Customer engagement in online brand communities: a cross-cultural study

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Siyuan Yang

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - The purpose of this comparative study is to explore how personal values embedded in cultural backgrounds in China and the UK influence customer engagement in an online brand community context from cognitive, affective, and behavioural perspectives.

Design - This thesis adopts netnographic approaches that comprise two phases of data collection. The first phase uses non-participatory observation to collect 5,689 textual posts from the Keep (China) and 4,875 textual posts from the MyFitnessPal (UK) online brand-hosted communities. Based on the first phase of observation, forty users from both communities are selected for the second phase laddering interviews.

Findings - Through observations, similar practices are identified in both communities with respect to cognitive engagement in the manifestations of attention and absorption, while distinct differences are found with respect to affective and behavioural engagement in the selected communities. Through laddering interviews, four themes, namely sharing, socialising, helping others, and self-advancement, are summarised to demonstrate the complexity of online brand community engagement from multiple CE dimensions namely cognitive, affective, and behavioural. Within each theme, comparisons are made between Chinese and UK respondents regarding multiple attributes, consequences, and values identified to account for how personal values influence individuals' engagement performance in.

Practical implications – This thesis offers valuable insights to international marketing professionals regarding the engagement of individuals from both collective and individualistic cultural background within an online brand community context. Armed with this knowledge, managers from multinational corporations can effectively design and customise an online brand community to suit the specific needs and preferences of these two distinct cultures.

Originality - By adopting a means-end approach, this study identifies the underlying values driving customers' engagement from a micro perspective, thus enriching existing frameworks of customer engagement in a cross-cultural context.

Declaration

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

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ABBREVIATION OF TERMS

CE - Customer engagement

KOC – Key opinion consumer

KOL – Key opinion leader

OBC - Online brand community

OBCE - Online brand community engagement

SCT - Social capital theory

SDL – Service-dominant logic

SET - Social exchange theory

SDL - Self-determination theory

SIT - Social identity theory

U&GT – Use and gratifications theory

1.Introduction

1.1 Research background and rationale

The influence of brands in shaping customer identities has led to the perception of brands as living entities (Sihvonen, 2019). They are expressions of individual values (Chahal and Rani, 2017; Round and Roper, 2017) and personal needs (Mogaji and Danbury, 2017; Thomas, White and Samuel, 2021). Recently, customers have been demanding more value from brands than just the sale of a product or service, reflecting a change from transactional towards the more relationship-based marketing that has occurred in the past twenty years (Islam *et al.*, 2019; Rosenbaum, Seger-Guttmann and Giraldo, 2017). Driven by the quick growth of digital environments and a desire to forge personal connections with customers, brands are increasingly attempting to interact with people on digital platforms (Kumar and Gupta, 2016; Lamberton and Stephen, 2016).

In the marketing field, the concept of "customer engagement" (CE), which is especially relevant in relationship marketing, plays a fundamental role for companies in the development of favourable relationships with target audiences, (Islam and Rahman, 2017; Kumar and Pansari, 2016a; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014). Under the lens of service dominant logic (SDL) (Vargo and Lusch, 2016) and relationship marketing, CE has been studied as a vital approach to fulfil value co-creation purpose and discussed as a strategic imperative in driving sales growth (Lee, Kim and Kim, 2011; Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019), enhancement of post-purchase service quality (Malthouse *et al.*, 2013), and consolidation of customer loyalty (Lim *et al.*, 2022; Kumar, 2020; Helme-Guizon and Magnoni, 2019; Hollebeek, 2011b). Therefore, to help marketing professionals determine the most efficient methods for creating long-lasting relationship with customers, the Marketing Science Institution (Msi) (2020) has included CE in their priority research list for the years 2020 to 2022, and considerable attention has been placed from both practitioners and academics in the past decade (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Bijmolt *et al.*, 2010; Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021; Harmeling *et al.*, 2017; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018; Islam *et al.*, 2019; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019).

Reflecting the interactive nature of brand-customer relationship, CE is conceptualised as a multifaceted construct, composed of cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions in previous studies (i.e. Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014; Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019). Leading marketing journals including the

Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (i.e. De Oliveira Santini *et al.*, 2020), Journal of Interactive Marketing (i.e. Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018), European Journal of Marketing (i.e. Naumann, Bowden and Gabbott, 2020), and Journal of Business Research (i.e. Taylor *et al.*, 2023) have published articles on CE-related topics throughout the last five years. These topics involve insights into CE antecedents and consequences (Chan *et al.*, 2014; Islam *et al.*, 2019; Pansari and Kumar, 2017), measurement of CE (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2016; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014), effects of CE on companies' performance (Kumar and Pansari, 2016a), and specific CE practices (Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018; Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould, 2009; Hollebeek, Juric and Tang, 2017). Since CE is highly complex (Hollebeek, 2011b), it is important to take the research context into consideration to generate a more concise understanding. Information and communication technologies, which have flourished alongside the emergence of Web 2.0 (e.g. forums, chats, recommendation systems, social networks, online brand communities) have served as valuable engagement platforms, which facilitate customer-oriented interactions (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001; Breidbach, Brodie and Hollebeek, 2014; Carlson *et al.*, 2018). Online brand community (OBC) is, thus, identified as an important avenue for researchers to uncover the dynamics of CE (Islam, Rahman and Hollebeek, 2018).

As of 2022, the global internet user base has reached 5.3 billion, a notable increase from the previous year's 4.9 billion, encompassing around 66% of the global population (Statista, 2022). The widespread adoption of social media has now become an essential part of people's daily lives worldwide. The digital marketing ecosystem offers individuals a platform where they can experience change and feel empowered. Through digital marketing, consumers can access a wealth of information about diverse populations worldwide, connecting with those who share similar ideas or come from different backgrounds. This ability to engage with multiple cultures and societies through online forums, support groups, information sources, and electronic word-of-mouth can promote greater intersectionality, diversity, and inclusiveness in society. Furthermore, the availability of information empowers individuals to make data-driven decisions using high-quality data. Digital technologies also grant consumers the role of agents in the marketplace, enabling them to navigate and shape their own experiences.

Unlike the traditional one-way communication, digital platforms have drastically altered consumer behaviour in virtual setting (Gensler *et al.*, 2013). Referred to as social aggregation occurs on the Internet when a substantial number of individuals engage in ongoing public discussions, fostering personal connections and building webs of relationships in the virtual

realm (Rheingold, 2000), the online brand community (OBC) inherits the basic features as well as functionalities of brand community (BC), providing brand managers with useful perceptions into lived experiences and tacit needs. Specifically, the OBC enables host companies to gain access to customers' information and preferences, which in turn improves the company's offerings. It is believed that businesses with effective OBCs have a considerable advantage over competitors because they have a clear understanding of who their customers are and what they want (Thompson and Sinha, 2008). According to the Global Web Index (2020), in 2020, 76% of internet users participated in an online community and 64% of people who visited online community websites said they did so more frequently than they had in the last several years.

In addition, the OBC offers a platform for people to look for symbolic relationships with peers who share similar interest and beliefs (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Muniz and O'guinn, 2001) and further facilitate real-time interactions. These interactions explicitly lead to a psychological connection between consumers and brands, which add a competitive advantage for the organisation. A central concept to discuss regarding OBCs is the term CE, which demonstrates an interactive relationship between community members and the brand. In line with the S-D logic propositions (Lusch and Vargo, 2006), individuals are acknowledged to be operant resource (i.e. knowledge and skills) contributors in the service context and share knowledge that serves both themselves and their peers. Furthermore, the OBC also provides an additional communication channel that a business can employ to communicate with its most ardent customer. Extant OBC studies have emphasised the advantages for businesses using virtual communities such as the capacity to involve their customers in different co-creation activities (Claffey and Brady, 2017) or to develop customer-brand connections beyond exchange (Yang *et al.*, 2016). These findings have significantly described OBC as a sufficient research context accounting for CE mechanics.

