

VALUE CREATION IN ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES ON YOUTUBE

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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Brändien ja tutkijoiden kiinnostus Web 2.0 ja sosiaalisen median mahdollistamia online-brändiyhteisöjä kohtaan on noussut viime vuosien saatossa. Näiden yhteisöjen keskiössä on yhteisön jäsenten välinen vuorovaikutus, joka sitouttaa ja tuottaa arvoa sekä jäsenille, että brändille. Online-brändiyhteisöjä on tutkittu muun muassa erilaisilla keskustelufoorumeilla ja Facebookissa, mutta suosittu videopalvelu, Youtube, on jäänyt vähemmälle huomiolle tässä yhteydessä.</p> <p>Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, onko online-brändiyhteisöjä olemassa Youtube-alustalla, ja jos on, minkälaisia erikoispiirteitä niillä on. Tämän lisäksi tarkastellaan, minkälaisia käytänteitä yhteisöissä käytetään, ja miten tutkimukseen valittujen yhteisöjen jäsenten vuorovaikutuksessa syntyy arvoa käytänteiden avulla. Arvonluontia käsittelevissä tutkimuksissa on tunnistettu kuusitoista arvonluonnin käytännettä.</p> <p>Tutkimusmenetelmäksi valittiin netnografia, joka on perinteisen etnografian pohjalta syntynyt, erityisesti online-kulttuurien ja -yhteisöjen vuorovaikutuksen tutkimiseen soveltuva menetelmä. Tutkimuksen kohteeksi valikoitui brändi, joka ylläpitää kahta online-brändiyhteisöä Youtubessa: Beardbrand ja Beardbrand Alliance. Tutkimuksen aineisto koostui yhteisön jäsenten vuorovaikutuksesta otetuista kuvakaappauksista, joita kertyi 340.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset vahvistivat, että brändin Youtube-yhteisöt täyttivät online-brändiyhteisön ominaispiirteet. Samalla tehtiin myös havaintoja alustan rajoituksista online-brändiyhteisön jäsenen näkökulmasta. Tutkimuksen tuloksena selvisi myös, että kummastakin yhteisöstä löytyi laajalti esimerkkejä lähes jokaisesta käytänteestä, mitä voidaan pitää merkkinä elinvoimaisesta online-brändiyhteisöstä. Tutkimuksessa kävi ilmi, kuinka käytänteet toimivat usein yhdessä toisten käytänteiden kanssa, ja ovat usein kilpailullisia sekä tuovat jäsenille pääomaa yhteisön sisällä. Osallistumalla käytänteisiin, jäsenet loivat arvoa, mikä puolestaan vahvisti heidän sitoutumistaan brändiyhteisöön ja sitä kautta myös brändiin.</p>	
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<p>Abstract</p> <p>Brands and researchers have become increasingly interested in online brand communities that Web 2.0 and social media have enabled. At the core of these communities is the interaction between its members, which creates value to both the brand and its community. Research on online brand communities has examined communities on platforms such as discussion forums and Facebook, but the popular video streaming service, Youtube, has received less attention in this particular context.</p> <p>The aim of this study is to discover if online brand communities exist on Youtube, and if they do, what kind of attributes they possess. Furthermore, the study examines what kind of practices exist in the chosen online brand communities, and how practices create value. Studies on value creation have identified sixteen different practices that create value in brand communities.</p> <p>Netnography was chosen as the research method of this study. It is a methodology, based on traditional ethnography, that is best suited for the investigation of online culture and communities. The chosen research site is a brand that hosts two online brand communities on Youtube: Beardbrand and Beardbrand Alliance. The data in this study consists of 340 screenshots of community interaction in total.</p> <p>The results of the study confirmed that the brand's Youtube communities possessed all the markers of online brand communities. Observations were also made on what were the platform's limitations from the perspective of online brand community members. Findings also showed that both of the chosen brand communities exhibited nearly all of the identified practices, which indicates that the communities are vital. The study also demonstrates how practices often work in conjunction with other practices, are often competitive in nature and provide cultural capital to members within the community. Participation in practices created value for community members, which in turn deepened their engagement with the online brand community and the brand.</p>	
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Depository	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 and social media have revolutionized the way individuals, groups, organizations and businesses approach communication, and today people are arguably more connected to each other than ever before. Through the use of communication technologies such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, people are able to connect with others who share similar interests as they do, unrestricted by geographical distance. Such interest-based online communities have become extremely popular and they may be formed, for example around a hobby, profession, difficult medical issue or a commercial brand.

With the rise of social media, many companies have noticed that a community around their brand can be an asset for innovation, co-creation with customers, receiving timely and efficient feedback, generate positive word-to-mouth and insight about their market (de Valck et al., 2009; Schau et al., 2009). The active members of an online community can often be very loyal towards the community, make an effort to grow and sustain the community, and have specialized knowledge on their interest, which makes them valuable to the organization behind the community. Interest has respectively risen in the academic world, and the earliest research on brand communities was conducted in the 2000s (e.g. Algesheimer et al., 2005.; Kozinets, 2002; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009). Even today, 20 years later, the scholarly interest in the field remains strong because new communication technologies keep changing the way these communities organize themselves and how they communicate with each other (Bowden et al., 2017; Hakala et al., 2017; Kumar & Kumar, 2020; Rintamäki, 2019.; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). The research on brand communities has therefore naturally been extended to these new platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media platforms differ in terms of their affordances which affects the way their users use them. For example, Twitter has a character limit of 280 which shapes the way users communicate on the platform. Facebook on the other hand has made creating groups easy and convenient on their platform, which promotes the creation of interest groups. As exemplified here, brand communities on different platforms operate differently, and have their unique characteristics and ways of interaction, which should not be overlooked.

Commercially initiated online brand communities are relatively easy to create with modern tools and technologies, however, such communities seem to struggle to retain their members for an extended period of time (Hartmann et al., 2015). This indicates that the value provided by such communities is insufficient for members to

keep coming back to engage and develop the community. Therefore, there is a need to better understand the value created in online brand communities, which will help in creating engaging and sustainable communities that consumers want to be part of.

The aim of this study is to understand how online brand communities (OBCs) function on YouTube, and how the members of the OBC engage with the community. Understanding how online brand communities communicate, organize, operate and create value on different platforms is integral for brand and social media managers looking to develop a loyal community around their brand, and utilize the different channels in their marketing communications. According to Barab et al. (2004), communities develop their own communication methods and culture over time. Moreover, online communities are often diverse in terms of member demographics because communication technologies such as YouTube transcend national borders. As this study examines specifically brand communities created by companies who operate in multiple markets, and who use English as their corporate language online, the online brand communities studied are heterogenous by nature. Online brand communities are formed around the brand as the ultimate point of interest that connects people together, and are therefore open for everyone to join in which creates a diverse demographic of members. Therefore, online brand communities provide insight on the modern, diverse online consumer culture, but also on the specific community's sub-culture, both of which are valuable. Previous studies have shown that value creation in online brand communities can be examined through practices (e.g. Korkman, 2006; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2017; Schau et al., 2009), and thus, the present research will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What kind of characteristics do brand communities on YouTube have?
2. What kind of communication practices exist in YouTube brand communities?
3. How do practices create value for the community or the brand?

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Service-dominant logic of marketing

Before delving into some of the central concepts of this thesis, I will discuss the paradigm shift in marketing thinking that has taken place in the past few decades, as it has been highly influential for both marketing theory and practice, and it has been foundational in developing research on value creation and consumer engagement that are central to this study.

The traditional approach to marketing was derived from the field of economics, which according to Vargo and Lusch (2004) involved a logic primarily based on the trade of “goods” (goods-dominant logic). Goods-dominant logic focused on tangible resources that were processed by the producer who embedded them with value (or utility) during the production processes. These goods were then stored or distributed to customers, and a transaction would take place. Vargo and Lusch (2004) note that from 1980s onwards, marketing thinking had slowly begun to stray away from the traditional approach towards a view of marketing as a continuous social and economic process revolving around interactive, intertwined networks of relationships and intangible goods such as information, skills, and knowledge. While some scholars concluded that the field was becoming more fragmented, Vargo & Lusch, (2004) describe how the various, seemingly fragmented research recognizing the inadequacies of the dominant logic, had an underlying shared logic behind them, which they call service-dominant logic.

In service-dominant logic, tangible goods are no longer considered as the focal unit of exchange, rather they are a way to deliver services. Vargo and Lusch (2004) posit that services, the utilization of specialized information, expertise, and knowledge, constitute the fundamental unit of trade. The core of the service-dominant logic lies in the process of co-creation and the generation of value through co-creation. According to the service-dominant logic, the emphasis is on the idea that value is not something inherent in a product or added to it by the company, but rather it is determined by what customers derive from the product. (Grönroos, 2006). Value is always determined by the one experiencing (i.e. the individual), and it is co-created by individuals and other entities (i.e. producers of service, other consumers, government etc.) which highlights the interactive and co-creative relationship between the firm and its exchange partners. The other, often social and/or economic entities participate by contributing resources to the co-creation process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In service-dominant thinking, individuals and organizations are intertwined in nature, forming networks, communities and societies that specialize in and develop their own unique competencies. Individuals and groups may then exchange their specialized competencies with another party who possesses competencies needed by the individual or group (Lusch et al., 2007). The service-dominant logic is philosophically grounded in the co-creation processes of consumers, partners and employees of the firm which poses challenges to the management to serve all these stakeholders (Lusch et al., 2007).

The perspective also posits that the firm is committed to co-creation of value through reciprocal provision of services.

In their work, Vargo and Lusch (2006) differentiate between two elements of value co-creation, namely value co-creation and co-production. Co-creation of value occurs at the intersection between the provider and the customer either through direct interaction or indirectly facilitated by a product or goods. In this context, value is generated and defined by the consumer during the process of consumption and through their utilization or usage. Co-production on the other hand involves the active involvement of customers or other partners within the value network in creating the central offering through collaborative creativity, co-design, or shared production of related goods. (Lusch et al., 2007, p. 284). For example, the firm may provide customers the ability to design the look of their product on their website.

This shift in marketing thinking has led to a move away from the traditional focus on individual transactions towards establishing and nurturing enduring relationships with customers over an extended period of time (Andersen, 2005). The task of the contemporary marketer is more often to create, develop and maintain profitable long-term relationships with customers. Moreover, Gummesson (2006) points out that the one-to-one relationship between marketer and consumer has transformed into networks that involve interactions between multiple individuals, and marketing professionals are increasingly adopting a community-focused approach, as demonstrated by the rise of social media platforms. Consumers are progressively assuming the role of value producers for organizations through diverse online collectives, which is the topic of the next chapter.

2.2 Online Brand Communities

The concept of a community has traditionally been understood as a socially cohesive group with geographic boundaries, rooted in familiar and emotional values, often within a rural setting (Brogi, 2014). However, during the last two decades, it has become apparent that the contemporary world has shifted from a material economy towards an information economy, largely due to the incredible development of communication technologies and the ever-expanding reach of the Internet. While the early sociologists blamed the modern urbanized society for the destruction traditional rural communities, the ability to share an identity regardless of geographical boundaries afforded by these developments, seems to have spawned new forms of communities; imagined communities (Anderson, 1983; Brogi, 2014). From a marketing perspective, this advent has been of great significance, as it has led to the emergence of modern marketing practices and the development of consumer culture, in which the brand has become the center of a shared identity in some communities (Brogi, 2014). In this section, I will elucidate the central concept of this thesis, the online brand community.

The concept of online brand community (OBC) was initially introduced by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412), who define it as "a specialized non-geographically bound community, based on a set of social relations among admirers of a brand". OBCs are specialized due to the emphasis on branded products or services, and

diverge from traditional communities by virtue of their commercial orientation and the shared interest, affinity, or even devotion that members have towards a specific brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). According to Brogi (2014), the distinctiveness of OBCs resides in the capability of their members to engage in interaction with one another, which entails sharing their brand-related interest, exchanging information or expressing their affection for the brand. As a result of these exchanges, McAlexander et al. (2002) argue, that members of the OBC establish connections with the brand, but also with the product, the marketer, and other consumers, all of which effect their experience with the brand. Although the common core element of OBCs is undoubtedly the brand, it is ultimately the relationships that enable the communities to exist and persevere.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) identified three markers of traditional communities which they argue are present in brand communities. These markers are consciousness of kind, shared traditions and rituals, and moral responsibility. The first marker, consciousness of kind, refers to the bond that community members develop not only with the brand but, more significantly, with each other. (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). It is described as a shared feeling of belonging, which Bender (1978) calls "we-ness", that simultaneously distinguishes and separates the members of the community from those who are not users of the brand (Brogi, 2014). According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), consciousness of kind is sustained by two separate social mechanisms, legitimacy, and oppositional brand loyalty. The first is a process by which the OBC members distinguish between those who are considered genuine members of the community and those who are not. This differentiation is typically demonstrated by possessing an in-depth understanding of the brand, its history, culture, rituals, traditions, and symbols that are significant to the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The latter is a process involving opposition towards competing brands which is an integral part of the community experience and a crucial aspect of the brand's meaning. Moreover, oppositional brand loyalty serves the purpose of delineating "what the brand is not" and establishing a distinction of who the community members are not. (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). These two social processes are focal in defining the social identity of the brand community.

