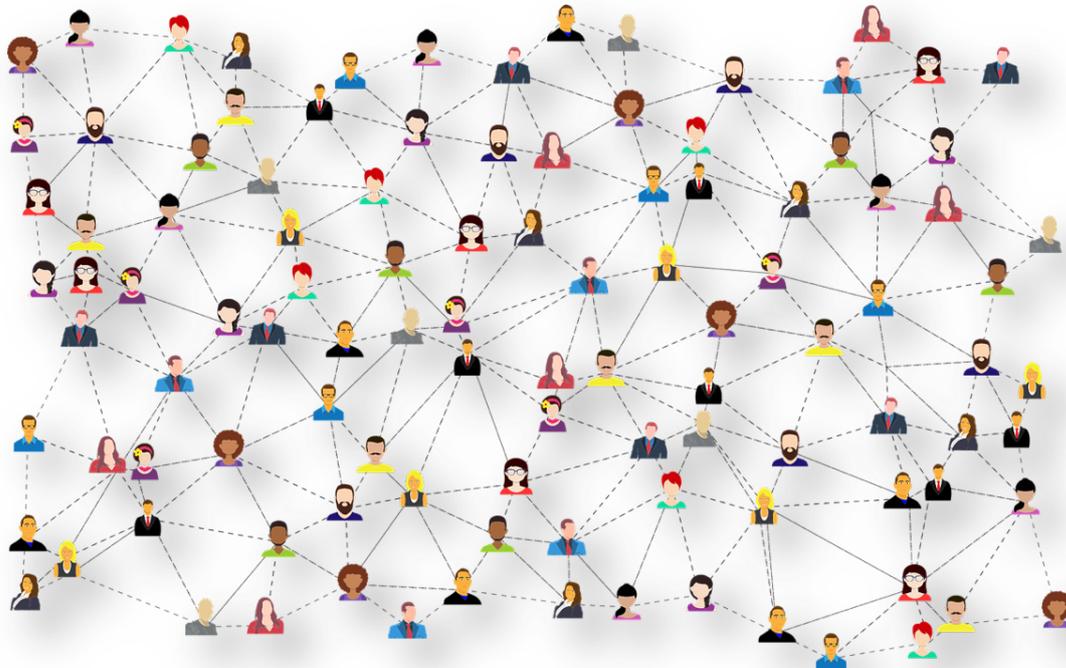




AALBORG UNIVERSITY
STUDENT REPORT

MULTIVOCAL COMMUNICATION IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE: A Comparative Case Study of Communication in Social Media Brand Communities between Brands and Community Members



Master Thesis by:
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International Business Communication
10th Semester, June 2019

Thesis Supervisor:
Line Schmeltz



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Abstract

In the digital age of today, the rise of social media has significantly changed how individuals interact, which, in turn, has important implications for the ways in which international business organizations communicate. Although social media was initially created with an intention of bringing individuals closer together, by enabling them to connect with friends, family, and colleagues, it has also become an important everyday reality for most international business organizations and brands, seeking to build, manage and maintain social media brand communities in order to connect with users. Despite the growing influence of social media, immense popularity among social media users, and recognition that businesses should be active and involved, many businesses and brands still do not understand how to communicate neither in brand communities nor with brand community members in social media. While previous research in brand communities has found evidence of strong brand communities and culture based on members' shared interests and admiration of a brand, limited research has been carried out in relation to the new form of social media brand communities. The aim of this thesis is to present the findings of an exploratory comparative case study of communication in two social media brand communities on Facebook, being the official and global pages of BMW Motorrad and Ducati. The research involved an analysis of brand communication as well as community member communication in one month. The data, which included a total of 123 brand posts, 945 community member comments, and 141 brand responses, were collected using the method of netnography and treated using the method of thematic analysis. The thesis not only answers questions about what and how the respective brands communicate, but also what and how the respective communicate members communicate. The findings show that although both brands communicate by posting content, for example, about their products, and by responding member comments, there is a considerable difference in their brand management perspectives, approaches and efforts. This reveals how BMW uses its brand community as a platform for conversation and co-creation of brand meanings between the brand and its users, whereas Ducati primarily uses its brand community as a transmission channel of marketing-defined brand meanings from the brand to its users. The findings also show that, regardless of the respective brands' communicative efforts, both BMW's and Ducati's brand communities include not only positively-engaged members, who are fans and admirers of the respective brands, but also neutrally-engaged members, who ask or answer questions, as well as negatively-engaged members, who hold hateful and oppositional views of the respective brands. Based on the findings, theoretical and managerial implications, as well as limitations and future research directions, are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Founded in 2004, Facebook's mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them (Facebook Newsroom 2019, para. 1).

According to the above mission statement, Facebook was founded with the intention of bringing the world closer together by empowering and enabling people to connect with friends and family as well as express their thoughts, opinions, and worldviews on the social networking site. The launch of Facebook in 2004, followed by multiple other social media initiatives such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, has particularly sparked a new online, interactive and social world in today's digital age. With more active users and more time spent on social media than ever before (Asano 2017; Kemp 2019), social media has become a popular and significant platform for connection, conversation, creation and collaboration for people across the world (Ang 2011).

Although initially created and intended for people and not brands (Fournier & Avery 2011), social media has also become a noteworthy everyday and global reality of online presence and communication for most international business organizations and brands. Due to its unique networked features of reaching a large amount of active social media users effortlessly, fast and with lower costs (Kietzmann et al. 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010), social media is considered an ideal platform of engagement with users. For this reason, it has become the mantra, the key concept, and the future, that most businesses want to become a part of (Hinton & Hjort 2013; Tsai 2009; Hinchliffe & Kim 2012; Habibi et al. 2014). This, in turn, requires creative new approaches and ways of thinking due to its way of impacting business (Ang 2011; Bhanot 2012; Ihator 2001).

As many individuals use social media to create and interact in groups or communities with other like-minded users (Kietzmann et al. 2011), particularly in relation to consumption and post-purchase experiences with products, services or brands (Laroche et al. 2012; Mangold & Faulds 2009), increasingly more businesses seek to build and maintain their own social media brand communities (Laroche et al. 2013; Habibi et al. 2014). In these brand communities, which are non-geographically bound communities (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001), centered around members' relations to a brand, product, company and other members (McAlexander et al. 2002), businesses or brands are able to

communicate with brand community members, being brand admirers, fans or enthusiasts (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001).

As a result, the concepts of social media brand communities and community management have become the buzzwords and new reality, that most international business organizations are facing in the digital and social media age of today (Habibi et al. 2014; Laroche et al. 2013; Ang 2011).

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the growing influence of social media, immense popularity among social media users, and recognition that businesses should be active and involved (Hanna et al. 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010), many businesses or brands still do not understand how to communicate, behave and interact neither in brand communities nor with brand community members in social media (Ang 2011; Baird & Parasnis 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010):

Not overly many firms seem to act comfortably in a world where consumers can speak so freely with each other and businesses have increasingly less control over the information available about them in cyberspace (p. 59-60).

Social media, in other words, presents a new communication landscape for businesses, in which the active voices of social media users have increasingly been empowered while businesses or brands' have lost control over communication and information (Ihator 2001). Understanding the dynamics of social media, including the dynamics of brand communities, becomes crucial for businesses seeking to manage social media brand communities.

While previous research in both offline and online brand communities has found evidence of people interacting and creating value based on their shared interest in a brand (Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002; Schau et al. 2009), limited research has been carried out in relation to the new form of brand communities which are based in social media (Laroche et al. 2012; 2013; Habibi et al. 2014; Zaglia 2013). Also, limited research exists in relation to community management (Ang 2011; Quinton 2013). Due to the limited research on social media brand communities and community management, this thesis seeks to contribute to research by not only investigating how brands communicate and manage their social media brand communities but also by examining how community members communicate and interact with each other and the brand. In other words, it applies a multivocal approach (Belova et al. 2008), seeking to

gain insights into two perspectives; being 1) the respective brand's perspective and 2) the community members' perspective.

For this purpose, the thesis takes an interest in examining and comparing two brands within the vehicle industry, being BMW Motorrad (hereafter BMW) and Ducati. More specifically, it seeks to examine the official fan pages of BMW and Ducati on Facebook, respectively, as these Facebook pages are organized and actively managed by the respective companies. Therefore, they are considered suitable examples of two relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich social media brand communities (Kozinets 2010a).

Previous research in vehicle related brand communities, which includes Harley Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Habibi et al. 2013), Saab (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001), Jeep (McAlexander et al. 2002), Volkswagen (Brown et al. 2003), European cars (Algesheimer et al. 2005), Mini Cooper (Schau et al. 2009), have found evidence of strong brand communities and culture (Habibi et al. 2013). For this reason, the BMW and Ducati brand communities are of particular interest and relevance to the research of this thesis.

1.2 Research Questions

As this thesis takes an interest in investigating communication in two social media brand communities managed by BMW and Ducati, respectively, from two perspectives, being the brands' perspective and the community members' perspective, the research questions of the thesis thus become;

***Research Question 1:** What and how much do BMW and Ducati, respectively, communicate in their social media brand communities; what are the differences or similarities in their communication efforts?*

***Research Question 2:** What and how do the respective community members in BMW's and Ducati's social media brand communities, respectively, communicate, construct, or co-create brand meanings?*

By asking the above research questions, the thesis then not only seeks to contribute to existing research on brand communities within the vehicle industry but more importantly, it seeks to contribute to the limited research on social media brand communities and community management.

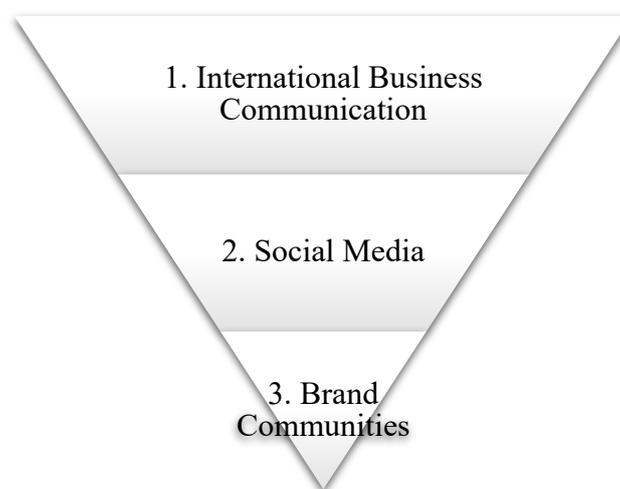
By comparing two brands within the same industry but also by investigating the perspectives of brands and the community members, respectively, it aims at providing new, unique and in-depth insights into the differences or similarities of brand communication in social media brand communities. In this way, the research not only provides important implications for future research on the topic, but also for businesses and brand marketers, in terms of shedding new light on how brands may better manage communities and also, understand how to connect and interact with community members in their brand-initiated communities in social media, in a way that contributes to support and strengthen their brand communities or meet the expectations of brand community members.

To address the research questions, the following section will provide a theoretical foundation for the thesis, in which literature on communication, social media and brand communities have been reviewed for pre-understanding and contextualization purposes.

2. Theoretical Framework

Based on literature in the domain of business communication, such as management, marketing and organizational communication, including literature on social media, and brand communities, respectively, the theoretical framework section seeks to provide a theoretical foundation for this thesis, which aims at exploring communication in social media brand communities between brands and community members. In other words, the theoretical framework will be divided into three main sections, following a top-down approach, as illustrated in below figure 1:

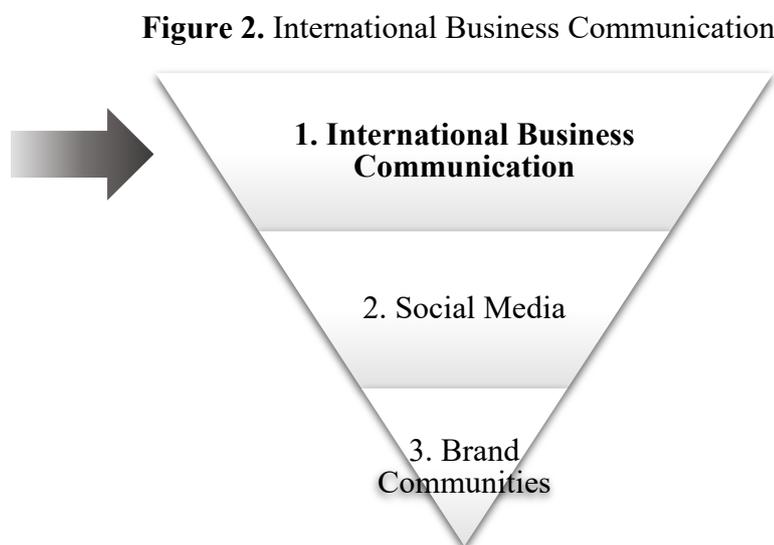
Figure 1. Theoretical Top-Down Approach



First, it will start with an overall introduction and discussion of existing perspectives within the field of international business communication in the digital age. Second, it will introduce and discuss the concept of social media, in terms of how it has developed and influenced communication for individuals in general and business organizations in particular. Third and last, it will include an introduction and discussion of the concept of brand community, including those based in social media. The theoretical top-down approach, in other words, is considered a logical way in reaching a pre-understanding of the theme and field of communication in social media brand communities and as such, the theoretical framework provides a basis for the research of this thesis.

2.1 International Business Communication in the Digital Age

This section represents the first out of three main sections of the theoretical framework, as illustrated in below figure 2. In this section, the field of international business communication in the digital age will be introduced and discussed, by including different or contrasting perspectives of how business communication is understood. Then, it will continue by describing how the concepts of postmodernity and technology, respectively, contribute to explain the changed world of communication, for both individuals and businesses alike. Third and last, it will discuss how international business communication in the digital age is understood in this thesis.



2.1.1 Business Communication Research and Perspectives

Communication is the foundation and the lifeblood of all international business organizations, and it is through communication that businesses acquire necessary resources, such as capital, labor, reputation, and legitimacy, in order to be able to operate (van Riel & Fombrun 2007). How business organizations communicate with their internal and external stakeholders to acquire such resources, however, depend widely on their communicative perspective. A review of literature on business communication research has revealed two main perspectives, being the transmission perspective and the constitutive perspective, respectively, which will be introduced and discussed in the two proceeding sections.

2.1.1.1 The Transmission Perspective

Existing research in business communication has revealed a dominating perspective of communication as a controlled strategic and managerial practice, commonly known and reflected in the disciplines of; integrated marketing communication (IMC) (Holm 2006; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015; Kliatchko 2005; Madhavaram et al. 2005); corporate marketing (Balmer 2001; Balmer & Greyser 2003) and corporate communication (van Riel 1995; van Riel & Fombrun 2007; Cornelissen 2017; Argenti 1996). The dominant thoughts within the disciplines above share an emphasis on business organizations' strategic, coordinated and controlled handling and integration of communication as an ideal, in order to ensure coherent and consistent presentations, increase credibility, value as well as transparency (Kliatchko 2005; Balmer 2001; Cornelissen 2017). The following sub-sections will introduce the disciplines of IMC and corporate communication, without going into detail, but to present the main idea or mindset behind the currently dominating transmission perspective of communication.

Integrated Marketing Communication

The idea of pursuing integrated communication was initially introduced in the 1950s, rooted in marketing literature, and by the late 1980s, it was conceptualized as the discipline of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) (van Riel & Fombrun 2007; Kliatchko 2005).

IMC is a concept that emerged and developed in order to better enable businesses to plan, combine and control marketing communication in a globalized world, characterized by fragmentation of the market-place, media landscape, communication and consumers (Holm 2006; Kliatchko 2005). Based on a review of multiple definitions of IMC, Kliatchko (2005) defines IMC as: "the concept and process of strategically managing audience-focused, channel-centred, and results-driven brand communication programmes over time" (23).

In other words, IMC is a strategic approach, which focuses on managing customer relationships by increasing value and behavioral effects through planning and combining communication activities across different promotional mix elements (i.e. advertising, sales promotion, PR), in order to create and transmit synergy, consistency and clarity in brand positioning, personality and messages, reflecting integration at promotional level (Holm 2006; Kitchen & Burgmann 2015). Also, the idea of IMC is to strategically ensure consistency across the overall marketing mix (product, price, place, and promotion) and brand strategy, and thereby ensure, higher efficiency, cost savings, enhanced returns and eased working relations across all departments, reflecting integration at corporate level

(Ibid.). The key thought of IMC then is to enable and ensure that businesses and their brands speak with “one voice” to all of its stakeholders, being consumers, customers and clients (Kliatchko 2005).

Corporate Communication

In *Corporate Communication: A guide to theory & practice*, marketing scholar Joep Cornelissen (2017) argues, that in today’s society, a business organization’s success and future depend heavily on how its key stakeholders, such as customers, employees, and investors, view the organization. The most crucial objective of a business organization then is to build and protect its reputation and legitimacy through communication (Cornelissen 2017; van Riel & Fombrun 2007). For this reason, a business organization’s strategic coordination of all internal and external communication with the stakeholders of the organization, is the core task and key to effectively create consistent messages across the organization, in particular in the event of globalization, where communication as a result of the wide geographical range of organizations has become more complex and fragmented (Cornelissen 2017; van Riel 1995; Argenti 1996).

The current dominant notion of corporate communication suggests that it provides an ideal all-encompassing framework, which enables businesses to effectively overcome fragmentation, clutter, contradictions and inconsistent impressions of a business (van Riel & Fombrun 2007), through the integration or alignment of all symbols, messages, procedures and behaviors, in order to project the organization as a unified whole (Argenti 1996; Cornelissen 2017; van Riel 1995). It integrates a whole range of specialized disciplines from the three principal communication clusters of management, marketing and organizational communication (van Riel & Fombrun 2007), such as internal or employee communication; advertising and customer relations; business-to-business communication; public affairs; media relations; crisis communication and issues management, among others, into a coordinated, consistent and coherent approach (Cornelissen 2017; van Riel & Fombrun 2007). The aim is to promote a strong corporate culture and a holistic, unified, and coherent corporate identity by speaking to multiple audiences at once with a consistent set of messages (Goodman 2000; Cornelissen 2017).

Corporate communication represents a particular mindset, which perceives an organization as “one body,” in which the different voices of the organization (e.g., managers or communication practitioners) are acting as one single body or entity (the organization). More so, it illustrates an orientation that organizations are imperative, dominant, and in control. According to sociologist Richard Sennett (1996), the notions of “wholeness, oneness and coherence (...) are the key words in the vocabulary of power” (25). As it appears, the vocabulary of power has been adopted in corporate

communication, which emphasizes an organization's assumptions and ambition of being in control and empowered through its integration of messages (Goodman 2000). In short, organizations use communication strategically and purposefully in shaping their own reality and reflecting their own perspective in order to advance or fulfill their own mission (Hallahan et al. 2007), while overlooking, downplaying or ignoring other dimensions or representations of reality (Christensen et al. 2008; Morgan 1993; Goodman 2000).

Integrated Communication in the Digital Age

The current notions of integrated communications are based on the assumptions and logic of communication as transmission models, where businesses rely on traditional linear, one-way or conduit models of communication by which messages and meanings are transferred from the organization to its stakeholders in order to reflect the intended reality or identity of the business organization or brand in question (Johansen & Andersen 2012; Christensen 2002). In relation to the development of new information technology, which increasingly has enabled stakeholders to express their ideas, opinions, and experiences with organizations and also, expect or request more information (Cornelissen 2017), businesses assume that transmission models of communication remain possible and ideal, and as a result, their idea of engaging with stakeholders, equals providing more information about the organization. Thus, by being transparent, businesses attempt to draw attention to the qualities of their ability to adapt to their surroundings by continuously disclosing more data or information about their plans, procedures, actions and operations (van Riel 2000), which in turn, is expected to help "audiences develop more sophisticated images of the organization in question" (Christensen 2002, 165). Also, in attempts to listen and adapt to different markets, businesses may claim to be gathering and responding to feedback from customers regarding their needs and desires, yet, they seem to continuously recreate their own reality and identity (Christensen 1997). According to Christensen (1997), this particular communication style may be described as:

A system of auto-communication, that is, a set of self-referential communication practices through which the organization recognizes and confirms its own images, values and assumptions; in short; its own culture (p. 199).

Thus, although businesses may appear to have a sincere interest in their stakeholders, markets and external world, they are in fact communicating in ways that self-enhance and self-confirm their own

images, strategies and aspirations, with the goal of upholding their own identity and reflecting their own reality (Christensen 1997), while neglecting to encompass the multitude of voices of their internal and external stakeholders as active and “creative partners in the production of experiences and identities” (Christensen et al. 2005, 159).