Even though more businesses are hosting online brand communities to engage their customers in value co-creation, many still hold a firm-centric perspective and lack a customer-centric online presence strategy. This scarcity is also reflected in earlier OBC studies. For instance, in Nambisan and Baron (2007) research, they found that even when community members take up service performed by the host company on a regular basis, it is not common for them to receive direct responses from the firm such as encouragement, rewards or support. Additionally, a number of brands struggle with their firm-hosted deployments as a result of false assumptions,

such as the idea that a peer-to-peer network does not need administration or moderation (Claffey and Brady, 2017; Sibai *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, it is valuable to design research that specialises in understanding OBC from a customer point of view, which also engenders appropriate practices to provide best support and advice on value co-creation. More importantly, even though contemporary global consumers frequently use online opinion platforms to share information about their interactions with people located anywhere in the world, it is still worthy to explore the underlying motivations driving their online brand community engagement (OBCE) decisions from a micro perspective. As highlighted by Messner (2020), culture is critical in influencing customer engagement and its subsequent connections to recommendation intentions. As one of the earliest definitions proposed, culture refers to the intricate construct that encompasses knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, customs, and all other skills and behaviours acquired by an individual as a member of society (Mccort and Malhotra, 1993). Despite numerous multinational corporations making concerted efforts to assimilate into local markets by recruiting indigenous employees, the inherent variability in political and economic landscapes across countries leads to distinct consumer preferences in choosing specific platforms for social engagement. Consequently, it is imperative to identify two distinct online brand communities that exhibit analogous functionalities but cater to diverse markets, which facilitates a comprehensive understanding of individuals' motivations when participating in online brand communities in a cross-cultural background.

While existing OBC studies have identified antecedents and consequences of CE in developed market (such as U.S, Germany, Spain, UK, and Finland), few comparison studies exist in the emerging markets (such as China, India, Middle East, and Africa), that address a gap for future research (Kumar *et al.*, 2019). To address this research gap, a comparative study has been designed in this thesis focusing on the markets of China and the UK. According to Statista (2023a), China is a major player in global internet usage, with approximately one-fifth of the world's internet users. In December 2022, the country's internet population grew by 35 million individuals compared to the previous year, which makes China an ideal setting for studying consumer online behaviour from a cross-cultural perspective. Furthermore, the UK, with its contrasting cultural position to China, also has a significant number of internet users, with approximately 61.67 million in early 2022 (Statista, 2023b).

In prior cross-cultural studies, cultural value has been discussed to ultimately affect an individual's values, motivations, dependency on brands (Mccort and Malhotra, 1993), how

they perceive services (Agarwal, Malhotra and Bolton, 2010), and how they evaluate services. Homer and Kahle (1988) discussed values based on cultural orientation as a powerful determinant of attitudes and behaviours, whilst Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) proposed values as key guiding principles in one's life. To systematically understand cultural values, several profound frameworks accounting for consumer behaviour diversities in different cultural settings have been developed, which includes Hofstede's cultural model (Hofstede, 1980), GLOBE's cultural model (House, Javidan and Dorfman, 2001), and Schwartz's value model (Schwartz, 1992). Within these models, Hofstede's cultural dimensions have been broadly utilised as the theoretical root in quantifying the impacts of culture on a sequence of online behaviours such as product ownership, adoption, and diffusion of innovation (De Mooij, 2017), word of mouth (WOM) (Lin and Kalwani, 2018), and relationship marketing (Samaha, Beck and Palmatier, 2014). Despite the abovementioned contributions, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions emphasise the impact of culture on people's behavioural aspects, which might simplify the complexity of consumers' cognitive and affective perceptions. This leads to limited knowledge with respect to a deeper level of an individual's cognition and affection processing while they engage in an OBC. Subsequently, to further explore the underlying motivations driving people's OBCE decisions, Schwartz's (1999) personal values, the most extensively used framework for describing human values (Keh and Sun, 2008), have been selected as the theoretical lens in understanding CE in OBCs from a more micro perspective.

Personal values are individual differences that have been found to be significant predictors of consumer attitudes, motivations, and behaviours (O'cass and Fenech, 2003; Marbach, Lages and Nunan, 2016). For instance, in research by Wirtz *et al.* (2013), participation in a community is strongly rooted in intrinsic motivation, if not the passion for the product, genre or activity around which communities crystalise. Since personal values are abstract and cross-situational, it is necessary to include mediators, such as domain-specific traits or attitudes, when connecting personal values to a specific behaviour (O'cass and Fenech, 2003). The value-attitude-behaviour (VAB) hierarchy (Homer and Kahle, 1988), theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 2011), and theory of reasoned action (Fishbein, 1979) have been widely employed for examining the impact of personal values on a sequence of consumer behaviours such as destination.

1.2 Research context

The preceding section offers valuable insights into the ways digital platforms, specifically OBCs, empower customers by facilitating knowledge acquisition and communication with both the brand and fellow users. With a defined research interest in mind, it becomes crucial to carefully choose an appropriate context for designing future research. As Arnould, Price and Moisio (2006) highlights, the selection of contexts play a fundamental role for researchers in developing and testing theories. In this section, the researcher will delve into the discussion of different types of OBCs in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research context.

Hybrid virtual community can be segregated into three disparate types that are defined by users, enthusiastic laypersons, and the kind of relationship they have with commercial producers, which are firm-hosted, firm-related (third-party managed) and independent (member-initiated) communities. Firm-hosted communities are created and maintained by firms and professionals, which enable brands to involve their customers in various co-creation activities. These companies create the online platform for information exchange, hire the community moderators, establish, and enforce the interactional standards and, if necessary, even set the agenda by expressly seeking input on specific topics. Firm-related communities are developed by community members who, via a self-organised process, establish and employ the rules of interaction. Despite different organisers, firm-related communities are not independent from firms, but have a mutual interest associated with a certain brand or even a particular product. In firm-related communities, knowledge collaboration often takes place around issues and practices that arise from daily use, as opposed to the partially requested advice in firm-hosted communities. Lastly, independent communities are normally initiated by members who have desires to be connected to other users with shared affinity towards the brand, without prompting or support of professionals or commercial organisations. These communities can be socially or professionally oriented (Grabher and Ibert, 2014). Other than reactively responding on company's offerings, interaction dynamics in independent communities are mostly driven by people's motivations and aspirations. The emergence of social media enables brand enthusiasts to develop efficient platforms for between-members conversations, since it allows them to share user-generated content and foster a deep level of interest and participation (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015). However, due to lack of regulations, these communities might also help to stir up tension and a negative reaction regarding their brands or OBCs (Bowden *et al.*, 2017).

The abovementioned typology is a static classification. Virtual communities are intrinsically dynamic in the continuously changing world of online environments and social media. As critiqued by Grabher and Ibert (2014), online communities grow and change, consolidate, and drift apart. In short, communities change throughout time and may move outside the parameters of existing typologies. On the other hand, these online communities are a part of bigger, developing ecosystems of social networking sites and online media that have dynamic boundaries, altering attributions, and changing usage patterns.

As discussed above, social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tiktok, offer businesses and organisations the tools they need to build communities that have the characteristics of OBCs. Owing to its high accessibility and flexibility, community members can publish and share content with other like-minded users in the community. However, this implies that there will be lower levels of devotion amongst consumers towards OBCs. This is because people can communicate with numerous businesses in one location with little effort. Brand communities on social network sites (SNSs) also have characteristics that distinguish them from OBCs hosted on a separate website. Specifically, the communication generated on SNSs are mainly business-centric, therefore a sizable portion of the content is produced by the brand representatives rather than users. This potentially leads to a consumer's low sense of responsibility and ownership of the community due to the shortage of interaction. In contrast, a consumer who decides to join a firm-hosted brand community on its own website is more likely to have a stronger sense of commitment because enrolling and participating in the community might take up more time and effort. More importantly, with the advent of smart devices in recent years, mobile applications also enable consumers to interact with other users and brands with the same approach as browsing the website, thus improving people's engagement experience and participation level.