The second proposed marker of community, rituals and traditions, are essential social processes through which the meaning of the community is preserved and communicated both within and beyond the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 421). Generally, these involve some type of shared acts of consumption involving the brand and serve to uphold the culture of the community. An example of a brand community ritual is the manner in which members greet one another, e.g. members of the Saab brand community who honk or nod as they pass each other on the road, thus publicly recognizing one another and validating the existence of a community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Traditions on the other hand, may take various forms such as telling brand stories or appreciating the brand's history. These socialization processes may be directly assisted by the marketer by, for example, providing materials such as brand stories, histories, myths or quizzes on brand knowledge. The community members are aware of the commercial nature of their community, and thus, the brand identity and ethos are of importance to them, sometimes to the extent that members may even contest the brand's ownership (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This highlights the

social nature of brand as a concept, as members of the brand community are constantly evaluating and negotiating its meaning. Moreover, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) note that participation in the rituals and traditions of the brand community also simultaneously perpetuates consciousness of kind.

The third and final proposed marker of community is that of moral responsibility, which refers to a sense of responsibility towards the entire community as well as towards individual members within the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001: 424). Moral responsibility is what motivates community members to collective action and enhances group cohesion. It is perhaps most evident in two key communal missions performed by the members of a brand community; integration and retention of members, and assistance of other community members in their brand use (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), which contribute to the longevity and continuity of the community and the relationships within it.

The concept of brand community as Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) have defined it, shares similarities with Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning, particularly the concept of community of practice. Communities of practice are bound by three interrelated dimensions which are mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Mutual engagement refers to the interaction among individuals that results in the development of shared understanding regarding specific topics or a problem. An example of such engagement in a brand community might be a newcomer asking for product-related help from the community. The joint enterprise on the other hand, involves individuals actively participating and collaborating towards a shared objective. For brand communities, the goal may be as simple as having a welcoming environment to discuss their favorite car brand. Through the mutual engagement in this joint enterprise, communities of practice, as well as brand communities, cultivate a shared repertoire. This shared repertoire encompasses the collective resources and specialized terminology that community members utilize to negotiate meaning and facilitate learning within the group (Wenger, 1998).

People are motivated to engage with OBCs for a variety of reasons. According to Wang et al., (2011), the primary motive behind participation in an OBC is sharing an interest with others (i.e. the brand, product etc.), but the economic, social, and physical benefits offered by a brand may also become a motivational driver towards participation in a specific OBC. Another potent motivating factor is the fulfillment of needs. Previous studies have claimed that participation in OBCs is driven by individuals' aspirations to satisfy their needs for self-presentation, self-expression, or to enhance their self-esteem (Back et al., 2010; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). In a similar vein, Simmons (2008) suggests that OBCs serve the desires of postmodern consumers to experience a sense of acceptance and construct a social identity through the brands they engage with.

In marketing literature, the relationship between a brand and the consumer has traditionally been viewed as a dyad. However, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) argue that brands are social entities that are shaped through social construction, and consumers play an active role in this process. Therefore, they depict the brand-consumer-consumer relationships as a triad. McAlexander et al. (2002) have even extended this into four additional types of relationships; consumer-brand, consumer-company, consumer-product, and consumer-consumer. It is clear, that OBCs cultivate significant

relationships between consumers and various parts of the brand community, which in turn affect one another. This is an important notion, as it demonstrates that OBCs are useful tools for the relationship marketer looking to improve or enhance the brand's relationship with its customers.

Since its inception, the concept of OBCs has caught the attention of both academia and marketing practitioners, and with the rise of social media, the lure of this phenomena has only increased. Due to the advantages they provide, such as gaining loyal customers, enhancing collaboration opportunities with customers (McAlexander et al., 2002), and influencing customer behavior (Muniz & Schau, 2005), many companies are highly motivated to explore, organize, and foster online communities centered around their brand. Social media appears to be highly suitable for the community-building endeavors of commercial entities, given that the creation and sharing of meaning constitute the central activities of a brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002), while the creation and sharing of content represent the primary function of social media platforms (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). OBCs provide important benefits to both the consumers and the marketer. An online brand community allows consumers to share and retrieve information about the brand, the community and products, while also enabling the marketer to keep their "hand on the pulse" of the consumer (Andersen, 2005), who may then gain relevant and valuable market and consumer insights from the OBC (Kozinets, 2002). Interactions and engagement with the community has been found to enhance the consumer's loyalty towards the brand (McAlexander et al., 2002). Moreover, OBCs enable productive collaboration between its members and the brand through value co-creation activities such as product innovation and development (Schau et al., 2009). From the brand's perspective, OBCs provide a way to manage customer relationships, but they can also be used to give the customer some agency over the brand's activities.

2.3 Social media and online brand communities

Scholars have explored several online brand communities in a variety of contexts, including blogs, brand websites, message boards, wikis, and popular social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Recent studies have shown increasing interest in the latter, which is no surprise, as social media platforms are perhaps the most prominent facilitators of interaction for contemporary brand communities. Indeed, brand-centered communities can be found on almost all social media platforms. According to Burgess and Green (2018), each of these social media platforms uniquely mediates, coordinates and controls the content and interactions that take place on the platform, and each of them have their own distinctive culture of use. Furthermore, they argue that these distinctive affordances, social norms, and the simultaneous co-evolution of their business models, technologies, and uses are in fact shaping and reshaping media and communication (Burgess & Green, 2018). Therefore, it is important that we understand the affordances and uses of each platform.

In order to better define the term social media, it is important to outline how it came to be. Social media is often used as an umbrella-term for all web-based

applications and platforms that mediate communication between individuals and groups, and it is also often confused with related terms such as User Generated Content (UGC) or Web 2.0. Initially, in the Web 1.0 era, online applications and content were first created and then published by individuals. The term Web 2.0 refers to the participatory and collaborative way in which software developers and users now continuously modify the World Wide Web. This shift in the very way the Internet is modified acts as the ideological and technical foundation for everything that takes place in the online environment. User Generated Content on the other hand encompasses the range of methods through which people utilize social media platforms. The term refers to the diverse forms of media content accessible to the public, generated and produced by the users themselves.

Categorizing social media applications accurately is a difficult task to researchers, as new platforms and applications emerge in the cyberspace and the ways in which each of them is used, may also change quite rapidly. However, Kaplan and Hainlain (2010a) argue, that social media applications can be classified in terms of their social presence and media richness, and how much self-presentation and self-disclosure they allow between the communication partners. Social presence refers to the degree of “acoustic, visual, and physical contact” that can be achieved on the application (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010a: 61). The concept media richness is based on the idea that the goal of any communication is to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity. Media differ in their degree of richness, which is the amount of information they allow to be transmitted, and thus some media are more effective in resolving ambiguity and uncertainty. The social dimension of the classification is based on the Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation, which posits that individuals, in all forms of social engagement, seek to regulate the impressions others develop about them (Kaplan & Hainlain, 2010a: 62-63). In general, individuals participate in self-presentation through self-disclosure, which involves the purposeful or inadvertent sharing of personal information, including thoughts, emotions, preferences, and aversions. Some social media applications require more self-disclosure than others and allow different types of opportunities for self-presentation. It is worth noting that self-presentation and self-disclosure can occur on platforms that do not explicitly guide the user towards it. Kaplan and Hainlain (2010a) identified six types of social media: collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Next, I will introduce some of the types of social media to illustrate the distinctions between them

		Social presence/ Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation/ Self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g., YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)

Figure 1 Kaplan & Hainlain's (2010a) classification of social media.

Collaborative projects enable multiple users to collectively create content, making it potentially the most democratic form of User Generated Content. Within collaborative projects, Kaplan and Hainlain (2010: 62) differentiate between wikis and social bookmarking applications. The former refers to websites that allow users to contribute, delete, and modify content primarily in the form of text, while the latter refers to applications that allow group-based rating and collection of Internet links and content. A well-known example of a collaborative project is the online encyclopedia Wikipedia that is available in 230 different languages. The central concept behind collaborative projects is that the collective endeavors of multiple individuals yield superior outcomes compared to what any single person could accomplish alone. Kaplan and Hainlain (2010a) categorize collaborative projects as low both in terms of self-presentation/self-disclosure and social presence/media richness, since the authors on these sites often remain anonymous and the only form of interaction on them occurs through basic discussion forums that are restricted to textual discourse.

Blogs represent one of the earliest forms of social media. They are a type of web-based diary, often organized in reverse chronologically, that is updated by the author. Blogs may serve a multitude of purposes, ranging from descriptions of the author's daily life to a DIY hobbyist's tutorials. Many firms also use blogs to keep their employees and customers informed about what is going on in the company (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Although text-based blogs are the most common, they may be created in other formats too. More recently, video blogs or vlogs have become a popular form of social media. Blogs are classified as high in self-presentation and self-disclosure Kaplan and Hainlain (2010a). Bloggers tend to publish under their real name and often reveal at least their face through a profile picture or a video blog. Moreover, blog topics often stem from the real-life events and experiences of the blogger, which uncovers information about themselves to the audience. The media richness/social presence is low because interactions between the blogger and their audience often only take place in the comments of the published blog.

Content communities revolve around the creation and exchange of media content among users. These communities cater to diverse forms of media, encompassing written content (e.g., BookCrossing), visual images (e.g., Pinterest), videos (e.g., YouTube), and slide-based presentations (e.g., Slideshare). Typically, users of content communities are not obligated to create an individual profile page in order to access

the community's content. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010a: 63) point out that content communities carry the risk of users sharing and editing copyright-protected material, which is problematic from the corporate perspective. On the other hand, they are popular and provide a platform for firms to promote their offerings, which makes them an attractive option for marketing purposes. Content communities are categorized as low in self-presentation/self-disclosure and as medium in media richness/social presence (Kaplan & Hainlain 2010a). This is because much of the interaction occurs through videos in which people share their physical appearance as well as personality on camera. However, everyone does not use the platform to create and publish videos, as some people choose to only watch and comment on the videos. In this case, the viewer's experience could be categorized as low in both self-presentation/self-disclosure and media richness/social presence.

Social networking sites are applications that enable users to create personal profiles and connect with other users. These personal profiles often entail personal information that can only be seen by those who have been granted access by the owner of the profile. User profiles may include any type of information such as texts, photos, videos or audio files. On most social networking sites, users connect with other users by inviting them to gain access to the information in these personal profiles, which also enables communication between users via direct messages. Many companies have started to utilize social networking sites in the creation of brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and marketing research in the form of netnography (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010a: 63-64). Kaplan and Hainlain (2010a) classify social networking sites as high self-presentation/self-disclosure due to the use of personal profiles to interact with other users, and as medium media richness/social presence due to the use of various media forms.

2.4 Youtube and online brand communities

Despite of the great scholarly interest in the area, one of the world's most popular social media websites, YouTube, has been less explored in the context of online brand community interactions. Previous studies have examined the factors that influence brand video performance (Gazzola, 2015) and modes of address in different content types on YouTube (Cunningham & Craig, 2017), but none have looked into value creation in brand communities on the platform at the time of this study. One reason for this may be that YouTube is not as obviously social platform, as for example Facebook, which operates on the basis of personal profiles and associating with others through the process of "friending" to establish social connections (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, cited in Burgess & Green, 2018). YouTube's value comes from the users who upload content to the website and the audiences who engage around that content. Within YouTube, the video content itself has served as a prominent means of social interaction and communication (Paolillo, 2008; Lange, 2007b, cited in Burgess & Green, 2018), as well as peer learning. According to Lange (2007), videos on YouTube serve important social functions, and the way in which videos are viewed, enjoyed, and forwarded reveal information about the participants and their relationships. Moreover, Lange (2007)

argues that similarly to instant messages, videos on YouTube strive to establish an “affinity”, which Nardi (2005) defines as a “feeling of connection”.

Although YouTube is perhaps more known for its’ user-generated content (UGC), some brands such as GoPro, have also recognized its potential for community-building, rather than just utilizing it as a mere marketing communications channel. An example of successful community-building is GoPro’s YouTube channel, which at the time of this study has 10,6 million subscribers (GoPro, 2022). The brand features videos of GoPro athletes displaying their skills at variety of extreme sports while promoting their products and demonstrating the incredible footage that their cameras enable. The YouTube channel serves not only as a marketing communication channel with engaging advertisement for the brand, but also as a place for GoPro’s followers and customers to come together and interact with one another. Although Kaplan and Hainlain (2010a) classified YouTube primarily as a content community that offers medium social presence/media richness and low self-disclosure/self-presentation, the comment section of each video provides a platform for viewer discussions, and thus, for brand communities.

