

**The Consumer Negotiation of Brand Meaning  
in Online Brand Communities**

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of  
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# Table of Contents

<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Declaration</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Copyright Statement</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>About the Author</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Preface: Some Reflections on My Research Journey</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>1.1 Research Background</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>1.2 Research Aims and Objectives</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>1.3 The Structure of the Dissertation</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>2.1 Online Brand Communities</b> .....	<b>15</b>
2.1.1 Understanding OBCs .....	15
2.1.2 Characterising Attributes.....	23
2.1.3 Participant Typology.....	32
<b>2.2 The OBC as a Virtual Third Place</b> .....	<b>36</b>
2.2.1 Concept of the “Real” Versus Concept of the “Virtual” .....	37
2.2.2 Understanding OBC as a Virtual Third Place in a Collectivist Culture: Does It Currently Fit with the Purpose of the Marketers? .....	38
<b>2.3 Brand Meaning and Social Bonds in an OBC</b> .....	<b>41</b>
2.3.1 The Shift from Brand to Social Bonds in OBCs .....	42
2.3.2 Brand Meaning and Brand Value .....	44
2.3.3 From Assigned to Negotiated Brand Meaning.....	46
2.3.4 Social Relationship and Tie Strength.....	48
<b>2.4 Social Practice Theory and OBCs</b> .....	<b>49</b>
2.4.1 Korean Culture: the Importance of Social Bonds .....	49
2.4.2 Why Look at Social Practices? .....	55
2.4.3 Social Practice Theory .....	57
<b>2.5 Summary and Discussion</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>Chapter 3 Research Methodology</b> .....	<b>61</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>61</b>
<b>3.2 Philosophical Background</b> .....	<b>62</b>
3.2.1 Symbolic Interactionism.....	63
3.2.2 Practice Theory .....	66

3.2.3 Pierre Bourdieu’s Practice Theory and Social Interactionism .....	69
<b>3.3 Research Design and Strategy.....</b>	<b>72</b>
3.3.1 Research Context: OBCs in Korea.....	72
3.3.2 Research Design .....	77
3.3.3 Study 1: Scoping Phase.....	81
3.3.4 Study 2: Main Study.....	90
<b>3.5 Ethical Considerations.....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>3.6 Summary and Discussion .....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Chapter 4 Scoping Phase Data Analysis and Results .....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Part I: Consumer’s Perceptions of OBC: A Typology .....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>4.2 Qualitative Evidence for an OBC as a Virtual Third Place.....</b>	<b>102</b>
4.2.1 Neutral Ground – a Public Setting .....	103
4.2.2 An OBC as a Leveller.....	103
4.2.3 Conversation is the Main Activity.....	104
4.2.4 An Accessible and Accommodating Place.....	105
4.2.5 The Regulars .....	106
4.2.6 A Low Profile .....	107
4.2.7 The Mood is Playful.....	108
4.2.8 A Home Away From Home.....	109
<b>4.3 Typology Development .....</b>	<b>109</b>
4.3.1 OBC Attachment .....	110
4.3.2 Bond-Based and Identity-Based OBC.....	112
<b>4.4 OBC Typology.....</b>	<b>115</b>
4.4.1 Brand Empire .....	116
4.4.2 The Workplace.....	118
4.4.3 Second Home.....	120
4.4.4 Brand Institute.....	121
4.4.5 Brand Theme Park .....	123
4.4.6 Shelter .....	124
4.4.7 Information Desk.....	126
4.4.8 Brand Pub .....	127
4.4.9 Brand Museum.....	129
<b>4.5 Summary and Discussion .....</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>Part II: Social Practices in an OBC .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>4.6 Introduction .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>4.7 Social Practice in OBCs .....</b>	<b>132</b>
4.7.1 Brand Use.....	133
4.7.2 Brand Possession.....	138
4.7.3 Impression Management.....	142
4.7.4 Social Networking .....	144
4.7.5 OBC Nurturing.....	148

<b>4.8. Summary and Discussion</b> .....	<b>152</b>
<b>Part III: Reflections on the Scoping Exercise</b> .....	<b>154</b>
<b>4.9 Assumptions Challenged</b> .....	<b>154</b>
<b>4.10 Reflections on Methodology</b> .....	<b>156</b>
<b>Chapter 5 Social Bonding and Brand Meaning</b> .....	<b>159</b>
<b>5.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>159</b>
<b>5.2 Brand Meaning and Social Bond: Revelatory Incidents</b> .....	<b>160</b>
5.2.1 Starbucks Korea: City Hall Event .....	160
5.2.2 Starbucks Korea: Lucky Bag Event.....	177
5.2.3 Le Creuset Korea: Sharing Events.....	182
5.2.4 Le Creuset: Chiffon Crisis .....	187
<b>5.3 Summary and Discussion</b> .....	<b>197</b>
<b>Chapter 6 Social Bonding and Brand Meaning: Interpretation</b> .....	<b>198</b>
<b>6.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>198</b>
<b>6.2 From Ethnographic Representation to Interpretation</b> .....	<b>198</b>
<b>6.3 Individual Level</b> .....	<b>201</b>
6.3.1 Conformity versus Distinction: a Sign of Brand Constellation.....	201
<b>6.4 Micro Level</b> .....	<b>202</b>
6.4.1 Spurious Versus Authentic Social Bond .....	202
6.4.2 Instrumental and Emotional Benefits of Social Bonds.....	204
6.4.3 Productive Versus Perverse Manifestations of Social Bonds .....	207
<b>6.5 Meso Level</b> .....	<b>210</b>
6.5.1 Value Creation through Social Exchange .....	210
6.5.2 Interdependent Status Games .....	211
6.5.3 Imaginative Possession of Brand .....	213
6.5.4 Brand Image Projected through Participants .....	215
6.5.5 A Learning Place: Social Approval and Taste Development .....	216
<b>6.6 The Negotiation Process</b> .....	<b>218</b>
<b>Chapter 7 Conclusion</b> .....	<b>222</b>
<b>7.1 Overview of the Project</b> .....	<b>222</b>
<b>7.2 Academic Contribution</b> .....	<b>225</b>
<b>7.3 Implications for Practice</b> .....	<b>232</b>
<b>7.4 Limitations and Future Research</b> .....	<b>236</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>240</b>
<b>Appendix A. Interview Guide</b> .....	<b>264</b>
<b>Appendix B. Coding Scheme of Revealed Social Practices</b> .....	<b>266</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1 The Structure of the Dissertation .....	14
Table 2 Online Community Definitions .....	17
Table 3 Main Research on Brand Communities .....	20
Table 4 Online Brand Community Attributes .....	24
Table 5 Four Segments of Community Participants .....	33
Table 6 Online Community Participant Typology .....	35
Table 7 Key Elements of Exchange and Exchange Processes .....	43
Table 8 Naver Community and Daum Café.....	75
Table 9 Basic Information about Selected Brand Communities .....	82
Table 10 List of Scoping Phase Informants .....	88
Table 11 Basic Information about Selected Brand Communities .....	94
Table 12 List of Main Study Informants.....	95
Table 13 OBC Social Practices .....	133
Table 14 Brand Constellation in OBCs .....	137

## List of Figures

Figure 1 Developing the Definition of an OBC .....	22
Figure 2 Defining Online Brand Community .....	60
Figure 3 Research Flow .....	62
Figure 4 Internet Communities in Korea .....	74
Figure 5 Consumer's Negotiation of Countervailing Brand Meaning: Transformative Relationship between Different Levels .....	80
Figure 6 Data Collection Methods for the Scoping Phase .....	85
Figure 7 Consumers' Perceptions of OBCs .....	116
Figure 8 Transformative Relationship between Different Levels .....	200
Figure 9 A Model of Consumers' Negotiation of Countervailing Meanings .....	218





## **Abstract**

The University of Manchester  
Jung-Min Han  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

### **The Consumer Negotiation of Brand Meaning in Online Brand Communities**

**2015**

There has been much enthusiasm over the power of online brand communities (OBCs). Ensuring that OBCs achieve their potential, however, is a challenge. Adopting the view that an OBC is a social entity at its core, this study examines consumers' perceptions of OBCs and how consumers manage the continuous tension between social-related and brand-related aspects of OBCs through brand-related and non-brand-related social practices.

The researcher took a symbolic interactionist approach and qualitative data were collected using ethnography and in-depth interviews from OBC participants in South Korea. The study was divided into two phases: the exploratory phase and the main study. In the first stage the researcher inspected OBCs and focused on understanding the social context by investigating four OBCs in the fashion and digital camera categories. Evidence of an OBC as a virtual third place (VTP) in the consumer's mind was revealed. A typology was developed and social practices were revealed and defined. In the main study the researcher developed the framework of brand meaning negotiation and revealed how consumers symbolically interact and negotiate brand meaning through social practices. The tension between social-related and the brand-related aspects during this process was illustrated.

The key contributions of this research are as follows. Firstly, the study reveals that an OBC has a strong VTP quality, whereby consumers hate to leave. Second, the study extends our understanding of an OBC by categorising consumers' different perceptions of OBCs according to their attachment to the brand, the OBC and other participants. Third, the study reveals underlying social practices within OBCs that show the characteristics of a collectivistic culture. The study also fills the research gap by examining the brand meaning negotiation process and suggesting a framework that shows how underlying practices link brand and social-related aspects of an OBC together, which was formerly a "black box". Lastly, it demonstrates that social bonds, regardless of their importance for making an OBC thrive, can be a double-edged sword and should be balanced carefully with brand-related practice.

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other universities or other institutions of learning.

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## **About the Author**

Jungmin Han entered the full-time Marketing, Operations Management and Service System (MOMS) PhD programme at Manchester Business School (MBS) in September 2009. Before this, she obtained her Master's degree in design management and her Bachelor's degree in industrial design at KAIST, Daejeon, Korea. Towards the end of her Bachelor's degree, she became interested in marketing, consumer behaviour and branding, which are highly relevant to industrial design, and decided to study design management to bridge her knowledge between marketing and design. After attaining the Master's degree in design management (the dissertation for which was about the influence of package design of private labels on consumer's purchasing intention), she took an interest in marketing and subsequently decided to enrol on the present course for her doctoral studies.

Jungmin has been involved in various teaching and research activities in the MOMS division. She served as a seminar leader for the undergraduate courses 'Global Contexts of Business and Management' and 'Services Marketing' and master's course 'Professional Analytics'. Jungmin has presented different aspects of her work at conferences including DMI (2008), conf-IRM (2011), GMC (2012), SMA (2012), AMS (2013), and CCT (2013). Currently she is working with Prof. Stuart Roper and Dr Debbie Keeling on further publications.

## **Preface: Some Reflections on My Research Journey**

I graduated science high school, majored in industrial design for my undergraduate degree and took design management for my Master's degree. During that period, I had to be a logical positivist who focused on lab experiments and surveys. My master's dissertation explored the influence of package design on private labels using mixed methods yet with a focus on statistical analysis. Nevertheless, I have always thought that relying on quantitative surveys and statistics is insufficient to understand human affairs; instead, I believe that delving deep into the subjective qualities which govern such behaviour is crucial. I therefore want to see "why" people are behaving as such – why do they say so in a given situation whereas it does not seem like they do think so? Why do they say that they prefer a particular function brand A has yet eventually go for brand B? If they do not behave as they say, how can I believe their self-reported surveys? Through my prolonged education, I have come to realise, particularly with the way I see life, that I am not a logical positivist but am instead an interpretivist. Hence, I was excited to take my first steps as an interpretivist for my PhD project, though I was a little daunted by the unforeseen difficulties I might encounter during the research process.

In this thesis, I have explored a topic in which I am not only the researcher but could also be one of the participants. I had been told and have thought it best to choose a topic in which I have a keen interest – one that can hold my attention for several years of my life. Hence, I have chosen a topic driven by curiosity, related to my research interest, and was relevant to my previous education, gaps in the literature and personal experience. I grew up during a time when and in a context where online community participation was prevalent: I have, along with my friends and many others, been actively participating in these for many years, and I have observed how such online activities are taking more and more important roles in many people's lives. I have experienced happiness and unpleasantness from such participation. As such, I knew that doing research in this area and in this context, especially with an interpretivist approach, would be emotionally and psychologically demanding.

Nevertheless, I strongly believed that this research was important, that it needed to be done, and that my experience could provide a valuable perspective and fill gaps in the literature about brand meaning for those who participate in online brand communities.

At the outset of my PhD, I was concerned that this would be a purely exploratory piece of work, which is known to be challenging, especially for students whose mother tongue is not English. However, the more I read about and investigated online brand communities and consumers' negotiation, the more I was convinced with this topic and my approach as an interpretivist. Focusing on the raw words and real life of the participants, and on the emic rather than the etic perspective, I could understand the deeper meaning behind what consumers are saying, which I have always wanted to know.

Throughout this work and my journey as an interpretivist, I have discovered a new perspective of the world and indeed myself. I hope that through this work readers can also garner insights that enrich their interpretive excursions.

# **Chapter 1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Research Background**

The traditional view of producer-owner brands and passive-consumers that focuses on differentiation and emotional-functional benefits has been challenged. A brand does not simply signal a product's utilitarian or emotional attributes, but, on a deeper level, it has particular and personal meaning relevant to the consumer (Belk, 1988). In the marketplace, a consumer is not a passive recipient anymore, but an active value co-creator who constantly negotiates the brand meaning and co-creates value (Cova & Dalli, 2009). Within this perspective, consumers realise their potential to utilise consumption in order to demonstrate knowledge, distinction and expertise (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987), construct, represent and maintain their identities (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995), and form social networks (Holt, 1995).

Online brand community (OBC) research has been popularised in this context, especially following Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) seminal work, where they defined a brand community as a group of consumers who are gathered together to co-consume brands with like-minded people. Inspired by their argument that an OBC may eventually enhance brand equity through shared activities, more recent research shows that they also carry out important functions on behalf of the brand itself by providing assistance to both consumers and companies (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). This development has drawn the attention of marketers toward establishing OBCs that enhance consumer loyalty, satisfaction, trust and commitment, by engaging consumers.

An OBC, however, may be diverse, dynamic and unpredictable; however, marketers have also realised that they both defy managerial control and keep evolving (Fournier & Lee, 2009). Portable electronic devices that give access to new social platforms make it easy for practiced internet users to identify the genuine OBCs

from “fake grassroots” contributions, which is, corporate communicators speaking as if they were unpaid customers or fan reviewers (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). With such socio-cultural and technological changes, consumers are more empowered than ever and OBCs have become new public platforms on which they can build social bonds around a brand.

When compared to the subculture of consumption, members of OBCs, are more “pro-social”, in that they do not like to be perceived as “marginal” or “counter-social” (de Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007). As Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 419) put it:

Brand community members possess a fairly well-developed understanding of their feelings toward the brand and their connection to other users. Members know it isn’t the most important thing in their lives – not even close – but neither is it trivial. They know they share a social bond around a branded, mass-produced commodity, and believe it is reasonable to do so. They do not wish to be confused with indiscriminate zealots who are “weird nuts” occupying marginal positions.

Hence, members enjoy a sense of togetherness and empathy, but they do not want to be marginalised. The reason they participate in the community is because they want to be understood by other people, as perhaps they are not by people who are close in real life, such as family, colleagues and friends (Jin, Park, & Kim, 2010). This may be especially true in socio-economic circumstance where long working hours and a tough economic environment encourages them to adopt more materialistic and individualistic approaches. Thus, OBC members may become both effective mediators and have their daily lives enriched by their involvement with a new third place, where they can build new social relationships, take part in online conversations and even contribute to other consumers’ sense of well-being (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). In such places, the “rules of the game” are different from real life because participants gain power by giving away knowledge resources instead of hoarding them (Hemetsberger, 2002).



Participation in OBCs is motivated by expectations of reciprocation of knowledge, emotional resources and social approval (Jin et al., 2010); therefore, members' views on how their own needs, and those of others, can be met become important. Recent research focuses on how individual and group objectives may be decisive, enabling specific practices to occur and be maintained through OBC interactions (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2011); such as the influence of social bonds, which leads to the assignment of meaning to individuals and the stimulation of participation when they are applied to social practices. For instance, a consumer who enjoys social relationships with other members might turn a simple purchasing experience into an exciting "brand" experience through information sharing, joint-purchasing, buying complementary items for the new purchase and also, perhaps, sharing stories or thoughts throughout the process; hence a simple purchase of an item may become a meaningful achievement (Nambisan & Watt, 2011).

Research in this field of consumption, which has been growing fast, suggests that social bonds help an OBC to thrive, enhance brand loyalty (Marzocchi, Morandin, & Bergami, 2013) and reshape consumers' brand meaning (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Broderick, MacLaran, & Ma, 2003). However, how consumers utilise social bonds strategically and how the brand develops new meaning during the interaction process is still in a "black box", in that it is known that it happens, but how it happens is unclear. Whereas in the literature consumers are described as being either altruistic or selfish, the author is of the view that those who build social bonds by giving information or advice to others act for both selfish, economic reasons as well as for altruistic ones. As Rheingold states, "I find that the help I receive far outweighs the energy I expend helping others: a marriage of altruism and self-interest" (Rheingold, 1993).

In this context, people begin to build close relationships with others and, over time, an OBC often develops into a site where people value the promotion of friendships more than for the attractiveness of the brand itself, which may have been the initial impetus for their participation (Marzocchi, 2013). Therefore, the social atmosphere

is more likely to contribute to the success of an OBC, which suggests that if a strong social atmosphere is absent people may lose their motivation to participate; hence an OBC will most likely decline. Therefore, it is important to understand the underlying balance between a brand and its social connections, which are likely to be complex, since they may change over time. In order to understand this dialogue, this study will offer a framework that will identify the underlying processes of brand meaning negotiation and the tension between brand and social aspects in OBCs.

The research has been conducted in the specific context of Korea. Despite the considerable amount of literature in the field of brand community, extant research has focused on North American and Western European cultures, which, even though they may be different in terms of horizontal and vertical power orientations, are represented by their focus on individualism; whereas Korea's contemporary culture, which is deeply influenced by a Confucian tradition, is exemplified by a collectivistic, high-power distance and high-context culture (Huntington & Harrison, 2001; Cha, 1994; Copeland & Griggs, 1985). Hence, culturally, Koreans focus on relational and emotional aspects (Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010). Furthermore, while some western cultures focus more on informational flow, Korean culture values more its social networks, such as families and groups, as the main source of emotional and informational support, thereby emphasising belief in collective decision-making, which means that the role of the media, as a main source of information, is diminished (Money, Gilly, & Graham, 1998).

With its high internet penetration and the cultural characteristics described above, group harmony and online community participation are important aspects of many Koreans's lives – for instance, 73.8% are registered on an online community and the number registered for more than three communities is 27.9% and for more than six to ten is 21.4%, which exceeds those with one or two (18.6%) (*Internet community report*, 2012). Because people using OBCs do not have to be concerned about being identified with the school they went to, the company they work for or, even, how they look (Walther, 1996), they can feel comfortable and be their “real selves” in

their virtual surroundings. This makes OBCs ideal settings for research into their workings, since the factors involved are more likely to be both explicit and observable, which offers a distinct advantage to put into balance the study's findings on OBCs.

## **1.2 Research Aims and Objectives**

Because of the complex network of inter-related consumption activities, brand, product constellations and embedded social networks, in order to understand how consumers create, negotiate, and make sense of brand meaning in a computer-mediated context, and how social influences shape the dynamics of their activities, it is important to understand how brand and social bonds link together. Therefore, this research will aim to gain an understanding of the balance between them in a Korean OBC context.

The research has two main aims: to understand the context – i.e. the community landscape – and the social bonds and practices of OBCs. The specific interconnected research objectives, therefore, will be:

*RO1:* to develop the definition and typology of OBCs

*RO2:* to understand the underlying social bonds and practices that take place within an emergent OBC typology.

The second research aim will be to fundamentally understand how brand meaning is developed by people becoming involved in OBCs. In order to achieve this, the author has set the following research objectives:

*RO3:* to reveal the social bond development process through social practices

*RO4:* to illustrate participants' brand meaning negotiation processes through social practices

*RO5:* to suggest a framework that illustrates the underlying process of brand

meaning negotiation

The study will achieve the first research aim by first-order concepts – participants’ naturally occurring discourses – and second-order concepts – the author’s thematised reflections. In this way, the study will contribute to the ongoing academic debate by examining the brand meaning negotiation process and suggesting a framework that shows how underlying practices link brand and social bonds. This study, therefore, will show that social bonds, regardless of their importance to make an OBC thrive, can be a double-edged sword; thus, it should be carefully balanced. The study will also enhance the research in this field by investigating OBCs in their Korean context.

### **1.3 The Structure of the Dissertation**

This dissertation contains seven chapters:

Chapter 1 gives a brief overview of previous work to facilitate problem identification and develops the research objectives.

Chapter 2 examines extant research, which adds to the knowledge base and reinforces the research objectives. The author reviews the literature that contributes to the theoretical definitions of the main concepts and critically reviews the literature in relation to the definition of OBC, characterising attributes and participant typology. The chapter offers an overview of an OBC as a virtual third place (VTP) by comparing Oldenburg’s notion of the third place and a VTP’s conceptualisation. Brand meaning and social bond creation in an OBC context are explicated thereafter. The author clarifies brand meaning by comparing it to brand value and insists that brand meaning is constantly negotiated by way of cultural intermediaries and social relationship. The chapter continues to offer a brief history and overview of the Korean Internet culture and explains the importance of social relationships in a Korean cultural context. The rationale behind looking at OBC social practices is justified for the purpose of this research.

Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach adopted in this study. The author explains the philosophical background of the research and how it justifies an interpretivist approach. Blumer's notion of Symbolic Interactionism and Bourdieu's Social Practice Theory in an OBC context are discussed. The research design and strategy are followed, which explain the research methods deployed for two studies - the scoping phase and the main study. Research context is described and justified together with the method of sampling and the data analysis.

Chapter 4 shows the results from the scoping phase data analysis. Firstly, the author reports a qualitative evidence of an OBC as a VTP and suggests the OBC typology by setting the criteria and then defining and describing each category. Next, social practices discovered in the study of the OBCs are illustrated under the following headings: (i) brand use, (ii) brand possession, (iii) impression management, (iv) social networking, and (v) OBC nurturing. The typology and social practices discovered in the scoping phase enabled the author to revisit and revise the research objectives and recommend research methods for the main study.

Chapter 5 provides a thick description on how people relate to one another and contribute to the reshaping of brand meaning through the social practices revealed in the scoping phase. The author shows how online posts, interviews and the descriptions of four revelatory incidents interlink to describe tensions between brand and social connection arising from members attempting to accumulate social and cultural capital.

Chapter 6 gives a detailed account of the study's key findings and presents an in-depth discussion of other scholars' findings, together with the latest theories. Nine themes that are evident in brand negotiation process are identified and divided into three social structural levels: the meso, the micro and the individual. The chapter then describes a framework that explains their process and the flow of field-specific capitals in an OBC.

Chapter 7 first summarises the thesis and discusses to what extent research aims have been achieved. Academic contributions and implications for theory and practice are discussed. Finally, limitations of the research are explained and areas for further research are suggested.

Table 1 shows the research flow of this thesis.

**Table 1 The Structure of the Dissertation**

<b>Chapter 1.</b> Introduction
<b>Chapter 2.</b> Literature Review
<b>Chapter 3.</b> Research Methodology
<b>Chapter 4.</b> Scoping Phase Data Analysis and Results <hr/> <b>Study 1-1</b> Consumer’s Perceptions of OBC: A Typology <b>Study 1-2</b> Social Practices in OBC
<b>Chapter 5.</b> Social Bonding and Brand Meaning
<b>Chapter 6.</b> Social Bonding and Brand Meaning: Interpretation
<b>Chapter 7.</b> Conclusion and Further Research

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

This chapter will, (i) define an online brand community (OBC), (ii) critically review the current research on online communities, brand communities and OBCs, (iii) describe consumers' perceptions of these communities as virtual third places (VTPs), where a brand becomes an effective mediator that facilitates their interactions, (iv) define brand meaning and social bonds in an OBC context, and (v) explain social practice theory in its OBC context and justify its use in this research.

### **2.1 Online Brand Communities**

The “brand community” concept came to the forefront of the marketing scene when Fournier (1998), during her examination of studies based on the complex relationship between brands and consumers, formulated a “consumer community construct” (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). The positive impact of brand communities on the health of brands are well-documented, not only for “cult brands” but also for commodities (Cova & Pace, 2006). The focus of this study is the website-based consumer communities revolving around a brand, as described by Hagel and Armstrong (1997) and Sicilia and Palazon (2008). The next section will explain what a website-based OBC actually is in a current socio-economic context.

#### **2.1.1 Understanding OBCs**

Traditionally, a community relates to a group of people inhabiting a specific place and researchers investigated its symbolic, social and geographical dimensions (Cohen, 1985; Geertz, 1973). For the purpose of studying OBCs, the distinction between a physical and a virtual community is of paramount importance, since participants in OBCs, through interpretive practices, may derive a range of experiences and meanings from the same OBC. In the next section, the origins of OBCs and how such communities may be seen as both communal and symbolic

places will be described.

### ***2.2.1.1 From community to online community***

The idea of community has often been used in the pursuit of understanding human beings, as can be seen from work of earlier philosophers (Durkheim, 1965; Kant, 1781; Marx, 1867; Nietzsche, 2003). A German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies developed the modern sociological notion of community in his seminal work of 1887, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (“Community and Society”). Categorising social networks into dichotomous sociological types, Tönnies opposed “community” with “society” by describing “community” as “all intimate, private, and exclusive living together”, while he defined “society” as “public life”, which is the world itself (Tönnies, 1957). The concept of community was further developed sociologically by Simmel (2002), Freud (1928) and Weber (1978). More recently, the idea of community has been developed by academics in the field of marketing, such as in Robert Putnam’s (2000) *Bowling Alone*, which expressed a concern that involvement with traditional community groups is in decline. Putnam’s seminal work posited that the very idea of community, which has traditionally been driven by history and consumer culture, in this new era of connectivity is transferring into the online world (Rheingold, 1993).

Anderson (1983, p. 49) suggests that all communities are imagined, because, “in the minds of each [community member] lives the image of their communion” – a notion that strikes at the heart of most definitions of online communities in that it is different from the traditional, geographically-bounded, community whose members interact face-to-face, an online community is a “social aggregation that emerges from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993, p.5). Therefore, an online community is argued to be a real entity that is given meaning by its participants, which is generated by its participants’ appropriation of accepted structures of communication and by the rules for interaction within them (Baym, 1995). Therefore, as Jones (1995) notes, the definitions of an online



community must engage both space and the social. Table 2 illustrates the proposed definition of online communities by current researchers.

**Table 2 Online Community Definitions**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Definitions</b>
Andrews et al. (2003)	Social networks Computer-Mediated-Communication
Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002)	A social space in a numerical context which authorizes groups to be formed, primarily supported by a continuous process of communication
Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001)	Any entity that exhibits all of the following characteristics: (i) an aggregation of people, (ii) rational members, (iii) interaction in cyberspace without physical collocation, (iv) a process of social exchange, and (v) an objective, property/identity, or interest shared by members
Blanchard (2004)	Groups of people who interact primarily through computer-mediated communication and who identify with and have developed feelings of belonging and attachment to each other
Carroll et al. (1996)	Groups of people Communication and collaboration over networks Shared goals and concerns
Carver (1999)	Virtual Communities are about aggregating people. People are drawn to virtual communities because they provide an engaging environment in which to connect with other people – sometimes only once, but more often in an ongoing series of interactions that create an atmosphere of trust and real insight.
Dennis, Poothari and Natarajan (1998)	People who share common interests and objectives and for which the electronic communication is the first form of interactions.
Erickson (1997)	Long term, computer-mediated conversations amongst large groups
Fernback and Thompson (1995)	A set of social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contacts within a specified boundary
Figallo (1998)	Groups which meet regularly to discuss subjects of interests with the other members
Gupta and Kim (2004)	A group of unknown people with the same opinions, which interact mainly in the Cyberspace to form relations, to share knowledge, to have fun or engage in economic relations
Hagel and Armstrong (1997)	Computer-mediated spaces where there is a potential for an integration of content and communication with an emphasis on member-generated content
Hesse (1995)	A community that spins time and geography; a community that supplements buildings and streets with personal computers and information superhighways
Ho et al. (2000)	Technologically mediated, persistent, environment which supports multiple interaction styles, capability for real-time interaction, and multi-user engagement
Howard (1993)	Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.
Jones (1997)	A new form of "community" created by the use of the CMC
Jones and Rafaeli (2000)	Symbolically delineated computer-mediated spaces, whose existence is relatively transparent and open, that allow groups of individuals to attend and contribute to a similar set of computer-mediated interpersonal interactions
Koh and Kim (2004)	A group of people with common interests or goals, interaction predominantly in cyberspace
Kozinets (1999)	Affiliated groups for which the online interactions rest on the share of

	enthusiasm and knowledge for a specific activity of consumption
Lee et al. (2003)	Cyberspace[s] supported by computer-based information technology, centred on communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content, resulting in a relationship being built
Leimeister and Krcmar (2004)	People who interact socially through a technical platform. The community is built on a common interest, a common problem, a common identity between members who follow implicit and explicit codes. The technical platform supports the interactions and the construction of trust and feelings shared between members
Maloney-Krichmar and Preece (2005)	A group of people with a common interest or a shared purpose whose interactions are governed by policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules, and laws and who use computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness
Preece (2000)	People who interact socially to satisfy their own need or to achieve a special role with a shared subject, and whose interaction is guided by tacit and explicit principles by using an information processing system to support and diffuse the social interaction
Plant (2004)	Groups of individuals and organizations which gather in a temporary or permanent way through an electronic interface to interact around a problem or a common interest
Rheingold (1993)	Social cultural groups which emerge in the Web when a sufficient number of individuals take part in public discussions during enough of time by putting enough heart at it so that networks of human relations are woven within the cyberspace
Rheingold (1994)	Group of people / May or may not meet / Exchange words and ideas / Computer-Mediated-Communication
Ridings and Gefen (2004)	Group of people / Common interests / Common practices / Organised / Communicate regularly / Internet
Romm and Clarke (1995)	Groups of people who communicate with each other via electronic media, rather than face-to-face
Schubert (2000)	Union between individuals or organizations which share common values or interests, using the electronic media to communicate within a semantic space shared on regular bases. Their participation is independent of time and of space
Wiertz et al. (2003)	Online aggregations of consumers who collectively produce and use the contents in connection with a commercial activity which is central to their interests by exchanging an informational and socio-emotional value

This list illustrates the three core elements of online communities, (i) people, (ii) networked interaction, and (iii) shared interest. Based on the literature that figures in this study, an online community requires a group of people with common interests who communicate and collaborate over networks; also, for it to be considered a community it must have interactive energy. The next section describes the “brand community”, which has been the marketers’ Holy Grail for the last decade.

### ***2.2.1.2 Brand Communities***

Due to their commercial character, brand communities are different from traditional

communities. The conceptualisation of brand community has been elaborated upon formalistically by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) in their influential paper, “Brand Community”, in which they defined, what they called this subculture in marketing as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (p. 412). This definition is consistent with Anderson’s (1983) view of “imagined communities” in which members understand that “there are other members of the community, just like them, in other faraway places” (p. 419). Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001), therefore, laid the foundation for the subsequently accepted notion of brand as both a catalyst for, and the cornerstone of, subcultural communities; consequently, a number of academics returned to the study of brand communities (Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Table 3 shows the main research studies relating to brand communities.

Brand communities have come under close scrutiny by marketing scholars as they are believed to be a means to lower marketing costs whilst increasing brand loyalty and creating value (Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Schau et al., 2009). The goals of current brand community research, therefore, has mainly focused on, revealing the relationship between brand community commitment and brand loyalty, the role of leaders (Marchi, Giachetti, & de Gennaro, 2011), and how to manage brand communities to build consumer-brand relationship (Dholakia & Vianello, 2011).

Research has shown that voluntary behaviours, such as, consumers supporting other consumers (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007), can coexist with displays of loyalty to a brand, i.e. the voluntary performance of helping behaviours influencing brand image. Previous studies have also focused on how brand community participants support each other’s brand usage by exchanges of expertise, how they help one another make product repairs, and how they affirm their interests and knowledge by forming a community around a collective sense of communal ethos and identity (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Muñiz & Schau, 2005).

**Table 3 Main Research on Brand Communities**

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Brand Communities (Ford Bronco, Saab, Apple Macintosh)	Consciousness of a kind, sense of belonging to an in-group, thanks to a brand this is patronised by all of the group members who feel strong connections to the brand and toward each other. (Oppositional brand loyalty) Power towards competitor; shared rituals and traditions; sense of moral responsibility
Harley Davidson, Harley Owners Group (HOG)	A subculture of consumption exhibits a homogeneous ethos of core values and expressions; displays a hierarchical social structure based on authenticity and commitments to a well-accepted ideology of consumption.
Camp Jeep BrandFest	Integrated brand community is a function of the customers' perceived relationships with their own products, the brand, the company, and other members
Nutella www.mynutella.com	A new form of sociality and customer empowerment on convenience product. Personal page or blog format – good for producing sub-cultural components, para-social relationship. Tips for developing convenience product-oriented brand communities proposed.
Macintosh	Brand Cult led by extreme brand activists with brand-focused devotion; provides an understanding of the phenomenon of extreme belief in a brand, and for appreciating the potentially all-encompassing role that a brand can play
European Car Clubs	Brand community: good for customer retention, not acquisition; for influencing consumers in negative ways; elicits consumers' behaviour intentions.
Culinary site www.smulweb.nl	Besides the collective site of the online community, there are competitions, conflicts and clashes too. Community members vary greatly in their passion, preferences and practices.
“Spoof” site Anti-Wal-Mart Anti-McDonald's Anti-Starbucks	The reasons why “anti-brand” communities emerge; pros and cons to the marketers pointed out.

Source: developed by the author for this research from, Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Cova & Pace, 2006; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001; Pitt et al., 2002; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Valck, 2005, 2007

### ***2.2.1.3 Defining an OBC***

It is generally recognised that the Internet empowers consumers due to the amount of information it provides, which enables consumers to make informed choices and reduce risk (Harrison, Waite, & Hunter, 2006). Kerr et al. (2012) concur, stating that contemporary Internet use reaches beyond informational value as it provides opportunities for computer-mediated communication that facilitates the exponential growth of social relationships. As such, the Internet creates more opportunities for multiple users to be influenced by each other by way of constant electronic updates.

In this study, the author will use the abbreviation OBC to describe virtual online communities that consist of individual consumers, who may never meet face-to-face, to engage in social interactions that are overtly centred on brands. As Shang et al. (2006, p. 400) stated, “consumer virtual communities can also be seen as a special form of brand communities”. The differences between a brand community and an OBC are that an OBC, (i) is a computer-mediated forms of communication, (ii) can be anonymous, if desired by the member, (iii) precludes face-to-face interaction, and (iv) allows members to present themselves whichever way they please. All these factors make an OBC different from “real life” communities.

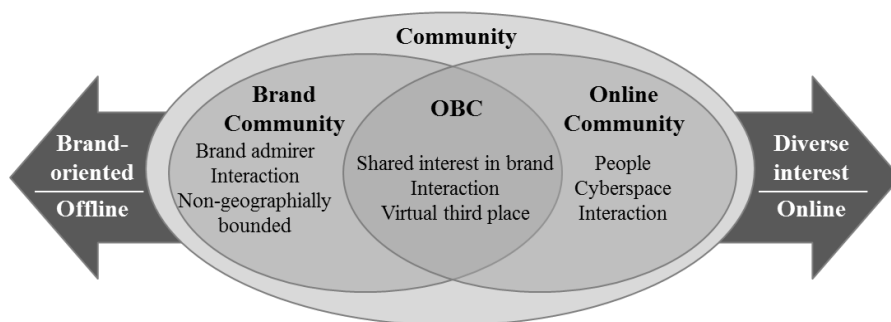
Based on sociological premises, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) argue that brand communities exhibit three core components, (i) shared consciousness, which refers to the perceived membership of constituents, (ii) rituals and traditions, and (iii) a sense of moral responsibility:

1. *Shared consciousness* – members feel a sense of camaraderie and belonging, which differentiates them from non-members (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006).
2. *Rituals and traditions* – members can create their own meaning of the brand community experience, such as by specific signs, jargon and behaviours that become common to the community.
3. *Moral responsibility* – members feel committed to other members and to the community as a whole; thus they are encouraged to support other members and promote community growth (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2008).

Research by McAlexander et al. (2002) and Algesheimer et al. (2005) largely supports the presence of these markers of community within OBCs, which they consider to be appropriate for the development of OBCs and to which they add one more marker – a shared place. Yet the division between a brand community and an OBC is not entirely clear, as can be seen from the research in which the authors

conflate the term brand community (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Schau et al., 2009) with online community (Broderick et al., 2003), web-enhanced brand community (Andersen, 2005), web-based brand community (Scarpi, 2010) and online brand community (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010; Cova & Paraque, 2010; Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008; Yeh & Choi, 2010).

During the early stage of brand community studies, it was realised that the consumers who dominated OBCs were the original adopters who participated in the communities because they were deeply involved with the brand (Cova & Cova, 2002; Kozinets, 1997). However, OBCs nowadays are more diversified and consumers more practiced in internet technology and electronic devices; hence they have become more immersed with OBCs, which have become part of their daily lives (Zaglia, 2013). Consequently, some assumptions need to be revisited. The following figure illustrates the development of an OBC definition as it is different from the concept of a “brand community” and an “online community”.



**Figure 1 Developing the Definition of an OBC**

The author’s definition of an OBC is:

An aggregation of individuals gathering in spaces on the Web with a shared interest in a brand, who use computer systems to share resources and support social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness.

The characteristics of this definition are:

1. It does not imply a dichotomy between online and offline brand communities, since offline communication can have a powerful effect on online communities (Pitta & Fowler, 2005a).
2. An OBC is not geographically bounded because computer systems support social interaction among the members, although the locality might matter in terms of group gatherings and events.
3. OBC members are not always brand admirers; therefore, when access is made easy, any consumer with a shared interest in the brand can join an OBC, which means that not only brand admirers, but also prospective consumers, disappointed customers and business partners can join.
4. Computer systems allow consumers to have a virtual space that facilitates a sense of togetherness – i.e. a shared place.

### **2.1.2 Characterising Attributes**

In this section, OBC character attributes will be explored in order to understand their objective structure. A number of academics have proposed online community attributes. Whittaker et al. (1997) proposed six online community attributes and state that online communities that possess more of these attributes may be clearer examples of communities. However, while Whittaker and his colleagues' list is a useful beginning, it was created to describe online communities, therefore it does not take into account the specifics of OBCs.

**Table 4 Online Brand Community Attributes**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Related Attribute</b>	<b>Continuum</b>	<b>Support from literature</b>
General demographics	Age	Old ↔ Young	(Gongla & Rizzuto, 2001)
	Brand type	High-involvement – low-involvement Non-religious religious Stigmatised – non-stigmatised	(Cova & Pace, 2006; Sicilia & Palazón, 2008)
	Creation process	Consumer initiated ↔ Company initiated	(Jang et al., 2008; Wenger, Mcdermott, & Snyder, 2002)
	Level of maturity	Transformation stage ↔ Potential stage	(Gongla & Rizzuto, 2001; Wenger, Mcdermott, et al., 2002)
	Size	Small ↔ Large Can be mixed (subgroup)	(Dholakia et al., 2004; Gongla & Rizzuto, 2001; Plant, 2004; Porter, 2004; Scarpi, 2010; Wenger et al., 2002)
	Platform	Easy to access ↔ Difficult to access	(Blanchard, 2004; Hoffman & Novak, 1996)
	Transaction	Commercial ↔ Non-commercial	(Armstrong & Hagel, 1996; Devasagayam & Buff, 2008; Leimeister & Krcmar, 2004; Plant, 2004; Porter, 2004; Wagstrom et al., 2011)
Membership characteristic	Boundedness	Loosely ↔ Tightly bounded community	(Lazar & Preece, 1998; Plant, 2004; Wagstrom et al., 2011)
	Cultural diversity	Homogeneous ↔ Heterogeneous	(Dubé et al., 2006; Wenger et al., 2002)
	Geographic dispersion	Dispersed ↔ Concentrated	(Dubé et al., 2003)
	Membership stability	Stable ↔ Fluid	(Wenger et al., 2002)
OBC administration	Leadership	clearly assigned ↔ continuously negotiated	(Kim, 2000; Koh & Kim, 2004; Williams & Cothrel, 2000; Yoo et al., 2002)
	Policies	Few ↔ Many	(Whittaker et al., 1997)
	Content creation	Low ↔ High	(Porter, 2004; Wagstrom et al., 2011; Williams & Cothrel, 2000; Yoo et al., 2002)
OBC activities	Degree of virtuality	Low ↔ High	(Blanchard & Horan, 1998; Devasagayam & Buff, 2008; Koh & Kim, 2004; Williams & Cothrel, 2000; Yoo et al., 2002)
	Shared activities	Few ↔ many	(Lazar & Preece, 1998; Whittaker, 1997)
	Topics relevance	High ↔ Low	(McDermott, 1999; Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000) (Kim, 2000; Porter, 2004; Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001; Whittaker et al., 1997; Williams & Cothrel, 2000; Yoo, Suh, & Lee, 2002)



This concept can be taken further to suggest that OBCs that have similar community attributes might be comparable. The basic characteristics of an OBC appear as a series of attributes that have been extracted from the literature and by analysing and contrasting the underlying characteristics of and OBCs in Korea. The attributes of OBCs may be divided into four categories (Table 4):

1. *Demographics*: age, brand type, creation process, level of maturity, size, transaction
2. *Membership characteristics*: boundedness, cultural diversity, geographic dispersion, membership stability
3. *Administration*: leadership, marketers' role in OBC (if any), policies
4. *Activities*: contents creation, degree of virtuality, shared activities, shared goal or interest

These attributes have enabled the author to identify clear examples of communities that contain, to a greater or lesser extent, the described attributes; however, these have their limitations for explaining an OBC for three reasons, (i) they cannot show the complex and dynamic interactions that make up an OBC, (ii) they ignore individual differences among consumers, and (iii) OBCs with the same attributes may display variations. These attributes, which, in combination, allow an OBC to be seen as a particular entity, will be described in the following sections.

#### ***2.1.2.1 General Demographics***

The first category consists of the OBC's seven principle characteristics, (i) age, (ii) brand type, (iii) creation process, (iv) level of maturity, (v) size, (vi) platform, and (vii) transaction:

1. *Age* – the age of the OBC – ranging from less than a year, to more than five years. Launching a new OBC is challenging, because of the difficulties of, (i) attracting members, (ii) retaining regular members, (iii) choosing appropriate technology, (iv) accumulating informational capital, such as archives based on an accumulation of regular postings, and (v) developing behavioural norms and processes (Butler, Sproull, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2002). It may also face difficult

challenges when, at the end of the life of the brand, it has to reinvent itself (Gongla & Rizzuto, 2001).

2. *Brand type* – i.e. whether it is highly symbolic and functional, or whether it is stigmatised or non-stigmatised. In a study of a hundred online communities, Preece and Ghazati (2001) found that members of patient and emotional support sites were generally more empathic than members of other groupings, while religious and sports communities exhibited the most hostility. Knowing about such behavioural differences will enable marketers and designers to tailor the most appropriate supportive online community.

3. *Creation process* – whether the community is consumer-initiated or company-initiated. Consumer-initiated OBCs are either built and hosted by consumers, independent of companies, or are sponsored by the companies, in which case it would almost certainly be attached to its own, official, Web-site, based on a bigger portal, such as Naver, Daum, Yahoo, Google, etc., or it may have a separate domain (Jang et al., 2008; Porter, 2004). Specific differences between consumer-initiated and company-initiated OBCs are difficult to identify. Perhaps it is simpler to see them as being on the same continuum, in the sense that marketers may take part in OBCs, even if they are consumer-initiated, since they can participate, or simply observe, without being identified. However, in company-initiated OBCs marketers and managers may play different roles from community to community.

4. *Platform* – the technical features of the platform on which the community is constructed. An OBC can exist as a separate website, within the company's website, on a portal and SNS (Social Networking Service). Various types of platforms with different characteristics exist. Their interface may provide synchronous/asynchronous discussion (Hoffman & Novak, 1996), how easy and convenient to come to the OBC (Rafaeli, 1988), if the community is linked to personal blog, website or other communities influence the community's dynamics.

5. *Level of maturity* – its transformation stage and its potential stage. This indicates where the OBC is located in its life-cycle. This is not necessarily synonymous with age. OBCs go through different phases throughout their life. Gongla and Rizzuto (2001), McDermott (1999) and Wenger et al. (2002) produced evolutionary models of community practices, which may also be applied to OBCs in terms of natural life cycles. While they all described the same process, they differed in terms of timing, the stages, the elements described, and the vocabulary. A typical life cycle may be divided into five stages, (i) potential, (ii) coalescing, (iii) maturing, (iv) stewardship, and (v) transformation (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). However, not every OBCs will reach a higher level of maturity, since, at every stage there is a possibility of it dying. Some take more time than others to evolve, in that they may linger at one phase for a long time, diminish, or progress rapidly to a higher level of maturity (Gongla & Rizzuto, 2001; Wenger, McDermott, et al., 2002). Therefore, identifying the phase an OBC is in, may help both explain its specific challenges and the decisions and actions that are needed to lead it to success.

6. *Size* – whether it is small or large depends on the numbers of members it attracts. There is usually, (i) a core group that produces most of the information, skills and social leadership (Quinton & Harridge-March, 2010), and, (ii) peripheral members, who often gain information they want from “lurking” (Nonnecke, Preece, Andrews, & Voutour, 2004). An online community becomes more valuable as more people join the community. Ackerman and Starr (1996) found that people only use a communication system if it already has a sizable number of members, even though not all would be active users; this is called the “threshold effect”. A large community is more likely to include people with contingent, diverse, distributive interests, hence social relationships may become ephemeral (von Krogh, 2002) and the OBC might easily lose its focus and become purely a community of interest. Because self-interested individuals may be enjoying a “free ride”, very large OBCs are usually structured into subgroups, by topic or region, to encourage more active participation.

7. *Transaction* – commercial or non-commercial. Transaction in an OBC means not only the purchase of a company product, but also trading between members, although some OBCs prohibit such practices. Also, because the OBC primarily focuses on a brand, it tends to perform the role of a “market-place” where consumers can collect, share, and trade branded products, services and artefacts. (Plant, 2004).

### ***2.1.2.2 Membership Characteristics***

The second category of characterising attributes relates to membership characteristics, i.e. how consumers became members, where they are located, how changeable they are and how they are different from each other. The four membership characteristics are, (i) boundedness, (ii) cultural diversity, (iii) geographic dispersion, and (iv) members’ selection process and membership stability.

1. *Boundedness* – loosely or tightly bounded communities. This is a sociological concept relating to how many social relationships remain within the defined population of a community. In a tightly bounded OBC, most social relationships and communications take place between its members, while, in a loosely bounded OBC, members have more social ties with people on the outside (Wellman, 1997). Plant (2004) stated that OBCs use different methods to select their members; for instance, the community may be limited to people who are highly loyal to a brand, which requires proof and the ability to filter out unsuitable applicants, such as those living in a particular geographical area, or who belong to a specific population. Social ties in such communities are tightly bound, whereas the Internet is characterised as a loosely bounded network. An example is the Nike (sportswear) OBC in Korea that recruits new members once a year and reviews candidates thoroughly before approving registration. Preece (1998) points out, what might be considered to be obvious, that members of such communities show greater degrees of empathy towards each other.
2. *Cultural diversity* – homogeneous or heterogeneous. This describes

differences between members in terms of profession, language, age, culture and country (Line Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006; Wenger, Mcdermott, et al., 2002). Members' cultural diversity lie on a continuum from those with similar backgrounds and national cultures to those with dissimilar backgrounds and national cultures. While cultural diversity can bring a rich variety of information and perspectives, it can also make participating and sharing difficult. In addition to shaping how a member relates to others and to the group, culture may also define what knowledge is worth discussing and what thoughts are likely to be accepted (Aaker & Schmitt, 2001). Consumers tend to interpret information based on their cultural filters leading to a potentially broad range of misinterpretations and distortions; therefore, it may be more challenging for OBC members to identify and share a common understanding in order to establish open communication and trust and develop social relationships, thereby extending the time required for an OBC to become fully effective. Consequently, norms need to be discussed, shared and negotiated, and both leaders and core members must understand and manage cultural tensions.

3. *Geographic dispersion* – from low to high. This refers to the member's physical location. OBC members may either be physically located in the same city or scattered around the world. High level dispersion brings both challenges and benefits. Because it is impossible for some members to participate in face-to-face meetings, physical distance may result in psychological distance. Also, information, such as where local stores or promotions are located is not relevant, hence leaders and core members should ensure that no-body feels isolated. On the other hand, high geographic dispersion may increase an OBC's cultural diversity (Laurette Dubé, 2003).
4. *Members selection process and membership stability* – from stable to fluid. Membership may be either permanent or temporary. An OBC that has a simple registration process will experience more membership instability than one that is more difficult to join. Stability may also be affected if key actors

leave the community and are replaced by new members, which will trigger a period of socialisation and sense-making as their values, norms, and communication patterns are tested. The survival of the OBC, therefore, will depend on the adaptability of its new members, such as by their regular participation and how much effort they devote to the community (Wenger et al., 2002). Also, a sudden influx of new members may call for a radical transformation.

### **2.1.2.3 OBC Administration**

The third category of characterising attributes relates to OBC administration, i.e. (i) leadership and (ii) policies.

1. *Leadership* – clearly assigned to continuously negotiated. In an OBC, leadership refers to the governance structure; individuals can be appointed to specific roles or roles can be left to emerge through interactions. If the OBC is company-initiated, a marketer may be appointed as a manager or a leader. Leadership attributes can be written into the initial layout and a formal governance structure created (Gongla & Rizzuto, 2001; Lesser & Everest, 2001). Alternatively, roles and authority relationships can be allowed to emerge through members' interactions and expertise (Lesser & Storck, 2001). In a situation where leadership is constantly being renegotiated and new needs are identified, responsibilities and roles remain in a state of flux. Clearly assigned roles, which may lead to engagement and accountability, are likely to become increasingly important as the OBC grows in size; they may also allow people to spend legitimate time working on it.
2. *Policies* – free to strict. Effective rules are the cornerstone of an OBC, hence its manager may allow it more or less freedom. Without rules governing a community is challenging (Whittaker et al., 1997).

#### **2.1.2.4 OBC Activities**

The fourth category of characterising attributes relates to OBC activities with a particular focus on members' involvement; these characteristics are true for both online and offline communities. The four factors are, (i) content creation, (ii) degree of virtuality, (iii) topic relevance, and (iv) shared activities.

1. *Content creation* – high to low. The ability of community members to interact with other members by posting and comments and modify the content can be a measure of how active a community is. The more effective the contents – both functional and emotional – the more attractive the community will be to its consumers to join and remain in it (Porter, 2004; Wagstrom et al., 2011; Williams & Cothrel, 2000; Yoo et al., 2002).
2. *Degree of virtuality* – low to high. Communities may be conceived and nurtured in the physical world as well as the virtual world. While the author appreciates that the spatial dimension is a continuum, therefore this study will put forward its two extremes as that affect an OBC – the geographically-bound physical and the virtual. Communities that interact in a predetermined location fall into the physical category. Harley Davidson's HOGS (Schembri, 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) and Jeep's Jamboree (McAlexander et al., 2002) are good examples of OBCs with low levels of virtuality, where motor-bike riding is the main activity, since members of such a physical OBC meet and perform with other loyal brand owners at pre-arranged locations, usually sponsored by the company. Whereas, virtual OBC members gather almost exclusively online and rarely enjoy offline gatherings (Cova & Pace, 2006).
3. *Topic relevance* – high to low. OBCs are constituted for the benefit of interested consumers, however, brand-related information is not the only topic discussed in the community. Although, in many cases, OBCs have been launched by companies with a specific objective, and discussions have intended to be restricted to brand-related topics, a degree of less-relevant topics are often tolerated, or even encouraged, since it is recognised that the

site is often subsumed into a consumer's way of life (Cova & Pace, 2006). On the other hand, when an OBC has many on-topic threads, consumers can see immediately the benefits of their participation, even though the less brand-relevant topics may increase personal relationships by providing emotional outlets (McDermott, 1999; Williams & Cothrel, 2000; Yoo et al., 2002).

4. *Shared activities* – few to many. Members have shared activities such as regular offline events or shared project. Shared activities give members the opportunity to get to know each other and build relationships (Lazar & Preece, 1998; Whittaker et al., 1997).

### **2.1.3 Participant Typology**

Members are the most important elements in OBCs, since they are what make them either thrive or fail. For reasons explained earlier, they are much more heterogeneous than members of off-line communities, such as neighbourhoods or schools. The next section, therefore, will review participant types in order to understand further the dynamics of the OBC typology.

Current literature universally uses a dichotomous typology of “lurkers” and “posters” (Nonnecke & Preece, 2003). Interested consumers may “lurk”, or “keep their eyes on posts” without writing anything – for many reasons, such as (i) to preserve their anonymity, (ii) to ensure privacy, (iii) to familiarise themselves with the OBC culture before contributing to it, (iv) out of shyness, or (v) because they are too busy (Nonnecke, Andrews, & Preece, 2006; Nonnecke et al., 2004; Jenny Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004; Rau, Gao, & Ding, 2008). Kozinets (1999) considered two non-independent factors – brand identification and social involvement – when he divided brand community members into four types, (i) tourists – who have low social ties, visit randomly, show little involvement and have only a passing interest in the brand or consumption activity, (ii) devotees – who have strong interests in the



brand and activities and also develop social ties, (iii) minglers – who post either irregularly or frequently, but are only superficially interested in the brand or consumption activity, and (iv) insiders – who have strong social ties to the community, take part in discussions and consumption activities and have expert knowledge about the brand (see Table 5).