The objective of this thesis is to explore the association between personal values and people's engagement in OBCs under different cultural backgrounds. This requires a strong consumer insights function with a cultural anthropology perspective. The ability of a brand to effectively communicate with its target audience and elicit an emotional response is what ultimately leads to the development of a long-lasting relationship with its customers. As favourable emotions become deeply ingrained, customers form enduringly positive associations with the brand. In the context of this thesis, the OBCs deemed most pertinent for examination were those manifesting a consumer orientation toward a specific brand with a global presence and exist

independently from any social media sites. First, by selecting a firm-hosted customer centric community, it is more effective for the researcher to understand naturally occurring behaviours encompassing information searches and interactive communication among consumers, which has been discussed prominent in existing OBC studies (Adjei et al., 2010; Brodie et al., 2013). Second, a firm-hosted customer-centric community's frequent member interactions and content creation provide the researcher with a rich environment to study in OBCs.

Earlier studies suggest that people generally find those with similar characteristics more trustworthy than government officials, professionals, and traditional media, as highlighted by Edelman Trust Barometer (2017). This implies that information exchanged among peers in online communities has the capability to influence others and, consequently, shape health behaviours (Willis, 2018). While existing OBC studies have identified research fields in sectors such as fashion, music, consumer goods, and hospitality, there exists a gap in knowledge within the social health sector. In the rapidly digitalising landscape of fitness, the ascent of Web3 presents compelling prospects for the engagement of fitness influencers, creators, and consumers, fostering the development of more engaged and supportive communities. Decentralised platforms and marketplaces within the Web3 paradigm facilitate user connection and interaction among like-minded fitness enthusiasts, enabling participation in collaborative challenges and workout initiatives. In consequence, the fitness sector was chosen as the research field for further analysis.

In order to identify the online communities suitable for this study, the researcher initiated an extensive search for the top ten fitness applications in both China and the UK. Twenty platforms were identified and subsequently evaluated for further analysis, considering criteria such as thematic focus, accessibility, and popularity (Kozinets, 2002). It is noteworthy that platforms functioning solely as fitness trackers or providing workout programmes without a firm-hosted community presence were excluded from consideration. Ultimately, MyFitnessPal emerged as the ideal community for examining individuals' online engagement behaviour in the UK. However, due to the inaccessibility for Chinese consumers, Keep, demonstrating comparable functionality, popularity, and accessibility was strategically selected to comprehend the online engagement behaviour of Chinese consumers, ensuring the validity of the findings. At the time of data collection in 2021, both communities had over a million active users (i.e., brand ambassadors, consumers, and fitness experts) who showed elements of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) three markers of community: share consciousness, shared rituals, and a

sense of responsibility. Additionally, as both selected communities are developed and monitored by the parent brand and sustained by the group of users, a sequence of shared practices and regulations are applied in daily communication, which adds in-depth understanding for this thesis.

1.3 Overview of the research

Crossan (2003) suggested that researchers find an appropriate ontological and epistemological position before deciding which methodology to apply. In reference to its interactive nature, social constructionism has been broadly employed in cross-cultural research since it allows researchers to analyse data collected from interactions among community members from a multi-cultural lens (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015), which supports the methodology selection for this research.

Netnography is adopted as the main methodology in this thesis. Specifically, two phases of data collections are involved. At the initial stage, non-participatory observation was conducted by the researcher in both selected communities (one from China and one from the UK). This method was selected because it enables the researcher to comprehend the community's environment and become familiar with rules or norms that are specific to its members. After gaining developed knowledge about the community, the second stage of data collection consists of semi-structured in-depth interviews in both selected communities (one from China and one from the UK) employing the laddering technique to probe the context of the choice of OBC as well as salient reasons for the choice. The laddering technique is rooted in means-end theory, which is specialises in examining the influence that personal values have on people's decision-making behaviours (Gutman, 1982). The key element of means-end theory is to uncover linkages connecting perceptual components across the range of attributes (A), consequences (C), and values (V). These associations are considered to be ingrained in an individual's cognition and serve as the foundation for understanding personal values and decision making.

1.4 Research question and research objective

Although CE has been acknowledged as crucial to preserving the longevity of an OBC, little investigation has been placed in understanding the motivations driving CE in different cultural

backgrounds from a micro perspective. To fulfil this gap, this research has introduced the concept "personal value embedded in cultural backgrounds" by comparing CE in selected communities in two distinct markets: China and the UK with the aim of identifying how personal values drive certain CE practice in the OBC context under distinct cultural backgrounds.

And a sequence of research questions is proposed:

1. What are the similarities and differences in CE in Chinese and UK OBCs?
2. How do personal values embedded in cultural backgrounds relate to these differences from a customer's perspective?
3. What is the relationship between personal value and CE with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions?

1.5 Intentional contribution

By answering the proposed questions, this study has made contributions from three perspectives. First, in line with the definition proposed by Brodie et al. (2011), this study introduces a contextual lens (firm-hosted online brand community) to the existing cross-cultural CE framework developed by Gupta, Pansari and Kumar (2018) thus enriching the knowledge of CE in a digital presence. Second, this study responds to previous scholars' highlights for further research into the drivers that influence CE in an OBC context (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Wirtz *et al.*, 2013). The development and implementation of successful customer engagement, to maintain and increase the membership of online communities, is one of the main goals of brand management, thus it is crucial to comprehend what motivates customers to participate in OBCs and what personal values they exhibit alongside the engagement. Personal values are fundamental ideas that transcend particular circumstances and act to influence individuals' behaviour, perceptions, personality traits, and culture (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987). Therefore, it is beneficial to investigate one's own values in the role of moderator to better understand what motivates OBCE. Additionally, the adoption of means-end theory allows the researcher to cultivate hierarchical associations between obvious community attributes and deeper extent values, which adds values to existing CE studies. Third, this research examines the framework proposed by Brodie *et al.* (2013) and contributes to the

framework by adopting Schwartz's (1999) personal value model in comparing OBCE in different cultural setting. Hofstede's (1980)cultural value scale, which was primarily employed in earlier investigations, has often been questioned (Mcsweeney, 2002; Kim and Gray, 2009; Williamson, 2002). In line with previous cross-cultural research calls, this study examines the level of Schwartz's (1999) personal value model accounting for an individual's decision making while engaging in an OBC, thus enriching the complexity of cultural influence. From a managerial perspective, this research provides valuable advice for marketing professionals to distinguish between customer engagement preferences in different cultural settings and assists them in designing cross-cultural engagement strategies in managing OBCs.

Methodologically, extant research took advantage of quantitative tools, such as questionnaire and experiment, to validate their assumptions of CE, which potentially simplifies the dynamics of the subject. By adopting a netnographic lens, this empirical study has comprehensively demonstrated the dynamics of CE in an OBC through longitude observations to uncover the influence of personal values leading people's behavioural decisions through laddering interviews.

1.6 Thesis structure

This thesis proceeds with a systematic literature review in chapter two, demonstrating the conceptual roots of CE, OBC, and personal values in collective cultural backgrounds. By demonstrating and criticising the key findings in existing studies, the gap explored in this research is addressed by the end of the chapter along with the research objectives and research questions. Chapter three then outlines a discussion of the research philosophy, which is comprised of ontological and epistemological positions. To achieve the research objectives, interpretivism and social constructionism are adopted as the philosophical position guiding the following research design. Chapter four comprehensively discusses the research strategy in detail. Netnographic methodology settings, data collection methods, analysis techniques, and ethical considerations accustomed to virtual settings are discussed. To ensure the quality of the research, credibility and transferability are also examined as two main criteria in assessing the research findings. Chapter five summarises the main findings derived from phase one - non-participatory observation. These findings are presented from three aspects, which are community infrastructure, community social roles, and community interaction. Drawing upon means-end chain theory, chapter six presents the key findings captured in the second phase of

research - in-depth laddering interviews. Starting with an overview of the interviews, this chapter presents the key findings that emerged from the data as four themes. Each theme is justified individually along with corresponding excerpts taken directly from the transcripts. Finally, chapter seven provides a detailed explanation of the findings discussed in chapters five and six and presents the contributions of this thesis in terms of theory, methodology, and managerial implications. To start, it examines the deficiencies discovered in the literature and how this research has added to the existing literature. The research questions are reiterated followed by a synopsis of the thematic classifications identified in addressing the research questions. By the end of the chapter, contributions (theoretical, methodological, and managerial), study limitations, and implications for future research are also explored.

