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The Power of Committed Consumers

A Quantitative Study of Branded Online Communities' Impact on Brand Perception

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how interaction drivers in a branded online community impacts the brand perception among members of a community. Understanding brand perception is important since brand management is crucial for differentiating on the market. This study examines a branded online community, which is a community created and hosted by a brand. By examining previous research, four drivers for interaction and two influential components have been identified as important factors to understand the impact on brand perception. By using a quantitative research method, an online survey was distributed in a Facebook community (N=528). The results suggest that engagement within the community will have a large impact on members' brand perception. All content within the branded online community will be associated with the brand, which is a risk since the content is user-generated and difficult to control. The brand must establish a level of involvement that will encourage user-generated content and ensure relevance, while not interfering with the conversations in the community. This will generate high engagement among consumers, which is shown to be key to raise brand perception.

Keywords: Branded online communities, user-generated content, brand perception, interaction drivers, consumer engagement

INTRODUCTION

In an ever-changing market where new products and services appear every day, the brand is the only way to differentiate and compete. Therefore, branding is the determining factor of a company's success in society, as the brand becomes a powerful tool to attach meaning and values to a product (Kornberger, 2010). Consumers are attracted to brands that they can identify with and relate to; they are buying the meaning associated with a product rather than the product itself. Having a clear and effective brand strategy is one of the key aspects of a successful

company, in order to be a strong competitor and differentiate on the market. Branding is a large and complex area, with multiple channels and a big dependence on consumers' cognitive processes. It is not only brand managers that are in charge of the brand meaning (Beverland, 2005). The brand is shaped through the interpretation and sense-making by consumers, and their emotions related to the brand (Kornberger, 2010; Roy & Banarjee, 2007). To sell a powerful brand, it is important to identify the wants and needs of consumers (Beverland, 2005). Understanding the brand image and how consumers perceive the brand is therefore vital

(Keller, 1993). This requires thorough market research, and sometimes marketers need to challenge existing branding practices to truly understand consumer behavior.

Digitalization and social media have made the creation and evolvement of the brand even more dependent on the consumer, as compared to traditional media (Quinton, 2013). This has also enabled consumption without purchase, as consumption of and interaction with the brand can take place online. The foundation of the brand lies in this communication and interaction between the company and its consumers (Gromark & Melin, 2011). However, as argued by Beverland (2005), problems might occur as it is not the company itself that has the power of creating content and steering the conversation among consumers in a certain direction. Allowing consumers to create content causes the brand to lose control of what is being produced (Quinton, 2013). The content produced by consumers, in various forms in online and offline contexts, will have a powerful effect on the brand meaning. Therefore, the user-generated content should be considered as an asset in the brand strategy, but it must be done carefully due to the risk of letting discussion flow among consumers without brand involvement. Understanding interaction drivers in the community will help the brand to do this (Khan and Khattak, 2017). To examine the influence of user-generated content, we have decided to focus this study on one marketing channel where user-generated content is seen as a crucial aspect: branded online communities.

Brand communities have previously been a place where like-minded consumers can interact and discuss topics related to a specific brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The internet has enabled consumers to create online communities, as well as provided a tool for companies to encourage more consumers to engage with the brand, without having to be constrained by geographical boundaries (Gummerus et al., 2012; Nambisan & Baron, 2007). Online communities have not only enabled consumers to reach other like-minded people, but also for companies to interact and communicate with customers through a new channel (McWilliam, 2000). For a brand, engaging in the online community can be a source to a live foresight on

market forces and trends. This highlights why it could be beneficial for a company to create a branded online community (Gummerus et al., 2012). A branded online community is an online community that is hosted and created by a brand. The branded online community may be a space for engaging with consumers, as well as collecting feedback and inspiration. The brand should encourage consumers to interact and exchange knowledge and experiences within the branded online community (Wang et al., 2017). The branded online community facilitates a space for the brand and the consumer to shape relationships, but also for consumers to build relationships with other consumers (Munnukka et al., 2015). Hosting communities for loyal consumers and consumer-to-consumer interaction is one way to encourage user-generated content (McWilliam, 2000; Hajli et al., 2017). User-generated content is seen as one of the most effective communication forms since it is considered to be more trustworthy than content created by a brand (Kim & Johnson, 2016).

For the branded online community to fulfill its purpose of encouraging conversations and interactions among the members, previous research has found some interaction drivers that have an influential impact. These drivers have been defined as important in order for members to stay active in the community; making the drivers crucial for the community's survival. The first driver is presented by Yang et al. (2016), who argue that the members need to experience that their efforts and engagement are being recognized, which is why recognition for contribution will be used as an interaction driver in this study. Members who feel appreciated by the community will keep interacting and creating content, which is essential for the community's survival (Yang et al., 2016; Gruen et al., 2000). Further, Yang et al. (2016) argue that members must feel that they are allowed to express their opinions, leading to the second interaction driver in this study; freedom of expression. Through interaction, relationships between members as well as between members and creators will evolve. Yang et al. (2016) found that when members build trust and relationships with each other, they will feel obligated to keep contributing to the community. Thus, member relations will be the third interaction

driver in this study. The quality of the content in the community will be associated with the community creator, and strong emotions towards the creator can arise (Nambisan & Baron, 2007). Therefore, the fourth interaction driver that will be examined is creator relations. We hypothesize that the interaction drivers have a direct effect on brand perception.

Previous research has argued for the importance of understanding how members are interacting frequently in online communities, and how the relationship to the brand can advance and evolve over time (Yang et al., 2016). This will be treated as influential components in this study. The first influential component is presented by Yang et al. (2016), who describe different levels of member activity, where the member may interact as a poster or a lurker. Further, the second influential component regards the duration of membership and how this can have an impact on loyalty towards the brand and brand perception, as highlighted by Yang et al. (2016) and Gummerus et al. (2012). We assume that the influential components have a moderating effect on the previously discussed direct effects.

Social media has grown into a platform where consumers' perceptions of brands and purchase intentions are influenced. Consequently, there is a need to understand how and why consumers interact in these forums (Munnukka et al., 2015). All content in the community will have an impact on the brand image and member's brand perception. Therefore, creating a branded online community comes with great risk, as the user-generated content in the community can be seriously harmful to the brand (Khan & Khattak, 2017). When the online community has been created, the members become the producers of the content in the community. Previous studies have mainly examined brand communities and online communities in general, and this report will contribute with a new perspective on communities that are hosted and created by the brand; branded online communities. Brand owners need to be aware of the risks and possibilities that come with creating branded online communities and to understand and know how the user-generated content is impacting brand perception among members of the community. As argued by Khan and Khattak (2017), this is why

researchers need to study the drivers of interaction in online communities. If the company does not manage the community successfully, there will be a risk that the branded online community will harm the brand perception among consumers. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the interaction drivers' impact on members' brand perception in a branded online community. Further, the purpose is to examine the influential components of the relationship between the interaction drivers and brand perception.

The following research questions will be examined:

- How are the direct effects of the interaction drivers impacting brand perception in a branded online community?
- How are the direct effects moderated by the influential components?

DELIMITATIONS

In this study, a Facebook group has been examined. This Facebook group is considered to be generalizable due to Facebook being a common platform for online communities (Ho, 2014; Yang et al., 2019). The Facebook community is created by a brand, owned by a well-known person in Sweden. It was important for the study to examine a community that has a strong brand and a known creator, with a clear purpose and subject. The group targets Swedish women and all content is in Swedish, which limits the reach. Even though the reach is limited to a geographic area and gender, this will not be considered as influential components in the analysis.

The first chapter of this report consists of the theoretical background, where theory about branded online communities, user-generated content, and brand perception is presented. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of our hypotheses, the interaction drivers and the influential components. In the methodology chapter, a description of the study design, as well as analysis, will be presented. The results from the analysis are presented and followed by theoretical implications. This is followed by managerial implications, future research, and conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

BRANDED ONLINE COMMUNITY

A brand community is a network that exists around a specific brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The community is specialized, not geographically bound, and is based on a structured network of social relationships between the members of the community (Fisher & Smith, 2011). The community evolves into its own subculture, where rituals, traditions, and mutual understandings and perceptions can grow. It might also be a place for sharing ideas and for helping each other (Gummerus et al., 2012). Communities can also be a great asset for the company since they will give a live foresight on market forces and trends among consumers (McWilliam, 2000). Gummerus et al. (2012) propose that customers who engage in brand communities gain more than loyalty and trust; they gain relationships and entertainment.

Online communities emerged when the internet turned from a static platform into an interactive space. It is a useful way for companies to exert consumer-to-consumer marketing and collect consumer insights and ideas by observing the consumers' interactions in online communities (Ridings et al., 2002). The emergence of online communities allows brands to communicate with their customers through a wide range of channels. With the spread and growth of social media, more and more brands are tempted to use these channels to connect with the market, mainly due to the opportunity to reach many users. Further, this enables the customer to engage with the brand in a way that goes beyond making purchases (McWilliam, 2000). The brand can use the community as a marketing channel, even if the subject of the community is not actually related to the company. The brand's involvement in the community will be moderate, and sometimes not even noticed by the community members (Ridings et al., 2002). This is called a branded online community and is described as an evolved brand community, where the community focuses on a subject, but is operated by a brand (Popp & Woratscheck, 2016).