2.5 Practice theory and value creation

Researchers have suggested that marketing efforts should shift away from individual transactions towards establishing and nurturing enduring relationships with customers over an extended period of time (Andersen, 2005). The service-dominant logic and its focus on interaction and networks has provided a foundation for research on consumer value creation and engagement which have become prominent research topics in the field of marketing. In consumer research, consumers behavior has been studied through the sociological theory of practice. Inspired by Holt's (1995) ethnography of baseball spectators, Schau et al. (2009) applied practice theory in their pioneering study of brand communities to discover how consumers create value through practices. In this chapter, I briefly present practice theory and practice as a concept before introducing the typology of brand community value creation practices developed by Schau et al. (2009) that was later refined by Hollebeek et al. (2017).

Reckwitz (2002: 249-250) defines practices as routinized behavior that encompasses various interconnected elements. These elements consist of various physical and mental activities, objects and their utilization, as well as underlying knowledge in the form of comprehension, practical skills, motivational awareness, and emotional states. The existence of a practice is reliant on the interconnection of its specific elements, and therefore it cannot be reduced to any individual component alone. In its essence, practices are “linked ways of understanding, saying and doing things” (Schau et al., 2009). Korkman (2006) highlights that practices should not be confused with actions, which refer to specific tasks that are performed, while practices encompass broader and culturally embedded "ways of doing" that encompass both the actions themselves and the surrounding context.

According to practice theory, people need to establish shared understandings and display competencies in order to participate in practices, which in turn reinforces social structure. Thus, in the context of an online community, social order of a community is achieved through competent performance of specific practices (Schau et al., 2009). Scholars (e.g. Holt 1995; Schau et al. 2009) have also linked value creation with practices. According to Schau et al. (2009), value resides in practices. In their notion practices are “carriers of value”, while individuals are “carriers of practice” (Reckwitz, 2002: 256).

In the context of brand communities, Schau et al. (2009) suggest that practices share a common "anatomy" comprised of three essential components. The component is general procedural understandings, which refer to explicit knowledge. The second component are skills, abilities, and culturally appropriate consumption projects, which encompass implicit knowledge and know-how. The final component is emotional commitments that are often expressed through actions and representations. These parts operate together but the way in which they do so may vary across brand communities. Practices also interact with one another, have apprenticeship-like qualities, provide cultural capital to community members, provide resources for insider sharing, create consumption opportunities, demonstrate the liveliness of the community and generate value (Schau et al., 2009: 35-40).

Hartmann et al. (2015) points out that value is not only experienced by participating in the productive moments of practices, but also in the consumptive moments. Practices are always performed by someone (i.e. an actor) but also received or consumed by others. Performing a practice thus creates value for the performer and others who participate by consuming it. Hartman et al. (2015) suggest that practices may be consumed in direct and vicarious consumptive moments. The first involves a moment in which someone performs a practice (e.g. greeting) and another person receives it directly. The latter moment occurs when an online community member helps another member with their problem, and a third member observes this exchange, thus experiencing the practice performance and vicariously consuming it.

This thesis adopts Schau et al.'s (2009) notion in which engagement in practices creates value, and incorporates Hartmann et al.'s (2015) view that practices are experienced in consumptive moments by both the actor and the recipient(s). While the recognition of indirect or vicarious consumptive moments in practices is important and “lurking” (e.g. consuming community’s content without directly participating by commenting) is a very prominent way of participating in online brand communities, particularly on YouTube, the focus of this study is on direct consumptive moments. This is due to the need to limit the scope of the study, and because of the nearly anonymous nature of YouTube communities which makes it difficult to obtain interview or journal data regarding vicarious consumptive moments of the brand community members.

2.5.1 Value creation in brand communities

Value in online brand communities is created and experienced through practices. Schau et al. (2009) identified 12 common practices in brand communities which they

organized in four thematic categories that work with one another to create value for consumers. The four categories are social networking, community engagement, brand use, and impression management. In this chapter, I will introduce Schau et al.'s (2009) brand community value creation categories and the practices that fall under them.

The Process of Collective Value Creation in Brand Communities

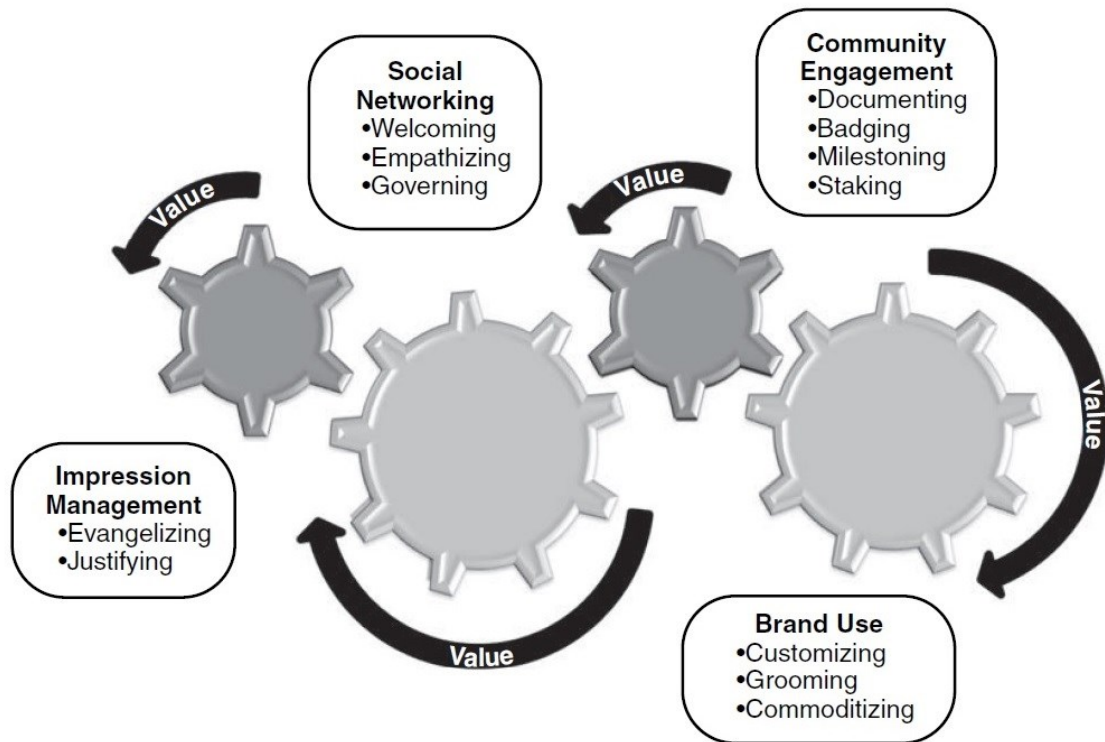


Figure 2 Depiction of the value creation process in brand communities by Schau et al. (2009)

The first category is social networking practices, which aim to foster, improve, and maintain social connections among members of a brand community. The category consists of three practices which are welcoming, empathizing, and governing. The practice of welcoming involves greeting new members, inviting them to the group, and helping them become familiar with the community. This is an important practice that contributes to the sense of community, and its goal is to make new members feel valued in the community. Empathizing is a practice that provides emotional support to the members of the community and strengthens the community spirit. The governing practice includes formulating how members of the community are expected to conduct themselves within the community, for example, in the form of community guidelines. The aforementioned practices function within the domain of emotions, strengthening the social and ethical ties within the community. They highlight the unity of the community, the commonalities among its members, and the expectations they hold regarding their own and others' conduct (Schau et al., 2009).

The second category is that of impression management, which focus on managing the image of the community and the brand in the eyes of those who are not part

of it. These practices include evangelizing and justifying. The practice of evangelizing involves communicating positively about the brand and sharing good news with the goal of attracting new members to choose the brand. It may also involve negative comparisons with competing brands. Justifying is a practice in which members of the community rationalize the time and effort they devote to the brand. Justifying occurs both within the community and outside of it, for example, in the form of debates or jokes about compulsive or obsessive brand-related behavior (Schau et al., 2009).

Third category is community engagement, which is housed by practices that increase members' engagement with the brand community. This set of practices includes milestoneing, documenting, staking, and badging. All these practices are competitive and provide social capital to members by allowing them to differentiate themselves from others within the community. In this set of practices, brand use is secondary to engagement with the community. Milestoneing refers to the practice of documenting noteworthy occasions related to members' ownership and consumption of a brand. The events often involve intimate moments in members' personal lives with the brand. The practice of documenting is closely linked with the practice of milestoneing, as it entails the documentation of members' journey with the brand in a narrative manner. Milestoneing is focused more on specific moments and its significance in consumers' life, whereas documenting is focused on the whole use journey. Staking is a practice that recognizes the heterogeneity of the brand community, for example, members may announce which specific sub-group of the community they engage with, thus distinguishing themselves from other sub-groups. Badging refers to the practice of turning milestones into symbols, which occurs through creating a semiotic signifier, for example, by purchasing a band T-shirt at a concert (Schau et al., 2009).

The fourth and final category is brand use which entails practices that aim to enhance or optimize the utilization of the core brand. This set of practices consists of grooming, commoditizing, and customizing. Grooming refers to the practice of caring for the brand or optimizing its use, for example, through maintenance of the branded product (i.e. cleaning the inside of a car) or discussing the proper ways of using the brand for optimal results (i.e. in the case of a skincare product). The commoditizing practice involves behavior in which members either distance themselves from or approach the marketplace. It may be intended to the brand explicitly or through presumed monitoring of the community site, or it may be directed at other members (Schau et al., 2009: 46). One example of commoditizing are Star Trek community's criticisms towards the merchandizing and commercialization of the brand in Kozinet's (2001) study. Customizing refers to the practice of modifying the brand to suit the specific requirements of an individual or group. This includes all endeavors to modify the product beyond its factory specifications, as well as engaging in activities such as fan fiction or creating art inspired by the brand.

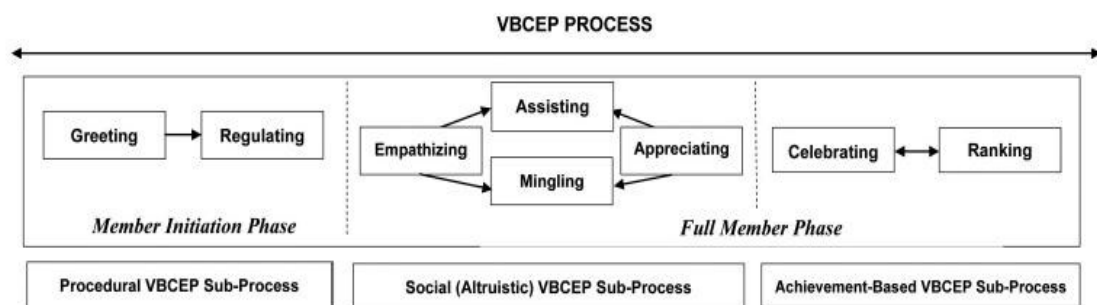
2.5.2 Virtual brand community engagement practices

One of the central terms in contemporary marketing and online brand community literature is consumer engagement, which has its roots in the service-dominant logic

and the domain of relationship marketing. Due to the active role of modern consumers in the marketing process, it is viewed as strategically important for establishing and sustaining competitive advantage and as a valuable predictor of business performance (Brodie et al., 2011). In the context of online brand communities, Brodie et al. (2013: 107) produced the following definition for consumer engagement:

“Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community involves the specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community. Consumer engagement is a context-dependent, psychological state characterized by fluctuating intensity levels that occur within dynamic, iterative engagement processes. Consumer engagement is a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, and plays a central role in the process of relational exchange where other relational concepts are engagement antecedents and/or consequences in iterative engagement processes within the brand community.” (Brodie et al., 2013: 107)

Recognizing the importance of engagement in the online space, Hollebeek et al. (2017) decided to build on Schau et al.'s (2009) work to produce a refined typology for specifically virtual brand community engagement practices (VBCEPs). Their model focuses on virtual engagement practices that co-create experiences and value for community members, which entails eight individual practices and three sub-processes.



Note: VBCEP = Virtual brand community engagement practice

Figure 3 Virtual brand community engagement practice process (Hollebeek et al., 2017)

There are some notable similarities with between Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) and Schau et al.'s (2009) models, but also differences. The first practice, greeting, corresponds with Schau et al.'s (2009) practice of welcoming, as they both refer to extending polite greetings to new members and exhibiting a positive response to their joining, as well as acknowledging and encouraging their present and future participation. Greeting is used to in an informal manner to initiate members to the community and to foster positive emotions towards the community with the aim of motivating newcomers to participate. In a similar vein, the practice of regulating refers to existing members providing information to new members regarding the rules, norms, and guidelines of the community, which equates to Schau et al.'s (2009) practice of

governing. Greeting and regulating form the first procedural VBCEP sub-process, which entails practices related to member initiation phase.