2. Literature Review

Chapter one introduced the research background and identified the research objectives of this thesis. Following the outline addressed earlier, this chapter reviews previous literatures that inform the central theme of this research, which include customer engagement, OBC, and cultural values. After presenting a brief introduction and methods of review, this chapter starts a comprehensive discussion of customer engagement including its definition, working definition, theoretical foundations, and multi-dimensionality. By incorporating the contextual lens, online brand community is identified for this study and relevant conceptualisations are addressed. Antecedents and consequences of online brand community engagement are, thus, comprehensively summarised. Afterwards, the key literatures of cultural values, motivational theories, and personal values are examined. At the end of this chapter, a research gap is justified and a series of research questions as well as objectives will be developed.

2.1 Introduction and methods of review

Researchers can map out the intellectual landscape of their chosen research area by reviewing previous literatures (Barari *et al.*, 2021; Paul and Criado, 2020; Rana and Paul, 2020; Shree *et al.*, 2021). Traditional methods of conducting a literature review have been criticised due to a lack of scientific rigour and narrowness of content (Briner and Walshe, 2014). By adhering to a predefined structure and a rigid methodology, systematic review allows researchers to achieve accuracy and validity while constructing a research framework (Aarikka-Stenroos and Ritala, 2017; Shree *et al.*, 2021). In this study, a systematic literature review following the practice by Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003) was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of customer engagement in online brand communities. The research question "What drive the relationship between cultural values and customer engagement with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural perspectives?" was identified before reviewing relevant articles.

Different forms of systematic literature review exist, namely domain-, theory-, and method-based reviews (Palmatier, Houston and Hulland, 2018), within which five sub categories are identified under domain reviews (Paul and Criado, 2020), i.e. structured theme-, framework-, bibliometric-, hybrid-based, and conceptual reviews. Aligned with the research objective of this thesis, structured theme-based reviews were adopted to help the researcher

comprehensively understand the theories, propositions, and hypotheses in selected domains as customer engagement, online brand community, and cultural value. Customer engagement, consumer engagement, customer engagement participation, online brand community, virtual brand community, personal value, cultural value, cross-cultural consumer behaviour, and community engagement motivation were selected as key themes leading the search for journal papers. These search phrases were used to search through databases such as ELSEVIER, JSTOR, Springer, Emerald, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library, and Google Scholar.

At the initial search phase, more focus was placed on reading literature review articles with the purpose of equipping the researcher with basic knowledge of the theoretical underpinning of selected concepts. These theories serve as the foundation for the proposed conceptual framework, together with the viewpoints addressed in the previous customer engagement in online brand community literatures. It is vital to develop a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria while finalising the research articles to be considered. First, studies need to focus on customer engagement, online brand community, and cultural value from a business perspective to ensure the relevancy towards the research objective. This was achieved by analysing the journal, title, keyword, and abstract of the articles. The "Academic Journal Guide" published by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS), was used as a quality standard to determine which journals should be included or excluded. Unless the publication was widely cited within the discipline, papers from journals receiving an overall score of less than 3 were not included. Second, only articles published between 2010 and 2022 were considered. The twelve-year time frame was designed according to the requirement addressed in Paul and Criado's (2020) study and was in line with the practice of extant literature of similar review articles (Shree *et al.*, 2021; Mishra, Singh and Koles, 2021). Third, only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English were taken into consideration for inclusion. By obeying above requirements, a total of 135 papers were selected and reviewed. The selected papers span multiple academic fields (i.e .consumer behaviour, relationship marketing, consumer psychology, international marketing, and motivational theory) and covers several sectors (i.e. product development, customer services, branding, and luxury product purchase).

The importance of customer engagement as a means for companies to improve their financial performance and enhance the relationship between the brand and customer has been widely discussed. Various studies have developed conceptual frameworks to understand the definition (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012), theoretical foundations (Hollebeek,

Srivastava and Chen, 2019), antecedents, and consequences of customer engagement (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Chan *et al.*, 2014). With the advent of virtual tools such as online brand communities, companies have a new opportunity to increase customers' perceived value (Marbach *et al.*, 2019). However, little attention has been placed on the impact of the type of market in which companies operate in (Gupta, Pansari and Kumar, 2018). While some researchers have proposed insightful findings with respect to cross-cultural engagement in social networking sites (Tsai and Men, 2017), there remains much to be learned about the influence of personal values in collective cultural backgrounds on customer engagement. The following section will start by defining key constructs and then explore relevant theoretical underpinnings to address the knowledge gap.

2.2 Customer engagement

Since the development of S-D logic (Lusch and Vargo, 2006), customer engagement has been recognised as one of the most emergent marketing constructs (Msi, 2020) which has been extensively discussed by both practitioners and academics (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Harmeling *et al.*, 2017; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018; Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014; Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Islam *et al.*, 2019). Previous studies have highlighted the fact that customer engagement goes beyond transactions and plays a significant role in promoting companies' performance (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Owing to its importance, customer engagement has been discussed and aligned with other essential marketing constructs such as relationship marketing (Bowden, 2009), service marketing (Kumar *et al.*, 2019), customers' attitude towards a brand (Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012) , and consumers' knowledge contribution (Gupta, Pansari and Kumar, 2018) .

2.2.1 Defining customer engagement

After a systematic literature review, customer engagement has been mainly conceptualised in three main schools. Firstly, some researchers reflected customer engagement as a sequence of specific interactive behaviours between customers and companies. For example, as one of the most cited customer engagement papers, Van Doorn *et al.* (2010) defined customer engagement as a sum of behavioural manifestation alongside a brand focus, which goes beyond transactions and driven by multiple drivers. This view is similar to that expressed by Kumar *et al.* (2010) who perceived customer engagement as an active interaction between the customer

and the company or the customer and other prospective customers with regard to a brand. Although the definitions mentioned identify the interactive nature of customer engagement, little knowledge is present regarding the role of customers in such interactive dynamics. Therefore, Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) enriched existing CE definitions (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Bijmolt *et al.*, 2010) by describing CE as a resource contribution behaviour delivered by customers through a series of interactive activities with focal brands. Although past studies have discussed customer engagement as a sequence of interactive behaviours including spreading word-of-mouth, helping other consumers, and leaving suggestions for companies, they acknowledged that customer engagement behaviour is motivated by certain cognitive processing and emotional forces (Porter *et al.*, 2011; Obilo, Chefor and Saleh, 2020).

Secondly, customer engagement has been recognised as a psychological process that leads to brand-related constructs (Bowden, 2009). Within Bowden's (2009) research, she defined customer engagement as a psychological process that goes beyond loyalty, with the focus of retaining engaged customers and developing positive relationships between companies and customers. Another key paper by Brodie et al. (2011) defined customer engagement as "a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interaction, co-creative customer experience with a brand" (p.260). Harmeling *et al.* (2017) argued that it is preferable to define customer engagement behaviourally rather than psychologically since such definition allows related psychological constructs such as involvement, satisfaction, brand love, and affective commitment to fluctuate independently. Such a proposition is in line with the study proposed by Obilo, Chefor and Saleh (2020), who perceive customer engagement as a behavioural construct and believe that emotional and cognitive factors are simply part of the consumption process. Although these findings provide valuable insights in studying customer engagement as either an antecedent or an outcome of related marketing constructs mentioned above, it might neglect the importance of customers' cognitive and affective perception throughout constant brand interactions as well as simplify the complexity of customer engagement performance.

