,001 - \$105,000	51	7.9
\$105,001 - \$125,000	37	5.6
\$125,001 - \$155,000	29	4.4
\$155,001 +	42	6.4
Total	659	100.0
Continent of origin		
Australia/Oceania	55	8.3
Asia	57	8.6
Americas	307	46.6
Africa	6	1.0
Europe	234	35.5
Total	659	100.0

6.4 Exploratory Factor Analysis

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed on the 32 questionnaire items with maximum likelihood as the extraction technique and an oblique rotation,

(Promax) as the factors were likely to be correlated (Gaskin, 2012). The first EFA results were as follows:

- The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, $KMO = .899$ (“meritorious” according to Kaiser, 1974). This result indicates the relationships amongst the variables were more than adequate and in all probability a factor structure underlying the data. All the KMO values for the individual items were also $>.60$ which is above the acceptable limit of 0.50 (Field, 2013).
- Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 10887.698$; $df = 496$; $p = < .000$), indicating sufficiently large correlations amongst the variables for further analysis (Holmes-smith, 2010; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007; Nunnally, 1978).
- The total variance revealed a nine-factor solution with eigenvalues over Kaiser’s criterion of 1 and explained 61% of the total variance. The variance indicates the first factor, *sense of belonging*, accounted for the highest percentage of the total variance at 28%, followed by *perceived enjoyment*, which accounted for 11% of the total variance. The other seven factors made up between 3% and 6% of the total variance.
- The communalities table showed item SL1 (use of common terms or jargon) had less than the recommended level of 0.3 and therefore this item was removed.
- The pattern matrix produced nine factors, and other than SL1 (.310), confirmed convergent validity with all items with factor loadings above the acceptable level of 0.4 on their respective component and discriminant validity. There were no cross loadings (Allen & Bennett, 2010).
- The results of Cronbach’s alpha, conducted to ensure items reliably reflected the construct they measured, were all at a suitable level of above 0.70 (Allen & Bennett, 2010). Table 13 shows the factor loadings, eigenvalues, variance explained, KMO and Cronbach’s Alpha for each item extracted for further analysis.

Table 13 Exploratory Factor Analysis Findings

Factor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
% of Variance	28.374	11.631	6.599	5.156	4.218	4.055	3.824	3.634	3.365
Eigenvalue	9.080	3.722	2.112	1.650	1.350	1.298	1.224	1.163	1.077
KMO	.895	.800	.729	.725	.725	.676	.719	.598	.676
Cronbach's Alpha	.888	.858	.890	.850	.849	.823	.818	.791	.743
SOB1	.617								
SOB2	.779								
SOB3	.736								
SOB4	.747								
SOB5	.680								
PE1		.811							
PE2		.901							
PE3		.802							
PE4		.567							
NT1			.947						
NT2			.810						
NT3			.760						
PEU1				.776					
PEU2				.762					
PEU3				.905					
PEU4				.434					
SV1					.759				
SV2					.856				
SV3					.825				
PA1						-.776			
PA2						-.762			
PA3						-.905			
PA4						-.430			
ST1							.740		
ST2							.863		
ST3							.733		
SL1								.310	
SL2								.954	
SL3								.796	
R1									.780
R2									.762
R3									.494

1 = Sense of belonging; 2 = Perceived enjoyment; 3 = Network ties; 4 = Perceived ease of use; 5 = Shared vision; 6 = Perceived anonymity; 7 = Social trust; 8 = Shared language; 9 = Reciprocity.

6.5 Congeneric Models

To test the robustness of each construct prior to developing the measurement model, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on each of the latent factors and the second order latent factor to be used in the proposed structural model. Evaluations followed the guidelines for structural equation modelling (SEM) presented in Chapter 5. The congeneric models for each construct, their standardised coefficients, reliability values, AVE, and their goodness of fit statistics are now presented.

6.5.1 Perceived Ease of Use

Four items originally measured the *perceived ease of use* construct. One item, PEU4 (I find it easy to use the community to do what I want to do) indicated a low loading (standardised coefficient) on the factor and was removed from further analysis and three items remained to represent the construct. All standardised coefficients were above 0.70, indicating the items represented the construct well (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al, 2010). The goodness of fit statistics suggest there is a good fit of the data (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The reliability (0.85) and variance extracted (0.66) also indicate the construct is an acceptable fit (Allen & Bennett, 2010; Field, 2013; Hair et al., 2010).

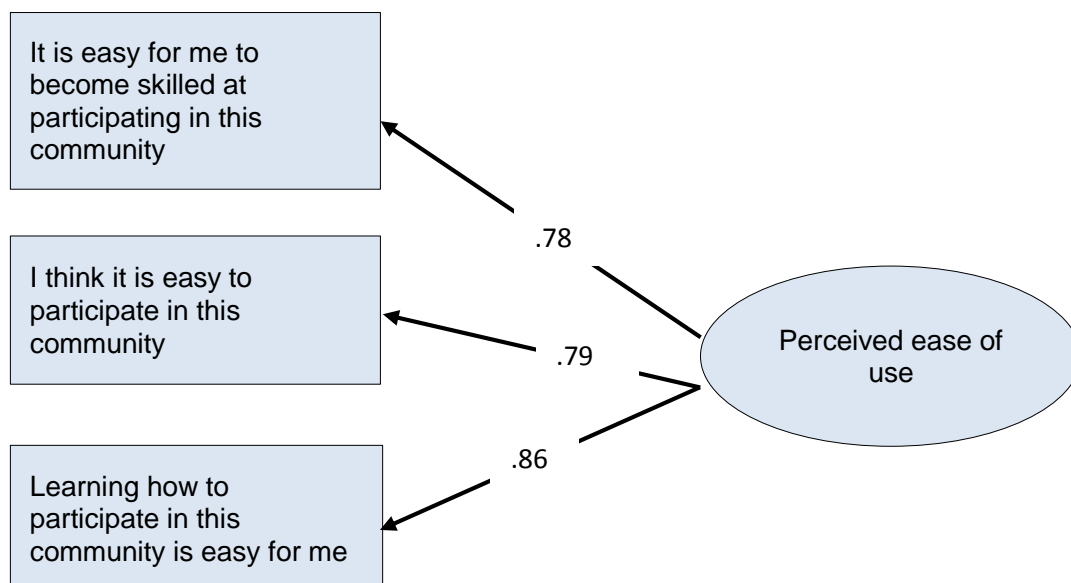


Figure 22 *Perceived Ease of Use – Items with Standardised Coefficients*

Table 14 Perceived Ease of Use – Goodness of Fit

CMIN/DF	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
$\chi^2 = 3.426; df = 1; p = .064$	.997	.997	.992	.061	.286

6.5.2 Perceived Enjoyment

Four items measured the construct *perceived enjoyment*. All had standard coefficients above 0.60 and all the goodness of fit indicators suggested there was a good fit with the data (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). The constructs' reliability (0.86) and average variance extracted (0.61) were also acceptable (Allen & Bennett, 2010; Field, 2013; Hair et al., 2010).

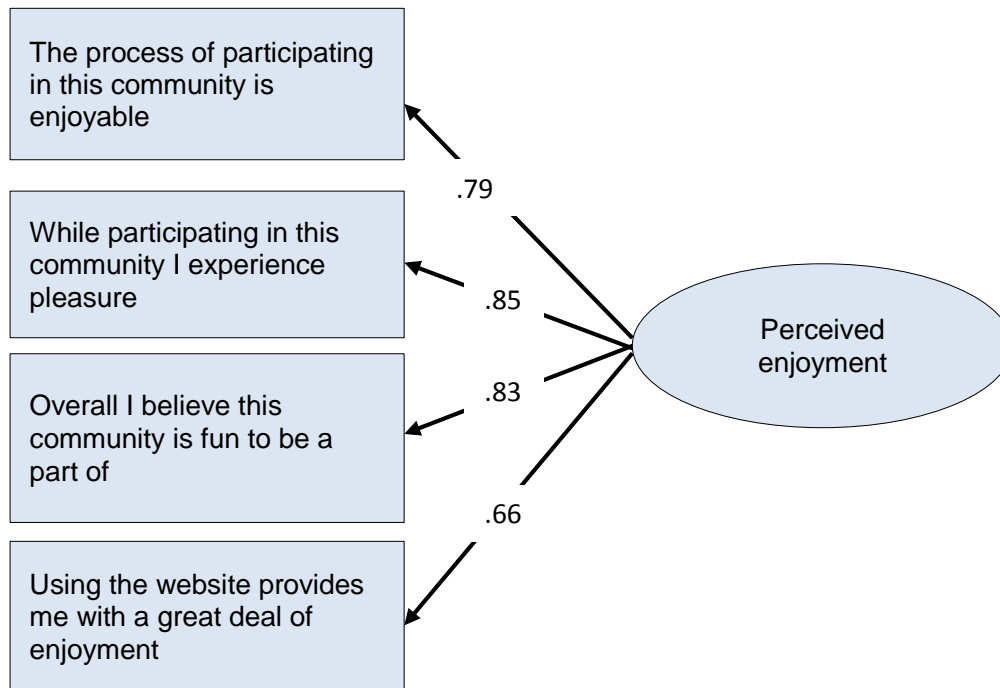


Figure 23 *Perceived Enjoyment – Items with Standardised Coefficients*

Table 15 Perceived Enjoyment – Goodness of Fit

CMIN/DF	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
$\chi^2 = 2.925; df = 11; p = .001$	.987	.991	.982	.054	.344

6.5.3 Network Ties

Figure 24 shows the three items used to measure *network ties*. As can be seen from the model, the standardised coefficients were all above the acceptable level of 0.60 (Hair et al., 2010).

The goodness of fit indicators suggest this model fits extremely well with the data which is not surprising given the large sample size (Hair et al, 2010). The construct's reliability (0.89) (Allen & Bennet, 2010) and average variance extracted (0.74) were also within the recommended range (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Gaskin, 2012; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

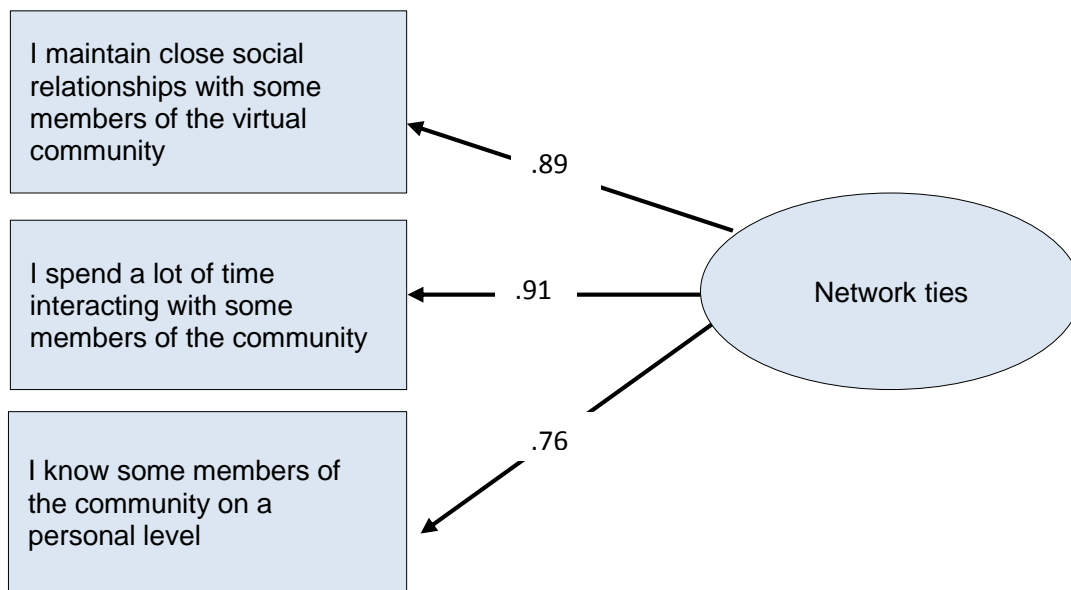


Figure 24: *Network Ties – Items with Standardised Coefficients*

Table 16 Network Ties – Goodness of Fit

CMIN/DF	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
$\chi^2 = 1.111; df = 11; p = .292$	.999	1.000	1.000	.013	.600

6.5.4 Member Anonymity

The *member anonymity* construct was originally represented by four items, however MA4 (when I participate in this community I feel my true identity is exposed) exhibited a low loading value on the factor and was therefore removed. As a result, the perceived anonymity of members in the present study was measured by three items, all with standardised coefficients over the acceptable level of 0.60 as recommended by Hair et al. (2010). Construct reliability (0.82) and AVE (0.55) were also both acceptable, and the goodness of fit indices implied a good fit with the data (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Gaskin, 2012; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

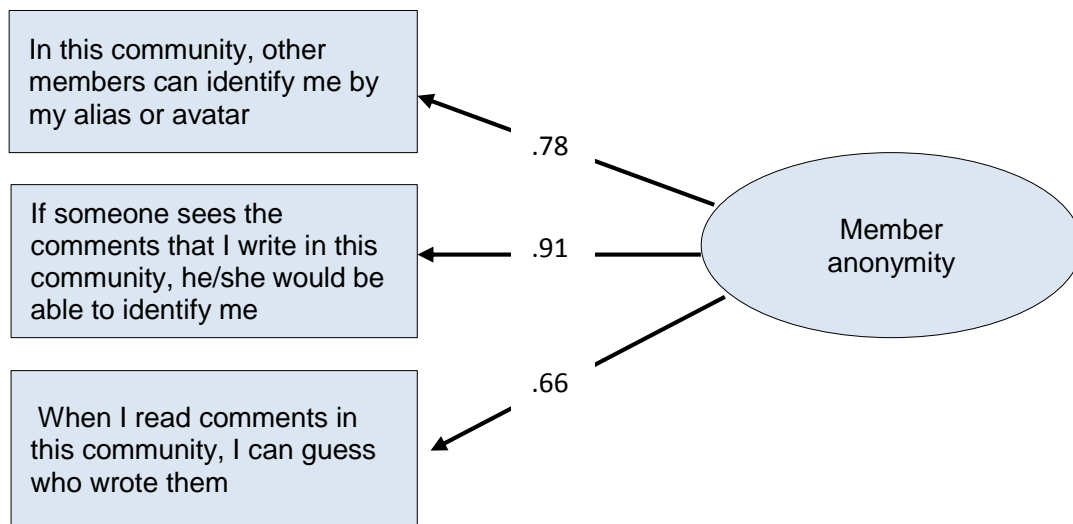


Figure 25 Member Anonymity – Items with Standardised Coefficients

Table 17 Member Anonymity – Goodness of Fit

CMIN/DF	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
$\chi^2 = .3348; df = 1; p = .067$	.997	.997	.991	.060	.293

6.5.5 Sense of Belonging

Figure 26 presents the congeneric model for *sense of belonging*. In this model the loadings were above 0.6, indicating a good representation of the construct (Hair et al., 2010). The construct's reliability (0.88) and variance extracted (0.54) were also acceptable (Allen & Bennett, 2010; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Gaskin, 2012; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Table 18 suggests a good data fit with the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Holmes-Smith, 2010).

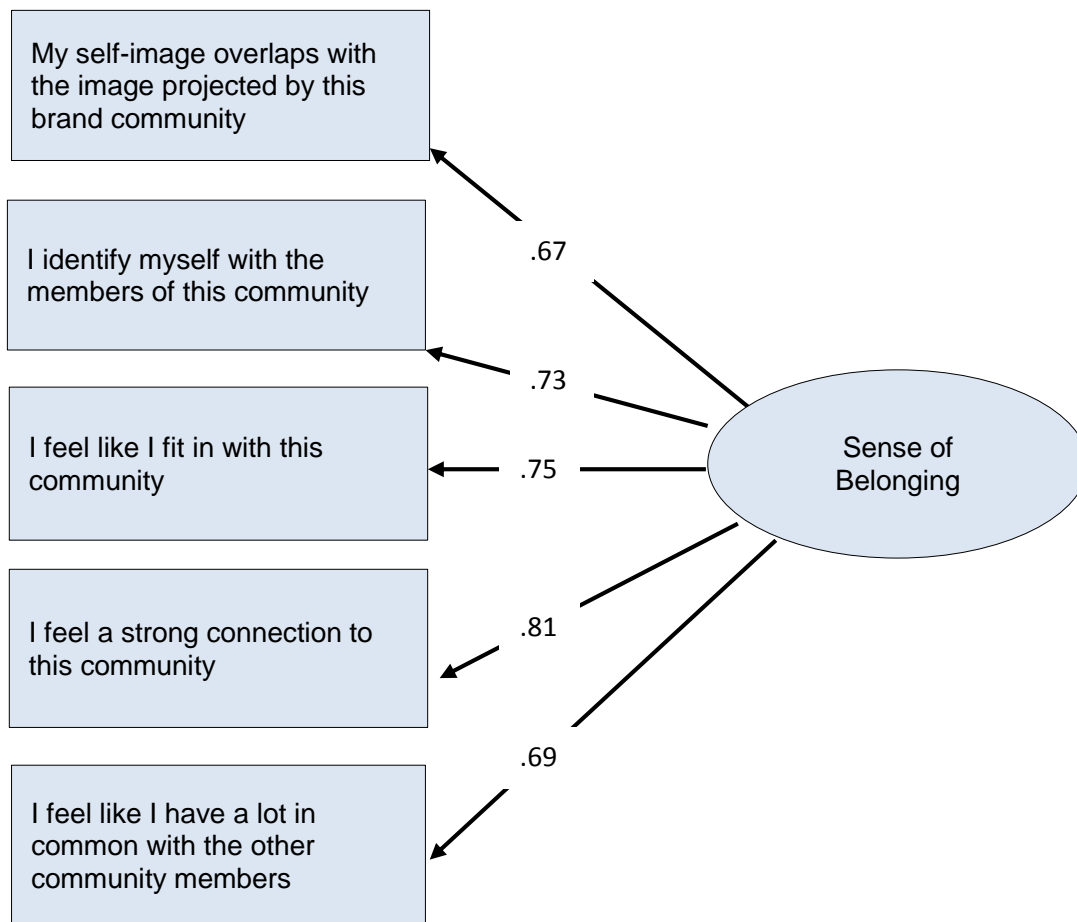


Figure 26 *Sense of Belonging – Items with Standardised Coefficients*

Table 18 *Sense of Belonging – Goodness of Fit*

CMIN/DF	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
$\chi^2 = 1.137; df = 5; p = .338$	.997	.999	.999	.014	.897

6.5.6 Social Capital

In this study, social capital is a second-order latent construct as discussed in Chapter 4. The individual constructs representing social capital are *shared language*, *shared vision*, *social trust* and *reciprocity*. The congeneric models, including standardised coefficients for each of the constructs, are presented below.