In sum, the current notions of integrated communications, such as IMC and corporate communication, holds a moderate view of the new communication landscape in the digital age and perceives it as one of gradual change. While businesses may have become more aware of their audiences and the feedback they provide (Cornelissen 2017; Carroll 2013), they continue to communicate as “one body” or “one voice.” Thus, they continue to communicate in ways in which they remain in control through the integration of communication across media, markets and message (Kliatchko 2005; Cornelissen 2017), in order to harness the “strategic interest of the organization at large” (Cornelissen 2017, 5). Consequently, they do not embody or integrate market or stakeholder voices into their communication initiatives (Johansen & Andersen 2012), leaving no room for interpretation, transformation or reinvention (Christensen et al. 2008; Goodmann 2000).

2.1.1.2 The Constitutive Perspective

Existing research in business communication has also revealed an alternative view of communication, being the constitutive perspective (e.g. Weick 1979; Craig 1999; Putnam & Nicotera 2009; Putnam & Mumby 2014; Taylor & van Every 2000), which in contrast to the current notions of integrated communications, emphasizes multivocality or polyphony within (and outside of) organizations (Belova et al. 2008). For this reason, the following sub-sections will seek to introduce the main idea or mindset behind the constitutive perspective of communication.

The Communicative Constitution of Organizations

While it is argued that corporate communication integrates specialized disciplines from the three principal communication clusters of management, marketing and organizational communication (van Riel & Fombrun 2007), it undermines the understandings and valuable insights developed in, for example, organizational communication research, commonly known as the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO).

For a long time, organizational communication scholars have been claiming that communication is the essence or the building block of organizations (Putnam & Nicotera 2009). Influenced and inspired by Weick’s (1979) emphasis on the verb “organizing” rather than the noun “organization,”

thus the process rather than the entity, scholars within this field have “focused on how communication is the means by which human beings coordinate actions, create relationships, and maintain organizations” (Putnam & Nicotera 2009, e1). Rooted in a variety of theories, such as speech act theory (e.g. Searle 1969), conversation analysis (e.g. Sacks et al. 1974), frame analysis (Goffman 1959) and systems theory (Luhmann 1995), to mention a few, the CCO perspective recognizes organizations as being communicatively constituted by a collection of multiple voices who, through ongoing, dynamic and interactive acts and processes of communication, create, construct or constitute an organization and thereby, its identity (Weick 1979; Putnam & Nicotera 2009; Taylor & Van Every 2000). The key idea or mindset of CCO then is based on the assumptions of communication as dynamic processes and thus on the “formative effect of language and speech on collective sensemaking and social coordination” (Christensen & Cornelissen 2010, 16).

Drawing on the notion of CCO, Christensen and Cornelissen (2010) aim at bridging corporate with organizational communication, as a way of challenging the current dominant emphasis on the structure or representation of the whole, by highlighting the need for researchers and practitioners alike to emphasize the structure or representation of the parts. Thus, the interactions and acts of communication between different voices of the organization (Ibid.). The multitude of voices, which have previously been downplayed in integrated communication or transmission models of communication, should not only be acknowledged but embodied as important actors that matter in the constitution and maintenance of organizations. Organizations are dependent on multiple voices to maintain the organization, as they may provide valuable alternatives, contrasts and differences to the traditional and univocal meanings, which may in fact, not apply to all of their stakeholders: “too much clarity and consistency in the formulation of “shared values” may actually prevent managers from establishing accord with some corporate audiences” (Christensen & Cornelissen 2010, 20). In other words, multivocality or polyphony is considered an essential dimension of all organizing (Ibid), in particular in the age of globalization (Bouwen & Stevaert 1999).

Polyphony

The term polyphony originates from the work of the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). Based on his analysis of novels by Russian novelist, Dostoyevsky, Bakhtin found evidence of polyphonic narrative, thus a “multiplicity of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses (...) each with equal rights and its own world [that] combine, but do not merge, into

the unity of an event” (p. 208). A central concept in Bakhtin’s thought is that of dialogue, being characterized as “an ongoing, open process, [which] is never finished, and always allows for loopholes and change” (Hazen 1993, 18).

Inspired by Bakhtin’s (1981; 1984) work on polyphony, it has become a widely applied metaphor by scholars in organization studies, for example, as a way of “analyzing organizations as discursive spaces where heterogeneous and multiple voices engage and contest for audibility and power” (Belova et al. 2008, 493). In contrast to the current notions of integrated communication and emphasis on univocality, the notion of polyphony in the context of organizations provides important and valuable insights about how organizations may be viewed as complex, diverse and ever-changing arenas shaped by a multiplicity of voices, which engage in active and ongoing sense-making (Belova et al. 2008).

Although the notion of polyphonic organizations might appear to be chaotic to some, it has important implications for organizational understanding, development, and change (Hazen 1993). By embodying different voices, other than the dominant, directive or authorial ones, organizations are better enabled to represent different identities, groups, interests and members of an organization (Kornberger et al. 2006), as each voice bring with it its own worldview and individuality (Belova et al 2008). In short, organizations embracing polyphony and dialogue reflect openness towards diversity, possibilities and transformation (Hazen 1993). Communication then, needs to be based on processes of dialogue, in which businesses organizations may not only listen and learn from a multitude of voices, but more importantly, actively interact, involve or include their stakeholders, both internal as well as external (Christensen et al. 2008), for example, through co-creation of brand identity, reality and meanings (Ind et al. 2013a).

Co-creation in the Digital Age

In recent developments within branding theory (Gregory 2007; Johansen & Andersen 2012; Ind et al. 2013; Ind & Coates 2013; Hatch & Schultz 2010; Ind 2015), the term co-creation has received increased attention. Drawing on the notion of polyphony, the co-creation approach suggests “a shift in thinking from the organization as a definer of value to a more participative process where people and organizations together generate and develop meaning” (Ind & Coates 2013, 86).

The concept of co-creation was introduced by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000), who suggest that in the digital age, customers have increasingly been able to initiate and engage in active dialogue with both businesses and other customers in creating value. Since the initial introduction, the notion of co-

creation has been widely applied, in particular to the field of branding or brand management, suggesting that organizations are able to actively involve a multitude of voices, being internal or external stakeholders, in participative processes of developing and co-creating brands, products and services (Gregory 2007; Ind et al. 2013; Ind 2015). This in turn, means that brands have become more fluid, complex and organic (Ind 2015; Iglesias et al. 2013), leaving little control in the hands of businesses in terms of brand management (Quinton 2013). Although the co-creation approach means less control for businesses, however, scholars increasingly suggest that seeing “branding as a process that sits at the intersection of the stakeholder and the organization, rather than the exclusive domain of the organization” (Ind 2015, 736), is needed in the changed world of communication (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2000; Quinton 2013). Relevant for brand co-creation are brand communities (Hatch & Schultz 2010; Ind et al. 2013), in particular those based in social media (Habibi et al. 2014; Laroche et al. 2013; Ang 2011). For this reason, the second main section of the theoretical framework, will delve into social media, while the third main section will introduce the concept of brand communities. First, the below section will seek to explain the changed world of communication.

2.1.2 The Changed World of Communication Explained

Literature on business communication has revealed two key factors, which have significantly changed the way in which individuals communicate, which, in turn has important implications for business organizations in the digital age of today. For this reason, this section will seek to explain how these key factors, being postmodernity and technology, respectively, have influenced and changed the world of communication.

2.1.2.1 Postmodernity

The first explanation to the changed world of communication is rooted in the work of multiple French philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard, among others, who have characterized the transformation of the world in general, and communication in particular, as postmodernity (Cova 1996; Christensen et al. 2005).

In the course of the twentieth century, societies in the Western world, started to reflect a new, major current or condition, known as the postmodern era (Cova 1996). According to Cova (1996), it is described as: “an era without a dominant ideology or utopia but with a plurality of currents and styles” (p. 16). While the modernist thought reflects an order of organizational imperative, characterized by a dominant, universal moral force and totalized reality, in which the organization is

in control (Hart & Scott 1975), the postmodernist thought outlines a new social condition, philosophical perspective and complete rethinking of scientific principles in general, which has had significant implications for organizations in general and managers and marketers in particular (Cova 1996; 1997; Boje et al. 1996). Traditionally, business organizations would solely manage all their communication activities, but in the postmodern world: “the notion of one single perspective or reality becomes impossible to sustain” (Christensen 2002, 164), as the postmodern individual rejects the totalizing ideas, messages or meanings imposed by businesses. Instead of merely accepting and consuming products, which have been invented by the organization, the postmodern individual or consumer seeks to participate in co-creation processes, by actively interpreting, creating and negotiating new meanings based on their own life experiences, self-image and worldview: “In postmodernity we are witnessing the emergence of the *customizing consumer* – the consumer who takes elements of market offerings and crafts a customized consumption experience out of them” (Cova 1996, 17). In other words, it is not the product itself, but the image, the meaning and the experience associated with the product that is essential and valuable to the consumer (Firat et al. 1995).

This transformation has not only challenged business managers in terms of accepting the new social condition of the customizing consumer in the age of the individual (Rapp & Collins 1992), but it has particularly challenged businesses to rethink new approaches in communication accordingly: “In its new framework, marketing has to include the consumer not as a target for product but as a producer of experiences” (Cova 1996, 18). With an active postmodern consumer, who seek to use, distort, transform, negotiate, construct or reshape the meanings of products, brands and services based on own experiences, businesses and brands then, need to emphasize interactivity, connectivity and creativity. In short, businesses need to adopt a people-centric and participative approach (Ind 2015), where marketing becomes an “interactive experience of joint creation of meaning for the customer” (Cova 1996, 20).

2.1.2.2 Technology

The second explanation to the changed world of communication is based on technological innovation and development. The development of technology, from radio and television to computers, IT, the Internet and other related technologies, in particular smartphones and other handheld devices, has changed and restructured patterns of everyday life, work and leisure (Kellner 1995; Kemp 2019).

They have not only provided new ways of accessing information and entertainment but also provided new ways of communicating with other people (Ihator 2001).

While the development of mass media, such as printing press, radio and TV in the early twentieth century, fundamentally changed the media landscape and thereby, the way in which businesses could communicate with a mass audience by replacing personal selling with mass advertising (McQuail 2010), the development of computer technology and the rise of the Internet, has in particular generated a digital world with new revolutionary communication processes, roles and outcomes (Argenti 2006; Ihator 2001; Hoffmann & Novak 1997).

A new collection of Global Digital 2019 reports, released in January 2019, provide important insights into how people worldwide use the Internet, mobile devices, and social media (Kemp 2019). According to these reports, more than 4.3 billion people around the world, which is about 57 % of the world's population, are Internet users as of January 2019, which is an increase of 367 million people or 9 % in 12 months (Ibid.). In addition, Internet users worldwide spend on average 6 hours and 42 minutes online each day (Ibid.), to not only find information, but also to connect with other people as well as communicate about and “with corporations directly and indirectly through a growing list of websites, online chat rooms and blogs” (Argenti 2006, 357).

More recently, the development of smartphones and other handheld devices, has played a significant role in changing communication. Today, smartphones and other handheld devices, such as tablets, have become more accessible and affordable than ever. As of January 2019, over 5 billion people worldwide are mobile users, which is 67 % of the world's population. This reflects an increase with over 100 million mobile users in 12 months (Kemp 2019). Thus, easier access to computers, but also the increased usage and access to smartphones, has given people the opportunity to use the Internet at hand, making it significantly easier to connect more frequently, with more convenience and effortlessly with others, in particular through interactive media, such as social media.

In the light of the new media and information technology, which is characterized by interconnectedness of people across the world, the relevance and reliability of old communication theories, models and styles should, according to Ihator (2001), be carefully assessed by researchers and practitioners as: “publics now have ready access to the mass media to tell their story from their own perspective and complain vehemently if necessary” (p. 199). The new information technologies' accommodation of real-time dialogue and information has thus created a new communication landscape, which is dynamic rather than static and in addition, has empowered the active voices of

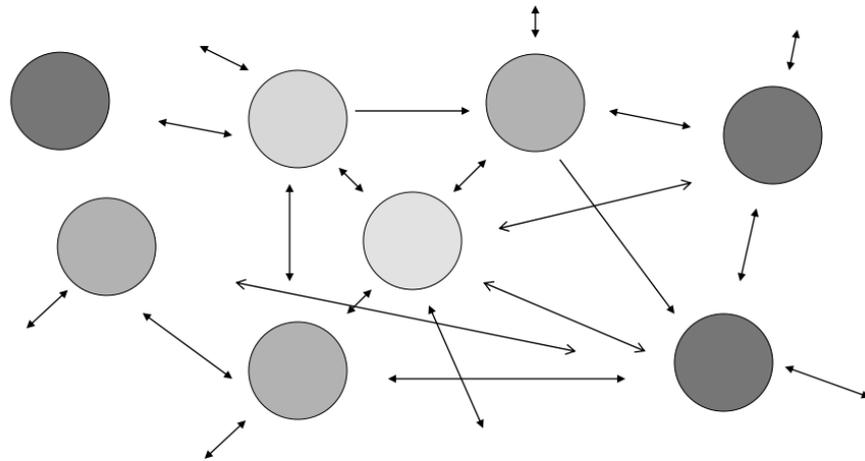
stakeholders while reducing organizations' control over communication and information (Argenti 2006; Ihator 2001). As a result, businesses have "less opportunity to prepare for presenting their own versions of reality [as stakeholders] expect information to be provided quickly, allowing little time for packaging" (Argenti 2006, 359). This, in turn, calls for a change of perception and new creative ways of communicating, which accounts for the complex and multivocal communication processes taking place among businesses and individuals alike in the digital age of today.

2.1.3 A Multivocal Communication Model

Based on the previous introductions and discussions of the transmission and the constitutive perspective of communication, respectively, including the concepts of postmodernity and technology as the key factors explaining the changed world of communication, this thesis holds that international business communication in today's postmodern and digital world is characterized by complex social systems (Luhmann 1995), with a "multiplicity of independent and unmerged voices" (Bakhtin 1984, 208), who communicate, negotiate, reshape and construct new brand meanings (Cova 1996) through a large variety of channels such as interactive media (Ihator 2001). In the new communication landscape that has developed, communication is characterized by complex, dynamic and ever-changing processes between multiple voices, besides the business organization or brand itself, who may communicate to, with, against, past or about each other, as illustrated in below figure 3, in the construction of meanings, based on their own experiences and lifeworld (Cova 1996). The new communication landscape, according to Fournier and Avery (2011), "not only encourages but demands flexibility, opportunism, and adaption on the part of the brands" (204).

Although used in relation to organizational crisis communication, the below figure well illustrates the multivocal, complex, and dynamic patterns of communication taking place in today's postmodern and digital age:

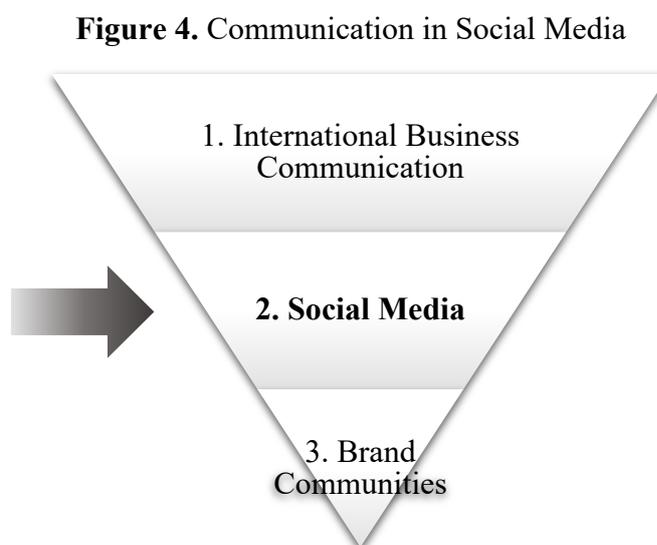
Figure 3. Multivocal communication (Frandsen & Johansen 2017, 148).



These dynamic communicative processes have in particular been enabled with the rise of social media. In other words, the structure and context of social media provide an ideal online arena for multivocal communication. For this reason, the following main section will introduce and discuss social media.

2.2 Communication in Social Media

While the preceding section has focused on introducing different perspectives of business communication, including the concepts of postmodernity and technology, this section proceeds with an introduction and discussion of how social media in particular has developed and influenced the way individuals and businesses alike communicate, based on literature on social media. This section then, represents the second main part of the theoretical framework, as seen in below figure 4, which aims at obtaining a better understanding of communication in social media brand communities:



2.2.1 Social Media Introduction

As previously mentioned, the development of information and communications technologies in recent years, has resulted in the digital world and information age of today, in which information, communication and conversation has reached new heights between Internet users (Ihator 2001).

According to the Global Digital 2019 reports, 79.4 % of all Internet users are social media users in 2019, which is more than 3.4 billion people or 45 % of the world's population (Kemp 2019). The number of social media users has not only increased by 288 million or 9 % in 12 months, but previous digital reports and statistics also reveal a steady growth in social media usage, in particular in the last five years from 2014 to 2019 (Kemp 2014; 2019). The accessibility and affordability of smartphones and other handheld smart devices has in particular driven the growth of social media usage in recent years and as of 2019, over 3.2 billion people worldwide are mobile social media users, which is an increase by 297 million in 12 months (Kemp 2018; 2019). According the newest reports and statistics,

the number of social media users are estimated to continue increasing in the coming years (Statista 2017; Kemp 2019).

The above-mentioned statistics on social media usage indicate, that social media has become an influential platform in the digital age of today. With the significant growth in social media usage year-on-year, it is therefore, as stated by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010): “reasonable to say that social media represent a revolutionary new trend” (p. 59). In other words, social media has become an everyday reality of interconnectedness for individuals across the world, but also for businesses, seeking to participate in the new, social media landscape by engaging with social media users (Ibid; Kietzmann et al. 2011). In order to understand what social media is and how it has specifically changed the way in which individuals but also businesses communicate, the following sections will delve into the concept of social media, how it has been defined but also how it has developed over the years, from being intended for individuals only into being used by businesses also.

2.2.1.1 A Social Media Definition

The most-often cited definition of social media stems from the work of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who suggest that: “Social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 61). As opposed to the technological foundations of Web 1.0, also known as the first generation of the Internet, being “the web-as-information-source with static websites” (Pelsmacker et al. 2018, 294), the second generation of the Internet, Web 2.0, was used for the first time in 2004 to describe new ways of using the Internet as a “web-as-participation platform in which users participate and connect to each other using services as opposed to [static websites]” (Ibid., 294). A significant feature of Web 2.0 is that it enables the sharing of User Generated Content (UGC), characterized as publicly published and accessible creative media content, which is created by end-users in a non-professional context (OECD 2007). These are then posted on Internet-based applications, such as Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube and Twitter (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). In short, social media can be seen as a collection of technologies which enables Internet users to actively and continuously collaborate, create, add, edit, modify, share and tag different types of content, for example, text, sound, video and images (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Pelsmacker et al. 2018; Kietzmann 2011). Based on key dimensions such as; social presence (intimacy and immediacy); media richness (communication medium’s ability to transmit information in a given time interval); self-presentation (efforts to control the impressions other people form of an individual); and self-disclosure (conscious

or unconscious revelation of personal information), Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), further distinguish between six different types of social media, being collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds and virtual social worlds.

2.2.2 The Development of Social Media

While the idea of social media can be traced back to early online initiatives from the late 1990s, it was not until the launch of social networking sites, such as Myspace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004, that the concept of “social media” was coined (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Facebook in particular, has become an influential social networking site and game-changer in the social media world, in terms of connecting people across the world (Ang 2011). Other social networking sites, such as Friendster and MySpace, all launched in 2003, proved to be successful in their initial years of existence. However, Friendster ended up closing down, while MySpace started losing users to the then rising site of Facebook (Tarver 2018). It is reasonable to say then, that the launch of Facebook in 2004, followed by multiple other social media initiatives, such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn, has sparked a new online, interactive and social world in today’s digital age.

As of January 2019, Facebook remains the most popular social networking site with over 2.2 billion monthly active users, despite a troubling year in 2018 with multiple crises, such as several data breaches, bugs, fake news and fake accounts, to mention a few (Kemp 2019; Lapowsky 2018). Following Facebook in popularity, comes YouTube with 1.9 billion and WhatsApp with 1.5 billion monthly active users (Kemp 2019). Other popular social media platforms are Instagram with over 1 billion monthly active users and Twitter with 326 million monthly active users, respectively (Ibid.). The launch, development and usage growth of social media signifies that social media has become a popular and significant platform of interaction particularly among individuals.

2.2.2.1 Social Media for Individuals

For individuals, social media has boomed a new online web culture, in which people no longer simply access, read, watch and thus consume Internet content, for example, in order to buy products or services (Kietzmann et al. 2011). Increasingly, however, people have become able to actively participate in creating, sharing, and discussing news, information and other forms of communicative and expressive content, effortlessly, in no time and on a worldwide scale through different types of social media platforms, such as wikis, content sharing sites, social networking and blogs (Ibid; Dijck 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). More specifically, social media has enabled millions of people to

add entries on Wikipedia, to share images on Instagram, to upload or view videos on YouTube, to maintain their professional profile on LinkedIn, to connect with friends on Facebook and to express their personal passion, experiences or opinions on blogs and micro-blogs, such as Twitter, among others (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Dijck 2013).