Lastly, instead of determining customer engagement psychologically or behaviourally, some researchers discussed customer engagement as a holistic marketing concept. They defined it as a customer's cognitive, affective, and behavioural investments in a sequence of specific brand interactions (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014; Hollebeek, Juric and Tang, 2017). This

definition emphasises the complex, multidimensional nature of customer engagement and provides a brand-related lens for researchers to further investigate customer engagement performance psychologically and behaviourally. For example, Breidbach, Brodie and Hollebeek (2014) defined customer engagement as " a consumer's positively valanced brand related cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity during or related to customer brand interactions." (p.154) Based on the existing definitions, Claffey and Brady (2017) managed to refine customer engagement more explicitly. They discussed customer engagement as "a multidimensional concept denotes the level of a consumer's participation in a collaborative knowledge exchange, combined with their cognitive and affective responses, resulting in a level of affective commitment to a relationship, which can be either with the firm or other customers in firm-hosted virtual community" (Claffey and Brady, 2017, p. 357). In addition, apart from understanding customer engagement in a multidimensional perspective, some researchers focus on studying customers as resource contributors. They define customer engagement as the outcome of a customer's resource contribution, which include knowledge, skills, time, and creativity to generate a focal firm's development of its product or service (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Harmeling *et al.*, 2017). For instance, in the research by Kumar *et al.* (2019) related to CE in a service context, CE is reflected as "a customer's motivationally driven volitional investment of focal operant resources (including cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social knowledge and skills) and operand resources (e.g., equipment) into brand interactions in service system" (p.141). Table 1 lists the key customer engagement definitions in order from unidimensional (behavioural/psychological) to multidimensional.

Although the term of 'customer engagement' has been broadly explored in different contexts in past decades, it lacks an agreement on how it is defined (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Some researchers use the concept as 'consumer engagement' (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Martínez-López *et al.*, 2017; Tsai and Men, 2017) , 'consumer brand engagement' (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014), and 'customer engagement' (Bijmolt *et al.*, 2010; Chan *et al.*, 2014; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018; Verhoef, Reinartz and Krafft, 2010; Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Kumar *et al.*, 2019) to describe the complex dynamics between the focal brand and their associated customers. In most cases, these concepts are used interchangeably; however, few researchers have tried to differentiate between the concepts implied. Vivek, Beatty and Morgan (2012) suggested customer engagement as a more relationship-centric construct since it refers to an individual's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural presence in his/her interaction with a service provider, while consumer engagement is investigated as a more initiative-driven concept. Despite such

a proposition existing, in this study, customer engagement is applied as the main terminology to describe the interactive nature between brands and customers that goes beyond transactions.

2.2.2 Working definition of customer engagement in this study

In line with the definition proposed by Brodie *et al.* (2011), customer engagement is defined as: *an individual's cognitive, affective, and behavioural investments towards a series of brand related interactions, which is contextually independent*. This definition highlights the intricate and multidimensional essence of CE, offering the researcher a brand-focused perspective for delving deeper into the psychological and behavioural aspects of CE. The term 'investments' is pivotal in capturing the role of customers as active contributors of resources. From this perspective, CE is conceptualised as the outcome of customers actively contributing diverse resources, ranging from knowledge, to skills, to time, and to creativity. These contributions are integral to nurturing the development of a focal firm's product or services, aligning with the principles of S-D logic. Given the research objective of this thesis, which aims to discern how personal values influence individual engagement holistically, this definition provides an explicit framework for the researcher to consider all aspects that emerge throughout a sequence of brand-related interactions.

Table 1 Definitions of Customer Engagement

Author	CE Definition	Dimensionality
Bijmolt *et al.* (2010)	Customers have the ability to collaboratively generate value, contribute to the development of competitive strategies, engage in the firm's innovation process, and become an integral part of the company.	Behavioural
Van Doorn *et al.* (2010)	Customer behavioural manifestations towards the brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers.	Behavioural
Verhoef, Reinartz and Krafft (2010)	A behavioural manifestation towards the brand or the firm that goes beyond transactions.	Behavioural
Jaakkola and Alexander (2014, p. 248)	Behaviours through which customers make voluntary resource contributions that have a brand or firm focus, but go beyond what is fundamental to transactions, occur in interactions between the focal object and/or other actors, and result from motivational drivers.	Behavioural
Vivek *et al.* (2014, p. 127)	The intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organisation's offerings or organisational activities, which either the customer or the organisation initiate.	Behavioural
Porter *et al.* (2011, p. 83)	Engagement is defined as a class of behaviours that is able to reflect community members' willingness to co-operate and participate in such a way that it creates value for others or for themselves.	Behavioural
Kumar *et al.* (2010)	Engagement is classified as behavioural and is defined as an active interaction between the customer and the company or the customer and other prospective customers of the brand or a product.	Behavioural
Kumar and Pansari (2016a, p. 498)	Engagement is defined as the attitude, behaviour, the level of connectedness (1) among customers, (2) between customers and employees; and (3) of customers and employees within a firm.	Behavioural
Obilo, Chefor and Saleh (2020, p. 2)	Consumers' positive and negative behavioural interactions with a brand and all its constituent elements (brand content, other consumers, etc.), beyond simple transactions, that result from their interest in and commitment to the brand.	Behavioural
Sprott, Czellar and Spangenberg (2009, p. 92)	Brand engagement in self-concept is defined as an individual difference representing consumers' propensity to include important brands as part of their self-identity.	Psychological

Bowden (2009, p. 65)	Customer engagement is a psychological process which goes beyond loyalty, which the focus of is retaining engaged customers and developing positive relationships between companies and customers.	Psychological
Brodie *et al.* (2011, p. 263)	A psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object in focal service relationships.	Psychological
Islam *et al.* (2019, p. 278)	A consumer's investment of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social operant, and operand resources in their brand interactions.	Cognitive, affective, and behavioural
Hollebeek (2011b, p. 790)	The level of a customer's motivational, brand related, and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions.	Cognitive, emotional, and behavioural
Hollebeek (2011a)	Engagement is the level of perceived cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment in, and ensuring perceived returns extracted from, a customer's interactive brand experience.	Immersion, passion, and activation
Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014, p. 154)	A consumer's positively valanced brand related cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity during or related to customer brand interactions.	Cognitive, emotional, and behavioural
Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen (2019, p.166)	A customer's motivationally driven, volitional investment of focal operant resources (including cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social knowledge and skills), and operand resources (e.g. equipment) into brand interactions in service systems.	Cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social
Claffey and Brady (2017, p. 357)	A multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural dimensions. In particular, it denotes the level of a consumer's participation in a collaborative knowledge exchange, combined with their cognitive and affective responses, resulting in a level of affective commitment to a relationship, which can be either with the firm or other customers in the firm-hosted virtual community.	Cognitive, affective, and behavioural
Pansari and Kumar (2017, p. 295)	The mechanics of a customer's value addition to the firm, through direct and/or indirect contribution.	-
Harmeling *et al.* (2017, p. 316)	A customer's voluntary resource contribution to a firm's marketing function, going beyond patronage.	-

| Kumar *et al.* (2019, p. 141) | A customer's motivationally-driven, volitional investment of focal operant resources (including cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social knowledge and skills) and operand resources (e.g., equipment) into brand interactions in service systems. | - |

2.2.3 Development of customer engagement

Engagement, presented as co-creation behaviours and interaction, has been broadly studied across multiple disciplines such as sociology (Mondak *et al.*, 2010), psychology (Giesbers *et al.*, 2021), organisational behaviour (Kumar and Pansari, 2016a), and marketing (Kumar *et al.*, 2013; Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021) . Within the realm of psychology, the term "engagement" pertains to the ability to take initiative, respond appropriately to social cues, and actively participate in social activities or interactions with others in a community (Giesbers *et al.*, 2021) . Whilst in organisational behaviour, employee engagement is recognised as "a multidimensional construct which comprises of all the different facets of the attitudes and behaviours of employees towards the organisation" (Kumar and Pansari, 2014, p. 9). It is noted that interactivity is the main feature of engagement nature from the mentioned definitions.