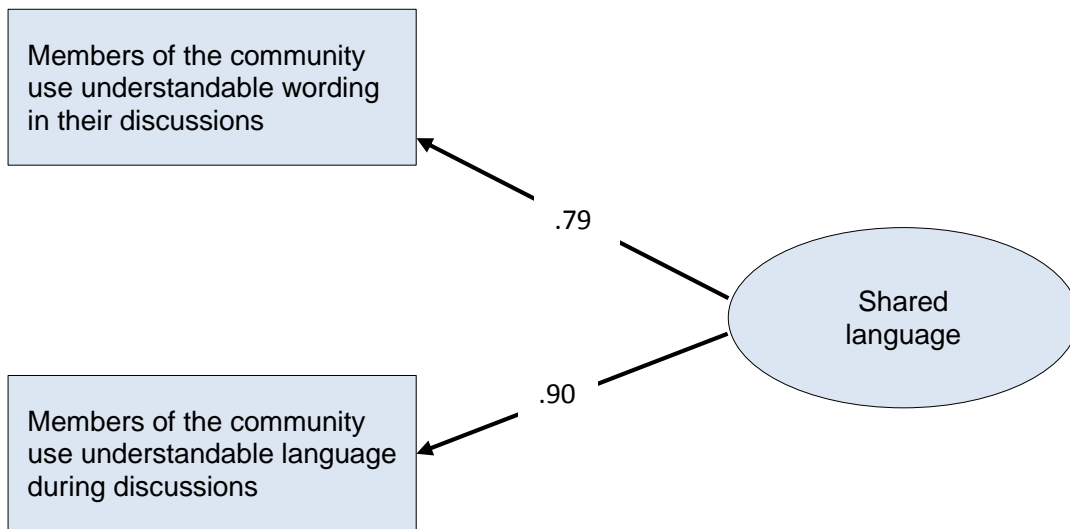


Figure 27 *Shared Language – Items with Standardised Coefficients*

The *shared language* construct was initially measured by three indicators, however at the exploratory factor analysis stage, SL1 (use of common terms or jargon) displayed a low standardised coefficient and was subsequently dropped from further analysis. With only two indicators to measure this construct, the goodness of fit and degrees of freedom could not be examined, however, construct reliability (0.79) and AVE (0.79) were both acceptable, as were the standard coefficients both above the accepted level.

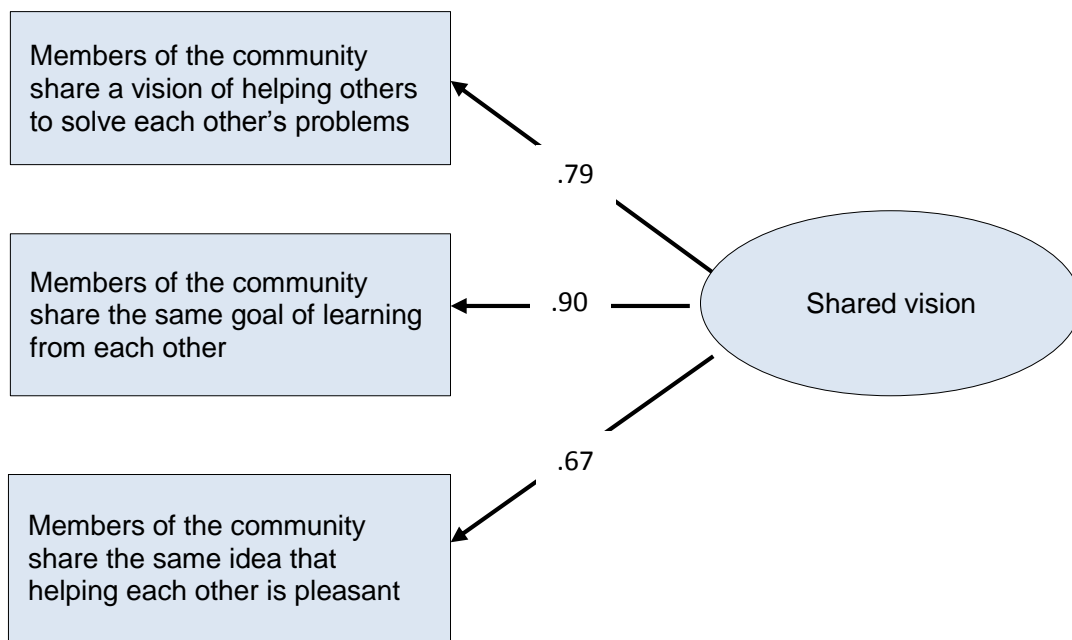


Figure 28 *Shared Vision - Items with Standardised Coefficients*

Three items measured the *shared vision* construct and all indicators had standardised coefficients above 0.60, implying sufficient representation of the factor. All the goodness of fit indicators suggested a good fit with the data this model fits extremely well with the data which is again not surprising given the large sample size (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). The construct's reliability (0.84) and average variance extracted (0.66) were also acceptable (Allen & Bennett, 2010; Field, 2013; Hair et al., 2010).

Table 19 *Shared Vision - Goodness of Fit*

CMIN/DF	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
$\chi^2 = .358; df = 1; p = 0.55$	1.000	1.000	1.004	.0000	.783

The *social trust* construct was represented by three items, all of which had standardised coefficients above the recommended value of 0.60. Construct reliability (0.82) and average variance extracted (0.61) were also very acceptable. In addition, the goodness of fit indices indicate the data fits the model extremely well also not surprising given the large sample size (Hair et al, 2010).

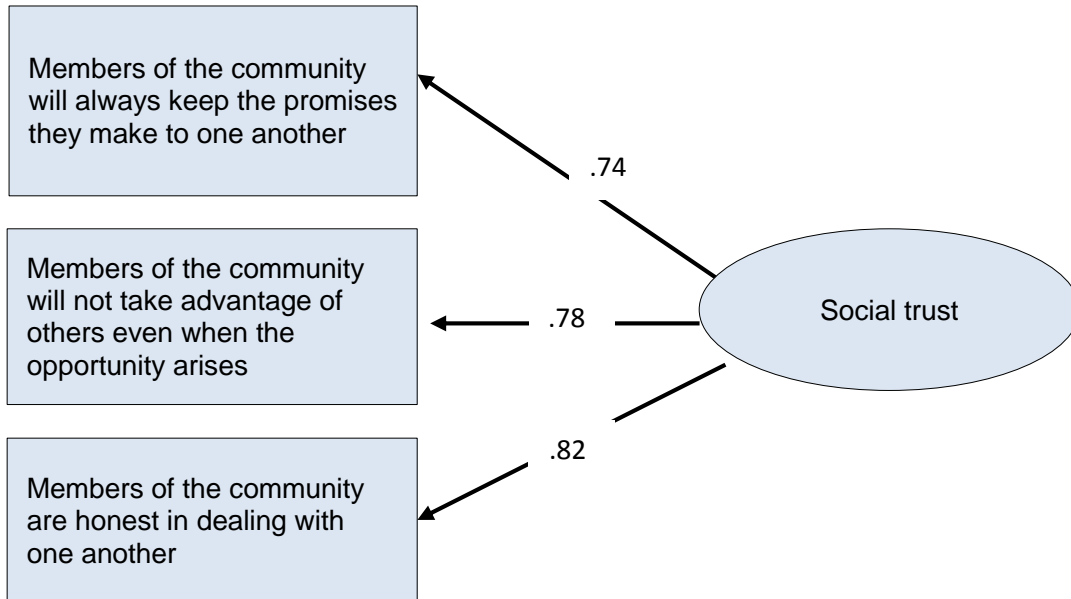


Figure 29 *Social Trust - Items with Standardised Coefficients*

Table 20 Social Trust – Goodness of Fit

CMIN/DF	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
$\chi^2 = .026; df = 1; p = .871$	1.000	1.000	1.004	.000	.943

The *reciprocity* construct, measured by three items, had standardised coefficients above the 0.60 level as recommended by Hair et al., (2010). The construct’s reliability (0.74) and AVE (0.50) were also acceptable (Allen & Bennett, 2010; Field, 2013; Hair et al., 2010). All the goodness of fit indicators suggest the model fits the data well, again given the large sample size (Hair et al, 2010), indicating the construct can be included in the second-order construct of social capital.

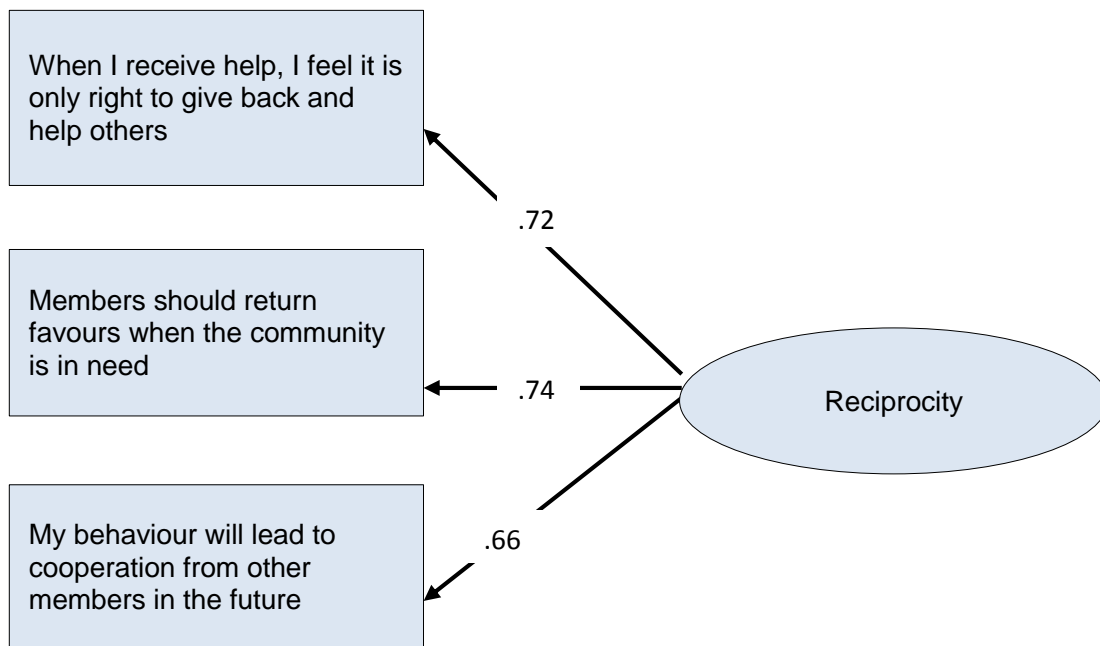


Figure 30 *Reciprocity – Items with Standardised Coefficients*

Table 21 *Reciprocity - Goodness of Fit*

CMIN/DF	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
$\chi^2 = .345; df = 1; p = 0.557$	1.000	1.000	1.000	.000	.850

In this study, social capital is a second-order construct represented by *shared language*, *shared vision*, *social trust* and *reciprocity* as discussed in Chapter 4. The congeneric models for each of these constructs indicate they are all acceptable as single-factor models with indicator loadings (standardised coefficients) above the recommended level. Reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) also suggest they have reasonable

measurement properties (Allen & Bennett, 2010; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). Additionally, the goodness of fit indices for each construct implies a good fit with the data. The *social capital* construct was measured by the four factors and showed a good fit with the data, as shown in Figure 31. The factor loadings for each of the first-order factors were all significant and above the recommended level of 0.60 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). The construct's reliability (0.86) and AVE (0.50) were also within the recommended range (Allen & Bennett, 2010; Field, 2013; Hair et al., 2010).

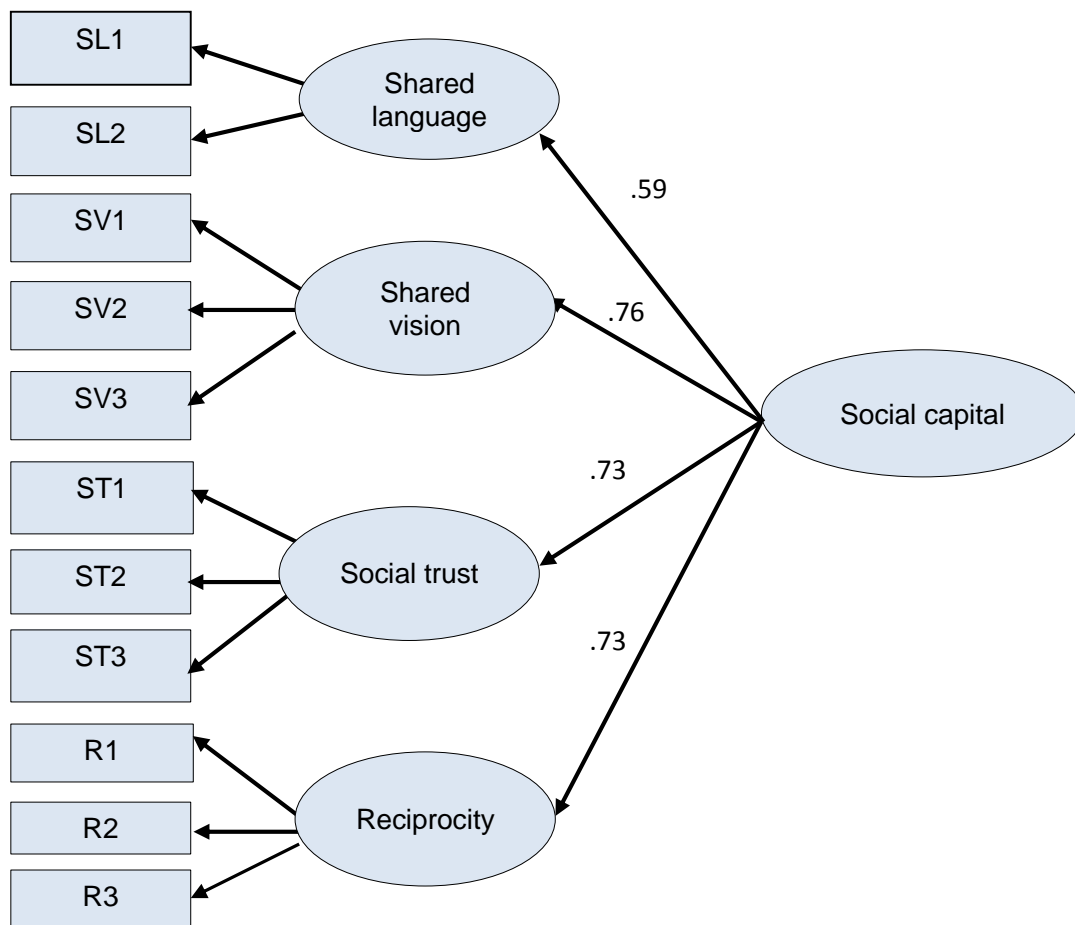


Figure 31 *Social Capital*

Table 22 *Social Capital – Goodness of Fit*

CMIN/DF	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
$\chi^2 = 2.759; df = 40; p = .000$	.970	.978	.970	.052	.385

6.6 Measurement Model Results

Having examined each congeneric model individually, the next step in the process of creating a reliable, well-fitting model for structural equation modelling (SEM) was to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the measurement model.

6.6.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To test the overall measurement model for reliability and validity, all latent variables were examined in the one model with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) performed using AMOS (version 22), and utilising the pattern matrix model builder (Gaskin, 2012). This resulted in a seven-factor measurement model, including the latent variables of *perceived enjoyment*, *perceived ease of use*, *network ties*, *perceived anonymity* and *sense of belonging*, with *social capital* as a second-order latent construct representing *shared language*, *shared vision*, *social trust* and *reciprocity*.

6.6.1.1 Measurement Model Fit

Examination of the fit indices for the measurement model indicates that, based on the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999), the model had an acceptable fit with the data ($\chi^2 = 660.261$; $df = 341$; $p = .000$, CMIN = 1.936, CFI = .967, TLI = .961, RMSEA = .038, PCLOSE = 1.000).

6.6.1.2 Convergent and Discriminant Validity

To assess convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs, the measurement model and the output were examined. The results showed all covariances had values below an acceptable 0.8; all item loadings were greater than 0.60, and the composite reliability values for all factors exceeded 0.70, indicating the construct was reliably reflected by the questionnaire items. These results indicate good convergent validity (Allen & Bennett, 2010; Gaskin, 2012; Hair et al., 2010). Average variance extracted (AVE), a calculation of reliability measuring the amount of variance in the items accounted for by the latent construct, were all above the suggested 0.5 minimum,

and the square root of each AVE was larger than its correlation coefficient with other factors, suggesting the test for discriminant validity was met (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Gaskin, 2012; Hu & Bentler, 1999), as shown in Table 23.

$$AVE = \frac{(\sum \lambda^2)}{[(\sum \lambda^2) + \sum (\Theta)]}$$

λ^2 = Indicator factor loadings

Θ = Indicator error variances

\sum = Summation

Table 23 Average Variance Extracted

	AVE	PEU	SOB	PE	NT	MA	SV	ST	SL	R
PEU	0.572	0.756								
SOB	0.533	0.462	0.730							
PE	0.612	0.550	0.541	0.782						
NT	0.737	0.111	0.471	0.148	0.859					
MA	0.551	-0.235	-0.479	-0.180	-0.610	0.742				
SV	0.657	0.381	0.525	0.460	0.150	-0.132	0.810			
ST	0.613	0.356	0.532	0.362	0.297	-0.250	0.546	0.783		
SL	0.590	0.387	0.347	0.354	0.083	-0.057	0.452	0.410	0.768	
R	0.500	0.439	0.491	0.429	0.158	-0.209	0.554	0.535	0.450	0.707

To assess the risk of common method bias, a single-factor test approach was utilised (Malhotra, Kim & Patil, 2006). This involved conducting CFA on a hypothesised model, including all items in the measurement model, represented by a single factor. The results of the test indicate common-method bias is unlikely, as the hypothesised model proved to be a poor fit with the data (Mäntymäki & Salo, 2011; Malhotra et al., 2006).