**Table 5 Four Segments of Community Participants**

	<b>Tourists</b>	<b>Devotees</b>	<b>Minglers</b>	<b>Insiders</b>
<b>Brand Identification</b>	Low	High	Low	High
<b>Social Orientation</b>	Low	Low	High	High
<b>Profile</b>	Potentially discovered the community by accident; temporarily participate in the community out of curiosity, novelty, and variety seeking; superficial participation that usually does not last very long	Joined the community out of passion for the brand (think many Linux users); may participate often but in non-public forms; take satisfaction in the rich brand resources provided by the community	The polar opposite to devotees; these social butterflies choose communities that fulfil their social needs best but have no or minor interest in the brand/topic; help keep a community alive and active but may sidetrack often	True leaders of a community that are both passionate about the brand and sensitive to social well-being of the community; well respected by other community members and may self-select as community moderators; frequent and highly visible participation
<b>Community status/influence</b>	Low	May be respected within small circle but mostly unknown	Highly visible but influence limited	High
<b>Network position</b>	A small number of superficial network connections	A small number of potentially deep network connections	A large number of superficial network ties	A large number of deep network ties; high prestige within the network

Source: Kozinets, Robert V. (1999), “E-Tribalized Marketing?: The Strategic Implications of Virtual Communities of Consumption,” *European Management Journal*, 17 (3), 252-264

Kim (2000) broadened the “lurker and poster” dichotomy by proposing five member roles based on progressive stages of their involvement, (i) visitors, who “browse” without having a clear role, (ii) novices, who have only recently joined and have a lot to learn, (iii) regulars, who have been around for a while and participate fully in

discussions and activities, (iv) leaders, who are volunteer contractors and staff, who are the community's long-time regulars and leaders and who keep it running, and (v) elders, who are long-time leaders and who share their knowledge with newer members and develop the community's culture. De Valck (2005), who conducted a study of a culinary online community, also proposed the following classification of member roles, (i) core members, (ii) functionalists, (iii) opportunists, (iv) informationalists, (v) conversationalists, and (vi) hobbyists. These typologies are summarised in Table 6.

There are similarities between Nonnecke and Preece, Kozinets, Kim and de Valck's typologies, since they all underpin the relationship of different types of members with their communities, their consumption activities and their brand experiences (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). This supports McAlexander et al.'s (2002) recommendation that research into brand community needs to take into account consumers' perspectives in terms of their relationships with brand, product, community and other consumers. Because the focus of this study is principally on the social bonds of an OBC, this it lays emphasis on the relevance the brand has toward determining how intensively individuals participate in the ongoing discourse about it.

**Table 6 Online Community Participant Typology**

	<b>Classification Dimension</b>	<b>Typology</b>	<b>Perceived limitations</b>
Brown et al. (2002); Reid (1993); Rheingold (1993)	Behaviour	Posters, lurkers	Limited attention on the participation, ignoring the dynamics of the community.
Kim (2000)	Involvement overtime	Visitors, novices, regulars, leaders, elders	Assumption of linear member role change over time without empirical testing.
Jennifer Preece (2000)	Behaviour and function	Moderators and mediators, commentators, provocateurs, participants, lurkers	The classification tends to be general without clear dimensions.
Jenny Preece (2001)	Motivational aspect	sociability and usability	
Holland and Baker (2001)	Purpose of participation	functional (information sharing) and hedonic (diverse experience) purpose	
Kozinets (1999)	Brand identification and social involvement	Tourists, insiders, minglers, devotees	Considers limited types of participants considering social involvement in a continuum between low and high, not considering anti-social behaviours (i.e. purpose of posting is to be aggressive and bet attention).
Fontaine (2001); Bourhis et al. (2005)	Community roles	Subject matter experts, core team members, community members, community leaders, sponsors, facilitators, content coordinators, journalists, mentors, admin/events coordinators, technologists	It falls short of investigating how decisions regarding those roles should be carried out to maximise the benefits of a virtual community of practice.
De Valck (2005)	Participation habit	Core members, functionalists, opportunists, informationalists, conversationalist and hobbyists	Only based on one community which has little generalisability.
Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008)	Motivations to join the community	Enthusiasts, behind the scenes, users, not me, average, socialiser	
Devasagayam and Buff (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008)	Temporal, spatial, exchange characteristic	Traditional, independents, deffidents asocials, passionates, hard-wireds, introvertives, loose-wireds	Limited to basketball brand community.
Cova and Cova (Cova & Cova, 2002)	Behaviour and participation habit	Sympathisers, participants, devotees, practitioners	Categorised tribes in a broad sense.

Heavily “brand-involved” members may form an inner circle and act differently from peripheral members, to the extent that, in many cases, they sometimes become innovative and take an active role in the creation of brand manifestations and brand meaning (Cova & Cova, 2002). Hence, marketers nurture devotees and insiders on the assumption that they are representative of their most important consumers. Such committed members, therefore, shape and sustain the manifestations and meaning of a brand. However, the core of the brand interest group is embedded in a much bigger – more peripheral – group of individuals and organisations, who have a certain personal and professional interest in brands (Luedicke, 2006). Less loyal consumers, i.e. consumers who have special purposes in mind, such as the promotion of their own websites or simply the promotion of themselves to others as “personalities”, or employees who wish to participate in the ongoing creation of brand meaning and its manifestations may take part in OBC activities. Take, for instance, a fashion brand community, where a person who is running his own internet shopping mall may post a picture of himself wearing the clothes he sells on his own website, whilst pretending to be a satisfied consumer .

Luedicke (2006) stated that sometimes, a member may raise an adversarial contribution to brand-related discourse, which may reinforce brand and OBC meanings and the social cohesion of the core members of a brand interest group. Hence, conceptualising an OBC by omitting antagonistic members of a brand interest group may lose potentially important future co-creators of brand meaning. Therefore, it is important to investigate different community participant types whose purpose and attachment towards OBC and brand varies. Deliberating on current definitions in the literature, the author suggests that focal consumer’s relationship with an OBC as a place should be considered in order to fully comprehend how participants with different roles may counteract.

## **2.2 The OBC as a Virtual Third Place**

The author argues that an OBC should be understood as a VTP. The concept of “real” and “virtual”, and how the dichotomy creates a single social realm will be examined

in this section, which will also present a backdrop of interaction between members.

### **2.2.1 Concept of the “Real” Versus Concept of the “Virtual”**

Perhaps one of the most fundamental ways of thinking about virtual space is to imagine you are in a particular spot on earth without knowing where it is (Space as geography); hence, the Internet has transformed the notion of space and place. People spend more time in front of computer monitors or smart devices than ever before, which means that virtual space, within Benedikt's (1991) definition, allows access from any place on earth to any other place on earth. Hillis (1997) suggested that virtual space is “being positioned as the ideal public sphere for imaginative subjectivities believing themselves virtually freed of bodily constraints” (p.20). Internet users imagine and conceptualise the real life and ‘live’ in the cyberspace of the Internet. In these circumstances, it is necessary to define the individual's relationship with real and virtual space.

The interaction between cyberspace and real space opens up the possibility of creating new spaces that are synthetic in that they do not actually exist. Foucault (1986) pointed out, when discussing the notion of space and power, that the relationships between spaces and "sites" are fundamental to the construction of place in any community and the exercise of power within the community. For instance, he argued, "we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites (p.23)". Indeed, the emerging relationship between real and virtual space is precisely at the point of opening up such relations that are creating new sites and spaces that can have their own intrinsic power because of the unique set of connections that are being established between them. Hence, it is necessary not only to understand how web pages are constructed, but also how web discourse is represented in other non-cyber elements of cybernetic space to understand such new places. In this vein, the traditional place-bound notions of community advanced by Tönnies (1957), Simmel (2002), and Durkheim (1965), are not applicable to cyberspace. As Benedikt (1991) argues, certain material dimensions of physical space can be reinvented in cyberspace.

Generally speaking, human activities take place in enclosed spaces that are designed to support them. Places are not just hollow containers, but spaces whose design and layout intertwines with the creation of social structures. Therefore, a place plays an important role in “encoding the cultural and social understanding of the behaviour and actions appropriate to an environment” (Lee, Danis, Miller, & Jung, 2001, p. 62). The place – its size, design, features, equipment, and physical presence gathering, influences the socialisation process, since a place is where participants engage in active creation and to attribute meanings (Tuan, 1979). It is also where participants and marketers make sense of who they are and what they are expected to do, by sharing understanding of appropriate behaviours and interpretation of environmental cues. Typically these physical elements are implicit, so their influence on social behaviour is often taken for granted. However, the great flexibility of virtual space, with its potential sense of transience and impermanence, arguably influences the way routines and rituals are formed. This requires participants to engage in a process of re-creating meanings to cope with the involved uncertainties and not rely on a passive process of simple acknowledgment of the new place. In so doing, they become involved in a process of place-making, which is necessary in order to appreciate the online environment (Lee et al., 2001).

### **2.2.2 Understanding OBC as a Virtual Third Place in a Collectivist Culture: Does It Currently Fit with the Purpose of the Marketers?**

Georg Simmel, who was perhaps the first sociologist to seriously examine sociability, wrote that it, “extracts the serious substance of life leaving only ‘together-ness’, the sheer pleasure of the company of others” (1949, p. 255). While the social sciences tend to focus on the many instrumental reasons that people interact with each other, for example, because of work or family obligations, Simmel (1949) reminds us that humans are truly social animals who sometimes seek out interaction purely for its own sake; he gives examples of sociability in the many varieties of playful conversation via anecdote, humour, witticism and flirting that tend to emerge around play activities, such as games, music and sports.

Oldenburg (1989) extended Simmel's work by analysing the places in which sociability tends to emerge; he states that Simmel called such settings "third places" and defined them as "generic designations for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work [the so-called first and second places]". Oldenburg argues that such informal public gathering places – cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, etc. –, are essential to the health of communities; he further stated that all great civilizations and great cities have had their characteristic public gathering spaces. However, in post-WW II US, characterised by the "automobile suburb," such third places had largely disappeared (Oldenburg, 1989).

Like Oldenburg, Whyte (1988) critiques certain urban centres, such as Los Angeles, for their conspicuous absence of sociable public life, and he identified elements of urban design that inhibit sociability. While Simmel (1949), Oldenburg (1989), and Whyte (1988) described activities and public places in the physical world, their approach can also be applied to the virtual world. About the WELL, one of the first text-based virtual communities, Rheingold (1993, p.26) wrote, "It might not be the same kind of place that Oldenburg had in mind, but so many of his descriptions of third places could also describe the WELL". The WELL is an imagined space created purely through textual description, yet even with such a simple technology, users could nonetheless construct engaging social experiences. Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) take this kind of community to the next level by introducing simulated 3D spaces and bodies. This virtual "material" world provides new resources for social interaction and it has been argued that new digital environments, like online games, can serve as ideal spaces for creating and nurturing different forms of community bonds beyond the social spheres of home and work (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). This is true in journalism, also (Robinson & Deshano, 2011).

The author's use of the term "VTP" is different from the Oldenburgian "third place"

as this study centres on virtual environments and their capacity to constitute such conceptual or notional places, not the physical notions of “third places” in social life. Soukup (2006) also acknowledged the difference between third places and a number of virtual communities and argued that describing Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) as a third place is an inaccurate use of Oldenburg’s term (p.432). In relation to this distinction, Oldenburg argued that virtuality lacks the instantaneity and power of physical, interpersonal contact, and, that online communities are too homogeneous to be true “third places”. While the author does not wish to downplay the potential significance of these issues, there is substantial evidence that certain online environments do, in fact, value diversity, and that many online networks evolve into, and even support, meet-ups and other actual, physical interactions (Broderick et al., 2003; Brodie et al., 2011). In addition, the importance of having a physical place in relationship building has been significantly challenged in the technological environment; thus, it is now common to have “friends” one has never met and to engage with them through Facebook or Twitter (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014); which is somewhat different from the time when Oldenburg first used the term “third place”.

Early studies of online communities focused on the possibilities of the internet as a “new social space” and Baym (1995) asserted that online groups with richly developed cultures have transformed the Internet into a new communal space. Jones (1995) also observed that any definition of online communities must encompass spatial as well as social elements, thereby supporting robustly a conception of community that connects material and spatial customs with the transmission of social values and belief systems. However, because the internet is now firmly ingrained in people’s daily cultural lives, the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ has become blurred. Papacharissi (2002) argued that, since online and offline interaction occurs in a single social realm, the false real/virtual dichotomy blunts the interpretive power of new media and community research. Online spaces are not replacing physical spaces of dialogue and social action, but they do operate according to their own logics of purpose and action, which can result in other things, including VTP, which



is the fluid space of practice through which cultural power can be articulated, grasped and deployed.

Hence, what this author points to is in line with, but distinct from, Oldenburg's paradigm, together with others that assume some sort of inductive normality is essential in order to legitimise these practices. Hence, this author is less concerned with physicality, less focused on the importance of heterogeneity as a normative value, less concerned with totalities, and less concerned with specific outcomes in the social sphere. OBC is a social world inhabited by other people where consumers interact by typing chat messages, posting and making comments. Because it contains thousands of concurrent users, who do not physically know each other, OBC constitutes a public space. As such, the author proposes that it functions as a VTP that can be studied in ways analogous to those "third places" in the physical world.

### **2.3 Brand Meaning and Social Bonds in an OBC**

The OBC posts, reviews, user-generated contents and comments are primarily concerned with consumption objects – the brand an OBC is centred around. McCracken (1986) stated that participants achieve an audience that historically was only available to advertising agencies and other professionals, thus brand meaning is constantly redefined and negotiated through the interactions of community members.

Companies put effort into assigning intended meanings to their brands and products through various means, such as product design and advertising. However, the brand's symbolism cannot be entirely controlled by a company because these attributes are personal manifestations linked to human relationships with the brand, the branded bi-products, the producing company and other consumers. Hence, meanings change because consumers can achieve mass audiences through OBCs, therefore "ordinary" individual's acts of consumption can have an enormous effect on a company's policy, which correlates with McQuarrie et al.'s (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013) notion of the "megaphone effect".

### **2.3.1 The Shift from Brand to Social Bonds in OBCs**

Through OBCs, consumers encounter other consumers, who are not “media celebrities”, who are using, or have used, the product and, realising the product has some faults wish to share the problem with other members, who may have had their own unpleasant experiences of it; they will also hope, perhaps, that the company will take note of his/her comments.

When people access resources they become linked through social exchanges, which Goffman (1971) called “tie signs” because such social exchanges contain visible evidence of how individuals are related and social exchanges, according to Douglas and Isherwood, (1979), possess symbolic properties that are shared within a social community. Also, it is through social exchanges that individuals develop a dual social linkage:

1. As Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 43) argued, through community membership "activities and associated interpersonal relationships [...] become the most powerful organizing forces in modern life". This, therefore, is the motivational basis for most successful self-selective OBCs. The more central a brand or activity is to a person, the more likely that person will be to pursue and value community membership and build social bonds within it. As Kozinets, (1999, p. 261) put it, “Communing in a shared passion is the essence of truly communal community”.
2. Social relationships are important factors in the lives of OBC members because of the intensity of the relationship he/she possesses with other members. As Rheingold (1993) stated, the Net supports a variety of communal ties, including some that are quite intimate, therefore, depending on the degree of involvement with the activity and the strength of social ties, member participation in virtual communities will vary; also, an individual’s relationship with the activity and with the community is also central to the continuation of membership.

**Table 7 Key Elements of Exchange and Exchange Processes**

<b>Key elements</b>	<b>Related concepts and theories</b>	<b>Basic assumptions/evidence</b>
<b>Intrinsic motivation</b>	Identity-involvement	Psychological pleasure derived from the active involvement with a challenging identity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997)
	Control	Perceived ability to control the most important conditions of one's life (Anderson, Challagalla, & McFarland, 1999; Thompson & Bono, 1993)
<b>Extrinsic rewards</b>	Personal use-value	Perceived utility of objects of exchange (Bagozzi, 1975)
	Social approval: recognition and reputation	Gaining peer reputation as central incentive to make one's work publicly available (Raymond, 1999)
	Gaining knowledge	Gaining knowledge by means of information exchange and help provided by expert members of the community (Kozinets, 1999)
<b>Meaning of exchange</b>	Expected reciprocity and equity	Cognitive evaluation of the input/output ratio in relation to a referent other (Walster, Elaine, Walster, Berscheid, & Austin, 1978)
	Generalised social exchange	Exchange takes place on the basis of utilitarian and symbolic value attached to things (Bagozzi, 1975; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and creates a general indebtedness (Haas & Deseran, 1981)
	Moral obligation	Reciprocation based on internalised norm or conviction (Durkheim, 1997; Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999; Etzioni, 1975)
	Gift-giving	The significance of exchange arises from objects and symbols given away. Gifts are not contingent on future reciprocation (Belk & Coon, 1993; Mauss, Cunnison, & Evans-Pritchard, 1970)
<b>Common goals and values</b>	Shared passion	Communities gather around a common interest, communing in a shared passion (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996; Kozinets, 1999)
	Values	Values as important moderators for solidarity in relationships (W. T. Anderson et al., 1999)
<b>Communal relationships</b>	Group bonds- micro level	Intimate communal ties (Rheingold, 1993)
	Sense of community – meso level	Webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993); Trusting relationship between two or more partners (Grönroos, 1999)

Source: Hemetsberger, 2002, p.12-13.

Motivationally, members use these dual social bonds to fulfil a variety of needs, such as affiliation, self-expression and self-presentation, thus, their use can have a positive effect on how people feel about themselves (Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007;

Toubia & Stephen, 2013). For instance, when adolescents receive positive feedback on their social network profiles, they enhance their self-esteem and well-being (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). Equally, Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) report that people, low in life satisfaction, enjoy positive benefits, such as increased social capital, from using social networks, while Buechel and Berger (2012) found that emotionally unstable people rely on them for support after suffering negative emotional experiences.

### **2.3.2 Brand Meaning and Brand Value**

It is now well-documented that brand meanings are not just created by marketers to be received passively by consumers; for instance McCracken (1986) and Muniz (1997) stated that consumers also play an important and active role in meaning creation – also known as “value co-creation” and Jaworski and Kohli (1993), and Firat and Dholakia (2006), by explaining how consumers create symbolic meaning and value through consumption, both concluded that attention has moved beyond a simple market orientation emphasis on consumers over products. Wikström (1996) also suggested that marketing philosophy does not focus on how companies create value *for* consumers, but rather on how they create value *with* them, signalling a change from a producer–consumer perspective to a “co-creation” perspective in which the role of company and consumer has been recast from producer-consumer to co-creators of value. At the same time, strategic brand communication has shifted from telling stories to consumers to sharing stories with them (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008; Woodside, 2010).

The concept of co-creation has emerged as one of the most important marketing paradigms, since it implies that consumers no longer occupy the end of the value chain; rather, they assume central importance in actual value creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). In support of this claim, Gabriel and Lang (2008, p. 334) argued that “consumers have proven that in spite of the best efforts to constrain, control and manipulate them, they can act in ways that are unpredictable, inconsistent and contrary”. A rich literature by researchers, such as Vargo and Lusch (2004), on the

subject, showed how interaction, dialogue, involvement, and consumption between companies and consumers, play important parts in value co-creation.

Firat et al. (1995), Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and Arvidsson (2005) all found that such a conceptual shift represents a profound change in the relationship between producer and consumer; therefore, much attention is being paid to how consumers can engage in the co-creation of value through individual experiences and interaction with brands, companies, and other consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). However, according to Sanchez-Fernandez and Iniesta-Bonillo (2007) and Holbrook (2006), “value” is one of the most controversial issues in marketing literature, since its complex and multidimensional nature can be perceived to have different meanings, depending on time, situation, or person. Also, Shankar et al. (2009) believes it has a symbolic meaning, Woodruff and Flint (2006) a value-added concept, Cova and Cova (2002) a linking value, and Vargo and Lusch (2004; 2008) value-in-use. Firat et al. (1995) believed that value can be explained through the idea of fragmentation, whereby contemporary consumers may customise value and meaning to achieve their lives or career goals; for example, one consumer may buy Nike shoes because they suit his feet whereas another might be attracted to its cultural value – hoping, perhaps, the shoes will help him look “cool”.

Lawrence and Phillips (2002) believed that value represents not only the functional and economic value of goods and services, but also the consumer’s interpretation of the objects, including products, brands, and services; in this way, value co-creation has moved beyond the consumer’s purchasing power and the functional purposes of products to focus on the symbolic meaning of consumption. Consequently, as Arnould and Price (2000) stated, it has become important for companies to understand how consumers value their set of life projects and how they enact their life narratives; also, many marketing studies have revealed how collective consumers co-create the symbolic meaning of consumption (Cova & Pace, 2006; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Muñiz & Schau, 2005).

### **2.3.3 From Assigned to Negotiated Brand Meaning**

McCracken (1986) stated that companies attempt to generate the meanings that consumers associate with their products through product design and advertising; for instance, design can invest products with formal elements, such as shape, colour, and material, often referred to as “design language”, which trigger both conscious and unconscious meanings that become associated with product artefacts (Rafaeli & Vilnai-yavetz, 2004). Consequently, firms present their products explicitly in advertisements by associating them with exotic lifestyles, such as by showing them being used by celebrities (Keller & Lehmann, 2006).

Through design and communication, however, firms can only attempt to imbue their products with meanings; the subjective states of perceivers, such as their idiosyncratic goals and their own cultural resources, affect the process considerably by the complex, and subjective, process of meaning-making (Holt, 1995). Hence, brand meaning ultimately depends on consumers’ perceptions of the brand and its products and artefacts as being “identity-relevant and enhancing”.

Negotiation of meaning is a twofold process of participation and reification: on the one hand, people interact with each other and engage in the community; on the other hand, they externalise and objectify their negotiated meaning. Through a community’s interactions over time, the community establishes what Wenger (1998, p. 83) calls a “shared repertoire”, which includes routines, rituals, tools, symbols and concepts that “combines both reificative and participative aspects. It includes the discourse by which members create meaningful statements about the world, as well as the styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identities as members”.

In an OBC there are products and sources, such as news, promotion and branded goods, and the ongoing social construction of meaning and identity in which an iPhone is fancy and a galaxy phone is functional, etc. While the former is more immediately observable, the latter is less so, however, such examples are crucial as

they define both the meaning of the objects and the outcomes of the brand community. Thus, at a social level, participants simultaneously produce concrete artefacts together with a community, or societal landscape, in which the meanings of the artefacts are negotiated. These processes underline the importance of supporting sociability within an OBC (Broderick et al., 2003).

This study locates brand meaning negotiation between brand and consumer, and between consumer and consumer, within the fluidity of changing brand meaning. In particular, it examines how OBC participation influences the process of brand meaning negotiation within the community by increasing possibilities for negotiation between brand and consumers but also between consumers. Negotiation is the process by which at least two parties try to reach an agreement on matters of mutual interest (Pruitt, 1981). In the present context, negotiation is a contested and conflict-driven arena where brand and consumers adopt different strategies when reconstructing their reflexive meanings.

Brand meaning within a social environment is not only developed and transferred but also negotiated and altered (Broderick et al., 2003). Each consumer brings an individual meaning to the brand in a given social situation. When two people communicate, they rarely talk about precisely the same subject as others do, for meaning is flavoured by each person's own cognitive world and cultural conditioning. When negotiating, cultures force people to view and value the many social interactions inherent in arriving at an agreement differently from how other cultures do (Huntington & Harrison, 2001). Within this, each person influences and is thus influenced by each other – another consumer who has a different personal meaning to the brand. The negotiation process proceeds as an interplay of perception, information processing and reaction, all of which turn on images of reality (accurate or not), on implicit assumptions regarding the brand being negotiated and on an underlying current of wisdom, beliefs and expectations.

Additionally, the marketing environment actively attempts to pass specific brand

meaning knowledge onto the consumer, which can lead to numerous interpretations of such meaning (Galli & Gorn, 2011). Opportunity therefore exists for many interpretations; however, in most cases, the brand's meaning is able to gain a unified meaning or settlement in the marketplace. What happens within the social environment to make this unification and acceptance of a dominant brand meaning possible is negotiation. Negotiation must take place to reach an agreed meaning that facilitates communication and interaction – a settlement of brand meaning.

As noted, brand meaning changes. Negotiation in consumer/brand relations is not typified by the disclosure and equality that value co-creation sometimes portray as happening between brand and consumers (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Nevertheless, modern consumers have increased their power and choices, and they have a high degree of self-determination. They are increasingly skilful negotiators in their relations with their brands and they decide for themselves what, when and under what conditions their actions should be performed (Christodoulides, 2009). Such consumers interact with others to achieve their objectives, either because they do not have sufficient resources to achieve their purpose alone or because interdependencies exist between them (Sung et al., 2010). Consumers attempt to make others undertake a particular course of action (e.g. information sharing), modify a planned course of action (e.g. to get rid of conflict) or come to an agreement on a common course of action. But as neither consumers nor marketers have direct control over other consumers, they must persuade them to act in particular ways and cannot simply instruct them or force them to behave in a certain way. Throughout such negotiation processes, consumer-consumer and consumer-brand relationships change but these changing relationships do not just involve mere negotiation. More accurately, they involve continual re-negotiation.

#### **2.3.4 Social Relationship and Tie Strength**

Granovetter (1973) stated that social relationships on the network differ in terms of the strength of users' connections to their friends, i.e. "tie strengths", which captures the degree to which a member feels close to and values the relationship with that



person. Strong ties are developed between members of OBCs who share personal connections, whereas weak ties tend to be the experiences of more distant acquaintances (Ryu & Feick, 2007). As Frenzen and Nakamoto (1993) state, although social networks make it easier to connect with both weak and strong ties, information flows within any given social network, whether online or off-line, depending less on the number of ties, or friends, than on their strength.

Consequently, strong ties have greater influence over their network of friends than weak ties (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Not surprisingly, people become more highly involved with, and more actively attend to the needs of, friends who they have developed strong ties with; hence, individuals tend to be more concerned about the image they present to strongly tied friends (Sudman et al. 1994) and, as Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons (2002) discovered, that, in OBCs, they are more sensitive to disclosing their negative aspects to them than they are to weak ties, since they are more concerned about their opinions; a finding that the authors found reflected “real life” offline social interactions, where people care more about presenting positive self-views to strongly tied friends. However, Tice et al. (1995) found that people tended to be less self-enhancing toward strongly tied friends, which was confirmed by Schlenker and Leary (1982), who reported that, although some social benefits accrue from highlighting positive self-characteristics, repeating them too often may be perceived as being arrogant. Tice et al. (1995) offer the example that people may be impressed the first time a person mentions that he went to a prestigious school, but the more often he repeats it, the more likely he will be dismissed as being conceited. Likewise, people tend to be less boastful and self-enhancing with close friends, who know more than strangers will about their positive qualities (Tice et al., 1995).

## **2.4 Social Practice Theory and OBCs**

### **2.4.1 Korean Culture: the Importance of Social Bonds**

McCort and Malhotra (1993) declared that, because culture is the foundation for how

consumers think, communicate, and process information, it is a significant variable that affects their behaviour. Therefore, because this study will examine Korean OBCs, it is important to have some understanding of Korean culture and how it impacts on the way consumers experience both brand and offline brand communities. The next section, therefore, will review the characteristics of Korean Internet culture in relation to consumption behaviour and social bonds.

Hofstede (1980, pps. 19 & 213) defined “culture” as, “the interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influence a group's response to its environment” and “individualism and collectivism” as the relationship between the individual and collectivity that prevails in a particular society. However, Markus, Mullally and Kitayama (1997) found that, even though collectivism and individualism may characterise cultural groups, not all individuals in a given context engage in the same ideas and practices, nor do they engage in them in identical ways. It is important, therefore to be aware of the fact that Korea has a high-context and collectivist culture that is deeply influenced by Confucian principles and shows high-uncertainty avoidance (Hall, 1976). Consequently, Koreans’ collectivistic mindset is characterised by close relationships with family members and, as Hofstede (1991) called it, “a strong sense of identity with a larger “we” group”, which is supported by much empirical evidence. Park et al. (2000), for instance, found that Korean online community members prefer a “collective” communication method – i.e. via a board, rather than the US members’ preference for the application of personal communication tools – i.e. via e-mail or messenger.

High-context cultures use more implicit information than do low-context cultures. Hall (1976, p. 79), who proposed that in a social interaction, events and context – i.e. information surrounding an event – combine to produce a given meaning, distinguishes between high- and low-context cultures, with Korea at the high end and most Western European countries and North America at the low end. Hall (1976) defined a high-context interaction as “one in which most of the information is in the context, while very little is coded, explicit, or transmitted as part of the message”.

Consequently, Koreans pay a great deal of attention to the context and they have an indirect communication style, both verbal and written, which is implicit and symbolic. This means that, in high-context and collectivist cultures, where people are more influenced by other in-group members than behaving to achieve their own goals, keeping personal internal attributes, where group harmony is emphasised, recognising and understanding the emotions and thoughts of others, and behaving “properly”, is crucial (Green, Deschamps, & Paez, 2005), hence a symbolic, interactionist approach is considered to be especially important. Triandis et al. (1988) suggest that people from such collectivist cultures are concerned about the results of their actions as members of an in-group, thereby emphasising the integrity of the in-group as opposed to their independence from it. Hence, they are more likely to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of their family, neighbourhood, or the nation as a whole. Triandis et al also found that Koreans also value group harmony and are likely to exhibit conformity and suppress personal preferences; which means that “saving face” becomes important, because they do not want to embarrass themselves, their family or their groups.

Likewise, Koreans value their social networks, such as families and groups, as the main sources of information, thereby placing more belief in collective decision-making than the media. According to Money, Gilly, and Graham (1998), for instance, companies operating in high-context, high-collectivity and high-uncertainty avoidance cultures, use more word of mouth (WOM) referral sources than those in low-context, high-individuality and low-uncertainty avoidance cultures. Therefore, consumers in collectivist cultures, such as Korea, are likely to find other’s reviews more useful and feel closer to each other than those who live in individualistic cultures such as the US or the UK. These tendencies lead collectivists to rely on other OBC participants’ opinions, available in cyberspace, for their purchase decisions and product usage, while individualists live by a set of meanings and practices that underline as bounded, unique, and independent for theirs. Hence, individualist and collectivist institutions are best represented as systems of meaning and practice, within which social bonds and the relatedness of individuals to their in-

groups and, more generally, to the world are expected to be very different (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Therefore, as Ito (1993) put it, a collectivist is expected to stress and reproduce the self in relation to others, or to the world, whereas an individualist expresses a bounded, subjective self – in this sense, westerners focus more on informational flows, whereas easterners emphasise emotional flows.

In a collectivist context, the meaning of an event and its social, or objective, consequences, is measured both by its impact on an individual's personal relationships and on its relevance to other people who are involved in it. Therefore, in a Korean high-context culture, it will be characterised by indirect and ambiguous communication, whereas, in low-context Western countries, where things are generally explicitly stated, there is only a small amount of shared, implicit information available regarding the context of an event. Whereas, people in high-context, Eastern cultures, are more accustomed to receiving, interpreting and sending implicit messages (Hall, 1976). Hence, Koreans emphasise the relational and personal rather than focusing on the actual information flow.

In a high context culture, such as Korea, many things are left unsaid and it is necessary to have an in-depth understanding of the culture in order to interpret them. Words and word choice, therefore, become very important, since a few words communicated to an in-group can carry, very effectively, a complex message; although such a message is much less effective to recipients from outside that group (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, & Lucca, 1988). Conversely, in a lower context, Western culture, the communication needs to be expressed much more explicitly; thus the value of a particular word is less important. As has already been explained, people living in a high context culture place a high value on interpersonal relationships and group members are closer to each other and are more sensitive to non-verbal cues, such as nuances, facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, and posture. Whereas, people from a higher context culture prefer to live or work in small, close-knit groups to which they will rely for support, since it may be difficult

to get it from outside, which is why professional and personal lives often intertwine (Triandis et al., 1988).

High-context collectivists tend to be more context sensitive and give greater consideration to social practices and their meaning, which are important considerations when consumers make decisions and participate in OBCs; hence, brand meaning creation and loyalty inform the sort of information-giving that makes purchasing more likely, such as pictures of products, price high-lighting and the presentation of new designs, while low identity-oriented activities, such as learning new skills and collecting particular items, are not essential for achieving brand-related identity; instead they are used to establish the image of an OBC, or to provide a context for the OBC experience, such as through web interfacing and by creating a welcoming atmosphere; therefore, they only indirectly influence brand meaning.

Because collectivists stress the relatedness between people, a major concern for those living in collectivist cultures is that they are perceived as competing for relationships with others. Changes in social worth as well as in the respect of family and in-group are more influential for collectivists than for individualists (Kelly, 1993). Social worth in collectivist cultures, is perceived to be interconnected, hence, a family member's misbehaviour is the family's shame. For this reason, "belonging to a community" means more for collectivists than for individualists. Members of collectivist cultures tend to be interdependent and to have self-concepts defined in terms of relationships and social obligations, whereas members of individualist cultures tend to strive for independence and have self-concepts defined in terms of their own aspirations and achievements (Triandis et al., 1988). Collectivists also tend to maintain blurry boundaries between professional work and personal intimacy, and Hofstede (2001) states that members of OBCs are considered to be "selfish" or "heartless" if they only concern themselves with functional aspects of the community and fail to take care of fellow members. In this atmosphere of personal intimacy, the accepted practice is for people to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of others and to treat in-group members better than outsiders, which is known as

particularism; however, in individualistic cultures, such treatment is considered to be unethical, which is known as universalism.

Hall (1976) states that, in Korean culture, it is natural for more information to be either internalised or associated with the physical context of an event (Hall, 1976). In this context, where information is confined to core members, in order not to go against in-group members, high-context culture Koreans tactfully avoid talking about topics or using phrases that may cause offence, because they are practiced at understanding other's points of view; they are also good at understanding what a person really means (Wu & Keysar, 2007). This understanding can be said to be "empathic" – i.e. "walking in another person's shoes" – which leads to harmonious relations that, over time, enable members of the culture to distinguish between the mind of the self and that of another (Realo & Luik, 2002).

Such high-context cultural characteristics affect OBC dynamics; for instance, as mentioned earlier, Koreans are more concerned about social reputation – or losing "face" (Kim & Nam, 1998). Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) defined this as "the claimed sense of favourable social self-worth and the estimated other-worth in an interpersonal situation" (p. 188), which is associated with "identity, respect, disrespect, dignity, honour, shame, guilt, status, and competence issues" (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel., 2002, p. 145). Hence, many collectivist cultures will not deliver bad news, or give criticism, for fear of losing face. For instance, if an OBC member posts wrong information, which is pointed out by another member, in order for the first member to save face, collectivists often show high conformity to their peers in order to belong to the group (Park & Jun, 2003). Generally, Koreans value "face", which, in symbolic interactionist language, is "me" – i.e. me myself being seen by other people as an object. The result is that members are more likely to put more effort into their answers to future questions in order to prevent suffering a loss of face (Park & Jun, 2003).

People in a collectivist culture possess a natural empathy, since they can imagine

how they look to others much better than people in low-context, individualistic countries can (Church & Lonner, 1998; Triandis, 1994) – hence, empathy is one of the defining attributes of collectivists, while individualists are more self-focused. Collectivists tend to be more socially engaged and “other-focused”. Markus and Kitayama (1991) stated that collectivists put importance on maintaining harmonious interdependence and such constructions of the self and others are tied-in to the implicit, normative identities that various cultures hold for what people should be doing with their lives and influence the very nature of individual experience (Geertz, 1975; Triandis, 1989). That is why, in Korea, “Me” – i.e. self as object – appears to be stronger than “I” – self as subject – and consumers reflect other people’s opinions about a product.

Likewise, members of collectivist cultures tend to be interdependent and to have self-concepts defined in terms of relationships and social obligations, as opposed to individualists, who strive for independence and achievement (Wu & Keysar, 2007). Also, social bonds are considered to be more important in a collectivist culture.

#### **2.4.2 Why Look at Social Practices?**

Consumers build brand meaning by learning about the brand, interacting with other consumers and creating their own social identity from the process (Duguid, 2005); they also acquire knowledge from learning, but they do not simply learn “about”; they also learn, as the psychologist, Bruner (1996), put it, to “be”. This implies that learning about the brand and OBC does not just involve acquiring facts, it also involves acquiring the ability to act in the OBC in a socially acceptable way, which means that members have to be recognised as being a “brand lover”, hence they become managers or connoisseurs, not only by modelling themselves, but also by gaining the acceptance and recognition of others. Learning, in all, involves acquiring identities that reflect both how a learner member sees the brand, or the OBC, and how the other members see the learner. Learning is a complex social process, one that cannot simply be captured by the notion that “all learning takes place inside individual human heads”, as Simon (1991, p. 125) put it; rather, it is as Teece et al.

(1994, p. 15) suggested, “[an] intrinsically social and collective phenomena”.

Such a claim does not deny the integrity of the individual; however, what the individual learns always, and inevitably, reflects the social context in which they learn it and in which they put it into practice, which includes the community as a whole and other members. To different degrees, these factors shape how individuals come to interpret the world and learn from it. It also reflects the way in which OBC context shapes the outlook of those individuals, during which time, social practices arise through, and at the point of, an individual’s engagement with it (Schau et al., 2009).

Social practice, therefore, seems critical to understanding the negotiation of brand meaning at an OBC since consumers are in practice with the ongoing, historically constituted everyday world as people both help to make it what it is by their participation in it, while, at the same time, they are being shaped by the world of which they are a part (Bourdieu, 1990). There are both spatial and temporal implications of this perspective, therefore by studying people it appears clear that they are always material and embodied. Minds do not act separately from bodies, nor does knowledge act separately from engagement in practice, which means that two people, or two minds, are never the same, since they cannot occupy the same place with the same point of view.

Looking at brand meaning negotiation through the lens of practice shifts attention from structural perspectives to perspectives of participation; hence, turning things around this way helps to reveal that the brand meaning developed through participation will be social, dynamic, and changing, just as practice and the community changes. They will also be cumulative, because, over time, the community develops its own practice history, in that participants will be both related and always in conflict, since conflict creates tension through different applications of power.



The study argues that taking part in contentious social practice shapes social bonds and builds brand meaning in complex ways. Enduring struggles and brand meanings are mediated through contentious social practice.

### **2.4.3 Social Practice Theory**

Social practice theory emphasises the historical production of people in practice, and pays particular attention to differences among participants and to the ongoing struggles that develop around those differences and across activities. In contrast to the under-socialised methodological individualism of the behaviourist models, social practice theorists, from Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977, 1990) to the more recent work of Reckwitz (2002), Schatzki (2001) and Warde (2005), have all sought a middle level between agency and structure. This has been found in the everyday and routine performance of social practices, such as cooking, driving, washing, shopping or playing football. The practice itself, rather than the individuals who perform them or the social structures that surround them, thus becomes the core unit of analysis. As Giddens (1984, p. 2) observed, “The basic domain of study of the social sciences [...] is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time”.

According to this view, consumption behaviour is not seen as the result of an individual’s attitudes, values and beliefs that are constrained by various contextual ‘barriers’, but as they are embedded within and occurring as part of social practices (Warde, 2005). In turn, Shove, (2003, p. 117) stated the performance of various social practices is seen as part of ‘the routine accomplishment of what people take to be “normal” ways of life’. Social practice theory, therefore, diverts attention away from moments of individual decision making and towards the ‘doing’ of various social practices. Further, as Reckwitz (2002) said, individuals themselves are removed from centre-stage and instead become the ‘carriers’ of social practices, carrying out the various activities and tasks that the practice requires. As individuals pass through life, they come into contact with, get recruited to, have ‘careers’ within, and occasionally defect from a wide variety of different practices.

Importantly, though, practice theory emphasises that it is through these engagements with practices that individuals come to understand the world around them and to develop a more or less coherent sense of self (cf., Warde, 2005). This does not, however, render passive individuals beholden to the dictates of practice, but instead considers them to be skilled agents who actively negotiate and perform a wide range of practices in the normal course of everyday life. Individuals deploy strategy, as a product of the habitus that is not based on conscious calculation but rather results from unconscious dispositions towards practice (Bourdieu, 1977). It depends on the position the agent occupies in the field. In this way, social practice considers a consumer's decision making as a shadow or reflection of what the habitus is doing (Bourdieu, 1990). A decision taken is an option that is part of the repertoire of the habitus, not an autonomous or chosen process.

Bringing about pro-environmental patterns of consumption, therefore, does not depend upon educating or persuading individuals to make different decisions, but on transforming practices to make them more sustainable. As Warde (2005) noted, "the principal implication of a theory of practice is that the sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves". Social practice theory, in this sense, raises a series of radically different questions about how to create more sustainable patterns of consumption. The focus is no longer on individuals' attitudes, behaviours and choices, but instead on how practices form; how they are reproduced, maintained, stabilised, challenged and ultimately killed-off; on how practices recruit practitioners to maintain and strengthen them through continued performance, and on how such practitioners may be encouraged to defect to more sustainable practices.

Therefore, the author argues that an OBC style is shaped by a range of pre-existing structures, including external contexts, temporal structures, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participant characteristics. In ongoing communicative interaction, participants strategically appropriate and exploit the resources and rules those structures offer; therefore, all interactions, including those that are identity-

oriented, convey social meaning, thereby creating a social context (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The result is a dynamic set of systematic social meanings that enables participants to imagine themselves as a community. Most significant is the emergence of group-specific forms of expression, identities, relationships, and normative conventions (Baym, 1999). Bourdieu, whose interest in how individuals maintained or advanced their positions within specific fields, comes close to this research project in his later stage, when he mentions the emerging and more dynamic conception of field-specific capital:

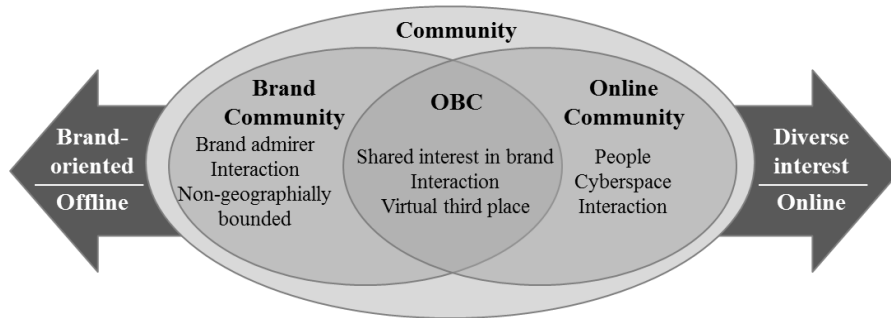
“A capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field [...] We can [...] compare a field to a game [and] picture each player having in front of her a pile of tokens of different colours, each one corresponding to a given species of capital [...] Players can play to increase or conserve their capital. [...] A species of capital is what is efficacious in a given field, both as a weapon and as a stake of struggle, which allows its possessors to wield a power, an influence, and thus to exist [...] instead of being considered a negligible quantity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 98–101).

Here there emerges a conception of capital that could explain why some members are able to exert influence on other members and acquire social status in an OBC. Capital can be transformed, invested and accumulated, much in the same way as money can. An agency with social capital can be compared to individuals who start with some capacity for cultural capital and proceed to accumulate social capital from its repeated exercise and display.

## **2.5 Summary and Discussion**

This chapter explained the concept of community, online community and brand community to redefine the notion of OBCs. A number of studies have used the OBC concept without differentiating it from online community or brand community, but the author stipulates three important elements that constitute an OBC that are clearly different from an online community and a brand community. Firstly, whereas the current brand community concept emphasises its non-geographically boundedness,

an OBC highlights the need of a cohesive and distinct virtual third place (VTP). Secondly, an OBC is not populated with brand admirers, but people with shared interests in a brand together with interests in sharing. Thirdly, an OBC contains both online and offline, intertwined, grassroots interaction.



**Figure 2 Defining Online Brand Community**

Source: developed by author

An OBC’s ability to sustain a sense of community must surely depend on the dynamic flexibility with which it negotiates challenges. It is also quite possible that some OBCs will never generate a stable set of social meanings, nor offer a sense of community if inappropriate interactions persist. By building bonds with others, members become attached to an OBC and assign meaning to the “imagined community”. Only after that stage can an OBC website become a VTP, where consumers habitually visit, contribute and relax, whilst accumulating field-specific capital. Thus, OBCs come into the lives of consumers, and consumers, in turn, engage with OBC practices to negotiate brand meaning, while brand meaning, in turn, is appropriated by consumers adopting, learning and struggling within a field of consumption.

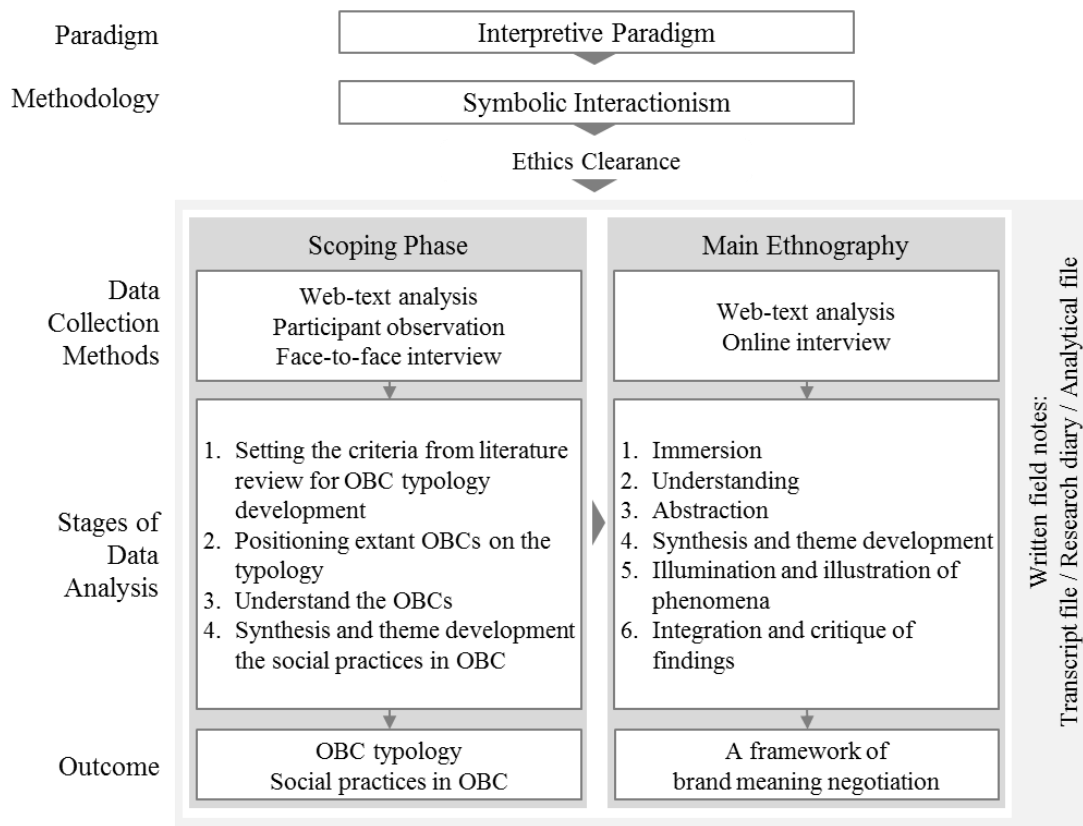
## Chapter 3 Research Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, which offers detailed insights into the perspectives of the actors being studied by locating the observer in their world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this regard, this chapter is organised as follows:

- discusses the philosophical background of the study – symbolic interactionism infused with a social practice theory (in a Bourdieusian sense);
- provides a background of the Korean context; and
- expounds the research strategy, including the research methods.

First, the chapter explicates the philosophical background of the study – symbolic interactionism and social practice theory – and shows how these theories will be used to accomplish the research objectives. Secondly, it gives and explores the research context. Finally, it then illustrates the research design and strategy, including the research methods. Research methods are elucidated in detail in two separate phases: a scoping phase and the main study. The scoping phase is exploratory in nature and relates to the first research aim – to understand the context (community landscape) and the social practices of OBCs. The main study attempts to learn in more depth about OBCs from the consumers' perspectives and relates to the second research aim – to understand how getting involved in an OBC can develop brand meaning. The main study is the major part of this research as it builds up a framework of a brand meaning negotiation process. Each study describes its selected OBCs, the nature of its informants, how informants were engaged in the study, its adopted methodology and its analysis. Figure 3 shows the structure of the research flow.



**Figure 3 Research Flow**

Source: developed by the author

### 3.2 Philosophical Background

The process through which consumers negotiate brand meaning in an OBC context is dynamic and involves uncertainties. Participants influence each other in an OBC and brand meaning is constantly negotiated by conjecturing how others think about it. Thus, participants are constantly reshaping the OBC and redefining the brand. This study adopts symbolic interactionism as a paradigmatic justification for this study, which asserts that individuals and material realities are constructed through a dynamic, communicative process. The symbolic interactionism used within this study's interpretive paradigm is infused with social practice theory, especially in a Bourdieuan sense (Bourdieu, 1990), to systemically analyse the process by interpreting an OBC as a field where symbolic power and field-specific capitals exist.

The symbolic interactionist approach also corresponds with certain current methodological practices that some within the social sciences say are moving from “certainty to uncertainty” – that is, from positivism towards interpretivism (Langer & Beckman, 2005). This chapter shows that symbolic interactionism is particularly well suited for the explication of the actor's construction of brand meaning and the role of social bonds within an OBC context.

### **3.2.1 Symbolic Interactionism**

#### ***3.2.1.1 What is Symbolic Interactionism?***

Symbolic interactionism is a social constructionist approach to understanding human group life and conduct. It stems largely from James, Dewey, Pierce and Mead – the early American pragmatists who believed that human beings should be understood in a practical, interactive relationship with their environment (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975). Blumer's (1969) formulation of symbolic interactionism extended Mead's work and has evolved over the years to form a rich body of literature and active research stream, and it is now an influential school of thought in social science research (Denzin, 2010).

Meaning, language and thought occupy central roles in symbolic interactionism and these core principles lead individuals to create a person's self and be socialised into a larger community (Griffin, 1997). Symbolic interactionism highlights symbolic communication as a device for constructing reality and it focuses on the process of interaction in individuals' formation of meaning (Blumer, 1969). The term “symbolic” emphasises how humans live in a world of objects that do not have intrinsic meanings. Instead, meaning is attributed to objects through two distinct steps (Blumer, 1969). The first is an internalised social process, or thought: the actor interacts with himself by indicating to himself the thing towards which he is acting. The actor then transforms meanings and change the direction of his action in their relevant situation. Here, then, interpretation is more important than simply applying previously integrated meanings. Indeed, interpretation is an active process of formation, reconsideration and revision that is shaped largely by the actual and

anticipated responses of others (Rock, 2001). This is in line with Giddens' theory of construction and his concept of the duality of structure whereby "the structured properties of social systems are simultaneously the medium and outcome of social acts" (Giddens, 1981). Rather than focusing on the social structure, though, Blumer emphasises the interpretive process and the context of the person's formation and use of meaning. According to Blumer, society is subject to conscious change by human effort. Manis and Meltzer (1978) summarised the basic propositions of symbolic interactionism:

- 1) Distinctively human behaviour and interaction are carried on through the medium of symbols and their meanings (the meaning component in human conduct).
- 2) The individual becomes humanised through interaction with other persons (the social sources of humanness).
- 3) Human society is most usefully conceived as consisting of people in interaction (society as process).
- 4) Human beings are active in shaping their own behaviour (the voluntaristic component in human conduct).
- 5) Consciousness, or thinking, involves interaction with oneself (a dialectical conception of mind).
- 6) Human beings construct their behaviour in the course of its execution (the constructive, emergent nature of human conduct).
- 7) An understanding of human conduct requires study of the actors' covert behaviour (the necessity of sympathetic introspection).

The seventh proposition is associated with research method. In terms of its methodological features, symbolic interactionism tends to prefer a naturalistic, descriptive and exploratory methodology and an ethnographic approach that requires researchers to enter the cultures of those behaviours they wish to understand (Prus, 1996). In terms of the research process for this work, rather than studying fixed, static, structural properties that require experimental design or a survey in a man-



made situation, it uses symbolic interactionism to study a real social context.

### ***3.2.1.2 Symbolic Interactionism and Brand Meaning: Implication for OBC Research***

While other theoretical perspectives such as phenomenology may also be appropriate for this research, this study focuses on symbolic interactionism because of the importance it gives to the symbolic meaning of a brand and a branded product in an OBC context. Although symbolic interactionism and phenomenology both involve understanding human experience, the two theories have significantly different foundational questions. Phenomenologists attempt to explain the meaning of human experience (Husserl, 1931) and describe the human world (Koch, 1999). They differentiate appearance and essence, and they focus on finding the root causes of a phenomenon by understanding people's subjective experiences and illustrating "experienced space, time, body, and human relation as we live them" (Van Manen, 1990). Symbolic interactionism, however, attempts to evade extreme subjectivity and investigates the specific meanings of symbols that people use during interactions, which enables a deeper analysis of the complicated brand meaning negotiation process (Davis, 1982).