Empathizing is a practice in which community members express support or understanding towards the feelings of fellow members regarding brand- or community-related matters. While Schau et al. (2009) considered empathizing as a social networking practice, Hollebeek et al. (2017) regard it as a VBCEP in their model. Another point of difference is that Schau et al.'s (2009) community engagement practices of badging and documenting are not included in Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) VBCEPs, although this may be due to the nature of the OBC they studied (an online designer handbag brand community). There are then three practices that are unique to the Hollebeek et al. (2017) model. The practice of assisting refers to helping other members with issues and questions about brand- or non-brand-related matters, whereas the appreciating practice involves expressing gratitude and thankfulness towards the community as a whole or towards specific members within the community. The practice of mingling encompasses specific online interactions among community members that go beyond the central brand. This includes the formation of distinct relationships within the community, which can be further nurtured through offline meetings, brand-related events, and other forms of engagement. These four practices form the second social (altruistic) VBCEP sub-process, which is part of the member phase of community engagement.

The final two practices form the third achievement-based VBCEP sub-process, which also reflect the community membership status of those who perform them. The practice of ranking which refers to members efforts to establish and enhance their role, position, or status within the community, corresponds closely with Schau et al.'s (2009) practice of staking. Finally, the practice of celebrating involves noting and commemorating other members' significant brand-, membership- or community-related events and milestones. This practice differs from Schau et al.'s (2009) practice of milestone in which members commemorate their own brand-related milestones.

Although the two models share similarities, Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) VBCEPs provide an even sharper lens through which specifically online brand community engagement practices may be examined. Therefore, this study will utilize both models, merging the four-component model of Schau et al. (2009) value creation practices with Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) virtual brand community engagement practices. By doing this, the study will have a more comprehensive view of the OBC practices that generate value.

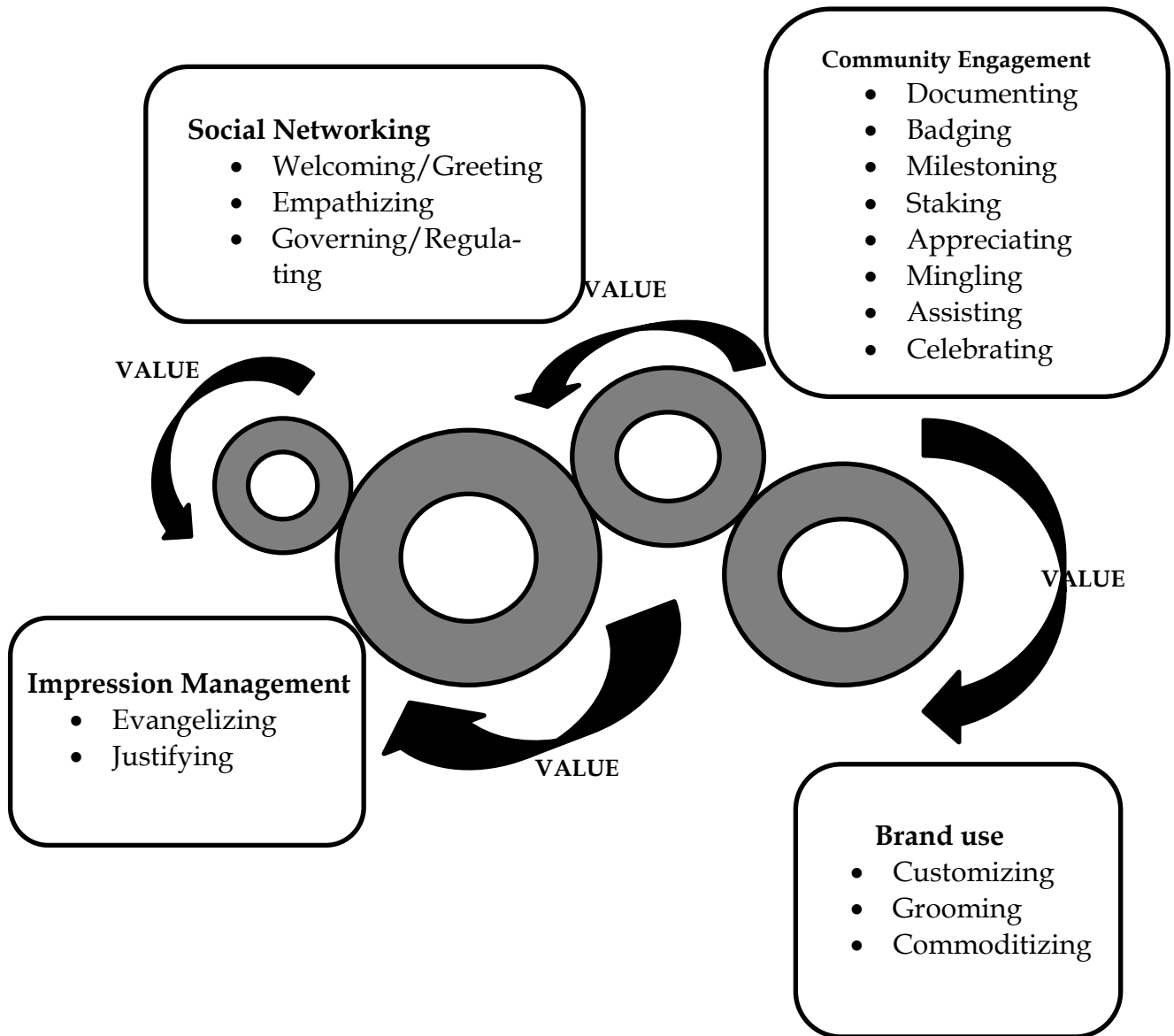


Figure 4 Merged model of the collective value creation process in brand communities (Schau et al., 2009; Hollebeek et al., 2017)

3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the research methods used in the present study. First, I will present netnography as a research method and why it was chosen over other methods. I will then describe the general process of conducting netnography and specifically how it is implemented in this study. Following this, I will summarize the analytical process behind netnography. Finally, the chapter is concluded with a brief overview of the chosen brand community and the data.

3.1 Netnography as a research method

The present thesis takes a qualitative approach by using netnography as its method of inquiry in the online environment. As this thesis aims to discover how brand communities create value through practices on YouTube, netnography was chosen as the research method because it allows the observation of practices in a naturalistic setting, unaffected by the researcher. This unique attribute is very appealing as it may help in providing genuine insights on the online communities examined.

Netnography, also known as Internet ethnography, is a qualitative research approach that adapts traditional ethnographic methods from anthropology to study the cultures and communities that emerge through computer-mediated communications in online environments (Jupp, 2006, as cited in Kozinets, 2006). Netnography, similarly to ethnography, is an open-ended practice, because it is based on participant observation, and it acknowledges and employs researcher reflexivity (Kozinets, 2002). This means that the method relies on the researcher themselves as a critical instrument in the research process (Sherry, 1991: 572, as cited in Kozinets, 2002), and as a result, netnography is significantly influenced by the researcher's interests and skills. (Kozinets, 2002:62). According to Kozinets (2002), traditional ethnography is rooted in the local, particular, and specific contexts. Although ethnographic data can be generalized, it is usually used to gain particularized understanding that is referred to as "grounded knowledge" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, as cited in Kozinets, 2002). Respectively, netnography produces knowledge that is rooted in the particular online context.

As mentioned, one of the distinct advantages compared to other research methods such as surveys, focus groups, or interviews, is the fact that it allows the researcher to access naturally occurring data discreetly (Kozinets, 2002, 2006). This is because it is performed by observing consumers in an unaltered context, without manipulation by the researcher, and thus it offers the researcher a window for observing naturally occurring behaviors. In contrast to traditional ethnography, netnography can be conducted in a fully non-intrusive manner (Kozinets, 2002: 62). An additional advantage of netnography is the ongoing access it provides to informants within a specific online social environment (Kozinets, 2002, 2006).

In the contemporary environment, where social interactions are increasingly technologically mediated, there is no shortage of available data for the netnographer. However, as Kozinets (2002, 2006) points out, this can also pose risks to the research.

One potential challenge is that researchers may feel overwhelmed by the textual and virtual nature of communication involved in netnography, which in turn may reduce the quality of research (Rokka, 2010). Netnographic data must also be contextualized which may prove to be a challenge for researchers due to the absence of social cues in the online environment. To help researchers succeed in conducting netnography, Kozinets (2002, 2006) recommends five steps and procedures of netnographic inquiry, which will be introduced next.

3.2 Netnography in the present study

The first stage of netnography is *entrée*, which entails the initial preparatory steps for the research process. First of these is the formulation of research questions and identifying a particular online community which would be appropriate for the type of research question (Kozinets, 2002: 63). Search engines, such as Google.com, are recommended for identifying potential research sites. Research question(s) should guide the selection towards viable online communities, of which the ones with higher “traffic” of interactions or activity should be preferred. In addition, substantial number of individual posters, extensive and descriptive data, and interactions between members that are relevant to the research question are all important signs that help the researcher identify potential sites of study (Kozinets, 2002: 63). In the present study this process began in September 2021 after the decision to focus on online brand communities on YouTube. Google searches and YouTube search function were utilized to search for brand communities that would fit Kozinets’ (2010) criteria, and potentially offer answers to the research questions. Beardbrand (1,81 million subscribers) was chosen as the focal brand of the study, and its alternative channel Beardbrand Alliance (158 000 subscribers) was also chosen to be included in the study. The brand choice, brand and its communities will be introduced more thoroughly in the data section.

Second, the researcher needs to acquire extensive knowledge about the online environment, the groups involved, and the individual participants they aim to understand (Kozinets, 2002: 63). In this way, the researcher will be better equipped to navigate within the vast amount of data found in the online community. Kozinets (2002: 63) highlights the importance of becoming familiar with the attributes of an online community, including factors such as group membership, market-oriented behaviors, interests, and language, prior to initiating data collection. This process was initiated once the focal brand community was chosen, and it was implemented over a period of two weeks. Several brand videos were watched to better grasp the context and community discussions associated to the videos were observed to become familiar with the selected communities and their characteristics as well as language use.

According to Kozinets (2002), once a suitable online community has been identified and studied for the research, the researcher may begin the data collection and analysis stage. Kozinets (2002) distinguishes the two key elements in netnographic data collection, first of which is the data that the researcher directly captures by copying from the computer-mediated communications within the online community. The possibility for nearly automatic transcription of online documents is recognized as a

distinct advantage over traditional ethnography. The second element is the data generated by the researcher through taking notes on their observations of the community and its members, interactions, and meanings (Kozinets, 2002:63). Data collection should be ongoing as long as there are new insights emerging on relevant topics (Kozinets, 2002). Kozinets (2002) recommends that the researcher takes reflective field notes while collecting data, which can be useful in contextualizing the data. In this stage, the netnographer's decisions regarding which data to preserve and explore hold significant importance, and these choices should be guided by the research question at hand, as well as other available resources (such as member's willingness to be interviewed, members' ability to articulate oneself, time, proficiency of the researcher) (Kozinets, 2002). This procedure will help navigate the plentiful nature of data and to avoid the potential information overload (Kozinets, 2002). In this connection, it is worth mentioning that spam, or unsolicited bulk messages, were excluded from the analysis as suggested by Kozinets (2010: 103). These messages provide no value to the community discussions and were for the most part ignored by the members as well. The data collection of the study began in late December 2021, and it was continued until late March 2022, which yielded 340 screenshots of community interactions that took place in the two chosen brand community channels.

Analysis of the data is often done concomitantly with data collection. While there are various ways to analyze netnographic data, the researcher must always contextualize the data, which may prove to be a challenge due to the lack of social cues online (Kozinets, 2002). A key decision for the researcher at this stage is whether to classify or code the data (with a software tool) for quicker analytical process and potentially risk losing some of the symbolic richness of the data. Kozinets (2002:63) argues that some of the most profound interpretations of netnographic data stem from metaphorical and symbolic analysis, rather than categorization. The present study began the analysis process after the data was collected and opted to manually code the data to break it down into smaller, more-manageable pieces, and then use hermeneutic interpretation to gain deeper insights. The analytical process is further elaborated on in the next chapter.

In a netnographic research, the research should aim to provide reasonable or trustworthy results, rather than pursue "validity" (Kozinets, 2002). To achieve trustworthiness, it must be clear what is analyzed and in what kind of context. Netnographic research is primarily based on observations of textual discourse in an online context, rather than observed behavior as in ethnography (Kozinets, 2002). This is a key notion that has several important implications. First, due to the nature of computer-mediated communication, the informants may be presumed to present a self-image that is carefully curated and controlled (Kozinets, 2002). Moreover, the ever-changing, dynamic, and multifaceted online environment, which shapes social representation, introduces challenges when it comes to identifying informant identity (Turkle, 1995, as cited in Kozinets, 2002). Therefore, netnography adopts Mead's (1938, as cited in Kozinets, 2002) approach, in which the focus of analysis lies not on the individual, but rather on the specific actions or behaviors (Kozinets, 2002). Kozinets (2002) draws from "the linguistic turn" and asserts that a computer text post is considered a social action, functioning as a communicative act that is amenable to analysis. Furthermore, every element of a communicative act, including the action itself, its type,

content, medium, and more, holds significance as trustworthy observational data. (Kozinets, 2002). The shift from the ethnographic observation of people to the netnographic observation of conversational acts necessitates that the researcher must recontextualize them. This is because they occur in a completely different conversational context; through computer-mediation, in a public space, and identifying the identities of informants poses a greater challenge (Kozinets, 2002). It is also worth noting, that generalizations to other markets or communities should not be made without substantiating evidence which can be obtained through triangulation of data collected from other methods, such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, or conventional in-person ethnographies. (Kozinets, 2002).