6.7 Testing the Structural Model

Having established a well fitting measurement model, the structural model was created using AMOS (version 22) with the inclusion of *perceived enjoyment* (PE), *perceived ease of use* (PEU), *network ties* (NT) and *perceived anonymity* (PA) as independent latent variables; *social capital* (SCAP) as a second-order latent variable; and *sense of belonging* (SOB) and *participative behaviour* (PB) as dependent observed variables. Paths between the factors were inserted in accordance with the hypothesis outlined in Chapter 4. SEM was conducted on all the paths in the hypothesis. The model fit statistics indicated an acceptable fit with the data ($\chi^2 = 2.475$ $df = 418$; $p = .000$. CFI = .939, GFI = .907, TLI = 9.32, RMSEA = .047, PCLOSE = .883). Alternative specifications of the model were also tested to ensure this model had the best fit to the data.

6.8 Hypothesised Relationships

Based on the structural model summarised in Table 24 and contrary to expectations, *perceived ease of use* was found to have no significant influence on *participative behaviour* ($\beta = .02$, $p=.72$), therefore H1 was rejected. *Perceived ease* was found to have a significantly strong influence on *perceived enjoyment* ($\beta = .53$, $p=.000$), supporting H2. *Perceived enjoyment* and *network ties* both had a significant positive influence on *participative behaviour* ($\beta = .15$, $p=.04$) ($\beta = .36$, $p=.000$), supporting H3 and H5. *Perceived enjoyment* and *network ties* also had a significant positive relationship on *sense of belonging* ($\beta = .32$, $p=.000$), ($\beta = .22$, $p=.000$) thus supporting H4 and H6. *Perceived anonymity* was found to have a negative significant influence on *participative behaviour* ($\beta = -.25$, $p=.000$) and *sense of belonging* ($\beta = -.25$, $p=.000$), and a strong negative impact on *network ties* ($\beta = -.57$, $p=.000$), therefore supporting H7, H8 and H9. Unexpectedly, *social capital* had no significant influence on *participative behaviour* ($\beta = .01$, $p=.884$) and consequently H10 was rejected. However *social capital* had a moderately significant influence on *sense of belonging* ($\beta = .40$, $p=.000$) and a weak but significant influence on *network ties* ($\beta = .15$, $p=.000$).

Table 24 presents each hypothesised relationship with regard to the parameter estimates for the model. The Standardised Total Effects (STE) column represents the beta

weights or standardised regression coefficients and factor loadings. For example, the standardised regression coefficient of .494 for *social capital* → *sense of belonging* means for a one standard deviation increase in *social capital* there is a .494 standard deviation increase in *sense of belonging*. This is the strength of the effect of one variable upon another (Holmes-Smith, 2010). *Social capital* therefore showed a moderately strong effect on *sense of belonging*. If the goal of OBCs is to increase the level of *sense of belonging* in their community, then increased *social capital* will have a strong impact. The STEs have been colour coded for easier interpretation. C.R. = t-values in the Critical Ratio column; C.R. values > 1.96 or p-values < 0.05 indicates statistical significance at the .05 level, and *** means the p-value is close to zero. The path analysis model is presented in Figure 32 and the full structural model is shown in Figure 35.

Table 24 Model Parameter Estimates

Hypothesised Relationships	STE	CR	p-value
H1: Perceived ease of use (PEU) → Participative behaviour (PB)	.024	.349	.727
H2: Perceived ease of use (PEU) → Perceived enjoyment (PE)	.533	10.767	***
H3: Perceived enjoyment (PE) → Participative behaviour (PB)	.149	2.104	.035
H4: Perceived enjoyment (PE) → SOB	.320	6.950	***
H5: Network ties (NT) → Participative behaviour (PB)	.357	4.784	***
H6: Network ties (NT) → SOB (SOB)	.221	4.492	***
H7: Anonymity (PA) → Participative behaviour (PB)	-.251	-3.536	***
H8: Anonymity (PA) → SOB (SOB)	-.245	-4.904	***
H9: Anonymity (PA) → Network ties (NT)	-.572	-11.625	***
H10: Social capital (SCAP) → Participative behaviour (PB)	.010	.146	.884
H11: Social capital (SCAP) → SOB (SOB)	.494	7.440	***
H12: Social capital (SCAP) → Network ties (NT)	.146	3.344	***

Key for colour coding:

<0.2 = weak effect

0.2 – 0.3 = mild effect but not unsubstantial.

0.3 – 0.5 = moderately strong effect.

0.5 – 0.8 = strong effect.

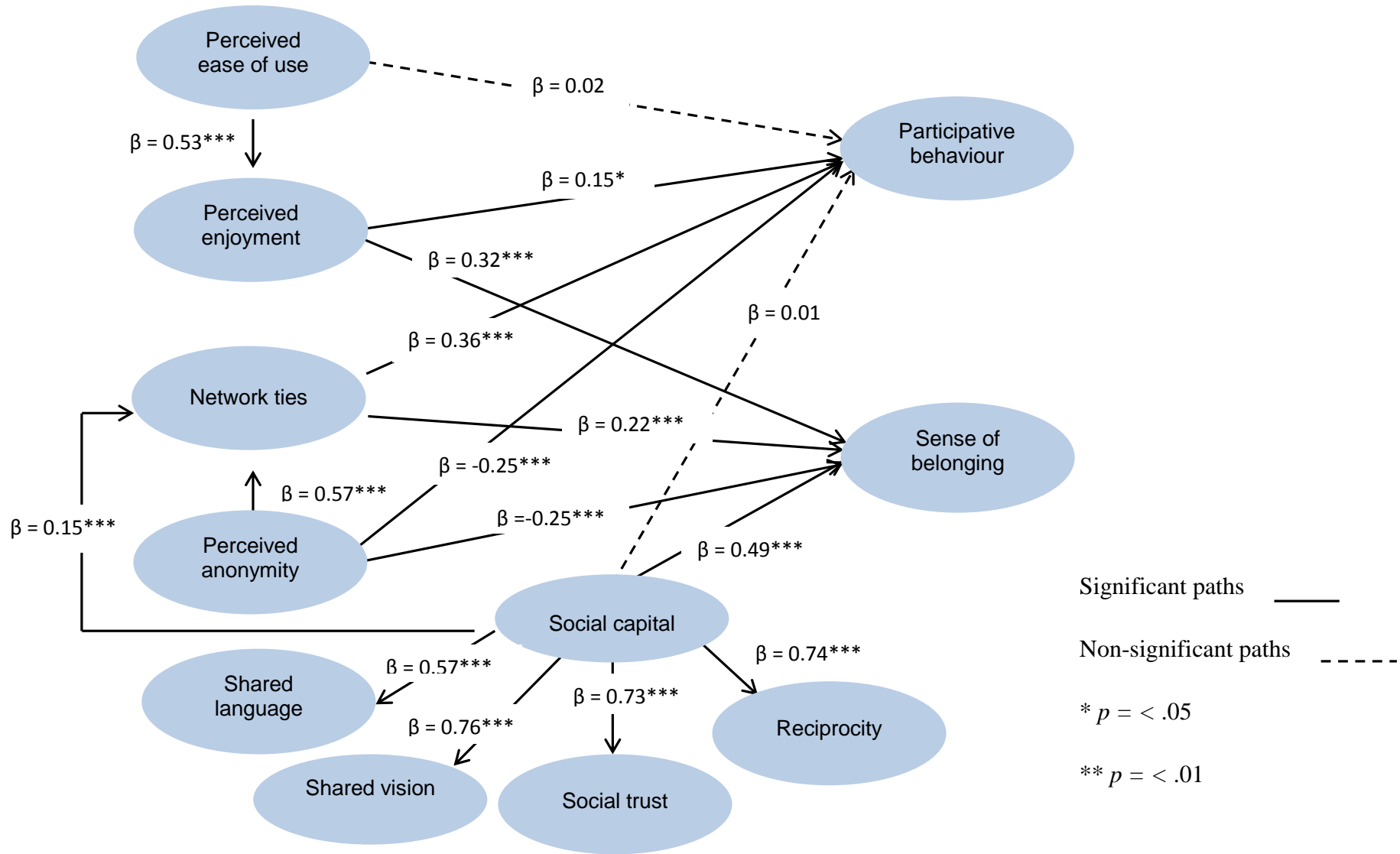


Figure 32 Path Analysis Model- Full Data Set

6.8.1 Information Seekers versus Socialisers

Included in this study was an item to examine whether members were visiting OBCs predominantly for information or for socialising. Participants were asked to respond to the statement: “I only access this site to get information” with one of five options on a Likert scale of 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. This item was included because the literature review highlighted a finding suggesting online community research is dependent on the type of community or the brand category under investigation (Dholakia et al., 2004; Shang et al., 2006; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). This assumption was based on the reasoning that factors influencing *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* (SOB) differ depending on whether members are predominantly information seekers or socialisers. To test this theory and address a gap in the literature two additional models were specified, the first using data from the subgroup of information seekers (options 4 & 5) followed by the socialisers’ subgroup (options 1 & 2).

The results indicated both the socialiser and information-seeker models were good fits with the data. For the information seekers sample the model fit statistics were ($\chi^2 = 1,896$ $df = 418$; $p = .000$. CFI = .942, GFI = .901, TLI = 9.35, RMSEA = .044, PCLOSE = .980). The socialiser path-analysis model is presented in Figure 33.

In the socialisers sample, the model fit statistics also indicated an acceptable fit with the data ($\chi^2 = 1,555$ $df = 418$; $p = .000$. CFI = .913, GFI = .791, TLI = 9.03, RMSEA = .061, PCLOSE = .025). The path analysis model for the information seeker is presented in Figure 34.

The results of a comparative analysis between these models indicate differences in the strength of the relationships between constructs, depending on whether the participant is an information seeker or socialiser, to the extent that some relationships are only significant for one or the other. The findings from the model comparison are provided in Table 25 and discussed further in Chapter 7.

Table 25 Comparison between Information Seekers and Socialisers

Hypothesised Relationships	Socialisers			Information seekers		
	STE	CR	<i>p</i> -value	STE	CR	<i>p</i> -value
H1: PEU → PB	-.181	-1.189	.234	.030	.326	.744
H2: PEU → PE	.626	6.593	***	.461	7.808	***
H3: PE → PB	.346	2.277	.023	.088	.958	.338
H4: PE → SOB	.136	1.739	.082	.425	6.963	***
H5: NT → PB	.232	1.703	.089	.487	4.713	***
H6: NT → SOB	.273	2.652	.008	.182	3.097	.002
H7: PA → PB	-.383	-2.600	.009	-.062	-.662	.508
H8: PA → SOB	-.278	-2.619	.009	-.224	-3.779	***
H9: PA → NT	-.579	-5.446	***	-.547	-9.083	***
H10: SCAP → PB	-.101	-.884	.377	.034	.352	.725
H11: SCAP → SOB	.582	4.139	***	.418	5.417	***
H12: SCAP → NT	.176	1.869	.962	.173	3.120	.002

6.8.2 Parsimonious Modelling

It has been suggested a more parsimonious model is achievable in structural equation modelling by removing non-significant paths (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) and rerunning the model. A modified structural model, with all non-significant paths removed, was created and tested for goodness of fit. An examination was made of the two models; one with all paths retained and the other with ten significant paths retained and two non-significant paths removed. A comparison of the standard loadings, *t*-values and overall model fit indicate model fit did not improve substantially enough to warrant the removal of the paths, and by their non-significance, are in fact relevant findings for this research as expanded upon in Chapter 7. The path analysis model, with all paths and standardised parameter estimates included, is presented in Figure 32.