As suggested by Kumar and Pansari (2016a), customer engagement has received attention in prior marketing studies as a crucial area of study for developing company-consumer relationships and other non-transactional customer behavioural linkages like trust, commitment, word-of-mouth, referral, and in-group recommendations. Owing to the increasing significance of relationship marketing, organisations are adopting proactive measures to engage with their consumers beyond mere transactions, fostering a collaborative environment where consumers contribute knowledge and expertise to co-create valuable products and services. Beyond this, under the theoretical lens of S-D logic (Lusch and Vargo, 2006), the concept 'customer engagement' represents a complex construct composed of service providers, customers and other related stakeholders. These agents jointly co-create value in the service context. As mentioned earlier, individuals are playing a more engaging role in a series of brand-related activities through providing cognitive and emotional feedback associated with physical resources. This heavily contrasts to when customers were previously mere sole recipients of goods/services provided by companies. Although S-D logic provided marketing researchers with a consolidated theoretical foundation of CE, some researchers critiqued the efficiency of S-D logic in developing a comprehensive understanding of CE in a service context. In this case, Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen (2019) integrated the aspects of customer resource integration, customer learning, and customer knowledge sharing to develop a comprehensive S-D logic informed framework of CE for empirical validation purposes.

2.2.4 Theoretical foundation of customer engagement

With the aim of enriching the existing knowledge of customer engagement, various theories have been used in earlier literatures as support for a series of conceptual and empirical studies. Islam and Rahman (2016) reviewed sixty-six literatures specialised in customer engagement spanning from 2005 to 2015 and identified twenty-eight studies adopting specific theories in designing research. The "Relationship Marketing Theory" (Van Tonder and Petzer, 2018) and "Service-dominant logic" (Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2016) have been broadly applied as the theoretical foundation to explore customer engagement from a holistic perspective.

Under these two theories, customers are no longer recognised as mere reactive recipients of brand-related clues, but rather as proactive contributors to brand interactions. According to S-D logic introduced by Vargo and Lusch (2008), service refers to "the application of specialised competences (i.e., operant resources: knowledge, skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity, or the entity itself" (p.26). Specifically, within a service system, people are connected by "institutional arrangements" and integrate operant/operand resources in value creation processes (Akaka and Vargo, 2015). The wide application of S-D logic implies the changing nature of customer and institutional entities' interactions and explains the shift of the primary unit of exchange from firms to customers (Brodie, Löbler and Fehrer, 2019). Despite these contributions of S-D logic, an important gap remains in associating it with other theoretical entities (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019) in investigating customer engagement from a micro perspective. Thus, Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen (2019) adopted interrelated levels of macro- and micro-foundational theory proposed by Coleman (1994) to refine five S-D logic axioms from a perspective of customer engagement and revise the existing propositions of customer engagement addressed by Brodie *et al.* (2011).

Upon these revisions, two significant elements, operant resources (cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social knowledge and skills) and operand resources (equipment), are added into the existing definition to explain the dynamics of customer engagement (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019). To be more specific, under S-D logic, engaged individuals who invest higher levels of resources in certain interactions are offering service to themselves or others, by accommodating resources (cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social knowledge and skills) for value-creation purposes (Karpen *et al.*, 2015; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). To better

explain the sophisticated nature of customer engagement, an integrative S-D logic informed framework is introduced by comprising three foundational processes of customer engagement, named: customer resource integration, customer knowledge sharing, and customer learning (Hollebeek, Srivastava and Chen, 2019).

Another group of theories, including social identity theory (SIT) (Chan *et al.*, 2014), social exchange theory (SET) (Zheng *et al.*, 2015; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018), and social capital theory (SCT) (Kalra, Agnihotri and Briggs, 2021), are specialised in understanding customer engagement as a consequence of certain social behaviours. Specifically, under these theories, social connections between individuals are identified as essential determinants of engagement in nature and consumers are assumed to dedicate positive thoughts and actions towards an object (brand) with the purpose of receiving certain initial benefits from the engagement.

Drawing upon social exchange theory (Thibaut, 2017), individuals make rational decisions to engage in a social relationship based on their perceptions of the cost and benefits. Specifically, consumers are more likely to engage when they have a positive overall experience in their exchange relationship with a company or a brand (Obilo, Chefor and Saleh, 2020). By embracing social exchange theory, Harrigan *et al.* (2018) discussed customer engagement as a manifestation of social interaction, within which individuals exchange resources with firms/brands cognitively, emotionally, physically, and socially. This is in line with the S-D logic propositions, which posit that consumers are now partnered with organisations to co-create knowledge through a series of social exchanges (Vargo and Lusch, 2008).

While social exchange theory emphasises the interconnection between individuals and organisations, social identity theory has provided researchers with a niche insight in studying customer engagement in a social group and community context. According to Tajfel (1978), social identity theory posits that individuals have a predisposition to classify themselves into specific social categories, thereby inducing social comparison and positive differentiation (Prentice *et al.*, 2019; Yingrui and Bin, 2006). Specifically, when an individual identifies with a social group, he or she is more likely to engage in activities that are consistent with their identities and feel that they are psychologically linked to the group's beliefs (Prentice *et al.*, 2019; Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Based on the level of identification, individuals would exert different extents of effort towards the tasks that contribute to the organisational outcomes (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). While most marketing studies emphasise the role of an individual's

identification with an organisation, Prentice *et al.* (2019) addressed the importance of an individual's identification with other affiliated community members and developed a framework specialised in analysing the impacts of perceived social identity on customer engagement performance.

Whilst social identity theory explains the importance of peer recognition in driving people's engagement intention, social capital theory proposed by Putnam (2000) included two dimensions as bridging and bonding to explain the function of participants' interaction and linkage within networks. The foundation of bridging social capital lies in individuals developing associations with people who are dissimilar to themselves, while the foundation of bonding social capital lies in individuals developing associations with people who are similar to themselves (Leonard, 2004). Under such a theoretical lens, Mostafa (2021) investigated how consumer e-empowerment mediates the influence of social capital on consumer engagement in the context of a Facebook brand page. Their results are aligned with previous literatures (Maghrabi, Oakley and Nemati, 2014; Kim, Lee and Preis, 2016) by indicating both bridging social capital and bonding social capital as important determinants of consumer engagement. More specifically, while bridging social capital involves weaker connections between community members, it can still be beneficial for organisations as it brings together individuals from diverse backgrounds in the manifestations of information-sharing and problem-solving (Maghrabi, Oakley and Nemati, 2014; Mostafa, 2021). In contrast, bonding social capital is formed through a user's identification with a brand and its associated users, making them more likely to provide feedback and collaborate with other consumers, thereby fostering voluntary engagement on the brand page.

Although S-D logic offers a robust theoretical foundation for comprehending CE as a dynamic and interactive phenomenon, its limited empirical examination has constrained the development of CE-related propositions. To bridge this gap, a series of social theories have been widely employed by researchers to understand CE as a consequence of individuals fulfilling specific social needs, allowing them to construct conceptual frameworks across diverse disciplines. However, the predominant focus of social theories on understanding customers collectively has, to some extent, overshadowed the differences between individuals. This means that there is a significant gap in understanding the distinct motivations and personal values that drive CE, particularly in various cultural context when examined from a micro perspective.

To address this critical knowledge gap, there is an imperative need to incorporate insights from motivational theories and deepen our understanding of personal values. This integration will be thoroughly discussed in section 2.4.2, with the objective of providing a comprehensive exploration of the intricacies involved in CE across diverse cultural backgrounds. By incorporating motivational theories and considering personal values, the researcher can enhance her understanding of the micro-level factors influencing CE, contributing to a more nuanced and culturally sensitive perspective in CE research.