As this thesis and the use of netnography as research method involves people as informants, it is both necessary and a good practice to discuss the relevant issues related to research ethics. According to Kozinets (2002) there are two main interrelated ethical concerns related to conducting a netnographic inquiry. The first is the so called "public-versus-private" debate, which has to do with whether online spaces such as a discussion forum, are considered to be private or public sites (Kozinets, 2002). The second issue has to do with what constitutes as "informed consent" in cyberspace. In both cases, there is no clear consensus, and thus, no ethically sound procedure for netnography has been established. Kozinets (2002: 65) proposes four ethical research procedures for netnography practitioners. These include: (1) disclosing the researcher's presence, affiliations, and research intentions to online community members, (2) ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of informants, (3) seeking and incorporating feedback from members of the online community being studied, and (4) adopting a cautious stance when it comes to the private-versus-public medium issue by obtaining informed consent from community members before directly quoting any specific postings in the research. The present study addresses these issues as follows. YouTube is a public website, and therefore, it may be assumed that its users are aware and informed of the fact that their activities on the site (commenting, upvotes etc.) are public as well. Moreover, the present study concurs with Sudweeks' and Rafaeli's (1995) view which posits that the users of a public forum such as YouTube give informed consent implicitly in the act of posting their message in a public area. As for Kozinets' (2002) call for disclosure of researcher presence, studies in the past have argued that non-disclosure is necessary in online research, in order to preserve the methodological validity and to avoid data contamination (Hewson et al., 2016). Researcher disclosure could be potentially harmful to the present research, as informants may begin to adjust their behavior if a social stimulus such as researcher presence is disclosed (Lehner-Mear, 2020). In addition, the research practices were reflected upon and assessed with the guidelines of Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2019). It was concluded that researcher non-disclosure does not pose any harm nor risk to the participants in the study, and therefore, the present study opts to not disclose researcher presence in the online brand community. Regarding Kozinets' (2002) recommendation of seeking and incorporating feedback from the members of the online community, this study cannot implement this due to the nearly anonymous

nature of its participants. Addressing Kozinets' (2002) final suggestion, it is unfortunately not feasible to contact each community member for informed consent, but the present study will take a careful approach to address concerns related to the private-versus-public medium issues by conserving the participants anonymity to the extent that is possible, and thus, protecting them from harm.

3.3 The analytical process of netnography

Netnography employs an inductive approach in the analysis of qualitative data (Kozinets, 2010: 118). Analysis involves the systematic organization of empirical data, identifying patterns, local categories, and fundamental descriptive units to bring order to the information (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In the context of netnography, the analysis involves a comprehensive examination of the complete dataset, deconstructing it into its constituent parts, and conducting various comparisons among them. Induction is a type of logical reasoning where specific elements from the diverse and distinctive world are observed to generate broader statements about the phenomenon (Flick, 2014). In the inductive approach, the research problem is often refined, and at times changed over the course of the research project. Respectively, theoretical concepts are formulated and refined as the research process unfolds. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Inductive data analysis is well-suited for netnography, as it enables the netnographer to handle and manipulate the complete body of recorded information gathered throughout the netnography process. According to Kozinets (2010: 119-121) there are two main ways netnographers approach the analysis of the data. The first is analytic coding, in which codes, categories, and labels are assigned to particular units of data. These codes indicate that the data exemplifies some more general phenomenon. Labels, codes, and categories often emerge through a process of inductive reasoning and close examination of the data, rather than being predetermined by the researcher. The second approach to the analysis of netnographic data is hermeneutics. The process of hermeneutics is iterative, involving the interpretation and re-interpretation of a portion of the qualitative data in relation to the evolving understanding of the entire context. A holistic understanding of the data is developed through these iterations over time (Kozinets, 2010: 120). Thompson et al. (1994: 433, cited in Kozinets, 2010) points that initial comprehension of the text is influenced and frequently adjusted as subsequent readings offer a more refined understanding of the overall meaning of the text (Kozinets, 2010: 120). According to Kozinets (2010: 120), when constructing hermeneutic interpretations, the netnographer should look for interpretations that are sensible and unambiguous, as well as accessible to the intended reading audience. Interpretations should also be backed by sufficient and relevant examples, that are related to relevant literature. In addition, netnographers' should aim to construct interpretations that are illuminating and rich in conveying the depth of the phenomenon at hand that also produce insights that alter our prevailing understanding. The present study applies both aforementioned data analysis methods to achieve results that cover all aspects of the whole.

The analytical process of netnography can be described in six common steps. First, field notes are utilized to assign codes or categories to the data. As mentioned before, the codes or categories emerge inductively and exemplify a more general phenomenon, which allows the researcher to break down the data into smaller pieces. Then, researcher's notes and initial reflections of the data are included. Third, the materials are organized and scanned to identify similarities as well as distinct differences. The idea behind this abstracting process is to construct the previously categorized codes into more general concepts, patterns or processes. The fourth step involves revisiting the field to gather additional data, with the aim of reviewing and enhancing the current comprehension of the patterns, processes, similarities, and differences in the data. Fifth, a small set of generalizations are developed to explain the consistencies in the data. Finally, the generalizations developed from the data are connected to existing literature that uses relevant concepts and theories to create a new theory (Kozinets, 2010).

In the present study, analysis began by reviewing the data with the help of field notes to develop codes and categories for units of data. The inductively developed categories and codes were used to sort out the data and to identify patterns, similarities, as well as differences within the data. Then, initial interpretations of the data were made after watching the related brand video to understand the context in which the data occurred. Data collection continued as it was conducted concomitantly with the analysis until no new findings were made. Data was then reviewed closely to refine the existing understandings and interpretations. The analysis produced some generalizations that explain the consistencies in the data, which are presented in the findings section. Finally, the generalizations developed were connected to existing literature in the discussion section.

3.4 Data

The data set in this study consists of screenshots of interactions on the chosen brand communities' YouTube channels. A total of 340 screenshots were included in the analysis. The number of comments in each screenshot varies due to the length of the comments. An example of a screenshot will be showcased below. The chosen brand, Beardbrand, has two channels which host two separate communities, both of which will be included in the study. The choice of research site as well as the two brand communities will be introduced in this section.

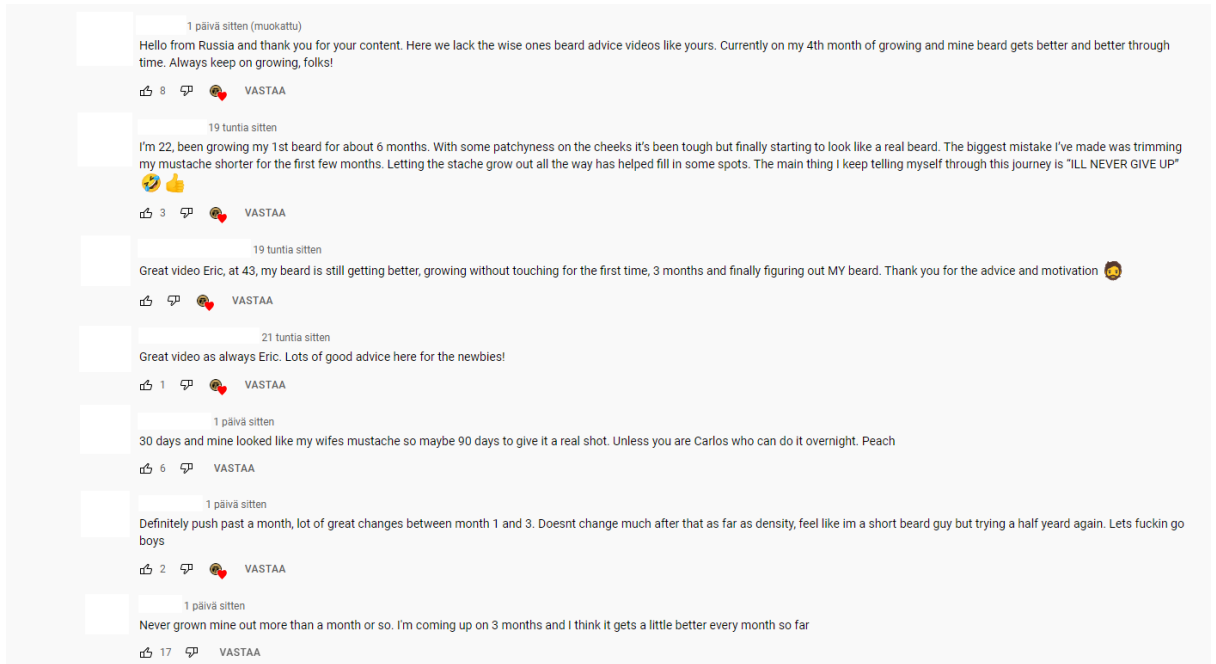


Figure 5 Example of a screenshot

3.4.1 Choosing the brand community

The choice of research site is an important step in netnography. Brand communities may vary vastly from one another, and in the context of online brand communities, the affordances of the platform may influence the way the community operates. Therefore, the choice of research site should be guided by the research questions at hand. Before making the decision on which brand communities would be suited for the study, it is recommended to become familiar with several brand communities (Kozinets, 2010). Once the aim of the study is clear and potentially viable brand communities have been identified, the researcher may choose to evaluate the communities through a criterion to ensure that a particular community is fitting and relevant to the research at hand. Kozinets (2010: 89) proposes six criteria which evaluate the suitability of an online brand community as a research site.

Criterion	Description
Relevance	How suitable the community is to the research questions and the core issue of the study
Activity	How active the community has been in recent times and how frequently the community takes action

Interaction	How rich the interaction is between the members of the community
Plentiful exchange of thought	To what extent do the community members partake in interactions
Heterogeneity	The difference between the members of the community from one another
Richness of the data	How descriptive and detailed is the data available within the community

Table 1 Criterion for suitable online brand communities (edited from Kozinets, 2010: 89)

Finding an online brand community that would fit all the criterion mentioned above is not an easy task, and therefore one should consider which of the criterion are the most important to the research, and emphasize them in making the decision on which community to study (Kozinets, 2010). As the present study approaches online brand communities from the perspective of value creation through practices, the most important criteria were relevance, activity, and interaction. Heterogeneity of the community was also considered to be an important factor from the intercultural perspective.

As the present study focuses on brand communities on YouTube, only brands with active communities on the platform were considered. Ultimately, Beardbrand was chosen as the brand community to be studied in this thesis for a variety of reasons. Both of its brand communities, Beardbrand and Beardbrand Alliance, fit Kozinets (2010) criterion well. Although the brand utilizes various channels to communicate with its communities, their most frequently used channels seem to be their two YouTube channels on which the brand posts videos for their community to watch and discuss on. This focus on using YouTube as the main platform for their online community supports the aim of this study extremely well. Their main channel, Beardbrand, is the larger of the two communities, consisting of 1,81 million subscribers, and thus providing a very active site for the study (Beardbrand, 2021). Their second channel, Beardbrand Alliance is noticeably smaller, consisting of 158 000 subscribers at the time. However, the community seemed to be very active and interactions in the comments were plentiful, which ultimately lead to including it in the study. The two channels have different purposes from the brand's perspective, and this is reflected in their respective communities, which may provide interesting insights about how different or similar the two brand communities within the same brand are.

3.4.2 Beardbrand

Beardbrand is a company based in Austin, Texas, that offers grooming, styling, and maintenance products for beards, mustaches, hair, and skin. They also have a brand barbershop, located in Austin. The company was founded in 2012 by Eric Bandholz, Lindsey Reinders and Jeremy McGee (Brunner, 2014). Initially, Beardbrand started

with the goal of creating an online community to unite beardsmen around the world. This was pursued through a blog, a YouTube channel, and a Tumblr blog, on which the founder Eric Bandholz, shared his experience and knowledge on growing a beard and provided style inspiration for men (Carey, 2018). The Beardbrand YouTube channel revolves around videos about men's hair and beard grooming, styling, as well as lifestyle. Over the years, they have created different types of content, ranging from grooming and styling tips provided by the founder, men's lifestyle and general life advice and personal vlog-type of videos, to featuring other bearded spokesmen and barbers, and showcasing wild customer transformations. The latter types of videos ended up becoming a viral phenomenon, harnessing millions of views and outshining the other types of content they provided in terms of viewership. While the viral visibility was good for their business, Beardbrand wanted to stay true to their original mission of providing a community for beardsmen and to create other types of content as well. This resulted in the brand deciding to dedicate their main Beardbrand channel to the successful barbershop transformation videos, and started another channel under the name Beardbrand Alliance, which focused more on men's lifestyle, grooming, and personal vlog videos (Beardbrand Alliance, 2019). Since 2012, their online community has since experienced vast growth and change, as their following today nearly reaches 2 million subscribers across their two YouTube channels (Youtube, 22.11.2021).