Branded online communities are platforms where the members can share insights and experience (Wang et al., 2017). Since exchanging knowledge between the members of the community is a vital part of the evolution of the brand and the community, it is important that the content is not restricted or dependent on the brand. Members who feel committed to the branded online community and who trust the community will keep engaging and interacting. These members will also form a sense of belonging to the community, as they feel that they can relate to the culture and the subject of the community. This will, in turn, cause the member to feel less uncertain about the product or service and the member will, hence, develop a more positive attitude towards the brand.

Creating a branded online community is a way for the brand to form relationships, exchange knowledge, and encourage interaction between consumers (Munnukka et al., 2015). This can, in turn, enhance brand perception. Nambisan and Baron (2007) argue that the interaction in online environments is just as important as the interactions taking place in offline settings, mostly because the online environment allows the host to involve a greater number of users. Studies show that loyalty and commitment to the brand can be strengthened through a branded online community where the members are encouraged to communicate with each other (Munnukka et al., 2015). This interaction can cause the members to feel more connected to the brand and will, thus, enhance brand perception. Host brands must be careful when creating and managing marketing channels and consider how these might shape the customer experience (Nambisan & Baron, 2007). Therefore, brand owners need to find a way to encourage these kinds of interactions and to create an inspiring environment that allows the consumer to form an emotional connection to the brand community (Munnukka et al., 2015).

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

The content in an online community is dependent on the members' posts and comments; the user-generated content (Yang et al., 2019). Using social media as a marketing platform has become a popular strategy, due to the possibility to encourage users to engage in creating user-generated content. However,

user-generated content is riskful since it is hard for brand managers to control (Arndt, 1967). Content created by other consumers is also often considered to be more trustworthy than company-created information, which means that it can have a greater influence than other communication sources (Kim & Johnson, 2016). Previous research has shown that users more often post negative opinions on social media, and negative comments and content tend to gain more attention than positive content (Yang et al., 2019). Due to this, the company must encourage consumers to generate positive content as well. One way of doing this is to create a branded online community. As argued by Kim and Johnson (2016), word-of-mouth via social media can be even more efficient than it would be in a face-to-face conversation since it allows for a greater spread of the message. Research also shows that interaction online might facilitate a better dialogue than it would face-to-face, as circumstances that might constrain from asking questions in person are reduced. In an online setting, it is easier to express feelings and opinions (Ross et al., 2009). Interacting with branded content on social media by “liking” or “sharing” what others post becomes a form of electronic word-of-mouth activity (Kim & Johnson, 2016).

BRAND PERCEPTION

Since the brand is created by the consumer’s interpretations and associations of the brand, it is vital to understand how consumers perceive the brand image (Kornberger, 2010). The brand image describes the total of associations and perceptions that a consumer makes about a brand (Keller, 1993; Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). It is described as “the way of thinking by a consumer about the brand and the feelings the brand arouses when the consumer thinks about it” (Roy & Banarjee, 2008, p. 142). In line with this, Kotler (2001) defines brand image as “the set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person holds regarding an object” (p. 273). Therefore, the definition of brand image perception will be used as the definition of brand perception within this report. Brand perception will always be impacted by consumers’ previous experience and knowledge. A strong brand image will generate loyal consumers, and it is a key component to differentiate and survive on the market (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 2010).

Therefore, it is highly important to interact with consumers and understand their brand perception, to generate a desirable and competitive brand and raise brand perception. By using the brand image as the groundwork for the branding strategy, the company can create a competitive advantage on the market (Roy & Banarjee, 2008).

Keller (1993) argues that the brand image is one component that conceptualizes knowledge about the brand. He argues that reaction in relation to a brand will result in a change in brand image perception among consumers; a change that will not occur if the element would be non-branded. Brand identity is the counterpart of brand image and is the tool that companies can use in order to manage their brand image perception (Nandan, 2005). An understanding of brand image will improve the work with the brand identity. Sometimes, a gap between the intended identity and the perceived image will appear, minimizing the gap will enhance brand perception. Consumers will interpret the brand identity communicated by the brand based on their subjectivity, resulting in each individual creating their own image of the brand. However, even if the brand is created by the individual, it can also be reshaped throughout the customer journey (Roy & Banarjee, 2008). Understanding interaction drivers will be an effective tool when developing the branding strategy and the brand identity.

For strategic reasons, it is important to improve marketing productivity (Keller, 1993). Companies must streamline marketing expenses, and by considering brand perception it will be easier to prioritize and distribute expenses. One of the important aspects when measuring consumer perception, discussed by Aaker (1996), is the organizational associations. This measures the organization beyond the brand, and its people, values, and programs.

Marketing practices in businesses today are highly dependent on and affected by activity on social media, which require adaptation in brand management (Laroche et al., 2012). On social media, consumers can fulfill their need for belonging and meeting other people that share values, norms, and interests. When this is done in the context of a brand, it will have a big impact on

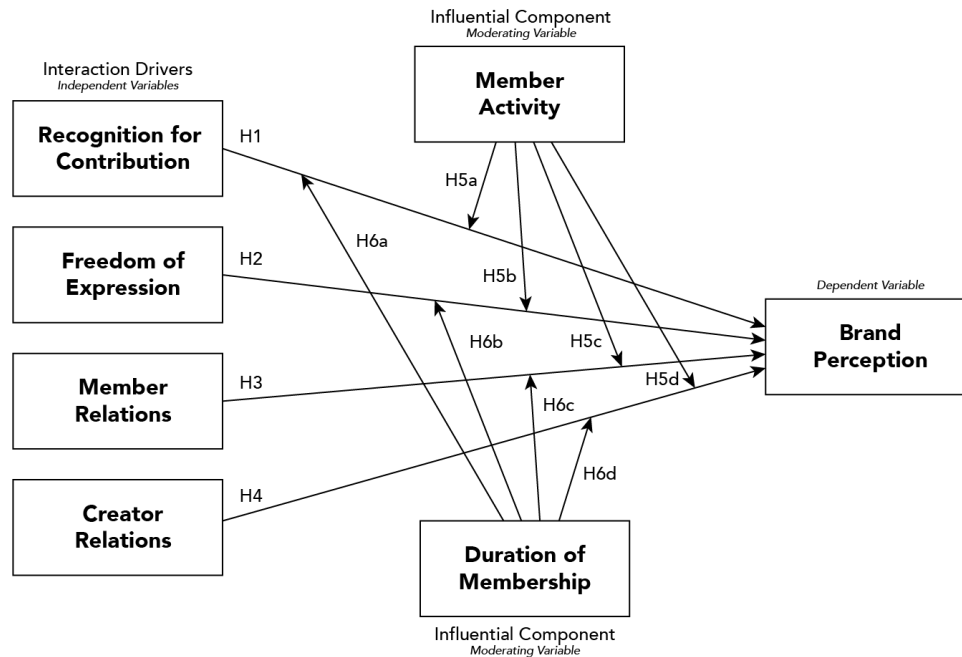


Figure 1: The Conceptual Model

consumers' brand perception. Previous studies have shown that consumers do not only care about the features and benefits of a brand, but also relational aspects, in the context of a branded online community (Kervyn et al., 2012).

HYPOTHESES CONSTRUCTION

In the following section, the direct effects and the moderating effects of our conceptual model will be presented. The model can be reviewed in figure 1. We will start by describing the direct effects of the interaction drivers on brand perception, and later move on to the moderating effects of the influential components.

DIRECT EFFECTS

To examine how the interaction drivers in a branded online community is impacting brand perception, four direct hypotheses are developed (H1–H4). The hypotheses are developed based on four identified drivers for interaction. Khan and Khattack (2017) argue that there is a need to study the drivers for interaction in order to understand the challenges and opportunities that follow when creating a branded online community. The interaction drivers in our study are derived from previous theory, where they have shown to be of importance to brands in an

online setting. The hypotheses are based on the following interaction drivers; recognition for contribution; freedom of expression; member relations; and creator relations. We will hypothesize that there is a direct effect between the interaction drivers and brand perception.

Recognition for Contribution

Perceived recognition for contribution is referring to whether the members feel that the community supports and recognizes what they are posting (Yang et al., 2016). Appreciation and encouragement from other members will be a driver for further interaction and participation in the online community. Members who are recognized and supported in an online community might get higher self-esteem and knowledge from interacting with the other members (Kang et al., 2007). Research states that recognition is the main, and sometimes only, reward to members in an online community (Gruen et al., 2000). This will, in turn, be beneficial for the entire community and the perception of the brand, since it will have a positive effect on the production of content in the community. User-generated content is essential for the survival of an online community, which is why it is so important to continuously encourage and recognize active members for their contribution to the community. A community that supports its

members will encourage more members to be active, which will contribute to enhancing a community with committed and loyal members (Yang et al., 2016; Gruen et al., 2000). Recognizing active members for their contributions will generate more posts and more qualitative content, which will enhance brand perception among members. For the first interaction driver, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived recognition for contribution has a positive effect on brand perception in a branded online community.

Freedom of Expression

Perceived freedom of expression refers to the degree to which the members are free to express their ideas and opinions (Yang et al., 2016). In order for interaction in the online community to continue, the members must also feel that their efforts are being allowed and appreciated, in order to drive interaction (Kim et al., 2008). If the community and its creators and administrators are restricting the content, this might discourage the members from contributing and joining the discussions. A community that allows its members to express opinions and experiences could become a platform for knowledge sharing on a professional level (Yang et al., 2016).