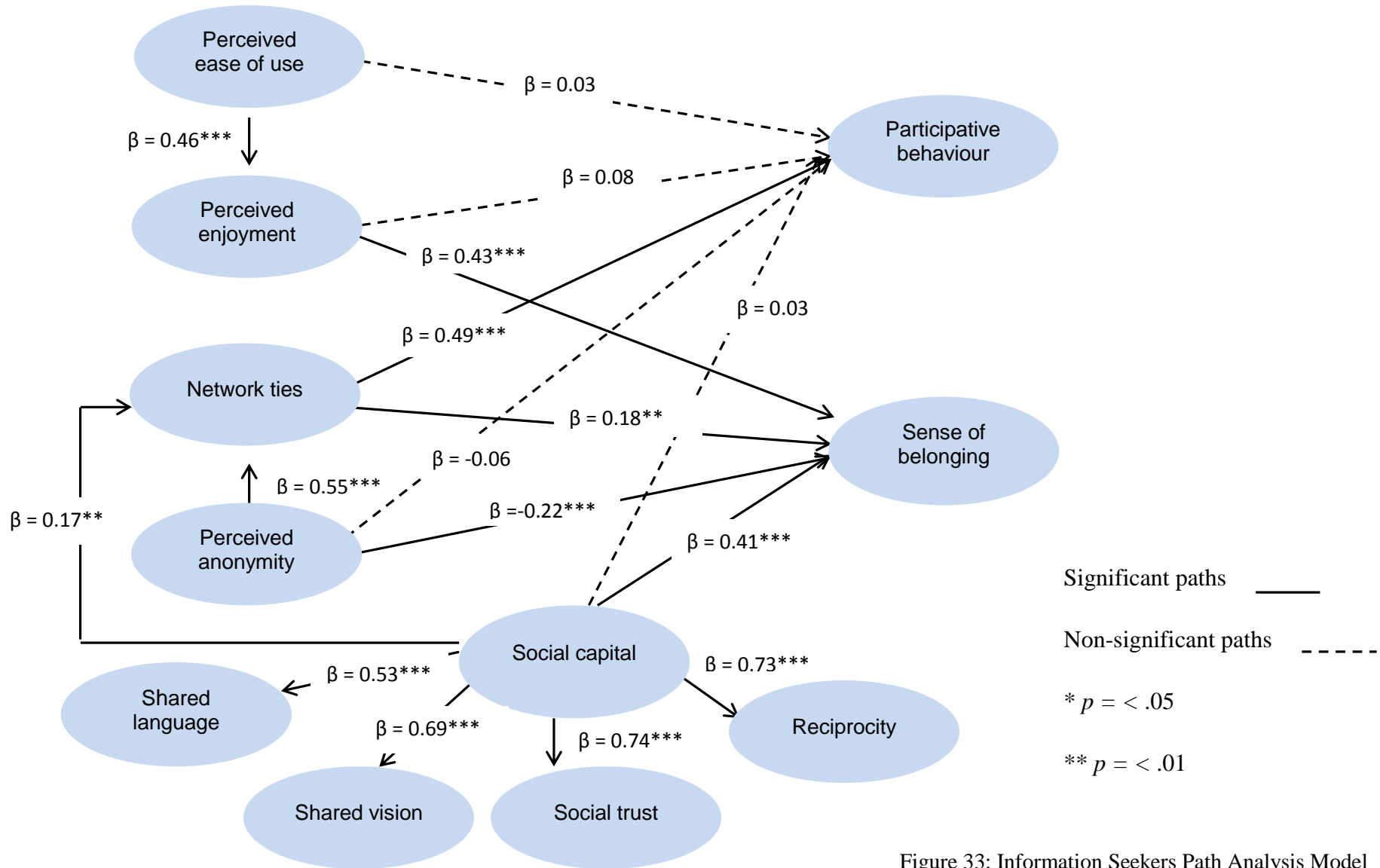


Figure 33: Information Seekers Path Analysis Model

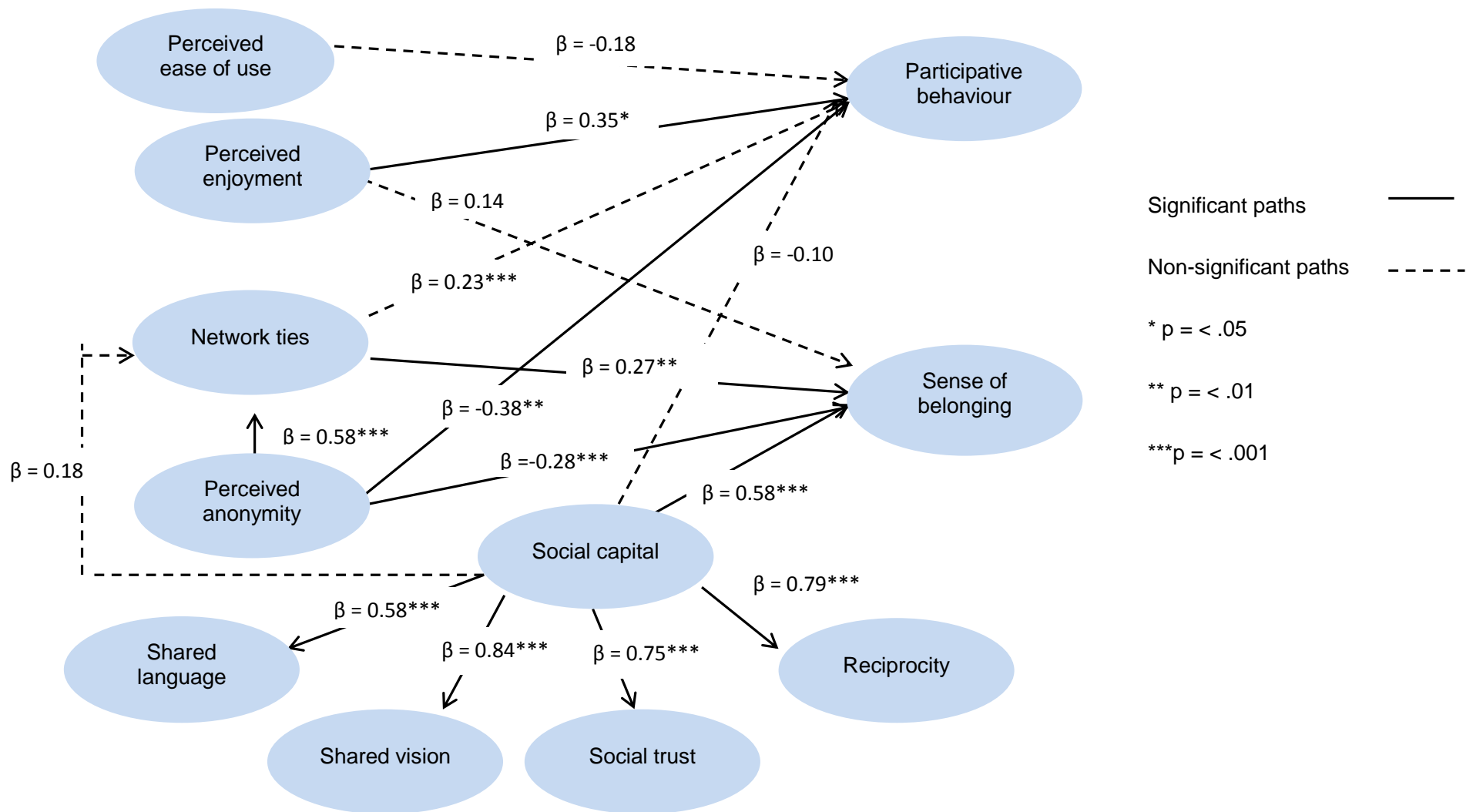


Figure 34: Socialisers Path Analysis Model

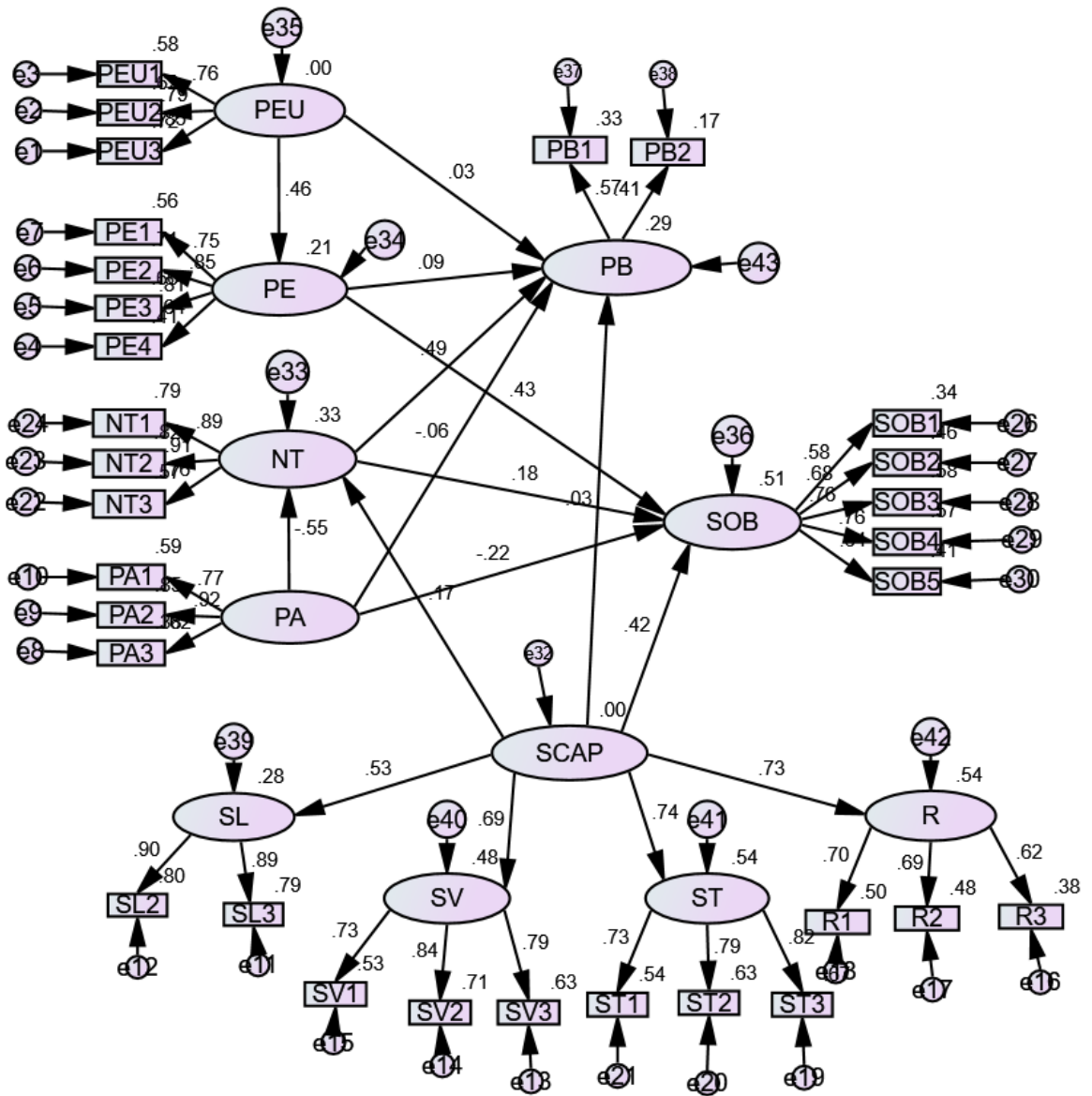


Figure 35 Full Structural Model

6.9 Summary

This chapter presented the results of the quantitative data analysis conducted for this study. A descriptive analysis in the form of frequency and percentage distributions of the demographic characteristics of the sample were provided. Measures of central tendency of the variables included in the research model are shown in Appendix G, where the results indicate the majority of the sample was well educated, married and male (89%). Most participants spent less than one hour per day logged into the community (81%), whereas only a small percentage spent more than three hours (5%) logged in per day. More than 70% agreed with the statement “only access the community for information purposes”.

The descriptive findings in this chapter were followed by the results of the EFA, which indicate the data was suitable for further in-depth analysis, followed by CFA, which found the measurement model was reliable and valid and a good overall fit with the data. Finally, the results of SEM were presented, which confirmed the full structural model was a good fit with the data, and supported ten of the twelve hypothesised paths. The next chapter provides an in-depth discussion of all of the findings reported in this chapter.

Chapter Seven

Discussion

7.0 Introduction

As indicated in Chapter One the purpose of this study was threefold; the first objective was to identify the variables that influence the critical success factors in online brand communities, and to develop a structural model to represent the strength of the relationships between factors. The second objective was to develop a social capital measure specific to OBC environments. The third objective was to explore the variances between information seekers and socialisers with regard to the strength of the relationships in the model.

There has been a rapid increase in the number of OBCs over the last decade, prompting an interest from marketers and scholars in the field of online consumer behaviour, yet little empirical research has been undertaken specifically related to OBCs (Lhotáková, 2011). To date studies have mainly focused on virtual communities in general. However, OBCs encompass a consumer-brand-consumer triad (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and uniqueness that differentiates them from other types of online communities. OBCs are genuine communities where members share a consciousness of kind, a history built on rituals and traditions relating to the brand, and a moral responsibility towards one another and the community. This suggests the need for more research specific to their characteristics and structure is overdue.

Prior research related to consumer behaviour in virtual communities in general focuses on the motivations for members' initial participation, whereas this research examined the influences on factors relevant to ongoing participation and a sense of belonging (SOB) in OBCs. Furthermore, this study explores both the individual- and community-level factors influencing participative behaviour and sense of belonging in OBCs, which expands the existing body of knowledge.

Based on the literature search and qualitative findings, a research model was presented in Chapter 4 illustrating the hypothesised paths between each proposed factor. These hypotheses were tested using structural equation modelling (AMOS version 22) on the data set collected from several OBCs (n = 669), with the results showing the model had

a good fit with the data. Additionally, a second order model was developed and tested, representing the elements of social capital when applied to OBCs, which confirmed good fit with the data. Subsequent models were also tested, using the subsamples of information seekers (n = 450) and socialisers (n = 149) and all these results showed good fit.

Findings from both the initial descriptive analysis and the structural equation modelling have been examined to develop a better understanding of the influences on the critical success factors in online brand communities. The results are discussed in the following sections with regard to the demographic characteristics of the sample, and each of the hypothesised paths in the model. This chapter also explores how the results from this study fit into the existing body of knowledge in the OBC field of research, followed by a summary of the overall model and the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

7.1 Demographic Profile of OBC Members

Based on the findings in Chapter 6, the average member of an OBC in this study was male, aged between 26 and 45, well educated, married, and employed full-time for an average salary of around \$50,000. These findings are broadly consistent with several other studies of OBCs, including Zhou et al.'s (2011) study of brand attachment in a Chinese car club, and the work of Woisetschläger et al (2008) who looked at the drivers of participation in a German fantasy football community, and Wang, Chang, and Yang (2012), who explored the benefits of belonging to a Chinese online community around the Apple brand. The similarities in demographic characteristics are significant, as they cross the cultural divide between eastern and western societies and all have a specific brand as their focus. This aspect appears to unite them with regard to their user profile.

In existing research, demographic similarities between OBC members points to established relationships with specific brands that represent their lifestyle and social status (Belk, 1988). They are financially and emotionally stable and in a position to pursue their own interests, and OBCs are accessible whenever they have time. On the other hand, in studies that examine other types of online communities such as social networking sites, the demographic appears to be younger and less settled (Cheung, Chui, & Lee, 2011; Pinho, 2013).

The OBCs featured in this study were all sent the same information and were contacted via email with the identical introductory message, yet only two sites participated enthusiastically. High response rates from the Brickset community and the Magic forum indicate either the moderators of these sites were more invested in the project and therefore encouraged their members to participate, or the types of people comprising the members of these particular communities were more understanding of the need for new research. Given the majority of the sample was well educated and over 26 years of age, it is likely they recognised the benefits of this study and were therefore more inclined to respond to the invitation.

7.2 Characteristics of OBC members

One of the unique features of the current research is the categorisation of respondents into subgroups of information seekers and socialisers, and the descriptive comparative analysis between the relevance of each construct and the strength of the relationships between the variables and the subgroups. The findings revealed participative behaviour differs significantly between the two groups, with three times as many socialisers as information seekers spending three or more hours logged into an OBC site in one day. Less than 30% of socialisers, as opposed to 60% of information seekers, spent thirty minutes or less on a community site per day. The number of postings was substantially higher for socialisers compared with information seekers in this study. For example, only 3% of information seekers contributed posts two to three times a week, as opposed to 20% for socialisers. These findings indicate a smaller core of dedicated participants in the OBCs in this study were the main contributors to the community on a regular basis.

There is also an association between the purpose for members' involvement and the strength of the constructs in the model. All the variables, with the exception of *perceived anonymity* were significantly ($p < 0.05$) raised for socialisers in the sample as opposed to information seekers. This suggests although there were significantly fewer socialisers than information seekers in the OBC, this core group of members had a higher level of perceived ease of use and experienced a higher level of enjoyment from participating. Socialisers appeared to have developed significantly more network ties, and their sense of belonging to the community was stronger. Information seekers on the other hand, are

perceived to be substantially more anonymous and less recognisable, which is understandable, as they also participate less in the community in general. These findings are consistent with Mathwick et al. (2008), who separated their sample between “newbies” (relatively new members to the site) and “wikis” (long-term members), resulting in stronger means for their core group of experienced members. Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2013) suggested although all members in OBCs benefit in some way from their involvement, there are some who act as providers in a community. These experienced members are more knowledgeable about the brand and have embedded themselves in the community through their contributions and the resourcefulness of their participative behaviour. Other members value their opinions and they become well known in the community; hence they are less anonymous. The purpose for involvement in OBCs therefore affects how members behave, and consequently the quality of their relationship with the brand (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Mathwick et al., 2008) (Refer to Appendix G for t-test analysis).

7.3 Relationships between Constructs

Based on the literature review and qualitative findings, the research model for this study hypothesised *perceived ease of use*, *perceived enjoyment*, and *network ties* are individual-level factors that positively influence *participative behaviour* in OBCs, and *perceived ease of use* has a positive influence on *perceived enjoyment*. It also hypothesised the individual-level construct of *perceived anonymity* has a negative influence on *participative behaviour*, *sense of belonging* and *network ties*. Moreover, *perceived enjoyment* and *network ties* are individual-level factors that positively influence members’ sense of belonging (SOB) to the community. *Social capital*, represented by *shared language*, *shared vision*, *social trust* and *reciprocity* is a community-level factor with a positive significant influence on *participative behaviour*, *sense of belonging* and *network ties*. The outcome of each of these hypothesised relationships is discussed below.

7.3.1 The Influence of Perceived Ease of Use

In this study *perceived ease of use* refers to individual members’ perceptions of the effort required to participate in the OBCs under investigation. It was proposed *perceived ease of use* would have a positive influence on *participative behaviour* and *perceived enjoyment* in OBCs, based on the assumption online communities that are user friendly and

effortless to navigate experience increased levels of participation (Davis et al 1992; Hsu & Lu, 2007; Liao & Chou, 2011; Mäntymäki & Salo, 2011; Moon & Kim, 2000; van der Heijden, 2004). Furthermore, if the site is easy to use, members' levels of perceived enjoyment will increase (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Liao & Chou, 2011; Mäntymäki & Salo, 2011; van der Heijden, 2004). However, contrary to prior research, the structural model indicated no significant relationship between *perceived ease of use* and *participative behaviour* in OBC environments, but did highlight a significantly strong influence between *perceived ease of use* and *perceived enjoyment* in OBCs.

The hypothesis that *perceived ease of use* has an influence on *participative behaviour* in OBCs was based on previous research where *perceived ease of use* was a key component of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM); verified as a consistent determinant of various different types of online systems usage (Davis et al, 1989; Hsu & Lu, 2007; Liao & Chou, 2011; Mäntymäki & Salo, 2011; van der Heijden, 2004). The lack of a positive relationship between these constructs in this study was therefore unexpected. One explanation for the lack of a significant relationship between *perceived ease of use* and increased *participative behaviour* in this study may be attributable to the demographic profile of the respondents, or improvements in internet speeds and OBC website design. For example, the majority of members in the OBCs featured in this study were relatively mature and well educated; suggesting their level of internet expertise was unlikely to inhibit their internet use. Kim et al. (2007, p. 826) concluded “*the self-selected members of online communities may already have higher levels of computer knowledge that allows them to incorporate the internet into their everyday activities*”. Support for a lack of relevance between the functionality of OBCs and participative behaviour is also illustrated by the comments of participants from the qualitative stage of the research discussed in Chapter 3. When asked how the ease of use of the forum influenced how much they participated in the community, respondent # 1 replied: “*I haven't had a problem with it so I don't know*” (R#1). Respondent # 4 suggested “*It's easy so it doesn't matter*” (R#4), and respondent # 12 said: “*I don't really go to the forum for fun, it's usually just to have a look for something specific*” (R#12).

Studies that have utilised the Usability and Sociability framework (Preece, 2001) identified *perceived ease of use* as a strong determinant of the usability of the site (Kim et al., 2007; Phang et al., 2008), which Preece (2001) contended is critical to the success of an online community. Interestingly, the *perceived ease of use* construct in this study had a

mean score of 4 on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, which implies the majority of respondents perceived their OBC websites were easy to use. Therefore, although easiness does not increase the amount of time members spend in the community or the number of posts they contribute, participants in general rate the usability of OBC sites relatively high. Members of OBCs appear to know what they are doing and consequently their perceived ease of use has limited bearing on their participative behaviour.

Furthermore, in support of this study's findings, Liao and Chou (2011) found no significant relationship between *perceived ease of use* and *participative behaviour* in online communities. Liao and Chou (2011) explained this was because the motivation to participate in internet-based communities is benefit driven, therefore whether the website is easy to use or not is less likely to influence attitudes towards usage than expected gratifications through actual use. This concurs with the findings from the structural model in the current study, indicating *perceived enjoyment* increases *participative behaviour*, and suggesting the intrinsic benefit of enjoyment influences participation in OBCs more than the functionality of the site.

While *perceived ease of use* does not appear to have a direct influence on the critical success factors in OBCs, in this study the relationship between *perceived ease of use* and the independent variable *perceived enjoyment* was the second strongest relationship in the structural model. The findings also indicate *perceived enjoyment* has a direct positive influence on *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging*. This suggests although the functionality of the site doesn't directly influence participative behaviour, the perceived usability of the site does affect members' perceptions of enjoyment, which in turn influences the factors critical to the success and sustainability of communities.

In support of the relationship between *perceived ease of use* and *perceived enjoyment*, previous research suggests *perceived ease of use* has a much stronger relationship with *perceived enjoyment* than with a range of participative behaviours (van der Heijden, 2004; Hsu & Lu, 2007; Mäntymäki & Salo, 2011). For example, van der Heijden (2004) found the strength of the relationship between *perceived ease of use* and *perceived enjoyment* ($\beta = .59$) was almost twice that of *perceived ease of use* and *intention to participate* ($\beta = .32$). Hsu and Lu (2007) had a similar result, and found the strength of the association between constructs twice as strong between perceived ease of use and enjoyment, than perceived ease of use and members' positive feelings towards

participation ($\beta = .43$ as opposed to $\beta = .23$). Mäntymäki and Salo (2011, p. 2095) also revealed perceived ease of use in their study had “*virtually no direct effect*” on attitude towards usage, whereas perceived ease of use had a significantly strong effect on perceived enjoyment.

The importance of the usability of OBCs in relation to members’ levels of enjoyment is further illustrated by posts from members in the Bodybuilding and Vogue forums, featured in the qualitative research. Member #104 from the Bodybuilding site was chatting with fellow members about the problems associated with a functionality aspect of the website and posted: “*Can confirm this is a (pretty annoying) thing, takes the fun out of it*”. A member from the Vogue forum also posted: “*This will be the last time I ever post here, this is not fun anymore. I'm going to go out with a bang: Vogue - you suck. Whoever is responsible for these forums should be fired*” (Vogue #24).

In this study it is evident the influence of *perceived ease of use* on *perceived enjoyment* had a stronger relevance for socialisers ($\beta = .63$) than information seekers ($\beta = .46$). This indicates the functionality of the site was more important to members’ levels of enjoyment when socialising as opposed to information seeking. Therefore, when members are socialising with one another, the easier it is to navigate the site the more they enjoy their time in the community. This assumption is reflected by a comment from a focus group participant in the qualitative stage of this study who suggested: “*If I can find a recipe really easily I’ll stay on and look for another one, then I start reading and looking at all sorts of things*” (R#5). One can therefore conclude the members in this study perceived themselves as capable of using their chosen OBC’s website easily, and the easier it is, the higher their levels of enjoyment. Furthermore, in accordance with Mäntymäki and Salo (2011), and consistent with the strength of the relationship between *perceived enjoyment* and *participative behaviour* for the socialisers subgroup in this study, online communities need to be enjoyable to encourage users to continue participating,

7.3.2 The Influence of Perceived Enjoyment

In this study *perceived enjoyment* is an individual-level variable referring to the intrinsic feeling of pleasure members gain from being involved in OBCs. The construct was measured by four items, all of which were found to represent *perceived enjoyment* adequately. The mean score for *perceived enjoyment* in the full data set is above 4 on a

rating scale of 1 to 5, indicating most participants agreed with “being part of the community is enjoyable”. However, although there is a significant relationship between *perceived enjoyment* and *participative behaviour* in the full structural model (Figure 32) the relationship is relatively weak between the two constructs. This is likely due to the characteristics of the sample. For example, the majority of respondents in this study were information seekers (70%) and for this subgroup *perceived enjoyment* has no relevance on their participative behaviour so it would affect the strength of the relationship in the full structural model. This finding is consistent with prior research, as it is expected when members experience pleasure that their participation levels will significantly increase, especially if they are socialising with other members (Hsu & Lu, 2011; Moon & Kim, 2011; Teo et al., 1998). It suggests an increase in participative behaviour is predominantly linked to socialising in OBCs, congruent with the Usability and Sociability (U&S) framework (Kim et al., 2007; Preece, 2001) and the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) paradigm (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Stafford & Schkade, 2004).