Symbolic interactionism is useful for this research because a brand's meaning changes from members' interactions around culturally meaningful and identity-enhancing products and brands (i.e. symbols). Eventually, members come to develop specific understandings of and emotional engagement with the object of their consumption (e.g. brand, product feature, logo), and they may resist attempts to alter meanings associated with given signs (Ravasi & Rindova, 2008). Furthermore, symbolic interactionists emphasise the importance of the context in which the process takes place (Blumer, 1969). An OBC is a place generated by consumers who have their meanings imbued in a brand and it is where they meet and perhaps influence others; at the same time, an OBC has its own ethos, internal social structure and unique form of expression that reciprocally influences each consumer's behaviour. When members first join the community, they learn from extant postings

and subsequently by practice how to behave properly in this special social context, where the brand is a mutual interest of the members. The so-called “netiquette”, online etiquette, is therefore learned from others and through their own communication. Newcomers assimilate the imbued meanings and adopt the social practices, or in Bourdieu’s words “the rule of the game” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 89). This is clearer in a Korean context where meeting other people’s expectations and respecting group norms is more important than it is in Western countries (Cha, 1994). During this dynamic and intricate process, both brand and OBC are assigned with meanings. An OBC in particular gains its symbolic meaning from this process, which nevertheless varies according to its members’ unique orientations to it. Cohen’s (1985) focus on a community as creating symbolic meaning reflects this interactionist perspective: “people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity” (Cohen, 1985, p. 118).

Although interaction does not necessarily require a high level of emotional involvement or change, it does require one to take account of the other. Likewise, interaction can be completed without either participant being deeply affected, sometimes interaction is done even without recognising (Bourdieu, 1990). Nevertheless, by focusing on interactions, symbolic interactionists can inspect the process of meaning creation. Despite having such a strength, symbolic interactionism also has a limitation in that it focuses on micro-level interactions between individuals so it neglects the macro level of social interpretation (e.g. norms, culture). It thus receives criticism for overlooking the influence of social forces on individual interactions (Meltzer et al., 1975). To overcome this limitation and structure the research where a symbolic interactionist approach can be better deployed, this study infuses Bourdieu’s notion of social practice into symbolic interactionism.

### **3.2.2 Practice Theory**

This study infuses practice theory (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984) into symbolic interactionism to develop a greater understanding of social influences and power

relations within the OBC. Castellani and Hafferty (2009, p. 38) said that “social practice is any pattern of social organisation that emerges out of, and allows for, the intersection of symbolic interaction and social agency”. Social practice involves interaction, which includes agents’ actions and communication strategies. Practice theorists view consumption as a set of social practices influenced by social norms, lifestyle choices, institutions and the structures of society. As with the symbolic interactionists, practice theorists insist that meanings have a social origin and they try to overcome the dichotomy between structure (societal level and the relationships within) and agency (acting individuals) by stressing that practices and associated behaviours are fundamentally shared, social entities. Practice theory suggests that individuals, and the attitudes and values they express, are parts of the practices they perform (Reckwitz, 2002). As Giddens (1984, p. 189) argued, “The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time”.

The most well-known theorists in practice theory are Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1984), Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1990) and Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1980). Despite the numerous differences amongst these scholars, they are united by a common concern and strategy; they consider the entire sociological landscape to be made of social practice, ranging from basic rituals such as writing a comment to more complex practices such as managing a company. Foucault, Giddens and Bourdieu have their own definitions of social practice, but this study follows Bourdieu’s notion of social practice, which will be expanded below, relates it to symbolic interactionism and applies his key concepts in an OBC context. Bourdieu’s (1990) structuralism is a structuralism constructivist, which emphasises the interplay between the agent and the structure. Bourdieu (1990) contended that the social world is made of structures (structuralism), objective structures of culture and language that condition the actions of the agents, which are built by agents (constructivist). The key concepts of Bourdieu’s social practice theory in relation to this research are habitus, field and capitals. The actions of people constitute and are constituted by

their habitus; at the same time, people possess capital and operate within fields.

Habitus is a core element of Bourdieu's theory, which he developed to capture "the permanent internalisation of the social order in the human body" (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2001, p. 130). Habitus is created through a social process and is not fixed – it can be changed when unexpected situations occur or sufficient time passes (Bourdieu, 1977). This works like a symbolic matrix of practical activities, which consists of "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). Bourdieu (1977) explained that a society is the product of people's own practices in daily life: individuals make choices and judgements and attribute meaning to their lived world. Though habitus is a core concept of Bourdieu's social practice theory, this approach alone limits itself because the social world cannot be explained by the sum of individual strategies. In this regard, Bourdieu recognised "the agent's practice, his or her capacity for invention and improvisation" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 13) and suggested the structure metaphor, field.

Fields are specialist domains of practice (e.g. art, photography, sociology) that have their own "logic" and are composed of various capitals: economic capital (revenues and assets), cultural capital (knowledge, skills and education), symbolic capital (prestige, renown) or social capital (connections, resources based on group membership, relationships and networks of support). The relative importance of the form of capital derives from the field because capital is used to make the position of the agent clear in its field. Agents use the capital to exercise more power and influence in a certain field. That is to say, capital intermediates the interaction between habitus and field, and eventually, practices are produced during the process. The distribution of the resources, which are composed of various kinds of capitals, forms the social world in the structuralist level and helps researchers to describe the social world in its objectivity. Bourdieu (1977) overcomes the weakness of a purely structuralist view by assuming agents in a field to be active players in a game. Skilled players with sufficient know-how and belief in the game are willing to invest

time and effort to play it. Successful play is only possible when there is a good fit between habitus and the field.

To summarise, Bourdieu (1977) insisted that understanding the workings of the social world requires a bifocal analysis of the objective life (structure) and the subjective life (individuals). Bourdieu (1977) admitted that there are independent structures in the social world that delimit the behaviour of the social actor. Though Bourdieu (1977) noted that individuals are able to build and adapt social phenomena through their thinking and their actions, he believed in the conditioning strength of social facts or collective practices, which complements the symbolic interactionist approach.

### **3.2.3 Pierre Bourdieu's Practice Theory and Social Interactionism**

Even though some academics criticise Bourdieu's theory by pointing out that the individual self is not inscribed, which is the focus of symbolic interactionism, Bourdieu's structuralist constructivism and symbolic interactionism share common premises in terms of epistemology (antiessentialism), theory of meaning (anticognitivism) and social ontology (social construction of reality) (Halas, 2004). Bourdieu's structuralist constructivism and symbolic interactionism also have a number of complementary concepts: control of meaning and intersubjectivity; symbolic struggle and manipulation of meanings; politics of symbolic practices and strategic interaction; historical dimension of meanings and situated (contextual) meanings (Halas, 2004). Likewise, Bourdieu's theorising is linked to symbolic interactionism at many conceptual junctures, and these two, i.e. Bourdieu's practice theory and symbolic interactionism, do not contradict each other. By infusing Bourdieu's practice theory into symbolic interactionism – particularly through the work of Blumer (1969) to emphasise the role agency plays in social practices without losing important concepts such as relationship – this work sees an OBC as a structured entity and considers its institutional rituals.

In this way, social practice is both the cause and the consequence of symbolic

interaction and social agency, which cannot exist without each other. Symbolic interaction provides social practice various types of relationships, such as conflict, negotiation and domination. In turn, social practice makes possible the intersection of symbolic interaction and social agency (Castellani, 1999) and gives symbolic interaction and social agency an organising framework (Castellani & Hafferty, 2009). Inspired by Castellani and Hafferty's (2009) work, this study focuses on the following components of social practice: (1) Interaction (symbolic exchange); (2) communication (information exchange); and (3) social knowing.

(1) Interaction refers to the various types of relationships that can exist through social practice (e.g. relations of power) as well as the various forms and expressions these relationships can take (e.g. conflict, negotiation, domination and contract) (Castellani, 1999). Castellani (1999) borrowed the term "dynamics" from physics to explain the entire interactions involved in a social practice - a web of interactions of which a social system is comprised, and the course of actions a social system takes. Not only individuals but also small groups to large institutions, all types of social agents can interact with each other.

(2) Communication refers to the sharing and exchange of information. The research separates symbolic interaction from communication to differentiate symbolic and instrumental discourse. A social practice involves communication because the former cannot exist without the sharing and exchange of information. Language is an important instrument of communication, which includes verbal and non-verbal language. In an online context, formal texts, emoticons and often music or photos all facilitate communication.

(3) Social knowing highlights the active, dynamic and relational character of a social mind. Social practices work for humans for their needs or concerns, and it would be pointless if social practices fail to do what they are supposed to do (Castellani & Hafferty, 2009). From a pragmatist perspective, social knowing makes sure that social practices "work". If a social practice is useful for an agent to accomplish a

goal, it continues to exist. Utility of a social practice matters and the social practice will continue to exist unless “others” with power eliminate it. This whole process – new social practices being created, agents learning and adapting social practices, social practices being developed, improvised, combined and even discarded – is done by this social knowing. At the same time, social practices enable social knowing to emerge, act, develop and interact.

Based on this philosophical background, this study explores an OBC as a field where agents (OBC members) interact with each other using branded products that are infused with symbolic meaning. Members communicate and negotiate the meaning of a brand and an OBC through social minds, social practices that emerge and develop, and interactions with each other. Social agents in this field make a different “social use” of the various physical objects, which are turned into “social objects” that are full of connotations and meanings. All the social characteristics of the consumers are linked with perception models of the products and brands from other people. The agent influences others with their way of acting and thinking; eventually, this will be permeated by the particular lifestyle that will influence the characteristics and behaviour of people in an OBC, and vice versa. During the process, different fields are composed by the localised “social objects” that are hierarchically arranged, internally homogeneous and destined to a unique class of agents different from the others. It is structured according to the presence of different types of amounts of capital. There are people with only a certain type of capital, many with more of one capital than another, and others without any capital in an OBC context. Throughout the process, different types of capital can be derived from other capitals at the cost of effort of transformation, which is needed to produce symbolic power effective in the OBC field (Bourdieu, 1986). Members create and retain the symbolic power that gives them superiority over other members of the OBC. For example, in the process of reciprocal gift exchange in an OBC, where there is asymmetry in wealth between different participants, the giver can impose a subtle relation of hierarchy and debt upon the receiver. This symbolic power perpetuates a social structure that dominant social agents favour, and it provides a sense of legitimacy to the social order.

### **3.3 Research Design and Strategy**

Understanding human conduct often involves studying people's covert behaviour, which shows the necessity of sympathetic introspection. Blumer (1969) emphasised the process of interaction in an individual's formation of meanings and the central role of these meanings in explaining and accounting for human behaviour. This derives a natural and useful research methodology that involves personal immersion in the world the researcher wishes to study so that they can make the most direct observation of that world. In this vein, this study uses qualitative methods to examine the process of human meaning construction, which attempts "to understand the mechanisms of social processes, and to comprehend and explain why both actors and processes are as they are" (Vidich & Lyman, 1994, p. 23).

#### **3.3.1 Research Context: OBCs in Korea**

To examine how social relationships are linked to consumers' brand meaning in an OBC, the context in which an OBC takes place should be understood. Economic conditions, population numbers and density, Internet penetration rate and other factors are relevant variables that differ from country to country. Contextual constraints and cultural differences influence how consumers consume brands and utilise OBCs in their daily lives. Therefore, this section sets a contextual background for this particular study. Although the characteristics of a collectivistic culture in relation to social bonds and an OBC are explicated in the literature review, the specific context for this work – Korean OBC culture – is briefly reviewed here.

Korea's online community culture first emerged during the mid-1980s. With the beginning of personal communications service, people began to make communities to share professional knowledge about things such as programming, software and hobbies. However, it was difficult for ordinary people to access the community as only a few people had computers and internet connections at that time. The community culture was popularised only after the Internet became common to Koreans in the late 1990s because of the portal websites. In 2000, the number of



personal computer users in Korea exceeded ten million (cf. the Korean population in 2000 was 47 million), which accelerated the spread of online community culture.

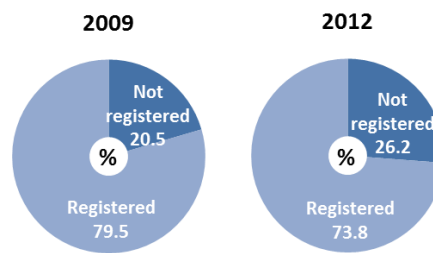
As Figure 4 shows, most Koreans belong to at least one online community. Korea's high online community participation rate (73.8%) (*Internet community report*, 2012) comes from its cultural background and Internet technologies. Korea's Internet is one of the fastest in the world and according to figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), at the end of 2011 Korea became the world's first country to see high-speed Internet technologies reach 100% domestic penetration ("OECD broadband portal," 2011). Numerous technologies contributed to this rate, including the new generation mobile networks, broadband Internet services and Wi-Fi. This is nearly twice as high as the 54.3% average for the OECD. Mobile phone use is a key contributor to this figure as more than half of Korean people use smartphones. LTE (Long Term Evolution, a 4G mobile communications standard) is also booming, providing a quality platform for mobile Internet services in Korea. With the help of these technologies and Internet penetration, Korean netizens can easily go online whenever and wherever they want. Korean people use online communities as a space where they can meet and communicate with other people and more than 40% of them participate in these to socialise (*Internet community report*, 2012). Many Koreans have also participated in offline gatherings as a result of an online community participation: 45.1% (2010), 44.7% (2011) and 31.3% (2012) (*Internet community report*, 2012). Indeed, community members often have close relationships with each other and many of them confess that they feel insecure when they are not connected.

### Major Internet Community Size

\*2012

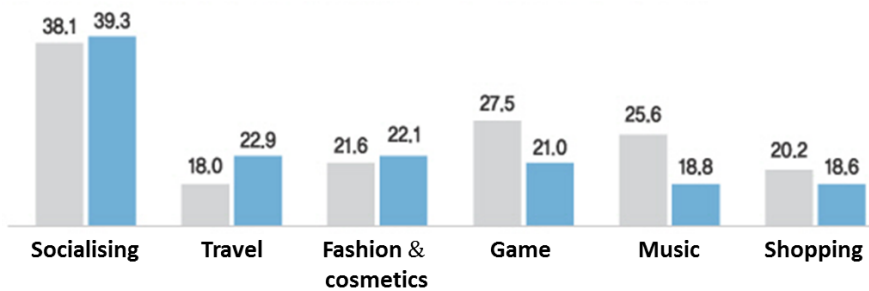
- Naver café: 8,800,000
- Daum café: 10,000,000
- Cyworld club: 3,100,000
- Dcinside gallery: 11,000,000

### Internet café · community registration



### Internet café · community registration field unit:%

■ 2009 ■ 2012





**Figure 4 Internet Communities in Korea**

Source: Trend monitor, Internet community status report, 2012

In this environment, Korean Internet culture has rapidly developed because more users became familiar with utilising Internet and therefore gained experience with it. Nowadays, these netizens are very familiar with online etiquette and they make use of multiple platforms such as blog, online community, SNS and media website without hesitation. In this way, networks have evolved from relatively stable and static systems to dynamic, negotiating and culturally embedded ones.

There are two major portals in Korea, Daum and Naver (Table 8). Most successful OBCs are based on Korean portal websites such as Naver and Daum platforms with few notable exceptions. Naver is the most popular search portal in South Korea, which held a market share of over 70% in 2011 (*NHN annual report, 2011*), and this is followed by Daum and Nate.

**Table 8 Naver Community and Daum Café**

Name	Naver	Daum
Logo		
URL	www.naver.com	www.daum.net
Launched	June 1999	February 1995
No. of Communities	9.81 million (in 2014, November)	10.2 million (in 2014, November)

Naver was launched in June 1999 and it debuted as the first Web portal in South Korea that used its own proprietary search engine. Their major services are "Knowledge Search (Naver Jisik iN)", launched in 2002, Internet services including a news service, an e-mail service, an academic thesis search service, Cafés, blogs, and a children's portal. Naver's success comes from understanding the special cultural context of Korea. Koreans do not just want information when they log on: they want a sense of community and human interaction. In this context, Naver had huge success from a service provided by Naver's "Ji-sik iN", a real-time question-and-answer platform, which prevails over Korean Wikipedia (Kim, 2010). Many respondents are eager to build and maintain an online reputation so they do careful research to provide useful answers. The success of "Ji-sik iN" largely contributed to the success of Naver's online communities because they share the same platform (Kim, 2010). Furthermore, the platform attracts people who want to build a new community because of the following benefits. First, creating a new community is quick and easy. One does not have to make any payment or spend a lot of time and effort to make an online community, though successful management of it is another issue. Secondly, it is easier to have members flowing into an OBC when a community is based on Naver as most Korean people use Naver to the extent that Western people use Google. Information from the communities or blogs on the Naver platform is presented on the top, whereas external information from independent domain is hard to find. Members readily register for the community because one needs to be a member to access the useful information. This attracts companies to make a new OBC on this platform, besides the additional promotions they may do such as those on Facebook and Twitter. Also, when a community grows big and active, a community can get financial support from the platform. For these

reasons, a huge number of communities are made every year, though it is evident that most of them fade away as fast as they appear.

The second biggest search portal in Korea is Daum. Founded in 1995, Daum is one of the pioneers of the nurturing of online communities. Its popularity started when it merged with the then most popular e-mail service daum.net or hanmail.net. After the merger, Daum started the forum service Daum Café in 1999, which gave it a firm status in the market (“Daum history,” 2014). The term café is now the synonym for "Internet forum" in Korean. Eventually, a number of “clubs” (the term used in the personal communications service age) on personal communications service moved to this new Internet space because of its easy access and user interface. People began to make cafés to share hobbies and socialise with other people such as the “StarCraft user’s café” or the one for “poem lovers”. After the service got a huge amount of new members and new cafés, people became used to this new system and called it “community” because of its easy user interface and welcoming culture in terms of community establishment, management and participation. Currently around 40 million members are registered and 10 million cafés exist on the Daum platform. Nowadays, Daum offers numerous Internet services to web users, including a free web-based e-mail, a messaging service, blogs, forums, shopping and news. However, throughout the last decade Daum has been second behind its domestic rival Naver, after the number of visitors to Naver community exceeded the number of visitors to Daum Café for the first time in the year 1999. Daum and Naver are now moving on to the mobile platform and they have released a mobile application for their communities (Kim, 2014). This gives consumers useful functions such as fast access to the contents, composing new posts, easy management, community chatting and customisation of the community display. They also launched new services that mainly target smart phone users, Daum Camp and Naver Band, which offer new forms of online communities by connecting more people using geographical data, pushing event invitations alerts and text messages to the consumers.

After major platforms such as Naver and Daum provided a space to communicate

with others, people with knowledge in various topics gathered in the communities and shared their opinions, and these became new reference groups for consumers' cultural consumption. People realised that they had gained a power to take part in the consumption process that was previously not possible for ordinary consumers. Before the advent of the online community culture, consumers were passive receivers of opinions from professional critics and marketers. However, like other development processes, the Korean online environment went through a turbulent time and a number of adverse side effects appeared, such as trolling (intentional posting of offensive message for fun to provoke others), flaming (hostile and insulting interaction between users) by so called keyboard warriors and Internet frauds to name a few (Kim, 2014). In addition, there have been cases where online community members have been assaulted or violated by another member they encountered offline, which aroused Internet users' attention. Although offline gatherings or events still exist and these forums effectively promote mutual friendships, people are well aware of the importance of privacy and anonymity online, and they have become cautious about revealing themselves to strangers (Sports.com, 2013). Consumers were also angered at the way they had been used by power bloggers and online communities, which eventually disclosed their real intention of earning monetary benefits.

### **3.3.2 Research Design**

Empirical research of symbolic interaction often employs ethnographic methods of inquiry, in which an investigator gains great familiarity with, and records what happens in, a setting of interest by personal participation as a participant observer and/or by open-ended interviewing of people who are actively engaged in the setting (Lofland, 1995). By doing so, a researcher can collect data that "are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (Geertz, 1973, p. 149). Inductive analysis of the data is appropriate to produce an account of how people in the setting experience it and the meanings that the setting has for them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). For these reasons, online ethnography was chosen, a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002). As a method,

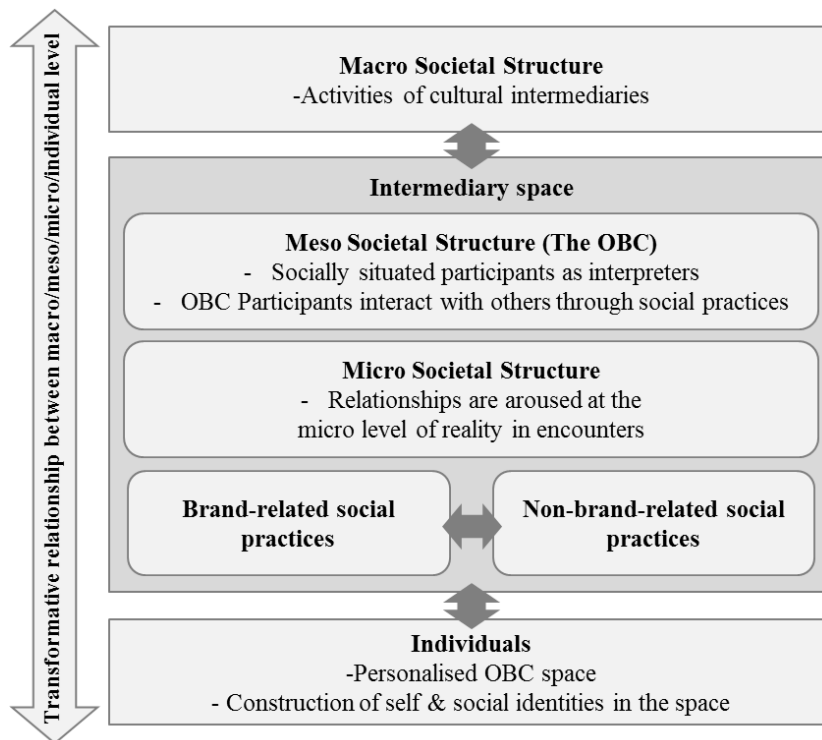
netnography can be faster, simpler and less expensive than ethnography, and it can be more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews (Kozinets, 2010). One researcher conducted the research so by immersing oneself in the context the researcher can judge which details are important and which can be omitted, and thus extricate the significant findings from the observations. The author has two supervisors to challenge the interpretations as an essential part of the process. The researcher can then start to build preliminary propositions from recurring patterns and estimate how well an earlier known theory fits the observations.

The research is divided into two phases (Blumer, 1969): a scoping phase and the main study. The first stage is to “inspect” the OBCs. The investigation focused on understanding the social context from first-hand information. The nature of this research is exploratory so it is impossible to make a detailed work plan in advance. Instead, it is usual in such work to pass through a process of accumulating intelligence about the object of study (Blumer, 1969). The concepts can be defined only after the research has a preliminary notion of the object of study, and of its context. Therefore, in the absence of definite concepts and research model, the research initially took a holistic look at the OBCs by gathering as much information about them as possible; it also postponed the cutting away of unnecessary data until it got a clearer picture about what the research requires.

The exploratory phase enabled the author to better understand the method (Rock, 2001). The author needed to tread carefully when interviewing Korean OBC members because they can be very reticent about sharing personal opinions. Members protect themselves from outsiders so building a personal relationship was a vital process in encouraging a fruitful, in-depth interview. During the exploratory phase, these provisional concepts gradually gained precision and social practices were revealed and defined. Once the point of view and the problem were defined, the researcher began to gather empirical data for the second stage – the main study. By doing so, the author could better understand the potential scope of the research. This does not mean that the insights and cases that do not fit the researcher’s conjectures

are lost or disregarded. Insightful cases or anomalies actually led the author to amend or correct the propositions. At this stage the basic social processes were identified, described and interpreted. This first phase was also about learning to understand the method. Fieldnotes were used to record the feelings, emotions and personal thoughts that often arrive through prolonged research engagement (see Sanjek, 1990), which helped the researcher to interpret data.

As a basis of this research, the relationship between macro, meso and micro levels of social structures is illustrated in Figure 5. Generally, social structures are patterns of social relations among individual and collective actors that endure for a time (Turner, 2008). Figure 5 shows a model of consumer's negotiation of countervailing meanings of OBC social practices in different levels, which will help the data analysis at both the individual and the community level. Macro social structure is a based structure of countervailing brand meaning. Cultural intermediaries create brand meaning by informing consumers about products through branding and marketing. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the term cultural intermediaries includes “groups of workers involved in the provision of symbolic goods and services” (Nixon & Gay, 2002, p. 496), which refers to those workers engaged in “occupations involving presentation and representation . . . providing symbolic goods and services” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 359). Cultural intermediaries include not only branding and marketing organisations but also PR organisations, practitioners in design, celebrities, religious leaders, journalists and politicians. These mediate between the production and the consumption of goods: they inform consumers about products that have been produced and they play a role in ascribing symbolic associations to products.



**Figure 5 Consumer’s Negotiation of Countervailing Brand Meaning: Transformative Relationship between Different Levels**

Source: developed by the author

Brand meaning created by cultural intermediaries is negotiated in the intermediary space, which is the focus of this research (Denzin, 2010). These environments are called intermediary space because they are located “between spaces” that are not owned by any one party, and they are neither purely commercial nor entirely recreational. It is through negotiation and compromise that we often see great potential for consumers to create a safe space that is generally accepting and supportive. Within this space, members can find the support that may not be validated or integrated within their ordinary life. Intermediary space means a complex field of tension (Bourdieu, 1977). In the space, a complicated negotiation process occurs whereby the participants build their power and negotiate meanings through brand-related and non-brand-related social practices. Here the space should be read as a spatial constellation that becomes a “third space” for OBC participants. The space has its characteristic as a whole but interpretations by various individuals



within the space may be incongruous.

The intermediary space includes meso and micro societal structures. In this study, it refers to an OBC in which participants interact with other participants through social practices. In response to the macro level structure, agents generated meso-level structures. Social structures and their cultures are sustained or changed by people's reactions to their circumstances (Bourdieu, 1977). At a micro level, relationships are aroused and flow from the micro level to meso and macro levels of reality. By the micro level the author refers to an individual in their social setting and a small group of individuals that exist in an OBC. Individuals may have focused encounters such as face-to-face interaction and online synchronous chatting or unfocused encounters such as mere mutual awareness (Goffman, 1961). During the process, new practices or structural transformation may occur. Conversely, relationships are aroused under various social structural arrangements, particularly those at the meso level of community that provide the immediate structural context for the encounters. Each participant interacts with a subset of other participants in an OBC, and each participant carries only a subset of all social practices and group norms.

The participant, in this sense, has an internal and external structure: the internal structure is built upon cognitive and imaginative capabilities (the agent has a mind – this happens in the level of agent as an individual); the external structure is built from specific interactions with other participants (the agent has a society – in this case, in the intermediary space). Each participant is continually engaged in problem solving, which results in the construction and maintenance of a complex systems of rules in OBCs and retains a novel generic role in the micro social structure. A micro social structure is in this sense a component of a meso social structure, a generic rule that plays out over a population of micro participants.

### **3.3.3 Study 1: Scoping Phase**

To develop OBC categorisation and identify the interaction practices that operate within OBCs in a Korean culture, extant literature is reviewed and primary data

gathered and analysed.

### ***3.3.3.1 Identifying the Communities: Sampling Method***

OBCs on the Naver platform were selected for this study. The author followed five criteria proposed by Kozinets (2002) for choosing suitable OBCs for netnography: (1) a focused topic; (2) high posting traffic; (3) a high number of discrete message posters; (4) detailed or descriptively rich data; and (5) a high level of between-member interactions of the type required by the research question (p. 63). With these criteria in mind, the setting ultimately chosen had four OBCs in two different industries on the Naver platform – fashion clothing and digital camera: Diesel mania, Lacoste mania, Canon DSLR club and Nikon club (Table 9). The selected OBCs satisfy the criteria, are relevant to the research question, have a large number of recent and regular communications between heterogeneous participants, and offer detailed data. The price points of the products sold by these brands are relatively high in the market. The prices for major products sold by selected digital camera brands and fashion brands range from \$500 to \$5000 and \$100 to \$1000 respectively. The expense is important because low price and low involvement purchases are not likely to lead to the levels of information seeking and meaning association that the researcher is exploring in this study. The selected OBCs are briefly reviewed before moving on to the data collection method. All OBCs have requirements that members should visit the website and leave a specific number of comments to be allowed to read other postings.

**Table 9 Basic Information about Selected Brand Communities**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Number of members</b>	<b>Year of foundation</b>	<b>Postings per day</b>	<b>Representative café (2011)</b>
Fashion	Lacoste mania	32,306	2008. 12. 02	93	X
	Diesel mania	217,421	2005. 06. 25	2176	O
Digital camera	Nikon club	31,580	2004. 02. 23	33	O
	Canon DSLR club	64,541	2004. 02. 11	210	O

The first OBC is Lacoste Mania (<http://cafe.naver.com/lacostemania>), which was established in December 2008. This OBC has one manager from Lacoste Korea, one vice manager and five staff members. This company-initiated OBC regulates postings that are not related to the brand, and it has company-generated and member-generated contents. Company-generated contents include Lacoste promotions, celebrity sponsors, art books and store locations. Consumers generate postings such as photos wearing Lacoste, post-shopping postings, questions and answers, new product information and regional information. This OBC has 32,306 members (June 2013), 25,422 postings since its foundation and, on average, 93 postings per day (June 2013). Previously in Korea, Lacoste's brand image was seen as old and lagging behind others. After Lacoste rejuvenated its brand image with the help of new designers and marketing strategies, young Korean people became enthusiastic about the brand again despite its expense and rare discount. With this trend, passionate consumers appeared and the community became prosperous.

The second sample, Diesel mania (<http://cafe.naver.com/dielmania>), is one of the biggest communities on Naver. This OBC was founded in June 2005 and has one manager and eight staff members. The community began with an interest in Diesel but now describes itself as a premium fashion community that shares information about premium jeans such as Diesel, Dolce and Gabbana, D-squared, Dior Homme and True Religion. Premium jeans became famous after 2000 among young Korean people. Previously, the Korean Jean market was dominated by Levis, Guess and Lee, but premium jeans became widely known in this market only after Diesel started to export its products to Korea (Chang, 2013). Also, magazines kept delivering photos of celebrities wearing Diesel, Seven for all Mankind, True Religion and so forth, so Korean consumers' interest in premium jeans skyrocketed. However, the price of premium jeans in Korea is considerably higher than that in European countries or the U.S. (Cho, 2014). Naturally, the need for purchasing agents has increased and people want more information before they purchase a jean they have not tried on. In this social context, the community could show rapid growth by giving consumers a place

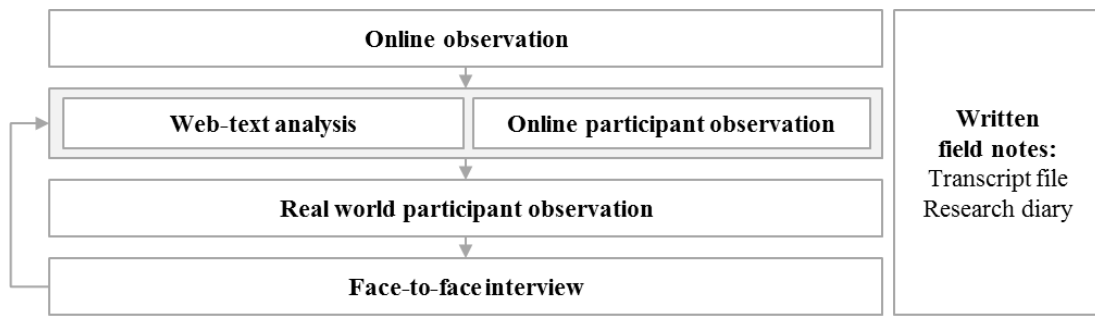
to share reliable information. Members upload their photos and postings to gain advice from other participants. This advice covers not only fashion-related information but also social issues and personal concerns (e.g., relationships, university, job, car).

The third sample is Nikon DSLR club (<http://cafe.naver.com/slrnica>). This OBC was established in February 2004; it has one manager and five staff members. The aim of this OBC is to share information and skills, and the community does not have any commercial sponsors. There are regular offline gatherings that focus on taking photos and learning new skills. Members upload their photos to learn from other members' comments and they share information regarding exhibitions and contests. Reviews on camera body, lens and other accessories are written in a professional manner.

The last sample is Canon DSLR club (<http://cafe.naver.com/a60a70>). This OBC was also created in February 2004 for Canon Powershot users and is run by one manager, one vice-manager and five staff members. The community deals with information about the brand and products, shopping, product usage, skills and group-purchasing opportunities. Trading between the members is possible only for members who have been participating in the community for a while in order to prevent fraud. Basic information about the selected OBCs is described in Table 9.

### ***3.3.3.2 Data Collection Method***

Web-texts were gathered, face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted and participant-observation took place for the exploratory phase [Figure 6].



**Figure 6 Data Collection Methods for the Scoping Phase**

Participant observation was conducted from the period of 2010 to 2012 for formal and informal gatherings in order to understand the nuances of interaction among participants in real life and to access native experiences that are hidden from outsiders. Ethnography’s reliance on participant observation responds to people’s inabilities to report fully on the complex interweaving of culturally significant behaviours. Though participants can record details about behaviours that illuminate these patterns during subsequent interpretation, even willing and articulate consumers do not formulate accurate statements about many clear-cut sociocultural regularities in their behaviour (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994).

In total, the researcher participated 6 times in offline gatherings and built personal relationships with other participants that facilitated the research process. After years of online participation, the researcher put name on the offline gathering attendance list and was introduced to other members by core members as a new gathering member. Thus, the author built social relationships with others and gained further insider information. Participation continued online and offline, and the researcher gained insights into other members’ thoughts on current issues in OBCs and observed members’ social connections. This enabled the author not only to gather data but also to discover “behind the scenes” and observe how members show congruent and contradicting behaviour between their online and offline actions, which is important for data analysis. During the process, the researcher had moderate participation and maintained a balance between "insider" and "outsider" roles to get involved in community activities yet at the same time detach oneself from other

members to remain objective (DeWalt, DeWalt, & Wayland, 1998) to limit the risk of “going native”. Fieldnotes were made for further analysis.

As with all forms of data, observational data taken alone has limitations. Observational data do not provide direct access to the perceptions, values and beliefs of informants and reveal little about informants’ internal states. Therefore, the author combined observational data with in-depth interviews (verbal report data) to explore the phenomenon of interest more thoroughly. Each approach measures different phenomena and the two types are not interchangeable. Interviews supplement participant observation data by providing emic, culturally particular understanding to interpretation. In addition to recollections of specific behaviours, interviews can include three other main things: (1) uses of instances of behaviour to support overgeneralisations; (2) reports of behaviour that are metaphorically glossed by the meanings of the behaviour; and (3) claims of idiosyncrasy based on ostensible contrasts between one’s own experience and that of others (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). In this way, a researcher can get emic meanings from informants’ stories, overgeneralisations, metaphoric glosses and claims of idiosyncrasy.

To recruit informants, members with different perceptions within the OBCs were identified by reviewing the postings on the website, which gave the author knowledge to complete purposive sampling (Babbie, 2013) for in-depth interviews. The amount of postings, contents of postings and frequency of visits of potential informants were also reviewed to ensure that the members shown noticeable differences in terms of brand expertise, sociability and perceptions on an OBC place. Informants were asked to recommend a member in a close relationship after each interview. Therefore, a combination of non-probability sampling (purposive sampling and snowballing) was deployed. To prevent the over-representation of named members who actively participate in an OBC (top 1%), informants with various degrees of participation were recruited. Online messages asking for participation were sent to the potential informants thereafter. The message includes the purpose of interview, the length of interview and compensation involved (each

interviewee was offered a \$5 Starbucks coupon). Initial electronic discussions were conducted to determine their suitability to meet the interview criteria (e.g. participation period and regularity). Recruitment was continued until a point of data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) when new interviews resulted in nothing new or no relevant information with respect to the emerging framework. In qualitative research, the focus is on the quality of information obtained from the participants rather than on the size of the sample. There is no need to determine the number of participants at the beginning of the research because the goal is not to generalise the findings in statistical terms. When repetition of themes is achieved and new informants do not add new information, saturation of data has been reached, the point of diminishing returns from any new analysis (Flick, 1998; Morse, 1995). In this context, clearly noted fieldnotes are important for the analysis of empirical field observations. In total, 41 informants were selected for an in-depth interview – 34 males and 7 females. The average age of participants was 31 years, with a range of 19 to 51. The number of male informants is considerably higher than that of females in the OBCs because of the industry characteristic and the image of selected brands in Korea. Details about recruited informants are in Table 10.

A face-to-face in-depth interview technique was used to understand the members' covert behaviour because in social situations, collectivists avoid blunt honesty to divert from sensitive issues and to exhibit a self-effacing humour as a way of preserving social harmony. Interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed between June and September 2011. This verbal report data serves a different purpose in constructing ethnographic interpretation than do observational data. The in-depth interviews were guided by a general rather than a highly specific a priori topical structure. The researcher focused on building a conversation-like dialogue (Bitner, Booms, and Tetrault 1990; McCracken 1988; Snow, Zurcher, and Sjoberg 1982) rather than asking questions that impose categorical frameworks on informants' understanding and experiences. Informants were encouraged to provide interview content (McCracken, 1988) by the author using the in-depth interviews to elicit emic meanings and thus increase the likelihood of discovering how informants construct

their OBCs and understand the brand.

**Table 10 List of Scoping Phase Informants**

OBC	Informant	Age	Occupation	Offline gathering	Experience of Participation	M/F
Diesel	Anna	25	University student	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Alex	21	University student	No	1 year - 2 years	M
	Harry	26	Unemployed	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Kang	21	University student	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Jason	24	University student	Yes	1 year – 2 years	M
	Joanna	29	Postgraduate student	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Kim	27	Self-employed	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Luke	25	University student	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Robert	26	Self-employed	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Ryan	28	Student	Yes	More than 2 years	M
Tyler	33	Engineer	Yes	More than 2 years	M	
Lacoste	Alexander	25	Office Worker	Yes	1 year - 2 years	M
	Brown	35	Internet café manager	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Jacob	19	University student	Yes	1 year - 2 years	M
	Jane	23	University student	Yes	1 year - 2 years	F
	Justin	25	University student	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Laco	33	Salesman	Yes	1 year - 2 years	M
	Lee	34	Engineer	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Stella	22	University student	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	William	29	Office Worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
Nikon	Ashley	29	Office Worker	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Anthony	27	Herbal doctor	Yes	1 year - 2 years	M
	Bentley	30	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Daniel	25	Postgraduate student	No	More than 2 years	M
	Elliot	33	Individual Proprietor	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Green	19	University student	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	James	36	Publisher	Yes	1 year - 2 years	M
	Jayden	41	Medical doctor	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Jamy	39	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Sebastian	30	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
Simon	43	Photographer	Yes	More than 2 years	M	
Canon	Baek	39	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Blake	51	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Brian	45	Photographer	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Cole	26	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	John	45	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Kylie	48	House wife	Yes	1 year - 2 years	F
	Michael	33	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Richard	33	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Samuel	29	Postgraduate student	Yes	More than 2 years	M
Thomas	33	Office Worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M	

After asking general questions as icebreakers and as a basis for understanding the context the interviewee is situated in, questions then concerned the participant's relationship with other members and the brand: how they participate in the OBC; how they make use of the OBC; how they have registered for the OBC; how they



perceive the OBC as a place; and how they assign meaning to the brand (see Appendix A). They were encouraged to explain their personal experiences in detail. Interviews took between 60 and 120 minutes, and they were digitally recorded and transcribed after participants approved ethical consent forms.

### ***3.3.3.3 Interpretation***

The researcher conducted an ongoing, iterative analysis process to theorise and understand consumer perceptions of an OBC as a virtual third place (Sunderland & Denny, 2007). Data was analysed to code and link relevant and important details. NVivo facilitated coding and the retrieval of web-texts and interview transcripts.

The researcher first developed open codes for each interview and thread and thematically categorised the codes (King, 2004). Emerging themes were then related to the specific umbrella themes, and the author revisited the data and analysed the scripts with the new lens developed so far. This iterative process was followed to make sure the analyses were consistent and to avoid missing insightful data. Analytical memos are kept throughout the analytical process to record the iterative process (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and these were used to substantiate claims of theoretical saturation. Themes were then interpreted with references to build the theoretical accounts of consumers' attachment to an OBC. The emergent framework in the form of an OBC typology was developed through the study and was illustrated with a detailed explanation that included interview quotes and excerpts from the threads. After that, the social practices in the selected OBCs were identified and tentatively categorised. Similar to the first step, the data were thematically analysed but with a different purpose of looking for the social practices. Social practices were developed from open codes of each interview, threads and fieldnotes, and 89 social practices emerged. The second analysis focused on merging the similar social practices and categorising them under an umbrella theme. The researcher went back and forth to the original data and generated 65 social practices under 7 themes. As the final outcome, the findings illustrate 18 social practices under 5 themes.

The author developed the method from this first phase and decided to pay more attention to the range of experiences and emotions that are part of this qualitative research. Observing, (re)constructing and writing experiences of “others”, researchers analyse and reproduce lives (Stanley, 1993). The relationship between the researcher and the researched is hence crucial, and this has been the subject of much debate and scrutiny in qualitative research. The author experienced the effects of context on the relationships that are formed in the field and had to stop guarding against over-familiarity. In this way, the author could confirm the ways in which the researcher has been positioned and (re)presented in the ethnographic texts.

### **3.3.4 Study 2: Main Study**

The exploratory phase broadened the understanding of an OBC, made provisional concepts clear and inspired new research directions. Based on the findings from the first study, the main study attempts to develop the propositions. It also reveals how consumers symbolically interact and how they negotiate brand meaning through social practices. The tension between social practices and the brand is explained and a framework is suggested as a result.

#### ***3.3.4.1 Community Selection: Sampling Method***

Based on information from the first study, OBCs that have strong social aspects were chosen with the expectation to vividly show the social influence on brand meaning negotiation: Starbucks and Le Creuset OBCs on the Naver platform. Both brands are more symbolic than functional and are representative communities on the Naver platform. The main difference between the two communities is that a Starbucks lover initiated Starbucks OBC, whereas Le Creuset OBC is a company-owned one.

#### **Starbucks OBC**

The background of the Starbucks brand development in Korea is important. It is a brand that has held and sustained a unique market position for over fifteen years. From Starbucks' founding in 1971 in Seattle as a local coffee bean roaster and retailer, the company has expanded rapidly. In November 2014, this American global

coffee company and coffeehouse chain was the largest coffeehouse company in the world, with 21,160 stores in 63 countries, including 642 in South Korea (“How many Starbucks are there?,” 2014).

Before Starbucks launched its first store in Korea on July 27, 1999, Korean coffee culture had been dominated by instant coffee ever since Dong Suh Foods Company started its production. Surprisingly, this small country with 49.78 million people (“Total population,” 2014) has more than 150,000 coffee bars, which is more than 10 times the 1,254 it had in 2006. Though it is known that the first coffee bar in Korea was Holly’s in 1998, the first coffee bar by Starbucks in Korea the following year brought a huge change in the Korean coffee market. Starbucks became a symbol of “expensive and luxurious coffee”, the price of which exceeded the average meal price at that time. Korean consumers also realised that the price of Starbucks coffee itself was at least 30% more expensive than in the U.S., with fewer cheap options available. The negative image transferred to the public and Starbucks consumers were often criticised for consuming such an expensive coffee that cost more than \$5, while instant coffee cost only 10 cents per cup. This perception created a now often-used satirical expression in the early 2000s – Doen-jang-nyeo, which means “soybean paste women” in Korean (Kang, 2006). This expression refers to the girls and young women who are addicted to conspicuous luxury and vanity. A typical Doen-jang-nyeo is a woman who drinks \$5 Starbucks coffee after a \$2 meal, and who carries a Louis Vuitton Monogram Boston bag. As can be seen from this symbolic expression, despite the huge number of Starbucks stores and their consumers’ high volume of consumption, Koreans perceive Starbucks as a coffee shop that caters for extravagant consumers who are vain and go there to be seen.

Still, the popularity of Starbucks outweighs the negative perceptions of it. It is not difficult to observe queues snaking around a Starbucks shop whenever a happy hour event is being held. Starbucks Coffee Company and Dong Suh Foods Company launched ready-to-drink beverage in 2005, and became one of the fastest-growing business in Asia. Korea is the only country that covers all the areas including bottled

coffee Frappuccino, canned coffee double shot and cup coffee discoveries, which shows the popularity of Starbucks as a brand in Korea. The sales outweigh the negative perceptions, and more and more consumers realise that Starbucks is not the most expensive coffee bar in Korea (Lee, 2014). However, Starbucks consumers are still fighting the social perception that they are wasting their money on the “commercialness” of Starbucks, a company that does not respect Korean consumers (“The prices of Starbucks coffee in Korea double the price of Starbucks in U.S.,” 2014). It is in this special social context that the Starbucks OBC was founded.

Even though Starbucks has its official website ([www.iStarbucks.co.kr](http://www.iStarbucks.co.kr)) with a huge number of members, this is mainly for events and not much interaction takes place there. There used to be other communities on Daum and Cyworld platforms but all these eventually declined, and only one on the Naver platform has survived, which is the sample of this research. The first sample, Starbucks gossip, was founded in 2007 and is one of the biggest communities on the Naver platform: it has 38,597 members, 163,499 postings and 13,271,546 visits in total (based on the information on the web page, retrieved in 2013.06). A Starbucks lover founded the community to create a place for Starbucks consumers and partners like Starbucksgossip.com in the U.S., and a manager and staff are annually elected among active participants.

### **Le Creuset OBC**

Le Creuset is a French cookware manufacturer best known for its colourful enamelled cast-iron French ovens, also known as "casseroles" or "Dutch ovens". The company makes many other types of premium cookware, from saucepans to tagines. It invites consumers to choose the colours they like, and it introduces limited editions that interest collectors. Le Creuset was established in 1925 and is now sold in more than 60 countries around the world. It is adored by consumers for its design and durability. In 1998 Le Creuset started to expand its business in Asia, beginning with Japan and later following this with Le Creuset Korea in 2006.

Le Creuset became eminent when imported cookware in Korea experienced a rapid

growth. Pressure cookers, saucepans and pots gained popularity among middleclass housewives, even though the price was significantly more expensive than the local branded products (Yoon, 2013). Le Creuset's consumers were not purchasing the product only because of the convenience or durability – it was also because of its emotional and aesthetic aspects. The fashionable colours and humorous shapes are loved by Korean consumers, mainly housewives, in a culture where family is much valued. This trend, along with the country of origin image (i.e. French cookware) and the influence of the media, made the brand one of the most desired items for a wedding gift.

However, Le Creuset is also known to be difficult to deal with as the material itself needs special care and use guide. Consumers realised that they have to learn more about the brand, products and the recipes (which had to be appropriate for the cookware). To satisfy these needs, the company established the Le Creuset OBC in 2007 to provide various content, information and events for the housewives who have the actual power to make a final purchasing decision and promote the brand image. With the help of this trend, this French cookware brand successfully launched its OBC and in 2011 became a Naver representative community, which means that the community is active and successful. The OBC claims that it supports a life with culture and people. The website has rich information provided by the company and its members actively share their recipes and know-how. Online flea market is also popular and is where members can exchange or trade Le Creuset cookware and accessories.

Different from the Starbucks community, the Le Creuset community is run by Le Creuset Korea. The community has 26,469 members, 38,738 postings and 4,040,379 visits (June 2013). The manager limits the topics so that the community can keep its focus on the brand; hence, topics are more restricted than those in Starbucks Gossip.

**Table 11 Basic Information about Selected Brand Communities**

Name	Number of members	Year of foundation	Postings per day	Representative (2011) café
<b>Starbucks Gossip</b>	38510	2007.04.15	351 (in 2013)	O
<b>Le Creuset Mania</b>	26478	2007.12.09	101 (in 2013)	O

Source: Naver website (2013. 06)

### ***3.3.4.2 Data Collection Method***

The selected OBCs were investigated from November 2012 until March 2013 using a netnographic approach. Web-text analysis and in-depth online interviews were conducted to investigate the tension between social practice and the brand through social practices revealed from the exploratory phase. The first method, web-text analysis, proceeded through two main rounds of coding. In the first round, the researcher laid out the postings linking them to the revealed social practices. Active members and new members were all considered in this process. Next, the researcher observed how they evolved gradually, and selected members' postings and comments were tracked to examine how an individual forms a relationship in the OBC. Noticeable incidents and active members are filtered to deploy purposive sampling in order to recruit informants for the in-depth interviews (Babbie, 2013). The author finished recruiting when themes were repeating and new informants added no new information (Flick, 1998; Morse, 1995). Fieldnotes were written throughout the process to facilitate further analysis. In total, 4 male and 23 female Korean members from selected OBCs were interviewed (age between 23 and 39). The number of female informants was higher because of the industry characteristic.

With the recruited informants, the online in-depth synchronous interview was conducted using a chatting program. The interview began with a casual conversation for icebreaking. After an approximate 5-minute warm-up session, the researcher asked a question about personal information (e.g. name, age, occupation, participation duration, etc.). The interview was then linked to the reason for participation and the frequency to help the informant illustrate their own experience. Some questions were related to the meaning of the OBC and the brand to the

informant. If not mentioned yet, the researcher asked about their personal relationship with other members to facilitate the conversation. Informants were allowed to share any incidents, postings and comments they felt to be memorable or impressive. They were encouraged to explore them in detail so that the researcher could understand the interaction between members, what is happening behind the scenes and the member's personal opinions of the event. Oftentimes members unconsciously identified a brand and an OBC, using the term brand mixed with an OBC.

*Hannah: I love miss Le (nickname of Le Creuset). I can't live without miss Le, I almost live with miss Le (laugh).*

*Researcher: Do you mean that you live with Le Creuset products or you live with the community?*

*Hannah: I mean the community... I am always connected. I think I am mixing up the terms because I love both of them.*

**Table 12 List of Main Study Informants**

OBC	Informant	Age	Occupation	Offline gathering	Experience of Participation	M/F
Starbucks	Abigail	29	Unemployed	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Emma	26	Office worker	No	More than 2 years	F
	Jenny	25	University student	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Ivanka	31	Housewife	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Joon	31	Office worker	Yes	6 months - 1 year	F
	Lublock	23	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Lyan	28	Undergraduate student	Yes	6 months - 1 year	M
	Margaret	25	Undergraduate student	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Mini	30	Postgraduate student	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Noah	25	Undergraduate student	Yes	More than 2 years	M
	Nounours	27	Postgraduate student	No	More than 2 years	F
	Seiren	27	Housewife	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Yeseul	26	Office worker	Yes	1 year - 2 years	F
Yujin	26	Housewife	Yes	More than 2 years	F	
Le Creuset	Avril	30	Office worker	No	1 year - 2 years	M
	Crystal	29	Housewife	Yes	1 year - 2 years	F
	Hannah	39	Housewife	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	HappyH	33	Housewife	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Heeya	33	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Helene	32	Teacher	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Hyang	34	Office worker	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Isabella	30	Teacher	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Lovehome	32	Housewife	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Marmite	32	Housewife	Yes	More than 2 years	F
	Olivia	35	Teacher	Yes	1 year - 2 years	F
	Pretty	33	Office Worker	Yes	More than 2 years	F
Tosil	34	Office Worker	Yes	More than 2 years	F	

In this interview, the researcher recognised that the informant wanted to talk about the community itself from the sentence “I almost live with miss Le” but the informant kept using the term “miss Le”, not “Le Creuset Community”. The researcher hence asked the question to confirm what the informant means by the term “miss Le”. It was not only this informant but also others often mixed up the terms, saying such things as “I think I kind of identify those two.” To help the members separate an OBC from a brand, questions related to a brand were followed directly after OBC-related questions to prevent possible misinterpretation. Interviews took between 90 and 150 minutes, and interviewees received a gift voucher worth \$5 as a reward. Interviews were transcribed for further analysis. The researcher confirmed data saturation after 27 interviews and 420 postings had been coded.

#### ***3.3.4.2 Interpretation***

The author analysed the data bearing the social practices in mind and conducted an ongoing, iterative analysis as the study sought to understand the process of consumers’ brand meaning negotiation and the influence of social bonds. The author followed the same methodology as the first exploratory phase of netnography and conducted an analysis of the verbal and visual texts visible on the websites (i.e. posts and comments) and the interview transcripts (Fairclough, 2003), with an emphasis on instances in which social bonds were asserted and displayed. The ideas of exchange and social classification that emerged from the exploratory phase were used as an initial guiding framework. The social bonds that produced meaning during the OBC participation were examined and cultural meanings that shaped and were shaped by these exchanges were analysed (with a focus on capital transformation).

The threads that were deemed to show the formation of social bonds were filtered and the posters were tracked. Each member was reviewed until the researcher felt they had a good understanding of the informant’s social relationship with others. This usually entailed reviewing 100 to 200 posts. The researcher also analysed the



comments written at the bottom of the postings to see their interaction with other members. On average, between 20 and 30 comments were attached to each post. The comments were examined for their character and topical focus. The researcher moved back and forth between examining each member in depth versus examining threads on the website at once. The next step in the data analysis was to go back to the informants' interview scripts, noting contradictions and confirmations in the web-text and the interviews. The iterative process continued until no further ideas emerged and all of the data could be encompassed in a framework for the brand meaning negotiation process.