According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), individuals engage in social media based on different reasons, preferences or needs, which involve activities related to identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Identity, for instance, represents “the extent to which users reveal their identities in a social media setting” (Ibid., 243). This not only includes the disclosure of user information such as name, gender and age, but users may also wish to present their identity through “the conscious or unconscious ‘self-disclosure’ of subjective information such as thoughts, feelings, likes, and dislikes” (Ibid., 243). Although many social media sites are built around identity, as users oftentimes are required to set up a profile, some users may not prefer to reveal too much of their identity, while others want to self-disclose subjective information. People may also want to use social media to engage in conversations with other users for different reasons, such as to converse with like-minded people, share ideas, thoughts or trending topics, build their self-esteem or share an important message in relation to, for example, politics, economics or the environment (Ibid.). Also, people may want or need to share and exchange content, such as images, videos or sound, which according to Engström (2005), are objects of sociality that contribute to “mediate the ties between people” (para. 4). In addition, people may prefer real-time presence, such as knowing when other users are online or where they are located, or they may want to build and maintain relationships with others. Depending on an individuals’ resources, relationships can be either strong “long-lasting, and affect-laden” (Krackhardt 1992, p. 218) or weak “infrequent and distant” (Hansen 1999, p. 84). Lastly, people may want to build and attest their reputations and trustworthiness, which is measured in likes, followers, view counts and ratings by others, or they may seek to form or engage in groups, such as communities and sub-communities (Kietzmann et al. 2011).

Thus, based on an individuals’ engagement needs or preferences to (or not to) disclose their identity, engage in conversations, share content, be present in real-time, build relationships, reputation or groups with others, users may select one or multiple social media platforms that provide the necessary functionalities. For instance, content sharing sites, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube, provide the functionalities that enable individuals to share content, but they also provide means for engaging in conversations and groups. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, provide the functionalities that enable individuals to build and maintain relationships, by setting up a profile,

but they also provide means for real-time presence, engagement in conversations and building of reputations (Ibid.).

Individuals may not only use social media to engage privately, thus on their private profiles and in closed or secret groups, but also publicly through blogs or public pages and groups, which are based around a particular topic, common cause or issue and used for group communication, allowing like-minded group members to connect based on common interest, discuss issues, express their opinion and share related content (Mangold & Faulds 2009; Kietzmann 2011; Moreau 2018; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Increasingly, individuals are connecting in pages or groups, by sharing information on any topic including post-purchase experiences related to particular brands, products and services (Mangold & Faulds 2009; Powers et al. 2012). By creating or engaging in so-called fan or hate groups in social media, also referred to as user-generated sub-brand communities (Habibi et al. 2014), group members are able to communicate with each other about their love or hate of, for example, a particular brand or product. This suggests that there are different types of social media users, which may not only be characterized by their emotions but also by their behaviour. For this reason, the following sub-sections will delve into the different types of users in terms of behaviour and emotions.

User Behaviour

The types of social media users can first of all be characterized by their behaviour. The Global 2019 Digital reports have not only found an increase in the number of social media users, but findings also reveal an increase in the amount of time that people spend on social media (Kemp 2019). By January 2019, the average global social media user spends 2 hours and 16 minutes per day on social media platforms, which is 40 minutes longer compared to the time spent in 2014 (Ibid.). According to Global Web Index (2019), not all of the time spent on social media is used by users to actually be “social”, thus, to actively engage with or contribute to the social media platforms they visit (Ibid.). As more people now have multiple user accounts across social media platforms, not all of these platforms are used for engagement, but they are as likely used to keep up with news. Particularly younger users, aged 16-24 years, use social media to fill up spare time or find entertaining content (Ibid.).

Active social media users then, can be placed into two main categories based on their behaviour, being; active engaging users and active listening users, also referred to as “lurkers” (Edelmann 2013; Nonnecke & Preece 2003). User activity in terms of engagement is understood as the active contribution with; postings, page likes, post likes, comments, post re-share, and ad clicks. In other

words, it represents users who are active and visible participators of social media and is oftentimes the most recognized form of online behaviour (Edelmann 2013). In Brandtzaeg and Heim's (2011) typology of social media users, they characterize the active and visible users as debaters or socializers.

User activity in terms of lurking, on the other hand, is oftentimes associated with nonparticipation and nonposting behaviour, thus a silent, invisible, inactive or passive use of social media, and for this reason, lurking has most often carried negative connotations (Edelmann 2013). Lurking, however, which is a popular activity among 90 % of all online users (Nielsen 2006), is according to Edelmann (2013), not only a normal but a valuable, active and participative online behaviour. Lurkers may spend hours on the activities of reading, listening, paying attention to and learning about different social media sites or groups, for example, in order to learn about the group and to act in response to group dynamics (Nonnecke & Preece 2003, 117). Lurkers therefore, should not be dismissed, however, they should be considered "valid participants, capable of supporting online communities and contributing to innovation" (Edelmann 2013, 646), as they are considered valuable sources of information or knowledge with potential to support, contribute and become visible users in social media.

User Emotions and Voices

Social media users can also be characterized by their voices and emotions, which have been emphasized in research on stakeholder communication (Luoma-aho 2009; 2010; 2015). In her work with stakeholder communications, Finnish public relations scholar Vilma Luoma-aho (2009) emphasizes the powerful nature of emotions in the social media age of today:

It could be argued that we have moved into a time of emotional publics, where feelings toward organizations range from love to hate, and the different stakeholders have several ways of showing their emotion and recruiting others to join in and comment on their feelings, for example through social media and different hate-sites and fan groups (Luoma-aho 2009, 323).

According to Luoma-aho (2009), social media has enabled or empowered users and publics to express their positive emotions, such as love, like and support, but also their negative emotions, such as dissatisfaction, complaints and criticism (Luoma-aho 2009; 2010; 2015), in particular in relation to the products and services delivered by a business or brand (Mangold & Faulds 2009). While positive

voices are an advantage to a business' reputation, negative voices are considered a threat to a business' success and survival, as they have potential to foster an online firestorm or shitstorm (Frandsen & Johansen 2017).

Besides the positively-engaged users, referred to as “faith-holders”, and the negatively-engaged users, referred to as “hate-holders”, Luoma-aho (2015), has also identified fake-holders, who are described as unauthentic users that have been: “artificially generated by either individuals or persona-creating software and algorithms to either oppose or support an issue” (13). Lastly, social media users may also be described as neutral voices, who provide information or asks questions, for example, in crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay 2014) but not only, as social media in general enables users to provide or receive information of all types (Westerman et al. 2014). As it appears, the types of social media users, may be described as positive, negative, neutral and fake voices, who altogether contribute to dynamic, multivocal and even complex communicative situations and styles among social media users worldwide, as they interact and communicate to, with, against or past each other, with potential of starting online firestorms (Frandsen & Johansen 2017).

In sum, social media has created a new communication landscape, in which different types of social media users around the world are able to join different types of social media platforms in order to fulfill a variety of social needs such as affiliation, self-expression, self-presentation, and enhancing self-esteem (Back et al. 2010; Wilcox & Stephen 2013; Yeo 2012).

2.2.2.2 Social Media for Businesses

Although social media was initially developed and intended for individuals and not brands (Fournier & Avery 2011), it has increasingly been considered an ideal or even necessary platform of engagement with users for many businesses, due to the growing popularity and unique networking features of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010), in which “communication about brands happens, with or without permission of the firms in question” (Kietzmann et al. 2011, 242). For this reason, more businesses are highly interested in, or feel pressured to, becoming part of the social media reality (Baird & Parasnis 2011), in order to listen in on conversations, stay alert of potential negative attention, and engage with social media users or consumers (Kietzmann et al. 2011). By not doing so, businesses fear of losing customers to competitors or of being perceived as “out of touch” (Baird & Parasnis 2011).

Despite the wish, need or recognition that businesses should be involved and active (Hanna et al. 2011), many businesses or brands still do not know or understand how to use social media to

communicate or interact with the multitude of social media users or consumers (Kietzmann et al. 2011), who “can speak so freely with each other” (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 60). Businesses, in other words, have been facing a new “nontraditional” and digital democracy, in which they increasingly have lost power and control over the information shared or communicated by individuals about their company, products, services or brand (Kietzmann et al. 2011; Mangold & Faulds 2009; Baird & Parasnis 2011). Thus, the new communication landscape with the growing number and types of social media users, not only provides businesses with a variety of opportunities but also with numerous challenges. For this reason, many businesses seek guidance in a multitude of “how to” books or short articles on how to better understand social media. This, however, seems to indicate a new trend or way of doing “social business”.

Social Media Trend: “Social Business”

“Social media [has] moved far beyond a means of staying in touch with old friends or colleagues. [It has] become how business gets done” (Hinchliffe & Kim 2012, viii).

As indicated in the above quote, there is currently an emerging and increasing tendency towards perceiving social media as a way of doing “social business” (Hinchliffe & Kim 2012; Hassan et al. 2015; Mangold & Faulds 2009; Owyang 2011; Li & Solis 2013; Evans 2010). “Social business” is a way of perceiving social media as a competitive platform, in which businesses strive to ensure success and economic growth by achieving better marketing, customer service, product development and sales through strategic approaches. In other words, social business focuses on using social media intentionally, effectively and strategically for driving meaningful or emergent business outcomes (Hinchliffe & Kim 2012). Thus, more businesses are increasingly focused on finding ways to control their social media efforts by using mere quantitative measures, metrics and tools, as an approach to analyze data and consumer insights, in order to make sense of the social media landscape (e.g. Walker-Ford 2018).

Over the recent years, more businesses have also started using chatbots, an “artificial intelligence assistant” (Marketing 2018, para. 4), due to their ability to “take on the burden of time-consuming business task” (Bucknell 2018, para.1) by responding users with a standard question-and-answer template. Also, more businesses are focusing more on using paid social instead of organic social, in order to be able to reach a larger audience with their advertisements (Kemp 2019). Organic social is the free use of social media, thus the publishing of posts and responding users free of charge from the respective networking site (Gurd 2019). Paid social, on the other hand, is characterized as the: “paying

to display adverts (...) or sponsored messages to social network users based on user profile e.g. *demographic*” (Ibid., para. 12). Due to the new algorithm updates in 2018, for example, by Facebook, which changed users’ news feeds to focus more on posts from their friends and less on brand posts (Swan 2019), paid social is most often perceived by businesses as the ideal solution to overcome the challenge (Miller 2018). The issue with paid social, however, is that it may not only attract criticism during potential crises (Gurd 2019), but also, some social media users take distance from anything commercial imposing their social milieu (Ang 2011).

As it appears, businesses are focusing less on using social media for valuable conversations and content, and more on using social media strategically and effectively to reach and acquire customers. The notion of social business in many respects reflects the traditional and managerial mindset, which suggests that businesses are able to control communication (Cornelissen 2017). In the social media age of today, however, businesses tend to overlook the initial intentions behind the creation of social media and thus, the primary reasons and motivations for individuals joining social media, which is to reveal their identity, engage in conversations, share, and build relationships or groups, among others (Kietzmann et al. 2011). Thus, to stay in touch with friends and family as well as to connect with other people (Fournier & Avery 2011).

Social Media Focus: People and Conversations

Attempts to plan, manage and control social media engagement by using merely quantitative tools, not only fail to understand users’ engagement needs but also fail to explain the complex conversations unfolding among people, which may not only be favorable but also unfavorable and even harmful to the respective brand (Kietzmann et al. 2011; Luamo-aho 2009; Frandsen & Johansen 2017; Falconi 2018). In other words, businesses need to move away from a “social business” mindset towards a human-oriented and relationship-building mindset, by relinquishing control, placing people and their needs first, embracing dialogue and seeking to understand what users value (Baird & Parasnis 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Fournier & Avery 2011). In short, businesses need to recognize and understand that social media is, as characterized by Fournier and Avery (2011), the “People’s Web” (p. 194).

In order to be able to understand conversations and know when, where and how to respond, businesses thus need deeper understanding, human reasoning and analysis, thus qualitative assessments of attitudes, emotions, and behaviors among social media users (Cottingham 2018; Farjami 2018), which requires that businesses “allocate resources to engage” (Kietzmann et al. 2011,

242). This in turn, will enable them to respond, converse and engage directly and appropriately with social media users (Ang 2011; Falconi 2018), in the right time and place and thereby, “show their audience that they care” (Kietzmann et al. 2011, 245).

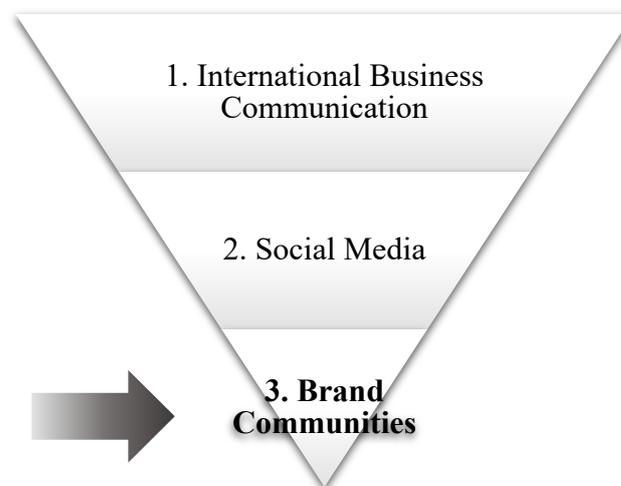
Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest that businesses engaging in social media should not only think about choosing and using the right medium but also learn to be “social”. In terms of being social, they suggest that businesses should be active, interesting, humble, unprofessional and honest. This in turn, will better enable businesses to interact in open and active conversations with the different types of users, such as the positively-engaged and the negatively-engaged ones (Luoma-aho 2009), as well as the valuable information-holding lurkers (Edelmann 2013).

Although businesses may be challenged by the many social media platforms available and continuously appearing, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest, that businesses should carefully choose the one(s) that “allow” them to join in on conversations and build relationships, for example, through the creation of brand pages. Brand pages, also known as brand communities, are in particular considered ideal and unique opportunities for businesses to build and maintain meaningful relationships with users, fans or followers (Habibi et al. 2014; Laroche et al. 2013), also known as brand community members. For this reason, the following main section will seek to introduce and discuss brand communities.

2.3. Communication in Brand Communities

While the preceding main section focused on introducing social media, this section proceeds with delving into the concept of brand community, in terms of how it is defined, understood and important for individuals and businesses alike, based on literature on brand communities. This section then, represents the third and last main section of the theoretical framework, as seen in below figure 5, which aims at obtaining a better understanding of communication in social media brand communities:

Figure 5. Communication in Brand Communities



2.3.1 Brand Community Research and Development

In order to be able to reach an understanding of social media brand communities, this section will delve into the concepts of community and brand community, respectively.

2.3.1.1 Community

As previously mentioned in section 2.1.2.1 Postmodernity, the postmodern society has often been characterized by the age of individualism, in which individuals, liberated from modern social bonds of collective, impersonal and fixed ideals, such as social classes, have increasingly been able to take personal action as to construct and express their own difference, own experiences and thus, own existence (Firat et al. 1995; Cova 1996; 1997). According to Cova (1996), however, postmodernity is particularly also known as a period in which individuals have started a “reverse movement to recompose their social universe on the basis of an emotional free choice” (p. 19). Thus, instead of seeking differentiation, individuals “search for the social link” (Cova 1996, 19). In other words, postmodernity may rather be characterized by tribalism or the time of the tribes, more commonly

known as communities (Cova 1996; 1997). Based on a review of sociology literature, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) found three core components or markers of community, being 1) consciousness of kind; 2) shared rituals and traditions; and 3) moral responsibility. The concept of community then, may be characterized as a social network or societal micro-group, in which people identify, commit and connect with other like-minded individuals based on a collective sense of belonging and contradistinction to others, including shared emotions, styles of life, values, traditions, concerns and moral beliefs (Cova 1996; Brint 2001; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Algesheimer et al. 2005). Traditionally, or in premodern societies, communities would be organized around families, religion, and described in terms of geographical locations or places, such as villages, towns or neighborhoods (Tönnies 1887/1963). In the digital age of today, however, the new communication technologies have enabled the formation of dynamic online communities, in which people are able unite regardless of the geographic location or co-presence of members. Rather than stressing local solidarity then, today's online communities emphasize primary ties, thus social relations between like-minded individuals based on common interests, identity and purpose, in particular in relation to consumption (Cova 1996; 1997; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Amine & Sitz 2004).

2.3.1.2 Brand Community

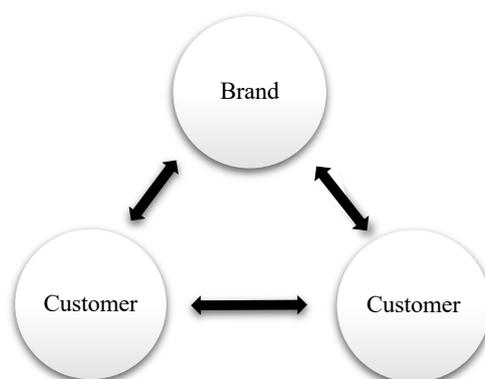
The idea of consumption communities has existed for a long time and been examined in multiple consumer studies, which have found evidence of strong brand communities, cultures and social ties between members based on their shared interests and consumption practices, for example, in relation to vehicles such as Harley Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander 1995); Saab (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001), Jeep (McAlexander et al. 2002); Volkswagen (Brown et al. 2003); European cars (Algesheimer et al. 2005); and Mini Cooper (Schau et al. 2009). For instance, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) found evidence of a "brotherhood" among Harley-Davidson riders, which signifies a close bond and commitment between a group of like-minded users, based on their shared lifestyle and identification with the pleasure of riding and owning a Harley-Davidson bike.

Consumption communities, which have been conceptualized as brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001), are thus important for users of particular brands. The most cited definition of brand community stems from the work of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), who suggest that: "A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), brand communities are social entities formed around any brand and are, like traditional communities, marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility between

consumer members. *Shared consciousness* refers to feelings of connectedness among members, who not only feel an important connection to the brand but also, share a strong social bond, relation and commitment to each other. This can also be described as a sense of “we-ness” (Bender 1978), which signifies that the “link is more important than the thing” (Cova 1997, 307). It is manifested through social processes as member differentiation and oppositional brand loyalty (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). *Shared rituals and traditions* are described as symbolic ways of communicating by which “the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community” (Ibid., 421). Rituals and traditions also function to maintain the culture of the community and are manifested in a celebration of brand history and in sharing brand related stories (Ibid.). Lastly, *moral responsibility* refers to a felt “sense of duty” to the whole community and to its individual members (Ibid., 424). In other words, members feel a social commitment or obligation to ensure group cohesion and survival, which is achieved through two community practices, being integrating and retaining members, and assisting brand community members in brand use (Ibid.).

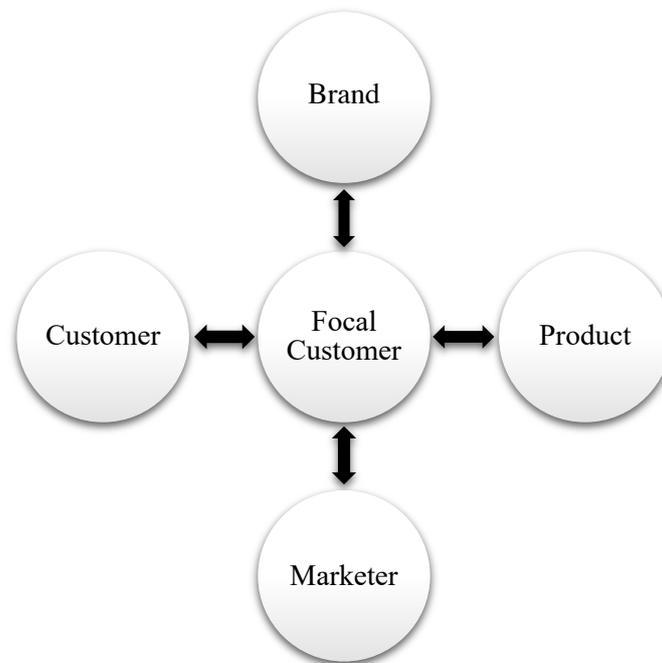
Thus, based on their common passion, admiration or interest in a brand, consumers are interacting in active, collective and meaningful creation and negotiation of brand meanings by sharing information and experiences, not only in physical and real-life community sites but also in computer-mediated community sites (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). This contributes to strengthen the social, often affectual, ties between members, as well as strengthen the values of the brand (Ibid). Brand communities, as introduced by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), thus reflect a shift from a traditional customer-brand relationship to a customer-customer-brand triad, as illustrated in below figure 6:

Figure 6. Brand community triad (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001, 418)



McAlexander and his colleagues (2002) suggest an extension of the brand community triad as well as a shift of perspective. First, they believe that the emphasis on social relationships among customers and the brand “to be correct but not entirely complete” (Ibid., 39) and instead, they suggest that customers also value relationships with their branded products and with marketers. Second, they suggest a shift of perspective, as they argue that: “the existence and meaningfulness of the community inhere in customer experience rather than in the brand around which that experience revolves” (Ibid, 39). According to this perspective then, brand communities are “customer-centric”, dynamic and more complex in terms of relationships, as customers may form relationships with the brand, with the product, with the marketer and with other customers (Ibid.), which is illustrated in below figure 7:

Figure 7. Customer-centric model of brand community (McAlexander et al. 2002, 39).