The full structural model indicates *perceived enjoyment* has a moderately strong positive influence on *sense of belonging* to the community. This outcome is consistent with Lin (2008), and Lin, Fan, and Wallace (2013), who suggested satisfaction with the site has a significant positive impact on belonging, due to the pleasure members experience using the site, which in turn leads to a stronger connection to the community. Interestingly, when the sample was split between information seekers and socialisers, the results showed a significant and moderately strong influence between *perceived enjoyment* and *sense of belonging* for information seekers, yet no significant relationship for the small core group of socialisers. This finding implies for information seekers, their levels of enjoyment increase through interaction with others and they develop stronger feelings of identity and belonging to the community. It suggests visitors to the site who enjoy their interactions with other brand enthusiasts develop a stronger attachment to the brand, the community, and other members of the community, as sense of belonging represents all these facets of relationships in OBC environments.

7.3.3 The Influence of Network Ties

One of the unique attributes of OBCs is the community is comprised of a network of relationships with a common bond based on a specific brand. Close network ties in

OBCs are also a separate independent variable on an individual level, representing the personal relationships members develop with each other in a community. The findings from the structural model in the current research show in general, *network ties* has a moderate but strong positive influence on the participative behaviour of members in OBCs, and a mild but significant influence on the sense of belonging members develop. The relationship between *network ties* and *participative behaviour* implies the more friendships members within the community the more they contribute their time and posts to the OBC.

Interestingly, when a comparison was made between socialisers and information seekers, only the information-seekers sample showed a significant relationship between *network ties* and *participative behaviour*. This suggests the more friends visitors make through their interactions with other members, the more they participate in order to maintain the relationships they've developed. In contrast, members who only seek information do not develop close ties with other members, and are likely to be more transient and less committed to the community. Therefore the collaborative nature of OBCs has the capacity to draw visitors to OBCs and convert them into long-term members who become socialisers and over time, develop a closer attachment.

The results from the full structural model show, for members who have built network ties within the community, there is a positive relationship with sense of belonging to the community. This may be because friendships with members of the same community engender feelings of belonging to a group with shared interests and ideals. Members can identify with other members and feel a part of OBCs. The strength of this relationship is slightly lower but nevertheless significant for information seekers, indicating the more friends people make while searching for information, the more they develop an attachment to the community as a whole. These findings are congruent with Zhaoa et al. (2012), who found familiarity had a positive effect on members' sense of belonging with a virtual community. Familiarity in Zhaoa et al.'s (2012) work referred to the extent to which individuals got to know each other through regular interaction, and is therefore akin to the *network ties* in this study.

Comments from focus group respondents in the qualitative stage of this study indicated a positive relationship between developing friendships in OBCs and a feeling of attachment to the group as a whole. Respondent #19 suggested: "*It becomes less about the subject and more about the community of people who all know each other, once you have a*

group of friends you want to go on more to see what they're doing". This view was reiterated by respondent # 16, who observed: *"The best thing is the friends. That's why I'm on it all the time, we have a group thing"* (R#16).

The relationship between development of network ties and members' increased sense of belonging is consistent with the idea that interactive communication in OBCs plays a dynamic role in the brand value co-creation process (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2013). This assumption is based on the notion that individuals who engage in regular conversations in OBCs are likely to discuss brand-related experiences or share brand knowledge, which increases their sense of attachment and identification with the brand, the community and each other, thus strengthening the brand's overall value.

7.3.4 The Influence of Perceived Anonymity

Perceived anonymity is measured by the member's perception of how easily they can be recognised in the community by their user name or their written contributions. With a construct mean score of 3.21, the sample in this study was divided about their levels of anonymity in the community. This may be due to the differing views of respondents about what perceived anonymity means in an OBC environment. For example, members assign themselves a user name when they register and are therefore referred to as "anonymous because their actual identity is unknown to other members. However, over time their username becomes recognisable within the community from their comments and opinions and the information they've shared. One focus group participant stated: *"It doesn't mean anything. We all know each other, we're in a team, it's just a stupid name, like a...nickname it's what you talk about and how you play the game they know you by"* (R#13). So although some members were still technically anonymous, they were in fact recognisable and therefore didn't necessarily perceive themselves to be anonymous to others in the community.

The full structural model in this study indicates the more recognisable members are in the community the more they participate, develop a sense of belonging and build network ties. This is consistent with community literature as previously discussed. For example, according to Doolittle and MacDonald (1978) when people in a community interact with each other they develop a feeling of safety and belonging that reduces their

perceived anonymity. In this way the feeling of being recognised in the group encourages continued participation in the community. The findings from the comparative analysis indicates a negative relationship between *perceived anonymity* and *participative behaviour* is only significant ($\beta = -.38$) for the socialisers subgroup, and not for information seekers. This suggests the more socialisers are recognisable in the community the more they participate, or the more time they spend in the community and the more posts they contribute the less anonymous they become. The findings also show *perceived anonymity* has the same mild level of influence on *sense of belonging* for both subgroups (socialisers $\beta = -.28$; information seekers $\beta = -.22$). This result implies as members became better known in the community and developed mutual associations with others, and regardless of their initial motive for participating, their sense of belonging increased as they developed attachments to more people. Although anonymity may be of benefit to new members by giving them the confidence to join into conversations or browse without making any contributions, as they become more committed to the community they like to be recognised by other members. Therefore being less anonymous or more recognisable through contributions to the community will increase their sense of belonging.

One of the strongest relationships in the structural model in this study was between *perceived anonymity* and *network ties*. This was equally significant for both subgroups, and indicates the more anonymous members were the less network ties they developed. Equally it suggests the more recognisable members were the more friendship ties they developed in the community. These results challenge deindividuation theory, which argues when people are in a group environment they become immersed in the group and lose their individualism, potentially leading to abusive behaviour, as they lack the inhibitions that normally come with acting alone (Zimbardo, 1969). In this study, it appears the less anonymous members were the more they developed close network ties and sense of belonging to the community. This is more consistent with the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), which suggests people who are anonymous in online communities become part of the group and more likely to conform to the positive values of the group (Blanchard, 2008). It therefore appears members who are recognisable by their pseudonyms from their contributions to the community develop network ties and a sense of belonging critical to the ongoing success of OBCs.

7.3.5 The Influence of Social Capital

One objective of this thesis was to develop a measure of social capital specific to OBCs, as current research is inconsistent with regard to the variables that represent social capital in general, and none have developed a model specifically for OBCs. The results of the exploratory factor analysis of the data obtained from several OBCs indicate *shared language, shared vision, social trust* and *reciprocity* are reliable and valid underlying dimensions of social capital in OBCs, and the subsequent structural equation modelling demonstrates the data is a good fit with the model. Consistent with Mathwick et al. (2013), the indicators of social capital also remained constant for all three models featured in this study (the full structural model and two subgroups of information seekers and socialisers). This also indicates support for the conceptualisation of social capital when represented by a *shared language, shared vision, social trust* and *reciprocity*.

When taken into consideration with findings from the qualitative research the high mean level of each aspect of social capital indicates that the communities in this study have created a positive environment where members communicate with one another other using terms understood by other brand enthusiasts, and share similar views about what the community represents or how it should be managed. It also means members can trust the advice they receive from the community, and are more likely to exhibit a moral responsibility towards each other. These findings are consistent with prior research regarding the culture of brand affiliated communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

One of the strongest relationship within the whole structural model was between *social capital* and a *sense of belonging* to the community. There is also a mild but significant influence between *social capital* and *network ties*. This indicates the more social capital a community has accrued, the more the connections increase between members and the group, as do the ties they develop with others. Understanding the facets of social capital therefore becomes a crucial element in sustaining successful OBC's. Social capital has a multifaceted influence in OBC's (Liao & Chou, 2011), therefore each facet of social capital is explored in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

For example, members who share the same language or use jargon specific to the brand a community is built around are united by their ability to use abbreviations and terms they can understand and outsiders cannot. This can also be viewed as a consciousness of

kind between members of the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The following excerpts from a conversation between members of the Brickset community illustrates how members use acronyms or language specific to the Lego brand, which outsiders may not be able to interpret without effort.

Member #1 (kor)

I just saw that MB is doing a TMNT line in 2016. I wasn't sure if the line was over with LEGO but after seeing this I'm assuming it is.

Member #2 (Drumnez)

Hmm I was contemplating whether or not to still my series 1 TMNT MFs. Might hang onto them now.

Member #3 (dragon114)

So tmt is going back to mb. That sucks. Still need to get all the tmt figs

Member #4 (Xefen)

In a way I see it as a good thing. If lego don't continue their popular licensed themes, they'll get snapped up by someone else. Now is LOTR popular enough for one of the clones? Probably not, but here's hoping.

The quality of interactions between members in the community is shaped by members having a language that they share that not only ties them to the brand, it also makes the exchange of information easier encouraging people to converse and form strong bonds with each other, increasing their attachment to the community. This facet of social capital also increases the number of network ties members develop, as friendships are likely to flourish when both parties are knowledgeable about the subject under discussion.

Another facet of social capital, referred to as a *shared vision*, also unites members of OBCs. For example, a community where members share the same goals and motivations for joining, and agree on how it is administered, ensures that members behave appropriately and get the most out of it. A shared vision means that members are more likely to identify with the community (Zhao et al, 2012), and are more inclined to develop close network ties within the community.

One of the most important aspects of social capital is social trust, as members need to feel they can rely on other members not to be abusive or out of line, and need to know

the information they receive is reliable (Zhao et al., 2012). The findings of Blanchard and Markus (2004) and Lin (2008) support this suggestion, as both provide evidence that trust has a significant influence on sense of belonging in online communities. Further research by Mathwick et al. (2008) also found trust is not only an indicator of social capital in online communities, but when mediated by social value, has a significant influence on commitment to the community by experienced members of the group. It makes sense that members of communities with a trusting environment are more likely to feel they belong to the community, find it easy to converse with others and enjoy being involved. Moreover, relationships between relative strangers can be enhanced where there is a level of social trust they can rely upon.

The last element of social capital is reciprocity, or the moral responsibility members have towards each other and the community as a whole. This is a fundamental aspect of a sense of virtual community, and one of the cornerstones of a true community (Mathwick et al., 2008; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Members who have accrued this facet of social capital know the posts they write will be read and their questions will be answered, as the community has established ground rules that everyone adheres to. Mathwick et al. (2008) suggested reciprocity significantly increases the value of the community for members, which in turn influences their commitment or sense of belonging to the group. Research indicates OBCs are known for their collaborative environment, where members who share an affiliation with a specific brand contribute voluntarily. Therefore a reciprocal environment is conducive to the community's ongoing success and the value of the brand (Lhotakova, 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2013; Zhao et al., 2012).

Interestingly, although the strength of the relationships between social capital and sense of belonging is slightly different between information seekers ($\beta = .41$) and socialisers ($\beta = .58$); both subgroups showed a moderate to strong significantly positive link between social capital and SOB. This finding implies OBCs with a culture based on shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity, increase members' SOB to the community when they socialise with one another. This finding is congruent with Mathwick et al. (2008) who also found social capital in online communities and members' commitment to the community is mediated by the social support they receive through their membership.

From another perspective, members of OBCs, while searching for information, are made to feel welcome in the community due to the language and vision they share. Visitors seeking information from OBCs are invariably interested in the brand the community is focused on, therefore by exhibiting a trustworthy culture and based on the norms of reciprocity, it is likely they will be drawn in and over time increase their attachment to the community. In addition, by increasing network ties, OBC members gain access to broader sources of information whilst also enjoying the social interaction OBCs provide (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Mathwick et al., 2008). From a marketing perspective all of these aspects are crucial when considering strategies for the successful marketing and management of an OBC.

7.3.6 Summary of the Influences on Critical Success Factors in OBCs

In summary, the structural model developed in this study demonstrates the significant individual- and community-level influences on critical success factors in online brand communities. It provides empirical evidence that members' perceived ease of use has a significant impact on how enjoyable they find being involved in OBCs. Subsequently, perceived enjoyment has a significant influence on their participative behaviour and sense of belonging to the community. There is also evidence to suggest members who have built network ties in OBCs are more likely to participate in the community through the time they spend logged on and the posts or threads they contribute. Their level of belonging to the community increases as they make more friends.

One of the most significant findings from this research is the strong effect of social capital on OBC members' sense of belonging to the community and the network ties they forge with individual members. This suggests the attributes of social capital, such as shared language, vision, trust and reciprocity, are highly important for building stronger relationships with the brand community and other members. Social capital therefore provides social support, integration and cohesion for OBC members.

Members' perceived anonymity also plays an important role with regard to levels of participation and belonging, but from a different perspective. For example, when members are less anonymous they are more likely to participate and develop an identity with the community. However, less anonymity does not imply they are known by their true

identity, only that they are recognisable by their alias and their contributions to the community by their pseudonyms. Anonymity also has a negative effect on network ties, once again related to members' inclination to share information and socialise more when they are perceived to be less anonymous. The impact of *purpose for involvement* on these results is significant as information seekers and socialisers are influenced by different variables and therefore may require different strategy development.

7.4 Theoretical contribution

Online brand communities (OBCs) have unique attributes that distinguish them from virtual communities in general; their members are dedicated to a specific brand and share a general kinship with fellow brand admirers. This study identified several factors influencing the participative behaviour and sense of belonging of OBC members - both attributes have consistently been identified in the literature as critical to the ongoing success of OBCs.

This study also brought together several theoretical concepts into one structural model to explain the influences on critical success factors specifically in an OBC environment. Previous studies focused on the separate constructs and across a range of disciplines, but never before in the context of OBCs. This research therefore makes a valid contribution to the existing body of knowledge and extends existing theory related to consumer behaviour in OBCs.

A further substantial contribution to social capital theory and OBC research is the development of a working definition of social capital specific to OBCs, as although the dimensions of social capital are based on prior research (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1989; Zhao et al., 2011), the application of social capital specifically in an OBC environment has not previously been previously.

Finally, categorisation of OBC members according to their purpose for participation has been achieved in this study, with the results indicating there is a significant difference between information seekers and socialisers regarding the strength of their influence on the critical success factors in OBCs. Moreover, it was conducted on a global scale and across a range of OBCs, thereby contributing a wider perspective to existing social capital theory and OBC research.

7.5 Practical implications

From a marketing perspective, OBCs act as an intermediary between customers and brands and successful OBCs have the potential to increase brand- related consumer behaviour, such as brand loyalty, brand recognition, positive word-of-mouth, and increasing purchase intention, all positive outcomes that organisations and marketers strive to achieve (Andersen, 2005; Casaló et al., 2010; Kuo & Feng, 2013). There is empirical evidence to suggest participative behaviour and a sense of belonging are factors critical to the success of OBCs, providing evidence of the variables that influence these factors, and a greater understanding of the strength of the relationships between constructs is of great benefit to all stakeholders in OBCs.

This study identified several key elements that impact on members' experiences in OBCs, which influence the amount of time they spend in the community and the number of posts they contribute. Members' perceived ease of use has an influence on their perceived enjoyment, which in turn has the capacity to increase participative behaviour, as do the number of network ties they develop and how recognisable they are in the community. From a marketing perspective the implications of these findings are twofold. Firstly, there is now evidence to suggest marketers can increase participative behaviour in OBCs if the site is easy to navigate, so that members enjoy being involved and network ties can develop. Secondly, members of OBCs need to have pseudonyms to initially feel confident about contributing to the site, but over time they become recognisable through their contributions to the community. The anonymity of members reduces the problems associated with stereotyping, or the divisions of race, culture or social status. Everyone starts on the same level and gradually builds their reputation in the community through sharing knowledge and social interaction. This is evidenced by the strong influence of being recognisable by a pseudonym on the network ties members develop in OBCs, and its significant influence on their participative behaviour.

The individual influences on the sense of belonging members develop, such as perceived enjoyment, network ties, and perceived anonymity, suggest the quality and quantity of their relationships impact significantly on how attached they feel to the community and therefore the brand. This is consistent with Zhou et al. (2011, p. 896) who suggested: "*without cultivating consumer emotion or attachment, consumers in a brand*

community may not necessarily become brand committed or loyal” whereas “sharing consumers’ consumption experiences gratify, enrich, and enable them. Consumers become attached to both the community and the brand” (Zhou et al., 2011, p. 896). These individual-level influences show support for the theory that long-term success needs OBC creators to stimulate and encourage conversation between members regarding the brand, and to retain pseudonyms, as this encourages initial contributions which develop into a sense of belonging over time.

From a community level, the shared language, shared vision, social trust and reciprocity found in OBCs, determines the levels of sense of belonging and network ties members develop. The more social capital is accrued, the more attached members become to the community and the more friendships they develop. From a marketing perspective this implies strong consumer relationships with individuals in the community and the community itself can translate into a stronger commitment to the brand (Ahluwalia et al, 2000; Zhou et al, 2011).

As indicated in the netnography study in Chapter 3, moderators and administrators of OBCs play an integral role in keeping members aligned with the culture afforded by an accrued level of social capital. Therefore, to achieve ongoing success, OBCs must embrace the brand’s attributes by encouraging the use of a shared language, emphasising the values the brand represents, and developing a culture based on social trust and reciprocity through effective brand-focused management of OBCs. However, evidence suggests the company who owns the brand should only have a passive role in the community, if any, to ensure members feel confident to contribute genuine opinions and share personal information (Algesheimer et al, 2005; Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2011). One key factor for sustaining successful OBCs therefore, is having the right administrative team with values akin to the brand, unaffiliated with the brand owner, and with the authority to ensure the ideals of the community are upheld.

The results of this study clearly indicate the importance of OBCs to organisations’ marketing strategies, as they provide multifaceted benefits for all stakeholders that companies spend heavily on trying to achieve. Members of OBCs are devoted consumers and invest their time in the community primarily to talk about and share information about a brand. Relationship marketing stresses the importance of maintaining relationships with consumers, and OBCs present an ideal setting for this to occur. Brand owners have an

opportunity to enhance the relationships between members of the community and their brand by providing an online community where consumers feel confident to interact with one another and share opinions. Moderators play an important role in successful OBCs, as there needs to be structure to the community for members to develop a sense of belonging through regular interactive communication. This is crucial for increasing loyalty behaviours. Converting visitors to their sites into loyal consumers of the brand is a significant incentive to create and support OBCs with this capability.