The findings from the ethnographic work are presented in two chapters. The first presents illustrative events within the community (online and offline). These events – named as Starbucks city hall event, lucky bag event, sharing event and chiffon crisis – show how OBC constituents get involved in social interaction and build social connections with others. During the process, different types of capitals are accumulated, transferred and create dominant members. The illustrations disclose how participants negotiate brand meaning through the revealed social practices. The selected cases are interpreted through the eyes of the observer and the interviewees. For each event, the extended narratives are presented prior to the interpretation. The author focused on the nature and the content of the exchanges and their implications for understanding social bonds, practices and brand meaning. The second chapter then outlines and explores the emergent themes from these events, with a focus on social bonds, social practices and brand meaning. A framework is suggested that shows this brand meaning negotiation process – flows of social and cultural capital and related social practices contradictory – by explicating countervailing meanings at different societal levels.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Manchester Business School. Before starting the research, the researcher obtained consent from four community administrators to conduct interviews with members and then

perform online observations on the websites. For the face-to-face interviews, the researcher showed a copy of the “Participant Information for MBS Research Project” to participants and explained what the research project is, how information collected from them would be used, and that confidentiality and anonymity would be guaranteed (Lincoln & Guba 1985). For the online synchronic interview, there is no sufficient, consistent and officially recognised ethical guidelines for how to conduct it (Mann & Stewart 2000). Mann and Stewart (2000) propose that informed consent, confidentiality and netiquette are very important for online research. Informed consent was obtained before the interview began. The researcher ensured that participants’ identities would not be revealed and that the work will use pseudonyms.

### **3.6 Summary and Discussion**

This research takes an interpretivist approach to study an OBC field and it focuses on the interactions between OBC participants. The study deploys symbolic interactionism infused with social practice theory to overcome the weakness of the former and explore collective practices without losing important concepts such as negotiation, resistance and difference. From this perspective, the author attempts to reveal the role of social bonds in an OBC context and show the influence of these on brand meaning, using a netnographic approach to do so. In this section the specific research methods adopted have been described and justified, and the Korean Internet culture has been briefly illustrated to show the indispensable role of social bonds and the importance of using an interpretivist approach in a society with high-context, collectivistic and high power distance.

There were environmental constraints on OBC sampling. For example, it is common for an OBC to thrive in a moment yet diminish within a year. Even though a huge number of companies and consumers create new OBCs on the Naver platform, few of them successfully attract new members and keep them visiting the community. This environmental barrier strongly influenced the selection of the OBCs for this research: the OBCs for this research are some of the few successful cases as they

have been prosperous for more than 5 years with a high number of postings and visits. Regardless of this limitation, an interpretivist approach values a researcher's understanding of a specific context and interpretation; in this way, the significance of investigating such OBCs is supported.

When collecting data in a collectivistic culture, accessing a community and interacting with its members should be done in a comprehensive, tactful and friendly manner. Such cultures value group harmony and are afraid that "the approach of an outsider" may cause a problem in an OBC; furthermore, they do not appreciate a feeling of being investigated. Hence, a researcher should become familiar with participants before delving into the investigation and they should always show one's respect to the community members and group norms to prevent members from being exclusive (Dillon, 2002). Also, the topic itself – social bonding and brand meaning – can be a sensitive issue for collectivists. They do not want to look like a snob in front of other people; thus, they are possibly hesitant about revealing their true feelings or thoughts. This is especially the case because selected brands have symbolic aspects, and members do not want to be blamed for consuming such a relatively expensive brand. The author therefore had to combine observational and verbal data carefully to interpret the data.

Another crucial aspect is the importance of fieldnotes in netnography. Consumers often show erasing behaviour when their postings or comments become a seed for trouble. It is a common practice to change one's user name when such things happen. Furthermore, as many people have learned from practice that revealing much information about oneself in a virtual world is not always beneficial for them, they often try to avoid this and even erase their "history" on the Web when they do so. In order not to lose the flow and to avoid distorting the community history, keeping constant records is crucial.

With the research methodology expounded in this chapter, the study firstly attempts to reveal how consumers perceive the OBCs they belong to and the social practices

that are commonly accepted in such OBCs, which are nevertheless constantly changing through human interaction in OBCs. The study particularly focuses on social, cultural and symbolic capital in an OBC as a field, a social arena in which people manoeuvre and struggle in pursuit of desirable capitals, in which brand and OBC meanings are negotiated through the iterative process.

## **Chapter 4 Scoping Phase Data Analysis and Results**

### **Part I: Consumer's Perceptions of OBC: A Typology**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The concerns have been constantly raised that the meaning of an OBC has become increasingly diluted (Fernback, 2007) because its online characteristic creates in participants an attitude of “easy access; no responsibility”. A typical example of a brand community, HOG (Harley Owners Group), primarily consists of highly loyal Harley motor cycle owners. However, not only satisfied consumers, who want to show off their collections, and would-be consumers, who admire the brand, join its OBC, but people who join purely out of curiosity. This renders the members different from those in traditional “third places”, who cannot enjoy the social environment if they do not actively participate in socialising (Oldenburg, 1999). OBC members do not have to reveal themselves publicly, because the online environment enables them to enjoy the many benefits without actively participating, which results in “lurking” behaviour (Preece et al., 2004).

This chapter present the results of an exploratory study and develop a deeper understanding of how consumers perceive an OBC as a VTP in order to understand the tensions that exist between brand and social connections, which will be more fully revealed in the main study. This closer look at an OBC will show the multiple realities in consumers' minds behind their participation behaviour. Therefore, this chapter describes and classifies consumers' perceptions of an OBC as a VTP into meaningful categories in order to, (i) allow an accumulation of knowledge on various types evolving in consumers' minds, (ii) improve the sense-making of empirical findings by considering the intrinsic characteristics of the VTPs under study, and (iii) provide practitioners with a useful framework to effectively describe, understand and manage VTPs.

VTP types of Korean OBCs are conceptualised in terms of to which degree consumers are attached to an OBC (OBC attachment), brand (identity-based attachment) and other members (bond-based attachment). After the characteristics of bond-based and identity-based attachments are addressed, nine types of VTPs are presented and explained, by way of with Korean examples. The different usages and effectiveness of each VTP type are highlighted.

## **4.2 Qualitative Evidence for an OBC as a Virtual Third Place**

The fact that only a small fraction of members actually “talk” in online environments raises an issue that an OBC might not be suitable to be considered as a VTP, because people have to get to know other people and participate in the communication in order to enjoy a traditional notion of the “third place”. Even in busy OBCs, only a small number of members create messages and leave comments, as can be seen from Kozinet’s (1998) research findings and also Lee et al’s (2006), which reflect 1% rule of Internet culture. It is well known that these highly active and socially bonded members shape the community atmosphere, promote discussions and act as moderators to the content (Bateman, Gray, & Butler, 2011; Bishop, 2007). Even though these influential members play an important role in setting the scene, the author contends that an OBC is intended not only for active members but for other members who also wish to enjoy the place – in this way, to its constituents, an OBC becomes a VTP.

An OBC is a social world inhabited by a variety of people. Consumers interact online by typing chat messages, posting and making comments, often complemented by offline gatherings. Because it will contain thousands of concurrent users, who will not know each other, it constitutes a “public” space, in the sense that its main characteristics correspond with Oldenburg’s notion of “third place”. As Rheingold (1993) noted from the investigation of WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), which was one of the first online communities where consumers could construct engaging social experiences, “It might not be the same kind of place that Oldenburg had in

mind, but so many of his descriptions of third places could also describe the WELL (p.26)". However, whereas WELL is an "imagined" space created purely through text description, OBCs demonstrate different cultural contexts and characteristics; such as, OBCs include audio-visual materials and conversations are centred on a particular brand. In this study, therefore, the author will find qualitative evidences of how an OBC became a VTP and then will compare this with Rheingold's (1993) and Oldenburg's (1999) ideas.

#### **4.2.1 Neutral Ground – a Public Setting**

Because Oldenburg places the emphasis on the public setting of a third place that is accessible to its inhabitants and considered appropriate by them to consider it to be their "own" place, consumers can easily register for, and conveniently access, an OBC, since easy interface and anonymity promote sociability; as Sennett (1978, p. 311) puts it, "people can be sociable only when they have some protection from each other". In the pervasiveness of capitalism and secularism, this "impersonality" ironically provides consumers with a neutral ground to come and go as they please and be sociable. Besides the manager or staff, who are nominally in charge, no-one is required to play host, and everyone feels "at home" and comfortable. By helping consumers feel free to be themselves, without the burden of responsibility, image or face, such an environment provides opportunities for experiences and relationships that are otherwise unavailable.

#### **4.2.2 An OBC as a Leveller**

Members can gain easy access to an OBC in order to discover one another without any social hindrances, such as class, rank, age, gender differences or physical handicap, which, in real life, might divide them. By freeing consumers from their formal associations such open access presents them with new possibilities (Oldenburg, 1999). Because secular success is not always valued, people are open to be satirised or criticised, especially if they draw attention to their outstanding physical appearance and affluent lifestyle. In an online context, though, where a

member's personal information and appearance are generally not revealed, an OBC can be more democratic than a physical third place, which corresponds with Oldenburg's (1999) argument that a third place is a leveller where people are transformed into equals.

However, another factor differentiates a physical third place from an OBC – it is likely that economic capital influences a member's cultural and social capital in the OBC because the *raison d'être* of the community is a brand. Consumers may feel disadvantaged and deprived by looking at other members' collections; hence, material deprivation may prevent the consumers from enjoying the place as economic capital decides the purchasing power of the branded products. Not only economic capital influences this equality, but it is also possible that a member, who works for the company that produces the brand, is more likely to be respected by the members of the community because of his knowledge. However, the influence of this social and economic capital hardly makes members discriminate against others, since some members may well defy such a person as soon as he or she brings their high-status into play (Soukup, 2006).

This form of levelling is attractive to consumers of all statuses; for instance, those members who possess high real world status, by distancing themselves from real life by their online participation and enjoying meeting others, who see them just as a person who loves the same brand, they can be their “real” selves. Similarly, those who are not high-status also enjoy the freedom of a place where they can be equal with others despite, say, an unsuccessful career or an unhappy social or home life. This is why people find such places comforting and enjoyable (Oldenburg, 1999).

#### **4.2.3 Conversation is the Main Activity**

Conversation that is “lively, scintillating, colourful, and engaging” is the main activity in an OBC (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 26). The joys of association may initially be marked by welcoming comments and maintained in pleasurable and entertaining conversation, ranging from brand news to personal stories. Therefore, even though a



consumer comes to an OBC with an interest in a brand, eventually socialising becomes his or her main interest, since, due to recent developments, the user interface enables them to have synchronous interaction; consequently they are not restricted to asynchronous postings and comments, but move on to real time conversations, which generate more diversified topics; this sense of immediacy is the hall-mark of an OBC (Soukup, 2006).

A number of informants indicated that they often feel more comfortable talking to community members than to their own families or friends because they do not have to reveal everything about themselves, or worry about how their “real self” image might be seen to have changed. Such social activity is a taken-for-granted part of members’ existence on an OBC, and some respondents report that it has become a natural part of their daily lives, since the place provides a “habit of association”, since they frequently mention that they forget about the passing of time.

A brand effectively stimulates conversation and complements third place associations (Cova & Pace, 2006). In the OBCs the author has investigated, members express shared interests, but they are not necessarily devoted to professional identities such as new product development; they simply enjoy conversing with others. A community full of brand experts or marketers working on brand promotion is not a VTP, nor is it a company-initiated websites on which “lurking” members read the postings. The social potential of brands in an OBC appears when members become involved in the conversations of ordinary consumers who feel able to relate their stories. Hence, witty and knowledgeable members play hugely important roles in creating atmosphere; consequently, they are adored by other members (Oldenburg, 1999).

#### **4.2.4 An Accessible and Accommodating Place**

People nowadays tend to lay more emphasis on their working careers and social successs rather than on enjoying the company of others in third places, primarily because of time and geographical constraints. Long working hour reduce the time

they can spend with their families, therefore, time spent on the Internet has significantly increased as they more frequently share their daily lives on online places (*VNI mobile forecast report, 2015*).

For instance, members can visit an OBC whenever and wherever they wish. Assured, as they are, some of their acquaintances will be present, since, as described earlier, synchronous communications have made them more accommodating; even when they cannot be connected at the same time of the day, a member can easily find the history of a friend's participation and keep the asynchronous communication going. It also opens up an opportunity to find other members who they may want to talk to, while keeping an eye on that "user name" in order to receive updates. Such "para-social" relationships are easily found in an online setting, and there is also the added benefit that a relationship can develop into a mutual one, which could extend to physical meetings, such as offline gatherings or group-chats.

A further advantage is that conversations in VTPs do not disappear after a day, but continue to be available; hence, the place is never closed, is always accessible to those enthusiasts who want to be connected to other brand lovers. In such ways, members' postings and comments, which have accumulated over time, become valued assets.

#### **4.2.5 The Regulars**

It is generally accepted that about 10% of people online comment on posts and that 1% of the people create content (Arthur, 2006), who keep on visiting and may be considered to "live" in the place. There is a constant flow of new members registering and that the lure of an OBC depends only secondarily on the interface and platform, since what primarily attracts regulars is what is supplied by fellow consumers. It is true, therefore, that regulars make a place lively by conferring on it a sense of character by their regular postings and comment and also by their keeping in contact with other members. Such regulars, with their deep attachments to the place, tend to be the ones who want to keep the OBC alive and thriving (Preece &

Maloney-krichmar, 2003). They also ensure that on any given visit someone well known to the site will be present. Furthermore, regulars who do not limit themselves to conversations with “inner-group” members, but who welcome newcomers as already friends, are the greatest assets of all by ensuring that newcomers to their OBC experience warm feelings of comfort (Schau et al., 2009). For instance, one informant confesses:

*I may feel very lonely if nobody welcomes me or people ignore me and just talk about things that I don't really know about ... I might have left the community after browsing a bit, but I found that people are actively communicating and are very friendly. Even though I was not very familiar with Internet culture or community culture, people here were very heart-warming and didn't ignore me when I had questions and that felt really good, like ... they recognised me and I felt like I am a member of this group. (Nikon, Jamy, 39 years old, male)*

This shows how crucial it is that regulars treat new members in this way. No doubt regulars would say that they were once newcomers; of course, the percentages mentioned above show that not every newcomer becomes a regular; many leave the community if it does not appeal to their interests, or, particularly, if they had to struggle to be accepted. The level of acceptance therefore, depends almost entirely on their forming social relationships. It helps when a newcomer knows a regular, since he or she will be accepted onto the site more quickly than if he or she were lone strangers because the regular's acquaintances will often be welcoming since they will feel able to trust him or her. Also, a total stranger has to build trust by regular participation and by following group norms, thereby receiving approval from other regulars, who will want some assurance that the newcomer is not going to leave after all the effort they have invested in him or her.

#### **4.2.6 A Low Profile**

Oldenburg's third place characteristic – a low profile – is differently applied in an OBC than it is in a traditional third place as it does not have a physical structure. The plainness of third places discourages pretention and encourages levelling. Anonymity already serves this role in an OBC because members cannot see each other as the visual aspect is substituted by a “subtly nuanced” conversation. For instance, like people do not upstage well-dressed people in a third place, in an OBC people may

tease a bragging or pretentious member; they might feel more comfortable with modest members without social pretences. One informant describes his discomfort when he sees a pretentious member:

*He always posts something in a very annoying way ... like, you've got a new Diesel jean and he intentionally takes a photo in front of a Ferrari ... expecting other people's reactions like 'Oh, you are so rich!, so cool!' but we are kind of used to these people ... you can show your Ferrari but not in this pretentious way. I tend to ignore, I never say what they want to hear (laugh). Oh, quite often, there are comments like 'Be honest, you just want to show off your car!'* (Diesel, Alex, 21 years old, male)

In a similar vein, members do not want their community to be commercialised – they want the place to stay as an ordinary part of daily routine where they can comfortably chat with others. To prevent the community from turning into a commercial one, members set strict regulations on consumer-to-consumer deals – for example, no premium, one selling post per day, etc. – and try not to be sponsored by stakeholders. When an OBC becomes too commercialised, the website may thrive by people visiting to purchase a product, but it will cease to be a VTP.

#### **4.2.7 The Mood is Playful**

The persistent mood of the VTP is playful, except for occasions when consumers pose issues regarding the brand's bad services or product faults. It is the same for their offline gatherings, formal or impromptu; they enjoy themselves and often hate to leave. One 19 year old informant confesses that he is addicted to the OBC because of this playfulness:

*I am always online because I want to be connected. I don't want to miss anything that is happening in the community, however trivial it is. I don't really talk that much in the community but watching other people's posts and photos...It makes me smile. People are always friendly to me, maybe because I am a student (laugh). I just get so much fun here, that's why I am always online, getting real-time alerts if there are any new posts or comments.* (Lacoste, Jacob, 19 years old, male)

As with Oldenburg's notion of the third place, witty and kind people are often found and are highly valued. The urge to return, recreate and recapture the experience appears in online chatting and threads. An OBC becomes a VTP because of that urge.

#### 4.2.8 A Home Away From Home

Oldenburg (1999) insisted that the third place is often more home-like than home – one reason being because the domestic circle can endure without congeniality, but a third place cannot – people who gather together in OBCs without any obligation expect to see familiar faces and to enjoy a convivial atmosphere. Also, the regular appearance of a particular individual cannot be forced as home and work can; hence, participants may leave the OBC whenever they wish and erase their traces of participation. Naturally, only like-minded people who cherish the community keep on visiting. This congeniality makes people feel comfortable about spending time in an OBC, so whenever they have difficulties in life, they find comfort by talking to other members with different backgrounds. One 39 year old informant stresses how important an OBC is for him:

*I had a very bad day at school... I was very much annoyed because of the education office, so many rubbish documents that I had to work on! But as soon as I am released from my work, I go to the OBC and chat with 'my people' (people who are close to him). We sometimes make an appointment to have a quick drink or watch a movie ... whoever available. That's the way I can get energy. I much prefer spending time with the OBC members than staying at home, it is more home-like for me ... My house is just a house where I sleep; this community is a real 'home' for me. (Canon, Baek, 39 years old, male)*

From the data analysis the author found that, in Korea, an OBC takes on a role of a VTP, in a different way to a real third place. The next section – an OBC typology – will explore different consumers' perceptions of an OBC as a VTP.

### 4.3 Typology Development

An OBC has been classified in terms of: basic human needs (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997), use (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000), community members (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000; Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001), platform (Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001), orientation of the community (Porter, 2004), brand type (Cova & Pace, 2006), and establishment (member-initiated or organisation-sponsored) (Leimeister, 2006; Porter, 2004). However, unlike these literature based branding and online community criteria, the author focuses on how consumers perceive OBCs. Because members

utilise the place at their convenience, their perceptions of OBCs vary in the ways they use them – for instances, how and why they build relationships with others and how and why their levels of commitment to the place may differ. The focus has been on these rather subjective criteria because objective criteria, such as platform, brand type or numbers of members, can be interpreted by members in many different ways. For instance, technological aspects, such as platforms, are essential when running an OBC, but even when it is based on equivalent technologies, usage patterns can differ.

This study is based in the Korean context, where OBC members form more social bonds and have more offline gatherings, which expedite relationship building processes, compared to those in other countries. Also, various platforms and new services, such as Naver community applications, Naver band, Daum café applications and Daum camp, are changing the Korean OBC landscape by providing members with opportunities to approach each other easily. In such environments the research focuses on an OBC's social structure by treating it as a place, which has computer supported social networks.

OBCs can be created by using a variety of technologies, such as synchronous chatting via messengers, text messaging, web-based bulletin boards and community websites. An OBC as a VTP is not a subset of the class “virtual community”, but represents a different approach to categorising virtual space. In order to classify OBCs, this study suggests two criteria, (i) OBC attachment, and (ii) bond-based and identity-based attachment

#### **4.3.1 OBC Attachment**

Place attachment, the emotional bonding that occurs between individuals and their meaningful environments, has gained much scientific attention from researchers such as Low and Altman (1992), Lewicka (2011) and Williams et al. (1992). The place attachment, is not necessarily about a person and a physical place itself; people are attached to the social relationships, not just physical place *per se*. Rosenbaum et al. (Rosenbaum, Ward, Walker, & Ostrom, 2007) also suggests that commercial third

place enables their patrons' supportive social relationships and serves as contexts, or natural forums. Because people associate places with their life events, the longer they have lived in a place, the greater their attachment to it is and the more rooted they feel (Elder et al., 1996; Herting et al., 1997). Belk (1992), Milligan (1998), and Rosenbaum (Rosenbaum et al., 2007) have all adopted a similar concept of "place attachment", which, they agreed, results from interactive and culturally shared processes of building social bonds with an emotional meaning. This study defines "OBC attachment" as did Hummon (1992) and Low and Altman (1992), as "the affective bond between a person and an OBC". As explained previously, members with strong attachments to their OBCs may be crucial to their success, since they are the people most likely to provide the sort of content that others value (Butler et al., 2002).

OBC attachment, which includes cognitions and meanings, lies at an individual level, however, its dynamic nature gradually changes in terms of its strength and form from the time a consumer joins to when he or she leaves. How people cohere for some purpose, and how an OBC is pleasing to its members are important factors in the bond formation between a member and an OBC. The following excerpts describe a twenty-one years old male informant's attachment to two different OBCs:

*Our community members have a sense of belonging. Members are very close to each other ... a 'sticky' relationship. We only accept very passionate Nike lovers, so once you are registered and actively participate ...people take care of each other and hardly leave the community. Many of us have a really close relationship like real brothers. Every time I go there (OBC website) it's friendly and they are like a family. So you see, I can't leave there...(Diesel, Kang, 21 years old, male)*

The informant hates to leave the Nike site because of his high OBC attachment. He goes on to describe his perception of the Diesel OBC, with which he has a more superficial relationship:

*Well, I can be said as a 'member' for I am registered ... but I don't take part in the community activities, I just get information. And when I see something intriguing I read it and write like great, good, not bad ... I haven't participated, nothing I've posted, I know nobody there, [but] no reason I should leave ...*

The researcher could see that there lies another reality in a member's mind, the same Diesel OBC is perceived by another participant as an indispensable place. This twenty-one years old informant reveals:

*I tend to visit the community on a regular basis, don't participate actively though ... usually just write comments and sometimes do some postings... not that often. Whenever I come here I see how other people are doing, what they buy and how they wear it and I like watching those things... people's lives. I am happy to see them. I must feel really bored if I don't have this community, because I visit the community whenever I get bored. What should I do if it disappears one day, I can't imagine... (Diesel, Alex, 21 years old, male)*

OBC attachment and meaning emerges from a variety of experiences and situations. Interactions with their environments, such as by reading postings, writing comments, participating in events, getting help from, or helping other members, demonstrate how anonymous spaces can be converted into places endowed with meaning, which serve as objects of attachment. This bonding can constitute a powerful element in a consumer's life by informing a sense of identity, creating meanings and facilitating the chosen OBC, thereby influencing the member's actions. OBC attachment affects issues as diverse as a sense of belonging, intergroup conflict, activities through online and offline gatherings, and mobility, i.e. moving around other communities or leaving the community. Thus, the degree of attachment to an OBC may be important in determining participants' perceptions; consequently, the author sets OBC attachment as the first criteria of VTP classification.

#### **4.3.2 Bond-Based and Identity-Based OBC**

Even though an OBC is centred on a brand, the meaning an individual attaches to a certain community cannot be explained solely by its functional, or practical, properties – i.e. those attributes necessary to get specific benefits or experiences. OBC attachment may have at least two origins, (i) functional properties, and (ii) emotional and symbolic meanings. OBC attachment may have purely functional roots – “*it is a good place to know more about a brand*” or the OBC may take on some special significance for the consumer who has an emotional or symbolic character – “*the place itself with people is important to me*”. In the former case the value of the community has been embodied in the utilitarian properties of the place,



such as information giving. It is in relation to functional meanings that have to do with the opportunities the OBC affords in terms of specific activity needs. This is similar to what Stokols and Shumaker (1981) describe as “place dependence”, or when the occupants of a setting perceive that it supports their behavioural goals better than any alternative.

Although a person may value an OBC because it is useful for getting updates and discounts, the people who use them may or may not feel a strong sense of attachment to them. Hobb and Turner (1985) say that people may be attracted to a group’s character or purpose and feel a sense of attachment to the brand. In the latter case the meaning, or value, of an OBC is assigned to it by individuals with little direct correspondence between the usefulness of the information. The emotional/symbolic level of meaning is concerned with the importance a person attaches to the place because of what the community symbolises, or stands for. This is what Proshansky et al. (1983) refer to as “place identity”. Festinger and his colleagues (1950) state that members develop relationships with other members that result in their becoming attached to an OBC. The former being an identity-based OBC attachment and the latter a bond-based attachment.

This study’s conceptual distinction between identity-based and bond-based OBC attachments does not imply that they are mutually exclusive in practice. Individuals may be attached to an OBC through both mechanisms simultaneously by expressing feelings of connection to the community as a whole and to the individuals within it (Ren et al., 2012). One consumer may have both types of attachment while another demonstrates a relatively higher identity-based attachment by emphasising the central position of a brand. Furthermore, an OBC member can get instrumental support by contributing information and receiving help from other members in return. Prentice et al. (1994, p. 491) state that identity-based attachment shows greater continuity over time and greater stability in the face of changes of membership because when an OBC attachment comes mainly from its instrumental support, it does not lose its attraction after prominent group members drop out. The following

excerpt illustrates an informant's identity-based attachment:

*I can listen to other people's stories. When I take a photo, of course I am curious if I took a good one. Or how I can take a better one ... If I use a different model, different brand, the way a camera works is different, users of the model know a lot better. I get technical and professional support from other members, so I happen to visit this community more often than other camera communities... I can get the answer to my question in any minute because we are using the same model. Products are compatible with all peripheral devices other people are using, trading second-hand products is fairly easy ... (Jayden, Nikon, 41 years old, male)*

This identity-based attachment may delimit itself because a member will only champion a brand and its products if functional benefit is the only reason for his participation in the OBC. Hence, people come together if they have mutual needs that are capable of being satisfied through interdependence; however, members may easily leave the community once they receive all the answers to their questions. People want to meet and communicate with other people with similar interests, which is one of the main purposes of joining an OBC since a consumer gets support from other members' empathy and sympathy. Mutual attraction between the members emerges as the basis of psychological group formation and group solidarity. Consequently, members build bond-based attachment that mitigates people's loneliness by providing social and emotional support, which leads members to stay in the community.

The following excerpt sums this up perfectly:

*They (non-community members) don't understand me. Why do you buy it? It's a waste of money! They tell me that I am stupid to buy expensive and useless stuffs... from their perspective. But people here give attention to me and are interested in the same things. I feel so good because they are very warm to me. Sometimes we have a cup of coffee together and talk about this and that, share the things we have... you know we sometimes do share lenses. That can be really something because they are expensive, but the members they do so, that's incredible, I appreciate it. I want to do the same... Very warm-hearted, I like our community. (Jamy, Nikon, 39 years old, male)*

Being biased towards bond-based attachment also has its perils. Canniford (2011) indicates the problems that arise when subcultures of consumption are compared with brand communities and consumer tribes. The argument is that some OBCs appear to revolve around lifestyle activity rather than brand, and that 'people are

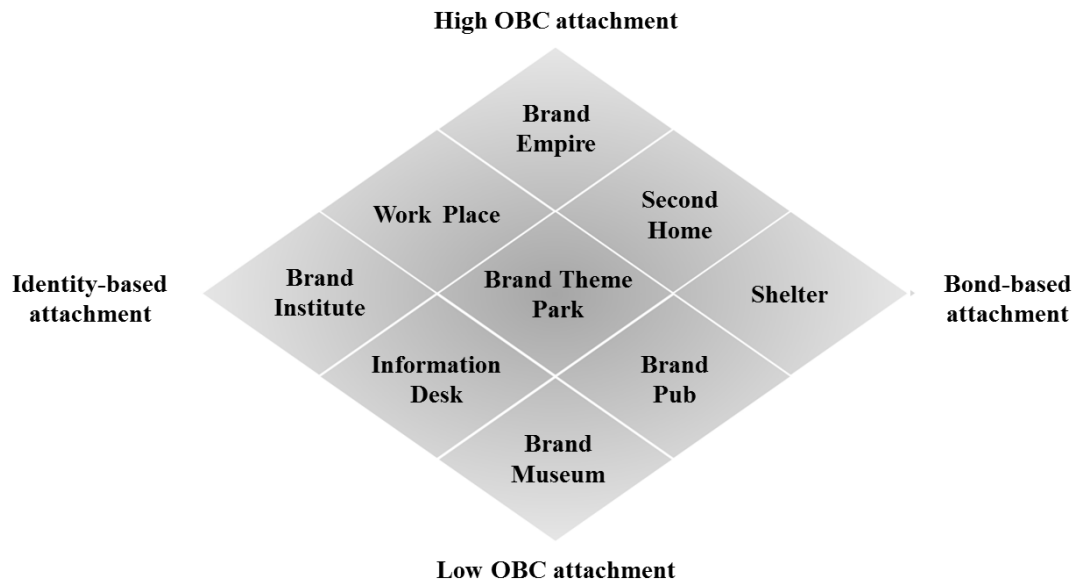
more interested in the social links that come from brand affiliations than they are in the brands themselves' (Fournier & Lee, 2009, p. 106). In such cases where brands are not central to the community structure, brand community theory begins to falter.

In reality, it is difficult to find a community with purely bond-based or identity-based OBC attachment; in many cases OBC attachment shows both characteristics to different degrees. The relative levels of these two types of OBC attachment and their dependence on each other may provide more insight into the meaning of perceiving an OBC to be a VTP. Because of these differences, perceived places can be categorised into different groups by using offline third-place metaphors – pub, community centre, place of worship, mall, park, gallery, lounge, library, café, museum, gym, hybrids, and so on – to illustrate different social, emotional and instrumental attachment to the virtual place, effectively borrowing typical character, usage and image of such third places. The author adopts the metaphors from real life, but it is important to note that people are not only transferring the ideas to online sites but even adding further dynamics, such as anonymity, non-synchronous communication, a member's personal history, etc.

#### **4.4 OBC Typology**

Figure 7 shows a categorisation of Korean consumers' different perceptions of OBCs in terms on the two criteria explained in the previous section – identity-based attachment and bond-based attachment. The figure is diamond-shaped to show that the attachments are inter-dependent – i.e. none of them can exist without the others. For instance, members with strong identity-based attachments who actively participate in OBC activities often become socially bonded due to the many opportunities they have to communicate with others. Similarly, members with little identity-based attachment can hardly build the social bonds because of the lack of common interest. With no evidence to prove that those members are interested in the group's purpose, it becomes difficult for them to communicate meaningfully and eventually they become excluded from discussions. The different types of OBC

attachment are explained below, starting from high to low, and the excerpts from interviews and postings are included to describe consumers' perceptions. OBC constituents disclosed multiple orientations in different degrees, for instance, information sharing and socialising, which is not fixed, but is constantly changing (Ouwensloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). The following section presents the OBC types as they appear in the figure.



**Figure 7 Consumers' Perceptions of OBCs**

Source: Developed by the author

#### **4.4.1 Brand Empire**

The first type of members' perception of an OBC is "brand empire", where members who are highly attached to an OBC put a brand at the very centre of their activities. Throughout the participation process, members understand that their cultural capital, such as their brand knowledge and/or collections, and their social capital, such as their relationships with other members, influence their social status within the community and their desire to keep a privileged position (i.e. symbolic power). One informant confesses how satisfactory it is to become a renowned member within the community:

*I always keep eyes on it so that I won't miss anything important... I can't do anything else because even with this one (Lacoste OBC) I am already busy, I spend all the rest of my time here. This is where I live besides my real life so I want it to be prosperous.... If I go somewhere else, I'm like nothing, totally nothing. Here in this community there are people I communicate with, and we do a lot of Kakaotalk (Korean chatting application), we send regards, say hello, sometimes make loads of phone calls. When they want to buy something, they ask me questions, as I know a lot... you know, people just want to belong to some group. Once I belong somewhere, then I want to be a head of it, it's like that. That's why people want to be famous, oh, am I this good? Like that. People get to know me! It feels really good. (Lacoste, Lee, 34 years old, male)*

Lee indicates that an OBC is invaluable to him because he is “like nothing, totally nothing” in other places and also that he can be a “kind of star” in his OBC. Because he works for the brand, he has a good brand knowledge and many members recognise him, wait for his response and respect his advice. Lee says that he feels encouraged to help “normal members” to enjoy the brand and the community and he finds it a “worthwhile side job”. Like Lee, Brown (Lacoste, 35 years old, male) also considers an OBC to be an empire built and protected by enthusiastic members like himself. A highly loyal consumer, he spends more than 1000 GBP per month on Lacoste clothes. He is also one of the most active members and he has a strong urge to make the community flourish, even though he is not hired by the company nor is he a manager of one of their shops. He enjoys his social status in the community and knows that the peripheral members are the source of his power. He understands the value of building strong social bonds, encourages new members to get involved in activities and tries to ensure enough people value his efforts. An excerpt from a fieldnote reveals all of this:

*When we arrived at the restaurant, Brown was already there with his close members. He was leading the atmosphere as always. . . Shin appreciated Brown for purchasing the cardigan for his sake and Brown seemed very happy and proud of himself for helping other people to get nice outfits for the upcoming season, “I love you guys, we have to be close to each other, that's how our community thrives! More and more people will join offline gatherings if they see us happily enjoying our time - make a smile, grab your cardigans, I will take a photo of you and your new clothes, I'll upload them now on the community website . . . Brown uploaded the photo on the spot and refreshed the webpage to see new comments. A number of members who haven't participated in such offline gatherings showed interest on this meeting and confirmed that they will join the next meeting for sure . . . (Fieldnote, June 2011)*

Brown says that he is “living together” in the same “empire” with people who like

the same brand. Members like Brown are generally insiders or leaders who know what is happening in the community in-depth and are well aware of their behaviour and its possible outcomes, because they are experts in OBC practices. He shows his close feelings towards other members and says that “they are like my real brothers, there’s nothing between us” but he became upset when those members began to neglect community activities, i.e by reducing their numbers of posts and comments, failing to attend offline gatherings, ceasing to purchase the brand products, etc. He meets other close members on most days and enjoys meeting new members and helping them to obtain the items they want. However, knowing that participation is not mandatory and that reciprocity is expected, Brown shows a strong need to be respected and acknowledged by others for his contribution – he says, rather sadly, “*sometimes I feel frustrated when I see people who think that I have to do it, because I am doing it as a favour. It’s not mandatory*”. When he thinks that another member is misbehaving, Brown says, he exerts his power “to protect the empire”:

*I punish them (laugh), I’ll kick him out of the community! I am good at fighting, you know. When they don’t appreciate I am kind of annoyed and think like why am I doing it? But many people are happy because of what I’ve done for them, so that keeps me going on... it’s like we are living in Lacoste world. I wish they like it as I do. I want them to feel obliged to protect this community, like I do.*

Brown’s enjoyment of exercising symbolic power in the community and his desire to be well-known and respected by others, is typical in this perception type. The brand becomes a meaningful instrument that gives him a social position. He also demonstrates perhaps an unhealthy sense of ownership and uses his perceived power to achieve his purpose, which is quite clearly to be respected by others. Hence, tensions arise when other members respond adversely to his attempts to exert his power on others; nevertheless, his devotion to the community effectively attracts new members.

#### **4.4.2 The Workplace**

The second social space is the “workplace”, where members have strong OBC attachments, especially, remarkable identity-based OBC attachments. Unlike in the

“brand empire”, where members are strongly attached to both brand and the social connection, a member’s objective mainly lies in the brand-oriented, functional aspects of the workplace. Members are focused on achieving either shared, or personal, goals in relation to the brand; therefore respect is given to “brand experts”, who can help members to better utilise branded products. The relationship between members is built during the interaction process of information exchanges, which facilitates members’ goal achievement. However, members avoid having overly close relationship with others because, “*it is not the purpose of taking part in an OBC*”. Simon’s remarks paint a picture of this purpose-driven place:

*I do what I can do for the community. I know more (about the brand and related skills) than other people do and I can help them with that. I like people here, but being close in a private way is a different issue. I don't get too close with them because, you know, this is where you come to learn more about Nikon products and to take photos and learn related skills, not just for socialising. (Nikon, Simon, 43 years old, male)*

Simon continues by explaining why he tries to keep his distance from other people, even though he is highly attached to the OBC and is involved in brand-related activities:

*I love our community, but at the same time, I don't want my life to be disturbed by community members. It may sound a bit mean, but I have my own life and the community participation is just part of it. If they want friends, they can do it elsewhere, why in this community? . . . The community has its purpose and we work for that. I don't really have to be personally too close with others, and I try not to, because once you get too close, it's hard to be professional. I have what I want to do, have to do for my career, and this is just one of my activities. Of course I do care what is happening in the OBC, you know I do seminars for free . . . I am just a helper, we just work together under the same brand Nikon, and that's it.*

Simon is a staff member of the OBC and he considers his participation benefits his career in advertising and graphics. Because he is an active member, he only communicates with members who want to learn more about the brand product. In this context, he teaches members photo related skills and also attracts new members to join offline gatherings. Although he appreciates his social connections made during the process, he is not attracted to make strong social bonds with members or to enjoy social status in the community. He rather focuses on what he wants to achieve – which is developing his photography skills, teaching others and co-

working with skilled users. Generally, members in a “workplace” setting are socially active only when it helps them to learn more about the brand and the product. As a passionate learner, James explains why he builds social connections within the community and describes its importance in helping him to achieve his objective:

*Some degree of socialisation is followed (during the OBC participation), it is necessary; we can help each other . . . If we go out to take a photo together, I can meet many people, you know there is something more than what you can do via chatting. Information and benefit that are only available offline face-to-face interaction. So I meet them offline, and then naturally we have to socialise... So in an offline gathering, we tend to talk more than online and get more as well . . . Actually, I can go to any community to get information but I stay in a community where there are people I know because things are a lot easier if you know people there, right? (Nikon, James, 36 years old, male)*

The social bonds members have built in the community facilitate their goal achievement, especially in a collectivistic culture where information is confined to physical events or restricted to personally close people. James understands how to use social capital to obtain instrumental benefits, which he learned from several years of involvement in a variety of OBCs. It is very clear that, in a purpose-driven place, brand and product expertise is the most respected and pursued, and social bonding only operates as a facilitator to improve the circulation of brand-related information.

#### **4.4.3 Second Home**

The third type of consumers’ OBC perception is called “second home”, where members feel an OBC to be like home and social capital is especially valued. The emotional support and comfort they get from other community members becomes a strong motive to stay in an OBC and learn more about the brand. Green shows his deep social and emotional attachment to the place, saying it is like a happy “addiction” for him:

*I just come here to feel comfortable. Whenever I feel stressed, I visit the café. I feel it is like home, sometimes even better than that. I feel relieved by seeing the postings of others that I know... I'd love to stay in the community forever if I can... I became a staff member of the community to help other people in return. There are so many experts with a lot of knowledge so I just enjoy our togetherness. I like Nikon, of course, but it's all about people here, you know what I mean... I can't imagine my life without the community. Whenever I am stressed*



*because of my study or family, I come here to listen to other people's advice and feel better... (Nikon, Green, 19 years old, male)*

Green expresses his attachment to other members within the OBC more strongly than for the brand or even the product. As he acknowledges in the interview, he gets comforts from the community from “family-like” members and appreciates the brand for offering him a chance to meet those “great people”. This social relationship motivates him to post threads that are helpful for others, such as schedules for offline gatherings, photos taken from previous gatherings and lists of participants, as he wants to be recognised as a part of this “family”. It is interesting to note that strong social bonds often create a small inner group, which distinguishes it from the actual OBC. For instance, Brian asserts how precious his small group is in his life:

*But the OBC as a whole, of course I kind of care about it but I'm not that interested like I am in my own small group. It is comfortable; I like it and want to stay here because it's nice. We go for a movie, dine out and even celebrate people's anniversaries together. After all, information doesn't matter, it's the relationship that makes you stay in the community... if somebody asks me, do you want to go for a community offline gathering or your small group gathering, then I can answer without hesitation that I'll definitely go for my own group. I'd say it's like where I'm born, my hometown, a place I can take a rest. People can be jealous or be repulsed because they feel they are isolated but I don't care, the most important thing is my group members' happiness. (Canon, Brian, 45 years old, male)*

Brian's remarks show, however, that such an inner, or sub-, group may have potential perils to an OBC because it may cause other members to feel isolated and leave the community. In order to compensate for this defect, members endeavour to create an amiable environment so that new members can be encouraged to become part of the “family”. Another informant, John (Canon, 45 years old, male), posts a daily diary and describes it as “*a kind of attendance check that I am always here*” in the hope of strengthening the community and making other members feel at home in it. He voluntarily spends his time and effort cultivating a nice home-like atmosphere and says it is “rewarding” to watch the community thriving and the members socialising in it.

#### **4.4.4 Brand Institute**

The fourth type, “brand institute”, shows strong identity-based attachment with little

bond-based attachment. That is, members focus on getting instrumental support and perceive an OBC as an “institute” where they can learn about the brand with very little commitment to social activities. Members contend that, because of the intermediate level of this form of OBC attachment, spending time on community activities that are not directly related to the brand is a “waste of time”. Members regularly attend the place to gather information and communicate with others, but only if it is related to instrumental support. Participants recognise that this place is for their mutual interest and thus they do not value the social network within it. A social relationship in the community, therefore, is something they “have to bear” in order to get what they want; the relationship ends when the purpose is achieved. In this way, members try not to go too deeply into the community activities so that they can leave whenever they achieve their objective.

Ashley shows her perception of an OBC as a “brand institute” where she forms superficial relationship with others and focuses on learning product-related skills:

*They just get what they need and that's all. I may sound a bit cruel but, basically, we meet to satisfy our own needs, right? So why should I sacrifice myself for the community? What do I get in return? No way. I am in this community to learn more about skills to make me take better pictures. Before I used to be a member of another camera community and I left it because it was too focused on socialising and didn't give me any benefit. I learned nothing. People were busy drinking and chatting... I felt like I wasted my time. I like here that I can learn something from others... (Nikon, Ashley, 29 years old, female)*

Ashley then lists the benefits she gets from the community, such as sharing lenses, getting answers to her questions and trading second-hand products. She strongly emphasises the importance of the information she gets from an OBC in order to better use a product. She demonstrates her clear understanding of what she wants from the OBC and her aversion to sacrificing her time for the community itself, or to other people in it, by citing her negative experiences. She contends that, even if she makes a contribution to the community, her efforts will hardly be recognised, and concludes that it is better to focus on her real life career than wasting her time in a way that will not offer a reward. For these reasons, she is only active in brand-related activities, such as sharing information and taking photos together, which helps her to

“take a shortcut to have full knowledge of my camera” and she tries to avoid getting involved in other topics.

Jason also considers socialising as a “waste of time on unproductive activities” and an OBC should be nothing more than a group of people who instrumentally benefit him:

*I love this place but I have my friends and no need to make new ones online. Actually, I don't understand why people are so into the community and post things actively... they are like losers. It's not helping you in any way, you are not paid, and it's not helpful for your career. But thanks to them I get all these benefits, so it's good, I appreciate it... (Diesel, Jason, 24 years old, male)*

Jason degrades OBC committed participants by calling them “losers”, which proves that he does not receive any social value in an OBC. In this way, members try to maximise their benefit in “brand institute” while keeping their distance from other members, which is unlike “second home” where strong social bonds, altruism and empathy dominate.

#### **4.4.5 Brand Theme Park**

The fifth type of perception is called a “brand theme park”, which is a metaphor used to illustrate consumers’ recreational use of an OBC, which is characterised as a place where people create satisfying experience thereby escaping from the stresses of daily life by enjoying its “rides and facilities”. Participants display an intermediate level of bond-based and identity-based OBC attachment, in that a balance between brand-related activities and social connections is, to a certain degree, maintained. Members find such an OBC, where they can chat about a brand and generally relax with other members.

Elliot shows his affection for this sort of OBC and he is full of praise for the pure joy he gets from such an amusing place:

*Nikon has good performance, so I like it, and also, I really like our community people. I didn't have any face-to-face meeting or one to one chat but I can feel it from the website (by*

*looking at other members' posts and comments). I upload photos to show other people and see the reaction of other members. If I get a comment like 'good shot!', it makes my day. It's my hobby these days... the community is like my playground. You 'throw something' and see the reaction of others. If there's no reaction I'll get bored and leave this community, but somebody always responds and it's fun! (Nikon, Elliot, 33 years old, male)*

He acknowledges his reluctance to take part in offline gatherings with other people because he is not a “social” person. Nevertheless, he is attached to the OBC itself through his “virtual” togetherness with other OBC constituents, people who are enjoying a good time under the Nikon camera theme. Members appreciate that they are understood and encouraged in this place with nobody “meddling” with their lives, as Stella says:

*My friends (non-community members) don't understand me. Why do you buy it? It's a waste of money! Stop buying expensive and useless stuff... maybe it looks like that from their perspective. Very annoying... But people here give attention to my collection and are interested in the same things, it is enjoyable. I don't have to worry about being seen as a brand-crazy woman overspending conspicuously because we are all the same. Oh what a relief! Sometimes we have a cup of coffee together and talk about this and that, share things we have, which are nothing for normal people but we know they are special...and time flies. (Lacoste, Stella, 22 years old, female)*

Stella complains that her family members and friends do not understand her consumption desires and she declares that she can show her real interest in the brand only in the OBC. Therefore, she concentrates on sharing her consumption experience with others by displaying her collections, participating in small events and receiving and giving styling tips. Unlike the “brand empire”, where symbolic power dominates, pure “playfulness” is the main characteristic of members who belong to a “brand theme park”.

#### **4.4.6 Shelter**

Even though consumers have come to OBCs because of a shared interest in a brand, social relationships develop and many members acknowledge that they are more attached to the OBC and its constituents than to the brand. Members express feelings akin to being “healed” by the social and emotional support they get from their contacts with participants. Consequently, the author has named the sixth type as a “shelter”, where the dispensing of comfort deriving from social interaction becomes

the most important reason to stay in the community. While members appreciate the brand for being an effective means for building such social connections, brand-related topics are often excluded from their conversation. An excerpt from a post shows how the poster, Jane, was comforted by other constituents:

*You'll remember my posting yesterday saying that I'm gloomy, and so many people gave me comforting comments, messages, text messages and even coffee coupons! They did it to make me feel better... thanks my angels! One day I want to treat you back... I feel like I'm going to cry, burst with happiness. (Lacoste, Jane, 2011.04.21)*

This 23 years old female poster revealed from an interview that she could be solaced and refreshed from others' comments and contended that she can seek refuge from life's difficulties:

*I don't really say such things to my friends or to my family, because you know, there are so many unhappy things in life. If I say everything to them they might think that I'm a loser or I'm grumpy all the time. But it's okay in the community – I can talk about things I am distressed about and then, I kind of relieve my stress and become refreshed by opening my heart to other members like this. (Lacoste, Jane, 23 years old, female)*

Once an active participant but now a lurker, Harry expresses his strong emotional attachment to other members and tells how they influenced his life. It is interesting to note that he actually stopped purchasing the brand products after several months of community participation after following advice from his close friends in the community:

*I haven't missed any kind of offline gatherings so far since my first participation. I really like meeting other people and love them... I feel like I am cured, healed, and they help me a lot. Before I used to be stressed because I wanted to buy so many things. A new Diesel collection, Dsquared jeans and so on. I used to do loads of part time jobs to buy them, and one day I found it pointless and was frustrated... and those older friends (in the OBC) gave me lots of helpful advice to make me live my own life; they told me not to be too obsessed to buy such things, and just to be myself... after that I ceased buying such expensive products that are not affordable. (Diesel, Harry, 28 years old, male)*

He implies that he used to purchase Diesel products to fill his emotional deficiency and his new friends from the community helped him to sort out his problem by giving him warm support and advice. After all, Harry has decided to stop buying Diesel products but keeps visiting the community to meet people he knows and be

relaxed:

*I still love Diesel but I am not very willing to buy it because I know I can't afford it now. I visit the community less often, but I still meet those guys (the informant's friends from the OBC). I often text and call them. We chat in the community chatting room as well, and it gives me comfort and makes me feel a lot better... I can talk about my recent concerns over my life, my career, everything, and I always get something from our talk. I can forget about the pressure of life for a while, too...*

Harry shows how his new friends became more valuable to him than the brand itself and now he reaches them via a number of other channels, such as text messaging, phone calls and SNS. In short, the most important characteristic of a “shelter” place is that the social relationships are considered to be more important than the brand itself, although the brand still remains valuable as a “matchmaker” that contrives meetings between members. Hence, members stay in the OBC because of the people they meet there, who make their lives better.

#### **4.4.7 Information Desk**

Consumers perceive an OBC as an “information desk” when they have a patently low level of attachment to the community and its constituents. These members are only interested in receiving instrumental benefit and in gathering the information they need, knowing that the website is well-equipped with brand-related information and knowledgeable consumers who are ready to answer their questions. Members look for updates, usage tips and other useful information created by others either by reading extant threads and the archives, without contributing anything. These members are not tempted to socialise because what they need can be achieved by clicking a mouse. Interaction between members only happens by way of questions and answers – hence, most postings are purpose-driven and empathetic communication is hard to find. Justin describes his instrumental usage of the community:

*I realised all the information I needed was here, so I joined the community and after that, I visit the community whenever I want to know something about Lacoste products... I rarely see other people's posts if they are not of my interest. I learned a lot from this community, whenever I have a question I can search for it in the community board or if I can't find the*

*answer, I can ask other people in the community. For me it's like a Q&A website, or Lacoste encyclopaedia. There are people who are very into Lacoste and know a lot, and they usually help other people, which is good for me. I don't know them personally but I appreciate that they help me... but I don't go further than that. (Lacoste, 25 years old, male)*

Justin appreciates the members who help other members in the OBC; however, taking part in community activities is not an option for him. Similarly, Joanna says that an OBC is “like a catalogue, even better than official websites because the contents are created by real consumers, so no exaggeration”. She stresses the importance of being a “smart consumer” and says:

*I don't know what's happening between other members because I don't read those threads (off-topic discussions or small talks) but I can see that people are hanging out there. Well it's good to have them (laugh) they are the ones who post what I need. But I don't want to waste my time like that. What would I get in return? It's free labour and the company will get the benefit, but what in return? . . . As long as I keep eyes on this community, I wouldn't be a stupid consumer who is not aware of the possible benefits consumers can get and lose opportunities. We have to be smart consumers. (Diesel, 29 years old, female)*

Likewise, members use an OBC to look for useful information without spending much time on it; thus an OBC becomes an “information desk”.

#### **4.4.8 Brand Pub**

The name “brand pub” is a metaphor implying a casual “dropping-by”. Consumers visit an OBC to hang out with old and new members; they enjoy sharing personal opinions and experiences about a brand and their lives, which is a distinct difference between a “brand pub” and an “information desk”.

Laco illustrates this by describing, with a disarming level of honesty, how he simply enjoys spending spare time with other members:

*I know very well about the brand and what to buy for myself, what suits me... and I have my regular Lacoste store, so I am not interested in information or online offers, not interested in helping other people either. I just want to have a pleasant time...so I often come by to see other people's posts when I have time, and post photos to listen to other people's comments on my styling. I can't visit that often because my life comes first and this community is for my pastime... they give me favourable comments and I enjoy communicating with them. (Lacoste, Laco, 33 years old, male)*

Laco highlights the significance of having a place to “have an easy and pleasant time”; he continues:

*I get exhausted from my work. I work till very late at night because I'm in sales department... no time to shop or meet friends. I just want to get refreshed when I have time, and going out somewhere to meet friends, making appointments, catching up, spend time and money... oh, bother it! On the contrary, I can talk to people in the community whenever I feel bored – browsing and chatting with other members, time really flies. If somebody lives nearby we can have an instant meeting as well and it's fun.*

He clearly feels more comfortable in an OBC than hanging out with his actual friends in offline third places because of the convenient togetherness and shared interest in a brand, which enables them to chatter about various topics without much effort.

In the same vein, Kim (Diesel, 27 years old, male), adds to that the anonymity of this online world, which allows him to show his real self:

*I like watching people's lives (in the community). I would feel really bored if the community disappears because I visit there whenever I am wearied by life. I refresh myself by reading other's small talks on threads and talking to them. I can casually talk about many things and show my real thoughts because I can stay anonymous, it's good that I don't have many close people here. I tend to keep distance from others so that this pleasant moment won't fade away... Anonymity! The power of online.*

Kim uses the community for his social needs and emotional comfort, not just for instrumental needs. The brand has become that mediator that provides him with an audience. Here he explains why he tries to evade close social connections:

*If I become close to somebody in the group and if he is a passionate participant, I will feel very uneasy that I'm not active in the community... I wouldn't be able to come and go at will because I'll feel guilty and sorry to him. I don't want to be in that kind of burden in this place. I just want to be relaxed. Behaving properly, thinking of my face and image... I always have to do that in my office so don't want to do it here. I am happy with my current position.*

He emphasises the virtue of this sort of OBC – that he can break off a relationship without worrying about his image or face. Unlike the “brand empire”, where strong ties dominate and a sense of symbolic power arises, the superficiality of the relationships offered by a “brand pub”, makes members feel comfortable in the ways



they want to.