Drawing on previous research, Fournier and Lee (2009) suggest that brand community structures can take three forms, being pools, webs and hubs, in which members interact and “add value by playing a wide variety of roles” (p.108). These common community roles, which are considered important to a community’s function, maintenance and development, are characterized as: mentor, learner, partner, storyteller, provider, greeter, guide, and ambassador, among others (p. 109).

The reasons why consumers engage in brand communities can be explained by social identity theory (e.g. Tajfel & Turner 1985), including social capital theory (e.g. Bourdieu 1983; Coleman 1988). As explained by Algeisheimer et al. (2005), brand community identification takes place when a “person construes himself or herself to be a member – that is, as “belonging” to the brand community” (20). In contrast to a unique and separate identity, this reflects a shared or collective identity (Ibid.), thus an establishment of a social identity based on intergroup behaviour (Tajfel & Turner 1985). The process of identifying with a specific social group, involves both cognitive and affective components, such as a collective sense of “perceived similarities with other community members and dissimilarities with nonmembers” (Algeisheimer et al. 2005, 20), including a sense of emotional or affective commitment to the group (Ibid.). In short, an individual’s identification with a brand community is based on an in-group/out-group differentiation, which indicates that the consumer: “agrees (or strives to agree) with the community’s norms, traditions, rituals and objectives (...) and promotes its well-being” (p. 20).

In relation to social capital theory, Habibi et al. (2014) suggest, that brand communities can be perceived as a “potential form of social network through which consumers realize social capital” (124). Thus, the sharing of information and experiences (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001), among others, enable consumers to “derive intangible social capital from their network of admirers or consumers of the same brand” (Habibi et al. 2014, 214).

In their examination of nine brand communities, Schau and her colleagues (2009) found evidence of collective value creation processes among consumers and marketers within the context of brand communities. They identified 12 common practices, organized into four thematic groups, being: social networking, impressions management, community engagement, and brand use (Ibid.).

Social networking practices “focus on creating, enhancing, and sustaining ties among brand community members.” (p. 34). These practices include welcoming, empathizing, and governing. For instance, it involves greeting new members, providing emotional support or articulating the community norms (Habibi et al. 2014). *Impressions management* practices “focus on creating favorable impressions of the brand, brand enthusiasts, and brand community” (Schau et al. 2009, 34) in the external world. These practices include evangelizing and justifying. For instance, it involves members acting as brand ambassadors, who are sharing good news and favorable information about the brand and encouraging others to use it (Habibi et al. 2014). *Community engagement* practices enhance member engagement with the brand community, and they provide members with social

capital. These practices include staking, milestoneing, badging, and documenting (Schau et al. 2009, 34). For example, this involves members presenting their standout experiences with the brand. Lastly, *brand use* practices are related to “improved or enhanced use of the focal brand” (35). These practices include grooming, customizing, and commoditizing. For instance, it involves members sharing advice or modifying products, which enhance better use of the brand. Thus, in their study, Schau et al. (2009) discovered multiple brand community practices through which “consumers realize value beyond that which the firm creates or anticipates” (p.30).

Research on brand communities suggest that these communities are important to users or consumers. However, brand communities have, since the conceptualization by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), also become important for businesses and brands, due to ways in which a group of devoted consumers organize “around the lifestyle, activities, and ethos of the brand” (Fournier & Lee 2009, 105). Brand communities are important, relevant and beneficial for businesses for many different reasons. For example, in relation to conducting market research, businesses are not only able to acquire valuable information about the “tastes, desires, and other needs of consumers” (Kozinets 2002, 62), but also valuable, creative and innovative ideas from users for the purpose of developing new products (Von Hippel 2005). In addition, brand communities are considered beneficial for businesses and brands in terms of sharing information and building relationships with highly devoted users or customers (Andersen 2005), involving or integrating users, ensuring loyalty (Andersen 2005, McAlexander et al. 2002), as well as engaging users in brand co-creation (Hatch & Schultz 2010; Ind et al. 2013).

2.3.1.3 Co-creation in Brand Communities

The dynamics, context and structure of brand communities provide ideal opportunities for businesses in terms of managing their brands in the digital era, by engaging with and involving users in brand co-creation, building and development (Hatch & Schultz 2010; Ind et al. 2013).

According to Hatch and Schultz (2010), the context of brand communities is ideal for businesses seeking to engage their customers in brand co-creation, based on the active role members play in creating brand value through community practices, such as information and experience sharing, social networking and engagement with other consumers as well as the company behind the brand. Hatch and Schultz (2010) suggest that these community practices involve dialogue between stakeholders and the companies, including other elements such as access, transparency and risk, which are

characterized as the four building blocks whereby co-creation occurs (Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000).

Ind et al. (2013) found evidence that people participate in online brand communities to find fulfillment, to socialize and to express their creativity. In this process, participants also expect organizations to listen and respond to their ideas and contributions, which in turn, require businesses to be active, participative and involved, by not only encouraging for ideas but continuously responding to feedback. Ind et. al (2013) suggest that businesses should “see community participants as an integral part of the brand – a rich source of diversity and creativity that can help organizations develop more relevant and innovative products and services for consumers” (6). Learning about the needs, wants and desires, and responding to stakeholder’s ideas and inputs, may in turn, not only lead to successful innovations, growth and new business opportunities (Ind et al. 2013), but also closer networks, commitment and connections between a business and its stakeholders (Ind 2015). As a result, it may positively contribute to community commitment and increase brand trust and loyalty (Andersen 2005; Jang et al. 2008).

2.3.1.4 Social Media Brand Communities

Recent research on brand communities suggest, that the online, social and unique networked nature of social media particularly provides an ideal environment for creating and maintaining brand communities (Habibi et al. 2014; Laroche et al. 2012; 2013; Zaglia 2013). As previously mentioned, Kietzmann et al. (2011) suggest that individuals use social media in order to gather in groups with like-minded people, oftentimes based on shared interests in relation to brand consumption (Fournier & Avery 2011). While user-generated communities, also referred to as sub-communities (Habibi et al. 2014), are build and maintained by social media users, businesses or brands are usually not able, invited or allowed to participate (Kietzmann et al. 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Instead, brands are able to create their own groups, pages or communities, labelled social media brand communities, on different social media platforms, such as Facebook, through which they have the opportunity to reach millions of users (Habibi et al. 2014), who have chosen to “friend” or “follow” their brand page (Fournier & Avery 2011). For instance, on Facebook, the Harley Davidson brand page has more than 7 million and Coca Cola has over 107 million members (Facebook 2019c; 2019e). Increasingly, more brands such as Apple, Starbucks, Nutella, Ben & Jerry’s, Mercedes, Burberry, Gucci, to mention only a few, use social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to manage brand communities, wherefrom they communicate with like-minded users, consumers or brand community members, i.e.

brand enthusiasts, by publishing various types of posts or content, which includes news, information, products or events related to the brand (Fournier & Avery 2011; Habibi et al. 2014). Also, they enable businesses to engage in conversations, as well as allowing users to explore content, share stories and experiences, ask and answer questions, create and negotiate meaning (Habibi et al. 2014).

In their research on social media brand communities, Habibi et al. (2014) found evidence of brand community markers (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001), consumer's relationship with brand elements (McAlexander et al. 2002) and value creation practices (Schau et al. 2009), including five unique characteristics of brand communities on social media, being social context, structure, scale, content and storytelling and lastly, myriads of affiliated brand communities (Habibi et al. 2014, 128-129). These unique characteristics, in other words, indicate that social media brand communities differ from other and previously researched offline and online brand communities.

Based on their findings, Habibi et al. (2014) suggest that the type of social media brand communities, which are initiated by businesses or brands themselves, are particularly important, relevant and beneficial for businesses and brands seeking to engage with users. For example, the cost of initiating a brand community on social media is not only lower, but the reach is also greater. In addition, they provide an ideal environment for dynamic and rich communications among members and the brand, for example, through the sharing of information, consumption experiences, brand stories, interpretations, and pictures or videos related to the brand. This in turn, leads to strengthening the ties among members and the brand, generating higher engagement and participation, building relationships, influencing community commitment and enhancing brand loyalty and brand trust (Schau et al. 2009; Jang et al. 2008).

2.3.1.5 Community Management

Previous research on brand communities also suggest, that the majority of community members are customers, and for this reason, businesses should focus on "customer relationship management" in order to produce positive outcomes (e.g. Baird & Parasnis 2011; Zaglia 2013). Ang (2011), however, claims that due to the dynamic nature of online brand communities, these can include both customers but also non-customers or prospects, thus social media users or members who are not necessarily customers of the company. For this reason, Ang (2011) suggests a more suitable term being: "community relationship management" (31). Also, as members of social media brand communities take distance from anything commercial imposing their social milieu (Ang 2011), such as straightforward advertising and selling (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010), businesses should rather think of

managing a connected “community” than “customers” (Ang 2011). Thus, businesses seeking to manage and benefit from connected communities, should learn to understand the nature of social media brand communities and how they facilitate relationships among users, by recognizing the importance of connectivity, conversations, content creation and collaboration (Ang 2011).

In sum, the dynamics of social media together with the dynamics of brand communities, enable businesses or brands to engage with the members of their social media brand communities. Increasingly, they have been encouraged to embrace brand communities as valuable, social linking, co-creation arenas, in which they may connect and engage in direct and meaningful conversations, as well as learn from a multitude of voices (Habibi et al. 2014; Laroche et al. 2012; 2013; Quinton 2013). This in turn, requires that businesses need to recognize the shifted power balance, the social collective, the critical user, the demand for transparency, and acknowledge that they are no longer the sole managers of brand meanings in the social media age of today (Quinton 2013; Fournier & Avery 2011).

3. Methodological Approach

This section outlines and specifies the methodological considerations forming the foundation and guiding the research process of this thesis. In order to make the entire research process clear and transparent, this section will touch upon the philosophy of science guiding the view of the thesis, followed by an introduction to the chosen research strategy and research design, including a specification of the research methods adopted in the collection, treatment and interpretation of data.

3.1 Philosophy of Science

The way in which a researcher perceives the world, more specifically, how one views the nature of knowledge or reality (ontology) and the development of that knowledge (epistemology), respectively, is central to the entire research process (Bryman 2016; Wahyuni 2012; Grix 2002). In other words, it is important for a researcher to start with considering his/her ontological and epistemological standpoints, as such considerations provides the foundation for how the research may be carried out in all its phases, from formulating the research objective, to choosing the research strategy, design and method, to the collection, analysis, interpretation of data and lastly, dissemination of findings (Bryman 2016). More specifically, Grix (2002) suggests that there is a “directional, and logical, relationship between the key components of research” (p. 179), meaning that a researcher’s ontological position logically follows an epistemological position, which then logically follows the choices of methodology, methods and sources. For this reason, this section will delve into the philosophical considerations forming the foundation of this thesis.

In terms of ontology, which is concerned with the nature of knowledge or reality, researchers need to choose between two positions, being the *objectivism* or *constructionism* position, respectively, in which the former is an ontological position that: “asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors” (Bryman 2016, 29), whereas the latter is an ontological position that: “asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It implies that social phenomena are not only produced through social interaction but are in a constant state of revision” (Ibid., 29). Rather than assuming an objective and physically described reality as something that is “out there” and external to the individual (Lavery 2003; Cohen et al. 2007), this thesis takes a constructionist position, based on the assumption that human life and the active involvement, practices or interactions between human beings, contribute to constructing, influencing and constantly revising reality (Bryman 2016). Thus, this perspective

supports the “belief in the existence of not just one reality, but of multiple realities that are constructed” (Lavery 2003, 26).

In terms of epistemology, which is concerned with the development of knowledge, researchers need to choose between the two contrasting positions, being *positivism* or *interpretivism* (Grix 2002; Bryman 2016), in which the former: “is an epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond” (Bryman 2016, 24), whereas the latter is an epistemological position that: “is founded upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action” (Ibid., p. 26). Following the constructionist ontological position, this thesis takes an interpretivist position, as it is concerned with the empathetic understanding and interpretation of human behaviour in contrast to the positivist emphasis on the description or explanation of human behaviour (Ibid.). Thus, in order to be able to understand what and how brands and community members communicate in social media brand communities, an interpretivist epistemological position must logically follow a constructionist ontological position, as it is considered the only logical way to get to know about communication in social media brand communities. These assumptions further impact the following stages of research (Grix 2002), in terms of what methods, tools and procedures are considered useful in order to reach the objective of the research.

Based on the above considerations and the constructionist/interpretivist positioning, this thesis more specifically approaches the research from a hermeneutic-phenomenology philosophical perspective, which will be introduced in the following section.

3.1.1 Hermeneutic-Phenomenology

In order to be able to approach the problem statement and research questions of the thesis, insights into communication in social media brand communities is necessary. In gaining these insights, the philosophy of hermeneutic-phenomenology seems to provide an appropriate approach to this thesis (Sloan & Bove 2013), as it resides within a constructionist/interpretivist paradigm of inquiry (Annells 1996). Whereas traditional hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of texts (Bleicher 2018), hermeneutic-phenomenology is concerned with understanding the phenomenon at hand, as experienced, interpreted and expressed by human subjects through communication and language (Bryman 2016; Lavery 2003). Hermeneutic-phenomenology, therefore, is considered particularly

relevant to this thesis, as it provides an approach for examining social media brand communities based on communication between brands and community members.

Historically, the philosophy of phenomenology was developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl around the turn of the twentieth century as a way of challenging the objective, empirical and positivist Cartesian philosophy (Barnacle 2001), where the world or reality is considered something that is “out there” and something completely separate from the individual (Lavery 2003). The early development of phenomenology by Husserl, which is also known as descriptive phenomenology (Connelly 2010), was a way of reaching true meaning through a deeper understanding of the world and reality as lived and experienced by human beings, by clarifying “how objects are experienced and present themselves to human consciousness” (Sloan & Bowe 2013, 1924). In other words, Husserl’s phenomenology is based on an interest in human beings or individuals as conscious beings, and on human actions as meaningful. Thus, it essentially emphasizes the life world or human lived experience (Ibid.). The focus of descriptive phenomenology is to develop a generic description of beings or phenomena as people experience them, meaning that a researcher remains neutral and detached in the investigation of phenomena and meanings of human experiences (Ibid.). This, according to Husserl, is achieved by “bracketing” out one’s outer world, individual biases or “particular beliefs about the phenomena in order to see it clearly” (Lavery 2003, 23).

Influenced by Husserl’s work, Martin Heidegger, also a German philosopher and colleague of Husserl, developed interpretive phenomenology, also known as hermeneutic phenomenology (Connelly 2010). Like descriptive phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology is also concerned with the life world and human experience as it is lived (Lavery 2003, 24), however, it is more complex with its focus on temporality and “being-in-the-world” (Sloan & Bowe 2013, 1296). According to Heidegger, a researcher cannot remove him or herself from the process of identifying and investigating phenomena by remaining neutral and detached, as he or she exists as a “being” in and of the world. The way in which a researcher understands a phenomenon or the world, is thus influenced by and rooted in a person’s own history of existence and situatedness in the world, thus a person’s own experiences, prejudices and pre-understandings (Lavery 2003). Interpretation, Heidegger suggested, is part of being human and therefore, to interpret is seen as critical to the process of understanding (Heidegger 1927/1962; Lavery 2003). The interpretative process is achieved through hermeneutics, being the interpretation of human actions, texts and language, and also, by entering a hermeneutic circle, or hermeneutic spiral (Kvale 1996), in which an interpreter “moves

from the parts of experience, to the whole of experience and back and forth again and again to increase the depth of engagement with and the understanding of texts” (Lavery 2003, 24). In this process, Heidegger suggested, an interpreter moves between the parts and the whole, seeking to discover and understand phenomena through language, while focusing on one’s own situatedness in the world, history, prejudices and pre-understandings.

Influenced by the works of Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology and Heidegger’s interpretive phenomenology, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, extended Heidegger’s ideas and work. Gadamer sought to develop hermeneutic phenomenology by concentrating on how language reveals being or existence, “with the philosophical stance that all understanding is phenomenological and that understanding can only come about through language” (Sloan & Bowe 2013, 1294). In other words, Gadamer saw language, understanding and interpretation as linked and inseparable, as he stated: “Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting” (Gadamer 1998, 389). Interpretation, in Gadamer’s view, is a process which involves the “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 2004a; 2004b), which is “a dialectical interaction between the expectation of the interpreter and the text” (Lavery 2003, 25). In other words, interpretation enables the interpreter, through dialectical interaction, to expand his or her horizon and thus, see beyond what is close at hand (Ibid). Like Heidegger, Gadamer believed that human beings and their understanding of the world are rooted in prejudices, presuppositions and pre-understandings (Gadamer 2004a; 2004b). In contrast to Heidegger, Gadamer believed, that in order to be able to reach new understandings and meanings, one needs to have an open and questioning mind when entering the hermeneutic circle (Regan 2012), while keeping a distance to one’s own subjectivity in the interpretative process. This in turn, opens up possibilities of finding new horizons, understandings and meanings of everyday life experiences through language (Lavery 2003; Regan 2012). In this view, a researcher interprets and communicates the meaning of what others write and say rather than communicating one’s own subjective meaning. This in turn, may reveal unexpected, alien or surprising information, ideas or perspectives to the interpreting researcher in relation to the studied phenomenon at hand (Regan 2012).

3.1.2 Reflections

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as Gadamer conceives of it, has been applied to this thesis, as it focuses on “meaning that arises from the interpretive interaction between historically produced texts and the reader” (Lavery 2003, 28). It thereby enables a researcher to reach new understandings and meanings by interpreting human beings, their actions, lived experiences and meanings in relation to phenomena,

through an open-minded reading and analysis of texts and other meaningful material (Sloan & Bowe 2013; Lavery 2003; Regan 2012) in the particular context being studied. In the application of hermeneutic phenomenology, Sloan and Bowe (2013) argue, that “the requirement is to examine the text to reflect on the content to discover something “telling”, something “meaningful”, something “thematic” (1292). This in turn, allows for rich insights into “the complexity of and/or broadness of people’s experience as they engage with the world around them” (Sloan & Bowe 2013, 1292).

As hermeneutic phenomenology forms the foundation of this thesis, the research is approached with an awareness and recognition that one’s own prejudice and pre-understanding of the world cannot be eliminated. Prejudices and pre-understandings are instead considered necessary starting points or springboards towards better understanding (Gadamer 2004b, 291), as they enable an interpreting researcher to develop research questions, conduct the research, and further develop understanding by challenging what one already knows (Gadamer 2004a; 2004b). In the process of searching for (new) understanding, however, the research of this thesis is approached with an awareness of my own values, bias and subjectivity, and therefore, I intend to ensure and maintain a certain distance to my own subjectivity throughout the research and interpretation of the collected data, in order to avoid a “restrictive interpretation of the text” (Gadamer 2004a, 251). Instead, the research is approached with an open mind with the possibilities of coming up with new findings and understanding (Regan 2012).

3.2 Research Strategy: Qualitative Research

Having introduced the philosophical viewpoints guiding this thesis, this section will account for the chosen research strategy, thus the general orientation to conducting the research (Bryman 2016).

Based on the previous philosophical considerations and the constructionist/interpretivist positioning, this thesis applies a qualitative research strategy, as it considered the most suitable strategy in examining and gaining in-depth and rich insights into communication in social media brand communities between brands and community members. Qualitative research recognizes the “experiential life-world of human beings and description of their experiences in depth” (Sloan & Bowe 2013, 1203) and thus stresses a socially constructed, complex and ever-changing reality of the world (Glesne 1999), by emphasizing words and language. Quantitative research on the other hand “embodies a view of social reality as an external, objective reality” (Bryman 2016, 32), by emphasizing quantification of research insights. Rather than emphasizing objective measurement, quantification and generalization in data collection and analysis, which often is employed in

quantitative research strategy, the qualitative research strategy emphasizes words, interpretation of texts, language and meanings (Sloan & Bowe 2013). This in turn, allows for rich insights and a deeper understanding of the observed phenomenon at hand and its dynamics (Attride-Stirling 2001), through the application of qualitative methods of data collection and treatment. Applied to this thesis, a qualitative research strategy then, allows for a deeper and meaningful understanding of communication in social media brand communities between brands and community members.