As argued by Khan and Khattak (2017), one of the greatest risks of using online communities as a marketing tool on social media is that the content that is being created is under the control of the members. Kang et al. (2007) further discuss that if there would be no freedom of expression, there would be no activity in the online community and thus, the relationship between the member and the community would be weaker. The study by Hajli et al. (2017) shows that trust towards the brand increases as activity and interaction increase in the online community. Members will then, in turn, feel encouraged to keep interacting when other members share their experiences, which will lead to stronger ties to the brand (Khan & Kahattak, 2017). The second interaction driver leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Perceived freedom of expression will have a positive effect on brand perception in a branded online community.

Member Relations

Gummerus et al. (2012) propose that customers who engage in online communities gain more than loyalty and trust; they gain relationships and entertainment. However, in order for an online community to be effective and attractive to consumers, trust must occur among members. Member trust is what makes members visit the community repeatedly, which makes it a factor that drives interaction within the community (Yang et al., 2016). Among active users, trust is the most vital aspect to encourage the members to stay engaged and for the community to thrive. Dishonesty and not keeping promises will be damaging to the community. Trust among members will be a trigger for engagement and involvement and will make members feel obligated to contribute to the online community. The nature of the online community causes members to form relationships based on trust towards people they have never met. Here, the member forms a relationship of trust to another specific person, but also to the entire community. As the online community is not dependent on face-to-face interactions, this could create a barrier to trust, as it is easy to interact in a fairly anonymous way (Ridings et al., 2002). However, as pointed out by Ridings et al. (2002), trust can be strengthened by the sense of mutual interest in the subject of the online community.

Another aspect that will impact trust is the norm of reciprocity, referring to the continuous supportive exchange process between members (Yang et al., 2016). This type of mutual indebtedness will create obligations, which will make members stay loyal to the community and stay engaged and involved. For an active user, being involved in a community means giving, receiving, and repaying useful knowledge. Engagement in discussions and sharing experiences will be a driver for member interaction, and activity will therefore increase. Engaging in an online community is a voluntary behavior that is fully controlled by the members themselves (Ho, 2014).

By exchanging information, member relationships are built and developed (Yang et al., 2016). This activity creates obligations towards the community and to the brand, and member relations will not only

impact the success of the community but also the brand perception among members. Therefore, the third interaction driver generates the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Member relations will have a positive effect on brand perception in a branded online community.

Community Creator Relations

The quality of the relationship between the consumer and the brand is defined by Wang et al. (2017) as the consumer's perception of how well the content correlates with the consumer's expectations and ideas about the branded online community. Members who feel like the relationship quality is high will develop a strong sense of belonging to the community and the brand, which will drive interaction within the community (Wang et al., 2017). Theory states that members often associate the content of the online community with its creator, as they believe that the hosting brand or person is responsible for the quality of the content in the community (Nambisan & Baron, 2007). This is further elaborated by Wang et al. (2017) who argue that high quality in the community will impact the brand perception as it reduces the members' uncertainty towards the brand.

The positive or negative effect on the relationship to the community creator will be greater if the member has a strong connection with the product, to begin with (Nambisan & Baron, 2007). Nambisan and Baron (2007) found that the experience of participating, and even more, the benefits that the member expects to gain from the experience, will have an impact on future community participation. This means that the emotions that appear from these interactions, both negative and positive, will affect the attitude towards the creator. As a consequence, this will have an impact on future interactions in the community and the willingness to stay active in the forum. Interaction in the online community will have an impact on the perception of the brand and the community creator. Using the fourth interaction driver, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 4: Creator relations will have a positive effect on brand perception in a branded online community.

MODERATING EFFECTS

To gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between the interaction drivers and brand perception, we will test for moderating effects on the previously discussed direct effects. We hypothesize that there are moderating effects of two influential components: member activity and duration of membership. We argue that different levels of activity will have different impact on how consumers perceive a brand, for example through different expectations or previous experience, as argued by Yang et al. (2016). Therefore, member activity is considered to be an influential component in this study. Yang et al. (2016) also describe how memberships will develop and evolve over time, which leads us to assume that duration of membership is another influential component on the direct effects. In the following section, we will present the influential components and their hypothesized effect on the direct relationships presented in hypotheses 1–4.

Member Activity

Participation in online communities can be different, depending on the motive of the member. It can be activities such as posting, commenting, or interacting with other members' postings, or simply reading without further interaction (Tonteri et al., 2011). This makes it interesting to explore as an influential component. The different levels of member activity can be divided into two groups; posters and lurkers (Yang et al., 2016). Lurkers are defined as a group who visits the forum to read and reflect on what others post. Even though they do not contribute by creating content, they are still an important part of any online community. Lurkers still have opinions about the content and priorities about what to read. Posters visit the community to post or to comment on other members' posts. However, Sun et al. (2014) argue that since lurkers might comprise a large portion of the overall members of the online community, there could be problems since the lurkers do not post or interact, which means that they do not contribute to creating the content.

The type of participation might also have an impact on the perception of the community. For instance, as argued by Tonteri et al. (2011), members who are

expecting personal benefits might not gain this by only reading what others post. Their study found that members who seek knowledge from the community are more likely to interact without posting (lurking), as also argued by Yang et al. (2016). Previous studies have spent less time on lurkers and have argued that these do not contribute as much to the online community as those who post. However, as argued by Tonteri et al. (2011), silently interacting with the community by reading what others post can create a strong sense of belonging to the community, making it important to include lurkers when studying the dynamics of online communities.

Interacting and being active in the branded online community will require some sort of effort from the member, which will be influenced by the level of analytical thinking needed to ask or answer a question. Pennycook (2017) describes that the dual process theory concerns the complexities of human cognition. More specifically, it is about how much thinking effort one has to make when answering a question or facing a problem (Pennycook, 2017). For instance, answering a simple question like “how old are you” does not require much advanced thinking from the person answering, and is a kind of thinking process that is beyond the control of the person (Pennycook, 2017; Kahneman, 2011). As argued by Kahneman (2011), it is, for instance, impossible to prevent yourself from knowing your name. Making judgments about others is also done automatically and cannot be controlled, where the person in question tries to decide whether the other party can be trusted or not (Kahneman, 2011). This type of thinking is referred to as intuitive, and the answer is autonomous. However, writing more in-depth answers to complicated questions puts more pressure on advanced thinking. This type of thinking is referred to as being analytical (Pennycook, 2017). Intuitive and analytical thinking are separated by the level of autonomy used to carry out the answer. Some situations trigger the user to think analytically, for instance, when facing a complicated task. Further, there are situations where analytical thinking is triggered even though analytical thinking was not the initial intention (Pennycook, 2017). As argued by Kahneman (2011), both types of thinking are important. Out of the theory on member activity,

four hypotheses have been developed and will be presented below.

Gruen et al. (2000) argue that recognition for contribution is important since it also creates continuance in commitment on a long-term time horizon. Posters, who interact actively in the community, expect recognition to a higher extent than lurkers, who simply visit the community to read and find inspiration (Yang et al., 2016). This means that, according to Yang et al. (2016), posters value recognition for contribution higher than lurkers, which means that member activity is an influential component. For the influential component member activity, we start by hypothesizing that:

Hypothesis 5a: The level of member activity has a moderating effect on the relationship between perceived recognition for contribution and brand perception in a branded online community.

Yang et al. (2016) describe that posters are more likely to be negatively affected by limitations in freedom of expression than lurkers. If the posters feel like they are not permitted to express their opinions, they might feel less encouraged to keep interacting and sharing. However, as lurkers only read what others post and are, hence, only exposed to what is being posted, they are not as dependent on the level of freedom of expression (Yang et al., 2016). Therefore, we propose that:

Hypothesis 5b: The level of member activity has a moderating effect on the relationship between freedom of expression and brand perception in a branded online community.

Members who interact by posting and commenting are more likely to seek personal and social benefits, for instance, to build relationships and to enhance personal status (Tonteri et al., 2011). This makes trust towards the community and its members important, for the poster to feel encouraged to keep interacting (Yang et al., 2016). We hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 5c: The level of member activity has a moderating effect on the relationship between member relations and brand perception in a branded online community.

Nambisan and Baron (2007) argue that the interaction within the community will raise emotions that will impact the relation towards the creator of the community. They mean that by interacting in the community, experiences will shape creator relations; both positively and negatively. Since all content within the community will be associated with the creator, we assume that this relationship will be moderated by the level of member activity. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 5d: The level of member activity has a moderating effect on the relationship between creator relations and brand perception in a branded online community.

Duration of Membership

When actively choosing to join the community, the consumer has in most cases some sort of connection or loyalty to the brand beforehand (Gummerus et al., 2012). By being active in the community over time, this loyalty can become even stronger, which is why we assume that this is an influential component for the direct effects. As argued by Gummerus et al. (2012), being active and engaged in the brand community will strengthen the relationship with the brand. In order for the relationship to grow and for loyalty to be formed, the brand needs to find ways to encourage the member to keep interacting.

Silveira et al. (2013) argue for the importance of dynamic brand identity in the ever-changing society. When a society moves fast, brands have to adjust and follow. They also must adjust to the growing trend of co-creation with consumers through, for example, user-generated content in an online community. In other words, Silveira et al. (2013) argue that brand identity must be seen as something dynamic that is constructed in exchange processes and relationships between market actors that is changing over time. Through changes in brand identity, the perceived brand image among consumers will change. In contrast, some authors argue that the brand identity must stay consistent (Nandan, 2015; Aaker, 1996). Nandan (2015) argues for a consistent brand that will minimize the gap between brand identity and brand image, and that this will result in enhanced brand perception. Based on this theory, four hypotheses examining the

moderating effect of duration of membership as an influential component will be presented below.