2.2.5 Dimensionality of customer engagement

2.2.5.1 Cognitive engagement

Cognitive CE refers to an individual's level of brand-related thought processing and elaboration in interacting with a focal brand (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014). In the context of engagement, cognition refers to a collection of enduring and active mental states that a consumer experiences in relation to the focal object (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). So, King and Sparks (2014) suggested three sub-dimensions of cognitive CE for hospitality and tourism brands as identification, attention, and absorption. While attention and absorption are used to describe a person's psychological presence in or investment in a brand, identification denotes the value of the engagement object to that person (Shin and Back, 2020). As the objective of this research is to explore how personal value influences people's engagement in different cultural backgrounds, more emphasis should be placed on capturing people's psychological perceptions derived from the interconnections with other parties, rather than simply understanding the brand's value to them. Thus, in the following discussions, attention and absorption are selected as two key elements to describe the cognitive dimension of CE.

Attention refers to the cognitive resources that an individual voluntarily allocates to an engagement object (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Shin and Back, 2020). Drawing on regulatory engagement theory (Higgins and Scholer, 2009), cognitively engaged customers are likely to pay deep attention towards exclusive brand messages such as service information, latest news, and related marketing campaigns in a regular manner (So, King and Sparks, 2014). This implies the nature of cognitive CE as sustained attention generated by people towards the brand. When people are fully equipped with brand-related knowledge and

become more immersive with the engagement foci, "attention" goes a step further and becomes "absorption", which indicates the situation in which customers cannot detach themselves from engagement objects. Specifically, in the field of marketing, customers who are absorbed tend to be fully focused, satisfied, and highly engaged when they interact with the brand (Shin and Back, 2020).

2.2.5.2 Affective engagement

According to Calder, Isaac and Malthouse (2013), the affective dimension of CE refers to the overall and persistent level of emotions that a consumer feels in relation to the engagement focus and is expressed through ongoing and repeated feelings, rather than one-time sensations (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014; Vivek *et al.*, 2014). It implies the level of how much an individual enjoys and feels enthusiastic while interacting with a brand (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2016). In expressing their feelings about an online brand community, two complementary aspects are identified as enthusiasm and enjoyment. Enthusiasm pertains to a consumer's intrinsic level of fascination and interest with the focal brand and refers to "the zealous reactions and feelings of a person related to using or interacting with the focus of their engagement." (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2016, p. 418). According to Lanier and Hampton (2008), enthusiastic customers take an active role in marketing initiatives, engage in social interactions, establish communications, acquire fundamental knowledge, and have a positive experience with the brand; whereas enjoyment implies a consumer's pleasure and contentment derived from interactions with the focal brand and fellow consumers.

Affective dimensionality is closely associated with commitment, which indicates individuals' willingness to stay in a long-term customer-brand relationship, to participate in brand-related interactions, and to advocate for brands (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). Companies can enhance customers' commitment level through developing emotional connectedness via a sequence of social interactions (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Bowden, 2009) .

2.2.5.3 Behavioural engagement

Behavioural CE, also known as "activation" (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014), refers to the degree of a customer's energy, effort, and time spent on a brand in a particular customer-brand interaction, beyond purchase (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015). This definition implied the interactive nature of behavioural CE and discussed consumers as

voluntary resource contributors in helping the organisation to achieve their business goals (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Two types of behavioural CE are broadly discussed in prior studies, namely customer involvement in product development (i.e. providing feedback, ideas, and information) and customers' communications about the focal brand (i.e. word-of-mouth, blogging) (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Both constructs recognised the important role of customers in helping companies in improving product offerings (Kumar *et al.*, 2010) and recruiting new customers. Since behavioural CE is executed by customers out of their own free will, some researchers believe that behavioural engagement is similar to word-of-mouth behaviour and it manifests as active sharing with, learning from, and promoting the focal brand (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2016). In online community settings, sharing is recognised as a foundational approach for brand community members to exchange experience (Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012), knowledge, and resources. This reflects the collaborative and interactive nature of behavioural CE (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015). These aspects have been further exemplified by Gummerus *et al.* (2012b) by including key website metrics to quantify engagement behaviours. Specifically, comments, likes, reposts, replies or even direct messages are distinguished as common sharing practices on social media platforms. Apart from knowledge exchange, learning, which involves consumers' information/help seeking, is also identified as a key aspect of online community participation (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015). Thanks to the flexibility of the Internet, consumers can freely ask questions and receive feedback from other knowledgeable users or brand representatives through social media platforms. As learning involves the aspect of information-processing, it intuitively lends itself to a cognitive categorisation (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015). However, the learning behaviour emphasises people's initiatives and consistency to proactively seek for information, while cognitive CE focuses on the procedure of information processing.

Since customer engagement is a contextual concept, it is important to include a specific research setting while exploring the nature of its multi-dimensionalities. Owing to the explosive innovation and the wide application of the Internet, the online community, demonstrated as a tool to transcend geographical boundaries, has successfully captured attention from researchers in studying the concept of customer engagement.

2.3 Online brand community

According to Onishi and Manchanda (2012), more than fifty percent of the top hundred global brands have online communities to develop interactive consumer experiences and provide consumers with additional branded information (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). These communities are referred to as online brand communities (OBCs), in which brand serves as the central construct transpiring all activity both offline (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005) and online.

2.3.1 Brand community

Brand community (BC) is defined as a "specialised, non-geographically bound community, and based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a branded good or service" (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001, p. 412). A brand community focuses on shared values and meanings that people associate with brands during consumption activities, rather than grouping people based on their geographic attributes (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001). As indicated by Muniz and O'guinn (2001) , brand community is built upon individuals' mutual enthusiasm towards a brand, thus it differentiates itself from a traditional community by including commercial character (Albert, Merunka and Valette-Florence, 2008; Zaglia, 2013). Three key indicators were proposed in defining a brand community as consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006a; Hammedi *et al.*, 2015).

'Consciousness of kind' explains how people view their participation in a community and is discussed as the most fundamental marker in conceptualising community (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006a). Under the lens of social identity theory, members of a brand community feel connected with both the focal brand and its peers. It is this connection that makes members separate themselves from outsiders (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006b; Zaglia, 2013), thus developing a certain level of belongingness. In addition, consciousness of kind explicitly influences development of communal feelings shared between members and these feelings are discussed to effectively strengthen members' sense of loyalty to their group and the focal brands (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001).

While consciousness of kind plays a central role in grouping individuals, shared rituals and traditions refer to brand culture, history, and consciousness that community members are able to depend on (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001; Kuo and Feng, 2013). Through socially processing communal activities, members generate unique community experiences of their free will and

further communicate their interpretation within and over the borders of the community (Casaló, Flavián and Guinalíu, 2008; Zaglia, 2013). Shared rituals and traditions take many forms such as a particular language or set of signs that are exclusive to the community. In previous literatures, it has been noted as an essential component of a successful online brand community (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001).

Lastly, moral responsibility accounts for a member's willingness to be morally committed to other fellow members and the community as a whole (Casaló, Flavián and Guinalíu, 2008). A member's moral responsibility can be built through introducing new members or set a role as a reference for other members (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001). The conceptualisation of brand community has provided both academics and practitioners with new contextual knowledge in understanding relationship marketing and customer engagement beyond transactions (Martínez-López *et al.*, 2017; Tang, 2010; Hammedi *et al.*, 2015; Islam and Rahman, 2017). With the evolution of the Internet and communication technologies, these communities are no longer constrained by the restrictions of location. Instead, they have been emancipated by the Internet's inherent ability to offer spaces that are both affordable and accessible for communication (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001). This phenomenon also nurtured new forms of relationship between consumer and consumer as well as consumer and brand.