3.3 Research Design: Comparative Case Study

Having chosen the qualitative research strategy, this section will account for the chosen research design, thus the framework for collecting and analyzing data (Bryman 2016).

As this thesis seeks to answer research questions regarding differences and/or similarities in the ways in which two brands and their respective community members communicate, the thesis applies a comparative case study design, also referred to as a multiple-case or multi-case study (Yin 2009). Case study research involves a detailed, in-depth and intensive exploration and examination of the complex nature of the particular case(s) at hand (Stake 1995; Bryman 2016). Choosing a comparative or multi-case study design in this thesis then, offers the possibility to generate context-dependent, detailed and rich insights into the same phenomenon at hand by looking into and comparing two cases, in order to be able to find any possible differences and/or similarities. The choice of the two cases are not based on, for example, being extreme or unique cases, but rather, they represent typical or exemplifying cases of social media brand communities, where the objective is to “capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation” (Yin 2009, 48). Also, the choice of a comparative case study design in this thesis is not based on an attempt to generalize findings, but rather, as the cases are chosen to exemplify the broader category of social media brand communities, the cumulation of findings may be used by other brands, which seek to build and maintain social media brand communities, as a “force of example” (Flyvbjerg 2013, 179).

3.3.1 Sampling Cases

Having decided on the comparative case study design, this section will account for the sampling of cases. As this thesis seeks to explore and gain detailed, in-depth and rich understanding of communication in social media brand communities between brands and community members, the selection of brand communities for this research was based on a set of criteria. In order to be

considered suitable to the research, brand communities should be; 1) relevant, 2) active, 3) interactive, 4) substantial, 5) heterogenous and 6) data-rich (Kozinets 2010a, 89).

In the search for cases fulfilling the above-mentioned criteria, two brand communities were identified and found suitable for the purpose of this research, being the official and global brand pages on Facebook of the motorcycle brands BMW Motorrad and Ducati, respectively. Although both BMW and Ducati have built brand pages across multiple social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, Facebook has been chosen as the most suitable social media networking site for research on brand communities, as Facebook is currently the most popular social media platform with over 2.2 billion monthly active users worldwide (Kemp 2019).

In terms of relevance, the BMW Motorrad and Ducati brand communities on Facebook are considered relevant, based on previous research on vehicle related brand communities (Schouten & McAlexander 1995; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn 2001; Algesheimer et al. 2005; Schau et al. 2009; Brown et al. 2003), which have found evidence of strong brand communities and culture (Habibi et al. 2013). Also, the BMW and Ducati brand pages are official and managed by marketers from the respective brands, meaning that they both not only represent the official brand voice of BMW and Ducati, but they also represent the multiple voices of community members. This makes BMW and Ducati Facebook brand pages relevant in terms of being able to examine communication between the respective brand including the different attitudes and perspectives represented by community members.

Furthermore, BMW and Ducati also meet the other criteria as BMW had more than 3 million members (Facebook 2019a) and Ducati had more than 3.5 million members (Facebook 2019b) at the time of this research, reflecting substantial communities. The brands and the community members communicate and interact on a daily basis, meaning that hundreds of posts, comments, discussions threads, shared videos and pictures suggest active, interactive, substantial, heterogenous and data rich brand pages. Below, table 1 presents an overview of the two cases selected for the purpose of this research:

Table 1. Case information

Brand Page Name	Social Media Platform	Page created (year)	Type	Number of members ¹
BMW Motorrad	Facebook	2010	Official/ Global	3,078,911
Ducati	Facebook	2007	Official/ Global	3,570,656

¹ As of May 29, 2019 (Facebook 2019a; 2019b)

3.4 Research Method and Data Collection

Having selected two cases appropriate for the purpose of the research, this section will account for the research method used in the collection of qualitative data.

3.4.1 Netnography

In collecting qualitative data in online brand communities, the research method of netnography has been applied as it seems most appropriate in the way it enables a researcher to collect online content, such as text and documents, through observation of communities online (Kozinets 2002; 2006; 2010b).

Netnography, developed by Robert V. Kozinets (1998), is a qualitative and interpretive research method that: “adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets 2002, 62). According to Kozinets (2006), it provides a useful, flexible, ethically sensitive, unobtrusive and ideal method for studying particularly consumption-related communities, in terms of investigating online consumer behaviour, emotions and reactions towards a particular brand, product or service expressed through real-time and naturally occurring communication. As consumers interact in online brand communities based on shared interests in, for example, motorcycles, netnography enables researchers to gain valuable, in-depth consumer insights and rich descriptions of online communities (Ibid.). These detailed insights into communities and members of such communities may, in turn, contribute to inform and aid businesses and brands on how to communicate, connect and build relationships with consumers in online communities. In gaining such rich understandings, netnography provides a multi-method approach. Initially, netnography strongly emphasized full participation in the online community being studied, supported by online interviews (Kozinets 1998), however, recent research suggests that netnographic study of online communities also may take place without any intervention or participation by the researcher (Bryman 2016).

3.4.1.1 Observation

In this thesis, the Facebook brand pages of BMW and Ducati, respectively, have been examined using primarily a non-participation or “purely observation” approach (Kozinets 2006, 281), also referred to as “lurking” in online communities (Dholakia & Zhang 2004; Kozinets 1998). This approach is unobtrusive in the way it allows researchers to observe or lurk without taking an active part, such as commenting, asking questions, contacting the participants or revealing one’s identity, as such actions

may lead the observed participants to behave or act in any way different than usual (Dholakia & Zhang 2004; Bryman 2016). Thus, observation ensures that participants of online communities are not influenced, intruded or steered by the researchers' own agenda, which in turn, enables the researcher to examine authentic and naturally-occurring behaviour and communication, which reflect "the real thoughts of the informants" (Dholakia & Zhang 2004, 5)

In this thesis, the observation process started by logging into my own Facebook account and clicking "like" on both BMW Motorrad's and Ducati's Facebook pages, respectively, on February 1st, 2019, by which I became a member of both of the brand pages. This, according to Kozinets (2002), marks an "entrée" in the community being studied. The intention was not to participate in the pages by taking an active part, however, it was a way of gaining an understanding of the contextual-setting of both brand pages and ensuring easier access to data². During the period of February 1st to mid-May 2019, the respective brands and community members were thus observed in order to learn as much as possible about what and how the participants, being the respective brands and community members, communicate in the BMW and Ducati brand communities. As suggested by Kozinets (1998), it was a way to "learn the language, the sensitizing concepts, the content matter" (para. 27), which in all, contributed with a rich inside perspective of the respective brand communities.

3.4.2 Data Collection

The process of collecting primary data material started March 1st, 2019 and continued throughout the month, until March 31st, 2019. This period seemed relevant due to the start of the motorcycle season for many motorcycle enthusiasts (Dairyland 2017). In this way, data was collected to reflect rich and recent insights into the BMW and Ducati brand communities, in which data would not only include recent postings and various topics by the respective brands, but also rich, unique and diverse stories of "lived experiences" by community members (Lavery 2003), expressed through naturally-occurring communication and conversation. The data then, according to Kozinets (1998), may be described as "artifacts" of the community being studied (Ibid., para. 10). Although field notes are recommended, it is also possible to conduct a rigorous research "using only observation and downloads and without writing a single fieldnote" (Kozinets 2002, 64). By focusing on one month, the collected dataset was thereby limited, making it possible to handle it in a meaningful way given the resources available.

² Data is also accessible without login

All of the collected data, which consist of a combination of textual and visual content, posted by the respective brands or their community members, were copied into word documents³, except if comments were considered irrelevant to the research. While all brand posts were included, however, comments containing tags, links, emojis, stickers or GIFs (without accompanying text), spam, abbreviations, spelling errors, or repetitions⁴, were not included, as it was difficult to understand the intended meaning and thus not possible to further analyze the data. Also, if comments written in other languages than English were difficult to understand even after translation⁵, these were also not included. All comments by both the respective brands and community members were thus selected purposively (Bryman 2016). This process resulted with the production of a dataset, which includes 58 brand posts, 457 community member comments and 135 brand responses in the case of BMW, and 65 brand posts, 488 community members comments and 6 brand responses in the case of Ducati. Thus, a total of 1209 postings, comprising both brand posts and brand or user comments. Below, table 2 provides an overview of the collected data, which serves as the final dataset for analysis:

Table 2. Overview of collected data

Facebook brand page	Collection period	Number of brand posts	Number of community member comments	Number of brand responses to member comments	Total
BMW Motorrad	March 1 – 31, 2019	58	457	135	650
Ducati	March 1 – 31, 2019	65	488	6	559
Total		123	945	141	1209

According to Kozinets (2006), collecting data from the Internet raises ethical issues and considerations. In this thesis, permission or consent was not required for the purpose of this research, as the data is publicly archived and available on both BMW and Ducati’s Facebook pages and can be accessed without login (e.g. Pace & Livingstone 2005; Bryman 2016). In addition, the identity of the community members has not been omitted in the collected dataset, as the topic is not sensitive in nature and also, the analysis focuses on the meaning of behaviour rather than on the human subjects. In all, the research in this thesis is considered to pose a minimal risk to the individual participants or informants.

³ Available in appendix 3 and 4

⁴ Repetition of a subject matter (e.g. same type of question/topic/response/image)

⁵ Translation by using Facebook’s own translate function

3.5 Data Treatment

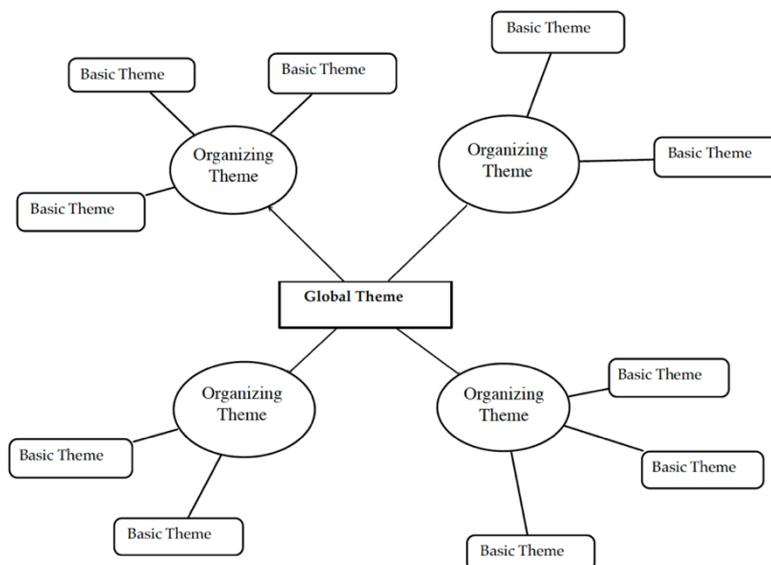
Having specified the method and process of data collection in the preceding section, this section will specify the applied method in treating and analyzing the data.

3.5.1 Thematic Analysis

In order to make sense of the collected qualitative data, it has been treated using qualitative content analysis. More specifically, the data content has been treated by conducting thematic analysis, guided by the analytic tool or technique as set forth by Attride-Stirling (2001).

Drawing on core principles from previous approaches in qualitative analysis, such as grounded theory (e.g. Corbin & Strauss 1990; Glaser & Strauss 1967), frameworks (e.g. Ritchie & Spencer 1994), and other approaches (e.g. Miles & Huberman 1994; Denzin & Lincoln 2008), including principles from argumentation theory (Toulmin 1958), Attride-Stirling (2001) proposes thematic analysis as a practical and effective method for analyzing qualitative data, which is achieved by the use of a detailed set of procedures and steps in the exploration, systematization and presentation of the data material under scrutiny. According to Attride-Stirling (2001), thematic analysis seeks “to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels” (p. 386). She further proposes that thematic analysis can be organized or presented as thematic networks, which are web-like mappings or illustrations that “aim to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes” (p. 386). This web-like illustration of themes, as shown in below figure 8, thus serves to map the relationships between the developed themes from analysis:

Figure 8. Structure of a thematic network (Attride-Stirling 2001, 388).



As illustrated in above web-like figure, themes developed from thematic analysis of data material, may take form in three classes or levels, being; 1) *basic themes* (basic or lowest-order themes derived from data); 2) *organizing themes* (middle-order themes that organize or group basic themes into clusters of similar issues to summarize more abstract principles); and 3) *global themes* (macro or super-ordinate themes that group organizing themes and encompass the principal metaphors in the data as a whole) (Attride-Stirling 2001, 388). In developing the above-mentioned themes, Attride-Stirling (2001) suggests that thematic analysis starts from developing basic themes and works towards grouping basic themes into organizing themes, and lastly, towards grouping organizing themes into global themes, which are “both a summary of the main themes and a revealing interpretation of the texts” (p. 389). This analytic process is, according to Attride-Stirling (2001), more specifically achieved in three broad stages, being; a) reduction or breakdown of text/data; b) exploration of text/data; and c) integration of exploration, which all involve interpretation and a detailed set of steps, guiding the full process of making sense of data (39).

Adapted to the purpose of this research, thematic analysis has been conducted based on the ideas revolving around the steps of; 1) code material, 2) identify themes, 3) construct thematic networks, 4) describe and explore thematic networks, and 5) summarize networks. Thus, not all main and underlying steps as proposed by Attride-Stirling (2001) were applied, but analysis was primarily guided by the stages of breaking down and exploring the data material.

In this thesis, the thematic analysis process has not been achieved manually but electronically (Basit 2013), by using the computer-assisted tool, NVivo. In order to ensure and improve reliability and validity in this qualitative research, the particular steps taken in order to reach findings, have been specified in the following sub-sections.

3.5.1.1 Using NVivo

In this thesis, the process of coding, categorizing and thematization, has been achieved by using the software NVivo version 12, which is a software program suitable for qualitative data analysis in the way it can “expedite coding, content analysis, data linking, data display” (Kozinets 2002, 64). More specifically, the collected dataset, which includes both textual and visual material from the BMW and Ducati page, was uploaded to NVivo, where after analysis and interpretation of the textual and visual data began by assigning codes, referred to as “nodes” in NVivo. The full analytic process of interpretation of data, which will be specified in the following sections, took place in two overall analysis phases, which is illustrated in below table 3:

Table 3. Overview of analytic process in phases

Analysis Phase	Description	Characterization
1	Brand communication	Analysis of posts and comments that have been posted by the brand
2	Community member communication	Analysis of comments that have been posted by the community members

In the first phase, brand communication was analyzed, by looking at each collected post and comment posted by the BMW brand and Ducati brand, respectively, in order to be able to assign codes, group into categories and develop themes. In the second phase, community member communication was analyzed, by looking at each collected comment posted by the BMW community members and Ducati community members, respectively, in order to be able to assign codes, group codes into categories and develop themes. NVivo was used in the analysis of qualitative data in this thesis, as the program is considered a helpful tool in interpreting data through coding and retrieving coded data. Also, it is helpful in the way it allows researchers to keep track of analysis, compare and organize codes, create categories and themes, and depict findings through networks or maps. Using NVivo, however, does not mean that analysis is done automatically by the program, as it still requires a researcher to interpret, code and retrieve data (Bryman 2016).

Step 1: Coding the material

As coding is considered a helpful technique and a central starting point in an analytical process (Attride-Stirling 2001), the analytic process in this thesis started with coding data in NVivo, which was achieved by creating codes or “nodes”, as they are referred to in the program.

According to Saldaña (2015): “a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolic assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (11-12). Thus, a process of coding starts with breaking down data into manageable portions or segments, such as words, text passages, sentences or quotations (Attride-Stirling 2001), and then, applying a code to the particular segment of data material, which summarizes the point.

In this thesis, the coding of data has not been based on a predetermined coding framework, however, due to the open-minded and explorative nature of the research of the thesis, data has been analyzed using open coding, which means that codes has emerged from data and are thus data-driven

(Saldaña 2015). In NVivo, a node is created by giving the node a name (e.g. “MC wear⁶”), a description and a color, making it easier to distinguish between created nodes. In this thesis, the uploaded documents in NVivo, containing the whole dataset of selected BMW and Ducati data, was examined in detail in the previous mentioned two analysis phases; 1) by looking at posts and comments posted by BMW and Ducati, respectively, and 2) by looking at comments posted by the BMW and Ducati community members, respectively. In order to be able to better distinguish between similar types of nodes, nodes related to BMW were provided a “b” in parenthesis, whereas all nodes related to Ducati were provided a “d” in parenthesis. As an example, “MC wear (b)” indicates a node attached to BMW data, whereas “MC wear (d)” indicates a note attached to Ducati data. The process of coding continued until all data was coded and the coded data was saved in NVivo. In order to improve reliability of findings, this process was repeated after a couple of days by returning to a “new” and un-coded dataset. The codes that emerged in the second coding round matched the codes that emerged in the first coding round. ⁷

Step 2: Identifying themes

Having applied all codes, or nodes, in the uploaded dataset in NVivo, the next step involved identification of themes. According to Attride-Stirling (2001), this step implies grouping codes into different clusters or classes of themes, such as basic themes, organizing themes and global themes. Other scholars have also referred to these groupings of codes as categories, sub-categories and concepts (Corbin & Strauss 1990; Basit 2003; Saldaña 2015). In this thesis, the identification of categories and themes have been achieved by retrieving the saved nodes in NVivo, in order to discover types, classes or patterns (Jorgensen 1989), while focusing on the notion of voice as set forth by Belova et al. (2008), which “attunes us to the embodied and experiential aspects of organizational life” (p. 496). Thus, themes were developed to reflect a particular voice in the respective community arenas, while categories were developed to reflect the topic or subject matter that these voices communicate about.

Step 3: Constructing thematic networks

Based on the findings of categories and themes, NVivo was used to arrange, organize and present themes by constructing thematic networks in the function “explore”, which allows one to create mind-

⁶ MC is an abbreviation for Motorcycle

⁷ Appendix 2 includes the NVivo codebook, being the list over developed codes, categories and themes

maps or concept maps. These thematic networks, which in this thesis will represent the developed categories and themes from analysis of 1) brand communication and 2) community member communication, respectively, will be included in the analysis section.

Step 4: Describing and exploring thematic networks

Having constructed thematic networks, the next step involves description and exploration, thus an in-depth interpretation of the developed themes and categories. In the analysis section of this thesis, the presented thematic networks will be supported by detailed descriptions and explanations of the themes and categories found in the analysis of 1) brand communication and 2) community member communication, including specific examples and quotes from the BMW and Ducati brand communities, respectively.

Step 5: Summarizing networks

Having described and explored the networks in full, the last step involves summaries. For each theme and category described and explored in the analysis section, a short summary will follow.

4. Comparative Case Analysis

The analysis section will be divided into three parts, in which the first part includes an introduction and pre-analysis of motorcycle brand communities, including a presentation of the BMW Motorrad (hereafter BMW) and Ducati brand communities on Facebook. The second part will then introduce the overall findings, followed by a presentation and characterization of the specific findings in relation to brand communication and community member communication, respectively. The third and last part will be summing up on findings, by mapping the key voices in the two brand communities.

4.1 Introduction to Motorcycle Brand Communities

An examination of the largest motorcycle brands (besides BMW and Ducati), being Harley Davidson, Yamaha, Honda, Kawasaki, Suzuki, Aprilia, Triumph and KTM, shows that all eight brands have built and actively maintain online brand communities on Facebook today. While all brands publish posts related to their brand, there seem to be a considerable difference in publishing frequency and also, in the amount of interaction between the respective brand and its members. In the brand community of Honda, the brand typically publishes content 8-9 times a month, which generate few likes, but not much, if any, interaction between members. As it appears, Honda's brand community is mostly brand-driven and used as transmission channel of news and information related to the brand and its products. In the brand communities of Yamaha, Triumph, and Aprilia, brand posts are published on a more regular and sometimes daily basis, which generate more likes and also more interaction between members in the form of comments. In the brand communities of Harley-Davidson, Kawasaki, Suzuki and KTM, brand posts are published on a daily basis and generate many likes as well as much interaction, primarily between members. Kawasaki, as the only brand out of the eight mentioned, sometimes also respond member comments. As it appears, the brand communities with much interaction are more member-driven and used as a channel of connection, conversations and relationship building between the members of the communities and the brands. Among all the mentioned brands, Harley-Davidson has the largest brand community with more than 7,000,000 members compared to Aprilia with around 660,000 members (Facebook 2019c; 2019d).

4.2. Presentation of Brand Communities

Having introduced motorcycle brand communities, this section will seek to present the respective brand communities of BMW and Ducati, respectively, in the following sub-sections.