Members want to be recognized for their contributions in order to stay active in the brand community (Yang et al., 2016). This feeling might change over time, which causes it to be an influential component on the brand perception. Further, members who are recognized for their contributions will be encouraged to interact more and stay active within the community. For the second influential factor, duration of membership, we start by hypothesizing that:

Hypothesis 6a: The duration of membership has a moderating effect on the relationship between perceived recognition for contribution and brand perception in a branded online community.

In correspondence with previous theory, members who feel as if they can express themselves freely within the group will stay engaged (Kang et al., 2007). Having the opportunity to interact in the community and being free to express opinions is, according to Kang et al. (2007), one vital reason for members to stay loyal to the community. Without freedom of expression, activity within communities will decrease over time and members will exit. We hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 6b: The duration of membership has a moderating effect on the relationship between freedom of expression and brand perception in a branded online community.

Members who are part of the community for a longer period of time will elaborate relationships, raise loyalty, and build trust towards other members. Relationships will create a feeling of obligation towards the community, which is key for driving interaction and for the community to survive (Yang et al., 2016). Therefore, the duration of membership is an important contributing factor in the formation of brand perception. We hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 6c: The duration of membership has a moderating effect on the relationship between member relations and brand perception in a branded online community.

As previously discussed, members joining an online community will have a predefined relationship with the creator (Nambisan & Baron, 2007). However, being a member of the community during a longer period of time might change the image of the creator (Kervyn et al., 2012). Lastly, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 6d: The duration of membership has a moderating effect on the relationship between creator relations and brand perception.

METHODOLOGY

CHOICE OF METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research is a formal and systematic way of exploring variables and the relationships that link them together (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019). This method seeks to find the truth through objectivity. As the aim of this study is to examine interaction drivers and influential components of brand perception in branded online communities, a quantitative research design was considered to fit the purpose. As discussed by Culotta and Cutler (2016), researchers have argued about different methods in order to understand brand perception, and some argue that evaluating a brand in a survey is a method with high validity. From this theory, we decided that an online survey would be a good fit for the purpose

Variable	Type of Variable
Brand Perception	Dependent
Interaction Drivers	
Recognition for Contribution	Independent
Freedom of Expression	Independent
Member Relations	Independent
Creator Relations	Independent
Influential Components	
Member Activity	Moderating
Duration of Membership	Moderating

Table 1: Variable Overview

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Brand Perception	7,1675	2,15125
Recognition for Contribution	6,4962	2,39167
Freedom of Expression	6,4198	2,02261
Member Relations	7,6263	1,84814
Creator Relations	6,2230	2,71453

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics (N=528)

of the study. The purpose has been examined through deductive logic, where hypotheses derived from theory are tested with relevant data (Lewis-Beck, 2003). Based on theory, four independent variables were defined to be used as interaction drivers: Recognition for Contribution, Freedom of Expression, Member Relations, and Creator Relations. Brand Perception was defined as a dependent variable. Further, two influential components were added as moderating variables: Member Activity and Duration of Membership. See variable overview in table 1. Descriptive statistics is presented in table 2.

SAMPLE

The first step when identifying a branded online community to use for the study was to find an appropriate platform. Facebook is one platform that brands can use to host communities. It is a social media platform with 2,8 billion active users each month, and this number is continuously growing (Facebook, 2021). The reason for the increasing number of company pages and communities on Facebook is the availability of users (Ho, 2014). The continued growth of Facebook is a result of consumers enjoying live interaction with other consumers (McWilliam, 2000).

In order to define which Facebook community to include in the study, a pre-study was conducted. The pre-study was designed as a survey and was sent by email to 129 students at the School of Business, Economics and Law at the University of Gothenburg. The questions in this survey were

designed using different sample questions that can appear in various Facebook communities, and which were all based on different subjects. For instance, subjects examined in the pre-study were interior design, private finance, and fashion. The aim of the pre-study was to understand the perceived level of complexity in different communities. From the pre-study, the subject “private finance and legal advice” was considered most complex, and we decided to perform our study in the Facebook group “Economista – Kvinnor som gillar aktier och privatekonomi” (further on ‘Economista’).

The members of the community Economista are the sample for the study, and they were approached via the Facebook group. Economista is a community for women, where questions and issues about private finance and legal concerns are discussed. Posts in the community regard legal advice, the stock market, budgets, savings, et cetera.

In 2013, Swedish entrepreneurs Isabella Löwengrip and Pingis Hadenius launched the book *Economista*, a guiding book for private finance. During the years 2014 to 2017, the duo hosted a podcast, and Economista Sweden AB was registered in 2017 by the authors. The Facebook community Economista opened up in October 2016. By the time that this study was conducted, the Economista community had 144 374 members.

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT

For the study, 11-point Likert scales were used, in order to include as much information as possible in every construct (Cummings et al., 2013). When creating the scales to be used for the survey, previous studies were used as inspiration and to ensure that the scales used for the study are validated, as suggested by Guenes and De Pelsmacker (2017). However, some items were adjusted, and other items were added to better fit the context of the study and to cover the aspects needed to fulfill the purpose. New scales can be created as long as construct validity can be ensured (Cummings et al., 2013). Table 3 illustrates the studies that were used as an inspiration when designing the items for the study. The survey was distributed in Swedish and was translated into English for this report.

Because Facebook is the environment in which the study is taking place, an online survey was considered to be the most appropriate method for collecting data. Online surveys are a way to simplify administrative tasks for the researcher, and flexibility is achieved as the respondent can choose when to answer the questions (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Another advantage is that data can be extracted for analysis directly after the survey has been closed (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006).

When designing the questions, it is vital to make them objective, brief, and clear (Iarossi, 2006; Cummings et al., 2013). According to Bryman and Bell (2015), this would encourage more respondents to fulfill the survey. We decided not to include a “no opinion” option in order to encourage the respondents to do the cognitive thinking and express their opinion, as suggested by Krosnick et al. (2002). Krosnick et al. (2002) validate that including a “no opinion” alternative will not improve the quality of the data collected. We decided to structure the survey in a way that first introduced the subject and the purpose of the study, and inform the respondents that their responses will be anonymous. The first questions were demographics, followed by questions based on the five interaction drivers. The full survey that was distributed to the respondents is presented in appendix 1. Before sharing the survey in the Facebook group, we made test rounds on a small test group consisting of members of the community, and encouraged them to give feedback. This was used to make the survey more simple and clear, and to reduce the risk of misunderstandings. The survey was then set up and designed in the online survey tool Qualtrics. The survey was posted in the Facebook group for the first time on February 25th, 2021, followed by two reminders. In total, the survey was available for voluntary participation for 17 days.

PREPARATIONS FOR ANALYSIS

The data was analyzed using the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS). To examine the structure of our variables and to ensure the reliability and validity of the study, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. When conducting an EFA, the measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) is used to ensure the appropriateness of using EFA,

Construct	Sources	Measurement Item	Cronbach's Alpha
Brand Perception	Aaker (1996)	The brand Economista is interesting.	0,944
	Aaker (1996)	The Facebook group is created by a brand that I trust.	
	Aaker (1996)	I would recommend the Facebook group to others.	
	Item developed for this study	Content in the group goes in line with the values of Economista.	
	Item developed for this study	I can identify with the values of Economista.	
	Wang et al. (2017)	My emotions toward the Economista Facebook group are positive.	
	Wang et al. (2017)	One can trust this Facebook group.	
Recognition for Contribution	Yang et al. (2017)	The Facebook group appreciates active members' contributions and engagement.	0,934
	Yang et al. (2017)	The Facebook group is thankful to active members.	
Freedom of Expression	Yang et al. (2017)	The members of the Facebook group proactively oppose negative discussions and opinions about the brand.	0,851
	Yang et al. (2017)	The members of the Facebook group are effectively handling complaints and critique toward the brand Economista.	
	Item developed for this study	I can express my opinions in the group without being critically questioned.	
Member Relations	Yang et al. (2017)	I believe that other members in the Facebook group will help me if I need it.	0,741
	Yang et al. (2017)	I am happy to help other group members.	
	Yang et al. (2017)	Members in the Facebook group will not take advantage of others, even when the opportunity arises.	
Creator Relations	Yang et al. (2017)	I believe that the group creator will help me if I need it.	0,954
	Yang et al. (2017)	The creator of the group will keep promises that they make to their members.	
	Item developed for this study	The group creators are engaged in the group content.	
	Item developed for this study	I trust the judgement and values of the group creator.	

Table 3: Items and constructs

where values above 0,5 show that EFA is valid to use for the data set (Hair et al., 2014). Our MSA results yield an appropriate result for using EFA (MSA=0,913). Bartlett's test for sphericity is used to test the overall significance of the correlations in the correlations matrix, and the results were significant ($p=0,000$). The results indicate a good model fit. After conducting the EFA we decided to remove a total of five items from the data set. The deleted items are presented in appendix 1. By doing this, we could extract better and more accurate constructs. This procedure generated independent variables that were distinct from each other.