#### **4.4.9 Brand Museum**

A “brand museum” is a purely nominal OBC, which members, who rarely take part in group discourse, are only weakly attached to. Members hardly perceive an OBC as a VTP because members, who register only to get necessary information, rarely visit again after they have browsed and received they were looking for. Members, therefore, have almost no personal connection with other members as they see the community as just one of many places they occasionally visit to see what is going on.

Daniel (Nikon, 25 years old, male) speaks of his indifference to the OBC:

*Yes, I am registered. I just posted one or two questions and when I've got a notice (alert from the website about a new comment) I went there to check it out. After that, I rarely visited there, very rarely... I have more than ten communities on my Naver community list, and how can I visit all of them that often? I just go there when I need something like... once a week or... sometimes like once a month? I haven't been there for ages.*

Members such as Daniel treat OBCs like a museum, they only visit to browse and after appreciating the “exhibitions”, they rarely come back because they have been there once. Consequently, such members rarely interact with others or leave post or comment on the website.

### **4.5 Summary and Discussion**

This chapter, which demonstrates that an OBC functions as a VTP, categorises members' perceptions into nine VTP types: (i) brand empire, (ii) workplace (iii) second home, (iv) institute, (v) theme park, (vi) shelter, (vii) information desk, (viii) pub, and (ix) brand museum.

The above typology, which is on consumers' subjective perceptions and usage of OBCs, differs from other typologies, which set objective types, such as creation process, size, maturity, transaction, and so forth. This typology, therefore, shows consumers' perspective and categorises a VTP as an imagined space that exists in

consumers' minds. It is formulated by a consumer's own interpretation of, (i) a brand, (ii) an OBC, and (iii) fellow consumers. The typology is based on two principle criteria; firstly, how strongly a consumer is attached to an OBC, and secondly, whether the consumer's involvement is more an identity-based attachment or a bond-based attachment, since members possess both in different degrees; also, both types of attachment are correlated in that a member can hardly possess a high bond-based attachment without having an identity-based attachment, and *vice versa*. In order to visualise the levels of both attachments effectively, this study presented a diamond-shaped diagram to illustrate each type and then it offered excerpts from respondents' posts and interviews, together with comments by the author.

The OBC typology suggested in this chapter shows that, in many cases, Fournier and Lee's (2009) finding that social bond takes priority over brand, has proved to be true. Hence, focusing just on the brand itself by developing an identity-based OBC attachment may be helpful for creating more brand-related information and attracting new consumers, bond-based attachment is possibly a more crucial factor with regard to making an OBC thrive. Seemingly, therefore, non-brand related, or "idle" talk, by socially attached members, in the context of an OBC, play a hugely important role. Also, as bond-based attachment increases, a brand becomes a "matchmaker" when mutual exchanges of emotional support develop.

The author observed that when members' bond-based attachments increased they formed small social units in which they passed the time. However, in such circumstances, the community as a whole may suffer from conflict that can easily grow, either between these different social groups or between extant social group and newcomers. Hence, personal relationships generate tensions in the field that may lead to high drop-out rates. Tuan (1999) drew attention to this in a slightly different context, when he stated that highly placed people may become hostile when they feel there is an attempt to change the OBC, as they are afraid of losing their position or their power. Likewise, this study found that communities characterised by strong social bonds are both more vulnerable to conflict and high member drop-out, and

that an OBC may develop into a community of interest when members focus on sharing their lifestyles rather than on the actual brand. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006), however, reported on the positive influence that small groups with strong ties have on community attachment,

Identity-based attachment, therefore, while they might encourage members to stay in a community when there is an issue with personal relationships (Fournier & Lee, 2009), such social bonds can be a “double-edged sword”. These findings pose a question regarding the tension between social connections and brands, which is the aim of the main study.

It is important to note, though, that consumers constantly change their motivation for participation. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) found that during the participation period, bond-based and identity-based attachments can be developed or decreased through discursive and non-discursive social practices. Notwithstanding that the boundaries within, and between, all kinds of VTPs are permeable and contested, the typology and the literature indicates a selection of OBCs and informants for this ethnographic study.

## **Part II: Social Practices in an OBC**

### **4.6 Introduction**

This part of the chapter will elucidate OBC social practices acquired from in-depth interviews, participants' observations and the web-text analyses of the four selected OBCs. Discovered social practices will be categorised and explained with the excerpts from posts and interviews to illustrate vivid examples. Understanding social practices within OBCs is important in order to understand them as cultural fields where individuals work together and communicate in a continual process of social maintenance or social change. The process of tension and resolution, evolution and stability, power and reciprocity, conflict and emotional support will be illustrated by examining social practices, which will help to understand the complicated and dynamic process of brand meaning negotiation that will be explained in Chapter 5.

### **4.7 Social Practice in OBCs**

The preliminary coding of the data revealed eighteen OBC social practices which fell under five themes. This chapter explored OBC social practices under five themes, (i) brand use, (ii) brand possession, (iii) impression management, (iv) social networking, and (v) OBC nurturing. The following section will explore the following five themes, which appear together with their constituent parts in the Table below.

**Table 13 OBC Social Practices**

<p><b>Brand use</b> Members utilise and adore the branded product. This also includes the grooming ritual (McCracken, 1986).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Nicknaming:</b> Members ‘nickname’ their products. There are generally used nicknames or special nicknames used by individual members.</li> <li>2. <b>Exhibiting:</b> Members show their collection to others.</li> <li>3. <b>Learning and teaching:</b> Members provide information about the usage of product, teach others product-related skills (e.g. techniques, recipes, know-how, etc), help other members when they have problems in relation to brand-related trials (e.g. product failure, customising).</li> <li>4. <b>Brand constellation:</b> Consumption of related or complementary products to make the best use of brand products.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Brand possession</b> Members acquire branded products and display them.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. <b>Craving:</b> Members show a craving to possess a certain branded product</li> <li>6. <b>Purchasing:</b> Sharing of information regarding pre-purchase (e.g. cheaper way to buy, specification), purchase (e.g. purchasing experience), and post-purchase experience (e.g. after sales service, problems).</li> <li>7. <b>Purchase support:</b> Substitutes for purchasing (for people who cannot buy a product), group buying (e.g. cheaper price, easier purchase), buying and selling second-hand products, etc.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Impression management</b> Members actively attempt to change other people’s brand image.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. <b>Evangelising:</b> Recommending the branded product to other consumers</li> <li>9. <b>Justifying:</b> Defending a brand against another brands or negative rumours</li> <li>10. <b>Consoling:</b> Comforting each other when members have negative brand experience. More emotional approach than justifying practice.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Social networking</b> Members build social bonds through social networking practices.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. <b>Empathising:</b> Lending emotional or physical support to other members for non-brand-related life issues.</li> <li>12. <b>Sharing and gifting:</b> Sharing belongings or giving gifts to other members (e.g. food, self-made accessories).</li> <li>13. <b>Appreciation:</b> Members who get help from others (instrumental or emotional) show their gratitude on the web.</li> <li>14. <b>Online and offline gathering:</b> Members have online gatherings (e.g. chatting, synchronous commenting) and offline gatherings (formal and informal).</li> </ol>
<p><b>OBC Nurturing</b> Members try to make an OBC thrive through these social practices.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15. <b>Welcoming:</b> Members help newcomers to get used to the community.</li> <li>16. <b>Anti-commoditising:</b> Opposition to profit-earning trading to keep the professional sellers away from the community.</li> <li>17. <b>Residing:</b> Members are connected to the community for most of their time with their electronic devices.</li> <li>18. <b>Self-purifying (governing, community management):</b> Members try to solve the problems such as intragroup conflict and flaming by themselves.</li> </ol>

Source: Developed by the author

#### 4.7.1 Brand Use

Social practices that are related to the actual brand use in life are included in brand use category. Members show their attachment to brands and branded items by nicknaming, exhibiting, learning and teaching.

#### **4.7.1.1 Nicknaming**

As Schembri (2009) also mentioned in the Harley-Davidson case, nicknames – or affectionate names – are commonly used by members. At a community level, they are also given to specific brands or products and become a part of community language. Generally, nicknames facilitate conversation and generate attachment. Jamy, 39 years old, Nikon, explains:

*I was using a compact digital camera and then I wanted to use a DSLR (Digital single-lens reflex camera). I've got registered here (Nikon community) and gave up to participate in a minute. I had no clue what they are talking about. I thought I knew about digital cameras! But then I've realised that I couldn't understand what they are talking about because I didn't know the words they use. I couldn't find any postings that explain the meaning of the jargon, and it was impossible to understand postings like 'point eight is the best value for money'...*

He continues to describe how things have changed for him after learning the new terms:

*But now I know everything and I always use the jargon as it is more convenient to use shorter words. And people who are interested in DSLR all know about it, if you don't know these nicknames you'd better learn. People have special attachment to their products so they can't help themselves but nicknaming their babies. Nowadays there are so many nicknames that some people wrote special postings to explain them...*

He believes that members who do not know the nicknames are indifferent towards the product. Threads explaining the nicknames help newcomers and to stop them from becoming frustrated and leave the community. Only after adopting the new terms can a member have a “native-like” conversation with others and feel one of a kind.

#### **4.7.1.2 Exhibiting**

By uploading photos and adding detailed explanations, many members show their newly purchased items or their collections and how they use them in daily life. Many readily admitted their need for compliments, but some also stated that they liked to help others get useful information. Others said showing-off doesn't bother them, especially if the are postings with expensive or huge collections. Many happily join conversations to show respect to the posters, while others became jealous and

“flamed” – a hostile, insulting reaction, often involving profanity. When asked to illustrate the good feeling described above, an interviewee expressed how satisfied he is when his ‘babies’ are praised by other brand lovers, he states:

*I just want to show them (his collections) because I have them... sharing with other people what I've got. Of course I am already happy to enjoy my collection at home but I think it's even better when I share it with others who know its value. As the saying goes, joy is doubled and sorrow is halved when shared... I think so too. When somebody says my collection is pretty great then I feel a sense of satisfaction as my babies are complimented. School parents might feel like this (when their kids are complimented by others) (laugh). I want to boast of my babies, want them to be seen because I love them. It might help others to get more information as well (Diesel, Robert, 26 years old, male)*

Some members flaunt their belongings, which they believe reflect their economic status; this makes some participants feel uncomfortable. However, such possessions are seen as cultural capital in an OBC. One informant shows his respect for this here:

*He (another member) really has a huge collection, it shows his affection to the brand. His taste is very unique though and there are things like oh, I can't wear it... but it is just enjoyable to see. I learned a lot from his threads and it's fun too... I think he is the best in Lacoste. It needs a lot of effort to take photos, post, write comments... all this comes from his love and affection, nobody is paying for it, so it makes him even greater. I don't know him very well personally, but he must be a nice guy to love Lacoste so much... (Lacoste, Alexander, 25 years old, male)*

It is noteworthy that members do not elaborate on customisations in OBCs, it is the actual collection that is symbolically personified. For instance, some members describe their collections as ‘precious babies’; they give meticulous care and attention to maintaining them and confess that it ‘breaks their heart’ when they are damaged. Indeed, prior to exhibiting their collections, posters ritualistically arrange and decorate them, the choice of composition reflecting their expertise and taste.

#### **4.7.1.3 Learning and Teaching**

Members provide information about the usage or care of products – after service grooming – by teaching others product-related skills, such as user techniques, maintenance know-how, etc. and they help with problems found in brand-related trials, such as product failure, customising, etc. Such information exchanges allow members to make full use of the brand and become engaged with the product, whilst

building relationships with others. One experienced member states that sharing information is reciprocal:

*The reason for helping other people voluntarily is because of my own experience. I had a tough time, I have this knowledge from that experience but at that time I was embarrassed, because of the same issue. I have a belief that there should be somebody helping others to make full use of the product... (Canon, Michael, 33 years old, male)*

He stated that he shares purchasing tips, photo skills and his experience of new camera bodies and their accessories. He, together with other members, holds voluntary seminars on the subject and they even let others use their collections to help them; one interviewee remarked:

*One of the best things about the Nikon community is that we can exchange lenses as we all use a Nikon body. A camera body is not very difficult to choose but for the lenses... you can't be sure if you should get it or not before you actually use it. Also, we can compare different Nikon bodies, analyse pros and cons and learn a lot from each other by taking photos together. I really learned a lot from that and it made me more engaged in community activities and made my Nikon more precious, as I became better. (Nikon, James, 36 years old, male)*

Learning and teaching practices attract new-comers and makes a community thrive. Many participants stated that this functional and emotional support was why they became involved in their communities.

#### **4.7.1.4 Brand Constellations**

Although the focus of an OBC is its particular brand, participants often consume other complementary or competitive brands at the same time; such simultaneous consumption is named “brand constellation” practice (Lange, 2005). Examples of this are Big Mac and Coca-Cola where consumers choose idiosyncratic combinations of items from their favourite brands. However, the OBC focus brand always comes first, since, being the dominant brand, its products are perceived by consumers to be necessary for their goal fulfilment, whereas the complementary brands may vary.

Brand constellations, in contrast to brand extensions, require a high level of product fit and may consist of more than two brands, such as camera equipment and travel.



The term “brand constellation” has been used instead of “product constellation” because product category membership is one of the primary associations of a brand (Keller, 1993), making it reasonable to include product-level considerations as part of the brand constellation construct. Consumers initiate a decision-making process to find a brand constellation that will fulfil their consumption goal at two levels, (i) at the product level, and (ii) at the brand level (Lange, Selander, & Å berg, 2003), hence, an acceptable fit between the brands is necessary for making a brand constellation choice.

**Table 14 Brand Constellation in OBCs**

	<b>Related brands / products</b>
<b>Diesel</b>	Premium jean brands (e.g. DSquared, Dior homme, Lacoste, Nudie jeans) and other accessories from fashionable and luxury brands
<b>Lacoste</b>	Bean pole, polo (only a few appears as it is strictly prohibited for a manager from the company to wear them)
<b>Nikon</b>	Canon, Laika, travel, restaurants, and other DSLR accessories
<b>Canon</b>	Nikon, Laika, travel, restaurants, and other DSLR accessories

For instance, the Diesel brand i.e. luxury, high quality, fashionable and trendy, is associated in value with other luxury jean brands or fashion brands; such related, and complementary, items thereby helping members to better utilise the products and create brand constellations. Nikon and Canon members are more focused on life-related topics, such as travel and daily life, as their DSLRs become powerful tools used to share the experience; what gives them cultural capital is not only what they possess, but how they take pictures. The following excerpt is from an informant who enjoys brand constellation:

*Yuyu really has a lot of good items. Burberry prosum coats, things like that...Dsquared, Dior homme, everything we want, brands that are popular in our Diesel OBC..... Not only about Diesel but other things are good to know as well. This is how you extend your boundary. Though the root always stays in Diesel I always look sideways at other things... other people are the same... though we always come back (laugh). (Diesel, Luke, 25 years old, male)*

This informant acknowledged that consuming more expensive brands than Diesel differentiates him by giving him status, even though the focus of the OBC he is a

member of is Diesel. During the interaction process, members gradually learn the symbolic meaning of the brand from other members and what they should do with it. Influenced by these practices, consumers are 'educated' about what other brands go well with the brand:

*So I began to get to know... before I just knew a bit about Diesel and had no idea about Dsquared, nudie jeans... I knew nothing. How I should match the items, what makes my jean look better, which brand matches well with this, oh I shouldn't match this item with this... these things, I knew them thanks to Diesel OBC. So when you go out, you just know, oh he belongs to Diesel OBC.... From the way he looks (laugh) Diesel jeans, Lacoste shirts, Bottega Venetta wallet, and a watch... say, Taghauer? Anyway, you know the style. Even though you are not wrapped with Diesel, you wear items that have something to do with Diesel. (Diesel, Tyler, 33 years old, male)*

Another informant showed how brand constellation can personalise the brand for the member:

*Diesel with Converse gives a young cheerful image that doesn't care about the formality. Diesel with Dolce and Gabbana sneakers says that you are rich and trendy, want to show off a bit? Diesel with New Balance is very common these days everybody wears like that, it gives me the impression that he made a safe choice, nothing special... you say different things with the same jean. (Diesel, Alex, 21 years old, male)*

Brand constellations change over time as the meaning of the brand changes due to cultural and socioeconomic fluctuations – and also as consumers get older. One experienced member states:

*The brand has a specific character. Now Diesel is kind of common but when it first arrived in Korea there was a brand new market – premium jean market. Diesel was more than double or triple the price of other jeans, and the OBC was established in this context, fashion-savvy people who want to share information about Diesel – that's why members are very interested in other trendy brands as well. And naturally, as you get older, your style changes – so you tend to talk about different brands too... Actually, what else can you say about Diesel besides style, washing, size, repairing, washing, shopping route? Not many things to talk about if you don't diverge from the topic. (Diesel, Kang, 21 years old, male)*

#### **4.7.2 Brand Possession**

Possessing a branded item is indispensable to OBC members. Members express their cravings, share information and support each other to possess the brand item. These possession-related practices are included in this category.

#### **4.7.2.1 Craving**

OBC members post about what they are eager to purchase, showing their love towards a brand and branded items they justify future purchase. By confessing their *Ppomppu* (Korean slang for a strong craving to get a product) these participants share their personal stories and often ask for other members' opinions about their cravings:

*Canon EOS Club, 2012.09.20 [Chatting] Title: Ppomppu to buy a wide-angle lens*

*I've been craving for a wide-angle lens, but was just like 'ok one day I will...' But after my Saipan trip I began to feel the urge to buy one and this time, taking the scenery from Nak-san park, I've definitely got the Ppomppu...haha Do I have to buy it or not?"*

Members admit their cravings, not only to be able to ask others' opinions but to share the passion; one informant confesses:

*I always get Ppomppoo whenever I come here ... so many things that I like! Sometimes I see really nice things from outside and when I become really into it I post a thread, how do you guys think about this? I really want it! Even though I don't actually get it, well in many cases I do get those stuffs, it is nice to share the feeling that I want something so badly. (Canon, Thomas, 33 years old, male)*

Participants get synergy from others empathy, especially because the OBC is a reference group for them. Owners encourage the cravers to join the crew and share the joy of decision-making. One member expresses his excitement from getting the item and looking for other members to join him:

*Canon EOS Club 2011.06.23: Hey!! I've impulsively bought "samsiki", as soon as I came back home I pressed the check-out button, it just possessed me... sometimes I really fear my initiative on purchasing! So now... is there anybody else who'll get the Ppomppu with me? I should tie up my hand beside the desk for a while (to prevent him from purchasing).*

Craving can be contagious; through the empathy of others when receiving first-hand experience and advice, other member's passions are easily transferred.

#### **4.7.2.2 Purchasing Information Sharing**

Participants ask other people information or opinion on branded items to make a 'smart choice' because OBC is a reliable reference group for receiving advice from

experts. Members share their own purchasing experience, such as why they made their own choice, how they did the market research, what the available offers were and what the product specifications were, etc. In terms of fashion items, what sort of occasion it is suitable for, how to coordinate it with other clothes or accessories, etc. Other items of information may well be product news, such as the release date, what similar products are there in other countries and price comparisons. One informant explains how this sort of information sharing practice has enhanced his brand experience:

*Before I just purchased without really knowing it, but by reading the posts I get to know more information. Before I just visited the store and bought, but now I know the model and the washing of the jeans and I also know the trend. In the store they usually recommend me a size that gives me enough room around the waist. But in the community people recommend a tight size, so that the pants can be stretched. After trying it from an offline store, I go online to purchase it ... it's almost half the price. Like that, I get useful information. (Diesel, Robert, 26 years old, male)*

Participants get information from other websites, or create their own from first-hand experience and create an expanding dialogue around it. One member explains how influential this sort of information is to him:

*I actually used Nikon when I was using a small digital camera, almost ten years ago. From then I knew that Nikon's product is good, from my experience. When beginners first join the community, including myself, the first question is: I want to buy a DSLR so which one is better, Canon or Nikon? Which lens is good? And community members give various reasons and comparisons. When I see those threads I feel like the brand recommended by them is more reliable. Especially from the DSLR people who listen to their friends who know a lot about this field, it's too expensive to easily buy and throw away. (Nikon, Green, 19 years old, male)*

In these ways, members discover the most suitable product for themselves by continuing to interact with knowledgeable others – i.e. through “mutual” or “parasocial relationships”. This information sharing practice attracts newcomers; although a number of “free riders” leave after receiving information.

Newcomers are cautious when they first join this information sharing practice because they are not yet used to the community culture and can too easily offend against the community norm. They are, therefore, recipients of information from the

beginning and they take a full part in the practice only after appreciating the group norms. One informant from Diesel OBC declares that he tries to keep silent on the OBC because of his lack of knowledge:

*I wanted to get information and see real photos... I rarely make comments and just solve my curiosity... because somehow, I don't have much information or knowledge about clothes... because people who are knowledgeable posts... I don't make many comments because I don't want to disturb others, I only comment on the threads that are not related to the clothes, say about lifestyle. (Lacoste, Joseph, 24 years old, male)*

#### **4.7.2.3 Purchase Support**

As mentioned earlier, participants help each other to purchase the brand items and credibility is built from OBC participation. Members are against direct commercial activities and sellers who register in order to sell products and pretend they are real consumers are strongly criticised and often rejected. Purchase support includes, (i) purchasing branded items on behalf of other members for other members' convenience, (ii) purchase together for the benefits, such as cheaper prices and ease of purchase, and (iii) second-hand product trading. Consumers commonly trade branded products, or related accessories, since they perceive an OBC to be a reliable place, especially because they can check the participation history of the seller. This sort of trading helps an OBC to attract participants and keep them visiting the site. One experienced member emphasises the importance of this support:

*A community can solve everything with this (trading). I first joined the community activity by uploading photos and getting comments, then I bought the body because I wanted to get to know what it is. After that, I wanted something better but I didn't know what to get and how to. In Korea you have to go to Namdaemoon to sell the product or post it in a second-hand community, but here (the OBC) we share photos and at the same time we can sell bodies and lenses, so it's more credible and can get better things for sure. (Canon, Cole, 26 years old, male)*

This social practice helps an OBC to thrive by providing utilitarian benefits; deception is strictly forbidden by the practice of self-purifying (see 4.6.5 OBC Nurturing). If a member cheats on another, he is reported and removed from the community.

### **4.7.3 Impression Management**

Consumers defend themselves through impression management practice by evangelising the brand, justifying their purchases and consulting other members who have negative experiences.

#### ***4.7.3.1 Evangelising***

Members, who strongly believe in the brand, try to convince others to buy and use it; hence, by actively spreading its strong points they become voluntary advocates of the brand. Because these members are not sponsored, or associated, with the company their beliefs are considered to be trustworthy. Interestingly, they do not preach to outsiders but to newcomers and other participants in order to convince them to purchase the branded items. They do not try to convert non-members as it is often considered to be meddlesome and, anyway, is likely to be disregarded; hence, they only preach to like-minded people. One 29 year old Lacoste member says:

*Lacoste is really good so I always buy it for my girlfriend although she is not a huge fan. At the beginning she didn't understand me but now she kind of understands me but is still not a fan, so I stopped giving her Lacoste. I don't want to persuade others to like Lacoste, it's my taste and they have their own... I don't want to ruin relationships by forcing others to like what I'm fond of. (Lacoste, William, 29 years old, male)*

Such members are cautious about convincing outsiders to purchase the brand, however, in the community they express their feelings without reservation by storytelling and by declaring how the brand enriches their own lives.

#### ***4.7.3.2 Justifying***

Members defend themselves from negative rumours about the brand and justify their purchase and love for the brand. If someone criticises a purchase, members become brand advocates by defending the brand and themselves; however they do not claim to be objective but they will use subjective words such as “we love the brand”, “it's always a good purchase”, “the brand is always right”. One informant exemplifies this:

*People always ask me, which one do you prefer? Nikon or Canon? I explain the pros and cons of each... I always try to be objective but I automatically become biased towards Nikon because I use it! Why would I have bought it? Because I think it is better! So it is natural... you shouldn't ask a Nikon user a question about preference (laughs) (Nikon, Elliot, 33 years old, male)*

When a negative issue appears, even after acknowledging that the report is true, to some extent members still advocate the brand. A 28 year old member exemplifies his personal experience of defending his taste:

*I think the quality of Lacoste is worse than before and the price keeps increasing... I don't think it's good value for money but the design is really good, I love their designs, the logo, so even though other people sometimes bug me, like, why do you buy it? You are paying for the brand name... but I don't agree. Replicas look cheap, I want the real one. (Lacoste, Justin, 25 years old, male)*

#### **4.7.2.3 Consoling**

Consumers who remain silent without complaining about the brand or service to a company may share their negative experience in the public space of its OBC and get advice or emotional comfort from other members. In this thread below, the poster's negative experience is sublimated into a positive one with the help of other members.

*I bought it last year and I paid like 400.000 won, and I found it in the outlet just a few months after and was 250,000! I asked the staff member and they said it just works like that and that the item was popular when it was sold in retail price... I feel betrayed, why do they send the product to the outlet so quickly? They always do that, don't feel bad... what can they do? You guys should wear it as much as possible so that you can get your money's worth!*

- *Here's the same stupid ^^;; I bought it even later than you did, so don't feel too bad! But I do agree with the staff member that it worth the money – it was really popular and really pretty it totally worth it! And you have already worn it for several months, that's great.*
- *Oh now I feel a lot better that I have my colleagues ^^ I was so upset yesterday I felt like Lacoste played on me! Yeah you are right, the shirt is pretty and it worth the money – I shouldn't feel bad about it. Thanks for the advice!*

The poster clearly accepts other participants' comments, whereas he was not persuaded by the sales person in the store. A “waste of money” became a “worthwhile consumption” after he received consolation.

#### **4.7.4 Social Networking**

Social networking includes social practices that mainly focus on building relationships among the members to gain social capital.

##### **4.7.4.1 Empathising**

Members identify themselves with feelings they see in other members' posts and lend emotional or physical support to them on non-brand-related life issues, such as careers, relationships, birthdays, etc., which is one of the main reasons why members stay in the community. A number of informants emphasised the value of empathising practice in their lives. One informant in Nikon OBC remarks:

*I am relatively younger than others so they kind of care about me. Like, this is better, why don't you try this one, at your age this thing is important... if it were not for them, where can I get these advices? If I were not a community member, I must be seeing people at the same age. But this community enables me to meet a huge range of people, from teenagers to fifties... so I can hear more interesting stories than I can normally get, and it helps me to live my life. This kind of relationship makes the community more valuable. (Nikon, Green, 19 years old, male)*

Another 37 years old informant says:

*Sometimes it's better to post than talking to real life friends because I can get a lot of support... people empathise with me and are really nice because we belong to the same community. (Canon, Baek, 39 years old, male)*

This mentoring, or emotional support, which may occur between unfamiliar members, is in the community spirit and it helps members of different ages and skills to build close relationships and deal with real issues, while maintaining a degree of anonymity and distance. Also, because online members are not involved in other's daily lives, they can offer unbiased insights..

##### **4.7.4.2 Sharing and Gifting**

Members often share their belongings and give gifts to other members, such as food, self-made accessories, free gifts, etc, an intracommunal gift giving that creates



harmony and is not associated with dyadic gifts – that is gifts intended to maintain or deepen an existing relationship participants share what they have with people in need willingly (Belk, 1976; Caplow, 1982; Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel, 1999).

The following excerpt from a post describes one type of gifting practice.

*I've got a free bag from Lacoste, a gift for VIPs, and also got a lot of free Lacoste key rings, I know I bought a lot! So I came to share it with other Lacoste members~ Message me if you want, first come first serve~ ^^ anyone who has commented on my posting before! (Oliver, 2011. 06.22)*

In many cases, to avoid “cherry pickers”, members have to hit a target before they can take part in this practice, such as attaining a certain number of visits and postings. Members who are highly attached to the community usually initiate this practice. The sharing and gifting practice is more symbolic than functional and recipients generally show their appreciation with a ‘thank you’ message:

*You know, some people just want to get some benefit, but it's important to our lives... those little warm human affection. This is just a little snack or a not that expensive voucher, but it just makes your day. (Canon, Samuel, 29 years old, male)*

In summary, gifting is a crucial practice, since it creates or maintains strong social relationships in the OBC.

#### **4.7.4.3 Appreciation**

Appreciation lubricates other social practices by giving the members emotional rewards. A poster easily loses motivation to help others if his efforts are not appreciated. Hence, to make the community thrive, experienced members comment on postings and recognise the efforts of the posters to encourage new or would-be members. As one informant states:

*I wrote a post that I bought these clothes... in my case, actually everybody will be the same, whether the purpose of posting is to show off or to share information, if there is no comment... I can see the number of hits but no comments ... that really bothers me. It'll be the same for everybody... I made my effort to make the post and there is no reaction... it hurts me. Of course I did it because I wanted to do, nobody asked me to do so. Maybe that's*

*why... If somebody comments on my post I really appreciate it, so I try to comment on other people's threads too. (Lacoste, Laco, 33 years old, male)*

This remark shows why he tends to comment on a specific person's post.

The author found that members tend to avoid negative or sarcastic comments on threads; here, Harry reports:

*If the comment is offensive the poster erases it. I know there are many pretentious comments... if the photo doesn't look good somebody says so the poster re-posts it. After all, you want to get good comments back from others. Mine was favourable so you should be friendly, so that nobody hurts. (Diesel, Harry, 26 years old, male)*

It is clear that members feel friendlier to people who have shown interest in them. Experienced members know that one way of motivating newcomers is to respond positively to postings, as Simon says:

*For me comments are really important. If there's no comment, I just don't feel like posting, I can see from the hits that people have read my posting and then they don't talk back to me – I feel ignored. We are social animals, so we value having a relationship with others ... everything begins from making the relationship. And relationship in an online community is all about talking back. (Nikon, Simon, 43 years old, male)*

#### **4.7.4.4 Offline Gatherings – Instant Meetings**

Besides online gatherings, such as chatting and synchronous commenting, members often hold formal and informal offline gatherings with cliques forming between close people via various communication channels, like smart phones and computer messaging creating a sense of co-existence. These offline gatherings became places of opportunity where virtuality and reality meet. A formal offline gathering may begin from a notice posted by a manager, while informal gatherings are initiated by members. However, offline gatherings do not necessarily guarantee strong permanent ties or continuous participation, since many members prefer the anonymity of online participation and decide to stay online, as Joanna found:

*I didn't really like the gathering because there were random people talking about general topics. As Korean society is always like that, people were trying to find links between them through universities and living areas – for me, there was no bond of sympathy. And maybe*

*because it is a fashion community people were bragging, trying to show off what they have or they are wearing – for instance, putting a key of an expensive car on the table or wearing designer labled clothes from head to toe... like that..... after the gathering, I found myself reading those people's posts – people who had good images. Other people's post, after the gathering, I don't even read. I felt like they want to be the lifestyle of Diesel mania but they are not part of Diesel mania. People full of vanity. That was my feeling. (Diesel, Joanna, 29 years old, female)*

Some people are sceptical about building strong relationships in OBCs without focusing on the brand itself:

*That community focused on promoting friendship. Apart from a few people, many others were ignorant of the product. One person who stayed in the community for more than one year knew almost nothing, was still using auto mode! (Nikon, Ashley, 29 years old, female)*

Offline gathering activates online participation and make OBCs stronger by generating more diverse topics and building relationships:

*I really need offline gatherings and I like meeting people. It also helps me a lot, I can get a lot more and a lot better information when I have face-to-face meeting. One thing I can be sure about is that my online participation has decreased as I ceased to join offline gatherings. For me, to take part in a Nikon community I should upload photos, and I need to go somewhere to take photos. Of course I can take photos of my daily life but I will have fairly limited subjects if I don't go somewhere else through offline gatherings...and for members who have met offline actively participate in the community because this is the only place to talk about the same subject during the weekdays, because most people are office workers including myself. This is the only place to talk about their shared activities and photos taken during the gatherings. (Nikon, James, 36 years old, male)*

Members take part in offline gatherings after getting to know each other online. Most prefer small-sized informal gatherings than larger official ones:

One informant states:

*I joined offline gatherings from the initiation of this community, more than five years now. I usually join group gatherings more than three times a month... at first I preferred informal instant meetings that have fewer members. Formal ones are initiated by the community itself and this kind of instant gatherings we can arrange by ourselves. Official ones you only meet once a month or once a quarter... (Diesel, Kim, 27 years old, male),*

Instant gatherings result in members becoming more attached to the community by making it a part of their lives. Noticeably, when asked to express their motives and feelings about the OBC registration and online group interactions, and to compare

their offline and online social experiences, most described an ephemeral quality to their online communal relationships, which have weak ties. Fernback (Fernback, 2007, p. 63) described online community life as “convenient togetherness without real responsibility”.

As Ryan indicates:

*I just get information. I don't want to get involved in offline activities or stuff, I am interested in the brand not the people there (Diesel, Ryan, 28 years old, male)*

However, the author also found a number of people who enjoy online gatherings because of time and cost restrictions and also because they wish to build close relationships. These members can choose between having simultaneous group chatting or real-time commenting. If they are satisfied with this they may keep interacting with others without offline gatherings.

#### **4.7.5 OBC Nurturing**

Experienced members work on both making the community thrive and that it fulfils the consumers' interests. This includes welcoming, advice regarding anti-commoditising, residing and self-purifying. These practices are closely related to OBC management.

##### **4.7.5.1 Welcoming**

The author's notion of a welcoming practice is in line with Schau et al.'s (2009) description, which is to greet new members and help them to learn about brand and how to socialise.:

*A good community is where people compliment each other, consulate each other, where there is joy and politeness. How many comments do you think you'll get if you upload a photo on Canon OBC? There are thousands of members and usually you'll get like 5. Despite of hundreds of hits... that shouldn't happen. (Canon, Brian, 45 years old, male)*

Most Korean communities require a new member to write a greeting to other

members so they might feel a sense of co-existence and we-ness. Indeed, some members check attendances as if each other's presence proves their own existence.

#### **4.7.5.2 Anti-Commoditising**

Members are made aware that an OBC is a place for consumers and that they are opposed to the site being used for trading; hence they try to keep professional sellers away:

*I often see people from Internet shopping malls, they disguise themselves as normal members but you can tell if you are experienced in these communities. The way they write or the photos they take have subtle differences... it is hard to kick them out because they do it very carefully. I don't like those people. An OBC is for brand lovers and I don't want my place to be contaminated by other people's promotions. They're not even from Lacoste (Lacoste, Laco, 33 years old, male)*

Members consider that commercialised websites are not reliable and want the OBC not to be "contaminated" by external forces such as professional sellers or "annoying admans". Laco continues:

*I don't like the community to be sponsored. You are influenced by the sponsor in some way.. Otherwise they'll stop sponsoring the community. So the manager makes events like purchasing together or writes fake reviews. So the website becomes less credible.*

As consumers are familiar with OBC culture, they have a keen sense of figuring out the commercial people:

*I know there are marketers in the community who try to make their brand famous among members. I've done it before too. Managers do it, they get registered and pretend they are normal consumers and post photos, pretending they don't know that much about the brand, saying I think this is really nice and the price is reasonable... The way they write is different, too many compliments. (Diesel, Jason, 24 years old, male)*

#### **4.7.5.3 Residing**

Members are connected to the community for most of their time by electronic devices, which, due to their rapid development means they can see new posts and respond to them immediately wherever they are:

*Yeah, right now as well, the Naver system lets me know if I get any comments on my post. I have an application and if I go to my news the system tells me who commented on my post or comments, so I revisit the page to check them out and response. (Diesel, Robert, 26 years old, male)*

The longer they reside in the community, they gain more expertise and build capitals as they read almost all the posts and make threads. This is an important practice to be 'named' in the community, and an OBC activity depends on the number of people who reside in the community. One informant indicates that it is like an addiction:

*I just habitually go to the community whenever I can use computers. I use mobiles as well, when I am outside home. If I can live there I just want to stay there forever... (Nikon, Green, 19 years old, male)*

A number of members regarded online and offline social interaction as indistinguishable:

*We do offline gatherings and post (offline gathering) epilogues online so that other people can see them and join us later. We keep contacting online because we have our own vocations so we can't meet like everyday. But we feel kind of connected as we can get in touch with other people whenever we want. And we can meet up on the weekends. (Canon, Baek, 39 years old, male)*

When asked to describe what makes the OBC home for the members, Baek continues:

*I guess it's ours. We own it and we have all the things, all my things in here.... It's my refuge and I feel comfortable in it, and I know that it's my place. I know it's mine and I can do what I want with it or in it, and just be at peace.*

Note how these informants refer to both spatial and sociocultural orders of VTP. Such references to senses of togetherness and inner-group preferences are highly easternised conceptualisations of place.

#### ***4.7.5.4 Self-Purifying***

Self-purifying represents members' attempts to solve the problems, such as intragroup conflict and "flaming" by themselves. Members also verify real and fake products, report impolite users or commercials and remove those people from the

community – indeed, they feel a sense of ownership of their community by nurturing and to revitalising it and look out for people trying to manipulate it.

As Brown states:

*This is Lacoste OBC, of course other brands can be mentioned but if one really loves the brand then go to that community! Why in this community, isn't it? This is a place for Lacoste, with people who like Lacoste, and one doesn't have to praise other brands here. That's not right. (Lacoste, Brown, 35 years old, male)*

Another interviewee emphasises the importance of staying in focus with the brand:

*There was a famous blogger, I saw the posting from the OBC, he is a really famous one who loves photo. And he wrote a posting in his blog that OBC is so useless in enhancing photo skill that we just socialise... Because we are basically a camera community, we should be focused on taking photos, that's his point. (Canon, Richard, 33 years old, male)*

Flaming, trolling, advertising and spamming are strictly forbidden to prevent members dropping out. Members voluntarily become watchdogs when they find problematic behaviours:

*Every little helps, for instance, the government may be in charge of cleaning the roads but in front of our houses we should clean them by ourselves... managers or staff can't check everything, there are too many postings to do so. So it is important we don't just ignore them but voluntarily report them so that something can be done. (Diesel, Alex, 21 years old, male)*

Kim says:

*There are some participants who didn't participate for a year and come back, and post loads of advertisements and stuff. There is no exception; we report them so that those morons cannot write anything more on the board. (Diesel, Kim, 27 years old, male)*

Members are also critical of any company misbehaviour and they keep their eyes on the company-related people or marketers, since they are aware of a company's attempt to exploit labour or manipulate information:

*I saw the posting before that they are hiring people for something, thought it was a monitoring job but it was promoting personnel. I have downloaded the form and it asks me for my facebook address, twitter address, social activities, things like that and I knew they were trying to promote the brand. They only pay like 30,000 won (250 usd) for that! They are*

*exploiting young people. So I raised this issue to other close people. (Lacoste, William, 29 years old, male)*

Sometimes there is conflict between OBC participants and OBC managers or staff members; members have been known to change the manager:

John states:

*Now the whole staff members have changed, the members were against them saying, 'even though you made it, it is not your community' so the manager voluntarily resigned, we voted a new manager, and after the incident the community is so dead. Few offline gatherings, almost nobody's there. (Canon, John, 45 years old, male)*

#### **4.8. Summary and Discussion**

This chapter explored OBC social practices under five themes, (i) brand use, (ii) brand possession, (iii) impression management, (iv) social networking, and (v) OBC nurturing. The first category – “brand use” – illustrated how members utilise, groom and adore the brand products. Members nicknamed their items, exhibited their collection, actively learn and taught brand-related skills and purchased matching items from different brands to make the best use of their products. The second category – “brand possession” – relates to product acquisition and display. Consumers declared their cravings for particular brand item, shared information and supported each other’s purchase. The third category – “impression management” – concerns members attempting to change other people’s perceptions of the brand. Participants take part in evangelising, justifying and consoling practices to improve image of the brand they love. The fourth category – “social networking” – involves empathising, sharing and gifting, appreciating others’ efforts, being involved in offline gatherings, and social bonding. The fifth category – “OBC nurturing” – is about members’ endeavours to make the community thrive by welcoming newcomers and protecting it from professional merchants to help members enjoy their togetherness without them feeling pressured by the brand company commercialising it. The stress here is that members reside in the community whenever they have time, answer members’ questions, solve intragroup conflict and



“flaming” problems by themselves, and finally, set a friendly atmosphere.

Excerpts from the interviews were presented to illustrate each practice and to show that OBC is fully dynamic and that it is not always about consensus or intimacy, it is about understanding that participants are bound together by a need to accomplish their own goals through working together and communicating in a continual process of social maintenance or change. It is also about realising that idiosyncratic individuals may interpret the same social practice quite differently. For instance, a member may take part in exhibiting practice to show off their collections, while another may do so in order to give detailed information about the product feature. As Markus and his colleagues (1997) stated, even though collectivism and individualism are characteristics of cultural groups, not all individuals in a given context engage in the same ideas and practices, nor do they engage in them in identical ways; hence, every practice comes with different meaning consequently, social practices are adopted in order to build field-specific capital and symbolic power. However, in a collectivist context, people’s behaviours are discernibly patterned; for instance, findings from this study’s exploratory phase, show a number of specific practices that come from the Korean people’s relatively stronger sense of materialism and conformity compared to more individualistic Western type countries (Schau et al., 2009). Koreans value their own social worth and the worth of their “in-group”, which means that they try to be nice to others and to feel comfortable by doing so; it is this cultural aspect that may have led to a sharing and gifting practice.

## **Part III: Reflections on the Scoping Exercise**

This part will enable the researcher to have a deeper understanding on how participants perceive an OBC and how they behave in it. The author will reflect on the outcomes of the scoping phase and identifies new insights that challenge the established assumptions and adopted methodology of the study.

### **4.9 Assumptions Challenged**

The result of the scoping phase, which revealed both new insights and a number of unexpected themes, focused initially on the members' brand loyalty, which consists of a consumers' commitment to repurchase or otherwise continue using the brand, as demonstrated by repeat buying of a product or service, or word of mouth advocacy (Dick & Basu, 1994). However, throughout the exploratory phase, it was found that brand loyalty is a limited concept by which to show an OBC's social dynamics; whereas, brand image, or meaning, is useful for emphasising the cultural and experiential dimensions of brands. Unstable and 'contested' meanings of brand and branded products, in a highly complex media-dominated environment, and of the productive and unpredictable nature of consumer practice, will be revealed. In the Western context, as long ago as 1955, Levy and Gardner (p. 34) reported that people no longer tried to be economical, or desired to emulate people of higher status. What mattered for the members of an OBC was the symbolic dimension of the product, i.e. the brand meaning. The brand results from the product's existence as a complex 'public object', and is made up of the meanings that advertising, merchandising, promotion, publicity, and even sheer length of existence have created. Marketing, therefore, has to work at this symbolic level, in order to create distinct brand images or brand personalities by means of advertising and other forms of mediated communication. Therefore, the author took a broader look at the brand meaning, by not restricting her attentions simply to brand loyalty, in order not to lose invaluable insights from the interpretivist approach.

The exploratory phase also informed that the social bonds can create social practices with a negative capacity; therefore, the preliminary assumption that the social bond will facilitate OBC participation and promote brand image and brand meaning is challenged. Extant researchers support this insight; for instance, Schau and her colleagues (2009) believed that empathy can be divisive in situations involving intragroup conflict, however, this negative aspect has not yet been investigated. The scoping phase, therefore, challenges this generally accepted assumption that building social bonds among members help an OBC to thrive by emphasising that the context and related practices should be revealed in order to induce a positive outcome. Brand meaning negotiation in an OBC setting is even more complicated than those in offline settings, such as themed stores, because of several unexpected consumer behaviours. OBC members produce meaning around the brand in an OBC setting, such as the one Nike superstore provides, which is a place where consumers produce meaning around the brand by making a place part of their own life histories (Peñaloza, 1999), an OBC provides a place for the productive interaction between consumers. However, with the exception of a themed environment, an OBC offers more freedom to its members as the marketers cannot be sure that the shared meaning, or the social relationships, that they would like to create, conforms to the parameters of the brand image. Meaning is produced by members who possess symbolic power emanating from their social and cultural capital. Therefore, although the literature focuses on the positive influences of an OBC's commitment to brand loyalty, a complicated set of dynamics create negative aspects. The author, therefore, delved into the complexity of the power struggle – which is closely related to social bonds – and also the brand meaning transformation that took place during the OBC participation process.

Another important thing to note is related to the industry of the brand and brand personality/image. On the assumption that the OBCs will share similar social practices, the exploratory phase investigated four OBCs – Diesel, Lacoste, Canon and Nikon - in two different industries: (i) fashion clothing, and (ii) digital cameras. The study showed that the brand personality and industry characteristics deliver a

huge difference in terms of OBC social practices, especially for the DSLR industry, which, because of its characteristics, sharing and gifting social practice strongly appeared. Of course, OBCs in the same industry, or even the same brand, because they possess different cultures, can develop in noticeably different ways, although they do have similarities. The researcher selected DSLR brands because it is generally known that the members are highly involved in purchasing the products for its high price, even more than normal digital cameras. Still, its high involvement/rational characteristics shape members' behaviour in OBCs that are interestingly different from the fashion clothing industry, which has high involvement and emotional characteristics. The author could decide to conduct the main study with OBCs with strong emotional characteristics where brand image or meaning is more deeply related to the member's personal lives and OBC experiences.

#### **4.10 Reflections on Methodology**

The exploratory phase informed the conduct of the final stage of the research. The first phase showed that a member's perception changes as OBC attachment and social connection develops. At the scoping phase it was interesting to conduct interviews with many different kinds of members; however, some of them, who appeared not to be interested in a brand, rarely had any opinions of their own and found it bothersome to concentrate on the actual OBC. This informed the author to filter informants to fit the purpose of the research for the main study. In addition, OBCs were selected that focussed clearly on both the brand and active social interaction. One of the selected OBCs for the exploratory phase, Diesel OBC, one of the biggest and most famous communities, was on its way to becoming an online fashion community, where other fashion brands are often discussed. Even though the focus of the OBC is firmly on Diesel, members openly shared opinions about other designer labels, especially premium jeans; hence, the author concluded that such a mixture can dilute the findings of the main study.

The author felt she could learn much about Korean OBC members' behaviour from the first study. For example, in a social atmosphere where people emphasise group

harmony, some participants, who appeared to want to build their good identity on the OBC, tended to erase negative comments made by others. They also erased provocative posts because of privacy or security. Such erasing behaviour, which could make it difficult to track what is exactly happening in an OBC, calls for the introduction of fieldnotes to avoiding the loss of rich material.

Discovering the real thoughts of those participants who were afraid of causing offence, or being controversial, was also a challenge since most hesitated even to say slightly negative things about other members, or about their OBC. In the Korean culture, in order to achieve an intimate atmosphere, it is important to listen very attentively to their personal experience. Collectivists, particularly, tend not to express their emotions outwardly in public settings, especially often repressed negative emotions. This confirms Markus and Kitayama's (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) findings that, if negative emotions are expressed, they are likely to be discussed in intimate social settings. In line with the above, the author found that her interviewees were worried about "face" in the OBC and sometimes they hesitated to deliver their true feelings in detail. Therefore, she had to build quite close personal relationships in order to hear from them and spend more time for icebreaking; time and emotion spent on this was crucial, because some participants feel "invaded" when outsiders come into their lives. Web-text provided the researcher with rich data for interpretation and the interviews complemented those interpretations. Also, oftentimes, informants appeared to be enjoying talking about their OBC posts, which greatly facilitated the interviews; therefore, the author encouraged them to browse the website, even during the interviews.

Finally, the author confirms that, in a collectivist culture, socio-emotional content is crucial. Emotions signal changes to reality in the context of research; such changes include beliefs about self, others, and the relationships between them. However, in an individualist culture, emotions signal internal, subjective feelings, and hence, there is little call for beliefs to be changed (Mesquita, 2001). With these fundamental differences in mind, the author observed that the collectivist members in her study

frequently changed their thoughts on brand through a continual process of tension and conflict resolution within their OBC communities.

## **Chapter 5 Social Bonding and Brand Meaning**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The main study aims to understand how tension between brand and social connection appears in an OBC. In relation to the insights and knowledge gathered from the exploratory phase, this chapter primarily investigates three things: i) how social practices relate people to one another; ii) how social practices are symbolically formed online; and iii) how social practices are integrated in an OBC and negotiate brand meaning. Based on the typology from the previous chapter, this chapter presents vivid illustrations of the process in the selected OBCs.

There is no one style for reporting the findings from qualitative research. Qualitative researchers must choose how they will tell it (Wolcott, 1990, p. 18) for the best representation of their research purposes, methods and data (Knafl & Howard, 1984). In this chapter, the data are presented with an eye for storytelling, showing the course of brand meaning development in an OBC by using threads and interviews as examples to explain the process of constructing a sound ethnographic interpretation from multiple data sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Data gathered from two OBCs are elucidated to give readers a deeper understanding of how the social practices revealed in the exploratory phase are still evident or different, how the social practices are linked and how people develop brand meaning with other people. Long-term immersion in the context increases the likelihood of encountering important moments in the ordinary events of consumers' daily lives and of experiencing revelatory incidents (Fernandez, 1986), as it did in this work. Revelatory incidents are the naturally occurring real-time events an ethnographer witnesses that stimulate real-time interpretive insights and launch systematic analyses of additional data. Varying perspectives on the behaviours and context of the interest are generated through ethnographic interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In the selected threads, the informants make counterarguments as they have different interpretations, they experience conflict but also conform with others, and they challenge each other. Findings are constantly developed and validated through web-texts and informant interviews. How consumers develop and negotiate brand meaning, and how it progresses into offline and again into online interaction with each other is evident in the selected representative threads and the interviews that followed. Layers of meaning containing interpretations or thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) are developed and checked across informants and multiple sources of data. Simultaneously operating layers of meaning in the interpretations are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

## **5.2 Brand Meaning and Social Bond: Revelatory Incidents**

This section illustrates four revelatory incidents from two selected OBCs: Starbucks and Le Creuset. The cases document the complex interweaving of online threads and behind-the-scenes activities. Members communicate using discursive text (alphabetic text presenting a sequence of ideas), non-discursive text (nonverbal texts such as photographs and emoticons) and through the tone of verbal text. The type of non-discursive text discussed here is perhaps more ambiguous and effable compared to discursive text. The impact of white or blank space in hypermedia texts and the use of emoticons and photographs are carefully interpreted considering the context.

### **5.2.1 Starbucks Korea: City Hall Event**

The first revelatory incident is a Starbucks earth day celebration event, which was held to help save the earth by using fewer disposable products. In this, 1000 consumers could exchange 10 used paper cups for a Starbucks tumbler and 3000 consumers get a flowerpot, and people made an extremely long queue in front of the city hall for it. The event was popular among the Starbucks community members but certain non-members considered the members who queued to be stupid and crazy to Starbucks. Conflict arose and Starbucks community members became upset and wrote posts about it before, during and after the event. The posts that follow have



been selected because they show various things:

- Conflict between community members and non-members, which was externalised at the event.
- Online and offline behaviour intertwinedness.
- Community members' attitude towards a company-held event.
- Tension between the company and OBC members.
- Assigned symbolic meaning to brand products.
- General reciprocity and appreciation between members.

The following post was made a day before the event. This shows people's expectations and their love towards both the old Starbucks logo and products from abroad. A sense of trust between the members is also evident.

**Title: City hall event and some chat**

**Poster: Amber**

Do you think I can exchange 10 double shot paper cups with a tumbler?

*(Photo of six old logo disposable cups)*

Old logo disposable cup is too good for the event, isn't it?

There are so many cups that I can't use – old logo disposable cup, Japanese tall ice cup... ^^

*(Photo of Japanese Sakura disposable cups of different sizes)*

*(Omitted. Participants talk about the poster's collection)*

But among those, Japanese Sakura disposable cup is the best.

I can't use it! Boohoo... so pretty T\_T

Tomorrow, after the event, I'm thinking of doing some sharing events.

It's a (Starbucks) card-sharing event – priority is given to the members who have participated in the event. If you are interested, don't forget to take a photo today! Hehe (face is not needed)

See you tomorrow ~ ( \_ \_ )

The post was written a day before the event and conveys her excitement. The poster shows her Starbucks collections that are “too precious to use” and her Starbucks card collections with which she is thinking of holding a “sharing” event for the participants. The following shows other members' responses:

**Comments:**

Ruby: Oh, I regret not collecting old-logo disposable cups before. At that time I was not that obsessed like now!

Mellisa: Haha. I didn't intentionally collect them but I used to reuse them. I used to fill the cup with coffee beans or use it like a box, putting hairpins or accessories in. I had a bit too much so I gave it to

other members. Anyways, old logo looks a lot prettier, don't you agree? ㄸㄸ

Ruby: Mellisa Old logo is the best, the logo looks more 'packed'.

Sky: Ruby True... it was impeccable ㄸㄸ old logo ㄸㄸ

Mellisa: looks like a real logo kk

Sky: Mellisa Yeah ㄸㄸ why did you change it ㄸㄸ who designed it ㄸㄸ I hate ㄸㄸㄸ I really want to have an old logo disposable cup!

Mellisa: Sky haha I'll share some old logo cups later, you are on my list ^^

Sky: Mellisa Really? I'm dancing now ㄸㄸㄸ thanks thanks

Nickname: I only have 2 disposable cups so have to drop by my home... See you tomorrow!

Mellisa: You can come directly ^^ I can bring some more cups kkk how does it sound?

Nickname: Melissa Really? Can you bring 8 more? If I don't have to drop by, I can buy some breads from Daejeon station haha

Mellisa: Nickname Yeah I can take like 50 more cups kk but will bring only 8 for you haha ^^ When do you plan to arrive?