4.2.1 The BMW Brand Community

To this date, the global and official Facebook page of BMW has 3,077,671 members, reflecting a medium-sized brand community, compared to the brand communities mentioned above. On the official page of BMW, the brand actively and daily posts content with news, information and entertainment related to BMW. According to BMW, the page is intended for fans, enthusiasts and riders of BMW motorcycles, who are encouraged by the brand to share their stories, passion and riding experiences including pictures of their motorcycles (Facebook 2019a). This means that the fan page also includes thousands of comments posted by members, as well as responses by the brand. As a brand, BMW was founded in 1916 in Germany and started making motorcycles in 1923. Today, BMW Motorrad, builds motorcycles for every purpose, primarily at its plant in Berlin, Germany, and is well-known by its logo, which incorporates the Bavarian state colors of white and blue and also, its premium quality (Company 2019).

4.2.2 The Ducati Brand Community

To this date, the global and official Facebook page of Ducati has 3,568,546 members, reflecting a medium-sized brand community. The official page of Ducati is also used by the brand to actively and daily post content with news and information related to Ducati, which generates likes but also thousands of comments posted by members, which occasionally are responded to by the brand. On its Facebook page, Ducati states that it produces “racing-inspired motorcycles with unique engine features, innovative designs, advanced engineering and overall technical excellence” (Facebook 2019b). As a brand, Ducati was founded in 1926 in Italy and is well-known by its logo, which incorporates red and white colors, as well as its design and technology. The red color in particular, is a well-known characteristic of Ducati, and is oftentimes used as the paint color on the Ducati motorcycles. Today, Ducati builds a range of “the most highly sophisticated and sought-after bikes” (Facebook 2019b), primarily at its plant in Borgo Panigale, Italy (Ducati 2019b).

4.3 Presentation of Findings

This section will first introduce the overall findings, and then it will continue with a presentation and characterization of the multiple voices that are found communicating and interacting in the BMW and Ducati brand communities.

In the analysis of the collected data, this thesis has identified the presence of 2 themes and 7 categories in the first phase of analysis revolving around brand communication, including 3 themes and 9 categories in the second phase of analysis revolving around community member communication. Below, table 4 illustrates an overview of the overall findings of multivocal communication during March 2019 in the BMW and Ducati brand communities, presented by analysis phase, theme, and category:

Table 4. Overview of findings

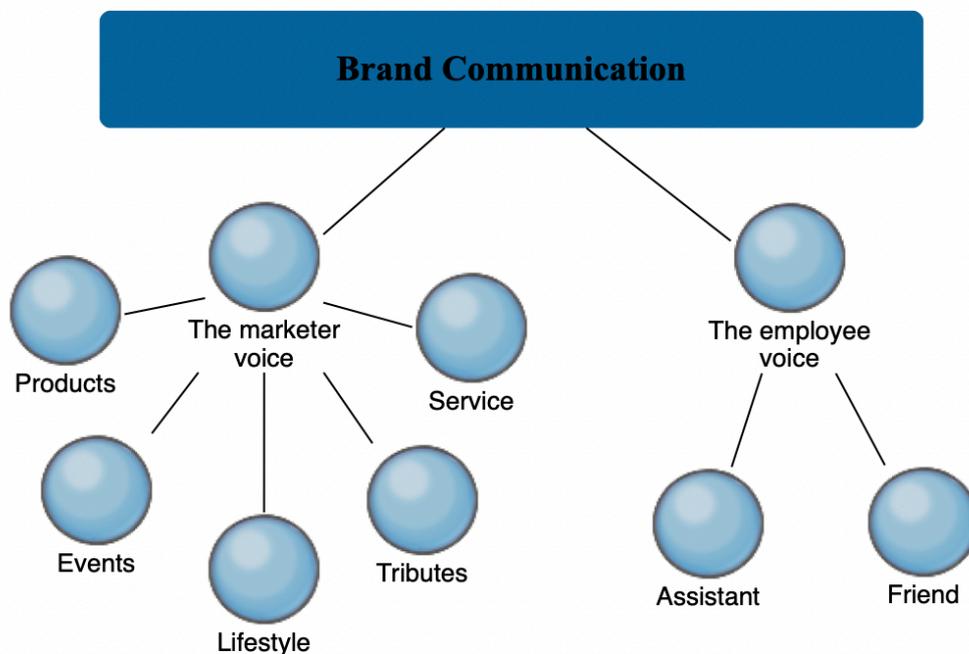
Analysis phase	Theme	Category
1) Brand communication	<i>The marketer voice</i>	<i>Products</i> <i>Lifestyle</i> <i>Events</i> <i>Tributes</i> <i>Service</i>
	<i>The employee voice</i>	<i>Assistant</i> <i>Friend</i>
	<i>The faithful member voice</i>	<i>Current customer</i> <i>Constructive critic</i> <i>Possible prospect</i> <i>Race supporter</i>
2) Community member communication	<i>The hateful member voice</i>	<i>Former customer</i> <i>Oppositional brand customer</i> <i>General brand/product critic</i>
	<i>The neutral member voice</i>	<i>Questioner</i> <i>Information provider</i>

Below, sections 4.3.1. and 4.3.2 will present and characterize the findings in detail, first by looking at how BMW and Ducati communicate and then, by looking at how the BMW and Ducati community members communicate while providing examples from both the BMW and Ducati brand pages.

4.3.1 BMW and Ducati Brand Communication

The analysis of BMW and Ducati brand communication on Facebook has revealed 2 themes and 7 categories, which are mapped in below figure 9. More specifically, both the BMW and the Ducati brand seem to be communicating with a *marketer voice* and an *employee voice* in their brand communities. *The marketer voice* communicates about different subjects related to *products, lifestyle, events, tributes* and *service*, whereas *the employee voice* communicates in different ways by acting as *an assistant* or as *a friend*. Both voices will be presented and characterized further in the following sub-sections, by drawing on specific examples from both the BMW and Ducati brand communities.

Figure 9. Findings of brand communication



4.3.1.1 The Marketer Voice

The marketer voice is reflected in the posts on the BMW and Ducati Facebook walls, published by the brands themselves. In the case of BMW, each brand post reflects a marketer voice that communicates with an informal, open and sometimes humoristic tone of voice, by using idioms, figures of speech or expressions. In the majority of posts, the BMW marketer voice communicates by using personal pronouns, such as “you” and “we”, including short and simple sentence structures. The textual content is always accompanied by high-quality visuals, such as images or videos, illustrating the subject matter. In the case of Ducati, the marketer voice is similarly reflected in each brand post, in which text is also always accompanied by high-quality visuals to illustrate the topic.

The language, tone of voice and sentence structures vary from post to post and are not always clear-cut. Some posts may be characterized by an informal tone of voice, simple sentence structures and occasional use of the personal pronouns “you” and “we”, while other posts lack personal pronouns, include more technical language, and are characterized by long and complex sentence structures, including expressions, that are uncommon, or even incorrect, in the English language. In both cases, the marketer voice of BMW and Ducati primarily communicates about topics or in ways that relate to *products, lifestyle, events, tributes, and service*.

Products

The marketer voice of both BMW and Ducati primarily communicates in ways that are related to products, such as motorcycle wear, motorcycle parts and, in particular, motorcycle models. When taking a closer look at this voice, there is a noticeable difference in the way the two brands communicate about their products.

In the case of BMW, the marketer voice communicates about BMW products, such as its various sports, adventure or touring motorcycle (hereafter MC) models, MC parts (e.g. cross spoke wheels and hand levers), and MC wear (e.g. leather gloves and jackets, waterproof pants and sneakers, helmets and race suits), by using a simple language with limited technical or complex terms. BMW also uses humoristic expressions on numerous occasions, for example, when communicating about tail lights, BMW expresses: “you’ll love it watts and watts”⁸. Also, in reference to a new sports bike engine, BMW states that it will make tech-fans: “go nuts (and bolts). 😊”⁹ In relation to MC wear, BMW uses an uplifting tone of voice, for example, by suggesting that a rider wearing BMW’s clothing products will be able to: “rock a look that will turn heads just as much as your bike!”¹⁰. In addition, in relation to the race suit product, which can be tailor-made with the colors, texts, logos and materials after the rider’s preferences, BMW calls for action by asking: “which colour scheme do you prefer?”¹¹ This not only encourages community members to interact by responding with their colour preference, but more importantly, it suggests that there are no already defined looks, colours or styles when it comes to BMW’s products. Instead, riders are encouraged to be creative and create a look that fits their identity, personality and riding style: “Don’t blend in, stand out! Your style, your

⁸ BMW post no. 11

⁹ BMW post no. 16

¹⁰ BMW post no. 49

¹¹ BMW post no. 17

way (...).¹² In a similar vein, BMW communicates about its different MC models in a way that encourages riders to share their own preferences (e.g. colour), experiences and interpretations of what a motorcycle product is supposed to be or look like: “Don’t fade to conventions, express yourself and your riding through your bike”.¹³ Thus, instead of imposing company-defined brand meanings, the BMW marketer voice communicates in a way that demonstrates BMW as a brand that is flexible, dynamic and open towards user interpretations and co-creation of brand meanings. This comes across in the riders’ abilities to customize MC wear and bike models, by attaching their own creative touch or meaning based on their own tastes, preferences and experiences. In addition, in the majority of posts related to MC models, BMW places a considerable emphasis on the experience and lifestyle of motorcycle riding, rather than focusing on the products or models in question. More specifically, almost every post related to BMW’s bike models are presented in a way that links the shown or mentioned MC model to the overall motorcycling lifestyle, reflecting a user- and community-centric perspective (Fournier & Lee 2009; Andersen & Antorini 2013).

In the case of Ducati, the marketer voice communicates about all of the products, thus MC wear, parts and models, by being more detail-oriented and product-specific. In other words, Ducati places a considerable emphasis on describing the design, the technology and the functionality of its particular products into more detail, by using more technical language. In relation to MC wear, such as waterproof textile jackets, pants and helmets, Ducati communicates about its products by suggesting: “When travelling with the new Multistrada 950, wear the waterproof and breathable Tour C3, with removable thermal lining, and the Ducati Horizon flip-up helmet with sun visor”¹⁴ This not only demonstrates the aforementioned emphasis on describing products into more detail, but also, by using the imperative verb “wear”, Ducati advises or instructs riders to use the products together as defined by Ducati. In another post related to MC wear, Ducati similarly suggests that in a riding situation with changing weather, their waterproof clothing and Ducati Horizon helmet offer better comfort and gives: “you all the versatility you need.”¹⁵ Thus, the way in which Ducati communicates in its product-related posts, suggests that Ducati is distinctly more product-oriented and focuses more on transmitting and enhancing the company-defined and intended brand meaning (Andersen & Antorini 2013), while being less flexible or open towards interpretations and co-creation of brand meanings. This is also revealed in Ducati’s limited effort to directly involve community members,

¹² BMW post no. 17

¹³ BMW post no. 50

¹⁴ Ducati post no. 3

¹⁵ Ducati post no. 14

for example, by actively asking about their preferences, experiences or interpretations in relation to its products. In relation to MC models, the marketer voice most often communicates about new motorcycle models, which are described by using somewhat more technical language about the details or features of the respective MC model: “The new Diavel 1260 S boasts sophisticated components, such as Brembo M50 monobloc calipers for even more powerful braking, and Öhlins adjustable suspension (...)”¹⁶ The emphasis on design, technological innovation and advanced electronics¹⁷ in relation to their MC models, seems to be a re-occurring theme and characteristic of the Ducati brand and identity, in the way Ducati communicates about: “aerodynamic resistance”, “GP16-derived carbon fibre”¹⁸, “ground-breaking design”¹⁹, “latest-generation technology”²⁰, “Testastretta DVT 1262 engine with its 159hp, power launch and quickshift”²¹, “elegant lines of the bike,”²² to mention a few. This suggests, that rather than focusing on the lifestyle of motorcycling, Ducati is more product-oriented in the way it focuses on the motorcycle products or models as defined, designed and intended by the brand itself, reflecting a product- or company-centric perspective (Andersen & Antorini 2013).

While both BMW and Ducati communicate about products, there is a significant difference in their brand management perspective and approach. BMW’s community-centric perspective reveals a dynamic, collective, and user-driven approach to branding, in which the user voices are emphasized and valued as active participants in the construction of brand meanings (Heding 2003; Andersen & Antorini 2013). Ducati’s product-centric and functional perspective, on the other hand, reveals a static, traditional, and company-driven approach, in which the marketing voice is emphasized as the definer of brand meanings (Ibid.).

Lifestyle

The marketer voice, as previously mentioned, also communicates in ways that link the brand and its products to the particular experience or lifestyle of motorcycling

In the case of BMW, the brand oftentimes uses the expression or motto: “Make Life a Ride”²³ in its posts, which contributes to placing emphasis on a shared identity, shared passion or shared

¹⁶ Ducati post no. 40

¹⁷ Ducati post no. 6

¹⁸ Ducati post no. 4

¹⁹ Ducati post no. 62

²⁰ Ducati post no. 58

²¹ Ducati post no. 9

²² Ducati post no. 7

²³ BMW posts no. 9, 13, 14, 19, 20, 23, 47, 52, 53, 54

consciousness of kind (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001) of a motorcycle riding culture or lifestyle in the BMW brand community. According to BMW, the motorcycling lifestyle does not conform to one way, but to different ways of riding, which again, depends on the individual rider’s personality, passion and preferences. This becomes evident when BMW communicates in ways that appeal to the adventure-seeking rider, who has an “insatiable appetite for adventure”²⁴, the cruiser, who: “cruises through the hills (...) away from it all,”²⁵ the track rider, who: “never stops challenging (...) the endless pursuit of excitement”²⁶ or the urban rider, who: “meanders through [the] streets.”²⁷ In this way, BMW illustrates that the shared lifestyle, which may take many different forms, all comes down to a “special bond” between rider and machine, including other riders.²⁸

In the case of Ducati, the brand sometimes uses the expression or motto: “Your Extraordinary Journey”²⁹, which is seemingly supposed to refer to a lifestyle, however, the expression is more often used in order to direct attention towards the functionality of products rather than on emphasizing a style of life. Instead, references to a motorcycling lifestyle comes across in a few other types of posts, for example, in a post, which mentions spring season and is unrelated to products, Ducati encourages riders to: “Enjoy the good season!”³⁰ In another post, Ducati uses expressions such as: “endless excitement” and “the pleasure of a safe ride,” which also seem to refer to a lifestyle, however, attention is instead directed towards the “iconic design” of the respective MC model, in this case, the Monster 821.³¹

While references to the motorcycling lifestyle come across in both brand communities, it is more evident and emphasized in the BMW brand community compared to Ducati’s.

Events

The marketer voice is also reflected in posts that communicate about events, such as adventure-related events, racing events for both professional and private riders, and lastly, training events. Events, according to Engström (2005), represent objects of sociality, thus activities or practices that contribute to connect people.

²⁴ BMW post no. 1

²⁵ BMW post no. 23

²⁶ BMW post no. 33

²⁷ BMW post no. 20

²⁸ BMW post no. 18

²⁹ Ducati post no. 3, 6, 32, 42,

³⁰ Ducati post no. 45

³¹ Ducati post no. 57

In the case of Ducati, the brand seems to highly prioritize events in its posts, in particular two seemingly important racing events, named the Motorcycle Grand Prix World Championship (MotoGP)³² and the World Superbike Championship (WSBK)³³. In relation to MotoGP, Ducati not only continuously provides information about the race and proudly mentions its team of riders, Andrea Dovizioso and Danilo Petrucci, but the brand also seems to emphasize the race as something that truly unites all “Ducatisti”³⁴, being fans and riders of Ducati. This comes across in their use of expressions such as: “a racing experience full of emotions”, “Forza Ducati,” “we are one,” “united” and “the great Duca family.”³⁵ Similarly, in relation to the WSBK race, Ducati also informs and proudly presents its Ducati team of racers, named Aruba.it Racing.

In the case of BMW, the brand also provides information about the race WSBK and their team of riders³⁶, while encouraging fans to: “show some love and support for our boys”³⁷. In addition, BMW also refers to their own adventure-event, the International GS Trophy Adventure³⁸, as well as their own racing event, BMW Motorrad Race Trophy³⁹, intended for private riders and teams.

While both Ducati and BMW communicate about events, it is considerably emphasized in the Ducati brand community compared to BMW’s, suggesting that Ducati primarily uses events to connect its users.

Tributes

The marketer voice also communicates in ways that relate to tributes. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a tribute is defined as: “an act, statement, or gift that is intended to show gratitude, respect, or admiration” (Oxford n.d.). In relation to brand communication, tributes are therefore understood as posts, which are intended to show gratitude, respect or admiration, for example, by mentioning and directing attention towards private users, professionals, or group of riders.

In the case of Ducati, the brand dedicates two posts to two of its professional racing pilots, being their former rider and “legend”, Troy Bayliss, and their current rider and “hero”, Andrea Dovizioso,⁴⁰ in connection with their respective birthdays. This suggests a way of showing gratitude, respect, and

³² Ducati post no. 1, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 56, 63, 65

³³ Ducati post no. 31, 35, 36

³⁴ Ducati post no. 1

³⁵ Ducati post no. 15, 13, 16, 15

³⁶ BMW post no. 25, 27, 29, 30,

³⁷ BMW post no 25

³⁸ BMW post no. 15

³⁹ BMW post no. 42

⁴⁰ Ducati posts no. 64, 49

even pride, of their team of racers. In another post, Ducati also mentions how its new MC model, the Diavel 1260, has won “one of the most prestigious international awards for design,”⁴¹ as a way of showing gratitude to their professional team of designers. In addition, Ducati dedicates posts to fathers as sources “of inspiration”⁴² in connection to Father’s Day, but also to female riders on multiple occasions, for example, in connection with International Women’s Day: “Today we want to celebrate all of you.”⁴³ In posts related to female riders, Ducati encourages them to share images of their Ducati “two-wheeled passion”⁴⁴ and their “best thoughts”⁴⁵ by using the hashtag “DesmoWomen”, meaning “women who choose Ducati” (Ducati 2019a, para. 3).

In the case of BMW, the brand similarly dedicates posts to female riders in connection with International Women’s Day: “Here is to the women who #MakeLifeARide everyday”⁴⁶, however, the brand also places a considerable emphasis on sharing user-generated content (UGC). As an example, BMW shows gratitude of a BMW rider’s UGC, by publishing the users’ image: “@easycancan and her #G310R love the landscapes of her city Kyoto. Who’s proud of their roadster?”⁴⁷ In another post, BMW shares UGC of an Austrian travel blogger couple, who travel around South Africa on their BMW GS bikes, being robust bike models intended for off-road riding, which BMW refers to as “true #spiritofGS style!”⁴⁸ BMW shares UGC multiple times in their posts, as a way of showing gratitude and appreciation of the devoted BMW users, being private users or riders, group of riders and bloggers, among others, who share stories about their own BMW experiences. By sharing brand stories, as experienced by users, BMW takes an active role in enhancing a collective feeling of being in a close network of motorcycle riders, who share the same passion (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001).

While both BMW and Ducati pay tributes to professionals, private users or groups of riders, BMW places considerable emphasis on private users and their generated content, whereas Ducati emphasizes its professional team of racers and designers.

Service

The last way in which the marketer voice communicates is related to service. In relation to brand communication, service implies additional information or advice provided by the respective brands.

⁴¹ Ducati post no. 51

⁴² Ducati post no. 39

⁴³ Ducati post no. 17

⁴⁴ Ducati post no. 43

⁴⁵ Ducati post no. 34

⁴⁶ BMW post no 14

⁴⁷ BMW post no. 9

⁴⁸ BMW post no. 13

In the case of BMW, the brand provides information about a free mobile app, named Rever, which is a GPS-form of app intended not only for BMW riders, but all motorcycle riders regardless of brand, in order to find maps, discover, plan, navigate, track and share routes or rides, while staying connected with a global community of motorcycle riders. BMW provides the information about the app and a direct link to the website where one can create an account, as an additional service to its fans in order to “Make every ride count.”⁴⁹

In the case of Ducati, the brand provides information about two music playlists, named “on the road”⁵⁰ and “style”⁵¹, which are a selection of tracks selected by Ducati as an additional service for its fans to listen to while riding. As an additional service, Ducati also provides information about its Ducati Link mobile app⁵², which is an app created by Ducati itself and intended for Ducati riders. The app enables riders to connect their bike with the app via Bluetooth, in order to discover, record and share their routes and performance, such as speed, lean angle and acceleration, with a community of Ducati riders.

While both BMW and Ducati publish posts related to service, BMW’s provided service is more general to motorcycling, whereas Ducati’s provided service is more brand-specific.

4.3.1.2 Summing up

While both the BMW brand and the Ducati brand seem to be communicating similarly with a *marketer voice* about products, lifestyle, events, tributes and service, there seems to be a noteworthy difference in the way BMW and Ducati make use of this voice, in terms of general tone of voice, language use, user inclusion, and emphasis on lifestyle and customization versus products and racing events. In BMW’s focus on the lifestyle of motorcycling and emphasis on user customization of products and experiences, it appears that BMW takes a community approach to brand management, in which the brand is the central point of social interaction and both BMW and users contribute to create brand value (Heding 2013; Andersen & Antorini 2013). In Ducati’s focus on racing events and particularly on its products’ unique designs, functionalities and technologies, it appears that Ducati takes to a traditional economic or identity approach to brand management, in which brand functionality is central and Ducati acts as the main brand value creator (Ibid).