Beardbrand utilizes both of their YouTube channels in similar ways. The brand posts a video, usually once or twice a week, on which their communities may interact in the comment section. The key difference between these two channels is the type of content that is published. On their main channel, Beardbrand, the brand mostly posts barbershop videos in which a customer receives a haircut and/or a beard trim in the Beardbrand barbershop. The Beardbrand Alliance channel on the other hand posts more varying types of content, such as reacting to different styles, beard growth tips, grooming tips, and general life and lifestyle advice pieces. Naturally, the two channels have attracted different types of audience, and thus host two separate communities.

4 FINDINGS

In this section, the theoretical framework established earlier will be used to examine brand community attributes and value creation on YouTube. The study examined two separate brand communities under the same brand, Beardbrand and Beardbrand Alliance. Only messages written in English were included in the analysis as they were the most prominent and translating messages from various other languages might lead to misinterpretations. Spam messages were chosen to be excluded from the analysis, as these messages could not be considered the same as community members' interactions.

4.1 Online brand community attributes on YouTube

As established in the background section, social media platforms differ from one another in terms of their affordances. On social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter, brand community members may post on the brand page or tweet at the brand which allows them to initiate conversations by themselves whenever they choose to. However, this is not the case on Youtube, where the discussions happen in the comment section that only exists on published videos in a Youtube channel, and thus, communities are naturally built around these channels. In the context of brand communities, the brand dictates when it posts a video which then offers a platform for community discussion. Although videos are posted regularly, for example Beardbrand publishes a video on both channels once a week, this does put some restrictions on community interaction.

On Youtube, users are required to create an account to post a comment on a video. Some of the members choose to hide their identity behind a username, some choose to use their real name or at least part of it. Posting a comment on a video displays the commenter's username and their profile picture. Members may upvote or downvote (also called like and dislike) each other's comments, which affects how high up the comment section the comment is displayed. This placement is also affected by creator upvotes and the number of replies the comment receives. Community members may reply to other members' comments using the "reply"-button or tagging their username with @-sign.

From a brand community member's perspective, Youtube as a platform does not provide many opportunities for self-presentation or self-disclosure. The tools available for the user within the brand community are choosing their profile name and picture, and then commenting on the brand's Youtube channel. In terms of media richness and social presence, Youtube only allows plain text and emojis in the comment section, where the community interactions occur. Therefore, from a brand community member's perspective, Youtube should be classified as low in both categories described by Kaplan and Hainlain (2010a).

4.1.1 Language and interaction

The language used in both communities was rather similar. Both communities interacted mostly in English, although there were a few comments in other languages which were excluded from the analysis to avoid misinterpretation. Both communities also exhibited the use of common internet abbreviations and specialized vocabulary related to beard and haircare. Some of the language use may be difficult to understand for a newcomer in the community, and thus, the use of this specialized vocabulary was a way to demonstrate competence in the community. The use of emojis was also prominent in both communities.

It is important that the researcher understands the special vocabulary and various abbreviations used by the members so that interpretations can be made about the data. To achieve this, familiarization with the language used in the community began concomitantly with the data collection, and the specialized vocabulary and abbreviations used were listed.

Special vocabulary or abbreviation	Definition
Yeard	Year-old-beard
Stache	Mustache
Mid	Middle (part of something)
Scruff	Facial hair that is kept relatively short (approximately 2-5 millimeters)
a Van Dyke	A style of facial hair that is named after Anthony Van Dyck, a Flemish painter from the 17th century (Kuoppala, 2022)
Pohonophile	A person who loves or studies beards
Patchy beard	A beard that does not fill some of the desired areas of the face
Debulk	To reduce the bulkiness of hair or beard by trimming it down

Table 2 Examples of community language use and vocabulary

The communities' use of beard- and haircare-related language exemplifies Wenger's (1998) concept of community of practice quite well. Mutual engagement

here occurs when the brand and its community attempt to define and discuss issues related to men's facial hair, and style in general. The joint enterprise is essentially the same between the two communities, which is to grow and maintain stylish facial hair and become the best version of oneself. The brand takes the roles of an expert and a facilitator that engages the community to work towards this joint enterprise through their brand videos. Finally, through mutual engagement in this joint enterprise, the community have developed a shared repertoire, exemplified in Table 2, that helps members negotiate meaning and learning within the group.

4.1.2 Overview of the brand communities

In this chapter, a brief overview of both Youtube brand communities and their characteristics is presented. Both communities were created by the brand for commercial purposes, and they are open for anyone who have a Youtube account and is interested in men's beard and haircare. All videos on both channels are in English, which may cause a language barrier to those who do not speak the language. Originally, there was only one channel, Beardbrand, which hosted all the content that the brand created for its Youtube community. However, in September 2019, the brand decided to create a second channel, called Beardbrand Alliance, to host their traditional grooming, lifestyle, and challenge videos that were overthrown in popularity by the barbershop videos on the main channel (Beardbrand Alliance, 2019).

Interaction in the original Beardbrand community is very active, as there are hundreds of comments on the videos. Most comments in the community do not receive any written responses, but they are often upvoted by other members and the brand, which indicates to the poster that the comment was appreciated by others. Nevertheless, interaction between members occurs in every comment section. The topics of discussion varied from video to video. On Beardbrand channel, the brand posts almost exclusively barbershop transformation videos, in which they showcase the talent of their barbers, and the wild beard and hair transformations received by the customers in the Beardbrand barbershop. Often the comments are related to the video and what happened in it, for example, how successful the result of the haircut was, or describing how one would have done a specific part of the haircut. The latter example indicates that there is a significant number of barbers in the community taking part in discussions. However, not all community discussion stems from the video. Other popular topics include asking for advice with grooming and discussing different grooming equipment. Interaction between the community members and the brand also occurs, as the brand regularly upvotes and responds to the community members' comments. Occasionally, the barbers in the videos respond to members' comments as well.

Despite being the smaller community of the two in terms of subscribers, interaction in Beardbrand Alliance community is quite active. There is, however, a noticeable variance in the amount of comments in each video. One video received over a thousand comments, whereas another one received only 29. Interaction between members occurs more frequently in Beardbrand Alliance community, and the comments tend to be longer than in Beardbrand community. The content on Beardbrand Alliance's

channel focuses on grooming and lifestyle videos, which is reflected in the community discussion as well. The topics of discussion are quite varied, ranging from beard and hair styles, beard growth tips, and attitudes towards beards to general issues of life and constitution of a healthy mindset. Members of Beardbrand Alliance community tend to ask more questions from others, and share more about themselves, especially in discussing ideas shared in lifestyle videos. Similarly to Beardbrand community, interaction between the brand and its community takes place regularly. The brand upvotes and responds to members' comments regardless of whether they are negative or positive, which allows for transparent and open discussion between the two parties.

4.2 Markers of brand community

In this chapter and the following chapter, excerpts from the data will be presented to exemplify the findings of the study. Interactions between members will include tags such as M1 (member one), M2 (member two), M3 (member three), and creator (brand's account), to illustrate the number of participants in the discussion and to make it easier to follow for the reader. Spacing will also be used to further indicate that a member's comment is a response to another member's comment. When there is no tag or spacing, the comment is used as a stand-alone example.

4.2.1 Consciousness of kind

Community members of Beardbrand share an interest and appreciation towards men's beard and haircare, the barber's craft and barbershops in general. Consciousness of kind in the community is perpetuated by the process of legitimacy (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), which involves knowledge, understanding, and know-how about beards, grooming and cutting hair. This is demonstrated by giving other members advice, voicing an opinion on how a haircut or beard trim should have been done, and using specialized vocabulary related to beard and haircare in the discussions.

"Lowering his part was genius. I'm always looking for something like that but didn't know how to express it. They do an undercut for me but my head ends up looking like an egg 😊" M1

"advice from a barber, if i were you i would tell my barber to keep it more full towards the top of the sides of your head right above the parietal ridge. tell them u want it kind of squared off instead of rounded. i do this to most of my clients and they always ask for it again. it sounds to me that your barber digs in and goes to high up with the sides. i hope my comment helped, let me know how it goes" M2

Here, member one (M1) comments about a communication issue he is having with his barber with some detail, to which another member (M2) responds with advice. Member two reveals that he is a barber by profession, and further establishes his legitimacy by giving detailed advice on how he would go about communicating member one's wishes to the barber.

Another way to establish legitimacy in the community, is knowing brand history, which some members display by referring to barbers who have appeared in past videos.

“Great job brother! And props for giving a shout out to Mahesh!”

“I love Mahesh! i do miss him in these vids, and James, your my 2nd favorite, sorry...”

“I like Jesse. He's a good barber. As far as the old barbers. Cisco is awesome! Jake and Mahesh were dope too. So is Bob. They have good barbers, but those older ones don't come out”

In the Beardbrand Alliance community, the members share a similar interest in men's beard and haircare, but also for general well-being of men. Consciousness of kind in the community is similarly perpetuated by the process of legitimacy, but the ways in which it is established differs from Beardbrand community. The brand's slogan, “Keep on growing!”, outlines the key elements that distinguish the “true members” of the community. The brand defined the meaning behind the tagline in their podcast in 2019, which is to grow and maintain your hair and beard, but also grow to be the best version of yourself (Beardbrand, 2019). Members of the community demonstrate their understanding of what it means to be a part of the community by posting positive comments, encouraging and empathizing with others, and helping those who need advice.

“Dig these videos! Love the content! Can't get enough. Viewing in from Hawai'I”

“Hello from Russia and thank you for your content. Here we lack the wise ones beard advice videos like yours. Currently on my 4th month of growing and mine beard gets better and better through time. Always keep on growing, folks!”

“The other day I was complimented on my beard from a guy with a better looking beard. It boosted my confidence to keep it growing.”

“man, have you seen your profile picture, you have an awesome beard my friend, nothing to be insecure about!”

Although geographical location does not play a significant role in terms of brand community membership, some members choose to share where they are watching the brand from in their greetings to the creators. Comments such as these highlight the fact that online brand communities transcend geographical boundaries.

4.2.2 Rituals and traditions

Since brand communities revolve around brand content on Youtube, both brand communities share the same key ritual, which is to watch their respective brand community videos. Each published video on Youtube creates a shared consumption experience with the brand, which also serves to sustain the culture of the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001: 421). Most of the members who engage in community discussions

reference ideas or visual things that were part of the video, which indicates that they have watched at least parts of it before posting a comment.

“That’s the densest looking beard I’ve seen on this channel in ages. Awesome look!”

“This was a very good episode.”

“His stache and beard are so epic. I’m so jealous you got to dive into that...”

Another shared ritual between the two communities is the use of Beardbrand’s slogan, “keep on growing”. It is most commonly used at the end of the comment to signal one’s membership in the community and to spread the brand’s message of growing in all aspects of life. Although the brand slogan is used in both communities, it is used more frequently by the Beardbrand Alliance community members.

“Don't get it twisted girls we don't grow beards for women, we grow them as an extension of ourselves and our masculinity, basically if you're growing a beard don't do it for your partner or anyone else but you, keep on growing”

“Eric man, with your hair color the beardstache you've been rocking looks absolutely splendid. Keep on Growing”

“What a video, not everyday a lot of us hear something like this. These are great tips Eric, and I will keep on growing.”

Beardbrand community members have a tradition of sharing their thoughts on the beard and haircut process as well as the result. Some members go into great detail in describing what they would have done differently, presumably due to a background in the craft.

“Has the fundamentals and was an all around good cut. but the texture shears killed it for me. I can't watch people bash the hairs with thinning shears. That hair will grow out and be so frizzy. This is a good example as to why you can't force a cut on everyone's head and hair textures. Sometimes it's better to try and talk your client into something that will work with his hair.”

“Getting your hair cut by someone who knows what they are doing and are fully sociable is a great experience.”

“Made him look 5 years younger great cut buddy !”

“decent haircut, but the top does not flow into the right side”

“Mid fade? Personally I would have just shaved him bald since he's balding on top but hey if mid fade is customers request or what the barber wanted. To each their own. Beard was crazy and A plus game. Haven't seen the finished product yet but that beard is so huge I can't even see his mouth. Shits dope”

Some members of Beardbrand Alliance community were reminiscent about the old days of the brand after watching a video in which the founder shared a personal

story and tips about having a midlife crisis. Comments such as these highlight members' knowledge and appreciation of brand history and traditions.

"great video, should do more often. like the old days." M1

"Yeah, more videos like these and less shorts would be better in my opinion"
M2

4.2.3 Moral responsibility

In Beardbrand community, members encourage one another in their beard growth journey, which gives off an impression of a welcoming environment. New, younger members are often met with encouraging comments and advice from older members with experience.