Chapter 8 provides a conclusion for the overall thesis, discusses the limitations of the study and identifies areas for future research.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

8.0 Introduction

This study set out to identify the individual- and community-level variables that influence critical success factors in online brand communities (OBCs). It was also aimed at examining the impact, if any, of purpose for involvement in OBCs on the strength of the relationships between influences on critical success factors. An examination of existing research identified the critical success factors in OBCs as *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* (SOB). However, theories pertaining to the attributes that influence these constructs are varied and inconsistent, and in the case of OBCs, non-existent. This presented a substantial gap in the literature which this study endeavoured to address with the following research questions as outlined in Chapter 1:

RQ1: What are the individual-level factors that influence participative behaviour in and sense of belonging to online brand communities?

RQ2: What are the community-level factors that influence participative behaviour in and sense of belonging to an online brand community?

RQ3: Does the strength of the influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in online brand communities differ depending on whether members visit the community site to gather information or to socialise?

From a marketing perspective, the importance of the current research relates to the critical nature of OBCs as effective marketing tools and a vital link between consumers and the brand. It has been suggested that strong bonds between consumers and the brand brings stability to a brand, and consumers who involve themselves with brand communities exhibit higher levels of brand loyalty (Brodie et al., 2013; Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). It is therefore essential for marketers to understand the culture of OBCs, how to retain existing members and encourage new members to join.

8.1 The Research Project

The research for this study was undertaken in two distinct stages and included both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This mixed methods approach was employed because it offers a greater understanding of the topic and a solid theoretical foundation on which to base empirical investigation. The qualitative research, guided by findings from the literature review and based on the research questions, was conducted first. This involved netnographic observation of three distinct OBCs, and focus groups, comprised of members from a diverse range of OBCs. The quantitative research was based on findings from both the literature search and the qualitative study, and involved a questionnaire, administered to a large number of members of several successful ongoing OBCs.

RQ1: What are the individual-level factors that influence participative behaviour in and sense of belonging to online brand communities?

In answer to the first research objective, the findings from this study clearly show individual-level influences on *participative behaviour* and *sense of belonging* in OBCs relate to how members personally feel with regard to their involvement in the community, such as their level of perceived enjoyment, the network ties they've developed, and how anonymous they feel they are. Individual members' *perceived ease of use* also has a significant effect on their *perceived enjoyment*, and therefore an indirect impact on the critical success factors in OBCs.

RQ2: What are the community-level factors that influence participative behaviour in and sense of belonging to an online brand community?

Social capital was identified as a key community-level factor with a significant direct influence on *sense of belonging* in OBCs, and a positive influence on the *network ties* members develop, therefore indicating an indirect relationship with both of these critical success factors. *Social capital* was represented by the sum of *shared language*, *shared vision*, *social trust* and *reciprocity*; each contributed equally to the value of the overall construct. The results of the exploratory factor analysis and subsequent structural equation modelling indicated the four factors were good measures of social capital in OBCs, and when tested as a stand-alone congeneric model the data fitted the model well. This implies the study has successfully developed an empirically tested scale for social

capital specific to OBCs, thereby fulfilling one of its main objectives. Since this is the first ever model depicting the scale of social capital specifically in OBCs, it will provide an effective measure of social capital for future research and be of great benefit to marketers and academics. The findings have therefore effectively addressed the second research question.

RQ3: Does the strength of the influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in online brand communities differ depending on whether members visit the community to gather information or to socialise?

In answer to the third research enquiry, a comparison between the subgroups of information seekers and socialisers confirmed there is a significant difference in the composition and strength of the relationships between influences and critical success factors in OBCs, depending on the purpose for participating in the community. Furthermore, the majority of OBC members were information seekers, with a small core subgroup of socialisers who were more active, recognisable participants in the community.

8.2 Key Findings

A key finding from this research is that social capital is a community-level construct within OBCs and crucial to their success and sustainability. The study showed a genuine community culture exists within OBCs due to the influence of the brand, regardless of whether the OBC is focused on bodybuilding, high-end fashion, or an iconic building-brick toy. This was demonstrated by the use of a shared language pertaining to the brand, a collective vision for the community based on the attributes of the brand, and reciprocity between members who share an allegiance to the same brand. From a marketing perspective, this collaborative culture also accentuates the trust members have in each other and the worthiness of their opinions with regard to the use of different products or brands. This is an important commercial facet of OBCs, as it suggests visitors to OBC sites are more likely to trust the advice of OBC members because they exhibit extensive brand knowledge. In today's internet driven society consumers rely on the advice of strangers with regard to future purchases as information provided by users of the brand is thought to be more trustworthy than advice from the company. It seems clear that social capital exists in OBCs as a multifaceted construct and is crucial to the ongoing success of communities.

Another important finding from this study was *perceived anonymity*, as an individual-level construct, is also crucial to the community, as it allows members to join the site with a clean slate and be who they want to be in the community. Members of OBCs are recognised by their pseudonyms through their contributions to conversations, the quality of the information they provide and their helpfulness towards others, as opposed to their background or status in society. In OBCs a whole new world exists, where members from any race, culture or creed from around the world can build a solid reputation through the knowledge they share, their generosity towards other community members and their sociability. OBC members are united by a shared interest that instils in them a sense of belonging to a collective, which increases the more they are recognised and acknowledged as productive members of the community. The less anonymous they are without revealing their true identities, the more they feel they belong. *Perceived anonymity* is therefore critical to the ongoing success of OBCs.

A comparison between information seekers and socialisers in this study revealed a core group of socialisers in OBCs who visit the community regularly to socialise with friends and discuss brand-related issues. This group spends the most time in the community, contributes the majority of posts and threads to the forum, and are most likely to be staunch advocates of the brand. People in this small subgroup have the capacity to convert primarily information seekers into long-term members. This is based on findings that indicate the participative behaviour and sense of belonging of information seekers increase when they enjoy being in a community and have made friends. The researcher suggests members from the subgroup of socialisers are likely to make ideal moderators, due to their diligence and extensive brand knowledge.

In addition to addressing the research objectives, a further finding to emerge from the overall project is that administrators and moderators of community sites play an important role in the development and sustainability of successful OBCs. This study indicates a need for structure in organisations regarding operation of the community, so that members can participate and develop a sense of belonging through regular interactive communication. Facilitating OBCs effectively is therefore crucial to their ongoing success.

8.3 Marketing implications

Consumers are becoming resistant to conventional marketing strategies. The decision to make purchases is now predominantly based on prior knowledge or referrals

from the opinions of consumers as primary users of products or brands. The internet plays a crucial role in providing consumers with more product choice and brand-related information on a global scale. Consequently, brand owners are becoming more reliant on co-creative relationships between consumers and their brands to ensure they are meeting the needs of well informed consumers. The marketing literature also widely acknowledges OBCs as effective facilitators of such relationships (Backhaus, Steiner, & Lügger, 2011; Madupu & Cooley, 2010).

From a community perspective, findings indicate that OBC's although commercially driven due to their brand focus, have all the traits of a genuine community, and an accrued level of social capital. This implies that OBC's as a collective have a culture where sharing a common language and shared vision are based on a specific brand, and members can trust that information exchanged will be accurate, and that queries will consistently be answered by other members. These are attributes of the community as a whole that encourage individual members to form a closer attachment to the community, each other, and the brand. The implications of such a close community with members who develop such a strong association with a specific brand highlights the importance of OBC's as an essential marketing tool capable of sustaining brand loyalty, and fostering a collective mistrust of competing brands.

From individual members' perspectives, the findings from this research indicate OBCs need to generate enjoyment value, facilitate connections between members, and encourage and support the use of pseudonyms to be successful and sustainable over the long-term. Additionally, although OBCs must be easy to use and navigate, the relevance of this aspect has been superseded by the importance of accurate, up-to-date information. It is the quality of the information provided by OBCs that will encourage repeat visits and sustain participation and membership.

The current research shows the majority of OBC members participate in the OBC to gather information. Furthermore, OBCs need information seekers as they keep the community vibrant through an exchange of new ideas and contact with a wider audience. However, it is the smaller subgroup of brand-loyal socialisers who are the more active participants in the community, and therefore the ones who primarily facilitate the exchange of information and brand knowledge. Consequently, the more in-depth, current knowledge they are equipped with the higher credibility the OBC can attain, and the more information

seekers it will attract. Consistently providing accurate interesting information, the likelihood of developing closer relationships with people seeking information is higher, and subsequently the opportunity to convert visitors into brand loyal socialisers is increased.

Based on these assumptions the researcher suggests that brand owners need to provide incentives to the socialisers in an OBC in order to sustain their interest in the brand, and to increase their brand knowledge. Socialisers should be invited to beta test new products, and included in brand decision making strategies where possible. From a marketing perspective co-creative relationships between the consumer and the firm will increase the knowledge socialisers have about the brand, strengthen their association with the brand owner, and ensure their continued representation and support for the brand in the OBC. It should be noted however that interference from the firm needs to be subtle and sanctioned by the moderators of the community in order to be conceivable, and effective.

8.4 Limitations

The results of this study are empirically valid; however as with any research where attitudes are measured and analysed, results should be interpreted with caution. For example, the differences between company-initiated OBCs and consumer-initiated OBCs have not been explored in this study and may have a bearing on the results, as the majority of the OBCs featured in this research were created by consumers with little interference from the brand owners. A larger percentage of respondents from one particular OBC should also be noted, limiting the expected range of responses. Another limitation of this study that can be addressed with further research is the wording of some of the items in the questionnaire, as several questions adapted from prior studies did not translate to the current study as effectively as was expected.

Furthermore, there are many different types of OBCs with a range of distinctive members, and although they have a brand focus in common, it is not always appropriate to make general assumptions about the findings. For example, in this study there is a bias as the majority of the sample was primarily from one type of community. However, given the time constraints and accessibility of the OBCs, this was unavoidable.

8.5 Further Research

Having developed a usable measure of social capital in OBCs, it is now possible to examine the relationships between social capital and a range of influences on participative behaviour. It is anticipated the social capital construct will theoretically have an impact on how easy OBCs are to use and how enjoyable they are to be involved in, based on the assumption that a shared language and shared vision are likely to make interactions easier and more enjoyable when there are commonalities between individuals.

Further research comparing company-initiated OBCs with consumer-initiated OBCs would also be of interest, as the majority of the sample in this study was from a consumer-initiated community, which as previously mentioned may have impacted the findings.

The role of moderators in OBCs would also be an interesting theme for research as there are differences between successful and unsuccessful OBCs that may have some relevance to the way they are managed and the administrative teams' objectives.

Finally, further research regarding OBCs with restricted access or the prerequisite of proof of purchase is needed. In this study, only OBCs who did not charge membership fees were included, thus limiting the sample as representative of the population.

8.5 Summary

Online brand communities (OBCs) are interesting phenomena. The people who join them participate voluntarily due to their interest in or attachment to a specific brand. The internet aspect of OBCs means membership is global, and individuals are only known by a pseudonym within the community, rendering them virtually anonymous. Although the group's affiliation with a brand denotes their commercial properties, OBCs predominantly exhibit attributes associated with a genuine community, differentiating them from online communities in general. Members of OBCs are connected by the friendships they develop with each other and the sense of belonging they have to the community, derived from their association with the brand. In OBCs, relationships are not based on the physical or social cues that often influence one's connection with others in face-to-face situations; rather they are based on the contributions members make to the community. Furthermore, it is the quality of the conversations between members and the depth of their knowledge that determines their recognition and status in the community.

Capturing the multiple influences on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in OBCs was a huge research challenge. However, the inclusion of several theories within the one study spans disciplinary boundaries and effectively extends previous research into OBCs. The researcher set out to explore the different factors affecting OBC members' behaviour with regard to their level of participation in the community, and how attached they become to both the community and the people in it. From the qualitative and quantitative research it was apparent people develop personal relationships with specific brands and OBCs perpetuate those relationships. They have the capacity to encourage people who have not tried the brand or aren't loyal consumers of the brand to change their views and therefore their purchasing decisions.

Within the field of OBC research the importance of this study relates not only to the provision of empirical evidence regarding the influences on the critical success factors, but also to the significance of this study as a comprehensive expansion of our general understanding of the structure of OBCs, and the behaviour of the people who frequent them. Furthermore, the current research expands on social capital theory by identifying the elements that represent social capital in the context of OBCs, and successfully tests the relevance of social capital as an influence on the critical success factors of OBCs.

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Appendix A

Community screen shots

Forum

If this is your first visit, be sure to check out the [FAQ](#) and read the forum rules by clicking the bolded link to the left. You may have to [register](#) before you can post: click the register link on the left to proceed. To start viewing messages, select the forum that you want to visit from the selection below.

Bodybuilding.com Forums

Welcome to the Bodybuilding.com Forums.

Main Forums		Last Post	Threads	Posts
	Supplements Everything about the world of supplements!	▶▶▶ Myprotein - 10 x BUNDLES -... by SkyFlight23 Today, 08:15 PM	668,755	10,906,982
	BodySpace Profiles And BodyBlogs View other BodySpaces and start your own!			
	Workout Programs What workout is best for your goal?	<<<< Wishwasdivin Is Taking ... by mvd546 Today, 08:18 PM	262,804	4,145,623
	Exercises Post questions about specific exercises here.	Skinny biceps - How to make... by 2k15Ali Today, 08:19 PM	208,267	2,584,019
	Nutrition Everything related to proper nutrition.	Input on my nutrition by tDeeks Today, 08:13 PM	334,374	4,039,317

More General Categories		Last Post	Threads	Posts
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More General Categories		Last Post	Threads	Posts
Popular topics!				
	Post Your Pictures Show the world the gains you have made!	Core/ BF Evaluation? by emsayer Today, 07:39 PM	98,778	1,441,861
	Post Your Own Articles! Here you can write a detailed article on any fitness subject and share it with the world!	HEVT Demonstration pics... by bigfeather 09-20-2015, 09:00 PM	754	25,707
	Sports Training Succeed in your sport!	Complete Leg Workout with... by Matth52 Today, 07:10 PM	35,139	370,698
	Fitness Competitions Fitness competitors can learn to succeed here.	WIN over \$200,000 in our... by ruichix Today, 06:25 PM	5,073	28,146
	IFBB Pro Bodybuilding Here you can discuss bodybuilding and fitness contests and competitors! Chat with real IFBB pros.	Flexatron is the uncrowned... by stknrice Today, 08:17 PM	41,966	1,310,644
	Contest Preparation Just hope your competition doesn't read this first.	Novice Physique Competition... by kimmelfitness Today, 04:54 PM	15,393	418,101
	Losing Fat Get rid of that extra fat quickly.	♠♠LF Chat v13.0♠♠Unlocking... by MuzzieChik786 Today, 08:15 PM	180,594	2,075,102

Appendix B

Focus group questions

1. Engagement questions (varied in each group).
2. How is your participation affected by the usability of the forum you are a member of? Please discuss.
3. Please give an example to indicate how your enjoyment has influenced your participation, or your sense of belonging to the OBC you are in.
4. Please discuss the importance of friendships in an OBC, and how they influence your participative behaviour and your sense of belonging to the OBC.
5. How does having a pseudonym, which essentially means you're anonymous, affect your participation?
6. Please talk together about the use of a shared language in your community, and how you feel it impacts on your involvement in the community.
7. Please try to give an example of how the OBC you are a member of has a shared vision. Also how it affects your participative behaviour or your sense of belonging to the community.
8. Do you feel that there is a level of trust between members in your OBC?
9. In general how do you feel about the concept of reciprocity in relation to your participation in the community? If possible please give an example of reciprocal behaviour in your OBC.

Appendix C

Focus group forms



Posting behaviour in virtual brand communities

I have been provided with a copy of the information letter, explaining the project.

I am over the age of 18.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that participation in the research project will involve:

- Participation in a focus group

I understand that the information provided will be kept confidential, will only be used for the purposes of this project and I will not be identified in any written assignment or presentation of the results of this project. I understand that I am free to withdraw from further participation at any time, without explanation or penalty.

Submission of this form will be deemed to be consent to participate in the focus group for this study.

Name

Date

Posting Behaviour in Online Brand Communities

I am conducting a focus group to discuss posting behaviour in online brand communities for research purposes as part of a PhD at Edith Cowan University, Australia. The aim of this study is to explore the motivations behind posting behaviour within a brand community. The project consists of two stages. For stage 1 of the project community members are being asked to participate in a focus group which will take approximately one hour, and will be given a \$30 gift card as reimbursement for their time. The focus group will involve sharing opinions on the subject of posting behaviour in virtual brand communities. Information gained from the focus group will assist in the development of a questionnaire for stage 2 of the study.

The information gained from the focus group discussion will only be used for research purposes, and will not be given or sold to any third parties, however results of the study will be provided to participants upon request via email to shutchi4@our.ecu.edu.au. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and while I would be pleased to have you participate, I respect your right to decline. There will be no consequences to you if you decide not to participate, and if you decide to discontinue participation at any time, you may do so without providing an explanation. All information gathered will be treated in a confidential manner, and your name will not be included in any publication arising out of the research. All of the research will be kept in a locked cabinet in the office of Dr Madeleine Ogilvie, one of the study supervisors.

If you are over 18 years of age and would like to participate in this project please complete and sign the focus group consent form which was emailed to you along with this information letter and bring it with you to the focus group meeting.

This project has been approved by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee. However, if you would like to discuss any aspect of this research please contact Stephanie Hutchinson at s.hutchinson@our.ecu.edu.au, Dr Madeleine Ogilvie m.ogilvie@ecu.edu.au or Dr Claire Lambert c.lambert@ecu.edu.au all of whom will be happy to discuss any issue relating to the research study. Alternatively if you have concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person you may contact:

Research Ethics Officer
Edith Cowan University
270 Joondalup Drive
Joondalup WA 6027
Phone: +61 8 6304 2170
Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

I would like to thank you in advance for your assistance with this research project.