⁴⁹ BMW post no. 22

⁵⁰ Ducati post no. 26

⁵¹ Ducati post no. 53

⁵² Ducati post no. 42

4.3.1.3 The Employee Voice

The employee voice is reflected in both BMW and Ducati responses to comments, which are posted by community members to a respective BMW or Ducati wall post. The characteristics of this voice is an informal, helpful and friendly tone of voice, including a use of simple language, short sentence structures and most often, emoticons. More specifically, analysis of this voice has revealed that it communicates by acting as an *assistant* or as a *friend*. In acting as an assistant, the employee voice communicates in a helpful manner, by providing information, advising, guiding or answering questions in relation to products, services, claims or complaints. In acting as a friend, the employee voice communicates in a more friendly manner, by providing compliments, words of encouragement or by asking questions as a way of showing interest in the community members' motorcycles and experiences. When taking a closer look at the employee voice, there is a noticeable difference in how much BMW and Ducati make an effort to respond community members' comments. In the case of Ducati, the employee voice is reflected in a total of 6 responses, whereas in the case of BMW, the employee voice is reflected in a total of 197 responses throughout the month of March.

Assistant

In Ducati's occasional use of the employee voice, it acts as an assistant by responding to questions or advising on how to share photos. When a community member asks about the price of a particular MC model, Ducati responds by directing the user to its website: "Hi Abdul, please check on our website👉!"⁵³ In a conversation between two community members related to sharing a picture to a respective brand post, Ducati interrupts by advising the respective user on how to share an image: "Hello Milena! Share with us your photo. Use the hashtag #desmowomen (...)"⁵⁴

In the case of BMW, the assisting employee voice appears on a regular and almost daily basis, sometimes also multiple times a day. When users ask specific questions related to the technology, or the functionality of products, for example, MC wear such as shoes, BMW responds by providing information: "Hi Nic, the shoes are made of leather. 😊 All the best, Jakob from the BMW Motorrad Team"⁵⁵ In relation to customer claims, BMW responds by advising their customers to contact their local dealer or email their complaint, while stating: "Our colleagues will be more than happy to help you! Best regards, Zier."⁵⁶ Also, when users ask for availability of various BMW models in different

⁵³ Ducati post no. 8

⁵⁴ Ducati post no. 17 (Translated from Italian to English using Facebook's translation service)

⁵⁵ BMW post no. 45

⁵⁶ BMW post no. 2

countries, BMW assists by encouraging them to contact their colleagues in the respective markets: “Hi Wilson, please contact our colleagues of BMW Motorrad India directly (...) 😊 All the best, Jakob”⁵⁷

Friend

In the case of Ducati, the brand also occasionally uses the employee voice to act as a friend, by congratulating community members on their anniversaries: “Ka Yan Chiu, congratulations!!!! Let’s continue to share your future anniversary with us 😊”⁵⁸, and on birthdays: “Happy birthday, Dante!”⁵⁹ As it appears, responses by Ducati are limited, kept anonymous, simple and short, with the use of emoticons and hashtags.

In the case of BMW, the brand most often uses the employee voice to act as a friend on an almost daily basis and also, multiple times a day. The friendly employee voice appears when users post their own images, stories or experiences to a respective brand post. When a devoted user posts an image of his F800R model, BMW responds by complimenting and showing interest: “Hello Luc, looks amazing! Did you go for a ride on the weekend? 😊 Cheers, Theo”⁶⁰. As the user responds, “of course Theo (...)”, BMW adds another response: “Sounds great! Keep going 😊 (...)”. This not only demonstrates a friendly tone of voice, but it is also an example of how BMW and members socialize by engaging in an ongoing conversation with each other. The compliments, words of encouragement and interest shown in user stories continues, as BMW expresses or asks: “cool picture! 😊”⁶¹ “awesome landscape”⁶², “That’s the spirit!”⁶³, “Looks so cool! 😊”⁶⁴, “Good selection Sarah!”⁶⁵, “how was your trip?”⁶⁶, “how do you like it so far? 😊”⁶⁷, to mention a few. The friendly employee voice, in other words, participate in the community as if it was merely another member of the community and not the managers of the brand. Also, as it appears, the employee voice of BMW is not anonymous,

⁵⁷ BMW post no. 20

⁵⁸ Ducati post no. 34

⁵⁹ Ducati post no. 39

⁶⁰ BMW post no. 3

⁶¹ BMW post no. 23

⁶² BMW post no. 55

⁶³ BMW post no. 4

⁶⁴ BMW post no. 9

⁶⁵ BMW post no. 14

⁶⁶ BMW post no. 55

⁶⁷ BMW post no. 9

as it oftentimes discloses names (e.g. Irina, Jakob, Theo, Zier, Julia), which contributes to add personality or “a face to the brand,” making the brand appear human and thereby, more approachable.

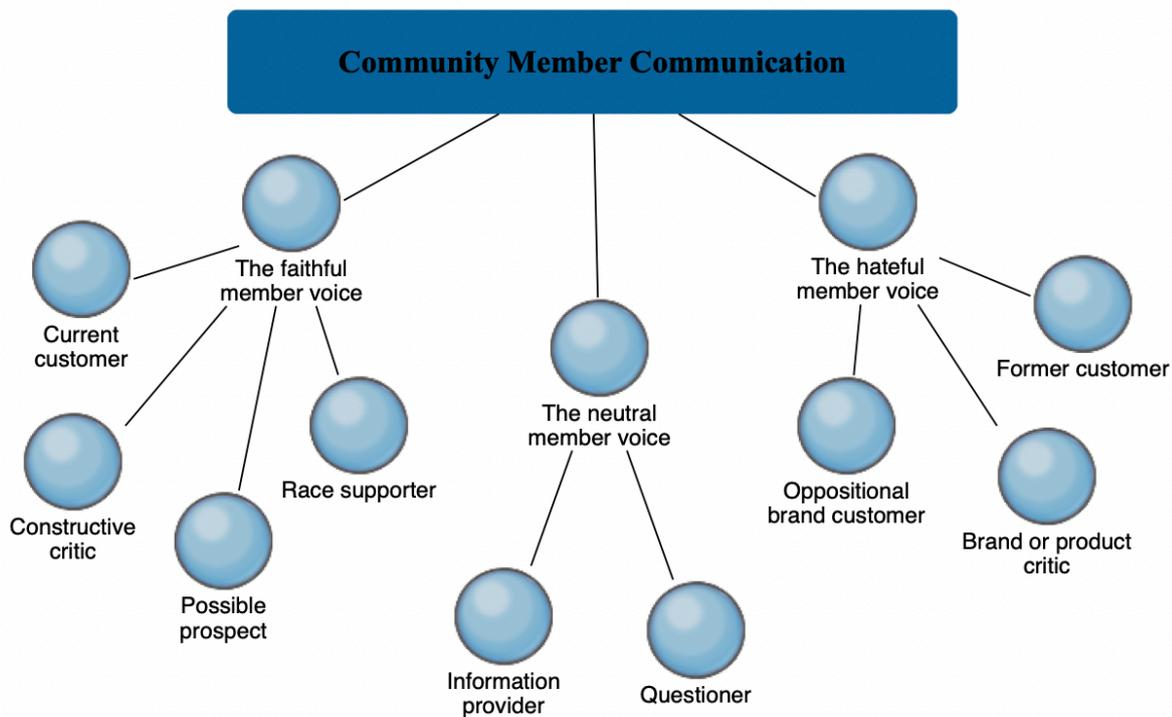
4.3.1.4 Summing up

Although findings reveal that both BMW and Ducati use the employee voice, there is a considerable difference in how much BMW and Ducati make an effort to respond comments. While Ducati uses it occasionally, BMW seems to take an active role in the process of building a community and interpersonal relations through shared consciousness (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). Ducati’s occasional or insignificant use of the employee voice also supports the assumptions that Ducati takes a traditional economic or identity approach to branding (Heding 2013), as it primarily seems to perceive its brand community as a transmission channel, in which it seeks to control and send brand meanings as defined by Ducati. BMW’s considerable use of the employee voice, on the other hand, supports the assumptions that BMW takes a community approach to branding (Ibid.), as it primarily seems to perceive its brand community as a platform for social interaction, conversation and co-creation between the brand and its users.

4.3.2 BMW and Ducati Community Member Communication

The analysis of BMW and Ducati community member communication on Facebook has revealed 3 themes and 9 categories, which are mapped in below figure 10. More specifically, both the BMW and the Ducati community members seem to not only be communicating with a *faithful member voice*, but also with a *hateful member voice*, and lastly, a *neutral member voice*, which are reflected in the comments posted to the examined brand posts. All three voices will be presented and characterized further in the following sub-sections, by drawing on specific examples from the BMW and Ducati brand community.

Figure 10. Findings of community member communication



4.3.2.1 The Faithful Member Voice

The faithful member voice is characterized by a positive tone of voice or positive brand attitude and reflects BMW and Ducati community members who reveal themselves as *current customers*, *constructive critics*, *possible prospects*, or *race supporters*. In short, this group of member voices may also be characterized as the “friends” of the brand or as referred to by Luoma-aho (2010), “faith-holders”. This group of voices also echoes previous findings of brand admirers or enthusiasts in brand community research (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001).

Current customers

In both BMW and Ducati's brand communities, the majority of members communicate in ways that reveal themselves as current customers of the respective brands, which is similar to previous findings (Laroche et al. 2013).

In the case of BMW, a multitude of members express their support, love, admiration and devotion to the BMW brand, for example, by expressing excitement about new or recent purchases, memories of their first ever purchased bikes, dedication to their currently owned bikes, or stories about their experiences, trips or travels on their bikes alone, together with a partner or with a group of riders. In relation to new or recent purchases, for example, members express how they impatiently wait to ride their new bike: "desperately waiting for better weather to ride my brand-new 1250GS 😊," or how their new bike makes them feel happy: "Only had it 4 weeks, grin factor all the way 🤪." ⁶⁸ In relation to their current bikes, members in general use expressions or words such as: "fantastic", "incredible", "proud", "love my bike", "admire", "amazing", "supreme", "awesome bike!", "fun," "iconic German bike!", "beauty," and "passion." ⁶⁹ to mention a few. Also, members will sometimes refer to their bike as "my beloved," "my love," "my babe" or "my partner 😍," ⁷⁰ which reveal close bonds between the riders and their motorcycles. Comments also reveal how members like to share their future planned trips: "I am planning a trip to Norway from Scotland later this year" ⁷¹ or stories about previous riding experiences: "It was an experience of a lifetime. We rode for about an hour in torrential rain (...)." ⁷² For the most part, members are not only posting comments which contain text, but oftentimes comments include visuals, such as images and videos of the members' bikes, riding experiences or adventures. The images most often show their bikes in beautiful locations, for example, in mountain areas, in forests, next to a lake, in front of a city skyline, or close to other scenic landscapes, in countries all over the world, for example, Malaysia, Japan, Norway, Hawaii, USA, Thailand, Italy, Sweden, Iceland and Canada ⁷³, to mention a few. Sometimes, members will also share images of themselves riding on, sitting on or standing next to their bike, and other times, members will show their restored and customized bikes while writing: "my 38 year old darling ;)" or "this is my build" ⁷⁴, which not only shows their passion, but also their own interpretations of brand

⁶⁸ Comments to BMW post no. 3 and 14

⁶⁹ Comments to BMW post no. 3, 9, 18, 23, 28, 32, 35, 50

⁷⁰ Comments to BMW post no. 14, 23, 32

⁷¹ Comment to BMW post no. 44

⁷² Comment to BMW post no. 55

⁷³ Comments to BMW post no. 9, 13, 18, 23, 32, 55, 58

⁷⁴ Comments to BMW post no. 34

meanings. Other members show their dedication by sharing an edited video of their bike, while expressing their loyalty to the brand: “Been riding for about 22 years on literally everything, but since I got hooked on the BMW’s, there’s no other brand for me.”⁷⁵ In a few cases, members will receive reactions, such as likes, or responses to their comments or images by other members. For example, a member responds another member by sharing her recommendations in relation to a particular bike model: “You’ll love it!! Can’t wait to ride mine again!”⁷⁶, while another member asks a question of interest: “Hi! What kind of tank bag is this? It’s great! Greetings!” (38). However, in most cases, members are primarily communicating with the employee voice of BMW. As it appears, members seem to be enjoying or valuing BMW’s participation in the community, as they most often will respond the comments posted by BMW. As an example, one member responds BMW by writing: “BMW Motorrad Jakob!! Good to hear from you! (...)”⁷⁷, which reveals appreciation and a somewhat close or friendly relationship between the member and the brand. In all, BMW members, who are current customers, communicate in ways that contribute to underlining a shared passion, lifestyle and consciousness of kind (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) among fans and admirers of BMW.

In the case of Ducati, members are in similar ways declaring their support, love and dedication to the Ducati brand, by using words and expressions such as: “gorgeous,” “love Ducati,” “amazing pieces of technology,” “excellent,” “fun bike,” “stunning machines,” “passion,” “fantastic,” “comfortable,” “the only one,” or “awesome bike,”⁷⁸ for example, in relation to their new or recent purchases, their current bikes or their experiences. Members will also refer to their bike as “she” or “my passion,”⁷⁹ which reveal riders’ close bond to their bikes. Communication also reveals how current customers act as “learners” in the way they seek help, guidance or advice from other members (Fournier and Avery 2009). For example, a current customer seems to be seeking advice in relation to “upgrading” his current bike rather than trading it for a new one. Another member responds to his comment, by writing: “Jarid, I’d recommend just upgrading the rear stock to Ohlins on your 2011 (...)”⁸⁰ In general, there seems to be a considerable amount of current customers that takes on a “mentor” role, in the way they teach others and share their own experiences (Fournier and Lee 2009), as they respond other members, for example, in relation to bike models, seat or bar height, products and parts. This contributes to ongoing conversations and relationship building among Ducati fans and

⁷⁵ Comment to BMW post no. 35

⁷⁶ Comment to BMW post no. 14

⁷⁷ Comments to BMW post no. 50

⁷⁸ Comments to Ducati posts no. 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 17, 18, 33

⁷⁹ Comments to Ducati posts no. 4, 34

⁸⁰ Comment to Ducati post no. 9

owners and also, it reveals a moral responsibility among members (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Comments also reveal how members like to share stories about their bike purchases, experiences and customizations. For the most part, current Ducati customers proudly share images of their current bikes, while writing: “I LOVE mine” and “It’s a fantastic bike 🍌.”⁸¹ Members also share images of their custom bikes while writing: “I prefer the XDiavel in my custom colors: metallic red, pearl white, and gold accents,”⁸² which indicates that Ducati members also custom build their bikes based on own preferences. By sharing objects of sociality, such as comments, images or videos, members of both the BMW and Ducati brand communities are not only mediating ties between the other members of the community (Engström 2005), but they are also documenting their experiences with the brand, which according to Chau et al. (2009), is a brand value creation practice.

While member communication in both the BMW and Ducati brand communities reveal members who are current customers, the majority of customers in the BMW community primarily interacts with the employee voice of BMW, whereas the majority of customers in the Ducati community primarily interacts with other Ducati members.

Constructive critics

In both BMW and Ducati brand communities, members also communicate in ways that reveal them as constructive critics, thus members who, based on their own experiences or preferences, provide comments that contain specific suggestions, ideas or thoughts in relation to products.

In the case of BMW, a multitude of members express their own preferences or ideas related to products: “All carbon will be perfect!”, “Different color options please!” and “Black/white pinstripes please.”⁸³ In relation to a brand post showing two off-road GS bikes, a member first expresses his enthusiasm about how both bikes are “incredibly well balanced”, where after he adds a suggestion: “I would only make one change – a higher windshield, somehow rain and snow always seem to find me.”⁸⁴ In relation to another brand post showing the color combination black, yellow and grey on a R1250 GS bike, another member shares an image of his bike, with red-marked areas, while writing: “I love this combo. But [these] parts selected, should be black as well.”⁸⁵ In relation to keys, a member comments: “The key is the old generation product, if you can cancel the key, [it] will be better.”⁸⁶

⁸¹ Comments to Ducati posts no. 18,

⁸² Comments to Ducati post no. 28

⁸³ Comments to BMW posts no. 50, 41, 41

⁸⁴ Comment to BMW post no. 40

⁸⁵ Comment to BMW post no. 24

⁸⁶ Comment to BMW post no. 21

These few examples among many, show how members contribute with their own ideas, preferences or suggestions to BMW in relation to its products. For the most part, they are left unanswered, while in a few cases BMW or other members respond by providing information.

In the case of Ducati, there are similarly multiple examples of how members contribute with constructive criticism, as they write comments, such as: “Don’t restrict my riding pleasure with too much technology,” “Cruise control option please,” and “It would be much better with TFT instrumentation (...) and a couple more horses.”⁸⁷ In relation to a brand post showing the new Diavel 1260, which mentions “precise shifting”, a member comments: “I have owned many Ducati’s over the years and still do, and not one of them shifted “precisely”. Ask any Ducati loyalist and they will all complain (...).”⁸⁸ For the most part, members will be responding other members, for example, by agreeing with their criticism or suggestions: “James Downie, yes, I agree”⁸⁹ and sometimes more members will join a conversation, by commenting back and forth, adding their different points of view, experiences or ideas: “I’ve had difficulty finding neutral on my ST4S. Thought it was just me! 😊” and “I’ve not had too much trouble finding neutral”.⁹⁰ These examples are only a few among many that show how members not only contribute with their ideas, experiences or suggestions to Ducati in relation to its products, but also how members engage with each other by sharing their own experiences and thoughts.

As it appears, both the BMW and Ducati brand communities include members who are constructive critics of BMW and Ducati.

Possible prospects

Community member communication has also revealed that both the BMW and Ducati brand communities not only include members who are customers, but also members who are noncustomers of the brand (Ang 2011). Based on their expressed enthusiasm, devotion and support towards the brand, these noncustomers are considered to be possible prospects, thus possible future customers. In the case of BMW, multiple members express how much they like the brand or product: “Dream bike,” “I really like this bike” and “I know I want one!”⁹¹, while other members express how they have already considered purchasing a particular bike model: “I was thinking about buying a 1250RS (...)”,

⁸⁷ Comments to Ducati post no. 6, 18, 18

⁸⁸ Comment to Ducati post no. 37

⁸⁹ Comment to Ducati post no. 27

⁹⁰ Comments to Ducati post no. 37

⁹¹ Comments to BMW post no. 6, 50, 16

“Went to the dealer and checked out the 850 today,” “this will be my next GS,” and “Eagerly waiting for BMW scooters in India 😊”⁹² Above examples show how BMW’s brand community also include possible prospects, based on their expressed enthusiasm about the brand and its products. Similarly, in the case of Ducati, the brand community also includes possible prospects, based on the way in which multiple members express their enthusiasm and purchasing considerations: “Gorgeous 😍”, “I don’t have Ducati, but I love Ducati 😍”, ““One day I’ll own one,” “I want the 1200” and ““I really want one of these (...) must go and test ride super sport S ASAP.”⁹³ These are only a few among many examples of positive members who are fans and admirers of Ducati, although they may not be current customers.

As it appears, both the BMW and Ducati brand communities include members who are considered possible prospects of BMW and Ducati, respectively, based on their positive engagement and support.

Race supporters

Communication has also revealed members who are race supporters in both the BMW and Ducati brand communities. In the case of BMW, which only mentions the WSBK race in its posts, the number of members who express their support to BMW’s racing team of racers is few. Members will, for example, show their support by commenting: “Wishing the team and riders the best of luck! 🙌🏎️” and “Good luck!!! 🙌🙌🙌.”⁹⁴ In the case of Ducati, which mentions both the MotoGP and WSBK races in multiple brand posts, a considerable number of members are expressing their support to the Ducati racing teams prior a race, for example, by venting: “Come on guys!!” or “Go Ducati ❤️🙌🇮🇹.”⁹⁵ As one of Ducati’s pilots, Dovi, seems to have success, members start showing him more support: “Great, great work Dovi!” and “It’s my Dovi🇮🇹.”⁹⁶ While both BMW and Ducati include members supporting racing events, they are most evident in the Ducati brand community, compared to the BMW brand community.

⁹² Comments to BMW post no. 2, 12, 24, 20

⁹³ Comments to Ducati post no. 4, 34, 10, 2, 45

⁹⁴ Comments to BMW post no. 25

⁹⁵ Comments to Ducati post no. 13, 15,

⁹⁶ Comments to Ducati post no. 21, 22

4.3.2.2 The Hateful Member Voice

The hateful member voice is characterized by a negative tone of voice or negative brand attitude and reflects BMW and Ducati members who reveal themselves as *former customers*, *oppositional brand customers*, and *general brand/product critics*. In short, this group of voices may also be characterized as the “enemies” of the brand, also referred to as the “hate-holders” (Luoma-aho 2009).