Nickname: Melissa If I buy a ticket at 8 am... I'll take KTX and arrive at Seoul station.. haha

Mellisa: Nickname Will try to be there before 11 haha this time I'm not taking my car kk

Banana milk: Oh were you planning to drop by your place only because of the cups? Kk

Nickname: Banana milk Yes.. not only the cup, I was thinking of changing my clothes as well.. I'm wearing the same clothes haha

Banana milk: Nickname clothes haha

Yuri: I took a lot of old logo disposable cups when I went to the main store kk but I can't use them for the event, they are just too precious ㄸㄸㄸ

Mellisa: Even though I exchange it (old logo disposable cup) with a tumbler, it would be a rubbish to the staff member kk ㄸ..ㄸ

Freecell: Do Starbucks main store still have old logo cups?

Yuri: Freecell Last year when I went there to take a class they did have old logo sampling cups haha

Freecell: Yuri Oh I think I'm such an idiot. I thought of Seattle. Starbucks headquarter in Seattle ㄸㄸ

Mellisa: Yuri Oh last year, spring or fall, I went to the city Starbucks store and got more than ten sampling cups kk Best Soju (note: Korean traditional alcohol) cup ^^;;

Yuri: Melissa I didn't go into the main store in Seattle haha But I don't think the store will use old logo products... I think they were using new logo cups. So I didn't buy any drink but bought a tumbler, I remember.

Banana milk: Oh.... Sakura cup.... I want to see it... Don't give it to them!

I also have double shot, old logo cup, old logo snowflake cup... all Starbucks cups. See you tomorrow kkk

Mellisa: haha will bring some and give them to you. Do you want sampling cups? ^^

Oh by the way let's have green tea Frappuccino tomorrow with my 1+1 coupon

Banana milk: Melissa Really? Will take my sampling cup and take a photo with your sakura sampling cup. My 1+1 coupon I kept it for my parents, but you guys are calling me to have more drink! So funny.. kk

Mellisa: Banana milk kk or I can share it with another member who will be there, or I can have all kkk why not haha

Sweetie: Noooooooooo never use sakura cup kkk noooo old logo ㄸㄸ I'll be there as well tomorrow, Let's try to be one of the the first 1000 people! Kkk

Mellisa: See you tomorrow kk ^^

Sunflower: I was cleaning my room yesterday and found old logo disposable cups, was happy ^\_^

Melissa: But now... I can't use them ㄥ\_ㄥ

Chubby girl: Old logo, sakura shouldn't be used ㄥㄥ

Melissa: hahaha I'll throw it away! Throw it away! Haha

Chubby girl: Melissa no way ㄥㄥ

Toto: I feel like I am looking at a store display~

Melissa: If I take all of them there is no space for food in the kitchen. I'm so obsessed to these little things! What a geek ^^

Toto: Melissa not miscellaneous at all! I'm just jealous~

Melissa: Toto Proof of obsession ㄥ\_ㄥ nowadays I try to take it easy.. collecting paper cups! Kk ㄥ\_ㄥ my friends laughed a lot haha

Galaxy: I'm drooling looking at the tumbler in the photo! I envy your collection!

Melissa: Hehe. Finally my weekend is coming!

Hoot: Sakura cups are so pretty ㄥ\_ㄥ

*(Omitted. Members keep chatting about the cups and the themes are constantly repeated)*

Some of these members had a small offline gathering a day before the posting and their conversation on this post continues. It can be difficult for new members to jump into the conversation if they have not had such interaction before. However, preparing the event, some participants showed their strong attachment to Starbucks and began to build new relationships by chatting to others about this event. In this way, the event became a good opportunity for new members to get to know other members and become one of the regular members. As can be seen from the post, members welcome everybody who is willing to participate in the event because they believe that they share the same interests.

One of their shared interests or a shared “taste” of theirs appears here – a Starbucks old logo cup. As the poster says, the “old logo cup is too precious to be used for the event”, and these members believe that the “old logo design is more like Starbucks, and it is even more valuable” because the product is discontinued. Old logo products help members to recollect memories about Starbucks and the members feel a sense of camaraderie by giving and gaining assurance that they share the same value.

Members also engage in “sharing” practice and general reciprocity. One of the members even insists on sharing her car with others so they can get to the event

location. Members often share small accessories, Starbucks goods and handmade foods, and in this post the poster is insisting on giving her “precious” reusable cup to others to encourage them to take part in the event. The only thing she requires is a photo from the event to prove that the member took part in it. Taking a photo and uploading it on the website is important for the community members because such photos certify their commitment towards the community.

In contrast to the sense of camaraderie between the members, there appears a disconnection between staff members and the community members. Members do not feel that Starbucks employees are Starbucks lovers, and Melissa argues that her precious item (Starbucks old logo reusable cup) “would be a rubbish to a staff member”. Another member, Yuri, sympathises with Melissa’s opinion and says that she “shouldn’t give it (old logo cup) to them (staff members)” as they do not appreciate the value of the old logo item. This “us and them” dichotomy is obvious in this dialogue: members feel closer to other consumers, not to the people who work for the brand.

These members confess that they are addicted to the brand (e.g. “proof of obsession”) and do not consider it to be shameful. In fact, they are rather proud of having a large collection of Starbucks goods and say that looking through their collections makes them “feel full without eating anything”. The amount of goods they have and the difficulty involved in obtaining the collection is important in their status building: members value the effort one has to make to get the limited items or the local items (e.g. City mugs, VIP cards, New Year edition tumblers, etc.) and the effort involved in keeping them neat and properly. These practices continually appear in related posts and comments. While this thread conveys members’ excitement and shows that consumers are preparing for the event, the following post depicts the poster’s actual experience of the “earth day” event.

<p><b>Title: Earth day event (city hall square) epilogue</b> <b>Poster: Alexandra</b></p>
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My moving route is, briefly..

Daejeon station – city hall – Saemaoul restaurant – city hall premium store – kyobo book store – newcore Kangnam department store – Bang-gae dong – my home. I had a terrible cold a day before so I couldn't sleep very well. On the day, I woke up at 6am, take a bath, and 'Melissa' told me that she'll provide me the paper cups, so I didn't drop by my home and went to a bakery... bought some breads, and ate with other members later... they all liked it so I was happy and felt it was rewarding ☺  
I took KTX 08:21 from Daejeon, arrived in Seoul in an hour, and went to the city hall square.

*(Photo of city hall square with staff members in cute-looking Starbucks costumes)*

And was like, shocked! Already?? There was such a long queue.

Weather was fine... was a bit cold, but the sunshine was really hot and I was almost cooked, was more than a photosynthesis. I have arrived at 10am, Starbucks people began to ask people to make a queue at 10:30am.

I was reading Starbucks Gossip postings at the moment, and was a bit happy that they do have a cold cup. Before I was like anyways it's a free tumbler, it cannot be that good... but it was way beyond my expectation!

*(Photo of a tulip pot and a Starbucks tumbler)*

This is the cold cup and tulip pot I have got. I could get both of them as I was an early bird. Hehehe~ I'm so happy! Watching the displayed pots, I felt like the spring has come. The smell of the grass was really good.... Even better to meet Starbucks Gossip members...

*(Photo of Starbucks disposable cups with plants arranged like a Christmas tree)*

On our way coming back home, we had a dinner together, 9 people in total. The manager treated us a very nice dinner ^^

And (list of IDs) went to Kyobo store to buy a magazine, and we went to the city hall Starbucks, and began our long chatting~~

More and more people began to join and wow, eventually we had 14 people.

I was afraid I wouldn't be able to remember all the nicknames, so I asked the manager and wrote down all of them kkk

I had a really enjoyable time with the members that I only knew from the postings. When can we do it again? This event was a very good opportunity for us to have this gathering ^^

*(omitted. Description of her day)*

So I arrived home at 10pm!

Was almost knocked down. But I have to write this epilogue, so now I am sitting in front of my computer to write this post before taking a shower.

I have to sleep... but I took a short nap on a bus, so I'm not sure if I can sleep any time soon.

I don't know where the power came, walking around all day kkk

Ohh... I'm feeling hungry. I should sleep before I get more fat.

It was a really nice day. It would be great if we could have this kind of gathering later.

*(List of the nicknames are written)*

It was really great to see you.

Thank you for reading this long post!

This post broadcasts the event and describes online and offline intertwinedness; how information is constantly updated by various devices, how members utilise it and how members have instant meet ups. The poster gets most updated information from her smart device (e.g. the kind of tumbler she could get, the number of Starbucks members came to the event and their location, etc.). She did not have much expectation regarding the tumbler (*“anyways it’s a free tumbler”*) but when she realised that the event provides a “cold cup” she wanted, her urge to get the tumbler increases. However, the tumbler is not “free” in the broadest sense of the word because these members had to spend money on their transport, travel for a minimum of 2 hours to get there, collect 10 disposable cups to exchange for it and wait several hours to exchange them for it. But what members wanted was not merely the £10 tumbler but the whole experience of participating in the event. Members therefore voluntarily spent time, effort and money on participating in it.

The poster also shared her route on the day with other members, which boosted their conversation. She gave her personal impression on the event and this helped the event to become a positive experience. She also wanted to tell other people how her day was and how her life is, and how good the offline gathering was. Her happiness is apparent and her strong desire to repeat the event is clear (e.g. *I had a really enjoyable time with the members, when can we do it again? It would be great if we could have this kind of gathering later*). This offline event was a good opportunity for the members to have face-to-face meetings with people they knew only by their nicknames. It was encouraging for them to meet a person in the same community rather than stay in the queue alone, intimidated by strangers. The event facilitated offline gatherings and complemented online interaction and *vice versa*. Because of this post, the members can plan for another offline gathering. The following comments were made on this post:

**Comments:**

Banana milk: Wow. What a wonderful memory! I'm going to have the bread tomorrow morning before going to the store~ kk

Melissa: I kept the bread in a safe place as well ^^ kk

Nickname: Ohhh the nicknames are so difficult to remember! Now - when can we have another gathering? Should be difficult to arrange one.

Nickname: Melissa Tomorrow you two will have the bread for a breakfast. Mine couldn't survive, was squeezed in my bag ;(

Melissa: Oh are you going to *Bu-pyeong* tomorrow? I was wondering whether I should go or not kkk maybe I can join

Nickname: Melissa Are you coming? By the way, aren't you sleeping? You should be extremely tired...

Melissa: Nickname You should be tired too ㅍ\_ㅍ

Melissa: Nickname I dropped by my hubby's office, had dinner, and took a walk as well kk... By the way do you have all the Japanese Starbucks cards? This year Sakura, Osaka new logo, terrace, last Christmas card...

Nickname: Melissa You are really healthy! Haha I was so hungry... so now I am kind of thinking of eating something, chicken and beer will help me sleep.

Nickname: Melissa I have Sakuras only

Melissa: Nickname I will leave home tomorrow at 7am. I don't need any tumbler urgently, so no hurries ^^ I'll contact you tomorrow when I arrive. If I drive I can pick you up~

Nickname: Melissa hmm.. my home and Bu-pyeong station... it's not on your way, let's talk about it later ^^

Cherie: wow you should be really tired. Have a good night! I had a Ramen and a glass of Soju and now am ready to sleep. See you again!!! ^^

Banana milk: Ohh 'a glass' of Soju? No way kk

Nickname: With a glass of alcohol, you should feel more tired kk

I'm so tired I won't go there tomorrow... See you again later, and see you also on Starbucks Gossip!

Cherie: Nickname no way, a bottle haha you know me! Taking a rest, watching a soap opera~~

Cherie: After having a glass I feel a lot better! Sleep tight, you'll be tired tomorrow if you don't sleep enough~

Mommy: Wow was a really fruitful day~

Nickname: A very fruitful day... unexpected tumbler and a lovely pot... I'm full of happiness~~

Amy: wow sounds like a challenging day. A very long day ㅍㅍ but a fruitful day~~~ kk

Nickname: They should have prepared a proper ticket number, but anyways Starbucks Korea must have prepared a lot... People who came late complained a lot, and I don't feel very good about it.

Amy..If there is another event, let's meet up! ☺

Amy: Nickname hehe yeah sure let's meet up kk I had a lecture today so couldn't go there. But don't forget that my heart was with you all!

*(Omitted. A lot of personal comments that sets the warm social context)*

The above comments were made in almost real time, and the post became a chat room for the members who stayed there to continue the conversation. These dialogues are real conversations about their life, so they are not limited only to Starbucks. The members report what they are eating and doing (e.g. taking a rest,

watching a soap opera, dropping by hubby's office, having a Ramen, drinking Soju, reflecting on a lecture that day, etc.), and they give their love to other members (e.g. when can we have another gathering? have a good night, let's meet up, don't forget that my heart was with you all). The members are enjoying the whole process of the event with others from its preparation to its completion; they are also building a sense of camaraderie and defending themselves when "they" (non-members) criticise the consumers for supposedly behaving irrationally.

There are interesting tensions in this post about different values between the OBC members and non-members, which can be added to the "us and them" dichotomy of the previous post. The event is not merely about getting a "free tumbler" as a reward for collecting ten disposable cups. One informant stressed from an interview that "it's not about money, I'm not a begger" and that "we just enjoy the whole experience with others, they will never understand". The tumbler becomes meaningful because of the effort they have made to collect the disposable cups, which means they have spent much money on Starbucks drinks and have kept the cups clean. Forming a queue to take part in the event, meeting other Starbucks lovers and getting compliments from other members about their brand-loyal behaviour also makes a tumbler meaningful. The poster, for instance, spent her own time, money and effort on giving other members something to eat to make the experience more enjoyable, and she says that "they all liked it so I was happy and felt it was rewarding...". She does not expect anything in return because other members' happiness is her emotional reward. From the interview, she said:

*... I was already happy because they liked it. When you do something like that, you don't want to get any money in return. Actually, if I get some money from that, I wouldn't feel that happy because it means that I did it for money, which would be really little. Well... I spent like 15,000won (approx. 9 GBP)... well I spent time as well but I can't charge for it. I'm not that rich but I'm happy to spend that amount of money to have a good atmosphere (laugh). And I believe that if I do so, other people will become more generous to other members...*

This general reciprocity becomes a social lubricant and promotes interaction between the members. Members receive such emotional support but they also benefit in terms of up-to-date information. The next post was made by a member who was waiting



for the event to start. Members actively exchange real-time information and help each other on threads as they do in this one, so the boundary between online and offline somewhat fades:

**Title:** *I am at city hall now ^^*

**Poster:** Stella

I have asked to a staff member, and he says there is no queue at the moment as it's too early and the event hasn't started yet.

I think the number of people who came for a tumbler are less than 10 now.

I have an appointment at noon so came early and kkk I think I was a bit too early kk

**Comments:**

Silver knight: I'm jealous jealous jealous jealous

Stella: Tulips and so many other flowers – it smells really good here ^^

Xie: I'm in the Starbucks just in front of the city hall – don't you feel cold?

Stella: Not cold ㄏㄏ but my leg hurts ㄏㄏ I came here from Incheon ㄏㄏ boohoo

Xie: I'm going to stay here till 10am and then will go there :( will you stay here with me?

Xie: Oops I haven't put any makeup, my face is all naked I'm ashamed :\$

Xie: Stella Well my face is not that naked but you will be prettier kk

Yuri: I think you came too early ㄏㄏ what are you going to do for the left 2 hours ...!

Stella: Yuri haha smelling the flowers I feel energetic ~^^

Ppanya: Do you think I'll be to late if I get there on time?

Stella: More and more people are coming. Now around 20

My rainy days: I'm thinking of going there later after dropping by the hospital

Stella: Haha hospital ㄏㄏ don't be sick ㄏㄏ

Sahabo: I think I'll arrive there around 10:30am, and you are already there!

Stella: Couldn't sleep well yesterday. Came out early cause I was worried about falling asleep

Coffee: So diligent~~ I'm wondering whether to go or not. Taking a tube for a long time it's bothersome.. haha

Stella: I took a tube from Incheon and was awful :( couldn't get any seat

Pinky: Is the city hall plaza the Pyung-Wha plaza? I'm about to leave now and don't know how to get there. So diligent haha

Stella: Cause I have plenty of time kkk as I have an appointment at noon, so was in a hurry a bit

Sunflower: I'm still preparing to go and wow! You are already there!

Stella: Followed my hubby, on his way going to work ^^

Pluto: Diligent!! I'll be there on time... haha I'm excited that I'll pass by Starbucks Gossip members, though I won't be able to recognise them

My rainy days: I'll be on time as well ^^ yeah I am excited as well!

Stella: My rainy days haha welcome! Come come come

Stella: I'm excited too, smelling the flowers here ^^ I'll be waiting for you all to come.

Hope many members come here to enjoy the event!

Cherie: I'm leaving Incheon too~ wow you went there really early~ are you already queuing? I'll be there in a minute!

Stella: No queue at the moment ^^ Want to get it as soon as possible and leave~

Cherie: Stella I'm going haha see you there.  
Is it the 5th exit, city hall station? I'm a bit worried whether I will be able to find you or not haha  
Piggy: I was a bit too relaxed – Didn't know people will make a queue! I think I should leave now!?  
Banana milk: I'm on my way too- I remember I met you before but can't remember your face :( please say hello to me when you see me haha  
Louis: I think you Starbucks Gossip members can have an instant meeting ^^ living in a rural area, I'm jealous!  
*(Omitted. Members keep broadcasting their status)*

The threads show how members communicate with each other during such an event. Information is exchanged in real time and the members help each other when required. Sharing the members' experience of the event and their daily lives with each other gives such events a special meaning. Members come up with instant gatherings and even without face-to-face interaction they feel each other's presence in the place and feel connected. The tumbler and the pot become a badge of participation in this event. Posting their feelings, giving comments and evaluating the pros and cons of the event, members actively make the event more special while criticism from non-members merely makes the community more united.

As noted, despite the generally positive atmosphere in these communities members are often challenged by non-members and conflict does arise. The next post shows a sharp conflict between OBC members and non-members. The poster scraped negative comments about the Starbucks event from another community and wanted to discuss the issue with other members:

**Title: Today's city hall event... some Netizens see it very negatively**

**Poster: Wendy**

It's for a good purpose... but they are busy slating.

*(the poster also uploaded a screenshot of people's negative comments about the event, which are the followings: )*

Comment 1: Today is not even a weekend! Such a long queue on Monday... and so crazy about the Starbucks logo.. Do you think they will be waiting like this if it were a tumbler with a Seoul city hall logo? They are wasting the food they ate...

Comment 2: There are so many people who have nothing else to do...

Comment 3: Just buy one (tumbler)! That's not that expensive (to make a queue for several hours).

**Comments:**

Schoushou: Those people are busy saying bad words about everything, not only about Starbucks. They nit-pick at everything, it's their life.

Ruby: Nate (name of a portal) is busy cursing Starbucks out – you know that. Just let it go. Offline and online are different.

Mini: F\*\*\* off... if it were not a Starbucks tumbler but 10,000 won (approx.. 5 GBP) they must have made a queue

Wanderer: Inferiority complex, delusion, victim mentality.. Serious disease. Pity on them. It's a pitiful situation.

Wanderer: They must be so jealous to write so

Lalala: Actually, what they say is not entirely wrong.

Bbong: True. Not entirely wrong

Earth traveler: I was getting today's coffee and the partner said that they are blamed for everything, talking about stainless cold cup and I just smiled ^^;;

Morning: That's so pathetic. They are just offended (by jealousy) kk

Sarah: I think they must have made a queue as well kk maybe they were posting on the queue!

Nell: True kkkkkkk or they are just jealous kkkkkk

Seiren: You can make a queue if you like, why are they stricken with a victim mentality ㄷㄷ

Sophia: You know, whatever Starbucks does, it's always blamed. There are so many more expensive coffee shops, but we are always considered as a soy-paste woman. I am so fed up. I also heard the rumour and read the comments and was feeling like okay, so that's why celebrities are suffering from trolling... kk of course I know it cannot be compared like that.. The only thing we can do is to ignore it! :( haha

Eunsei: Just buying one from a shop and getting one from the event, exchanging with 10 used cups, are different. When I see the tumbler, my mind is just different. Do you think people will be waiting for 2 hours just for 10,000won (5GBP)? This is not about price, it's a fun (and with a good purpose) event that you can enjoy with other members. Why don't they think so?

Yoon: They are so evil. No warm heart... shit.

Dizzy: They can make a queue, they just have a different way of thinking. Different value.

SB: I saw it from Facebook as well – Starbucks coffee, as harmful as a cigarette, like that.. The comments were like oh, there are ladies who will die for Starbucks~ ㄷㄷ

Aileen: So many people who just say whatever negative. If you say that you like Starbucks, you are just blamed... ㄷㄷ it's just a personal preference, personal choice, taste. Just please let's respect each other.

Melissa: I don't give a shit haha if they ask me are you that free to do so? Then yes I'm free that's why I'm here. Are you kidding? What I do: social criticism, what others do: inferiority complex, its people's logic. It's always like that.

Gina: Nate and Naver news comments are all like that. Never mind, they are just keyboard warriors, have nothing else to do, idiots

*(omitted. members keep talking about Internet culture)*

Many members joined the debate on this issue, which reveals the difficulties members experience because of the image of Starbucks in Korean society. It also highlights the dichotomy between members and non-members, and how members

are irritated by this. Members justify themselves (e.g. they must be jealous to write so, they nit-pick at everything, etc.), become sarcastic towards people who slander the Starbucks lovers (e.g. inferiority complex, delusion, victim mentality, they are so evil, etc.) and comfort each other from emotional attacks (e.g. pity on them, the only thing we can do is to ignore it, never mind, they are just keyboard warriors, etc.). However, a few members do agree with the criticism that “what they say is not entirely wrong”, though others ignore them.

Seiren complains that “we are always considered as a soy-paste woman”. The term “soy-paste woman” used to refer to Starbucks consumers as they spend more money on a coffee (approx. 4 GBP) than a meal (approx. 3 GBP), which invites criticisms of being pretentious. It eventually became a very well-known new term among Koreans and many female Starbucks consumers are labelled as this.) Seiren also insists that she detests the idea that “Starbucks lovers are stupid and pretentious to buy expensive drinks and food”. She emphasises in the interview:

*I enjoy having a drink at Starbucks, I can get relaxed in a comfortable seat with familiar atmosphere, and it makes me feel like okay, everything will be fine... I get myself refreshed, get charged, sort of. But it seems like people do not appreciate this value I get from Starbucks and they pretend as if they are smart consumers and I am not.*

In a similar vein, Eunsei focuses on the meaning assigned to the tumbler she can get from the event and explains that “just buying one from a shop and getting one from the event... are different”. Getting the tumbler is an “achievement” and such memorabilia is a reminder of the day and how she had such fun with other people. From this posting, it is evident that members are aware of other people’s negative opinions about those who consume Starbucks products. In these circumstances, OBC becomes a refuge where like-minded people support each other, and in these they try to change out-group people’s perceptions so that they are not scorned by “evil” people. After a long conversation regarding this issue, the post that followed revealed a member’s concern for the community.

**Title: I don't know why people hate Starbucks Gossip so much these days** ππ

**Poster: Reine**

**Level: Venti**

I've been here (Starbucks Gossip) for more than a year.

There is another community that I always do lurking around, and people there, whenever they talk about Starbucks, they talk about Starbucks Gossip. They say like, the Starbucks Gossip people went to the city hall event all together, Starbucks Gossip people will go to the happy hour event all together, Starbucks Gossip people will get all the limited tumblers... They always blame Starbucks Gossip people, for literally everything! Even though we don't add any premium on the limited tumblers and resell them. I just feel very annoyed and offended.

**Comments:**

Ruby: That sounds reasonable. Or maybe they know about the things because they have heard a lot about Starbucks Gossip from somewhere.

Bear: Really? They should blame people who buy all the limited products and resell them with a premium.

Ruby: Yeah. I don't know why they blame Starbucks Gossip ππ

SB Goddess: Ruby Actually when you see the IDs of people who resell the products on the second-hand world website, there are many from Starbucks Gossip. It's pitiful though...

Ruby: SB Goddess Oh that's why Starbucks Gossip is being blamed by others...

SB Goddess: Ruby True... when I see second hand world website, I really feel bad and actually can't understand why people are doing so.

Bear: SB Goddess Maybe those people (who are trading second hand Starbucks products) are participating in the community to get new information and move fast?

SB Goddess: Bear Actually... I can't understand. Buying everything so that other people who really want the product cannot get anything... And reselling them to earn money. What's that?

Bear: SB Goddess True. But there are supplies because there are needs.

Haha: SB Goddess You are right I can't agree more. I really hate people who are reselling on that website. Of course I can't say anything because they are selling their own product... kk

SB Goddess: Especially, I really hate it because people who I can easily recognise – from photos from IDs – are doing that.. It really offends me.

Haha: SB Goddess That's true. Starbucks Gossip people say like they hate second-hand world website, but actually the sellers there are all Starbucks Gossip members kkk so how can I blame them here? Kk though I hate them.

Minto: I also saw the name of our community on a different website. Was not a very good one. Maybe it's just because our community is too famous...

Ruby: Maybe. I'm a bit worried as other people have a bad image about Starbucks Gossip.

Red bean: There must be a feeling of 'soy-paste', There are people who feel bad about these things.

Ruby: I always get discounts, never throw away disposable cups – I am always worried about 'how can I get it cheaper?' ππ

Red bean: Ruby Actually Starbucks is cheaper than other brands. If you add shots or upgrade the size, other brands may cost even more. People who don't know that say such things ππ

Chung: Actually before knowing the Starbucks, no, before knowing the Starbucks Gossip, I had a kind of bad perception about Starbucks, besides the tumblers – I loved them ☺ But then I realised, after knowing the Starbucks Gossip, the drinks are really nice and a lot of benefits exist – promotions, discounts, etc. I also realised that people are really nice and economical. I think people are really

stupid to say 'soy paste, soy paste', because it actually is not that expensive. And hmm the community stuff... I think it's something irresistible. I am not the one who resells, and hope people don't do that  
ㅍㅍ sad.

Ruby: I used to visit Starbucks but then I saw something like they sponsor something? And stopped going there – it was few years ago. And by chance I came back to Starbucks and my prejudice has changed.

Ggongi: I also began to love Starbucks more after becoming a Starbucks Gossip member. I am criticised by others as well, a lot. People don't like Starbucks lovers...

Ruby: Yeah, same here. I like Starbucks more because of the community, and now that the community is being blamed this much ... ㅍㅍ

Aha: You know there are a lot of postings, people complaining of unjust or unfair happenings, once you know the story, most of them are not the partners' faults. Some people ask for the recipe they have seen from the Starbucks Gossip website, but not all of them are available from the store. It is difficult to be a partner~

Ruby: Absolutely right. There are things that cannot be done. I wish people to do some investigations before making a decision. Extra shot or other things, they totally depend on the partner, sometimes it is just not possible. When I see people complaining I don't feel very good.

Lucia: You are right. When I see those postings sometime... I feel like oh there are a lot of good people here (the community) but a lot of 'ugly' members as well.. ^^;;; I was ashamed ㅍㅍ

Aha: Lucia There (second hand world website) are some people who are active here ㅍㅍ

The poster is distressed about some negative images people have about her Starbucks OBC. She identifies herself with the OBC (e.g. “I just feel very annoyed and offended”) and says that it is a false accusation. This sense of brand self-identification and brand-OBC identification often appears from interviews:

*I could get good, real-time, high-quality information, which was great. I also could meet many nice people – they even gave other members disposable cups for free. Oh it was not me who received it but I was very touched, as if I were the one who actually received it. It is really warm here, these little events make me love Starbucks gossip even more! Our members are the best in the world...so I feel bad when my community is attacked by strangers. Starbucks and Starbucks Gossip, I can't separate them (Starbucks, Joon, 31 years old, female)*

Members value the reputation of an OBC so they try to get to the root of a matter and talk about the free riders who use the OBC for their own benefit. Participants discuss possible solutions regarding this issue with certain users, which shows self-purifying practice. Members are therefore concerned not only about the brand of the OBC but also the OBC's image. They try to improve the image by showing good gesture to people around them. They set strict regulations to prevent possible trouble to stop the OBC from becoming a commercial place. Members monitor other websites as well to keep professional sellers away from the OBC. However active a member is in an

OBC, commercial activity is not accepted. In the texts of this work the members strongly convey how they do not want to be seen as stupid consumers. Many even confess how their perceptions of Starbucks consumers have changed after their participation, and they assert that the consumers are not pretentious but “really nice and economical”.

However, the author discovered that an informant’s argument often contradicts what members write on the boards. Informants argue that what happens behind the scenes is different from what people see on the community website. Although taking part in offline gatherings and instant meetings is considered a cool and fun experience (Joon, for example, emphasises the value of offline participation), Mini explicates her willingness to clearly distinguish online and offline social network. She mentions the “fantasy” she has about the brand and how she wants the OBC to be a comfortable place without anybody annoying her, a VTP that is not connected to one’s real life. Mini contends that she is not fond of offline gatherings but enjoys watching other members’ interaction. She went to the event place by herself without meeting any Starbucks members but still appreciates the online connection:

*I don't meet Starbucks Gossip members. I prefer going to the event by myself (without letting other members know). But you know, there are close members, and they go to those places together. I don't want to say anything about it, but this is just not my culture. I know that it's like nothing – nothing weird to meet online community members face-to-face. But I just don't want to do that. So this time I went there by myself as well. Actually not by myself, my friend was there, but not a community member. We were on our way going for a lunch... though I don't like meeting other members, I think it's a good culture. It looks nice, warm-hearted Starbucks lovers.*

*Actually I think I'm a bit afraid of breaking my fantasy as well... not knowing people personally, you have that 'nice' image. Nice people in the community... in reality, it can be a different story. They might not be that nice as I have imagined based on their online activities. Then I wouldn't like the community that much... if I find out that they are not those kind of nice people. I'm kind of afraid of it. At the same time, if you become too close to the person, you have to be friendly and always have to make excuses about not going somewhere, not doing something, not participating in the events... things like that. I want to be free from those implicit restrictions and just want to take part in the events when I want, only. If I become too close to others, it is hard to do so. You always have to think about other people, how they would think about me, they should be annoyed if I don't participate,, things like that. (Starbucks, Mini, 30 years old, female)*

Mini says that she does not want to be too close to other people but nevertheless wants to stay in the community. The “onlineness” of the community makes this possible. Interestingly, she mentions that she is “a bit afraid of breaking my fantasy”. She prefers to keep superficial relationship in order not to discover any negative aspects from the community. Furthermore, she indicates that it is a burden to have a close relationship because once this happens OBC participation becomes a responsibility that ruins the VTP-ness she likes. She is concerned about other people’s reaction and their emotional feelings, and she does not want to go into the inner circle of the community. Noah also contends that keeping the “line” and staying anonymous makes him more comfortable and ultimately allows him to better enjoy the community:

*Noah: ....and there came a lot of instant gatherings... but I personally... I am not sure about these instant meetings. One of the reasons I like Starbucks OBC is that I can keep the ‘line’.*

*Interviewee: What do you mean by keeping the ‘line’?*

*Noah: I think if you become too close... you can be reluctant... reserved... The good point of the Internet is the anonymity. I want me to be seen as ‘(his user name)’, whenever I go there. But if I meet them up, of course it would be good but... hmm... the relationship can become complicated and I think I’ll get some restrictions for the SG (abbreviation of the community name) participation ...(omitted)... Well, when you become close you tend to have a higher expectation, kind of pressure that you should satisfy their expectation? I’m afraid of that, so I don’t go to instant gatherings. I personally am not good at saying no, so I try to avoid any problematic situation.*

*Interviewee: Can you tell me what you mean by the pressure that you should satisfy the expectation?*

*Noah: Hmm... like... what are you doing today? Why don’t you join the gatherings? Like that? Actually I’m a very lazy person haha but if you build a close relationship you want to meet the person often, you want to call the person, and then you can’t say no you should go out.... And if I stop being active in SG people who know me personally will contact me... like, are you busy? Why can’t I see you on SG? And they I will feel like I should go there... hehe I just want to go there when I want to go, and don’t go when I don’t want to go. Haha. Also... they are the people I met on the Internet, so the real ‘personality’ can be different from what I’ve seen on the Internet haha. The relationship.... Kk maybe my fantasy about SG can be broken... kk I just like the way I am.*

*Interviewee: Can you illustrate the ‘fantasy’ you have just mentioned? Fantasy about SG*



*Noah: hmm I am not sure as I haven't participated in other communities this much like SG, so I am not very sure, but you'll feel the same as well. SG has... very kind happy people, affluent? Very thoughtful and caring.. hmm... but... frankly speaking, I come here to be happy, pleasant, because people are kind and relaxed, but if I meet them up offline and If I feel like oh... no... then... My interest (or pastime) disappears kkk I am worried if online and offline are totally different...*

### **5.2.2 Starbucks Korea: Lucky Bag Event**

Starbucks runs a lucky bag event in a number of countries and Starbucks Korea launched this event in 2007. A lucky bag contains numerous items including coupons, tumblers and mugs. Consumers can purchase a lucky bag without knowing the contents. Therefore, after every lucky bag event, Starbucks OBC opens an online market so that members can exchange / buy and sell duplicated or unnecessary products. This became an annual event for the members and it gained much popularity, which resulted in a long queue even before the store's opening hours because of the one-lucky-bag-per-person policy. The following threads describe the process of sharing information regarding the contents of the lucky bags and the left stock, confirm their achievements (lucky bags), show how members emotionally and instrumentally support each other, and explain how members trade unwanted items and set the rules to reduce discords. Members talk about completing their collections of mugs, tumblers, muddlers, VIP cards and other Starbucks goods, and they attach great importance to such collections. One of the members wrote the following post about his lucky bag contents, showing his lucky bags from the year 2012 for others' interest. This post illustrates the members' excitement before the event and the joyful atmosphere of the event itself.

**Title: Lucky bags from last year and the year before last**

**Poster: Katia**

Long time ago.... there was a time when lucky bags stayed in the store for several days but last year, all of them disappeared before noon ;(

*(photo of 2013 lucky bag contents)*

2013's lucky bag gave me a big sorrow as I had via mug cup and star tumbler (these goods are not

preferred by OBC members) but I could fight back my tears as I have got two more Starbucks diaries kkkk

*(photo of 2012 lucky bag contents)*

And this is 2012's lucky bag, which really was a jackpot!  
I was so happy to have the white Lucy (name of a tumbler model)  
The mugs are all very neat as well.

*(photo of black coffee bean lucky bag)*

And for the last... last year's Coffee Bean lucky bag..  
I bought it as I quite liked the eco bag but it attracts dusts, fur+dust+fluff..  
It was almost like a vacuum cleaner kkk

*(photo of coffee bean lucky bag contents)*

Nobody knows how Starbucks Lucky Bag for this year would be like before we see it...  
I wouldn't wish for a jackpot. I just hope it to not to be too bad ~ ^^

**Comment:**

Toktumi: wow 2012's lucky bag looks really nice, it would be great if we have something like that this year!

Katia: Toktumi I would have been happy without having free drink vouchers, what a beautiful composition!

Seulgi: me too, I don't look for a jackpot, I would be happy if it is just okay..

Katia: seulgi what if I get a mug bomb (a lucky bag full of mugs) hehe

Vida: Katia oh my... I can't imagine, that should be horrible!

Iccream: 2012's mug is really pretty! But why people hate via mug? I was thinking of buying it hehe

Yegrina: I bought via mug and regretted kk

Katia: via mug is not bad to use but it is not pretty kkk at that time, I was brainwashing myself that it is not too bad...

Niki: hmm... I am really wondering... If I should buy it or not

Katia: niki I know that feeling, I'll regret if I don't buy and if I buy and get nothing... I am in agony too

Lynsay: 2012's one really is a jackpot!

Katia: lynsay: fantastic isn't it? White Lucy rules! ☺

Lamie: I kept thinking that I shouldn't buy any Lucky bag!! Because I am not fortunate at all! But... now that I am browsing the Starbucks Gossip website I find my self seriously thinking of getting it... oh no!

*(Omitted. members keep talking about their past lucky bags and their wishes for this year's contents)*

A Starbucks lucky bag is sealed and its contents are unknown before it is opened. Using the constituents' words, each bag can be a "jackpot", "normal" or "fail". It is also difficult to get one because a huge number of people queue before the stores on

the release date, so getting a lucky bag is indeed considered “lucky” in the community culture. The difficulty of purchasing a lucky bag made members share information in terms of the kind of products that will be included, the number of stocks each store has, some tricks to pick a good lucky bag and other useful information from Starbucks partners. Discussion take place before the event starts and members broadcast their excitement and preparations. They help each other by updating real-time information about the lucky bags, such as the number of stocks left in a specific store, which encourages members to get on the trend. Members wish each other luck before going to the store to enjoy this lucky bag fever. One informant states how others’ excitement encouraged her to take part in the event:

*Maybe I do self-justification about the purchase, you know when I buy a tumbler I buy it because I need and as I’ve said, I sometimes make impulsive purchase and wonder what I should do with this item. I once became very close to regret my purchase. But then I uploaded its photo on the community board and people complimented my tumbler, and then I thought – oh is it a good one? Then I’ll just keep it. I felt a lot better and my impulsive purchase was justified. It was the same for the lucky bag, I didn’t like the contents that much but after reading other people’s comments, I felt a lot better and didn’t feel bad about it anymore. I can sell unwanted items in the lucky bag when the market opens as well, so I just buy it. (Starbucks, Jenny, 25 years old, female)*

The informant felt relieved to get compliments from other members on her lucky bag and decided to keep the items. She continues:

*Frankly speaking, sometimes I post photos of my purchase so that I can get their agreement. There are popular items and not very popular items, and I feel a lot better if something I’ve got is a well-known one. And actually they are prettier than others; they are famous for some reason.*

Members post photos of their lucky bags to certify the items they have achieved and they receive congratulations from other members. Joon (Starbucks, 31 years old, female) says that she gets “vicarious satisfaction” from such posts and she becomes happy as if she has achieved the items. Even though such positive experiences prevail during the process, negative brand experiences such as service failure or products with defects appear. Members’ emotional support, however, can change possibly negative experiences into slightly embarrassing but nevertheless enjoyable experiences. One member realised that one of his tumblers in his lucky bag was

broken and he posted his emotional upset and disappointment to Starbucks. Other members empathised and suggested possible ways to exchange it for a new one. After a successful exchange, he posted in joy:

*I've got a new one! I didn't know that I can get an exchange. I was just so depressed and even regretted my lucky bag purchase but now everything has changed... I already look forward to the next year. Thank you for your advice, I love my lucky bag! (Starbucks, Noah, 25 yers old, male)*

The aforementioned dichotomy between “us and them” also appears in discussions about this event. The following poster expresses her displeasure with non-members’ sarcasm about the event.

**Title: I see some people saying Lucky bag is a marketing...**

**Poster: Honeybee**

For people like me who often present gifts, it is a good value for money. When I have to buy a present in a hurry it is difficult to find what I really like, so I tend to buy things in advance and offer it as a gift with some coffee beans or Via products. I live just beside Starbucks store so I don't have any pressure on waiting for the product to be release.

But I often see some sarcastic posts saying that ‘there were too many people waiting, I can't understand why they make such a long queue, I am offended...’ these posts make me feel very bad. Either the person is a Starbucks mania or a merchant, they went to the store earlier than anybody else in this cold weather... everybody has their own story and own reason. Please have consideration to others when you write a post. By the way, for me everything looks pretty... even when other people say they are ugly and criticise that they are in a lucky bag because they are remained articles ^^

**Comments:**

Goodgirl: That's because people have different standpoint. It's pointless to meddle one way or the other on someone else's business, but I think it is okay to say the reason they are not buying lucky bags ^^

Honeybee: Goodgirl I know what you mean, but I wish you read other posts and comments before commenting on my post. There are too aggressive comments... so I wrote this post ^^

Goodgirl: Honeybee just let it go...haha they are always like that. It was the same in the diary season (the season OBC members collect stamps to get a Starbucks diary)

Yoon: I guess they say so because they feel bad that they couldn't get the Lucky bag.... I see those posts without consideration quite often these days, more and more... it wasn't like that before. Don't feel too bad and have a nice day.

Honeybee: Yoon I get loads of information from Starbucks. There are many nice people like you. Now I know from this event that there are many different people with different characteristics in our community.

Love woo: don't think about the post, I know what you mean by that aggressive post. How can he

blame a lucky bag because it doesn't have what he want? Lucky bag stands for one's 'luck', that's the spirit of lucky bag haha... This kind of little fun gives us energy to survive, life is so tough ;( Sexysv: love woo life is tough... ;( that's very true. This little fun is the beauty of life~ ^^ I am still browsing SG website, it's been three hours now!  
(omitted)

Some members agree that a lucky bag is not value for money but others contradict this point and argue that the experience itself is meaningful for them. For instance:

*I know that but I always do it because it's fun.  
I'm contented. I bought it because of the pretty box but I love it!  
It was my first lucky bag so it was a meaningful experience.  
I bet you'll buy it later anyhow, because we are pushovers haha  
I thought purchasing a lucky bag itself means that I am lucky – and then I became happy. I managed to get one for the first time!*

Similar to the Starbucks earth day event, Starbucks OBC members received criticisms about their Starbucks fever. The comments describe how members emotionally support each other and justify their behaviour. Throughout the process members feel a sense of camaraderie and they overcome this hardship (i.e. criticisms) by their mutual support. One important social practice that appears in relation to this post is anti-commoditising. Consumers tend to sell mugs or tumblers after the event to get rid of items they do not want. OBC members strongly regulate this trading and they forbid consumers to earn any profit from such activity in order to prevent the community from becoming commercialised. They only allow such trading between members who proved their affection to the items and do not allow treating brand products as a mere commodity. In relation to this issue, Yujin contends that members should not earn a profit from other group members and prefers to use expressions such as “exchange” and “sharing” rather than “trading”.

*You know nowadays we have that lucky bag sharing category. I like that the staff members are not focusing on the market, it is easy to attract new members if you activate market part but they don't do that... I really like that. Basically the market we have is not a commercial place but a kind of exchange or sharing... so you can't get any unfair profit, you should price it cheaper than the retail price, so maybe that can be a reason that SG is not a commercial place... it's more like sharing than trading... (Starbucks, Yujin, 26 years old, female)*

Abigail adds to this conversation by saying that she feels guilty about making a profit from members, empathising the pure love to the brand with no commercial intent. Also, her experience of a nice Starbucks consumer made her think about

general reciprocity:

*This is a community for people who love and like Starbucks tumblers and how can they accept getting profit from trading? It doesn't look very good when I see them selling Starbucks tumblers from other communities. It feels like somebody I know is doing a secret business behind me... ;( Of course I don't know the person but I feel kind of betrayed... (omitted)... I think it's their choice, they are free to do so. Even though it doesn't look very good that's my own value. This time I took valentine's cylinder tumbler on the market at 47,000 won. It's cheaper than the price in Japan, I got it at 485,000. When I was posting it my friends were telling me that I'm being an idiot but I had a feeling that as I am a member of this community I shouldn't do that (selling it at a normal or more expensive price) (Starbucks, Abigail, 29 years old, female).*

She shows how she takes care of other members and asserts that getting monetary benefit from other members should be forbidden because “doing a secret business behind” cannot be justified. She continues to share her pleasant experience and a sense of general reciprocity:

*...There was a tumbler that I really really wanted to purchase but when I realised it, it was already an year after the released date. And also, it was a popular tumbler. But that person put the item on the market with the price 6,000 cheaper than the retail price. The reason for the reduction was because she used the tumbler coupon (a free drink coupon is followed when Starbucks tumbler is purchased in Korea). I was firstly, surprised. It was the first time I've ever seen. Calculating the tumbler coupon! We had a direct dealing and she brought me so many things besides the tumbler. Five Starbucks cards, five coasters, little snacks, etc... So I felt that oh online relationship can make this kind of good relationship, giving without any strings attached. Think about it, in a way, we won't see each other again, we just met for the trade and she was so nice to me. So after that, whenever I trade, I don't send the product only (but send more gifts with the product) and try to be an honest seller, she impressed me. A positive effect of the community. I want to share what I've received from other people. I like our community even more than before and even my purchase has increased! I buy more things from Starbucks and always keep extra cards for other people.*

### **5.2.3 Le Creuset Korea: Sharing Events**

Sharing is a common practice in the Le Creuset OBC. Members share because they have items they do not need or to repay another member's kindness. Sharing practices often appear in other OBCs as well, but members in this particular community created a ritual to give this sharing practice some fun. Members offer not only brand-related items but also other small gifts, such as home-made food or hand-made accessories. Constituents have a sense of humour and enjoy playfulness, which

leads them to hold sharing events. A sense of altruism and general reciprocity arises that sets the harmonious atmosphere. Such sharing events are held by individuals, and it is common to have multiple sharing events on the same day. The following web-texts involve members describing how they enjoy sharing with many other members – not only those to whom they are close.

**Shall we do sharing?**

**Poster: Duri**

There, there, here's my first present!

I made grapefruit tea, lemon and home-made pickles recently... I just made this pickle yesterday ^^

It will arrive on Saturday if I send it tomorrow, then it will be perfectly ripened!

By the way, I can't guarantee the taste but I made it with all my time and effort using good ingredients