"Wish I could grow a beard! Currently 23 years old only able to grow a moustache"
M1

"Give it time. You may be able to" M2

"Nothing wrong with a mustache man ! I've had a beard for so long, every now and then, I'll trim it down to a 1 and let the 'stache grow.. " M3

" I'm thinkin about doing the same" M4

"You trim all of it including the stache to a 1? Or just the beard and leave the stache?"
M3

"just the beard, leave the stache" M4

Similar discussions between newer, less experienced members and experienced members also take place in Beardbrand Alliance community. The example below also highlights another action that evidences members' moral responsibility towards one another, which is assistance with the use of the brand. The founder, and other members of the brand, partake in community discussions frequently.

"How do I deal with random beard hari that sticks out? Is there aproduct of anything I can do or use to stop that from happening?" M1

"let it grow out a little the extra weight will keep them I check... berad balm works well.... don't cut or trim them though cuz they won't be flyaways tomorrow... also get a Kent or wooden comb n a good quality boar bristle brush" M2

"M2 (Name edited) tackled the question very well. I'd also add that it's helpful to recognize that a beard will very likely never be perfect. Part of it is just accepting there's going to be a couple of hairs out of place at all time. Don't worry about it too much. But you can use a Styling Balm or Mustache Wax for a medium hold. Utility Balm will give a very light hold. The brush helps as well as M2 said." Creator

However, in both communities some of the community members' questions were left unanswered.

"1st time attempting to grow a mustache. It's been a couple weeks and it's coming out pretty good so far I just wish it had that thicker fuller look. Any advice?"

"What do I need to do to get my beard trimmed on video by you guys"

"Any tips for someone with a ticklish neck? can't have my guy trim me up without giggling and that's not my goal in a barbers"

Situations such as these may be influenced by how Youtube arranges viewers comments. It is unclear how this algorithm works, as Youtube does not provide this information publicly.

4.3 Value creation practices in Beardbrand communities

4.3.1 Social networking

Social networking between members and the brand occurred in both communities to some extent. Greeting or welcoming other members was one of the few absent practices in both communities. One reason for this may be that there is no way to identify someone as a new member, unless they disclose that information themselves. Another reason may be the way in which community members use the platform. Videos are the primary attraction of Youtube which are consumed first, and community interaction is secondary.

Members in both communities governed what was acceptable and fair behavior in the community. For example, critiquing the barber's process or the result in Beardbrand community was very common and usually acceptable. However, on a few occasions, other members felt that the critique was unwarranted or unreasonable, and decided to step in to defend the brand.

"1.8 mil subscribers and this is the haircut you show us? This is so bad I feel ashamed for the "doctor". You can literally get this haircut for 1\$ in India" M1

"You did see the part where he threw a dart at the board of random haircuts right? Also the part where Chris says he doesn't do designs. It's supposed to be a fun challenge for everyone including the barber. Enjoy the content and your dollar haircuts."
M2

Members of Beardbrand Alliance had a discussion over a video, in which the brand pointed out three "out of style" beard styles and gave suggestions on how to make them more stylish. The clear consensus was that the brand, nor anyone else, should be judging the style choices of others.

"When I start worrying about what other people do that has no negative impact on my life or anyone else's. I'd better start looking within myself. Love beardbrand and their products. But this comes off as too judgy to me. If beardbrands goal is to become

men's cosmo. Then please go ahead and proceed. I will support any style of an individual that brings them joy and happiness." M1

"Absolutely agree. Gregg's chat In this video ain't right. Almost a bit high and mighty..a circle beard did not look good on him, neither did a handle bar mustache but to some folk they could rock it really well.. Greg's always tailored, suited and booted and it matches his bears..wack on some Levi denims and a vintage aerosmith T shirt and he won't pull it off, but someone with that style and a handle bar mustache would.so yaknow" M2

"You have a totally fair take on the video. I may filter it out, but the judgmental tone is 100% there." M3

"I don't believe by any means that was the intention. But it comes off that way to me at least. Again that's just my opinion. I honestly believe BB and alliance are trying to help. I don't know any of them personally. But I don't believe they're trying to intentionally bash anyone." M1

On another video, Beardbrand Alliance community members discussed having opinions on other people's appearance. Interactions such as these, formulate how the brand and its brand community members are expected to conduct themselves.

"I feel like everyone who just openly mocks beards are those who are jealous. Green is an obvious color. I dont mock people who go to the gym frequently because I'm lazy and stay active in general all day"

"I agree. Beard or no beard should NOT be a point of discussion for approval. It's simply an expression to that person which needs no permission, validation, nor opinion from someone else. Do what you want with your hair, and don't bother asking me again cuz I don't care. You do YOU, and leave me out of this subjective hair length bozo topic."

Members of both communities felt comfortable enough to share their personal struggles to others and were often met with empathizing comments from both fellow community members as well as the brand.

"Awesome video! Earlier this year I unfortunately lost my hair & beard to chemotherapy. I definitely look forward to regrowing." M1

🙏 M2

"Thank you for your prayers. I just received word that I'm in remission. M1

"that's wonderful! Hopefully you make a full recovery" M2

"thank you so much! God Bless you & your family!" M1

"All the best to you my friend, you absolutely deserve it, praying for you" M3

"We're standing with you from the other side of the internet, man. Always, Keep on Growing. 😊 -Sly" (Creator)

Empathizing comments from other community members offer emotional support and reinforce social cohesion within the community. Members also provide

empathy towards the people behind the brand. The last excerpt below refers to community members comments about the founder's voice.

"Haven't been able to grow facial hair until my late 30's, and it's just the mustache area filled in now. FINALLY able to grow a mustache now so I really appreciate these beginner growth tips. Don't listen to the haters about your voice, we all sound different my dude. I think you sound unique and it goes well with your wicked accent." M1

"I feel you, I'm 28 and can barely grow facial hair my dad and brother both have full facial hair" M2

"Yo, leave my man alone over here! He is giving us some info and I for one appreciate it my guy!" M3

Social networking practices create, enhance, and sustain ties between members of the brand community and the brand. This reinforces the social and moral links within the community and creates value for both the members and the brand (Schau et al., 2009).

4.3.2 Impression management

Beardbrand community members commended the brand often on various aspects. Many of their barbers received compliments on their work, and their expertise in their craft was highlighted. The brand's products and content were also praised.

"Im a barber...love watching this"

"That style looks really good on him. Oh man, the Old Money styling balm is excellent, love the fragrance. And keep it up Bob!"

"Getting your hair cut by someone who knows what they are doing and are fully sociable is a great experience."

"I love barbershop roulette!"

"Man , I wish I had barbers this talented in my area. I haven't found one yet. Sucks."

"I feel like when you get a cut from Bob you also get a lesson and education on your hair. I like that 😊"

"youre an artist.. love the content"

Similarly, members of Beardbrand Alliance applauded the brand and specifically the founder for the content he creates. Some members even credit their beard growth to the brand. Messages such as these present the community and the brand in a positive way to any newcomers.

"I came for moustache growing tips, and but I stayed for Eric shouting life lessons to my face. Beautiful." M1

"Thanks for everything Erick! Probably you'll never read my comment, but I have to say thanks to you and beardbrand I'm rocking a full beard." M2

"I'm reading it man. Appreciate the kind words and glad the videos have helped. It's why we do it. 😊" Creator

"you're awesome man! Keep up the good work with the beardbrand products, the best out there, worth every penny. 🤝" M2

"Please keep making videos forever Eric! Love your content!"

"Great video as always Eric. Lots of good advice here for the newbies!"

Some of the Beardbrand community members have invested a significant amount of time into teaching themselves how to trim their own beard through watching the brand's videos.

"Im in barber school and I've been doing my own beard for years now and the way this guy explains the process of trimming a full beard is very comprehensive. Keep the vids coming." M1

"Right!! I've watched probably 30+ vids to try to learn how to properly trim my beard and always end up messing up but I just learnt everything I wanted in this 1 vid. More like this 100" M2

One of the members also justified choosing barbering as a profession in an intriguing way, which highlights some of the values present in the community.

"Great job! Your sister may be a vet and your brother an engineer, but their jobs probably do not make people feel so much better about themselves."

"You are an amazing barber and you change lives just like an engineer or veterinarian. Don't ever apologize for the incredible work you do. I would Love to see your chest tattoo."

A member of Beardbrand Alliance justified purchasing Beardbrand's products in a comprehensive manner. Comments such as this serve as a powerful word-to-mouth advertisement for the brand within the community. Impression management in the form of evangelizing or justifying creates value by increasing the size of the brand community and polishing the brand image to those outside of it.

"Eric, you're a humble dude! So I will toot your horn so to speak. Beardbrand products might be a bit expensive for some budgets but you get a product made from natural ingredients and in the 10 months I've been with Beardbrand never have I regretted the purchase. I thought I'd try the comb Eric showed, I now have 3 and the brush does what he said it would. Be patient and treat yourself to these products because you're worth it!"

4.3.3 Brand Use

Proper brand use was often demonstrated in the videos published on both channels. On Beardbrand's channel, the barbers would use the brand's products and give tips on how a certain look can be achieved. Moreover, the videos displayed the barber's process of cutting their client's hair and beard, which many of the community

members who trim their own hair or struggle to communicate their wishes to their barber found helpful.

“We get a lot of questions about beard trims with longer guards - Glad to see a professional trim with NO GUARDS! This is the best way to shape a beard. People want to take the easy out with just snapping on a guard, but you can't get the shaping like that with guards.” M1

“Amen to that ! Clipper over comb and free hand all the way!” M2

“Wish I could trim my curly beard like this!! Though I also use Mahesh's technique and it helps a lot.”

“I like the way you explain before so you see the results and understand the process.”

Many of Beardbrand Alliance’s videos contain tips on how one can style their beard, to which many of the members refer to in their comments.

“ The Greg roll brush technique is the truth. Still use it to this day and get asked all the time. I refer them to Greg videos.”

“I never knew about moustache wax. Definitely getting it along with the comb, Eric. Great tips.”

Members of both communities made suggestions about the brand’s products as well as content. A Beardbrand Alliance member suggested adding a “Keep On Growing” -flag shown in the background of a video to the brand’s webstore offering. Another member proposed that some of the proceeds should go to a charitable cause instead of the brand. Both comments were directed at the brand with the intention of influencing their behavior in the marketplace, and thus, are an example of the commoditizing practice.

“Off video topic but I need that flag” M1

“Maybe one day we'll produce a few to offer on the store. :)” Creator

“that'd be fire” M1

“That'll be nice if some of the proceeds from the payment can go to movember or prostate cancer awareness” M2

Beardbrand community members offer their ideas for future content frequently. One of the members suggested a new haircut style to be added to the “roulette” board, to which Beardbrand barber customers may throw darts at to choose their haircut. Another member commented that they want to see some of the barbers take part in the barbershop roulette.

“This guy was a champion! Please add Ronaldo Nazario haircut from the 2002 world cup! It's worthy!”

“I wanna see Jesse or Joe take a turn playing barbershop roulette!”

One community member had an idea for developing a new service around the brand that received some support from another community member. However, the brand did not respond to the comment.

"It would be great if Beardbrand would list "good" barbers for men in areas around the country." M1

"I agree with you! I've been growing my beard for nearly a year now and keep a medium guard on my buzzer because I don't trust myself or a local barber with a longer style that I want. Growing a beard is an investment in time and patience and I don't want to have a clipper happy barber screw it up." M2

4.3.4 Community engagement

Community engagement practices are competitive and generate social capital in the community by allowing members to differentiate themselves from others (Schau et al., 2009). Documenting one's personal brand journey was a common practice in both communities. Other members and the brand would frequently upvote and occasionally respond to these comments in a positive and encouraging manner. Members of the Beardbrand Alliance often shared their personal beard growth journey and tended to do so in greater detail than members of Beardbrand community.

"I've been growing my hair out for almost a year and a half now, and the beard for almost a month. I'm really likin' the look and am looking forward to discovering how my facial hair looks untouched after six months; maybe even a year. We shall see." M1

"Hell ya! Keep on growing M1 (name edited)." Creator

"Three days ago I had my beard/mustache styled for the first time - it was awesome - while I enjoyed the video of young college girls commenting on men's beard's, the most important comment/approval was from my beloved wife - "I love it!" Thank you Beardbrand Alliance! And agreed with a few comments below - what would older mature women say about men with luxurious beards say?"

"When I was first experimenting with different facial hair styles, I did a weirdly combined longer circle beard with chin straps, and shaved the neckline way too high, so my goatee was super thin. So basically a combination of both #1 and #2 at once. Not doing that again! I'm growing my full beard out long right now."

Milestoning significant events was also common in both communities. One of the most common examples was the noting of 1-year-anniversary of a member's beard, which was also called a "year" in the community. Growing a beard for one year straight without cutting or trimming it too much was considered a notable achievement and a source of pride. Some of the members also made a milestone of the beginning of this journey.

"I hope my beard looks like this started my first year journey 2 weeks ago" M1

"Best of luck in your year journey buddy" M2

"Currently at my first year. Almost 6 months." M1

"Hell ya! Keep on growing." Creator

"Congratulations" M2

"1 year anniversary next month for my beard... When i was younger I thought I'd never be able to pull a beard off cuz of the patches but here we are, it's more or less touching my chest.."