Former customers

Both the BWM and Ducati brand communities include members who, based on their negative experiences with the brand, threaten with becoming or have already become former customers.

In the case of BMW, there are two examples of members, who express their dissatisfaction with the brand and their desire to look for another brand, based on prices and their negative experiences, such as bad service. In relation to price, a member writes: “[It] has become more expensive [with] €200, so I’m going to look for another brand!”⁹⁷ This example shows, how a member, who has previously been customer of the brand, threaten with becoming owner of another brand, as he finds that BMW has become too expensive. In relation to a safety recall, by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in the United States, of a particular bike due to fuel leak, a member expresses his dissatisfaction with BMW’s lack of service in correcting the fuel leak: “After being a loyal customer buying 3 new BMW motorcycles in a row, I am moving to another brand (...) I would think BMW would be concerned with a NHTSA safety recall that was not properly corrected, but apparently not.”⁹⁸ Thus, based on the member’s negative experience with BMW, he has decided to no longer support the brand.

Similarly, in the case of Ducati, there are two examples of members, who have been Ducati customers, but based on their disappointment with the quality or function of products, they have chosen to become former customers. In relation to a brand post about a new Ducati model, a member sarcastically expresses his dissatisfaction with the paintwork on his bike: “Nice, but no more Ducati for me. Here is my Diavel Titanium...nice paintwork.”⁹⁹ In relation to another brand post about Ducati’s super sport bike, another member expresses how he sold his Ducati bike after 3 weeks: “It simply didn’t have the power I need...I was so disappointed.”¹⁰⁰ In this example, the member

⁹⁷ Comment to BMW post no. 2

⁹⁸ Comment to BMW post no. 2

⁹⁹ Comment to Ducati post no. 5

¹⁰⁰ Comment to Ducati post no. 62

expresses how Ducati's products have failed meeting his need for more power in a bike and for this reason, he is no longer customer of the brand.

Thus, in both cases of BMW and Ducati, members express their dissatisfaction or disappointment with brand's products or service, which has led them to become former customers.

Oppositional brand customers

The hateful member voice is also reflected in member comments, which reveal opposed behaviors towards both BMW and Ducati. In other words, both brand communities include members who are oppositional brand customers, thus members who hold negative and opposing views about BMW and Ducati.

In the case of BMW, comments reveal members who engage in the brand community although they are customers of an oppositional brand, such as KTM, Honda or Kawasaki.¹⁰¹ In relation to a brand post showing the BMW S1000RR, which is a super sport bike, a member comments: "Beat you guys with ZX10R (not even RR) (...) cause it's a Ninja."¹⁰² In this example, a member, who is customer of Kawasaki, a competing brand to BMW, seems to be mocking BMW and its fans by claiming that his Kawasaki is much faster or more powerful. The same negative behaviour is seen when a member asks another member to share an image of his "machine", which is responded by: "Here it is,"¹⁰³ followed by an image of the member's blue Kawasaki. Other members will mention their dedication to the brand Honda, by stating: "Now I got the Honda 230" or "This will be my vacation! Just on a Honda," while sharing an image of the bike.¹⁰⁴

In the case of Ducati, there seem to be a larger group of members, compared to BMW's brand community, who reveal negative and opposing behaviour towards Ducati. These members are expressing their dedication to oppositional brands, such as KTM, BMW, Suzuki, Honda, Aprilia and Yamaha,¹⁰⁵ by writing comments, such as: "Nope. I'll stick to my RSV4 thanks" or: "still prefer my KTM,"¹⁰⁶ revealing their loyalty towards Aprilia and KTM, respectively. Other members exhibit more negative, demeaning and hateful behaviour towards Ducati, for example, by writing: "Ugly thing and no practice...I take my KTM Super Duke R 1290...miles way more beautiful, fast, reliable and corner like [a] beast." Although the negative comment is countered by another member stating:

¹⁰¹ Comments to BMW posts no. 4, 9, 33,51,55

¹⁰² Comment to BMW post no. 33 (Ninja is a bike model, made by Kawasaki)

¹⁰³ Comment to BMW post no. 51

¹⁰⁴ Comments to BMW posts no. 9, 55

¹⁰⁵ Comments to Ducati posts no. 5, 9, 10, 18, 41, 44,51, 54, 62

¹⁰⁶ Comments to Ducati post no. 62, 54

“A comment nobody asked for,” the negative member seem to believe that he is entitled to express his opinion like everyone else, as he responds: “I ask for yours?”¹⁰⁷ In similar types of comments, members seem to agree that their bike from another brand is more powerful or cheaper than Ducati, by writing: “My haysabusa has 197 hp from the factory” or: “Just don’t fall off it, you’ll have to sell the house by the bits. I race a K4 GXR, [which is] as fast & a lot cheaper to fix.”¹⁰⁸ In both examples, members express their loyalty towards Suzuki, which also turns out to be countered by Ducati fans, as they write: “Comparing a busa to a cruiser? 🤔” or: “But it’s not a Ducati 🤔”,¹⁰⁹ revealing how Ducati devotees get involved by defending Ducati or questioning the legitimacy of the negative and opposing brand members in the Ducati brand community.

As it appears, both the BMW and Ducati brand communities include members who are oppositional brand customers.

General brand or product critics

The negative member comments also reveal general brand or product critics. In other words, both BMW’s and Ducati’s brand communities include members who are general negative critics of BMW and Ducati or their products.

In the case of BMW, members express their critique of BMW and its products, by writing comments, such as: “extremely boring, [such a] disappointing color range,” “[BMW] are very late in innovation!!! Their engineers and design group are useless!!!” or “I’ve got this helmet and I’ve got problems with it! Not happy! Worse helmet I ever bought and very expensive!”¹¹⁰ These examples reveal negative or hateful attitudes towards BMW and its products. Similarly, in the case of Ducati, members express their critique of Ducati and its products, by writing comments such as: ““I am tired of [spending] \$400 dollars in parts every two years to fix your bad design. You are charging me over an over for your failure,” “Ugly, heavy, slow, not good in corners, not beautiful,” or “If something is bad, do not expect Ducati to help you.”¹¹¹ Despite the negativity, dislike or hate expressed, other members, sometimes other members step in and try to convince the negative member otherwise, for example, by providing suggestions of another bike model: “Jerry, take a look at the Monster 1200s (...) It can do it all.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Comment to Ducati post no. 51

¹⁰⁸ Comments to Ducati posts no.

¹⁰⁹ Comments to Ducati post no. 9, 10

¹¹⁰ Comments to BMW posts no. 2, 3, 43

¹¹¹ Comments to Ducati posts no. 37, 50, 51

¹¹² Comment to Ducati post no. 62

As it appears, both the BMW and Ducati brand communities include members who are generally negative towards the BMW and Ducati brands and their products.

4.3.2.3 The Neutral Member Voice

The neutral voice is characterized by a neutral tone of voice or neutral brand attitude and reflects BMW and Ducati members who do not clearly reveal themselves as either “friends” or “enemies” of the brand, but instead, these members are rather neutral in the way they engage in the communities by asking questions or providing information.

Questioners

Both the BMW and Ducati brand communities include “questioners”, being members who ask questions but who do not clearly indicate whether they are fans or haters of the brand.

In the case of BMW, members are asking questions such as: “where was that trail?” or “which bike?”¹¹³. In addition, in relation to a BMW brand post showing a Russian professional rider on a frozen lake, members tag other members, while asking questions such as: “Benny are we going to do this too? 🥰🥰” or “what does it look like, Bjarne Wi and Benny Anders, off to the cold?”¹¹⁴, indicating inclusion of other members, but no brand affiliation. Lastly, members will sometimes also ask product related questions, such as: “Are they made of animal skins?” and price-related questions, such as: “How much [does] it cost?”¹¹⁵ Similarly, in the case of Ducati, members are also asking questions, for example, in relation to products: “What manufacturer makes the helmet please?” and in relation to the prices of products: “What [is] the price?”¹¹⁶. While product- and price-related questions in both cases of BMW and Ducati may hint an interest in the respective product and brand, there are no following comments to sustain that indication and as such, these types of questions may as well be asked simply based on curiosity or comparison with similar brand products on the market. Thus, depending on the answer they may receive, members may either chose the respective brand or end up choosing another brand product. As it appears, both BMW and Ducati community members ask questions, which neither indicate a clear dedication to nor a strong dislike of BMW or Ducati, respectively.

¹¹³ Comments to BMW post no. 12, 53

¹¹⁴ Comments to BMW post no. 54

¹¹⁵ Comments to BMW post no. 32, 45

¹¹⁶ Comments to Ducati post no. 3, 80

Information providers

Lastly, both BMW and Ducati brand communities include “information providers”, being members who either replies, for example, some of the abovementioned questions with information or merely provide information as a response to a BMW or Ducati brand post. In either case, information providers do not indicate a clear dedication to or dislike of the BMW or Ducati brands.

In the case of BMW, members provide information, such as: “I read somewhere that approx. 53 % pilots are motorcyclists” in relation to a brand post showing an airplane and a motorcycle. In relation to another brand post showing a video of a group of Norwegian riders on adventure, another member informs: “if you fancy that sort of stuff: Go visit Thethi national park in Albania (...).”¹¹⁷ Similarly, in the case of Ducati, members also provide information, for example, by responding other members’ product related questions: “X-Lite X-1004, by Nolan Group” or: “Yes, there [are] other options for a higher seat as well.”¹¹⁸ In relation to a brand post regarding the start of the riding season, members also inform: “All year round in Thailand 🇹🇭 😊” or “Not yet in Canada 🇨🇦, but close.”¹¹⁹

As it appears, both BMW and Ducati community members provide information, which neither indicate a clear dedication to nor a strong dislike of BMW or Ducati, respectively.

4.3.2.4 Summing up

The examination of BMW and Ducati community member communication has revealed three key voices, being a *faithful member voice*, revealing current customers, constructive critics, possible prospects and race supporters; a *hateful member voice*, revealing former customers, oppositional brand customers and general product/brand critics; and lastly, a *neutral member voice*, revealing questioners and information providers. Thus, regardless of the brands’ communication efforts, members still communicate, construct and co-create brand meanings, as well as criticize and ask questions. There is a difference, however, in the way that BMW members oftentimes interact with BMW and sometimes other members, whereas Ducati members primarily interact with other Ducati members. Positive Ducati member voices also reveal how they take active roles in building shared consciousness and moral responsibility (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001), particularly when feeling attacked or threatened by negative ones.

¹¹⁷ Comments to BMW post no. 35, 44

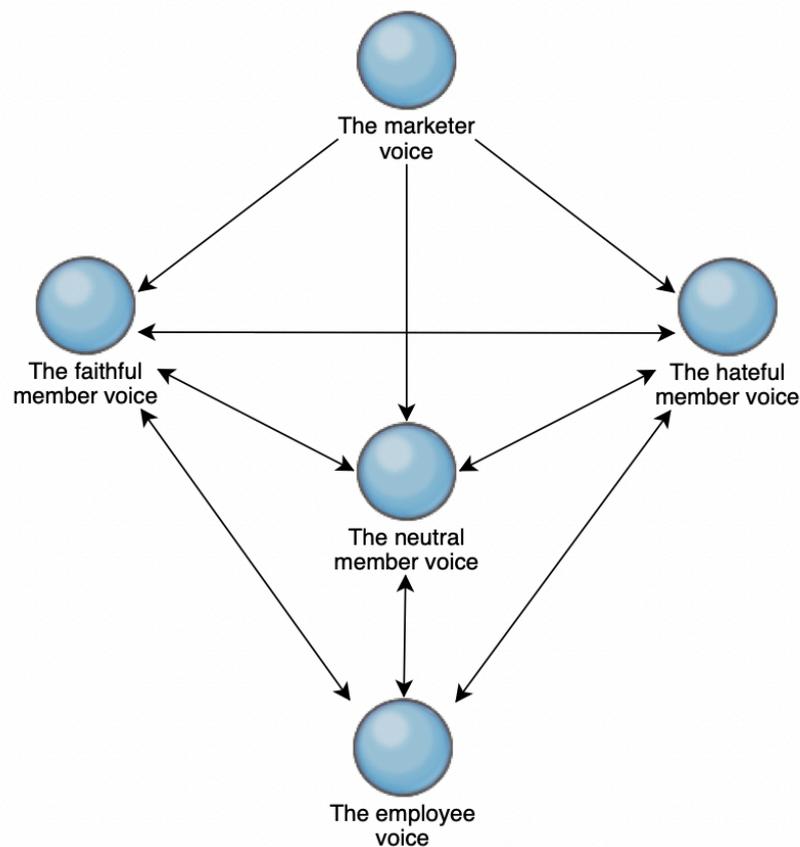
¹¹⁸ Comment to Ducati post no. 14, 18

¹¹⁹ Comments to Ducati post no. 45

4.3.3 Summing up on findings

Communication in each of the two brand communities of BMW and Ducati, has revealed five key voices, being the marketer voice, the employee voice and the faithful member voice, the hateful member voice and lastly, the neutral member voice, who communicate with each other, reflecting complex webs of relationships between the various community members and brand elements (i.e. marketer, product and brand) (McAlexander et al. 2002), as mapped in below figure 11:

Figure 11. Key voices in the brand communities of BMW and Ducati



As illustrated in above figure, the marketer voice, used in both BMW's and Ducati's brand communities, communicates in a one-way direction to the community members, who are positive, negative and neutral members, whereas the employee voice is used considerably by BMW and occasionally by Ducati to interact with members. Despite the similarities in using the two brand voices, findings seem to reveal two different ways of managing brand communities, based on the respective brand's perspective and approach to brand management and brand identity. In BMW's case, where the brand seems to hold a community-centric perspective and takes a dynamic, collective

and user-driven approach, also characterized as a community approach (Heding 2013), the brand community is used as a platform for interaction, conversation and co-creation of brand meanings and brand value between the brand and its users. In Ducati's case, where the brand seems to hold a product-centric and functional perspective and takes a static, traditional and company-driven approach, also characterized as a traditional economic or identity approach (Heding 2013), the brand community is primarily used as a transmission channel, in which marketing-defined brand meanings are sent from the brand to its users.

The above figure also illustrates that both the BMW and Ducati brand communities not only include positive members, who are admirers of the respective brand, neutral members, who are asking and answering questions, but also negative members, who hold a hateful and opposing view of the respective brand. All three member voices not only receive content from the marketer voice, but they also actively interact to a high extent with other positive, negative and neutral members, considerably with the BMW employee voice and occasionally with the Ducati employee voice. Thus, regardless of BMW and Ducati's communicative efforts, positive, negative and neutral members communicate and interact with each other, by criticizing, constructing and co-creating brand meanings.

5. Discussion

The five key voices identified in this thesis, demonstrate how brand communities in social media brand communities are multivocal. Based on these findings, this section will seek to discuss theoretical implications, managerial implications and lastly, limitations and future research.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The research presented in this thesis is relevant from a theoretical point of view, as it offers implications for the field of social media brand communities (Habibi et al. 2014) including community management (Ang 2011; Quinton 2013), by empirically illustrating the existence of different types of brand voices including different types of community member voices. In terms of the different brand voices, this thesis contributes to research by demonstrating how brands may not only communicate with a marketer voice, but also with an employee voice, which may engage in dialogue with members by playing different roles (Fournier & Lee 2009), for example, by acting as an assistant or as a friend, allowing members to connect and build relations with different brand elements (i.e. the brand, the product, the marketer) (McAlexander et al. 2002). In terms of the different member voices, this thesis contributes to research by demonstrating how brand communities may not only include customers, fans or admirers of the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001), but also prospects (Ang 2011), negative or hateful critics and neutral members (Luamo-aho 2009; 2015). Since the new form of brand communities are established in social media, where everyone has access to communicate, share content and express their opinions, the findings thus offer implications for combining two separate research streams of social media and brand communities (Zaglia 2013).

5.2 Managerial implications

The research presented in this thesis is also relevant from a practical point of view, as it offers implications for how social media brand communities may be managed by businesses and brands.

Following Ind et al. 2013, conversations between brands and members in brand communities are key. In order for brands to build relationships, create value and build strong brand communities (Fournier & Lee 2009), it requires that brands actively participate and engage with its users. Traditional brand management and brand identity approaches, in other words, are ill-suited in these communities, as they reflect an urge to control brand meanings and identity in an environment that is social, interactive and collective. Drawing on the empirical study of BMW and Ducati, there is a significant difference in the way the two brands manage their communities. While BMW seem to

conform to an open and participative brand community practice with its dynamic and user-driven approach, Ducati, on the other hand, signals a need or desire to control communication and brand meanings in their community with their traditional and company-centric approach. This could not only be problematic in the event that positive members voices are feeling unheard or unappreciated for their contributions or involvement (Ind et al. 2013), but also in the event that negative member voices, such as former customers and general brand critics, are feeling ignored (Luoma-aho 2009). Thus, the new form of brand communities in social media requires businesses and brands to rethink their communication, by broadening their perspective, engaging in dialogue processes and remembering that users are “actually people, with many different needs, interests, and responsibilities” (Fournier & Lee 2009, 106). In terms of positive voices, brands should seek to support, acknowledge and address these, as it may contribute to make them feel heard and appreciated. In terms of neutral voices, brands should seek to, for example, respond product-related questions, as it may influence their perceptions of or commitment to the brand. Lastly, in terms of negative voices, brands should not ignore these, but instead, they should seek to embrace criticism or address potential issues, as it may contribute to change their perceptions of the brand or prevent a potential crisis. In short, businesses or brands should not be intimidated by the existence of multiple voices, however, they should learn to embrace, embody and understand these on their own terms in order to be able to build strong brand communities (Fournier & Lee 2009).

5.3 Limitations and future research

The research reported in this thesis has several limitations that should be recognized. First, the thesis only investigated two brand communities in Facebook related to vehicle categories. Although consumers or users in this product category are highly involved (Zhou et al. 2012), future research could include other product categories (i.e. with lower involvement). Second, the thesis only investigated communication in social media brand communities in a short-term period, however, it could be interesting for future research to observe communication over a long-term empirical study, in order to find variations over time. Third, the thesis investigated two rather large social media brand communities in Facebook with over three million members, however, future research could investigate smaller brand communities as well as compare brand communities across other social media platforms such as Instagram, in order to find variations. In short, these and other limitations of this thesis, calls for more expansive future research on brand communities based in social media.

6. Conclusion

Social media has become an everyday reality and significant part of international business organizations' communication in today's digital age and for this reason, businesses or brands such as BMW and Ducati, seek to build and maintain brand communities based in social media.

The findings of this thesis not only show how the two vehicle brands, BMW and Ducati, including their community members, communicate with multiple voices, but also different ways of managing brand communities. In terms of the brands, the findings show that although both BMW and Ducati use a marketer voice to post content related to, for example, products, and an employee voice to respond members' comments, there is a significant difference in their brand management perspective, approach and effort to get involved. In BMW's case, the brand seems to hold a community-centric perspective as it takes a dynamic, collective and user-driven approach to brand management, also characterized as a community approach (Heding 2013), whereas in Ducati's case, the brand seems to hold a product- or company-centric perspective as it takes a static, traditional and company-driven approach to brand management, also characterized as a traditional economic or identity approach (Heding 2013). This, including BMW's significant and Ducati's insignificant effort to respond member comments, reveals that BMW's brand community is used as a platform for interaction, conversation and co-creation of brand meanings between the brand and users, whereas Ducati's brand community is primarily used as a transmission channel, in which marketing-defined brand meanings are sent from the brand to its users.

In terms of the members, the findings also show that both the BMW and Ducati brand communities not only include faithful member voices, being fans or admirers of the respective brand, but also neutral member voices asking and answering questions, as well as hateful member voices, which hold negative and opposing views of the brand. The faithful member voices communicate about their positive experiences with the brand, for example by sharing images of their own motorcycles, whereas the hateful member voices communicate about their negative experiences with the brand, for example, by expressing their disappointment in brand products or service. Thus, regardless of BMW's and Ducati's communicative efforts, the positive, negative and neutral members actively communicate, criticize, construct and co-create brand meanings.

In today's social media age, businesses and brands seeking to build and maintain strong brand communities in social media, should not attempt to control these by transmitting company-defined brand meanings, but rather, they should perceive brand communities as open, dynamic and social arenas for conversation and co-creation. By engaging with a multitude of different user voices, brands

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are able to address criticism or potential issues, change members' perceptions of the brand, and lastly, show appreciation of positive members' involvement, by engaging with them in the construction and co-creation of brand meanings and value. This in turn, will have positive effects on communal feeling and commitment and contribute to increase brand trust and brand loyalty.

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