In order to create simpler constructs from the items that were defined in the EFA, summated scales were constructed for the analysis, as suggested by Hair et al. (2014). This is a method used to increase the reliability of a study, as several items that measure the same thing are combined into one construct. In order for the summated scale to fulfill these benefits, content validity needs to be ensured. This means that the researcher must use prior experience and knowledge to make sure that each item is relevant to use for measuring each construct. Cronbach's alpha was used to ensure that internal consistency is present for our scales, meaning that the items in the scales should be related to each other (Connelly, 2011). The values for Cronbach's alpha should be above 0,7 (Hair et al., 2016). They can be found in table 3.

DATA ANALYSIS

We concluded that a multiple regression analysis is appropriate for our research and the purpose of the study. The purpose for choosing regression analysis is to explore the relationship between one dependent and several independent variables (Hair et al., 2014). Further, the dependent and the independent variables should be defined based on theory; the level of measurement error in the dependent variable; and the level of specification error, meaning the inclusion of relevant independent variables. In our research model, we have one dependent variable and four independent variables. Multiple regression was used for testing hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H4.

The sample size is considered to be one of the most important components of multiple regression in

order to ensure the statistical power of the study, as the size will determine how much sampling error will be reduced (Hair et al., 2014). Our sample of 528 respondents is considered big enough to ensure statistical power and to perform a linear regression.

In order to assure that the results are representative of the sample and that the regression analysis is appropriate for the sample, some assumptions for multiple linear regression must be met (Hair et al., 2014). In the data set, all assumptions were met. The scatter plots indicated linearity between the dependent and the independent variables, tests for heteroscedasticity showed acceptable results, the error terms showed independence, and the residuals were normally distributed. When the assumptions of linear regression were met, we could move on with the analysis. Since the set of independent variables that are included in the model were defined using previous studies, a confirmatory specification technique was chosen for the regression analysis.

The hypotheses H5a–d and H6a–d are exploring the moderating effect of two additional independent variables on the already predefined direct relationships between the dependent and the first independent variables, as analyzed in hypothesis H1–H4. To test this moderating effect, the PROCESS macro created by Andrew Hayes (2013) was applied. The macro can be used as a complement to regression analysis, as another independent variable is added to test for a moderating effect on the relationship between the original independent variable and the dependent variable (Hayes, 2013).

METHODOLOGY DISCUSSION

Validity is a measurement for the relevance of the study, in other words, if what is supposed to be measured is actually measured (Lavrakas, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2015). To ensure validity and to stay in line with the purpose of the study, we have kept the purpose and the research questions in mind when designing the survey and developing the study. Construct validity was ensured, as the scales for the study were developed from scales that had already been validated through previous studies, as suggested by Cummings et al. (2013). Validity has also been examined through split sample validation, which is a method to compare two randomly

	Split Sample 1	Split Sample 2
N	264	264
R²	0,728	0,745
Adjusted R²	0,724	0,741
Standard error of the estimate	1,128	1,094

Table 4: Split Sample Validation

selected samples from the data set (Hair et al. 2014). The data was divided into two equal parts, and these were compared in order to ensure validity. Comparison of the samples showed similar results and thus, we can confirm validity (See table 4).

One problem that may arise when targeting the respondents online in Facebook communities is the issue of self-selection bias (Lavrakas, 2008). This issue occurs when respondents are allowed to decide themselves if they want to participate or not. The main problem with self-selection bias is when a respondent decides to participate based on aspects related to the behaviors or characteristics of that person. If this results in a big nonresponse, there might be a threat to the validity of the study (Lavrakas, 2008). An issue that might arise for this study is if posters rather than lurkers will feel more encouraged to participate in the study. Another issue could be that the members who enjoy the community will be more willing to cooperate, which might cause limitations and problems with generalizability for the study.

Another risk of using online surveys is the risk of misinterpretation due to the formulations and design of the scales. When studying Facebook use, acquiescence bias might arise, meaning that respondents are more prone to answer “agree” or “yes”, than they would be to answer “disagree” or “no” (Kuru & Pasek, 2016). The reason might be, according to Kuru and Pasek (2016), people’s underlying desire to agree. This might cause limitations and errors in studies conducted online and needs to be considered for this study. Further, as argued by Cummings et al. (2013), the formulation of the questions in the survey has an impact on the response rate as well as the respondents’

interpretation of the questions. The questions in the survey could have been formulated differently, in order to capture the essence of the research questions in a better way.

Privacy is considered to be another risk when doing online surveys and might constrain respondents from answering (Evans & Mathur, 2018). Therefore, ethical aspects were considered throughout the study. Permission to post the survey in the community was granted in advance, in order to not violate the terms and conditions of the Facebook group. Further, the members were informed that their answers would be treated anonymously.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE DATA

After finalizing the survey, we received a sample of N=528. Due to the nature of the group, we will assume that all respondents are female. The average respondent was between 31 and 40 years old, living in a big city, and having work as occupation (see appendix 2). All questions in the survey were mandatory, leaving us with no missing data.

Three questions were asked to identify the level of member activity. The result of member activity showed that a majority of the members had low interaction (defined lurkers), and only a few were

Influential Components		Frequency	Percentage	
Member Activity	Posting more than four times a year	Yes	28	5,30%
		No	500	94,70%
	Commenting more than once a week	Yes	31	5,87%
		No	497	94,13%
	Liking more than once a week	Yes	165	31,25%
		No	363	68,75%
Duration of Membership	<1 month	21	3,98%	
	2–6 months	52	9,85%	
	7–12 months	89	16,86%	
	1–2 years	211	39,96%	
	3–4 years	144	27,27%	
	>5 years	11	2,83%	

Table 5: Sample Characteristics (N=528)

highly interacting within the community (defined posters) (see table 5). The average duration of membership within the community was 1–2 years (see table 5).

HYPOTHESES TESTING RESULTS

Hypotheses 1–4: The Direct Effects

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to analyze the direct effects of the interactions drivers in hypotheses 1–4. When the regression model was estimated and we could assure that all assumptions were met, we ran the regression model. When looking at the overall model fit, the coefficient of determination indicated that 73,2% of the variation in the dependent variable Brand Perception is explained by the independent variables (adjusted $R^2=0,732$, see table 6). Three outliers were identified in the data set, however, when reviewing the coefficient of determination (R^2) after deleting the outliers, no influential impact was found, and we decided to include the outliers in the data set (Hair et al., 2016). Multicollinearity was evaluated before analyzing the data, and we could conclude absence after evaluating correlations as well as variance inflation factors.

As shown in table 6 the results are significant for all independent variables, meaning that we can accept hypotheses 1–4 with 95% confidence ($\alpha=0,05$). Hypothesis 1 examined the relationship between brand perception and recognition for contribution. The relationship was statistically significant ($p=0,028$, $t=2,204$) with a positive effect on the dependent variable ($\beta=0,067$). Therefore, we can conclude that perceived recognition for contribution will have a positive effect on brand perception within the community. Hypothesis 2 explored if perceived freedom of expression would impact brand perception. The result was statistically significant ($p=0,000$, $t=7,484$) with a positive relationship between the variables ($\beta=0,255$). Support was found for hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 3 was checking for relationships between member relations and brand perception and found a statistically significant result ($p=0,000$, $t=9,390$). The relationship is positive ($\beta=0,293$). Hypothesis 4 in the regression analysis showed statically significant results as well ($p=0,000$, $t=10,382$). The fourth hypothesis examined if strong creator relations would affect brand perception, and found a positive relationship ($\beta=0,376$). Throughout the multiple regression analysis, we can support hypotheses 1–4.

Overall Model Fit	
Adjusted R^2	0,732
F	360,934
Sig	0,000

	Regression Coefficients		Statistical Significance	
	Standard Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0,217		2,678	0,008
Recognition for Contribution	0,027	0,067	2,204	0,028
Freedom of Expression	0,036	0,255	7,484	0,000
Member Relations	0,036	0,293	9,390	0,000
Creator Relations	0,029	0,376	10,382	0,000

Table 6: Results of regression analysis

Hypotheses 5–6: The Moderating Effects

For the following hypotheses, we wanted to examine the moderating effect of the two influential components: member activity (H5) as well as the duration of membership (H6). This was done by implementing the PROCESS model 1 developed by Hayes, using a confidence interval of 90% ($\alpha=0,1$). Hypotheses 5a–d explored the impact of member activity on the relationships between the independent variables and brand perception. H5a examined the moderating effect on the relationship between recognition for contribution and brand perception, where the variable member activity was found statistically significant ($p=0,0036$, $t=-2,9269$, $\beta=-0,3280$). The interacting effect was statistically significant ($p=0,0753$, $t=-1,7821$, $\beta=-0,0744$), which is the reason for accepting H5a. The model explains 37,61% of the variance in the dependent

variable brand perception ($R^2=0,3761$). H5b explores the moderating effect of member activity in the relationship between freedom of expression and brand perception. Member activity ($p=0,3281$) and the interacting effect ($p=0,1970$) were not found statistically significant. Therefore, H5b was rejected.