π π

Isn't there anybody to enjoy it? Haha

You can run from 10:30pm,

Let's run for 3 minutes ~~~♡

Take my head and tail, the one who takes my head will take grapefruit tea and the tail the pickle

~~~♡ Lemon is a service!

It is good to drink easily, like normal mineral water, you can use hot water or cold water, as you wish  
haha

But I have one condition,

It would be great if a member who has done this kind of gifting or will do it later take part in this event.

This is not a big thing, and I have nothing to say if somebody says I am being cheap,

But I want this good sharing or gifting continues so that it can promote friendship among members ^^

I'm attaching this condition to make the community have more warm human affection ^^

If...

There's somebody who wants to taste it

Send me an empty glass jar

I'll fill it in and send it back to you haha

Glass jars are so expensive and I am poor boohoo π π

*(Photos of well-packaged pickles, grapefruit tea and dried lemon)*

The poster shares home-made food with OBC members and suggests having a sharing event. She suggests a game – one OBC members call “grabbing a tail”. In this game, a poster sets a specific time (e.g. 3 minutes, starting from 9 pm) to comment on the post and a member who comments just next to the poster wins the game. She also gives one condition for taking part in this sharing: a member should

have done or be planning to do the sharing, which shows a sense of general reciprocity. It is common practice to set such restrictions in order to prevent cherry pickers from destroying the community atmosphere by stealing the gifts and concealing themselves.

More than fifty members took part in this game and many comments were made in an attempt to grab the poster's "tail". The following post was made by the winner who successfully received the gifts to show appreciation:

**Title: Duri's present has arrived~~!!**

**Poster: Mail**

You will remember, few days ago I caught Duri's tail and won the home-made pickle...

Today the gift has finally arrived~~~ ☺

I opened it and not only the pickle but also the grapefruit tea, dried lemon, Starbucks muddler... so many things! Ohhh I am so touched~~~♥

I've tasted the pickle and ohh~~ so yummy so tastey~~~ kk

Thanks thanks a lot ^^ Looks so delicious~

I'll do the gifting soon as well~~

All of you, have a very nice weekend ~♥♥

*(Photos of the arrived gifts: pickles, grapefruit tea, dried lemon and other snacks)*

As happened with this poster, the recipient of the sharing event often plans the next sharing event. Sharing events always have their place in the OBC and through these members repay another member's kindness by doing the same or similar for others. Excluding free riders, members actively participate in this sharing not necessarily to gain small gifts but to enjoy the whole process with others. Members voluntarily share items with others because they have received much support from the community and hope this general reciprocity makes the community members happier. One informant explains the reason she keeps participating in sharing practices:

*It just makes me feel good to share things with other members. Things I've shared, they are nothing big... of course if other people take it for granted then I wouldn't want to do it anymore. But these kind people always appreciate for what I've done, and I feel like oh, I want to buy this for sharing (laugh). I'm putting the cart before the horse, I'm not sharing left items but buying items to do sharing! They are too lovely to spare money ... (Omitted)... I also take part in other people's sharing posts as well but just for fun. It's okay if I don't get it,*



*I just like joining the crew. And if I'm lucky enough to get it, that's even better! But I just like the atmosphere, playing around with other members... that's the point. (Helene, 32 years old, female)*

Even though in one sense the purpose of sharing is to make the best use of unwanted items, consumers voluntarily prepare small things to write in sharing posts. The informant's remark that "they are too lovely to spare money" shows her strong bond-based attachment to the community. Appreciation, not taking things for granted, is an important element of sharing practice that must be continued. Members also use these events to attract "lurkers" and produce more active members. The following post is written as a part of this intent. In it the poster welcomes every member with the hope that this event will help silent members chat with others and feel comfortable in the community.

**Title: [gifting] It's been a long time since my last gifting**

**Poster: Heidi**

I haven't been here for a while, I've been participating occasionally... and today I see a lot of new members and feel a bit unfamiliar with them ㄒㄒ

I haven't done gifting for ages and today I'm holding an event~

Somebody will like it and maybe somebody won't like it, but please take part in it for fun ☺

This is, personally, my favourite item, it makes me think of the innocence of childhood and smile.

Many of you will know, V&B pickle dish.

Of course it's a new item, you'll feel the Christmassy atmosphere with this item!

I'll do tail-catching as always.

Time... maybe around 10pm when moms have time? I'll post a new thread at 9:30 pm.

You can go to the thread and make comments from 10 pm.

I haven't done it for ages so I won't put any grade restriction, everybody can join.

I'd be happy if this will motivate some people to take part in the community activities more enthusiastically ^^

*(Photos of sharing items, nicely decorated on a pretty table clothes)*

**Comments:**

Yujin: I just want the table clothes kk so nice

Heidi: oh is there anything you really want? You have so many nice things~~~ ☺

Broccoli: fancy~

Heidi: please take part in this event ^^

Judy: they are all so pretty, I lost my words ^^ everything becomes perfect because of the glass! I am a newbie I am registered but haven't participated much yet please welcome me~~~

Heidi: This will be a good opportunity to be active ^^

Porrori: V&B pickle dish..^^; I am not a lucky person I always fail to get the gifts, poor me... but I

want to run as well ^^

Heidi: These kind of things are like this, if you get it of course it is good, but even when you don't get it, you get refreshed while running ^^ please run for fun ^^

White bean: oops I really love Christmas~~^^ I always felt lack of pickle dish as I only have one, and I really wanted to get it but it is discontinued – how happy to see it here! I'll run enthusiastically today ^^

Pretty duck: cool! Love love. Do you think I'll be lucky enough to get it? ^^

Mail: wow~ Heidi~ it really is a jackpot! I'll set an alarm to run~~~ haha

Fresh: wow Heidi, it really is a jackpot~ I'm in for sure~ see you soon~

Mommy: oh.. that's time to put my baby to bed... I can't run breast-feeding kk maybe I should use my husband~~~!!!

Me Green: Wow, it really is a free-handed gifting!

Emi: wow... generous you.. Fighting!

Xie: What a fantastic table cloth and setting ^^

Bunny: Wow I am really excited~ looking forward to it ^^

Andre: Love the table cloth! I love your generous gifting~

Gangnam lady: oh~ Heidi~ no less. Maybe I can get V&B this time? Kkk I couldn't come here often these days as I was kind of busy, but I'll remember this event and will come over~

Triplets: pickle dishes~~♥♥

Joan: wow cool~~

Ppoguri: lovely setting... table cloth is so pretty too ^^

Narang: long time no see sis~~ kk I'll come to run as well~

Happy: Me too I'm ready to run today~ If I come back early from my mother-in-law's place. I am really tempted ^^

Spino: Today I'll make it!!!

Forever: Oh that's true we haven't done it for a while. I'll give a challenge after sending my son to sleep ^^

Ruri: wow~~~ I'm excited haha I am not very used to it but will follow what others do ^^ Thank you for the sharing~~

The comments show that new members connected with regulars and chat with them while waiting for the starting time. They show their intention to participate so the poster can be encouraged and feel contented to hold the event. To prevent possible conflicts between active and non-active members from discrimination, posters show the selection process. One member who confesses her “addiction” to the community says that these sharing events enrich her OBC experience.

*Le Creuset community is really part of my life these days. I check new posts before I sleep and the first thing I do in the morning is to check new posts... but at the same time, this is something I should keep away from... I always think like oh no, I should stop it, I should stop going there (because of waste of time)... and delete the application on the phone but keep reinstalling it (laugh). Once I come here I want to buy more things... oh yeah seeing is wanting, that's very true. And I like watching people doing sharing... it just makes my day to see that there are such heart-warming people I don't make a queue as in many cases I*

*already have or I don't need them. I always check who is doing a new sharing event. (Le Creuset, Heeya, 33 years old, female)*

She then describes how her relationship with Le Creuset OBC is one of “love and hatred” because she loves the community but the community also fuels her urge to get more brand items, although she tries not to purchase more Le Creuset. Crystal explains what it is like when she begins to crave a brand product because of reading another member’s post. It is interesting to note that she enacts an imaginative possession of products in the post that strikes her fancy.

*Whenever they post, they take really pretty photos. Le Creusets look totally nice in their photos, and especially, there are other accessories that make Le Creuset look a lot fancier. Of course, Le Creuset itself is pretty too. Anyhow, when I see such photos of Le Creuset in pretty kitchen with cute accessories, I imagine how it would look in my kitchen, and oh, I feel like that casserole is supposed to be in my kitchen!(Le Creuset, Heeya, 29 years old, female)*

For the community is female-dominant, her remarks such as “pretty kitchen” and “cute accessories” prevails in photos. Members enjoy grooming their products with such accessories and making the best use of their belongings, while getting recognised by other members encourages them to work even harder.

#### **5.2.4 Le Creuset: Chiffon Crisis**

Certain product models are popular among Le Creuset OBC members, and Chiffon (a community-specific nickname of a pastel-pink casserole) is one of these. This revelatory incident happened because chiffons were released in Costco with discount. The members named it a “chiffon crisis” and became busy buying these products for themselves and for other members, making every effort to choose flawless products for others. The following posts were selected among the members’ posts because they show a conflict between community core members and peripheral members, and between the brand and OBC members. The posts and interviews illustrate the intertwinedness of online and offline behaviour and members’ cooperative attitude. A number of members reside in the community to provide other people with information. Members desire certain items and want to match a brand product with other items or accessories to make their collections special. Members appreciate others’ efforts and they express their love and affection for the community. The first

post here is a review of this chiffon crisis and is written by one of the core members.

**Title: Saying goodbye to a week of <chiffon crisis>**

**Poster: Hana**

Before the holiday begins, we couldn't believe our eyes. In Costco, blue colour, coastal Marmite!  
We thought Coastal Marmite can be found in Japan only...  
We couldn't believe our eyes even after a certifying photo...  
And headed to Costco, abandoning our housework.  
We didn't expect any discount or something and... and...

Wow! They had discounts and coastal was not an issue at all, we were shocked, it was not a matter of believing our eyes or not, we almost had a heart attack – pink marmite, chiffon!!!!!!  
Every morning at 8am, we could see our members' outstanding performances.  
we exchanged real-time information, it was almost like an intelligence combat... Our love for Le Creuset made it possible! From Gwang-myung to Yang-Jae, Yang-Pyeong to Sang-bong!  
Defending trollies to the last from other dealers...  
Including a quick service guy... I'd love to give you the Oscar award, all the members who appeared in Costcos all over the country ^\_^

I.. because of my baby... because I am not a Costco member.. Thankfully and shamelessly, could get a pretty baby staying at home. I was so lucky, thanks to the lovely members who sent me these pretty babies without any reward... There were some upsetting issues but you know that they all happened because of love for Le Creuset – so let's resolve our misunderstandings.

Now.. looking back the busy week... I'm thinking.  
One day our coastal marmite and chiffon marmite may be a legend –  
Or maybe, Costco will sell more Le Creusets! White marmite next month...? ohh is it a happy imagination or a fearful one...? Haha

*(Omitted / more specific details about the event and puns)*

Now let's burn our love for Le Creuset!  
My dear members~~ I love you~~ thank you ^^  
Wrapping up... I'm uploading a group shot of my pinkies.  
Please somebody stop me~!

*(Photos of pink chiffon-coloured Le Creusets)*

Was thinking of selling one among my chiffons but well, instead of that, we have a new family member!  
Nice gradation they make haha

Was smiling like a crazy woman, looking at these pinkie casseroles, and now that I see the orange boxes (the colour of Le Creuset package box) .. I sigh... what should I do, really...

*(Photos of antique marmite and chiffon-coloured Le Creusets )*

Lastly, I upload one more photo before I leave. Now the legend of our community, antique Marmite and our new legend candidate, lucky chiffon~~^^ really.. pretty pretty.. isn't it? ^^

The poster shows the benefits she got from real-time communication during the chiffon crisis. She appreciates how other members helped her to get the “babies” or “pinkies” (Le Creuset casseroles) when she was unable to join the promotion because of her baby. She describes her love towards Le Creuset products and confesses her addiction to the brand. The post is wrapped up with photos of her collections, and these suggest she is in the process of completing her own collection that includes models deemed “legendary” in the community. OBC members share their experience on this thread:

**Comments:**

Min: Your post is like a poem~~ yeah was a busy and tough week. Now I want March to come so that we can meet a new heart dish <3

Hana: Haha poem.... Thank you. Hopefully, heart dish won't make another crisis haha

Pastel: Wow~ so pretty. Me too I wanted to stop buying chiffons but boohoo... so pretty. I can't stop

Hana: You can't stop, that's the problem of Le Creuset. Endless buying π π π

Happy recipe: The crisis has finished with your clear summary... I wish our new items become a legend so that we can smile later... it's not attractive to be normal... Miss le is arrogant ☺

Hana: I'm not sure if this would be the last crisis... if white Marmite comes out it should be like.. it's more than a crisis.. Then what's that? World war 3? Kk I wish they stop making chiffons (so that it can have more value as a limited colour)

Rana: How did you write it this well? You win the first place ^^

Hana: ohhh first place ^^I'm happy that you enjoyed it

JT Mom: Are you a writer? It really eats into my heart you are such a good writer ^^ now the community will be calmed down kk well will be crowded again when new products are released on March kk

Hana: Thank you for reading my post kk I wish the community to be quiet till March ;( Thank you for all the time and hard work!

Lovely bean: Wow! Didn't know you have this much!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Wow... I have four Band-Aids on my hand because of this Marmite crisis kk but was a fruitful week!

Hana: Thanks bean!!! Marmite has brought us together! Kkk now that I know where you live, I'll barge into your place when the weather gets warm... kk wait for me!

Chic angel: Yeah I wish coastal and chiffon be a legend – and no more new product for a while!!! I'm about to bankrupt.

Hana: Yep I want to visit LeCreuset headquarter and suggest – stop producing!!!

Hoppang princess: Hana ~I love your writing~ I also got 3 chiffons thanks to the angels~ and could get a lot of hot items from Japan. I was really happy yesterday for purchasing them but... looking at all the dishes and casseroles at home I sigh... how can I manage them? So I was a bit depressed today.. I have a lot more to be delivered and where should I put them? Spending massive amounts of money and feeling happy and feeling depressed – what am I doing? I feel like I have bipolar disorder~

I was thinking of selling some of them but instead, I bought a lot more! ㄸ.ㄸ

Hana: I totally understand~ smile like a crazy woman, cry throwing away the package... a bipolar disease haha I also have the same issue. I have sold my heart mug yesterday and today I am looking for a new one! What the hell am I doing ㄸㄸ

Haute: Fantastic collection! In the last photo, which one is antique and which one is chiffon? For me it's too difficult to tell the colour --;

Hana: The one a bit unclear and thick is antique and the pale one is chiffon ^^ antique gives you a classy and posh feeling, and the chiffon is bubbly and lively. •

Lily: How can you write this well? It sums up this week haha and the pink world is really beautiful  
^ \_\_\_\_\_ ^\*•

Hana: Not at all – thank you for enjoying the post ^^

Judy The writing represents my heart~ actually it'll be the same for all the members~ it so vividly expresses last one week! I think our members must have been healed thanks to the chiffons... I expect our next crisis to come kk

Hana: Judy, you have suffered a lot as well. Nobody forced us to do so but with the power of Le Creuset love, we could be that energetic! I don't want to have any more crisis for a while.. I am so tired now haha

Shinee: haha this post should be rewarded. English teacher you are? I think you should be a Korean teacher. I sympathise with your point of view ^^ always fun, reading your posts. I can't sympathise more – whenever I see my orange boxes and Staub boxes... phewww What am I doing.. what are these things... why am I so into these things?

Hana: Shinee ~^^ thank you ^^ I... think I have already passed the point of no return... I am getting more grey boxes (*The colour of Staub package*) these days

Miss Gee: I am a Le Creuset beginner so didn't know what the crisis and finally...this time...ah! So many 007 people, I respect you! Without order everyone voluntarily completed the mission. So this is the crisis! Now I now what it is... ☺

At the same time, thanks for the angels who helped me to buy this lovely Marmite ^^\*

Hana: kkk 007 agents voluntarily carrying out the mission kkk I can't agree more. If it were not for our Le Creuset love, how could we do it? Miss Gee, you know I always enjoy your posts ^^

calla1447: ohhhh ~ jealous

Hana: don't have to, I'm about to bankruptbb trying to stop, stop, stop, but the number is just increasing!

SB mom: Ohh what an enjoyable writing! You are the best~~ they are all precious babies aren't they? I envy you~~ I'll try to forget about the posting kk

Hana: SB mom^^ no way, you have a lot of Staubs ^^ you are the best

TS Mom: I laughed so much. After uploading a certifying photo one day before the day, I went to the Costco every day... I won't do it again! I wish this year becomes a legend ^^

Hana: TS mom, you are one of the first reporters! Haha yeah for the last few days, every morning, I felt like a heart attack was coming ㄸㄸI feel really sorry for the people who suffered a lot every morning ㄸㄸ

hoho7080: Wow you are such a good writer, and I really like your casseroles! This year I gave up the Marmite because of my 50 days old baby... but it's nice to look at the photo.

Hana: Oh I'm embarrassed, I'm not good at all. I do have a 100 days old baby too and could get really lovely Marmites thanks to the angels ^^ all the best to your baby

Happy: Wow this post really describes the week. You are a good writer, I can't sympathise more... kk who will understand me? People around me will thank that I'm such a casserole-crazy. I can only share this happiness here!

Hana: kk casserole-crazy!! Yes true you can't do it if you are sober-minded. I'm crazy but happy

thanks to Miss Le! I can't tell other people either that I'm a casserole-geek kk I'm so happy to have this place to share my love.

Lovely: I have got the chiffon but missed it because of a car accident... on my way coming back from a wedding hall a drunk driver ruined my day bb I don't have antique Marmite and really wanted to have a chiffon one – so sad that I have missed it, I envy you so much! I was such an unlucky person today

Hana: ㄒㄒ Lovely.. .poor thing I'm so sorry to hear that. There are many people who bought it and some of them will sell it for sure. I'll let you know if I find one. How do you feel? Hope you are okay everything will be fine as you have gone through this tough accident ^^

Lovely: Hana.. Thank you for commenting this late at night, I am more relaxed. I feel like my body is becoming more painful and I'm really worked – but still I'm thinking of Le Creuset! I am such a child... ^^

Amerind: I can feel from the writing that you are enjoying your life! Good writing skill. I wish I have the skill as well haha and I think you don't need to buy any more pinkies, I think it's enough!

Hana: I want to stop buying as well, maybe I should imprison myself!

Masil: What a good writing skill kk

By the way, the quick delivery guy incident kk that's me. I gave you a strong impression haha it was really funny for us but if we say it to other people they will think that we are crazy!!!!

I really envy your collection!! ^^

Hana: That was a really good idea, I was really impressed on that day! I was happy for you on that day, I could picture you and the baby in your office. It was so funny that the quick delivery guy asked me 'is it something really precious'? What a dramatic life! Haha This chiffon should be kept as your family treasure ^^

Andre: I'm impressed with your writing! This Marmite crisis I was there with my daughter – went there taking several buses and tubes – exchanging them several times, etc etc... very precious babies. But I couldn't get chiffon and 'pretty house' gave it to me! I'm so touched ^^ what a beautiful mind! I am happy that the crisis has finished this time – and lastly, the pinkies are so pretty but I can feel how painful it would be to collect all of them~~ ^^

Hana: Oops why aren't you sleeping this late at night? Didn't you sleep at all or did you wake up early? I am awake to feed my baby – playing with Le Creuset website. I guess the chiffon will be delivered today. Let me know when you get it ^^

Kkachil: It was a hard thing for me to get the chiffon as I live in a city that doesn't have any Costco. Now that I've got the chiffon and marble now I am wiped out~ kk the destructive power of this Marmite crisis was massive. I was always online to pick the chiffon, so my house is such a mass~ loads of things to throw away, loads to clean... Didn't have a proper meal for a while, I always had a brad instead. Haven't done any exercise for a week! No phone call... even my dog is going to laugh at me ^^\* I wish they have a new event after at least a week so that I can take a proper rest~ my mind and body are all too wasted kk I'll be hospitalised if I have another crisis this week. Anyways, thank you my angels for sacrificing yourself this time, you are the best! I respect you ^^

Hana: My house is such a mass too kk can't sympathise more. When I'm in a toilet, when I am feeding my baby... my eyes are always glued to the screen. Take a rest ^^

Joules: Ooh I love pink so much and everything you have are so pretty! Jealous

Hana: Thank you ^^ but it's just too much!

Hana: Beautiful,, blue is beautiful as blue and pink is beautiful as pink... pastel colours, vivid colours... ohh they drive me crazy kk

*(Omitted. Members keep chatting about the casseroles)*

The thread illustrates consumers' camaraderie and symbolic meaning on Le Creuset products. The members treat Le Creuset products very carefully so that a quick delivery guy asks the poster if it is "something really precious?" and the poster jokingly says that the chiffon should be kept as a family treasure. The poster was impressed by another member who showed kindness to her without any reward and this was reflected in the delivered product, which ultimately made it more meaningful and precious. One member appreciates the brand and says that "Marmite (name of a Le Creuset casserole colour) has brought us together", and she confesses that she "can only share this happiness here". The members appreciate each other's presence as they have like-minded people to share their love for the brand, and they even call themselves "casserole-crazy". It is not only joy but also sorrow that is shared in the community, and from this members often empathise and offer support: for example, Lovely says that she failed to get the chiffon because of a car accident but Hana tries to cheer her up and promises that "I'll let you know if I find one". This online relationship developed into an offline one and one of the active participants, Pretty, emphasises how offline communication is important for her, which shows that online and offline is intertwined in the community:

*Of course, it depends on the community, what's the topic or the purpose of it... but for me offline gathering is the main activity and this online space is kind of complementary. Especially with my mobile I can't get away from the community. I can get an alert that somebody has commented on my post, so it's real-time communication. So I am always connected, and when the person is nearby we can grab a coffee and have a nice chat. Especially in this 'chiffon crisis', have you seen my post? I have really felt that oh, people who don't know each other can be connected offline through wireless communication... you know, it was like, people who only exist inside the computer come out, alive, and come into our daily life... I really felt that this community is deep inside my life because of this event. People instantly exchange information at the spot, purchase them for other members, meet up instantly at the place, share with other people, I really felt that. I became very close to some of them.. Selling some products that I don't need but somebody really wants. We used to text a lot, sometimes make phone calls, and became a very close friend. Some of them even sent me a gift for my 100 days old baby. How heart-warming? (Le Creuset, Pretty, 33 years old, female)*

The informant says that offline gathering is the real relationship and that the online website exists to complement the communication. She is not afraid of meeting a stranger as long as he or she belongs to the community, which shows a sense of trust



between the OBC members. The chiffon crisis made her realise the significant presence of the community in her everyday life and how important having face-to-face interaction is for her. During the process, she built close relationship with other members.

A hint of brand constellation also appears and this relates to the conflict between the manager and OBC members. One member indicates that she is attracted to gray boxes (the colour of another famous casserole brand's box), which is common among Le Creuset members. Members consume numerous brands along with Le Creuset, but the community manager tried to forbid talk about such brands. A conflict arose between the community manager (which may represent company from a member's perspective) and members. One member says that she was repulsed by the regulations set by the manager:

*This is an official community of 'Le Creuset Korea', so it is not completely free to exchange information. I mean, quite intentionally, the community takes the lead. Quite exclusive, so sometimes I experience inconvenience. A degree of complaint is accepted but you just feel uneasy about critically comparing it with other brands, you can't say everything... Do you remember the cutlery incident? There was a post about how cutleries that go well with miss Le (nickname of Le Creuset among OBC members) are on sale. It received fervent responses from the members but the threads were all deleted. See here: (a link to her post) Besides this post, a lot of members kept posting, angry... they were very upset and embarrassed. Anyhow... so I love community members but I don't love or believe in the community itself for 100% sure. It is a valuable communication channel between the members and the Le Creuset Korea, but it feels very stuffy sometimes, feel like I'm talking to a wall. I think the manager 'Le Creuset Korea' has a lot of difficulties as well. The problems lie on the head office's policy, not the manager. Community manager is just a hired employee; he doesn't have all the right to make decisions. So it really is case by case, some posts are neglected, some posts are regulated... (Le Creuset, Isabella, 30 years old, female)*

She adds to this and contends that the community is “like love and hatred” to her because of such conflict.

*Le Creuset Korea's behaviour is disgraceful so I want to keep my distance sometimes but I can see the information about the release date of the limited edition... information is confined to this community so I keep coming. Many people come for the flea market, I once was very active in 'selling' category. I adopted a lot of babies from there. I can find rare items or discontinued models here... It's like love and hatred, but I know I can hate it because I love it . . . Even during that period when I was not coming to the community, whenever I see new products from the department stores or on the TVs, I become curious and*

*revisit the community. I always try to take some more distance but I think it should be difficult before I complete my collection.*

The next post describes a member's passion to have a private collection and groom branded products. Members began to post a lot about the casseroles after the Costco chiffon crisis and this member shows her hand-made Le Creuset accessories and shares her own story:

**Title: Chiffon~~ boohoo~~ wedding~**

**Poster: Suni**

Hello~

Everyday I am like clicking clicking clicking... my mobile is always connected to the Le Creuset community...

Before I fall asleep... feeling a wrist pain... again I come back to the community and sleep reading the posts ^^

Yesterday... evening, finally~ there was a wedding ceremony~

Coastal (nickname of a satin blue-coloured casserole) and Chiffon (nickname of a satin pink-coloured casserole) lovely~

*(Photo of blue and pink chiffon-coloured Le Creuset set with a cute hand-coloured paper-lion)*

I am not posting this thread to brag about my chiffon but

I really appreciate Amy and Hani for purchasing this lovely baby for me...

Sending my gratitude, I'm uploading the photos~

*(Omitted. Process of purchasing)*

I almost gave up... and Amy bought this Marmite (name of a model) for me without saying anything to me...! I truly appreciate it. I was so touched, I am about to cry now again!

Really appreciate it ^^ And today is the wedding day ~ ^^

I told my hubby to come back early today because we are having a wedding today~ ^^

With a contribution for the wedding~

He was asking me, why I want them to be married...

They can't have children... ㄒㄒ

...—; I'll adopt them. Kkk smaller satin pink and satin blue would be great...

*(A photo of a pink Le Creuset with a hand-knitted cover that looks like a little wedding veil)*

This is the wedding veil~~ flower hat!

And the lion is coloured by me and my daughter... I'm clumsy ㄒㄒ; ;

Really... pretty. These... are awesome.

After using Marmite for a while, wow~~~~ everything can be done with it, it's all-powerful.

Soup, stew, stir fry... (a number of Korean food names are listed)  
I'm getting really fat these days... but... just so delicious... boohoo~~  
Can't dine out~ ^^ except the Burger King. Don't know why I love burgers at this age!

I think Marmite is more~~~~~ useful than the round one.  
Once again... (a list of the members IDs) thank you so so so much.

**Comments:**

Serimom: Congrats on adopting new pretty babies~~^^ I also use Dune 2cm and the most useful one is the Marmite~~^^ Today an angel will send me yellow 18cm so I am waiting for it ~~^^

Happiness: Yeah.. so multifunctional good very good...

Tough puppy: Finally you've got it! Congrats! The knob is so pretty, very desirable ^^

Happiness: Yeah finally kk do you remember?

Tough puppy: Happiness Of course I do remember. Defending the chiffon to the death... haha anyways, a huge congrats.I was running like a crazy woman at that time as well...

Happiness: Tough puppy kk but looking back... on that day, even though we had a difficult time, I felt like I kind of confirmed my love towards Le Creuset.. so it is a good memory.. kk

Min: Congrats congrats.. ^^ what a pretty wedding~~

Happiness: I feel really great... I'm still looking at the coastal and chiffon... I feel like I'm going to be cross-eyed kkk (*note: she is using this expression to show that she is concentrating on the casseroles*)

Hanimommy: This joy makes me love Miss Le (Nickname of Le Creuset) more and more~~^^ I am loving my Kiwi Tagine from a Japanese website.

Happiness: Thanks once more~ once more once more~

Ghost princess: You are so fun~ they are now married ^^ You are adopting kids as well kk

I didn't have chance to see the chiffon but it looks like they make a good match <3

Mini: Two casseroles... they look like a new groom and new bride... Too colourful casseroles look like grandma and grandpa haha but wow~ they look gorgeous

JJunoo: Adoption ^^ I think I should get a bride for mine as well haha

Happiness: Me too, by matchmaking. Haha matchmaker is Amy. ^^

Junni: Kk I love the veil. The blue colour is lovely too ^^

The member begins the post by revealing how attached she is to the community, and she shows love and affection towards the casseroles by this marriage event, not forgetting to appreciate members who helped her to adopt these “babies”. She uses a “flower hat” (crochet knitted casserole knob cover) that she made as a wedding veil for the casseroles and decorates her table to get a perfect shot for this online exhibition. Her casseroles are humanised and praised by the poster throughout the post. Members join this conversation then talk about their collections and think about the past memories they have shared to get the products. They keep appreciating each other, evident with Serimom calling another member “an angel” to show her love

and respect for other members who helped her. Hannah explains this humanisation and also how she identifies Le Creuset products with the OBC and the brand itself:

*I think miss Le is not considered as merchandise but is identified with the Le Creuset community. When I posed the question to others before I realised that people some people explain about Le Creuset and some about miss Le. I mix them up as well. Le Creuset itself is more than a simple merchandise for the members. We call it 'baby'... we say we 'embrace' it (note: they use this expression when they buy a new item)... we say we dump when we throw away any Le Creuset products... It is difficult for me to separate them... Le Creuset community is centred on miss Le, isn't it? (Le Creuset, Hannah, 39 years old, female)*

Despite the generally positive atmosphere, the researcher also observed that a lack of appreciation often results in conflict between members. The following informant received help from another member and wanted to pay it back as a part of the community's general reciprocity. However, she became frustrated by other members who took her help for granted and consequently decided not to be generous to others. She describes how much effort she put into helping other members only to have some members show contentment for her altruistic behaviour:

*When I went to the Costco I saw a 18cm Marmite that cannot be found in Seoul, so I bought 5 marmites for other people who wanted it. There were so many people who really really wanted to have it... and I know that feeling! But then I've realised that it is a really difficult job to do – very challenging. It took me 3 hours to choose 5 casseroles. I have a very bad backache, I have spondylosis so I don't work at all at home. But I just wanted to do it for them (laugh) I just wanted to do it. And because it is for other people, you tend to choose them more carefully. If it were mine I would compromise at some point, but it is not for myself, so I couldn't compromise at all. Eventually I could finish the work, and I treated my friend who accompanied me, after many twists and turns, I came back home, and oh there was no box! So I went out again and was digging the rubbish bin to find out some boxes. Oh God, was really tough. Only to send them to other people, I suffered a lot. Sending the parcel is challenging as well, you know the weight. But once people receive them and become happy...I would feel rewarded. But it was not the case. Many of them disappeared . . . and I've decided not to do it again, if I do so, that will be only for my very close friends. (Le Creuset, Tosil, 34 years old, female)*

The informant insisted on helping other members because she “understands that feeling” in terms of craving Le Creuset, and the above excerpt shows the effort she made in her altruistic behaviour. However, she adds that she did not get the emotional reward she was supposed to get, which led her to stop helping other members. She began to interact only with core members, who always provide the emotional and instrumental support she needs. Her experience shows how conflict

can arise through social bonds.

### **5.3 Summary and Discussion**

This chapter provided ethnographic representation about four revelatory incidents in OBCs using excerpts from web-texts and interviews. The selected incidents enabled the researcher to illustrate how the social practices revealed in Chapter 4 are interlinked and create symbolic meaning. The existence of a VTP in consumers' minds was evident while online and offline intertwinedness was illustrated. The chapter also showed the negotiation of brand meaning as a social activity, how consumers socialise as they negotiate, and that members are making full use of non-discursive texts such as emoticons, photos, spaces between lines, layouts and music for meaning-making. Non-discursive texts allowed an analysis of what participants emphasise or how they contradict meaning by their use of words. Furthermore, members showed contradictory and confirmatory remarks in their social practices to "play the game" in the field, which offered the author an in-depth view of the social practices and diverse interpretations from consumer perspectives. The Korean context emerged and it was shown that this is largely influenced by social, economic and environmental change. While trying to reveal the dynamic nature of the selected OBC the researcher discovered the importance of considering the symbolic power in OBCs, which mainly derives from the cultural and social capital the members possess in the community. Power relationships between members were hard to ignore, especially as members often feel pressure to conform to the "named" members in addition to the community norms. Informants' backstage perspectives pointed to an undercurrent of competition for the symbolic power that coexists uneasily with the publicly performed politeness and friendliness in a VTP.

# **Chapter 6 Social Bonding and Brand Meaning: Interpretation**

## **6.1 Introduction**

Chapter 6 draws social practices into a framework showing the tensions between brand and social bonding (see Figure 9), which are discussed at three different levels, (i) individual, (ii) micro, and (ii) meso in relation to brand, brand meaning, social bonds and practices (see Figure 8). Brand meaning negotiation and social capital flow in OBCs will be illustrated as a result of the main study, which enabled the author to examine, (i) social bond formation in an OBC – i.e. discovering others, (ii) capital accumulation and transformation in the field, (iii) tensions and resolutions throughout the process, (iv) outcomes of the social influences, and (v) how the outcomes again feedback to social bond development in the OBC. The multi-layered ethnographic, complementary and discrepant data, presented in Chapter 5, will be systematically analysed, interpreted and presented under the following nine themes: (i) conformity versus distinction, (ii) spurious versus authentic social bond, (iii) instrumental and emotional benefits of social bonds, (iv) productive versus perverse manifestations of social bonds, (v) value creation through social exchange, (vi) interdependent status games, (vii) imaginative possession of brand, (viii) brand image projected through participants, and (ix) social approval and taste development.

## **6.2 From Ethnographic Representation to Interpretation**

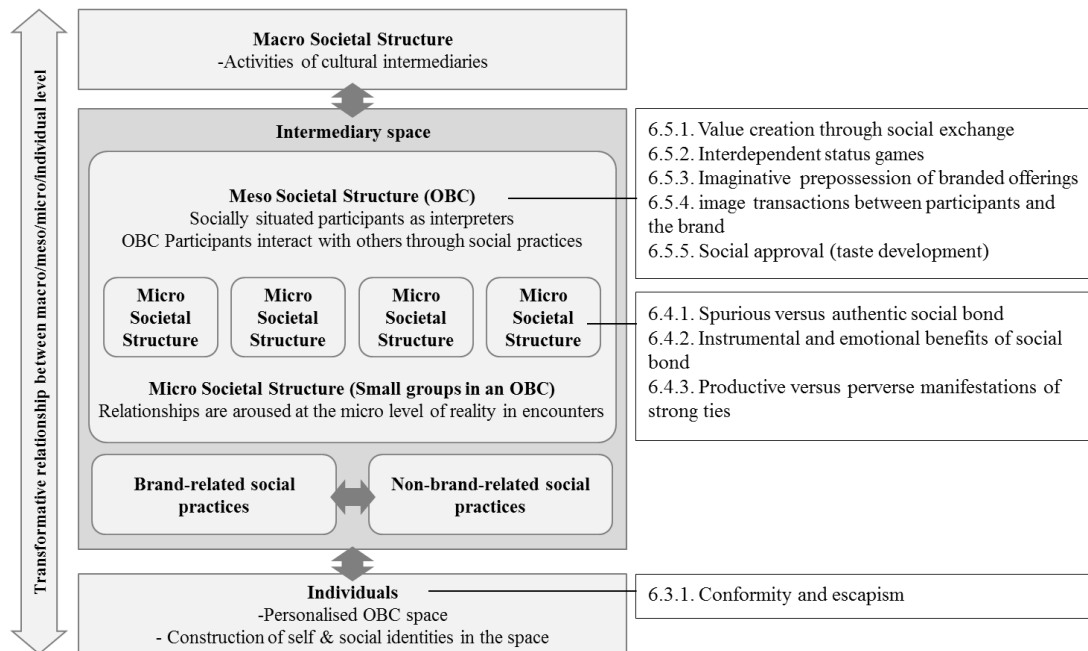
Discursive statements are important; however they are only part of what participants do with their symbol-making skills. Their use of digital tools and the expression of their emotions, both demonstrate how language is made up of much more than words alone. OBC participants' conversation includes non-discursive forms of meaning-making, forms that take advantage of image, emoticon, and non-sequentiality. Consequently, from the meanings of the words they use in non-discursive conversation, it is possible to assess what participants are emphasising, or

contradicting; also nonverbal expressions are vital to both brand-related and non-brand-related practices.

Ethnographic interpretation can be conveyed through several different representations, each of which highlights the various features in the layers of interpretation required in order to achieve different goals. The following is a general layout of the social bonding in an OBC before delving into a behavioural constellation, which may be divided into three levels: (i) the self, (ii) the interpersonal – consumers with symbolic power and connectivity, i.e. social capital, who influence other closely related participants, thereby forming a new reference group, and (iii) the brand (evaluating other participants and negotiate brand meaning). This division casts light on the dynamic nature of OBC practices. The pertinent question, therefore, is not whether interactions between consumers influence brand meaning, because it is well-known that they do (Naylor, Lamberton, & West, 2012; Nitzan & Libai, 2011). The research attempts to reveal how consumers negotiate brand meaning; hence, the researcher has investigated the Korean OBC brand negotiation process, where consumers are influenced by other members. Figure 8 below shows a framework of the nature of the negotiation process.

The transformative relationship is divided into four social structural levels: (i) the macro, (ii) the meso, (iii) the micro, and (iv) the individual. At the macro level, the marketer controls the flow of information by assigning intended brand meaning while individuals rebuild its meaning based on their brand experience. At the meso level, consumers negotiate brand meaning with others in an OBC. At the micro level, societal structure refers to smaller groups in an OBC that constitute people who have things in common, such as similar hobbies or interests, where they live, what their tastes are, etc. In this intermediary level, which includes meso and micro levels, information is exchanged through social practices. People interact with each other, observe how other consumers behave and, by assuming their thoughts, attempt to reach their own goals. At the individual level, economic capital transforms into social capital, i.e. networking through possession-related discussion, as can cultural

capital, i.e. brand-related knowledge shown on the posts or in offline gatherings, and, symbolic capital, i.e. a staff or manager who works in the brand store, or so called “named” members who actively participate in the OBC with high recognition.



**Figure 8 Transformative Relationship between Different Levels**

Social practices can be largely divided into “brand-related”, such as the exhibiting of products, information sharing and second-hand brand product trading, and “non-brand-related”, such as social support and the sharing of personal belongings. However, as participants become more involved with non-brand-related issues, these social practices overlap and the brand loses control as the OBC becomes more a community of interest. Hence, the intermediate space is a complex field of tension and many layered negotiation processes between community participants. Also, as Griffiths and Gilly (2012) observed, participants show territorial behaviours that impact on other members and the OBC atmosphere. Consequently, while an OBC does not have a geographical area, its participants consider it as a VTP, which often influences other consumers’ brand experiences negatively.

Participants possess incongruous understandings of the character of OBCs that are



rooted in their constructed meanings about online and offline social spheres; hence, such intertwining means they cannot be dealt with separately. The following sections will explain some of these countervailing meanings in relation to OBC social practices and capital transformations.

## **6.3 Individual Level**

### **6.3.1 Conformity versus Distinction: a Sign of Brand Constellation**

Festinger (1954) stated that, whereas consumers feel assured in conformity due to there being associated with large numbers of others, they nevertheless continuously compare themselves with others; as Ordabayeva and Chandon (2011) conclude, it is inherently human to judge how well they are doing. Wood (1989) stated that people engage in both unfavourable upward and favourable downward comparisons, upward comparisons occur faster, since as Collins (1996) observed, they arise by default for self-evaluation purpose. Unfavourable comparisons with what others have, therefore, lead to envy and feelings of inferiority, which in turn motivate those with lower levels of possessions to keep up with them by attaining, and publicly displaying, their own, similar, or better, possessions (Christen & Morgan, 2005; Dupor & Liu, 2003). In an OBC context, this shows as tension between conformity and escapism; thus, personal collections and brand constellations show how members manage such contradictory concepts, resulting in a precarious balance between wanting to be left alone with their individual freedoms and wanting to find the supportive intimacy of a community.

For instance, as an OBC member, a consumer adopts community-specific consumption patterns and feels a sense of kinship and togetherness when using its jargon, nicknames, and discussing its brand products. One Starbucks informant states:

*There are some really popular drinks among the community members ... hidden menus. They are not written on the menu board but you can order them and they're really tasty. I don't order simple drinks that much because I have what I want, and usually order like, iced Americano with extra shot and hazelnut syrup, or green tea Frappuccino with Java*

*chocolate chip, extra espresso shot and chocolate drizzle... I think every members knows about such recipes because they were really famous in the community. When I see other people ordering such drinks, I think like 'oh, he should be our community member!' and just feel glad and, I feel like he is my friend! (laugh) (Starbucks, Nounours, 27 years old, female)*

However, some members, who are not satisfied with the feeling of togetherness but want to be differentiated in a socially acceptable way, try to be unique and differentiate themselves from others by consuming rare items, such as limited editions or customised items. Other members may display their differences by consuming alternative quality brands, customised products or hand-made accessories. In the Le Creuset OBC, some consumers show an interest in Staub sauce-pans, Villeroy & Boch cups, saucers and cutlery and Daiso' cheap, but similarly designed, dishes. Indeed, having a good mixture of such collections proves a member's cultural and economic capital, which differentiates themselves from many others while keeping their focus on the primary brand, as one Le Creuset OBC member states:

*I feel like they are really mine when I add such little stickers or accessories. I also match my Le Creusets with other items that go well with my collection. Some people ask me after seeing the photos, where they can get such items, and it doesn't bother me at all because I am happy that they like my aesthetic sense. I become proud that my babies (her collection) are more special. (Le Creuset, Hyang, 34 years old, female)*

## **6.4 Micro Level**

### **6.4.1 Spurious Versus Authentic Social Bond**

OBC participants build their social identities through social practices in an OBC. The participants want to keep the OBC as personal places where they can show off their brand-addictions without revealing them to their offline friends and acquaintances. However, while Brown et al. (2007) suggested that the actors in online social networks relate to web-sites rather than to the individuals who post on them, some develop strong relationships with other members who they feel can truly understand their brand-based passions. In such ways, members' interests move from the OBC itself to their new friends; which is what Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) reported as communities looking out for and helping their members; it also

reinforces the findings of Pitta and Fowler (2005b) that relationships can be built outside the main community, thereby creating a mini-network of consumers with specific interests. One Starbucks OBC informant describes his strong social bonds with others and asserts how satisfied he is from having them:

*This is a place where I can be myself. I have to be a teacher in a school, I have to be a good son at home... They might think that I am geeky (laugh) but my good friends here all like what I like, and I can be myself in this place. We don't only talk about that (the brand), but still, this is the only place where I can be my true self. I don't want my students to know that I am doing these things (laugh) it's umm, ruining my face. I want to keep my serious image. But then if they get to know that I like these little things... they'll have a different image (Starbucks, Joon, 31 years old, female)*

A Le Creuset informant describes the virtue of building social relationship with other members and emphasises the advantage of the relationship:

*I mean, this is for a totally different purpose. You do what you can do with offline friends and there are things that only can be done online, like talking extensively about the brand itself. If I say it to my offline friends they will get bored. Even if they have the same interest, it's a bit tricky – there can be some delicate situations like a sense of competition? Oh she has more than I have. These things happen because you know the person offline. If somebody you know from online has more than you have, you don't feel bad. You just feel like, oh, that looks good... but if your neighbour has more than you have, well... that's a different story. It can be different from person to person, but in my case, I don't want to be compared offline... so I prefer online interaction in relation to Le Creuset. Well it is nice to have a friend to share interest, but still... you can have it online as well, can't you? I want to separate my life from this. (Le Creuset, Avril, 30 years old, female)*

This informant says that she does not want to be disturbed by people who do not understand her. However, it is more common to find more spurious relationships among members. The online characteristic of an OBC allows members to have spurious relationship that can be built from community-held events or simple online communication. Such relationships, of course, can develop into strongly tied, authentic relationships, by frequent and regular communications and shows of empathy. Although a member might invest time and effort in sharing experience and information in an attempt to build authentic social bonds with another, transforming a spurious social bond into an authentic one is not so easy. Other members might hesitate to reveal him/herself, since a lack of trust is rampant in the online world. The following excerpt illustrates the informant's fear to show his existence to others,

which is the starting point of relationship building:

*There are times I read something and I almost started to post my photos in the store. I was looking for photos to post and again I thought, "No." I may encounter people barking out impressions and I may get hurt. Some people have gotten so mean-spirited. I don't want to be witch-hunted. All of a sudden everyone has this license to talk out loud and attack others... I know people here are nice but there are crazy people everywhere. So I just do comments on other's posts to communicate but haven't tried to write my own post or talk to other members personally. (Le Creuset, Ivanka, 31 years old, female)*

Even though he showed a deep attachment to the OBC from the interview this respondent is clearly reluctant to get too close to others for fear of being rebuffed, which means that offline gatherings, or the sharing of practices, are often very important turning points for such reserved members. Other challenges grow out of the "virtualness" of an OBC. While most participants indicated the importance for relationship building of an OBC they also perceive it as a "symbolic universe", while several described living in the virtual world at the expense of the physical one as "being quite dangerous", as expressed by this Le Creuset member:

*When I am sitting there chatting with people and my kids cry... you might as well be working. My husband said that this is very unhealthy. I like talking to real people as well, but sometimes it is more convenient to be online.... But then again the relationship can be superficial and you may misunderstand another as you are not looking into each other's eyes. A small misunderstanding can cause a big problem... I think that is the dilemma that people struggle with. I care about trying to not get into the lure of the online too much and keep my 'real' relationships. You shouldn't believe people easily that you haven't seen before, it is dangerous nowadays and you should be cautious (Olivia, 35 years old, Le Creuset)*

Whereas active members with authentic social bonds attempt to attract more people to participate in community activities, those members who enjoy spurious social bonds stay calm and keep their distance from other members.

#### **6.4.2 Instrumental and Emotional Benefits of Social Bonds**

As has been shown in this study, the most compelling reason for consumers to participate in OBCs is to meet like-minded people. Camaraderie, however, is not their only goal. A consumer may join an OBC for different reasons, such as, (i) to get useful information and help from others, (ii) to meet people with the same interests, and (iii) to receive emotional support – i.e. hedonic/emotional – or, (iv) to take part

in specific events. Consequently, highly involved and enthusiastic consumers not only engage in extended searches and information gathering, but they also tend to become consultants in their field; however, they still may not be able to explain their social bonding behaviour on an OBC (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Besides meeting the necessary structural conditions, social bonding primarily depends on the specific contents and rules of exchange applied within a given community. In the investigated OBCs for this study, the social processes of building and maintaining relationships were facilitated for two principle benefits, (i) instrumental, and (ii) emotional. Instrumental benefit includes getting brand-related news, or other information in relation to purchasing or receiving promotional material, such as coupons, teaching classes, gifts and free events, as Nounours explains:

*This place is a lot better than any other places because it is focused on the brand itself and has a lot of information. The posts that are helpful for me are kind of ignored in other places as people are not interested in it at all. But here, I can find everything about Starbucks ... nobody blames me for loving Starbucks when I ask a question, such as “where can I get this tumbler?”, “how is the new drink in Japan? Is there anybody tried it?” (Starbucks, Nounours, 27 years old, female)*

Regarding emotional benefits, some participants obtain them from the site’s accommodating and empathising practices, which create a “home-like” atmosphere, as with Hyang, a Le Creuset member:

*This is the warmest place to be in my life. I wanted to get involved because people are so kind they are all nice people. When I am exhausted and wasted from work and do not want to talk to my family... because they can’t understand me or I don’t want to make them worried... I can just talk to people here and feel a lot better (Le Creuset, Hyang, 34 years old, female)*

Informants such as the last two suggest that it is possible for them to receive an “amazing amount” of instrumental and emotional support and help and their answers underpin the importance of the main motivational preconditions for voluntarily building social bonds in an OBC. One of them expressed the need for diverse and first-hand information, which ranks first of all the motives listed by informants. Some informants also stated that they enjoy “looking at other people’s branded daily

product usage”, while others talked about simply having fun and receiving consolation. Many participants referred to social pressure and explain that they are too reserved to express their brand love to people in their real lives. Yesueul, a female Starbucks member noted that, in her social environment, people were sarcastic about her consuming a large number of its products:

*They ask me to buy a drink for them... saying, “Oh, you’ve got so many coupons”. Or, “You have so many coupons so why don’t you share them? Ridiculous. They criticise me because I buy too much and then say that I should give them some; if I say “no”, they say bad things behind my back... so I just don’t want to let other people know that I’m a Starbucks lover. I only show myself in SG... in fact people get to know each other because we have something to talk about. It is really difficult to meet a person who can properly communicate with you... as you get older and older, especially... (Starbucks, Yeseul, 26 years old, female)*

Nounours shows a feeling of repulsion to non-members around her, saying that “they bother me for nothing”, and continues:

*I can’t forget about it, it was almost five years ago. I went to a local Starbucks shop and there was a limited drink, strawberry something Frappuccino, strawberry vanilla? Something like that. It is very rare to see something with strawberry in Starbucks, and I am kind of person who always go for limited stuffs, I just like trying. My friend asked me, “what do you want to drink?” and I said, “that limited strawberry one, I wanna try!”. And I still remember, she stared me as if she were looking at the most extravagant person in the world, saying, “oh are you that kind of person? Ok.” I was shocked! What’s wrong with going for the limited edition? And she was not paying for me, anyways. No right to criticise... Anyhow, after that, I don’t really say that I like Starbucks, even if I like it pretty much. People always look at me, their eyes keep telling me that “I am different. You such a thoughtless person.”. Starbucks is everywhere, and they go there as well. But it seems like if one likes Starbucks, one doesn’t have any taste and likes showing off. But I even brew coffee beans at home and do hand drips! I know Starbucks coffee is not the best in the world, but everything together – their food, stores, services, tumblers... Starbucks is a really great brand and I can’t deny it ... I bought a new city mug last month, and didn’t tell anybody that I bought it, because they will give me that look again, and say that I am old enough to spend money on something else ... Talking about it, I’m pissed off again. None of your business! (Starbucks, Nounours, 27 years old, female)*

In this way, a sense of homogeneity arises that facilitates the generation of the social bonds, especially because they feel that OBC members do not judge them. A number of informants argued that they do not want to persuade their real-life friends to understand them because non-OBC members do not have enough interest or knowledge about the brand. Hence members emphasise their pleasure regarding receiving “the empathy of others”, especially because of the Korean collectivist

culture, and because they want to be understood and get attention from other people, all of which enables them to both temporarily escape from real-life social pressure and to reveal their real selves. However, talking about, and displaying, branded products can be associated with boasting, which is not considered to be a virtue in Korean society. Also, ostentatious behaviour spoils group harmony by arousing jealousy; for example, people may be impressed the first time a person mentions that she has a fabulous Le Creuset kitchenware collection. The more often she mentions the brand and its products, it can easily lead to the perception that she is being pretentious. A number of informants acknowledged that they have suffered from “unfair comments” in this respect so that now they try not to talk too much about the possession of the brand they so obviously love.

There are, however, a number of reasons why many other members are not so concerned about appearing immodest when they interact with other OBC consumers. Miller and Arnold (2003) found that, because self-presentation online is inherently impersonal, people are less likely to actually notice if their self-presentations have been rejected or criticised. Also, because most members share similar values and have invested excessively in the branded items, their extolling the brands’ virtues is not considered to be mindless, but is respected. Nevertheless, some members avoid negative comments because they are aware of online reciprocity. It is, of course, possible that the same social norm that dictates modesty in offline social interactions may either not be present, or is suppressed in an OBC; consequently, some people, who may not be as modest in an online environment as they are offline, receive emotional support when they express their real selves.

#### **6.4.3 Productive Versus Perverse Manifestations of Social Bonds**

Research in social psychology demonstrates that being socially connected to others provides community members with perceived benefits; hence, participation in OBCs meet underlying psychological needs (Johnson et al., 2006). However, building strong ties among members has both positive and negative influences on an OBC; the positive outcomes being increased attachments to the brand and community and

the negative consequence of social influence in brand community has been observed. It is clear, from the findings of this study, that members with strong social relationships, (i) promote socialising. (ii) create a positive OBC atmosphere by responding to other member's posts, (iii) help others to obtain information and support, and (iv) encourage, or arrange, offline gatherings. Here two Le Creuset informants explain how their relationships with others encouraged them to contribute to the community:

*I do it for people that I like and there will be many other people who will get benefit from my post, which is good. They might not write anything on my post, appreciating, but it's okay... at least I know that people I know in this community will get benefit. And when we meet up, we can talk about the posts, which is good. We keep talking online and offline and online... and again offline. (Le Creuset, Lovehome, 32 years old, female)*

*I kept taking photos of new Le Creuset products in the store, and my hubby asked me why I take photos wherever I go. So I said that I'll post it on the community so that YJ and KH can see, and he gave me a weird look and said, what do you get in return? Phew... guys! They don't really understand how fun it is to share! (Le Creuset, HappyH, 33 years old, female)*

These informants provide content that attracts new members to register to the community, and they help to retain members; by their activities they also set good examples, thereby discouraging "free-riding". The following remarks show how participants have changed because of such members:

*They are very well known and actively socialise with others... they often have offline gatherings and I can see that they are having much fun there and that made me think, 'I want to be there!' Whenever I see their posts that are useful for other members I feel kind of... sense of guilt? And think that 'oh, I should become active as well...' which is not very easy though (laugh) (Starbucks, Lublock, 23 years old, male)*

*I sold Starbucks Valentine edition tumblers this time, Sakura tumbler, and I priced it even cheaper than its original price in Japan. My friends told me that I am being an idiot but I just felt like, as long as I am a Starbucks OBC member, I can behave like that (selling the tumbler at a premium) (Starbucks, Yujin, 26 years old, female)*

On the negative side, some participants found that the strong social bonds of others prevented them from focusing on the brand:

*Hmm... things like, "do you have a schedule today? Why don't you come to today's offline gathering?" Actually, I hate troublesome works very much. When a person becomes close to another person they may want to meet each other more often. If somebody calls me for that*



*reason then I should hang out with them... also, if I don't appear often on the community board, they will contact me saying "are you busy these days? Why don't I see you on Starbucks OBC?" Then it's a burden, I feel like I have to go there. I just want to go there whenever I want... (Starbucks, Lyan, 28 years old, female)*

In a similar way, strong social bonds disturbed the informant from enjoying the VTP quality of the community by enforcing social pressure. She continues that personal relationship may destroy her "fantasy" of an OBC:

*I like Starbucks OBC. People look happy fun, kind, affluent, that's why I come here but then, If I meet them and if they are not like that... then my fantasy will disappear.*

Nounours describes a negative incident:

*That group always cover up for their close friends. There was a fight between two members, one female and one male, and he eventually disappeared from the community. After that, it was a whole different lens I look through the community. I was surprised that people were on her side and nobody was on his - nobody knew why they were fighting! But people commented like 'It can't be xx's fault', 'don't bother' ... to me, as a teacher, the whole process looked like students who want to be close to the strongest student in the class. And thought that I shouldn't go deep into the community and should keep my distance... after that, I had different lens to look at the community... (Starbucks, Nounours, 27 years old, female)*

Such socialisation can often hinder new members' participation:

*Entry barrier was quite high then. People were doing 'comment play' (keep commenting on a post, almost like a real-time chatting, often done by close members) everywhere and it was common to have several hundreds of comments on one post. It was difficult for new members, or not very social members, to jump into the conversation, so I had to just watch it. I remember I made one comment asking something, and mine was ignored because there were so many other comments. I felt ignored and isolated at that time (Starbucks, Noah, 25 years old, male.)*

Algesheimer et al. (2005) reported that negative consequence of social influence may happen when consumers feel normative community pressure, and consumers may react and disobey the "rules" in order to regain their freedom.

A participant with strong social bonds may only focus on his/her own small group and no longer post on the community board, presumably not feeling the need to participate in the OBC as a whole. This sort of member would rather socialise behind the scenes, such as by enjoying offline gatherings and private conversation with a

close few. Hence, because they socialise with only a very few in-group members, information is denied to newcomers, who are struggling to participate. This could lead to a community's decline, which has been the case with a number of online communities in Korea.

## 6.5 Meso Level

### 6.5.1 Value Creation through Social Exchange

Hemetsberger (2002) reported in his article on an open source community that gift giving and generalised social exchange behaviour was evident in the OBCs he had selected to study. In an OBC, social exchange behaviours, which include collective bargaining, sharing, gift-giving, and other generalised social exchanges, help some members to achieve certain important extrinsic goals. This “economic model”, which assumes that things are exchanged for their economic or utilitarian value, is opposed to the “social model”, whereby exchanges takes place according to their symbolic value (Ekeh, 1974). In the OBCs observed in this study by way of consumers' threads, comments and interviews, the norms of reciprocity were evident in the form of “sharing in return” and that the “sharing” was treated as an entertainment through written and photo postings and, in return, appreciation shown, also in terms of photos and gifts. It also appeared clear that, because of the risk of “cherry-picking”, members did not allow “lurkers” to take part in their “gifting and sharing” practices. The following remark sums this “value created from social exchange” altruism very clearly:

*It is nice to share if there is something that I don't use. I buy a lot so I get a lot of free gifts as well. When I get identical items, what's the point of having all of them? If other people like it it's even better. And they like it. If they behave like oh, you should give it to me as you have a lot, then I wouldn't want to give anything to them, but our community members are all grateful whenever they get anything from others. When I get something the first idea that comes in my mind is 'oh, I should do the sharing...' sometimes I buy more to do sharing. It's not a matter of money, I can spend more money for them, I am just happy that I can give something to them. (Le Creuset, Hannah, 39 years old, female)*

Social exchange in an OBC is different from gift giving (Sherry, 1983) as participants do not know the receiver before it is decided by a game or lottery. The giver receives the attention and emotional support from other members and accumulates social capital through the event and the receiver gets instrumental benefit through the special meaning given to the item. Notably, in an OBC, value created is not merely getting something free; rather, it is the symbolic benefit of receiving another participant's kindness, which commonly is reciprocated. This study also witnessed consumers' altruistic behaviour by way of such sharing and gifting practices, as the following excerpt illustrates:

*I haven't done any sharing event yet, but I did receive one. After that I felt obliged to do the sharing and I keep preparing it... I am still thinking what to do, what others would like, so I haven't done it yet. Before I bought a lot of Starbucks coasters so I'm thinking of sharing them, many people use coasters (so it won't fail). Or a Starbucks card that my friend from U.S. brought to me, I don't collect cards. But then again, everybody has huge collections so I don't know what they lack of... it's really difficult. Small and useful things... something like that... (Starbucks, Joon, 31 years old, female)*

In addition, social exchanges in OBCs create a family-like atmosphere and build up an appealing whereby participants give special meaning to the community.

### **6.5.2 Interdependent Status Games**

Social distinctions are observed in the type of participation, level of knowledge, and expert and novice roles within an OBC. Therefore, symbolic power becomes evident because consumers, through their respective brand meanings, convert different forms of capital into symbolic power, which, in this case involves status, authority, respect and social legitimacy. In this way, capital is transformed and the hierarchy of consumers changes through a contesting discourse, since a member, who is an "individual agency", having been subordinated by the forces of social practice, seeks to deploy it for his/her own purposes. As a social reward, the member receives friendship, peer reputation and positive reactions from other members. For such cooperation, social rewards, in terms of a sense of autonomy, accrue, which in turn creates a self-sustaining system of social and informational exchange.

In this context, possession of a branded product is closely related to cultural and social capital, because the focus of an OBC is on a particular brand. Of course, some members do not possess any of the branded items because they are looking for better deals, or because they have not decided which item to purchase. It is difficult, therefore, for those members to build field-dependent capital because it is only through knowledge of its history and its regular utilisation that a member can know enough about it to provide the community with solid information.

Gradually, though, active members become “named” members, who are vital for the longevity of the community; the following excerpt from a Starbucks contributor shows the value of such members:

*A member with long period of participation tends to have a lot of Starbucks goods such as tumblers and sometimes they give them to close people. He shows his collections and gives it as a gift... so it is good to be close to him. I wish I were close to him! . . . People tend to be on his side when somebody blames him. Even though people do not have personal relationship with him, they feel close to him because he is an active poster and his user ID is kind of familiar. He knows a lot about Starbucks and he loves it so much, and we all know it, so in a way he is respected. (Starbucks, Lublock, 23 years old, male)*

In the OBC field, cultural capital can take a variety of forms, such as, (i) a deep understanding of the products – i.e. its history, limited editions and other “inside” information, (ii) stories about the brand, (iii) the ability to judge and critique OBC culture in relation to its aesthetic ideals, (iv) a fluency in the OBC jargon, and (v) possession of many of the branded products. Members can easily recognise another member’s cultural capital from their accumulated postings and comments on the website. OBC cultural capital can also be objectified by their collections, which may reflect their own cultural and artistic tastes.

Such field-dependent social capital refers to weak-and strong-tie social connections that consumers can use to access OBC resources, such as, (i) invitations given by the company to branded events, (ii) offers of social support, and (iii) a sense of belongingness and camaraderie through the sharing of common interests and tastes. Like cultural capital, social capital is closely interlinked with other capitals and is not exhausted once it is leveraged to gain economic or cultural capital. In many cases, it

even increases over time. The overall stock of cultural and social capital generates power relationships between cores and peripherals. An OBC's core members have connections with the business and act as facilitators between ordinary members and managers; they possess knowledge, expertise, experience and collections of branded items. They have "badges" signifying their grade, which show next to their user names. Therefore, their social and cultural capital is observable throughout the web-texts and they eventually become "named" members. At a macro level, core members enable an OBC to gain scale, credibility and sociability. The core member's knowledge, persistence and connection also increase the success rate of OBC and peripheral members acknowledge their expertise and appreciate their devotion by applauding their contributions, as one member writes:

*You always do your best to help us though you are not paid by the community! The community thrives with the help of people like you. I feel so bad that I get so much benefits, please bear in mind that I am always grateful. (Le Creuset, Sarah, 2011.05.13)*

These core members make small parties to have offline gatherings and a delicate conflict begins based on jealousy. The core members are sensitive about their social rewards because they do not want to fall behind in this place where they have already accumulated significant stock of capital. To defend the value of their field-dependent capital, these members try to prevent people from free-riding, discriminate normal and special products and show that they are aware of important brand-related issues.

### **6.5.3 Imaginative Possession of Brand**

Respondents acknowledged that they get vicarious satisfaction from seeing other people's collections, as Marmite, a Le Creuset informant remarks:

*I like browsing the website to see other's collections, I often see them again and again whenever I have time... and then I feel like I actually have them! I know it sounds stupid... once I went shopping with my friend and my friend went to a Le Creuset store, she was looking for a pink marmite and I was explaining about it to her so passionately, as if I've been using it for several years, but all my sayings were from the website, from a specific member's post... and I realised, oh, I am speaking as if I have one (laugh).....I don't have that marmite and I am not planning to have one, I don't need that size at all. But I just love*

*that baby so much... though I haven't used it in my kitchen! (Le Creuset, Marmite, 32 years old, female)*

A respondent from the Starbucks site states:

*Joon: ...other members, thankfully, posts other country's products or the items I've never seen, stores I haven't been, so I get this vicarious satisfaction.*

*Researcher: Can you articulate on the term you just used, vicarious satisfaction?*

*Joon: My occupation doesn't allow me to have a vacation. So I can't travel abroad, not even other cities. So when other members upload photos of pretty stores and various tumblers from abroad, I become excited as if I've been there. Like... reading a book? A book that is written by the person I kind of know ^^ I can't experience everything, I can't visit every single stores, I can't possess every single tumblers. I also get cravings, like this season's Sakura adelic brown. I didn't like it from the photo on the SG website but I saw photos uploaded by members and I was like oh my god!!! But it was too late, at that time it was already discontinued... (Starbucks, Joon, 31 years old, female)*

Social bonds are helped by seeing positive information from familiar names dominating the posts, because, once close relationships are built people tend not to provoke others by saying negative things about their collections. Collectivists, especially, pay much attention to retaining “face”, especially in public, so they do not like others reacting against them, or *vice versa*. Even when members do not agree with another member's opinion, if they know each other, they will not react against the person in a public place, or humiliate them in front of others; hence “brand-friendly” information predominates in the OBCs.

These social consumers are connected to each other via a range of electronic devices and receive push alerts from their OBCs; therefore, their impact on would-be consumers is huge. When a member finds something interesting, such as a new Le Creuset display, or a Starbucks promotion, they can report it without much effort before they forget about it. Easy access to an OBC, therefore, encourages more consumers to participate and not just loyal and passionate consumers. In essence, the accumulation of information on an OBC enables members to feel experienced with the product, even before they actually purchase it.

#### 6.5.4 Brand Image Projected through Participants

Consumers use OBCs to fulfil a variety of social needs, including self-expression and self-presentation (Gosling et al., 2007), especially the self that they do not want to show to other close people, such as their “brand frenzy”. Therefore, as Valkenburg, Peter and Schouten (2006) and Gonzales and Hancock (2011) reported, using an OBC can enhance self-esteem and positively affect well-being. However, during the process, the brand image is transferred from other members’ image or identity they get (Dahl, Argo, & Morales, 2012). Some respondents reported that when they have tried to follow the advice or style of a seemingly better looking individual, they have become disappointed when they discovered that someone, far removed from their ideal, is consuming the same brand. For instance, HappyH from Le Creuset, reported:

*I purchased casseroles for them but they didn't appreciate it and just stayed silent. It was regrettable. Actually, I even didn't want to visit the community then, I didn't want to hang out with people who don't understand such feelings. My Le Creuset collection was still precious but thinking that those people are using the same design... that was odd and annoying. What's the point of having this casserole? I thought like that. I suddenly became very realistic. Why should I be ignored because of a casserole? Why did I waste my money on it? (Le Creuset, HappyH, 33 years old, female)*

Another informant, from Starbucks, also indicates that she saw the brand differently after her OBC participation:

*After a period of participation in Starbucks community, and getting familiar with members who always go to Starbucks, I felt like I know very well about Starbucks... I feel like this is my brand. But this is my brand among so many coffee brands. I mean, now I don't feel that Starbucks is a luxurious brand (laugh). Now I know that Starbucks Korea is careless about many things . . . before Starbucks for me was something for American movies, Hollywood stars doing takeaways. But now... it's just one of the local stores. We talk about it everyday in the community and I know that our members almost live there so I feel like Starbucks is more down to earth now. Our members are ordinary people, and they consume Starbucks a lot. So I feel the brand is an ordinary one. I mean, it's good and I like it, but it's not special. (Starbucks, Yeseul, 26 years old, female)*

Personal conflicts in an OBC may cause a consumer to leave the community, and eventually the brand. Another Starbucks informant expresses her disappointment thus:

*The manager (of the OBC) can totally change the community. How the manager behaves... Frankly speaking, I don't like the current manager that much, there are rumours that he sells products to others... so I tend not to participate that much and I don't feel like posting when I buy something new... well obviously I buy less than before because of that. I kind of lost my affection to the community... and Starbucks... it reminds me of those people I hate and I don't want to consume the same thing... (Starbucks, Margaret, 25 years old, female)*

A completely opposite effect is reported by Hyang from Le Creuset OBC:

*She is very stylish and affluent, a very good cook. Her family looks happy. I'd love to have a life like theirs when I get married... everything (kitchenware) she has is nice and expensive. I liked Le Creuset even more after knowing her because I know that she never buys cheesy stuff (Le Creuset, Hyang, 34 years old, female)*

While members may be presenting valid information about themselves on the website, they often filter out the negative information to present a positive self-view, and sometimes they will even lie or exaggerate (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011) because it is easier to disguise one's identity online where few members know one's real self. Nevertheless, consumers believe in their manipulated identity by assuring themselves that they are consuming the right brand. As Granovetter (Granovetter, 1973) pointed out, image transactions often differ in regard to the strength of members' social connections to other members. It is interesting to note that parasocial relationships are evident in this context; hence, some members might feel close to others, even though those others might not recognise, or even be aware of, them.

### **6.5.5 A Learning Place: Social Approval and Taste Development**

OBC members acquire knowledge and develop taste by learning about how others utilise branded products in their daily lives, how they share their knowledge about them and how they become confident about purchasing items that others have recommended on the OBC, as Pretty from the Le Creuset OBC indicates:

*I love my pots more than before. Actually, there should be a good reason for so many people to buy a specific brand, don't you think so? So many people are supporting the brand. I found a lot more people than I have imagined in this community, people who know a lot about the brand and use them very smartly, have nice collections... now I am more*



*convinced with my purchase and I have learned a lot from the community (Le Creuset, Pretty, 33 years old, female)*

As her quote indicates, there had to be “good reasons for so many people to buy a specific branded product”, suggesting that a “collective” choice is understood to be better than individual judgment; she continues:

*Pink marmite is a trend these days in our community, at first I was like... why? But now... seeing it again and again, I can't wait to purchase it. No wonder why this is so popular among others, there always is a reason for a specific item to become popular.*

Thus, OBC participants rely on collective opinions to inform their decisions and they are usually satisfied with their purchase because they have made a collectively approved choice. The following excerpt from a Le Creuset informant describes how she gradually learned about product lines and other brands from experienced members:

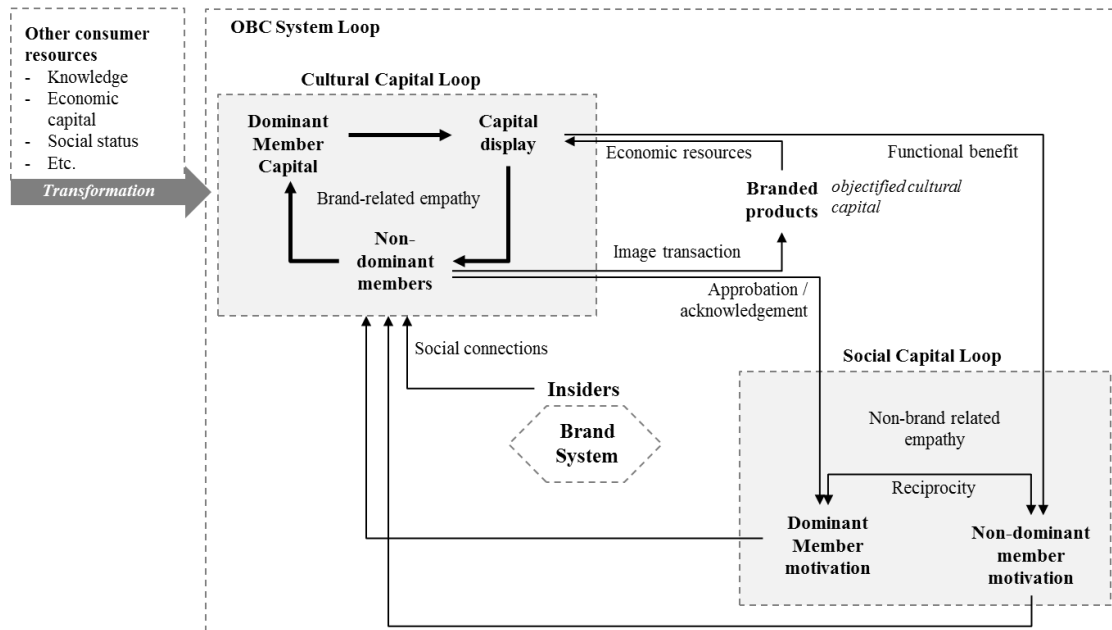
*At first, I knew nothing about Le Creuset. I just bought the set because I always wanted to have one and it was a good deal... and I joined the community to learn more about it. Then it was like a whole new world... the community people all know about chiffon colours and stuff, the popular and the prettiest ones, but for other people they don't really care about these things. It is just Le Creuset... but for us, there are things that are more difficult to get, like limited editions... more desired colours, designs, preferred by members, and “must have” items (laugh). At the beginning I didn't like those pastel colours but now... after seeing all those pretty photos, I am in love. I have already ordered some pieces from Japanese auction website ... (Le Creuset, Helene, 32 years old, female)*

Her comments clearly imply that her change of taste came from the community. In this way, members come under the influence of community-specific grooming rituals. Anne illustrates how important keeping such rituals is for her in the following excerpt:

*I came back from my mother in law's house with my baby and I found a Le Creuset sticker in a litter-bin! Oh my goddess!... my hubby told me that he cleaned it up as best he could and the sticker was detached from the casserole, so he threw it away. He then said, “Why do you need it? It (the word ‘Le Creuset’ on the sticker) is already written on its lid and on its bottom!”. I told him that our community members all keep stickers on Le Creuset but he never understood. phew... Guys!” (Le Creuset, Anne, 2011. 06. 11)*

## 6.6 The Negotiation Process

The theoretical framework for this study of brand meaning creation and capital accumulation in an OBC is shown in Figure 9.



**Figure 9 A Model of Consumers' Negotiation of Countervailing Meanings**

Source: developed by the author

This study's research focused on the intermediary space [Figure 8], where consumers gather information and form social bonds. Brands become "matchmakers" in OBCs, therefore, because consumers regard reciprocity as important, they are generous and understanding towards in-group members, which facilitates the formation of social bonds. Consequently, most information, social support, camaraderie and entertainment comes from core members' voluntary contributions, and it is they who keep the peripheral members interested and stop them from leaving the community.

Consumers join OBCs in the first instance to obtain instrumental help; they then stay on to see other consumer's postings and comments, and, if they stay long enough, they look to it for emotional support. From early on, therefore, they learn that they can make full use of it only when they have built up trust, and developed social

relationships with others. Through the process, many members gradually build up their bond-based commitments and feel that their OBC is like home, where they feel able to share their daily lives and personal worries. Once members begin to see, and to value, their OBC as a VTP, a brand gets the credit for providing the members with a medium to continue meeting people they have grown to be fond of, thereby nurturing a benign atmosphere in the OBC. Consequently, members not only build trusting relationships, but they also begin to rely on other members' advice and opinions, which converts the OBC into a very important reference point in their daily lives. Conversely, brands, which have performed the intermediary role of "matchmaker", profit greatly from having created new consumers by bringing them together with current users of their products. Thus the brand has both enhanced and sustained its meaning by utilising the time, energy and enthusiasm of its customer base.

During the course of this study, the author has found that consumers become more committed to an OBC if their efforts result in, (i) receiving the information they initially needed, (ii) some form of acknowledgement from others, (iii) the building of friendships, and (iv) the creation of a sense of kinship. On the other hand, if they do not experience such positive feed-back, as consumers, they may lose their commitment by feeling isolated, or, if they express such feelings, fall into conflict with others; hence, these dynamics will have a deleterious effect on brand meaning.

Also, because a principle characteristic of an OBC is "voluntary behaviour", even though there is a shared goal, if participants finds it uninteresting they will almost certainly abandon the community as soon as they have received the information they came for, since their continued involvement would be predominantly based on emotional rather than utilitarian desires. In summary, members use a nexus of activities and interpretive strategies to disentangle and distinguish their investment in a field of consumption by building social bonds – if such bonds are not forthcoming, they will leave.

This study discovered two dominant types of negotiation mechanism, the first relies, in the consumer's mind when he or she observes group activity that gives a new meaning to a brand. The second mechanism concerns all those participants who build social bonds with other members. This study, therefore, extends Ligas and Cotte's (Ligas & Cotte, 1999) framework, by considering an OBC as a meso environment. Feedback loops are provided to show the iterative process of change involving an interrelated set of social and cultural capitals.

The consumers' capacity to make capital displays gains an audience and this feedback increases their cultural capital. During the process, non-dominant members as an audience receive new information about the brand in question and the dominant member's image is projected onto the brand. Prominent brand insiders, such as marketers and sponsors, now provide social connections to the members, which further enhance their social status in the OBC. Because he/she has a number of acquaintances he/she is motivated to keep contributing, which leads to the non-dominant members being more involved in the community. Hence, each loop charges the others.

An in-depth knowledge of the OBC field, which consists of an interlinkage of consumers, employees, stores, third-place hangouts, and intersecting social networks, is very important regarding understanding how individuals invest in it. For example, consumers may enter into one node of an OBC, such as a board or an offline gathering, in order to expand their social connections, which can easily lead them into other, connected, nodes. Through such explorations, they steadily increase their personal investments in this field of consumption and, through the process of reciprocity, increase their overall stock of field-dependent cultural and social capital.

In the OBC field, cultural capital can take a variety of embodied forms, such as a deep understanding of branded products, such as, history, limited editions, inside information, and their stories, the ability to judge and critique its culture in relation to the appropriate aesthetic ideals, and fluency in the OBC jargon. OBC cultural

capital can also be objectified in their collections that innovatively express cultural and artistic tastes. Field-dependent social capital refers to weak-and strong-tie social connections, which consumers can use to access resources available in the OBCs. As mentioned earlier, some examples of resources gained through social capital include, (i) being invited by the company to branded events, (ii) offers of social support, (iii) being given a sense of belonging, and (iv) experiencing the camaraderie afforded by sharing common interests and tastes.

Like cultural capital, social capital is never spent, in the sense of it being exhausted of value once it has gained economic capital; in fact, in many cases it even increases. At the same time, the participants enhance other participants' real selves, and through this process a member's brand meaning changes as it is realised the real consumer of a brand is not the person in the beautified advertisements, but someone much more ordinary. Thus, participants in OBCs exert their influence over others through their positions of power in the networks by deploying various capitals that enable them to lead opinion and generate practices. In this way, participants reshape brand meaning whilst trying to fit in with the OBC as a group.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

### 7.1 Overview of the Project

There has rightly been much enthusiasm over the power of OBCs. Ensuring that an OBC achieves its potential by balancing both users' and companies' needs, however, is a challenge. Adopting the view that an OBC is a necessarily social entity at its core, this study has examined consumers' interactions within OBCs, and their experiences and perceptions of them. It has clearly emerged that consumers manage a continuous tension between social-related and brand-related aspects in OBCs and that they do this through brand-related and non-brand-related social practices. The focus of the research has been, thus, not to investigate the usefulness or utility of a particular OBC but to understand the process of Korean consumers' ongoing brand meaning negotiation process. Consumers culturally frame their consumption interests and tastes according to the underlying practices in the field of consumption, where consumers have a "network of interrelated consumption activities, brand and product constellations, and embedded social networks" (Arsel & Thompson, 2011). This study has explored OBCs in Korea, taking a symbolic interactionist approach. An ethnographic approach, which attempts "to understand the mechanisms of social processes, and to comprehend and explain why both actors and processes are as they are" (Vidich & Lyman, 1994, p. 23), has allowed observation and insight into the process of human meaning construction.

The research had two aims. The first was to understand the context and OBC social practices, with the following research objectives:

**RO1:** To develop the definition and typology of OBCs

**RO2:** To understand the underlying social practices within OBCs

These objectives were realised within the first stage of the project, which acted as a scoping phase. The first stage involved "inspecting" the OBCs and in it the

researcher focused on understanding the social context by investigating four OBCs in the fashion and digital camera categories: Lacoste, Diesel, Nikon and Canon. The author took a holistic look at OBCs by gathering as much information as possible until a better picture had been built about the context of the research. In particular, this phase allowed the author to better and more thoroughly understand the intricacies of an OBC, and it exposed the author's assumptions about OBCs. Evidence emerged of an OBC as a VTP in consumers' minds and the OBC typology was developed to further explain the meaning of OBCs as VTPs from the consumer perspective. An OBC appeared to be a home away from home for a number of the participants in this research, and they seemed to prefer this virtual space to real-life third place activities, due to its accessibility and accommodating atmosphere. Consumers were found to be using this place as a shelter or escape where they would not be blamed for indulging in consumption.

After this, social practices were revealed and defined under five umbrella themes: brand use, brand possession, impression management, social networking and OBC nurturing. This categorisation revealed brand-related and non-brand-related social practices related to brand and social connections. This first phase broadened the understanding of OBCs, made provisional concepts clear and inspired new research directions. Reflecting on the research process, the author also used this as an opportunity to learn more about the process of ethnography as well as to identify the prior assumptions about OBCs. These were important aspects that were taken forward into the main study. Furthermore, it was this phase that extended the scope of the project from a brand value to a brand meaning perspective. Whereas brand value is often used to measure brand equity, brand meaning is a more qualitative dimension in the sense that it refers to the qualities of a brand that create value, including the physical attributes, functional characteristics, and personality of a brand (Plummer, 1985). Given that the interest in this study was to reveal the process and not to measure the output of the "black box", the author decided to focus on the meaning in consumers' minds that "develops from the interchange among three environments: the marketing, individual, and social, as each environment contributes

to a uniform way for consumers to identify and interact with a branded product” (Ligas & Cotte, 1999).

The second research aim was to understand how getting involved in an OBC develops brand meaning for the consumer through revealed social practices. There were three research objectives here:

**RO3:** To reveal the social bond development process through social practices

**RO4:** To illustrate the brand meaning held by the participants

**RO5:** To understand how social practices build social bonds and brand meaning

This second aim was addressed in the main stage of the study. The two OBCs used in the main study were selected based on the typology developed from the first phase, considering the strength of consumers’ bond-based and identity-based attachment, to ensure the VTPness (virtual third placeness; through the consumer lens) of the selected OBCs. The collectivist culture was manifested in the posts and interviews, which enabled the researcher to better implement the research design. Based on the findings from the first study, in the main study the researcher developed a framework of brand meaning negotiation and revealed how consumers symbolically interact and negotiate brand meaning through social practices. The consumers pointed to different experiences and perspectives on the community and the brand that may have shaped brand meaning in the OBC context. Variations in experiences and opinions were maximised among consumers with different perceptions. In contrast, however, the analysis highlighted the constancy and recurrence of some themes across the posts and interviews. The tension between social-related and brand-related aspects during the process was illustrated and a framework was suggested [Figure 9]. The author presented an interpretation by showing the transformative relationship between different levels: macro, meso, and micro societal structure, and individual level. The flow and transformation of different field-specific capitals show how OBC members (constituents) build social bonds and struggle to gain symbolic power in the field,



which in turn influences other consumers' behaviour and brand meaning. These contributions will be explained further in the following sections.

## **7.2 Academic Contribution**

It emerged clearly from the informants' experiences that a successful OBC must achieve a harmonious interplay between the social and brand motivations of community's constituents. Whereas the marketers shed light on the positive influence of social bonds among consumers (Marzocchi, 2013; Scarpi, 2010; Zaglia, 2013), many of the consumers demonstrated that they had begun to perceive OBCs as VTPs and to utilise them as routes for promoting personal well-being. The study focused on this delicate balance between the social and brand-related aspects, the interplay of which has important research and managerial implications.

In relation to the first aim, the VTPness of an OBC emerged as a vital aspect of the consumer experience, to the extent that some of the informants "hated to leave" their OBC. Although the informants in this study were united in perceiving an OBC as a place for consumers, and not for the brand itself, the evidence from the online context of this study offered insight into the range and depth of different perspectives that pertained to the consumers' perceptions of an OBC as a VTP. The VTP aspect was important for these Korean consumers because they wanted to socialise with others without revealing anything about their private lives before developing a strong relationship. They were found to be reluctant to take part in offline activities before getting to know other people online and appreciated the ability to "cut" relationships out of their lives whenever they wanted by simply disappearing from the community website. A key insight from this research is that this convenient togetherness, ironically, led to the development of strong VTPness in OBCs by offering accessibility and a playful atmosphere. Oldenburg (1999) suggested in his concept of the third place that a true third place has hallmarks such as the following: they are free or inexpensive; food and drink are important though not essential; they are accessible and accommodating; they involve regulars; they have a playful atmosphere; conversation is the main activity; they operate on neutral ground; they

have a low profile; they work as levellers; people see them as homes away from home. In comparison, an OBC is almost free, has various kinds of information and threads for people to chat about, offers anonymity that guarantees neutral ground, even more so than offline third places, has welcoming practices that help members to feel comfortable, offer ways for members to find new and old members, are always crowded and are easy to access - even better, members can be connected to this kind of VTP over the Internet throughout the day. Unlike the case a decade ago, when Soukup (2006) mentioned that technological entrance barriers may cause anxiety and fear, consumers nowadays are familiar with Internet technology and can relax in OBCs without being intimidated by technical issues.

Whereas extant research has focused on categorising OBCs by quantitative criteria such as size, age, platform, subject and membership type, here, the author considered an OBC not as a company-owned website but as a place for consumers, and adopted two criteria upon which to base a categorisation framework that would bring insight into the range and depth of meanings that OBCs have for consumers. These two criteria were how strongly a member is attached to an OBC and where this attachment comes from. Two types of attachment emerged as important: identity-based and bond-based attachment. A consumer with strong identity-based attachment focuses on brand-related practices and the shared purpose of the community, whereas a member with strong bond-based attachment puts more emphasis on the relationships between the community members and the community's atmosphere. Different combinations of these attachments result in unique characteristics for each type of perception. These diverse perceptions of OBCs and members' remarks showed the importance of considering consumer perspectives.

With regards to how attachment forms, the author discovered that bond-based and identity-based attachment developed through brand-related and non-brand-related social practices. For instance, members built bond-based attachment through diverse social practices; they welcomed other members, provided emotional support, consoled other members, provided emotional and physical support, shared

information (including brand updates or grooming tips) and took part in offline gatherings. By adopting such practices, members communicated with others in a casual setting and built strong social connections. Identity-based attachment emerged from engaging in brand-related activities, such as learning about the brand and teaching other members new skills, sharing information, devoting time and effort to justifying consumption of the brand to others, evangelising to others about using the brand, and getting support regarding their purchases.

The combination of such attachments seems to result in consumers holding different perceptions, and implies that, in many cases, a brand is not the focal reason for being committed to an OBC. For instance, among highly attached OBC members, those with strong bond-based attachment indicated that an OBC was like a second home in which they “resided” and where they received emotional support, whereas members with strong identity-based attachment perceived an OBC as a “workplace”, where they united with others under a common purpose and actively took part in brand-related activities without much off-topic discussion.

Whereas the extant typologies have categorised community members in terms of how active they are (e.g. posters and lurkers), the typology developed in this research demonstrates that overlapping perspectives may co-exist within the same community. Consumers can change their perceptions as they participate and, indeed, two perspectives can co-exist in a person’s mind. The author argues that this typology will be more useful as a means of understanding a community’s “success” or characteristics because it is based on what matters in the consumer’s mind, and not the number of posts they make. In this typology, members with high OBC attachment who considered both the brand and the social aspect important considered an OBC to be a “brand empire” in which the brand is the most important element and consumers are united by their brand loyalty. Members also have close relationships with other members, which makes the community an authentic OBC. An OBC as a “workplace”, like “brand empire”, puts a brand at the centre of attention and consumers immerse themselves in brand-related projects. When

conflicts arise they can be resolved based on the consumers' loyalty to the brand. Once members develop strong social bonds, they begin to consider an OBC as a "second home" where they get comfort from other empathising members and talk more about themselves than the brand itself. Consumers who perceived OBCs as a "brand institute" considered them places to obtain the information they needed without necessarily having to contribute themselves. When consumers with a medium level of OBC attachment have less identity-based attachment and more bond-based attachment, a brand begins to lose control and consumers begin to rely on each other without exhibiting much loyalty to the brand (shelter). Later on, a consumer may lose their interest in an OBC and utilise it to get simple updates (information desk) or to have short discussions (brand pub). Eventually, they will cease to visit the OBC on a regular basis (brand museum). As not all OBC members are loyal to the OBC itself, understanding these different individuals will shed light on further research in this area.

This study also provides insight into the underlying social practices within OBCs. Exhibiting, gifting and sharing practices were evident in the communities studied, which are characteristics of a collectivist culture. Through such social practices, brand meaning is accepted and altered by consumers juxtaposing and combining countervailing meanings. This study has revealed the meaning negotiation process through the interpretation of consumers' perceptions and experiences of brand. The author's analysis highlights that members' interpretive use of social practices creates emergent brand meanings that reflect their personal goals, context-specific interests and countervailing cultural meanings associated with brand. Consumers may act independently when attempting to interpret marketer-induced brand meaning, but social forces are also important (Sirsi, Ward, & Reingen, 1996; Ward & Reingen, 1990), especially in the process of brand meaning negotiation. In addition, the author observed how, through the practice of consoling, the social aspect was able to transform negative brand experiences into positive, contributing to consumers' emotional comfort.

### **Delving further into brand meaning**

In relation to the second aim, this study fills the research gap and contributes to the ongoing academic debate through its examination of the brand meaning negotiation process and its suggestion of a framework showing how underlying practices link the brand and social-related aspects of an OBC.

The exploratory phase enabled the author to investigate the negotiation process through revealed social practices in this collectivist culture. The framework [Figure 9] provides us with much insight regarding how OBCs work, where conflicts come from and how they arise, and most importantly how consumers form their brand experiences in OBCs. For instance, consumers' altruistic behaviour in sharing their belongings and gifting them to each other facilitates social relationship building and sets the atmosphere in OBCs. A brand performs the role of relationship maker in an OBC, as an intermediary profiting from bringing consumers together. The brand provides context, which may enhance or sustain brand meaning due to the proximity of consumers with a shared interest, and consumers decide whether or not to stay in an OBC based on whether or not they like the people who contribute to it and their discourse. During the process, tension arises between brand-focused activities and group sociability, and when the balance is destroyed the community ceases to be an OBC and becomes a community of interest (when social connection prevails) or offers only a one-way information flow. The revealed practices and their intertwinement with field-specific capital flow show how members resolve such tensions through a constant negotiation process, thereby disclosing the entire picture of interaction that was previously a "black box".

It is interesting to note (as aforementioned) that, during the process, the social aspects of an OBC can transform negative brand experiences into positive ones, which contributes to a consumer's subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is often used by psychologists as an umbrella term for a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of their own life (Lucas & Smith, 1999). These evaluations include emotional reactions to events as well as cognitive judgements of satisfaction

and fulfilment. People judge their own well-being in relation to their environment and the lives of others around them, and OBCs make a consumer's life rewarding by providing positive experiences. People in collectivistic cultures, especially, are more likely to use norms and the social appraisals of others in evaluating their subjective well-being compared to those in individualistic societies, who are more likely to place a heavy weight on internal feelings arising from their own happiness (Diener & Suh, 2000). For instance, perceiving an OBC as a home away from home, consumers who had experienced service failure or had had negative brand experiences were emotionally supported by other OBC members. The author observed OBC members working as moderators, consoling disappointed customers, encouraging them not to give up on the brand, and attempting to regain their loyalty. The author suggests that consumers look for emotional support in this online space not because they are low in life satisfaction (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007) or because they are emotionally unstable (Buechel & Berger, 2012), but because they enjoy a number of positive social benefits from using OBCs that have become a part of their lives, such as finding a VTP in which to meet like-minded people, to relieve stress and to regain self-confidence. Even though a number of offline third places exist, such as coffee shops, consumers find VTPs to be different from offline third places. In our interviews, consumers explained that an OBC had a special meaning for its members in that they could show their "materialistic self" there, something which they might hesitate to reveal in front of real-life acquaintances. Consumers' materialistic identities only appear when they are with like-minded people who are less likely to judge or criticise them.

It is important to note that OBCs in different industries showed slightly different social practices. For instance, the Diesel and Lacoste OBCs focused on exhibiting personal belongings, while the Nikon and Canon OBCs centred on teaching and learning practices. Presumably, the nature of the products would have led people to focus on such practices, as cameras exist for taking photos and fashion items exist to make people look better and to allow them to demonstrate their physical identity.

### **Exploring the darker side of community**

This study has shown that social bonds, regardless of their importance for making an OBC thrive, can work as a double-edged sword and need to be carefully balanced with brand-related practices. Members with strong social bonds stressed that they preferred spending time with members with whom they were close and not with OBC members in general. Such social bonds can motivate people to participate in OBC activities; however, at the same time, the author observed that small cliques often led to critical conflicts that caused OBCs to decline in popularity. Having learned from such perilous experiences with conflicting in-groups, a number of OBCs have implemented regulations in terms of socialising online (e.g. banning the continuation of an offline conversation online, banning pointing blame at another member). It was observed that normative pressure, an obligation to abide by the community's norms, image projection and conflict with other members often resulted in resistance and usually happened when consumers were more attached to the than to the OBC itself.

Notably, the source of normative pressure and reaction to it was found to be the consumer's engagement in the community, which indicates that such communities' positive influences give birth to their negative influences. The author found a number of cases in which consumers had left OBCs after experiencing critical conflicts with others, and had eventually ceased to be interested in the brand in question because of the negative image such experiences projected onto the brand itself. Even worse, these members were found to have spread negative word of mouth. This finding that OBCs can influence their members in negative ways adds to existing studies that have focused on the positive aspects of OBCs. The author suggests that this finding should provoke further thought on the role an OBC can play in changing brand image or brand personality through positive and negative influences. In view of the potential perils of the social component, even though such negative influences do not always occur, this study suggests that further work should be done in this area on how OBCs can prevent the brand becoming an object of hatred for once highly committed OBC members.

### 7.3 Implications for Practice

If they know how consumers interpret OBCs and how they manage their brand and social aspects, marketers can build better structures, develop more meaningful feedback and design more effective forms of events. The interplay between brand and social connection implies that marketing strategy must be designed so that brand-related activities are embedded within, rather than merely sit alongside, social interactions. When social bonds become more important than the brand itself, consumers lose focus on the brand and begin to flirt with other brands in an OBC. Companies should provide consumers with a place and events they can enjoy so that consumers will keep on consuming the brand in order to build relationships with others; however, it should not be ignored that there is a fine line between “help” and “unnecessary intervention” on the part of the companies.

This finding has considerable managerial value because it links the OBC’s influence to consumer behaviours that affect profitability and could help marketing managers to persuade their companies to build OBCs for their consumers. Companies often focus on using SNS rather than building OBCs because OBCs tend to require a greater investment of time and resources to make them successful than the effort needed to set up a new Twitter account. However, we should focus on the actual benefits and relationship building of marketing rather than website traffic. SNS cannot provide the VTPness consumers need. Even worse, marketing campaigns can blow up in a hurry and attempts at humour can backfire and invoke outrage. OBCs, on the other hand, have self-purifying practices that lead consumers to try to prevent possible conflicts and sort out any issues themselves if something scandalous occurs. Practitioners can gain insights from consumers’ different conceptions of OBCs and the possible conflicts that may arise in such communities. The illustrations provided by this research of conflicts between managers and consumers, such as consumers sharing information that is not beneficial for the company (e.g. price discount information, cheating) and managers blocking such posts, could help practitioners to set in place regulations and strategies aimed at minimising conflicts and managing successful OBCs.



Businesses, and particularly their advertising and direct marketing programmes such as personalised offers, are increasingly passing unnoticed or being ignored by consumers (Sela, Simonson, & Kivetz, 2013). Consumers are well-practised in detecting fake reviews and advertisements disguised as blog posts, and they do not want to be nuisanced by social marketing. The 2013 TNS report, a global study of consumer behaviour online, unveiled that 57% of consumers had no interest in engaging with brands via social media. This figure was 61% in the U.K. and 60% in the U.S. In this hostile environment, this research challenges marketers to take a more interactive approach and offers a potential alternative means of marketing, namely providing a place where consumers can take a rest, but in close association with a firm and its brands. By offering online and/or offline venues for consumers to meet and interact with one another, and by orchestrating, moderating, or facilitating consumer-to-consumer social interactions, companies will be able to bypass the hurdles created by the current social and business trends and take advantage of the available technology. OBCs can provide a pro-social environment in which individuals and groups benefit from their interactions. This study proves that OBCs have become an integral part of a number of people's lives. The author's discovery and explanation of what leads OBCs to be experienced as VTPs can help managers to develop and manage them. Specifically, when soliciting members for their OBCs, many companies tend to target new or potential consumers by providing information (e.g. technical support, teaching them how to use the software) or by holding events. The findings of this study suggest that such approaches to new member acquisition do not work well if the firm's goals are to enlist engaged, active community members and to create a vibrant, self-sustaining OBC. Providing information will only make consumers perceive an OBC as a "brand institute" or an "information desk". In order to convert such people into loyal consumers with a positive relationship with the brand and the OBC, social bonds need to be built. The social practices revealed herein and the illustrations of their interlinkages will enable marketers to understand the underlying process of brand-mediated social bond formation.

This study demonstrates that OBCs have become an integral part of many people's lives. The explanations herein of what leads OBCs to be experienced as VTPs can help managers to develop and manage OBCs. Specifically, when soliciting members for their OBCs, many companies tend to target new or potential consumers by providing information (e.g. technical support, teaching them how to use the software) or by holding events. The findings of this study suggest that such approaches to new member acquisition do not work well if the firm's goals are to enlist engaged, active community members and to create a vibrant, self-sustaining OBC. To get new consumers registered for the OBC is a decent start; however, marketers still have to develop an "online website" into a true VTP. Although this thesis deals with a snapshot of the OBC perceptions and behaviour rather than examining temporal development, it has shown that social relationships are inherently dynamic and, over time, develop both positive and negative sides. For instance, providing information will make consumers perceive an OBC as only a "brand institute" or an "information desk". However, the firm will be able to convert such people into loyal consumers who have a positive relationship with the brand and the OBC by helping them to build social bonds; it does this by holding events or providing adequate places for people to share their daily lives, and by turning the OBC into a "workplace" and a "brand empire". An OBC may begin as a "brand pub", but when it yields rich brand-related information, more consumers who are looking for this will join and start discussions about the brand. Consumers therefore keep talking about the brand, and inevitably about themselves; in this way, such information given by a company may possibly cause their perceptions of an OBC to be as a "brand theme park" or "shelter".

Marketers can also relate developing an authentic OBC with the social practices revealed in this research. For instance, consumers would more actively participate in brand-related social practices such as learning and teaching, exhibiting and purchasing information sharing when the given information acts as a catalyst for such participation. This interaction will provide more opportunities for consumers to know more about their acquaintances, which will eventually reinforce their personal

relationship with them and promote non-brand-related social practices such as empathising, sharing and gift-giving, and offline gatherings. Such fortified relationships reinforce consumers' attachment to an OBC, which again supports OBC nurturing practices such as welcoming, anti-commoditising, residing and self-purification. An OBC with a number of strongly dedicated members will show evidence of the social practices revealed in this research. As such, the revealed social practices can be used as an indicator of which aspect – brand or social bond – participants are focusing more on in a certain OBC, which will help marketers to deal with possible perils. That is to say, the brand-related and non-brand-related social practices revealed herein and illustrations of their interlinkages will enable marketers to understand the underlying process of brand-mediated social bond formation, which will help them to decide on further strategies and tactics to develop a strong OBC that consumers can use as a VTP. This will lead to an idiosyncratic evolvement of brand understanding by consumers.

Furthermore, managers should also consider inherent risks and ways to counteract these, such as managing tensions when devoted and less-devoted members are part of the same community. Interdependent status games between members with high symbolic power and more peripheral members/lurkers cause tensions. The tension is eventually projected through participants, as explicated in Chapter 6, so managers should set up regulations that protect the peripherals from the powerful ones. These could include banning the mentioning of each other's name on boards (so as not to make the peripherals feel isolated), banning sarcastic comments (so as not to discourage them from being an insider), or holding seminars for newcomers and giving them opportunities to become familiar with other members. Such measures would help to reduce certain tensions and encourage hidden consumers to become active participants.

Such knowledge will benefit the OBC managers and will provide rich insight for the firm *per se*. Firms cannot refrain from dealing with OBCs. They may cause problems, but they are a great opportunity for brands. By creating contexts for interaction with

consumers, marketers can cultivate relationships with different stakeholders to strengthen the brand. Consumer-initiated OBCs are probably more difficult to manage than marketer-facilitated events (e.g. brandfests), which offer the easiest context for interaction. The research in this work has shown that the meanings consumers associate with brands vary across different social and cultural contexts. To develop and build consistency with different consumers from diverse contexts can be rather complex. Managers have to monitor the response of their consumers according to their branding activities. By doing so, the firm will be able to discover what brand meaning is settled down in an OBC, and they can then deploy marketing and advertising strategies accordingly.

Specifically, practitioners should remember that OBCs welcome marketers only if they are contributing to the community. The findings herein suggest that consumers do not like their communities to become commercialised and dominated by marketers. Firms need to listen to OBC participants and concentrate on engaging consumers in those brand communications within OBCs that consumers perceive to be “non-commercially driven”. As such, information sharing, education, and enabling consumers to support each other are important tasks for marketers. By creating opportunities for discussion and conversation with consumers, firms can leverage the involvement and reflect interest in the audience.

#### **7.4 Limitations and Future Research**

While this study sheds light on the interplay between the social and brand-related aspects of an OBC, it does have some limitations, as do all studies. First, the author focused on Korean OBCs that showed collectivistic cultural characteristics. However, it is still in question whether country-dominant cultures persist in the online space. The author identified most of the social practices revealed by previous work (e.g. Schau et al., 2009), such as welcoming, empathising, and evangelising, but with noticeable differences. For instance, the participants did not exhibit customising practices, that is, modifying the brand to suit group-level or individual needs. The

members tended to take the original as given, and products with original feature were the most valued. In addition, sharing and gifting practices, which to the author's knowledge have not previously been reported, prevailed among the Korean members. Further cross-cultural research is needed to examine any differences or similarities between consumers in different countries, regarding their perceptions of balancing brand and social elements when engaging in OBCs.

Second, the researcher relied on a limited number of product/service categories. Therefore, further research with a larger set of product/service categories is needed to identify how this framework would work in different contexts and whether OBCs in different categories involve industry-specific social practices. The author found that OBCs in different industries, especially in terms of fashion versus electronic brands, had different tendencies. Whereas general social practices, such as welcoming, grooming, evangelising, and empathising, to name a few, appeared common to both, the fashion brands' OBCs were more about showing off the products' physical appearance, whereas the electronic brands' OBCs focused on developing skills and knowledge. These differences may be due to industry differences or to male/female dominance. It is important that we investigate where such differences come from and how they appear so that marketers can deploy different strategies accordingly.

Third, as this research is an ethnographic piece, there are a few drawbacks from the chosen methodology. Typical disadvantages associated with ethnographic research include huge investment in the researcher's time, difficulty in presenting results, reliability issues from working alone, an interviewer effect by being a participant in the group/culture, invasion of privacy and that replication of the study can be difficult. Bias on the part of the researcher can affect the design of the study and the collection and interpretation of data, because in the field the author engages in participant-observation. In this work, the author participated to a certain degree in the OBC members' daily life, partaking in the rituals of the selected OBCs and joining in with ordinary activities while making careful observations. This emic

viewpoint, which differs from the etic or outsider's perspective on daily life, is a unique and critical component of ethnographic research. In order to benefit from such advantages and avoid the possible disadvantages from this approach, the researcher wrote fieldnotes thoroughly to help her avoid being unreasonably biased. Noting reflections on the research from a personal point of view in the fieldnotes, which was clearly separate from the description and analysis, helped the researcher keep track of if and how her attitude changed. Also, because the researcher in an ethnographic study often works alone, as the researcher did here, there is often nobody who can check the findings for reliability. The author's two supervisors and two colleagues helped the author to achieve this reliability by reading excerpts from the web-text and interviews, and by checking the codes derived from the collected data.

It would be interesting to compare brands with high and low involvement or brands with emotional and rational aspects. On a related note, another limitation concerns the OBC samples selected for this study. There were environmental limitations as not every brand had successful OBCs. The selected OBCs were for global brands and it is possible to argue that those individuals who like global brands are more globalised and less culture-bound. In effect, researchers have discovered that consumers favour global brands not only because they have better quality (Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2004) but also because consumers often enjoy greater self-esteem and enhance their self-image (Friedman, 1990; Roy & Chau, 2011) by using such brands to feel part of their global identity. Such differences may mean that this study has focused on specific types of consumers, for instance high-status seekers, and hence future studies could consider local brands to broaden the scope of the findings.

The social leverage of the OBC presents an excellent opportunity to revisit the integration of the brand and social aspects of OBCs. While this study takes some steps towards such integration, much remains to be formalised in conceptual and theoretical terms, and to be investigated in empirical terms. The author hopes that this study will catalyse further research and encourage creative managerial initiatives

related to the social leverage of OBCs.

Lastly, the study did not focus on the brand value and instead focused on brand meaning and negotiation. Talking about brand value was beyond the scope of this research, especially because of its quantitative nature such as paying a premium for the brand name, and because it is contentious to measure brand value. Brands are vulnerable in the sense that they are dependent on intangibles as people have different perceptions of them. Perceptions and brand meanings can take many years to build; however, they can be destroyed overnight. Brand value can deteriorate quickly, so, rather than focusing on the value of a brand and how to assess it realistically, the author focused on brand meaning and negotiation. These factors eventually decide the value of a brand, though they may sound more ambiguous than the more commonly used terms of brand value and value co-creation.

As for further research, it would be interesting to compare brands with high and low involvement or brands with more emotional and rational aspects. The author investigated two OBCs of clothing brands and two OBCs of technology brands for the first phase of the study, and two OBCs from each of kitchenware and coffee brands for the second phase of the study. The clothing/coffee brands, which are known to be associated with more emotional aspects, in the given context appeared to involve conspicuous consumption whilst the technology brands, which are more associated with rational aspects, were about gaining skills and knowledge. Further research in similar cross-industrial studies should reveal valuable insights.

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## **Appendix A. Interview Guide**

Before the researcher began the interviews, she reminded interviewees to share any specific incidents each question reminded them of and to feel free to say anything they felt was relevant both to specific questions and to the overall subject. Interviewees often talked about web-posts so when this happened the researcher and the interviewee looked at the mentioned post together, which helped interviewees to show and explain memorable incidents. The in-depth interview had 5 main parts as follows, which are loose guides that interviewees can deviate from:

### **Part 1. Ice breaking and introduction**

1. Please briefly introduce yourself (e.g. age, occupation, residential area, etc.).
2. Do you participate in other online communities? If so, can you please give details of these (e.g. name of the community, participation period, etc.)?
3. What products of the brand do you own?

### **Part 2. Questions about the OBC**

1. Please illustrate how you became part of the selected OBC.
2. For what reason did you initially register for the community? Why do you think people come to the OBC?
3. How long have you participated in it?
4. Please describe when and how you have participated in online chats and/or offline gatherings. Please say what you have done and how you felt about it.
5. Please provide your general thoughts about participating in online and offline OBC activities.
6. What kind of special characteristics do you think your OBC has?

### **Part 3. Questions about the interviewee's attachment to the OBC**

1. How would you describe your community in a word?
2. How often do you visit the OBC, what activities do you usually get involved in and how do you use it?



3. What are the main impacts of the OBC on your life?
4. Do you think you are loyal to your community? If so, why? If not, why?
5. Why do you actively participate in this OBC more than other communities?

**Part 4. Questions about relationships with other participants and social bonds with them**

1. Who are you close to? How did you become close to each other?
2. What are the main impacts of these people on your life?
3. What are the differences in terms of your consumption behaviour before and after getting close to these people?
4. What are main advantages and disadvantages of being close to other members?
5. What difficulties have you encountered when you socialise with other members?

**Part 5. Further questions and interviewee comments**

Interviewees were told to ask the interviewer any questions they have about the interview or to add comments regarding it such as how he or she felt during the interview, if the interview was clear, or if there were any difficult or sensitive questions he or she found hard to answer.

## Appendix B. Coding Scheme of Revealed Social Practices

| <b>Theme: Brand Use</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Members utilise and adore the branded product. This also includes the grooming ritual.                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Category (Practice)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Code and Data Example                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <p><b>Nicknaming</b><br/>Members ‘nickname’ their products. There are generally used nicknames or special nicknames used by individual members.</p>                                                                                                                                              | <p>Code: Own product nickname<br/>Code: Specific model nickname</p> <p><i>Nikon: 17–70, oh no, it is 18–70, daddy a bundle. 18-55 is baby a bundle, 18–138 is a grandpa bundle, though I don’t know why it is named so.</i><br/><i>Lacoste: Blueblanc is the prettiest this season.</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <p><b>Exhibiting</b><br/>Members show their collections to others.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <p>Code: Showing own collection<br/>Code: Showing one’s lifestyle<br/>Code: Showing new purchase<br/>Code: Showing oneself with the brand product</p> <p><i>Lacoste: I buy some new shirts so I take photos of myself with them and tell others where I bought them and how the sizes fit.</i><br/><i>Diesel: I post my new purchase as a commemorative post.</i></p>                                                                                                                                |
| <p><b>Learning and Teaching</b><br/>Members provide information about the usage of product, teach others product-related skills (e.g. techniques, recipes, know-how, etc.), help other members when they have problems in terms of brand-related trials (e.g. product failure, customising).</p> | <p>Code: Learning about products<br/>Code: Learning new skills<br/>Code: Teaching new skills<br/>Code: Posting brand tips<br/>Code: Providing feedback</p> <p><i>Canon: I couldn’t get the colour or angle I wanted and posted the photo (which I didn’t like). People commented on it saying such things as try this setting, try this one under this condition... I always keep my photos even though I don’t like them so I can ask other people about them when I go offline gatherings.</i></p> |
| <p><b>Brand Constellation</b><br/>Consumption of related or complementary products to make the best use of brand products.</p>                                                                                                                                                                   | <p>Code: Matching with different brands to complete the look<br/>Code: Matching with accessories to make the brand product unique, “I am different”<br/>Code: Matching with other brand product for functionality</p> <p><i>Diesel: I kind of bring Diesel and what I like closer. Like, if I like Lacoste, I wear Lacoste with Diesel. If I like camping, I wear Diesel when I go camping, maybe I can match Moncler. A good match makes the clothes look even better.</i></p>                      |
| <b>Category: Brand Possession</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Members acquire branded products and display them.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Category                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Data Example                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <p><b>Craving</b><br/>Members show a craving to possess a certain branded product.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <p>Code: Want to possess<br/>Code: Curiosity<br/>Code: A sense of competition (synergy)</p> <p><i>Lacoste: I want to buy every Lacostes, like crazy, want to spend all</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
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|                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <i>my salary on it! ... I just feel like, if I hear something like, this design of my size has only five pieces in Korea, I just have to buy. I feel like I lose if I can't buy it. I hate the feeling of losing.</i>                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Purchasing</b><br>Sharing of information regarding pre-purchase (e.g. cheaper way to buy, specification), purchase (e.g. purchasing experience), and post-purchase experience (e.g. after sales service, problems). | Code: cheaper way to buy<br>Code: Purchase<br>Code: Post-purchase<br>Code: Opinion leaders (escapism)<br>Code: Opinion followers (conformity)<br><br><i>Diesel: We exchange information, give information, send promotion information by text... if I like something from another member's post, I send him a message to get specific information.</i> |
| <b>Purchase Support</b><br>Substitutes for purchasing (for people who cannot buy a product), group buying (e.g. cheaper price, easier purchase), buying and selling second-hand products, etc.                         | Code: Purchasing for others<br>Code: Group buying<br>Code: Buying and selling second-hand products<br>Code: Discount information                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

| <b>Category: Impression Management</b><br>Members actively attempt to change other people's brand image.                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Category</b>                                                                                                                          | <b>Data Example</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Evangelising</b><br>Recommending the branded product to other consumers.                                                              | Code: Recommending a brand product<br>Code: Complimenting a brand<br>Code: Showing proud of using a brand product<br>Code: Showing attachment to a branded product<br>Code: Giving promotion information to persuade                       |
| <b>Justifying</b><br>Defending a brand against other brands or negative rumours.                                                         | Code: There should be reasons to be famous<br>Code: They do not understand how special the brand is<br>Code: Best quality<br>Code: Worth money<br>Code: The most convenient / useful / functional                                          |
| <b>Consoling</b><br>Comforting each other when members have negative brand experience. More emotional approach than justifying practice. | Code: Problem solving together<br>Code: Recovery from service failure<br>Code: Camaraderie from using the same brand<br>Code: Social trust between consumers<br>Code: Confirmation of shared value<br>Code: Criticising the brand together |

| <b>Category: Social Networking</b><br>Members build social bonds through social networking practices.           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Category</b>                                                                                                 | <b>Data Example</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Empathising</b><br>Lending emotional or physical support to other members for non-brand-related life issues. | Code: Supporting lifestyle<br>Code: Resolving conflicts between individuals<br>Code: Empathising with life issues ("People are always on my side")<br>Code: Similar age / Similar area<br>Code: Going out together (movies, dining out, etc.)<br>Code: Helping people in geographically proximity |

|                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
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| <p><b>Sharing and Gifting</b><br/>Sharing belongings or giving gifts to other members (e.g. food, self-made accessories).</p>                                       | <p>Code: Sharing handmade products/food<br/>Code: Gifting spare products<br/>Code: Gifting free gifts from the brand<br/>Code: Gifting brand product<br/>Code: Sharing brand product to test before purchasing one</p>                                                                                                                                               |
| <p><b>Appreciation</b><br/>Members who get help from others (instrumental or emotional) show their gratitude on the web.</p>                                        | <p>Code: Showing how their life became better<br/>Code: Confession<br/>Code: Certifying received gifts / help / etc.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p><b>Online and Offline Gathering</b><br/>Members have online gatherings (e.g. chatting, synchronous commenting) and offline gatherings (formal and informal).</p> | <p>Code: Online synchronous / asynchronous chatting<br/>Code: Instant / formal offline gathering<br/>Code: Making cliques (not participating in online activities much)<br/>Code: Offline gathering promoting online activities<br/>Code: Geographical restrictions<br/>Code: Joy from active online / offline participation<br/>Code: Fear of offline gathering</p> |

| <p><b>Category: OBC Nurturing</b><br/>Members try to make an OBC thrive through these social practices.</p>                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Category                                                                                                                        | Data Example                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <p><b>Welcoming</b><br/>Members help newcomers to get used to the community.</p>                                                | <p>Code: Welcoming comments on new members' posts<br/>Code: Setting regulations to help new members participate in OBC activities<br/>Code: Encouraging new members to introduce themselves<br/>Code: Newcomers getting used to the community</p>                                                                                                                                          |
| <p><b>Anti-Commoditising</b><br/>Opposition to profit-earning trading to keep professional sellers away from the community.</p> | <p>Code: Hating professional sellers and advertisements<br/>Code: No premium<br/>Code: More about people, not a marketplace<br/>Code: Family-like</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <p><b>Residing</b><br/>Members are connected to the community for most of their time with their electronic devices.</p>         | <p>Code: Owner spirit ("I have to be here for people who need my help")<br/>Code: Addiction ("OBC is essential in life")<br/>Code: Little world ("I can see how the world works in the OBC")<br/>Code: Continual idle talk to get rid of boredom – fun!<br/>Code: Habitual log-in (Cores leading the OBC)<br/>Code: The sense of being connected<br/>Code: Enjoying one's "popularity"</p> |
| <p><b>Self-Purifying</b><br/>Members try to solve problems such as intragroup conflict and flaming by themselves.</p>           | <p>Code: Report advertisements / rude members<br/>Code: Sense of equality (when problem occurs)<br/>Code: What is wrong is wrong, no shield<br/>Code: No personal attack, we are here for the brand<br/>Code: There is no employee so we should do it<br/>Code: Setting community-specific regulations</p>                                                                                 |