"Great video Eric, at 43, my beard is still getting better, growing without touching for the first time, 3 months and finally figuring out MY beard. Thank you for the advice and motivation 🙌"

Member of the Beardbrand Alliance community shared their initial experiences of growing their first beard. Other members replied with encouraging comments, and some even asked for an update on the process after several months. Commenting on other members comments after a significant amount of time was common in both communities, however, receiving a reply was rare.

"Never grown mine out more than a month or so. I'm coming up on 3 months and I think it gets a little better every month so far" M1

"heck yea dude! enjoy it and keep it up 😁" M2

"Dude.. Uncanny how similar our timelines are lol Last winter I grew mine out for about a month and then shaved it. Back in August, I decided to grow it longer so i'm about a week away from 3 months. Hoping I can keep it going thru the winter" M3

"hey man how's your progress?" M4

"haven't shaved yet. It's all filled in and getting longer" M1

Staking involvement with a specific subgroup within the community was not common practice in either of the communities studied. However, some of the Beardbrand community members staked their interest in the brand based on the skill and expertise of the barber. The brand's barbers occasionally responded to the critique, and other members would often defend them.

"What is that haircut ? ;joy: I feel for any new beginner barbers trying to learn from this. No logical steps taken, just cutting random bits of hair and the finished product looks like an apprentice has done it. Used to love beardbrand when there were good barbers, get Cisco back he's the only one that knows what he's doing" M1

"I literally explain every step, but my process may not be yours. Like i replied to your comment in my last video, theres more than one way to skin a cat. If you put more focus into improving your craft than hating on other barbers you may be a bit happier in this industry. And yes, we agree about Cisco, we wish that dude would come work with us. He's too busy killin it out there. 🙌" Barber (from the video)

"these complainers are in the minority. The cut looked great man" M2

In the Beardbrand Alliance community, there was a discussion around what type of content the community members prefer, which prompted a response from the brand. Youtube shorts are a shorter type of video, mainly targeted towards mobile

application users, and which shares similarities with the popular application TikTok. Community members wanted to highlight that they are on Youtube for its longer duration videos and in-depth discussions.

“This content is so much better than the 30 second clips...” M1

“Ya I agree. The shorts shouldn’t be pushed out to subscribers. Only supposed to see them in the shorts section of YouTube’s mobile app. They’re promoting it heavily so that’s why we’re making them. -eric” Creator

“Don't get me wrong Eric, there's a place for it... but this is YouTube, not tik tok and I really enjoy the chats and in depth conversations etc the longer videos provide... I like to hear how you're doing... All the best brother...” M1

Assisting other members occurred frequently in the Beardbrand Alliance community. Members would often ask each other for advice for specific issues. The first comment is simultaneously one of the few examples of the grooming practice.

“Totally going to bring back my walrus moustache for the upcoming corona time! I shaved it off last year, but started to I miss it immediately. Yeah, after one month the moustache looks totally different and after three month it looks awesome. Btw: I use a toothbrush to apply oil to my moustache, it works like a charme.” M1

“I like that style I have never tried it before but I would like to. Can you give me any advice?” M2

“Sure, it's actually pretty simple: Just let it grow out for 3-6 months. Do not trimm it! The hardest part is learning to eat and drink with it. You don't really need any product. I only used a small comb in the morning and applied some oil every now and than.” M1

These discussions were often prompted by one member describing an issue they were having, and another member responding with suggestions or advice. Assisting other members in the community not only creates value to the one receiving assistance but also to the person giving it, as they gain cultural capital in the community.

“My mustache hairs under my nose raises forward before laying flat so it always brushes against my nose and it's the absolute worst Therefore I always keep at it 8 weeks length” M1

“Same here. that happens to my beard all over my face. There are two things that you can do to fix it. (1) let it grow long enough so it begins to fall over. For me this usually takes 2-3 weeks of a really awkward caveman beard but then it begins to fall over and look neat. the effort is totally worth it, imo. (2) Oil the living shite out of the beard. I'm talking drench your beard in oil before bed everyday for a few months. Within about a month or two mine gets really soft. I use coconut, castor and almond oil, or a ready made beard oil. Hope this helps.” M2

“I have this issue too!” M3

“Read my comment above. That really helps. Within a few weeks of growth my face goes from looking like a porcupine to a greek god. Mainly you have to let it grow out so it falls over” M2

Appreciation towards other members was commonly expressed through Youtube's upvote functionality in both communities. Members receive a notification when someone upvotes their comment. Some of the most popular comments had over a thousand of upvotes. Appreciation from other members generates positive feelings towards the community and it may increase participation in the community discussions.

"I just love it when I get the notification that says "Someone has liked your comment" or "Someone has subscribed! It makes my day"

Occasionally, appreciation was also expressed through written comments. A Beardbrand Alliance member highlighted the entertainment value of the community discussion in their comment.

"All the comments are as entertaining as the video itself. We need a second part with ladies in their early-mid 30's"

Mingling with other members to develop a relationship outside the online brand community did not occur. However, many of the Beardbrand community members made comments about going to visit the Beardbrand barbershop.

"You're making feel me tempted to drive from Fairland down to Austin to get my haircut."

"Awesome job as always Bob, see you in about a week and a half. And just FYI, Jeffrey Jones played the principal in ferris beulers day off and Charles dance played the villain in the golden child. And yes, Jeffrey Jones is a pervert."

"Awesome job as always! Hoping to get a beard trim at this shop the next time I am up that way. Great cameo by Bud!"

"Great work! I'm stopping in when I'm traveling trough CT. Freshen up my squatchy beard."

Correspondingly to the practice of appreciation, the simplest way members celebrated other members' achievements was by upvoting their comment. For example, one of the Beardbrand community members shared that they had lost their hair due to chemotherapy and that they were now in remission and looking forward to the regrowth. This comment received over one hundred upvotes. Community members also celebrated this by replying to the original comment.

"Awesome video! Earlier this year I unfortunately lost my hair & beard to chemotherapy. I definitely look forward to regrowing." M1

"that's wonderful! Hopefully you make a full recovery" M2

"Great news! I lost my mother to it and so cannot describe how much I hate it. Hope you kick its ass brother!" M3

"All the best to you my friend, you absolutely deserve it, praying for you 🙏" M4

5 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the findings of this study are introduced in conjunction with previous studies regarding online brand communities, practices and value creation. Very few, if any, of the previous studies have examined online brand community value creation on Youtube, and thus, the present study utilized previous studies with varying perspectives. For the first research question, focal markers of brand communities were examined, based on the work of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). According to their research, brand communities are constituted by consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility towards the community.

The Beardbrand community is a Youtube brand community created by the brand for commercial purposes. The content on the channel is focused around beard and hair transformations in the Beardbrand barbershop due to their popularity (Beardbrand Alliance, 2019). Interaction occurs between the brand and the community members frequently through the comment section of each video. Interaction between members of the community also develops often, although quite a large portion of members comments were aimed at the brand or at a specific person behind it. Language use in the community is mostly English and contains similar vernacular that can be seen in other social media. In addition, the community uses specialized vocabulary related to beard and haircare frequently.

The second community, Beardbrand Alliance, was created by the brand for the specific purpose of creating a variety of content around the brand to its brand community (Beardbrand Alliance, 2019). The content on the channel varies from beard and hair grooming tips, lifestyle videos, and opinion pieces. Interaction between the brand and the community occurs frequently, similar to Beardbrand community. Despite being noticeably smaller of the two communities, interactions between members are common. The community's language use is very similar to Beardbrand community.

Consciousness of kind was exhibited in both communities and perpetuated by the process of legitimacy. Beardbrand community members established legitimacy through displaying their knowledge and understanding of the barbering craft and knowing brand history. Members of Beardbrand Alliance on the other hand established legitimacy by exhibiting their understanding of the core brand message, "Keep on Growing", and respectively knowing the brand and its history. Rituals and traditions were also present in both communities. Perhaps the most focal ritual in both communities was watching the brand video itself, which was almost a prerequisite to understanding what the community discussion was about. Another ritual that both communities shared was the use of the brand slogan, which simultaneously perpetuated consciousness of kind. Members in both communities evidenced the moral responsibility towards one another by helping and supporting others.

The latter part of the first research question related to the affordances of Youtube as an online brand community platform. One of the fundamental elements of Youtube is video content, which is the primary vehicle of communication on the platform (Paolillo, 2008; Lange, 2007b, cited in Burgess & Green, 2018). While videos are an excellent way to create a relationship between the brand and its community, the content is often only created by the brand, which produces restrictions on brand

communities. Community discussions are the most active at the release of a new video and fizzle out over time as less people watch and engage with the video. The videos also heavily influence topics of discussion in the community, but do not determine them completely. Furthermore, Youtube offers only limited tools for brand community members to express themselves within the community hub, which is the comment section.

The second research question regarded value creation practices in the online brand communities, for which the theoretical background was based on the previous studies of Hollebeek et al. (2017) and Schau et al. (2009). The final framework for the study consisted of sixteen different practices, of which nearly all were found in the data, with the exceptions of welcoming and badging practices. This suggests that the two Beardbrand's brand communities possess a diverse range of practices which is indicative of a vital brand community (Schau et al., 2009). The brand could find ways to implement the missing practices in the future to improve the vitality of their brand community even further.

The final research question pertained to how practices create value in the examined online brand communities. Investigating how particular practices create value is difficult, as they work together and support one another, which was also evidenced in the data (Schau et al., 2009). Many of the practices, especially community engagement practices, were competitive. Members would compete on brand knowledge and history to display their competencies, which provided cultural capital to participants. Furthermore, participation in practices in the community cultivated shared insider jargon and modes of representation that enriches members' experience with the brand. The number of practices and their diversity also evidence the vitality of the brand community. Some practices, such as documenting, generated consumption opportunities by first formalizing a consumption practice which then provides a template for other members to build their own consumption experience on. Overall, practices create value by enabling and enhancing brand use and encouraging deeper engagement with the community. Brands should provide their community members opportunities to demonstrate competencies through competitive practices that allow them to gain cultural capital and creates value for the participants.

6 CONCLUSION

This study was conducted by using netnography as its research methodology. Netnography is an online version of traditional ethnography, that is best suited for examining online culture and community interaction. One of the advantages of netnography is that it allows completely unintrusive observation of the research subject. The study used data that was publicly shared on Youtube by consumers. The aim of the study was to gain understanding of online brand communities on Youtube and value creation through practices.

The study followed common procedures set out by Kozinets (2002: 63) to the extent that was possible. These procedures included the choice and assessment of online brand communities, observation of the community, data collection, analysis of the data, interpretation of findings, evaluation of trustworthiness, and research ethics. The choice of brand community was made based on how active and relevant the community was in terms of the research questions at hand, using Kozinets' (2010: 89) criterion. Therefore, only brand communities on Youtube were considered, and the two Beardbrand communities were chosen.

One of the key research decisions in netnography is whether to disclose researcher's presence to the community examined or not, which may have influence on the behavior of the community during the research project. Ultimately, the decision was made to not disclose researcher presence, as it was deemed to not pose any risk to participants and would yield naturally occurring data as a result. In the future, it could be interesting to find out how disclosure of researcher's presence in the community affects community behavior in a study using netnography.

The analysis of the data was conducted inductively, which involves using logical thinking to observe individual pieces of the whole to generate more general statements regarding the phenomenon. The aim of the analysis is to achieve understanding of the community and how it interacts on Youtube. According to Kozinets (2002), netnography should pursue to achieve trustworthy results instead of validity. Therefore, it must be clear what is analyzed and in what kind of context. To ensure that the data and its was understood correctly, the brand videos as well as the data were closely examined and re-examined multiple times over the duration of the research. Trustworthiness of this study could have been increased through member checks, in which the researcher requests members of the studied community to review interpretations of the data. Unfortunately, this was not feasible in the present study.

Online brand communities and value creation have raised the interest of brands and researches, but the overall engagement of members is rather superficial in many instances, which calls for further investigation. The present study provides an example on what kinds of insights brands might find about their brand communities in terms of value creation. During the research project, a third Beardbrand community was discovered on their website, which required purchasing a membership. Including this community in the study would have provided interesting contrast between two free to join brand communities and a closed brand community.

There are of course other limitations to the present study, as it was conducted as a master's thesis, and thus, its scope is less extensive. For example, the data set was

collected and analyzed mostly manually, which hindered its overall size. The use of data analysis software could increase the data sample and provide even more trustworthy insights of a single brand community. Moreover, the research could have benefited from additional data collection methods such as interviews with community members, which would have respectively provided more insights to the phenomenon.

Future studies in the field of online brand communities could explore other less researched platforms and how its affordances enable or restrict the brand community. Researchers using netnography as a research method could implement other data collection methods, such as in-depth interviews, or analyze the data with the assistance of software to produce more extensive studies. Another interesting research site in terms of value creation could be closed online brand communities, such as Beard-brand's paid access community, as members of closed communities are presumably more engaged and invested in the brand.

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