The next hypothesis, H5c, examines the relationship between brand perception and member relations. The interacting effect ($p=0,0193$) shows a significant result. However, the moderating effect does not ($p=0,7205$). These results indicate that we must reject H5c. The fourth hypothesis investigating the moderating effect of member activity, H5d, explores the effect on the relationship between brand perception and creator relations. The moderating effect indicated significant results ($p=0,0054$),

	Moderating Effect: Member Activity			Interacting Effect		
	p	t	β	p	t	β
H5a	0,0036	-2,9269	-0,3280	0,0753	-1,7821	-0,0744
H5b	0,3281	-0,9790	-0,0941	0,1970	-1,2918	-0,0571
H5c	0,7205	0,3579	0,0366	0,0193	-2,3467	-0,1372
H5d	0,0054	-2,7959	-0,2475	0,6042	-0,5186	-0,0145

Table 7: Results of PROCESS test hypotheses 5a–d

	Moderating Effect: Duration of Membership			Interacting Effect		
	p	t	β	p	t	β
H6a	0,4226	0,8026	0,0547	0,2368	-1,1844	-0,0338
H6b	0,9318	0,0856	0,0049	0,2805	1,0803	0,0293
H6c	0,5016	-0,6725	-0,0392	0,1387	1,4827	0,0460
H6d	0,4211	0,8051	0,0429	0,4804	-0,7062	-0,0139

Table 8: Results of PROCESS test hypotheses 6a–d

however, the interacting effect ($p=0,6042$) does not, which is why we will reject H5d. An overview of the results of hypotheses 5a–d can be found in table 7.

The results of the four hypotheses presented below, H6a–d, investigate the moderating effect of the variable duration of membership. H6a explores the effect on the relationship between recognition for contribution and brand perception. The moderating variable ($p=0,4226$) and the interactive effect ($p=0,2368$) do not show significant results, and H6a was rejected. H6b is testing the moderating effect on the relationship between freedom of expression and brand perception. The moderating effect is not significant ($p=0,9318$), neither is the interacting effect ($p=0,2805$). Therefore, H6b was rejected. H6c evaluates the effect on the relationship between member relations and brand perception. The moderating effect, duration of membership, is not statistically significant ($p=0,5016$). Neither is the interactive effect ($p=0,1387$). The results indicate that H6c is rejected. The final hypothesis, H6d, focuses on the relationship between creator relations and brand perception. The moderating effect ($p=0,4211$) and the interactive effect ($p=0,4804$) is not statistically significant. The final hypothesis,

Hypotheses	Support
H1	Yes
H2	Yes
H3	Yes
H4	Yes
H5a	Yes
H5b	No
H5c	No
H5d	No
H6a	No
H6b	No
H6c	No
H6d	No

Table 9: Overview of Hypotheses

H6d, is rejected. The results from testing H6a–d is presented in table 8. An overview of the support for all hypotheses is presented in table 9.

DISCUSSION

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Engagement

This study proves that engagement is an important aspect when a company wants to attract new consumers and raise brand perception. Creating engagement is a key aspect for any brand in order for the business to thrive. When engagement is achieved, committed consumers could potentially act as ambassadors for the brand. In the context of a branded online community, the process of identifying, analyzing and encouraging engagement is more precise and simplified, since it occurs within one single marketing channel. Here, we argue that the interactions are easier to manage and control, compared to other settings with multiple channels, where it is a challenge to identify, manage and create engagement. To create engagement, some engagement must already exist. The initial engagement should preferably be encouraged by the brand through marketing activities. For example, social media creates opportunities where engagement can be created. Building an inspiring social media feed before launching a new business might create hype and engagement which boosts the brand perception and attracts consumers.

Our results show that recognition for contribution and freedom of expression are important interaction drivers that will impact brand perception. By encouraging these interaction drivers, companies can create engagement. This goes in line with Yang et al. (2016) and Kang et al. (2007) who demonstrate that engagement within a community will generate more engagement, and the absence of engagement will have damaging effects for the community and the brand. We argue that a community without members or content can be compared to a grocery store without groceries or a restaurant without people; it is a challenge to attract consumers to an empty space. No matter the business, engagement from consumers will always be a driver for further engagement. This study shows that consumers strive to be a part of a context where they can exchange

knowledge and opinions, and where they can feel appreciated and encouraged. Our results demonstrate that in order to achieve this, there must exist efficient interaction drivers. Kim et al. (2008) argue that members must feel that their contributions are allowed when posting in the community, and that restrictions from creators might discourage member contributions. Interference from creators might also disrupt the interaction driver creator relations, which is fragile due to the creator's impact on brand perception.

We believe that engaged and committed consumers are likely to be passionate and knowledgeable about the brand; causing them to act as brand ambassadors. Engagement among consumers is important to make other consumers interested and to generate word-of-mouth, as engagement could result in positive reviews and opinions about the brand. It is the committed consumers who will drive interaction about the brand, and who will create interest among other consumers. Another setting where engagement from individuals is important is in a workplace setting. Just as consumers should be approached as potential brand ambassadors, so should the employees of a company. Committed and engaged employees are crucial for the evolution of a company, as they are the creators of the brand strategies and activities. Enabling this might be done through an open and inclusive environment, where employees feel encouraged enough to share their ideas and creativity. Without committed employees, there will be no driver for innovative or analytical thinking. For a company to build a sustainable and competitive brand, interaction drivers must be acknowledged to foster committed employees.

Complexity

This study shows that perceived recognition for contribution among members is an important interaction driver for brand perception. However, the high complexity of the subject in the community could be the reason why the effect is weak compared to the other drivers. The dual process theory developed by Kahneman (2011) explains that analytical thinking is triggered by issues that require knowledge, that is, high complexity situations. Eventually, a conflict can appear between posting members' expectations to be recognized for their

contributions, and the fact that answering the question will require knowledge and experience from the other members. Our analysis indicates that the level of analytical thinking might be an obstacle for the member who wants to write a post, which means that the need for recognition for contribution becomes even stronger. Here, the fear of being judged by others might rise. Judging others is explained by Kahneman (2011) as an autonomous behavior and thus something that is beyond control for the individual. Since knowledge is encouraged and appreciated by the community in this study, not having enough knowledge might cause the member to limit interaction in order to not be judged due to ignorance. This might be an explanation for the high proportion of lurkers, as being a poster will demand a high effort and an advanced level of thinking.

We can conclude that the level of member activity has a moderating effect on the relationship between recognition for contribution and brand perception, making member activity an influential component. The need for recognition for contribution will be different, depending on the level of activity. This result is confirmed by Yang et al. (2016), who argue that being recognized and appreciated by the other members is vital for the member to feel encouraged enough to keep interacting with the community, while lurkers are not as affected by recognition for contribution as posters. Therefore, we assume that posters, who frequently interact with the community, are dependent on being appreciated for their efforts. Lurkers, on the other hand, do not see this as a determining factor. However, we argue that lurkers visit the community to gain knowledge about the subjects discussed and that they will be dependent on the posters to gain insights and to become active and knowledgeable members themselves. This is confirmed by Tonteri et al (2011), who argue that lurkers are likely to visit a community with the purpose of gaining knowledge. Therefore, recognition for contribution is indirectly an important interaction driver for lurkers as well, even though they are not aware of it themselves. Thus, we argue that being recognized and appreciated is, directly and indirectly, important for any level of member activity, since recognition for contribution is crucial for the survival of the community. We believe that members of high

complexity communities do not have to be posters to have expectations on the content. Even though lurkers are not ready to contribute with content to the community, they are still demanding others to contribute in order to gain more knowledge themselves. If others do not contribute, lurkers' brand perception will be negatively affected, due to lack of content.

The results of this study show that trusting the members of the community and feeling an obligation to contribute might work as a trigger to analytical thinking, which will cause the member to recognize the other members by answering their questions. Further, when feeling appreciated and trusted, the members will feel more free to express their opinions. This tells us that freedom of expression, as argued by Kang et al. (2007), and member relations, as highlighted by Yang et al. (2016), are vital interaction drivers, eventually resulting in increased brand perception. We argue that allowing members to form relationships with other members to build trust and a sense of obligation applies to a brand's continuous work. Consumers who trust other consumers will keep consuming, especially since advice and opinions from other consumers tend to be more powerful than those from the brand. This study shows that brands should consider involving consumers in their creation process even though the product is complex. Building relationships between members and the brand is important to drive interaction and increase brand perception. Being accepted and trusting other members, as well as the brand, might be especially vital when the product or subject is complex since interacting with others and using the product demands more effort and knowledge from the consumer. However, as this process is complex, involving consumers and encouraging them to interact will be challenging.

Due to the complex nature of the community, we believe that being a poster will be challenging. We argue that, in order to be an active member, knowledge and experience is required. In turn, this will create an extensive knowledge gap between posters and lurkers in the community. Lurkers visit the community to gain knowledge about these complex subjects by reading what the posters write. In order to minimize the knowledge gap between

posters and lurkers, posters must interact and let the lurkers take part of the content. Eventually, the lurker can become a poster and transform into an active and appreciated part of the community. Therefore, member activity should be an influential component in a branded online community, even though this study cannot fully conclude this assumption.