Personal details form

Name _____

Age _____

Gender _____

Occupation _____

I am a member of the following online brand communities

Appendix D

Questionnaire and consent forms

This survey has been prepared by Stephanie Hutchinson a PhD student at Edith Cowan University. The purpose of this study is to explore the motivations behind posting behaviour within a brand community. Participation is only open to members who are over the age of 18. This study is completely voluntary, and information within the survey will not be given or sold to any third parties. While I would be pleased to have you participate, I respect your right to decline. There will be no consequences to you if you decide not to participate. It is important that you understand that your involvement in this study is voluntary. If you decide to discontinue participation at any time, you may do so without providing an explanation simply by closing the survey. If you withdraw, all information you have provided will be destroyed. All information gathered will be treated in a confidential manner, and your name will not be included in any publication arising out of the research. All of the research will be kept in a locked cabinet in the office of Dr Madeleine Ogilvie, one of the study supervisors. Submission of this questionnaire will be deemed to be your consent to participate in my project. This project has been approved by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee. However, if you would like to discuss any aspect of this research including how to obtain the results of the study, please contact Stephanie Hutchinson at shutchi4@our.ecu.edu.au, Dr Madeleine Ogilvie m.ogilvie@ecu.edu.au or Dr Claire Lambert c.lambert@ecu.edu.au all of whom will be happy to discuss any issue relating to the research study. Alternatively if you have concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person you may contact: Research Ethics Officer Edith Cowan University. 270 Joondalup Drive. Joondalup. WA 6027 Phone: +61 8 6304 2170 Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au I would like to thank you in advance for your assistance with this research project.

Please take your time to answer the following questions, there are no right or wrong answers, please tick the box that most closely represents you or how you feel. There are several sections to the survey so please try to complete the whole questionnaire. Thanks.

AP1 In a normal day how much time would you spend logged on to this community?

- 30 minutes or less (1)
- 30 minutes to 1 hour (2)
- 1 hour to 2 hours (3)
- 2 hours to 3 hours (4)
- More than 3 hours (5)

AP2 I contribute online posts to this community

- Once a day or more (1)
- Two to three times a week (2)
- Once a week (3)
- Once a fortnight (4)
- Once a month or less (5)

AP3 I only access this site to get information.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

PE1 The process of participating in this community is enjoyable

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

PE2 While participating in this community I experience pleasure

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

PE3 Overall I believe this community is fun to be a part of

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

PE4 Using this website provides me with a great deal of enjoyment

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

PEU1 It is easy for me to become skilled at participating in this community

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)

- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

PEU2 I think it is easy to participate in this community

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

PEU3 Learning how to participate in this community is easy for me

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

PEU4 I find it easy to use this community to do what I want to do

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

SOB1 My self-image overlaps with the image projected by this brand community

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

SOB2 I identify myself with the members of this community

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

SOB3 I feel like I fit in with this community

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SOB4 I feel a strong connection to this community

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)

- Strongly Agree (5)

SOB5 I feel like I have a lot in common with the other community members

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

NT1 I maintain close social relationships with some members of this virtual community

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

NT2 I spend a lot of time interacting with some members of this community

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

NT3 I know some members of this community on a personal level

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

PA1 In this community, other members can identify me by my alias or avatar

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

PA2 If someone sees the comments that I write in this community, he/she would be able to identify me

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

PA3 When I read comments in this community, I can guess who wrote them

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)

- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

PA4 When I participate in this community, I feel my true identity is exposed

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

SL1 The members of the community use common terms or jargon

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SL2 Members of the community use understandable wording in their messages

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

SL3 Members of the community use understandable language during discussions

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

SV1 Members of the community share a vision of helping others solve each other's problems

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

SV2 Members of the community share the same goal of learning from each other

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

SV3 Members of the community share the same idea that helping others is pleasant

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)

- Strongly Agree (5)

ST1 Members of the community will not take advantage of others even when the opportunity arises

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

ST2 Members of the community will always keep the promises they make to one another

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

ST3 Members of the community are honest in dealing with one another

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

R1. When I receive help, I feel it is only right to give back and help others

- Strongly disagree (1)

- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

R2. Members should return favours when the community is in need

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

R3. My behaviour will lead to cooperation from other members in the future

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Undecided (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

The following are some personal questions about you that will be used for statistical purposes only. Your answers will be held in the strictest confidence.

D1 Gender

- Male (1)
- Female (2)

D2 Age group

- 18 - 25 (1)
- 26 - 35 (2)
- 36 - 45 (3)
- 46 - 64 (4)
- 65 + (5)

D3 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Didn't graduate from highschool (1)
- High school graduate (2)
- Trade/technical/vocational training (3)
- University graduate (4)
- University postgraduate (5)
- Other (6)

D4 Marital status

- Single (1)
- Married/Defacto (2)
- Divorced (3)
- Separated but not divorced (4)
- Widowed (5)

Q54 What is your occupational status?

- Student (1)
- Casual employee (2)
- Part-time employee (3)

- Full-time employee (4)
- Retired (5)
- Unemployed (6)
- Self-employed (7)
- Other (8)

D5 what is your approximate annual family or single household income?

- \$0 - \$15,000 (1)
- \$15,001 - \$35,000 (2)
- \$35,001 - \$55,000 (3)
- \$55,001 - \$75,000 (4)
- \$75,001 - \$95,000 (5)
- \$95,001 - \$105,000 (6)
- \$105,001 - \$125,000 (7)
- \$125,001 - \$155,000 (8)
- \$155,001 + (9)

D6 In which country were you born?

Email Please enter your email address here to be eligible for the prize draw.

Appendix E

Community characteristics

The Brickset Community

The majority of respondents were from Brickset.com (69%) a site dedicated to the LEGO brand group. A well renowned organisation, LEGO produces a very successful line of building blocks known for their quality and robustness. The company was founded in Denmark in 1932, and statistics from the LEGO website (lego.com) indicate that more than 400 billion LEGO bricks have been manufactured since 1958. Their largest market is Germany, closely followed by the USA. LEGO products are primarily intended as construction related toys for children, but also appear to attract a great deal of interest from adults; as is evident from the 100,000 plus members of the Brickset community (brickset.com, 2014).

The Brickset community was created by Huw Millington in 1997 mainly as a website for users to identify and reference different sets of LEGO. However it soon became apparent that people who were interested in the brand wanted to share their enthusiasm with other fans, this prompted Huw to establish a forum within the website specifically designed as somewhere for people to share information and to socialise. By 2007 the site had become so popular it became affiliated with Amazon.com and eBay.com giving members the capacity to buy and sell their LEGO online (Brickset.com, 2014). According to Brickset.com (2015) the community has grown from 13,000 unique users in 2009 to over 100,000 members today in 2015. Although Brickset.com has experienced high growth in their member numbers, in comparison to the size of some of the other communities featured in this study they are still a relatively small entity. A possibility for this is that there are other LEGO related communities for fans to choose from.

Magic the Gathering Salvation Forum (MTG)

Another site featured in this study is mtgsalvation.com a community of Magic the Gathering enthusiasts and the first trading card game to be produced commercially. 'Magic' as it is referred to was created by Richard Garfield and first published in 1993 by a company called Wizards of the Coast (Williams, 2007). The online community can play

the game in a virtual world or converse with each other in the community forum. This is a very popular community with over 200 thousand members worldwide.

[Dr Who Forum](#)

The Dr Who fan website [thedrwhoforum.com](#) has over 2100 members and is based around a very popular British television show that initially aired in 1963 and is still running to this day ([drwho.com](#), 2013). Members are devoted fans of the television show and share their opinions on all aspects of the series.

[Ferrari Chat](#)

This [ferrarichat.com](#) community is focused on the Ferrari brand of vehicles and has more than 150 thousand members. The people who join this site are not necessarily owners of a Ferrari but are avid fans and conversations are generally focused on technical issues or specifications regarding different models of Ferrari. The website is well organised with links to Ferrarichat forums specific to international regional areas such as the UK or India that members can access directly from the forum ([Ferrarichat.com](#), 2013).

[Everquest](#)

The [allakhazam.com](#) forum which since undertaking this research is now accessed through [www.zam.com](#) is home to more than 25 million users involved in online gaming. The Everquest forum is one community within the Zam website that houses several other gaming communities. The Everquest forum is where people interested in the game get together to discuss tactics, or game moves, and generally socialise with other keen players of the game ([allakhazam.com](#), 2013).

[Watch Turf](#)

One of the sites dedicated to individuals who are interested in horology or the study of watches is called [newturfers.com](#), and is home to members who are interested in many different brands of watches. The site is very sleek in its design and attracts members from all over the world to socialise and share pictures of their watches ([newturfers.com](#), 2013).

BMW

Although only a very few responses were from this website it is also worthy of mention as an example of the size of these online forums related to luxury brands. The bimmerfest.com community is dedicated to lovers of the BMW brand vehicles and has more than 420 thousand members. This is a very popular online forum that is completely devoted to everything connected with BMW vehicles and as with Ferrari Chat also has members on a worldwide scale (Bimmerfest.com, 2014).

Appendix F

OBC screen shots

The Brickset Forum

Brickset Forum Discussions Activity Sign In Brickset.com Search

Home

We've introduced a new feature to display your country alongside your posts. **Please edit your profile and fill in the 'Location' field.** This will be particularly useful in the marketplace category. Thank you.

You must be **16 or over** to participate in the Brickset Forum. Please read the [announcements](#) and [rules](#) before you join.

Brickset
Collecting

DC Comics, Super Heroes – Limited Edition Bat-Pod (June 2015)
48.6K views 963 comments Most recent by YogaFett2 1:16AM Collecting

ToysRUs falcon
27 views 1 comment Most recent by dougts 1:11AM Collecting

Small Clear Zip Seal Bags
57 views 6 comments Most recent by ryjay 1:02AM Collecting

TRU Bricktober sets??
1.7K views 44 comments Most recent by bea September 25 Collecting

Names for the next wave of Minecraft sets
2.6K views 40 comments Most recent by Lyichir September 25 Collecting

[More Discussions](#)

Howdy, Stranger!
It looks like you're new here. If you want to get involved, click one of these buttons!

[Sign In](#) [Register](#)

Categories
Recent Discussions
Activity
Participated
Best Of...

Categories

All Categories	16.7K
Announcements	0
Current Announcements	0
General	6.4K
Collecting	2.1K
Buying & Selling Topics	1.2K
Everything else LEGO	2.1K

The Magic Fundamentals Forum

Home > MTG Salvation Forums

Forum Rules Search Tools

Read before you post!

▼ **Magic Fundamentals**

Forum	Latest Post	Threads	Posts
The Rumor Mill (118 Viewing) Everybody loves Magic rumors! Share yours with others here. Please read the Rumor Mill Guidelines. ↳ New Card Discussion ↳ Speculation ↳ Rumor Mill Archive	View Moderators ▶ Big Box Promo - Stocking... by dabap 44 minutes ago	29,218	1,433,194
Magic Rulings (158 Viewing) Got a rules question? Ask it here! There are many rules gurus that frequent our forum. ↳ Magic Rulings Archives ↳ Rumored Card Rulings	View Moderators ▶ Official Word on Basic L... by Dire Wombat 2 hours ago	73,943	360,923
Magic General (83 Viewing) For discussion of everything to do with Magic that can't fit in any of the other forums. Magic-related opinion polls are allowed in the Opinions and Polls subforum. ↳ Card Authentication ↳ Opinions & Polls ↳ Deckbuilding/Playtest Groups	View Moderators ▶ Magic etiquette - was I b... by ThyLordQ 24 minutes ago	25,791	591,527
Magic Software (11 Viewing) For all your electronic Magic needs. ↳ Magic Online ↳ Duels of the Planeswalkers ↳ Mobile Apps ↳ Third Party Programs ↳ Streams and Videos	View Moderators ▶ MTG Image - Provides high... by jibot 21 minutes ago	2,321	24,830
Magic Storyline (14 Viewing) Come here to discuss the storylines within Magic.	Uncharted Realms Discus... by Vorhospike	2,690	82,649

The Dr Who Forum

THE DOCTOR WHO FORUM

Theories even more insane than what's actually happening

[Home](#) [Forums](#) [Blogs](#) [Activity](#) [Etiquette](#) [Members](#) [Join](#) [Help](#)

Forums

[Home](#) > [Forums](#)

Forum	Topics	Posts	Freshness
General A forum for general chat and news.	25	16,513	5 hours, 30 minutes ago amyandroy4dayz
Episodes A forum about episodes	164	14,623	39 minutes ago purofilion

[The Twelfth Doctor \(15, 5,815\).](#)
[The Eleventh Doctor \(44, 7,173\).](#)
[The Tenth Doctor \(23, 384\).](#)

ctorwhoforum.com/members/

Ferrari Motor Vehicles

FerrariChat.com

User Name Remember Me?
 Password

[Register](#)
[FerrariAds.com](#)
[Sponsors](#)
[Paid Subscriptions](#)

Welcome to the FerrariChat.com.

If this is your first visit, be sure to check out the [FAQ](#) by clicking the link above. You may have to [register](#) before you can post and view images: click the register link above to proceed. To start viewing messages, select the forum that you want to visit from the selection below.

Forum	Last Post	Threads	Posts
FerrariChat.com			
eBay Ferrari Auctions	Ferrari : 360 Spider F1 2004 ferrari 360 spider f... by eBay Today 07:10 PM	915	929
FerrariAds.com Classifieds free to view, but subscription required to post ads.			
Ferraris	[For Sale] Three pedal with all the right colours &... by asphaltca Today 07:29 PM	1,137	23,812
Ferrari Parts & Collectibles	[For Sale] Ferrari 355 Shock Actuator by ttanner Today 08:25 PM	3,947	23,477
Other Cars	[For Sale] 2005 MINI COOPER S R53 for sale by WJHMH Today 08:17 PM	546	7,604
Other Parts & Collectibles	Breitling All Diamond 18k Yellow Gold Watch by asphaltca	720	3,558

Everquest Gaming Site

Home
Games
Forums
Videos
Wiki
 Wowhead
 Hearthead

ZAM Forums
Forum Settings ▶ Jump to Category

Cross Site Forums	Threads	Posts	Last Active Thread
Computer Hardware & Troubleshooting <small>Use this forum for asking other visitors for computer-related technical help. (Otherwise known as the "Help me Kaolan" forum). Remember, this forum is multi-game, so please specify the game you are asking about.</small>	5019	19396	Upgrade advice 16 days ago
General Video Game Discussion <small>Use this forum to discuss any games not covered by specific forums.</small>	22685	138657	Destiny 2 hours, 1 minute ago
Out Of Topic <small>A forum for the ZAM community to babble about non game related subjects.</small>	39498	907232	A shameless self promotion. 8 days ago
Site and Forum Feedback <small>Use this forum for feedback and suggestions regarding the site and forum system, broken site pages, requests to lock or delete forum threads and posts, issues with your account, complaints regarding other users, and all other topics directed to the admins. Be sure to mention the game, browser, etc.!</small>	12350	63870	Weird Arrows Bug 2 days, 9 hours ago
The Asylum <small>No holds barred forum for deep OOT discourse. Not for the faint of heart.</small>	25220	745650	Things we'd be talking about if the forum wasn't dead 17 minutes, 45 seconds ago
TV, Movies, Anime & Books <small>Forum for other types of media.</small>	1734	25079	The MCU Omnibus Thread 3 hours, 10 minutes ago
Dark Age of Camelot Forums			
General Discussion	6102	14278	Crafting 8 days ago

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Sincerely,
The ZAM Team

Search the web and Windows

Rolex Watches

Latest Posts		
Topics	Statistics	Last Post
My car is trying to kill me! Started by ChrisEdu , 22nd September 2015, 05:13 PM	9 responses 58 views 0 likes	by ChrisEdu Yesterday, 05:19 PM
PANERAI PAM562 LUMINOR BASE 8 DAYS TITANIO PAM 562 NEW MODEL SUPER RARE HOT DEAL Started by TWCmike , Yesterday, 03:48 PM	0 responses 4 views 0 likes	by TWCmike Yesterday, 03:48 PM
AUDEMARS PIGUET ROYAL OAK OFFSHORE RUBBERCLAD WHITE DIAL SUPER DEAL DISCONTINUED Started by TWCmike , Yesterday, 03:47 PM	0 responses 9 views 0 likes	by TWCmike Yesterday, 03:47 PM
PANERAI PAM98 RADIOMIR GMT ALARM 45MM JLC MOVEMENT PAM 98 DISCONTINUED RARE FIND Started by TWCmike , Yesterday, 03:46 PM	0 responses 7 views 0 likes	by TWCmike Yesterday, 03:46 PM
An interesting photo... Started by harb , 24th September 2015, 10:26 AM	6 responses 33 views 0 likes	by rolexplorer2 Yesterday, 03:00 PM
F.S. ROLEX 16600 SEA DWELLER (NO HOLES CASE) Started by cheswickhouse , Yesterday, 11:23 AM	0 responses 30 views 0 likes	by cheswickhouse Yesterday, 11:23 AM
Number plate of the day Started by cakey , 6th March 2015, 01:27 PM	222 responses 2,158 views 0 likes	by ChrisEdu 24th September 2015, 06:38 PM
FS: Audemars Piguet Offshore ROO Black NEW MODEL 26470ST Started by patek.wis , 25th August 2015, 06:50 PM	2 responses 80 views 0 likes	by patek.wis 24th September 2015, 06:08 PM
Today i am sporting my... Started by Thecollector , 23rd January 2011, 01:37 PM	4,606 responses 198,141 views 0 likes	by cakey 24th September 2015, 05:48 PM

Bimmerfest.com

Forum	Last Post	Threads	Posts
BMW Model Discussions			
New Member Introductions Welcome to Bimmerfest! Whether you are a current BMW owner, shopping for a new or used BMW or just interested in cars, we hope you enjoy your visit. Take a moment to introduce yourself and post a picture of your BMW for the rest of the Bimmerfest BMW community to see.	cover removal by mhohmsacr Today 06:26 PM	46,923	111,637
General BMW Questions Use this forum to ask general question about the BMW ownership and keep up on the latest BMW news. Direct all model specific questions to model specific forums below.	What series/model is the BMW... by him330i Today 03:21 PM	21,275	226,395
BMW News Get the latest BMW headlines, news, and rumors and discuss the future of BMW with other BMW enthusiasts!	Hidden report shows BMWs 33... by Autoputzer Today 06:15 PM	1,207	3,594
1 Series / 2 Series The 1 Series / 2 Series Forum. E82 / E87 / E88 1 Series (2008 - 2013) F22 / F23 2 Series (2014 - Current)	Receipt of BMW Online Messages by mvalldo Today 06:28 PM	4,365	42,075
3 Series / 4 Series The 3 Series / 4 Series Forum. If you would like to see all new posts in all the forums, click here . E21 (1975 - 1983) E30 (1982 - 1993) E36 (1991 - 1999) E46 (1999 - 2006) E90/E91/E92/E93 (2006 - 2013) F30 / F31 / F32 / F33 / F34 / F36 (2012 - current)	340i mini mods & pics by phantom701 Today 06:44 PM	180,983	2,353,515
5 Series Ask questions and discuss the 5 Series here. If you would like to see all new posts in all the forums, click here . E28 (1982 - 1988) E34 (1989 - 1995) E39 (1997 - 2003) E60 / E61 (2004 - 2010) F07 Gran Turismo (2010 - Current) F10 / F11 (2011 - Current) 5 Series DIY	Creator 110- scan tool by boostmaster Today 06:45 PM	128,850	1,400,999
6 Series BMW 6 Series forum E24 (1976 - 1989) E63 / E64 6 Series (2004 - 2010) F12 / F13 (2012 - Current) F06 Gran Coupe (2013 - Current) 6 Series DIY	reset calendar date by HarbE Today 06:23 PM	16,013	190,413
7 Series / 8 Series			

Appendix G

Descriptive analysis of questionnaire constructs

The following section describes the outcome of descriptive analysis on the 10 variables featured in the questionnaire. Details include measures of central tendency such as the mean and standard deviation values of the dependant variables 'Participative behaviour' and 'Sense of belonging', and the independent variables 'Anonymity', 'Network ties', 'Perceived enjoyment', and 'Perceived ease of use'. Also the variables that represent the second order latent construct 'Social capital' which includes 'Social trust', 'Shared language', 'Shared vision' and 'Reciprocity'.