We argue that the nature of a branded online community is similar to any other social setting. Here, there will also be a knowledge gap between those who are highly engaged and knowledgeable, and those who are silently consuming the product. This gap can be an obstacle for the consumer to engage in-depth with the brand and to be one of the active consumers. As lack of knowledge might prevent consumers from continuously interacting with the brand, it is vital for brands to acknowledge consumers who strive towards becoming active consumers and, potentially, brand ambassadors. This can also be applied at a workplace, where knowledge must be constantly exchanged among employees, to make sure that experience and skills are updated and for employees to be able to perform their jobs. However, employees must feel appreciated and free to express their opinions in order to enjoy the job and develop appropriate skills. Building relationships with co-workers will also be crucial in order to develop a sense of belonging to the company. This will lead to trust towards the co-workers, but also decrease the fear of being judged or excluded from the group for expressing thoughts or opinions. It is also vital to build relationships towards the employer, and that the employee can identify with values and opinions of the employer. Further, acknowledging and appreciating the opinions of employees who sit quietly in the conference room is important, as they might have valuable insights from watching and observing the conversations during the meeting. There needs to be an inclusive company culture that does not judge anyone for lacking certain knowledge, and that, at the same time, encourages knowledge sharing among the employees. In this sense, interaction drivers are important to generate a good company culture.

Quality

As previously discussed, members will expect high quality and knowledge when interacting in the community. This study shows that the demand for quality requires the community creators to encourage, but also to restrict, the content of the community. However, the results also show that restricting the activity within the group and limiting the perceived freedom of expression might restrain interaction and, consequently, have a negative impact on brand perception. We believe that this is especially crucial in a branded online community, since the members often enter the community with expectations on the conversations and the content, as described by Gummerus et al (2012). This means that brands need to find a way to establish high quality, while encouraging interaction and engagement. We argue that brands in general face the challenge of deciding how much content to share, but also how to manage complaints and letting consumers express their opinions. There needs to be a balance between restricting complaints in order to reduce the risk of bad rumors spreading, and allowing consumers to start a debate, and using that feedback to make improvements to the product. For brands it is important to mind the fact that a large proportion of their consumers do not interact by openly sharing feedback and complaints, but rather interact silently, just like lurkers in a branded online community. Most consumers will silently make judgments and build emotions towards the brand which, consequently, will be more challenging to respond to. Brands then need to find a way to use the lurkers' knowledge and perception, in order to get to know the majority of its consumers and to develop the brand strategy.

In this study, no moderating effect from duration of membership was found on any of the relationships between the interaction drivers and brand perception, in contrast to Gummerus et al. (2012) who argue that loyalty towards the community can become even stronger over time. We can conclude that it is vital to make sure that members want to stay in the community and continue to interact for a long time, but there is not enough support to state that the duration of the membership is an influential component in this study. In contrast to our results, Yang et al. (2016) argue that being part of the

community for a longer period of time will raise trust among members. Thus, even though this study shows that member relations is an important driver of interaction, there is no proof that it is changing over time. The lack of evidence might be a consequence of the spread in perception and its development over time. One member joining the group might have high brand perception at the beginning, which could decrease over time, while another might go from low to high brand perception. This can be due to previous experiences, associations and knowledge about the brand or product. Just like Nambisan and Baron (2007) argue, the experience when approaching a brand could be good or bad, based on expectations that might arise from previous interactions with the brand or recommendations from other consumers. If the brand meets the expectations, the brand perception will increase over time, while a bad experience will decrease brand perception. We believe that the extensive difference between consumers, in regard to experience and knowledge, is the reason for the insignificant results in this study. We discuss that the arguments on why the effect from duration cannot be confirmed also can be applied to the workplace previously described. In a company, a new employee might have high expectations and a really positive image of the employer at the beginning. However, this image might be negatively affected over time when the employee increases knowledge and gets familiar with the company. Another employee might have low expectations, but later end up enjoying the workplace and staying for years. Maybe, circumstances such as opportunities to be promoted or relations towards co-workers can have an impact on this effect, which makes the process hard to predict and to draw any general conclusions about.

User-Generated Content

Our assumptions about creator relations as a driver for interaction show the effects of trusting and relating to the community creator, and its effects on the brand perception. When discussing online communities, it is not the creator who actually creates the content; it is user-generated. User-generated content on social media is a big risk for the brand, but it can also generate opportunities and positive results. Our results indicate that user-

generated content is a very powerful tool that should be encouraged, since it is much more trustworthy than information communicated by the brand, as in line with Kim and Johnson (2016). Just like more traditional word-of-mouth, consumers are trusting reviews by other consumers who have actually tried the product. We argue that it is important to ensure high quality content in the setting of a brand. Even though it is hard to control the user-generated content, it is important for the brand to monitor and understand how content is created. Companies must embrace the force of user-generated content. Instead of fearing and restricting this type of content, we argue that there are ways to use it to strengthen the brand. By embracing it, the user-generated content will not be a risk to the brand, but an asset giving valuable insights about consumers and the market. We argue that the importance of user-generated content can be compared to activities within companies. While the activity of the members in a branded online community is vital for the survival of the community, activity of employees in a company will be vital for the survival of the company. Employees who feel restrained from expressing opinions or who do not feel accepted by the co-workers will be suppressed in their work process. Companies who do not recognize or appreciate innovative and creative ideas, will have problems creating sustainable and competitive brands.

Our results indicate that member relations is an important driver for interaction that will impact brand perception. One explanation could be as discussed by Laroche et al. (2012), who argue that one of the purposes fulfilled with social media is consumers' need for belonging and creating member relations. We argue that if this need is fulfilled within the community, members will associate belongingness and positive relations with the brand, causing brand perception to increase. Our study shows that a space for interaction is needed in order for member relations to grow, which will be essential for fulfilling consumers' need for belonging. This interaction between consumers is enabled by allowing and encouraging user-generated content. The need for interaction is just as important in all brand settings, where it could be used as a tool to strengthen the brand perception of any brand. Enabling interaction among consumers

could be made through social events, enjoyable facilities where people can stay and interact with like-minded people, et cetera. By extending the offering and creating experiences, companies can build stronger brands. In the workplace, it is also important to facilitate spaces for social interaction. As an employer, encouraging relationships between employees in order to build a good company culture is crucial. By arranging team-building activities, the employer will send a message that employee relationships are a valued part of the company culture. This will drive interaction.

Our results show that branded online communities are a tool to drive interaction between members and create member relations, as also discussed by Munnukka et al. (2015). We argue that by continuously encouraging recognition for contribution, the brand will enable member relations and engagement. The results of this study confirm the need for perceived freedom of expression as an interaction driver, in order to enhance brand perception. This result is aligning with Yang et al. (2016), who argue that restricting and interfering with the conversations in the community might discourage the members from making an effort to contribute to the community. We discuss that to maintain quality and to make sure that the content is relevant, brands might feel an urge to manage and restrict the content, however, the results of our study suggest that it is important not to disrupt content and discussion among consumers. Enhancing freedom of expression can also be beneficial for the brand since user-generated content is considered more trustworthy than company-created information (Kim & Johnson, 2016). To hold on to this effect, we argue that it is important to keep the content in the community separated from the other brand marketing activities and leave content-creation to members, which is in line with the discussions by Wang et al. (2017). We argue that, since freedom of expression is a vital interaction driver in our results, it is crucial to allow consumers to shape their own discussion and to create relationships with each other.

No evidence is found for our assumptions about member activity as an influential component on freedom of expression, member relations, and creator relations and their proven relationships to

brand perception. Despite this result, previous research has found evidence that the level of member activity will have an influential effect. Yang et al. (2016) state that members who interact on a high level will form a sense of belonging and obligation towards the community, resulting in more interaction, increasing brand perception and stronger member relations. Kang et al. (2007) argue that the absence of freedom of expression would result in less activity and a weaker relationship between the member and the community. Content creation is vital for the survival of the community, and as argued by Nambisan and Baron (2007), the quality of that content will have an impact on the perception of the community creator. Interaction and creating content is, according to previous studies, the driver of freedom of expression, member relations, and creator relations. In summary, previous research states that activity is a crucial aspect of online communities, which is why it is surprising that member activity is not considered an influential component. As this study could not confirm theory regarding the effect of member activity, we argue that one potential reason is the complexity of the subject in the online community. It could be the fact that lurkers visit this kind of community to gain knowledge and hence, are as dependent on relationships and trust as posters. This also means that lurkers will demand more from the other members, and will have high expectations on the quality of the content. As the community acknowledges experience and knowledge, perhaps lurkers strive towards gaining knowledge as an attempt to become posters in the future and to truly become an active part of the community. Lurkers will then expect other members to contribute with content, in order to compensate for and solve the knowledge gap in the community. Making interpretations and judging other members' stories and opinions does not require writing a comment; all it takes is reading the post. This study proves that, as a brand, recognizing lurkers as important consumers is crucial, as they will have opinions even though they are not sharing those openly. In contradiction with the discussion by Yang et al. (2016) regarding previous research on the influence of lurkers, we argue that lurkers must be included when studying online communities and branding activities.

Concluding Discussion

Our results indicate that consumer interaction is mainly driven by the basic needs of humanity, such as recognition, freedom and relationships. Consumers seek contexts where they experience belonging and confirmation, and where they find trust to themselves as well as to others. In online communities, and in everyday situations, consumers strive towards being recognized, appreciated, and to experience the feeling of being a part of a context. Consumers do not only consume a product, they consume an emotion, a lifestyle and the access to a community. This study shows that consumers do not strive towards just being a part of society; they want to engage, interact, gain knowledge and be appreciated for their efforts. This is applicable to all consumers, independent of the level of activity. Just like in branded online communities, there will always be knowledge gaps between consumers in the society. Consumers must have some knowledge and experience about the brand, for them to become an active part of the context. Here, knowledge concerning the product or service itself is crucial, as well as knowledge about the culture of the context, and the values of the brand. The need for belonging and confirmation will always exist, however, this can be inhibited by the obstacles due to the need for knowledge and experience. By facilitating a space for consumers' needs, making it long-lasting and available for all consumer types, a company can differentiate their brand and create a unique offering.

The wants and needs of consumers create opportunities for a company to use in their marketing strategy. By facilitating a space for interaction and belonging, and by involving the consumers in the company, positive associations towards the brand will grow. When consumers associate belonging and recognition to the brand, they will become more loyal and increase brand perception. Companies that offer more than just a product will be more successful in the long run. Broadening the offering to a further extent is beneficial for the brand, and by knowing and understanding consumer wants and needs this can be done successfully. After all, what the consumers seek is contexts where they experience belonging

and recognition, just in line with the basic needs of humanity.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

User-generated content has a very powerful impact on brand perception, which is why it should be encouraged by brand managers. Involving consumers in the production of content will be effective in the long run, and therefore we advise companies to invite this collaboration without fear. This study proves that user-generated content is a trustworthy source that gives both the company and other consumers insights and feedback, and that relational aspects will enhance brand perception. Suggestions to encourage user-generated content, apart from branded online communities, could be using influencer marketing. The phenomenon of influencer marketing is somewhat an extended version of user-generated content. From the consumer perspective, the marketing channel of influencers is seen as a like-minded consumer that is trusted, and it has a big effect on the sales of collaborative brands.

Another reason why user-generated content is a powerful tool and should be encouraged to raise brand perception, is the knowledge that users possess. Users of a product might have a different perception of the usage, seeing it from a different perspective and therefore come with new input that can be used in product development or marketing purposes. Since the community also encourages members to help each other and respond to questions, one could see the community as a big knowledge bank, where knowledge from many members is collected and can be shared with other consumers. Further, user-generated content is more reliable than content created by the brand. Therefore, one effective strategy to encourage user-generated content could also be a website function where reviews and ratings can be posted and visible for presumptive consumers. Due to the power of user-generated content, we suggest that brands should embrace the fact that users will create content that is out of control of the brand. The brand should facilitate platforms where consumers are invited to engage. This way, the brand still does not control the content creation, but they can monitor the interactions in the community. By facilitating a

space that is available for consumers to interact within, the brand can also use this for inspiration and feedback.

In order to take advantage of the power of user-generated content, the creators must manage the content and ensure quality, while making sure that the members feel free enough to keep interacting. Making sure that the content is relevant and representative of the subject of the community is crucial. For a branded online community, negative impressions about the content will be damaging for the brand. To ensure relevant content within the group, it is important to have a clear purpose. Another way of restricting the content without interfering is to have clear rules that need to be accepted by the member when entering the community. It could also be a statement about what kind of content is allowed. This will make it clear for the members what to post, but also what kind of content to expect when becoming a member.

The study concludes freedom of expression as one important aspect of brand perception. Therefore, interfering with the content as a brand must be done with great caution. The content must be managed and administered in order to stay relevant, but it can not disrupt the discussions since this will restrict freedom of expression and member relations. Further, we would advise managers creating a branded online community to carefully consider the risks and workload. User-generated content may be damaging to the brand, and still, it is very important not to interfere too much with the content within the community. A branded online community should be a place for the members to interact and create member relations, however, there will always be a need to administrate in order to keep the content relevant. A growing community will require work, and once a successful community is running it will not stop. Engagement creates engagement, and this is an autonomous phenomenon without an ending. From a long-term perspective, the brand creating an online community must be able to manage and maintain it to create a positive brand perception.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research is encouraged to explore the environment of branded online communities by using a sample consisting of a different distribution

between posters and lurkers, to draw conclusions about member activity. Often, the distribution is a majority of lurkers, however, it could be interesting to include a greater number of posters in order to draw conclusions about differences and how posters experience the environment within the group. There is also a need to explore branded online communities with other subjects and levels of complexity, to compare how that might influence content creation and member engagement. We have discussed how the high level of complexity in the focal community might have influenced the result, and comparisons to a low complexity community could confirm and develop these discussions. A combination of the above mentioned aspects is encouraged in future studies, to see what difference the level of complexity has on the importance of posters and lurkers.

Further, as this study was limited to a member perspective, there is a need to explore the use of branded online communities on social media from a creator's perspective. This would yield more contributions on how to successfully manage the community and to examine how and why communities are created.

Future studies should examine the actual impact on levels of brand administration. This study indicates that the level of brand interference has a big impact and might be damaging to the community if it is not managed thoughtfully. However, future studies could explore communities that actually have different levels of brand interference and look into how this is impacting brand perception.

We have examined the community from the member's perception of the environment, future studies are encouraged to contribute by examining the behavioral activities within the community through a netnography where posts, comments, and likes could be analyzed to draw conclusions about brand perception. Also, further research on the influence of duration of membership is needed since our study did not find any significant results on this matter. It would be highly interesting to see how brand perception is changing over time in the branded online community.

CONCLUSION

The interaction drivers defined in this study are concluded to have an impact on members' brand perception in branded online communities. The community is dependent on the interaction among members, but allowing the members to control the content can have both positive and negative effects. The perception of the brand is dependent on the survival of the community, and the community is dependent on the members to create content and engage. Members who are not being recognized for their efforts and who feel restrained from expressing their opinions might feel unwilling to keep interacting with the community. Relationships between the members and to the creator are highly important, as it builds trust and a sense of obligation towards the community. This means that allowing members to, in an unrestrained way, create content and interact with each other will enhance brand perception. Engaging consumers and making them committed will be a powerful marketing activity. However, there is a risk that the quality of the content is affected as the brand loses control over what is being posted in the community. The interaction drivers examined within this study are all dependent on user-generated content and committed consumers. Therefore, they are the key in creating an effective branded online community, and for the brand to evolve in other situations. User-generated content is extremely powerful in many ways, however, managers must be aware of the risks associated with the content produced in the context of their brand.

Most of the influential components examined in the study did not show support for any moderating effect. Member activity showed a moderating effect on the relationship between recognition for contribution and brand perception, and this was the only significant result among the influential components. We assume that posters are more dependent on being recognized for their efforts. As lurkers are reliant on posters to be active in order to gain knowledge, they will be indirectly dependent on posters being appreciated for their efforts. Therefore, even though the results show a difference in member activity, we argue that recognition for contribution is as important for all levels of

members' activity and its impact on brand perception. Member activity was rejected as an influential component on the other direct effects. We discuss that this could be explained by the complexity of the community, where all members are equally dependent on the content creation and therefore also the interaction drivers. This means that brand perception will be impacted by the interaction drivers no matter the level of member activity. However, the results of the study prevent us from drawing conclusions about this effect. Further, duration of membership was not concluded to be an influential component. We believe that this result is explained by a difference between individuals within the group, since brand perception will be shaped by previous knowledge and experience when entering the group. More research is needed to make conclusions about influential components.

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APPENDIX 1

Survey

QUESTION	ANSWERING OPTION	ACTION
Demographics		
How old are you?	Younger than 20; 21-30; 31-40; 41-50; 51-60; 61-70; Older than 70	
What is your main occupation?	Working; Studying; Other	
Where do you live?	Big city; Smaller city; Countryside	
Duration of Membership		
For how long have you been a member of the Facebook community?	1 month or less; 2–6 months; 7–12 months; 1–2 years; 3–4 years; 5 years or more	Used
Member Activity		
Posting more than four times a year	Yes/No	Used
Commenting more than once a week	Yes/No	Used
Liking more than once a week	Yes/No	Used
Brand Perception		
The brand Economista is interesting	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
The Facebook group is created by a brand that I trust.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
I would recommend the Facebook group to others.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
Content in the group goes in line with the values of Economista.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
I can identify with the values of Economista.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
My emotions toward the Economista Facebook group are positive.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
One can trust this Facebook group.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
Recognition for Contribution		
The Facebook group appreciates active members' contributions and engagement.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
The Facebook group is thankful to active members.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
Members of the Facebook groups engaged in posted questions.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Deleted
When a post is posted, I expect many members to engage.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Deleted

Freedom of Expression		
The members of the Facebook group proactively oppose negative discussions and opinions about the brand.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
The members of the Facebook group are effectively handling complaints and critique toward the brand Economista.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
I experience that the community administrators allow members to shape discussions and group subjects	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Deleted
I can express my opinions in the group without being critically questioned.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
Member Relations		
I believe that other members in the Facebook group will help me if I need it.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
I am happy to help other group members.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
Members in the Facebook group will not take advantage of others, even when the opportunity arises.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
Members of the Facebook group will always keep promises to each other.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Deleted
Members of the Facebook group act friendly towards each other.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Deleted
Creator Relations		
I believe that the group creator will help me if I need it.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
The creator of the group will keep promises that they make to their members.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
The group creators are engaged in the group content.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used
I trust the judgement and values of the group creator.	Incorrect (0)–Correct (11)	Used

APPENDIX 2

Demographic Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Age	<20	13	2,46%
	21-30	184	34,85%
	31-40	138	26,14%
	41-50	82	15,53%
	51-60	75	14,20%
	61-70	30	5,68%
	>70	6	1,14%
Geographic location	Big city	269	50,95%
	Smaller city	182	34,47%
	Countryside	77	14,58%
Occupation	Working	381	72,16%
	Studying	108	20,45%
	Other	39	7,39%