Participative behaviour

The variables for participative behaviour include two types of participation as representative of the primary facets of participative behaviour.

Amount of time spent in the community (PB1)

The first variable was designed to measure the amount of time members spend in the community with the question 'in a normal day how much time would you spend logged on to this community?' Each answer is assigned a score of 1 (low participation) to 5 (high participation). The mean for this question is 1.78 and the standard deviation 1.053. The results show that 52% of members are logged onto the community for 30 minutes or less per day, and only 4% are logged on to the community for more than 3 hours per day.

Time spent in community (PB1)

Question	Score	Frequency	Percent
30 minutes or less	1	344	52.2
30 minutes to 1 hour	2	193	29.3
1 hour to 2 hours	3	72	10.9
2 hours to 3 hours	4	21	3.2
More than 3 hours	5	29	4.4
Total		659	100.0

Frequency of posts contributed (PB2)

To measure the frequency of posting in the community the statement 'I contribute online posts to this community', with five options ranging from once a day to once a month was put to members. Each answer choice is assigned a score from 1 (low participation) to 5 (high participation). The mean for this question is 1.91 and the standard deviation 1.418. Results show that although a higher number of members (73) contribute posts daily, than 2 to 3 times a week (53) once a week (52) or fortnightly (56), members' predominantly only post once a month or less (428).

Frequency of posts

Question	Score	Frequency	Percent
Once a day or more	1	73	11.4
2 to 3 times a week	2	53	8.1
Once a week	3	52	7.9
Once a fortnight	4	56	8.5
Once a month or less	5	428	64.9
Total		659	100.0

Information only

A question was included in the survey in order to ascertain if members were visiting the site for information only: 'I only access this site to get information', with five options on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The mean for this question is 3.77 and the standard deviation 1.274. This outcome indicates that the majority of the sample agrees with the statement (70%). Therefore the majority of members only access the site for information purposes.

Information only

Question	Score	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	1	44	6.7
Disagree	2	106	16.1
Undecided	3	49	7.4
Agree	4	224	33.8
Strongly Agree	5	237	36
Total		659	100.0

Sense of belonging

There are 5 Items for the construct a sense of belonging, all of which are on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Sense of Belonging

Item	Standard deviation	Mean on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree
My self-image overlaps with the image projected by this brand community	1.046	2.93
I identify myself with the members of this community	.947	3.40
I feel like I fit in with this community	.743	3.70
I feel a strong connection to this community	.924	3.27
I feel like I have a lot in common with the other community members	.907	3.54

Anonymity

There are 5 Items for the construct anonymity, all of which are on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The means for all of the items are above 3 which indicate that members feel they are moderately anonymous.

Anonymity

Item	Standard deviation	Mean on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree
In this community, other members can identify me by my alias or avatar	1.190	3.06
If someone sees the comments that I write in this community, he/she would be able to identify me	1.102	3.29
When I read comments in this community, I can guess who wrote them	1.053	3.30
When I participate in this community, I feel my true identity is exposed	1.032	3.55

Network ties

There are 3 Items for the construct network ties, all of which are on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The mean scores for these items are all below 3 therefore the results for this construct were the lowest of all the constructs, and indicated members generally did not feel they had developed network ties within the OBC.

Network ties

Item	Standard deviation	Mean on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree
I maintain close social relationships with some members of the virtual community	1.103	2.11
I spend a lot of time interacting with some members of the community	1.060	2.17
I know some members of the community on a personal level	1.158	2.00

Perceived enjoyment

There are 4 Items for the construct perceived enjoyment, all of which are on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The mean scores for these items suggest members experience a degree of enjoyment being involved with the community.

Perceived enjoyment

Item	Standard deviation	Mean on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree)
The process of participating in this community is enjoyable	.748	4.08
While participating in this community I experience pleasure	.716	3.99
Overall I believe this community is fun to be a part of	.703	4.18
Using the website provides me with a great deal of enjoyment	.701	4.23

Perceived ease of use

There are 3 Items for the construct perceived ease of use, all of which are on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The outcome of this analysis indicates that members are inclined to believe the community is easy to use.

Perceived ease of use

Item	Standard deviation	Mean on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree)
It is easy for me to become skilled at participating in this community	.774	4.02
I think it is easy to participate in this community	.706	4.02
Learning how to participate in this community is easy for me	.754	4.07

Social capital

Social capital is measured by four constructs, shared language, shared vision, social trust, and reciprocity. Each of these constructs has 3 items all measured on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Social capital

Item	Standard deviation	Mean on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree
Shared language		
The members of the community use common terms or jargon	.675	4.22
Members of the community use understandable wording in their messages	.670	4.02
Members of the community use understandable language during discussions	.678	4.02
Shared vision		
Members of the community share a vision of helping others to solve each other's problems	.768	3.95
Members of the community share the same goal of learning from each other	.745	3.97
Members of the community share the same idea that helping each other is pleasant	.710	3.97
Social trust		
Members of the community will not take advantage of others even when the opportunity arises	.868	3.33
Members of the community will always keep the promises they make to one another	.702	3.28
Members of the community are honest in dealing with one another	.691	3.63
Reciprocity		
When I receive help, I feel it is only right to give back and help others	6.39	4.10
Members should return favours when the community is in need	.673	3.98
My behaviour will lead to cooperation from other members in the future	.719	3.76

The following section describes the outcome of descriptive analysis on the eight independent variables, and the two dependant variables featured in the questionnaire. Details include measures of central tendency such as the mean and standard deviation values of the independent variables 'Perceived ease of use' 'Perceived enjoyment' 'Network ties', and 'Anonymity'. The variables that represent the second order latent construct 'Social capital' which include 'Shared language', 'Shared vision', 'Social trust', and 'Reciprocity'. Additionally the dependant variables participative behaviour and a sense of belonging (SOB). All variables were measured on a five point Likert scale with 1 representing strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree, with the exception of participative behaviour which is the product of two items relating to the time spent in the OBC and the frequency of posts contributed.

Construct means and standard deviations

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation
Perceived ease of use	3.96	0.65
Perceived enjoyment	4.08	0.64
Network ties	2.09	1.00
Perceived anonymity	3.21	0.96
Shared language	4.02	0.64
Shared vision	3.96	0.65
Social trust	3.41	0.65
Reciprocity	3.94	0.73
Sense of belonging	3.48	0.70
Participative behaviour	1.84	1.03

For perceived ease of use, the mean was 3.96 and the standard deviation observed was 0.65 suggesting that in general respondents perceive the community as easy to use.

Perceived enjoyment received a slightly higher average of 4.08 indicating that participants

in the study perceive involvement in their OBC as enjoyable. Network ties yielded an average of 2.09, suggesting that the majority of respondents are less inclined to develop close relationships in their OBC. The average for perceived anonymity at 3.21 implies that in general respondents are neutral with regard to the perception of their level of anonymity in the OBC. For the social capital construct the shared language element received a mean of 4.02 and a standard deviation of 0.64 indicating that the majority of respondents generally agree that they share a similar language within the community. A shared vision garnered an average of 3.96 also indicating that participants agree that they are likely to share a vision or goal for their community. The social trust element of social capital yielded an average of 3.41 suggesting that although slightly more respondents agree that social trust exists within the community in general the view is leaning towards neutrality. Reciprocity received an overall rating of 3.94 indicating that on average respondents agreed that members in their communities show reciprocal behaviour as the norm.

The dependant variable participative behaviour yielded an average of 1.84 and a standard deviation of 1.08, this is quite a low score implying that respondents in this study generally spend little time participating in the community on a daily basis and contribute posts less than once a month on average. The sense of belonging construct received a mean of 3.48 indicating that the majority of participants in the study tend to agree that they have developed a sense of belonging to the community. Overall, the findings revealed that participative behaviour and developing network ties in an OBC received the lowest average ratings, followed by perceived anonymity, social trust, a SOB, reciprocity, shared vision and perceived ease of use. Shared language and perceived enjoyment received the highest mean score.

Comparative analysis between the subgroups of information seekers and socialisers revealed that the majority of respondents from the OBC's featured in the quantitative stage of this study are information seekers (70%) with a smaller portion of socialisers (23%) and a few respondents who are undecided (7%). There is also a difference between means for each sub-group. For example, the core group of socialisers although only a small percentage of the overall membership of the community participate more, has a stronger SOB, finds the site easier to use, more enjoyable and with more network ties

than the majority of members looking for information only. They are also more recognisable in the community. It also appears that the information seekers; which make up the majority of the members in an OBC, are predominantly members with weak ties who visit the OBC for information and either develop relationships with the other community members and become a socialiser, or move on having benefited from the information provided by the OBC.

Comparison between information seekers and socialisers subsamples

Subsample	Socialisers		Information seekers		<i>p</i> -value
Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	
Perceived ease of use	4.12	0.70	3.94	0.62	***
Perceived enjoyment	4.24	0.70	4.06	0.61	***
Network ties	2.44	1.08	1.95	0.94	***
Perceived anonymity	2.71	0.93	3.40	0.93	***
Shared language	4.10	0.65	4.02	0.61	.21
Shared vision	4.06	0.69	3.96	0.61	.09
Social trust	3.54	0.73	3.38	0.62	***
Reciprocity	4.11	0.52	3.90	0.54	***
Sense of belonging	3.48	0.71	3.22	0.73	***
Participative behaviour	2.51	1.21	1.61	0.87	***

With regard to the participative behaviour of the respondents in the sample there were also differences between the levels of participation between information seekers and socialisers.

Comparison between information seekers and socialisers relating to frequency and percentage of time spent participating in an OBC in one day

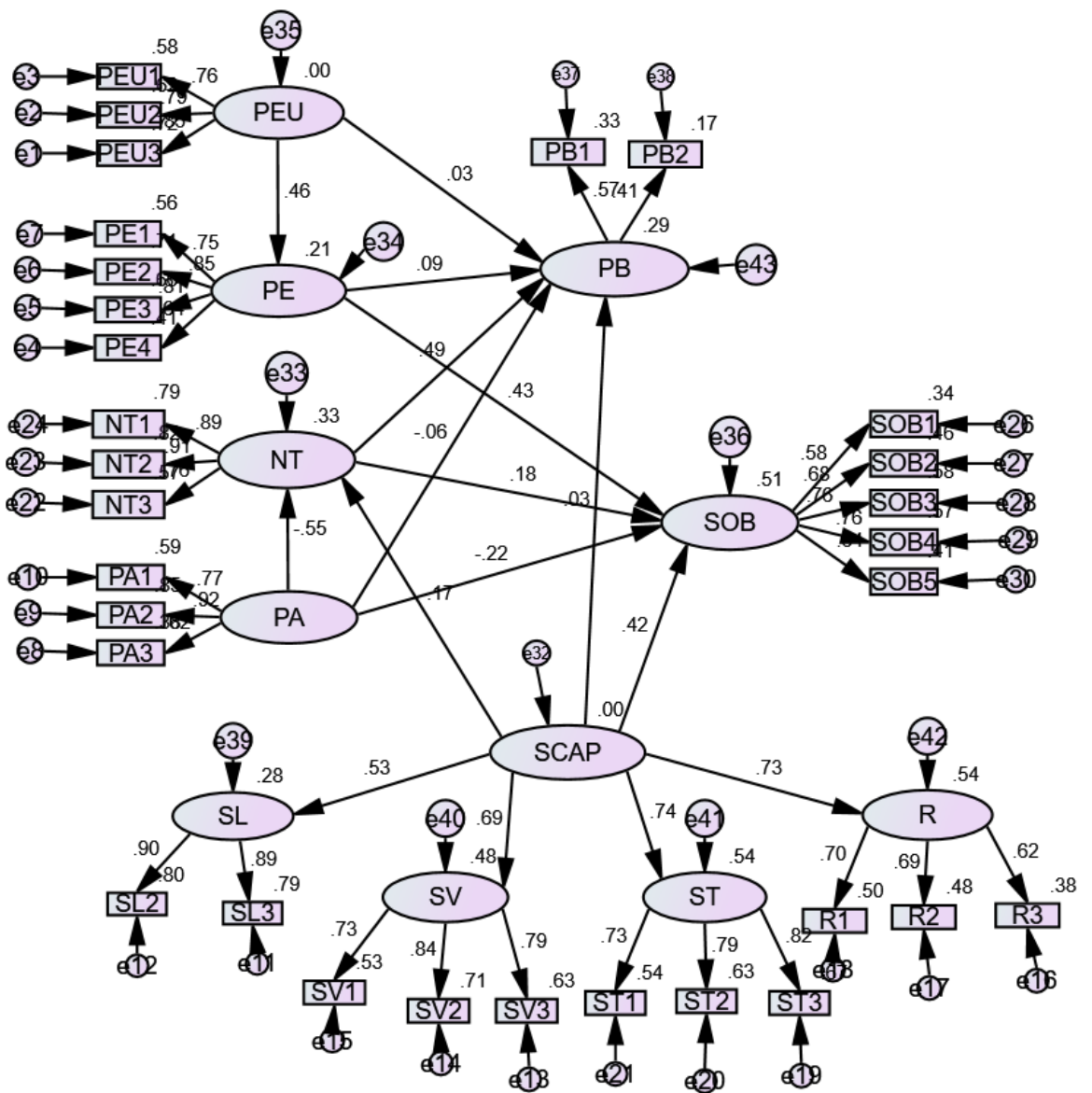
Participative behaviour (Time spent in the OBC)	Information seekers (frequency and percent)	Socialisers (frequency and percent)
30 minutes or less	275 (60%)	45 (30%)
30 minutes to 1 hour	119 (26%)	56 (38%)
1 hour to 2 hours	42 (9%)	25 (17%)
2 hours to 3 hours	11 (2%)	9 (6%)
3 hours or more	13 (3%)	14 (9%)

Comparison between information seekers and socialisers relating to frequency and percentage of posts contributed to an OBC

Participative behaviour (Posts contributed to the OBC)	Information seekers (frequency and percent)	Socialisers (frequency and percent)
Once per month or less	364 (79%)	50 (34%)
Once per fortnight	29 (6%)	20 (13%)
Once per week	23 (5%)	22 (15%)
2 to 3 times per week	16 (3%)	30 (20%)
Once per day or more	31 (7%)	27 (18%)

Appendix H

Full structural model



Appendix I

Social Capital Studies

Best & Kreuger, 2006	Generalised trust, reciprocity, and integrity.	Random sample of residents in the US (related to survey on internet usage).	General environment.	The indicators of social capital positively relate to the level of interaction with people met on the Internet.
Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998	Network ties, network configuration, appropriable organisation, shared codes and language, shared narratives, trust norms, obligations, identification.	A discussion and model development.	Business environment.	Social capital facilitates the creation of new intellectual capital.
Liao & Chou, 2011	Network ties, social trust, reciprocity norm, shared language, shared vision.	An online survey was conducted with a sample of 318 virtual community participants.	Online virtual community environment.	Social capital positively contributes to virtual community participants' attitudes and intentions toward knowledge adoption.
Chi, Chan, Seow, & Tam, 2009	Social trust, social norms.	Two experimental studies: one in the context of real-world, small-scale online communities, and the other in the context of computer-simulated large scale online communities.	Online community environment.	Offline social capital can be transplanted into an online community (small or large) to foster the development of trust and social norms that make a community thrive.
Lee & Lee, 2010	Sociability, trust, generalised norm, life contentment.	This study conducted an online survey of college students at the University of Buffalo, the State University of New York.	Online community use.	People who access the internet for online community use tend to have more sociability and higher levels of social capital than online community non-users.

Jones & Taylor, 2012	Shared values, shared language, norms of behaviour, common understandings, network ties.	Online questionnaire to respondents recruited by the Study Response Project – an online survey project hosted by the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University.	Consumer services.	Social capital is a theoretical framework to examine the effect of relationships on customer loyalty.
Li, Clark & Wheeler, 2013	Trust, shared language, shared vision, communication dimensions, network ties.	Conceptual paper	OBCs.	This paper demonstrates that OBCs can be understood from a social science perspective by introducing the theory of social capital.
Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998	Social interaction ties, trust, trustworthiness, shared vision.	Data collected from multiple respondents in all the business units of a large multinational electronics company	Business environment.	Dimensions of social capital are significantly related to the extent of interunit resource exchange, which in turn has a significant effect on product innovation.
Mathwick, Wiertz & DeRuyter, 2008	Voluntarism, reciprocity, social trust.	Both quantitative and qualitative data in a virtual P3 community sponsored by a firm that develops software for digital media creation and Web development.	Virtual community environment.	Social capital is a latent construct, an intangible resource determined by the normative influences of voluntarism, reciprocity, and social trust. Social capital creates value for members of a social network.
Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau & Zhang, 2012	Familiarity, trust, perceived similarity.	Target population are members of Taobao, the largest consumer-to-consumer (C2C) website in China with over 170 million registered users at the end of 2009.	Virtual communities.	Factors that cultivate a VC member's sense of belonging and their effects on facilitating participation in the VC in terms of the intentions to get and share experiences and knowledge.