2.3.2 Defining online brand community

In recent years, brands have shown a keen interest in organising consumers into OBCs to take advantage of their potential for value co-creation (Manchanda, Packard and Pattabhiramaiah, 2015; Liao, Huang and Xiao, 2017). OBCs take forms in electronic discussion forums, bulletin boards, list servers, chat rooms, newsgroups, and social network sites (De Valck, Van Bruggen and Wierenga, 2009; Coelho, Rita and Santos, 2018). Due to the technological capabilities of OBCs, consumers can generate brand related conversations with either the brand representatives or other members without time and space limits (Santos *et al.*, 2022). Consumers are no longer recognised as passive recipients of brand traits, but are regarded as value co-producers, which is aligned with the S-D logic propositions (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Lusch and Vargo, 2006).

In former marketing studies, OBCs in discussion are normally sponsored by firms and refer to firm-hosted online brand communities (FHOBCs) (i.e. Liao, Huang and Xiao (2017); Gruner, Homburg and Lukas (2014)). Wiertz and De Ruyter (2007) defined FHOBC as a firm-hosted aggregation of users who, through the exchange of intangible resources, jointly co-produce and consume information about a commercial activity that is important to them. As discussed by Gruner, Homburg and Lukas (2014), FHOBCs have been categorised into three types based on their accessibility, level of control, host integration, and member engagement. They are named as open OBCs, discerning OBCs, and restricted OBCs, in which discerning OBCs are perceived as the highest level of host integration and member engagement. Specifically, discerning OBCs often require registration before members can take any actions, therefore the firm can monitor users' communications and integrate them into the community through diligent responses to members' questions and concerns (Gruner, Homburg and Lukas, 2014). As FHOBCs emphasise optimising customers' experiences beyond transactions, they provide an efficient platform for brands to establish relationships with their customers (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). These relationships disclose the distance between goods/services providers and consumers and help firms distinguish their competitive advantage from competitors. Therefore, FHOBCs are selected as the contextual focus for this study because they highly integrate both firms' and customers' efforts in establishing long-term relationships beyond transactions. Table 2 lists the main definitions of the online brand community discussed in the previous marketing literatures.

2.3.3 Theoretical foundation of online brand community

After reviewing previous marketing literatures, two research focuses are noticed to guide researchers to select an appropriate theory while designing online brand community studies. The first focus is to understand the functionality of an online brand community and explore how physical features influence people's online engagement (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; De Valck, Van Bruggen and Wierenga, 2009). These authors discuss community features as important constructs in affecting an individual's overall perception of an online brand community, which later influence their emotional development and engaging behaviour.

In Islam and Rahman (2017) study, the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework was solicited to justify the theoretical background of how unique community characteristics affect customer engagement. According to the S-O-R framework, specific elements of an

environment elicit a person's cognitive and emotional states, which then influence their behavioural responses (Robert and John, 1982). The framework was initially adopted to examine how store atmosphere influences consumer purchase behaviour and has been extended to a wider range of disciplines such as computer experience (Eroglu, Machleit and Davis, 2003), SMS advertising (Sharma *et al.*, 2021), website experience (Mollen and Wilson, 2010), and other consumer behaviour-related areas (Islam and Rahman, 2017).

In the context of online brand community, stimulus refers to the community's infrastructure and its collective identity that affect an individual's internal state (Islam and Rahman, 2017; Mollen and Wilson, 2010). The internal state is defined as the cognitive and affective intermediary state of a customer, where cognitive state represents an individual's mental processes and information possession, while affective state reflects the emotions displayed by an individual in response to the environmental stimuli (Islam and Rahman, 2017; Eroglu, Machleit and Davis, 2001). Once a customer's cognition and affection have been well developed, he/she will display approach (positive valence) or avoidance (negative valence) behaviours within the community. The S-O-R framework provides academics with a valuable lens in understanding how physical community presence affects people's decision making while engaging with other individuals or the brand. However, this research focus simplifies the complexity of engagement and neglects the social perspective of a relationship developed over time.

The second focus is to include a social perspective in studying an online brand community and investigate how people's motivations drive their engagement in nature. Social exchange theory (SET) (Harrigan *et al.*, 2018; Jin *et al.*, 2015), social cognitive theory (SCT) (Lee, Kim and Kim, 2012), social identity theory (SIT) (Jin *et al.*, 2015), and social capital theory (SCT) (Chi, Harrigan and Xu, 2021) are recognised as dominant theories in guiding researchers in conceptualising online brand community engagement (OBCE).

Based on social identity, social cognitive, and social exchange theories, Jin *et al.* (2015) explored the underlying motivations of people's knowledge contribution behaviour in online social Q&A communities. In their studies, knowledge exchange behaviour is viewed as a social practice executed out of users' own wills. Social identity theory suggests that people have an instinctive desire to discover who they are and identify with some group (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). By answering questions such as "Who am I?" and "What am I?", individuals build up

distinct personal and social identities, which distinguish us from others (Jin *et al.*, 2015). As Golder and Donath (2004) state, establishing one's online identity provides significant motivation for knowledge contributors not only by assisting them in improving their reputations and self-esteem, but also by increasing the possibility of future reciprocation, which is rooted in social exchange theory. SIT explains individuals' fundamental desire for social interactions and their intentions to group with people who share similar values, interests, and mindsets towards an object. In 2021, Chi, Harrigan and Xu (2021) enriched contextual knowledge of existing findings and adopted social identity theory and social exchange theory to investigate the effects of social capital on customer brand engagement in online service communities. Specifically, three-dimensional social capital, namely structural, relational, and cognitive is discussed as an antecedent of customer engagement via the mediating construct of collective psychological ownership (CPO). Through both person-object and person-person interactions, CPO emerges (Pierce, Jussila and Li, 2018; Martinaityte, Unsworth and Sacramento, 2020; Chi, Harrigan and Xu, 2021). As stated by Wiggins (2018), when an OBC enables customers to express their social identities and fulfil one of the four fundamental needs, efficacy and effectance, having a place, self-identity, and stimulation, customers are more likely to view the community as an extended self and to commit to future community development (Chi, Harrigan and Xu, 2021) through manifestations of posting comments, providing feedback, replying to questions, and others (Karahanna, Xu and Zhang, 2015).

Considering social exchange theory, customers who acknowledge community support and fully understand the community are more likely to generate a series of positive emotions towards the brand and feel obligated to reciprocate the perceived benefits accrued from interpersonal communications (Chi, Harrigan and Xu, 2021). As customers become exposed to more brand-related traits (Kumar *et al.*, 2019), people's voluntary commitment increases interactivity both amongst customers and with the brand and, subsequently, leads to higher levels of customer brand engagement (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014). Social exchange theory explains why people help others, exchange knowledge, and generate WOM (Blanchard, 2008; Jin *et al.*, 2015), thus it has been recognised as one of the fundamental theories to aid understanding communication that occurs within social relationships (Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021). Apart from exploring OBCE from a social exchange point of view, it is also meaningful to discuss OBCE as a whole to understand its importance in promoting an organisation's performance. Thus, Fisher (2019) adopted social capital theory (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Chi, Harrigan and Xu, 2021) and stakeholder theory to discuss OBCs as key stakeholder groups of

brands and conceptualised their online community benefits, namely information, influence, and solidarity benefits, accounting for the success of firm performance. However, this research does not provide empirical evidence to validate the propositions, which addresses a gap for future studies.

Table 2 Selected definitions of online brand community

Author	Definition	Community type	Methodology	Key findings	Comments
Muniz and O'guinn (2001, p. 412)	A specialised non-geographically bound community, based on a structural set of social relations among admirers of a brand.	-	Ethnography	Three significant characteristics of brand communities are identified as shared consciousness, rituals, and traditions.	This paper takes a sociology perspective and defines brand community in the construct of community as a network of social relations linked by social bonds.
Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002, p. 3)	Online communities refer to computer-mediated social spaces of intentional actions in which members create content through ongoing communication processes.	SNSs	Online survey	By utilising the Model of Goal-directed Behaviour, virtual community participation, also referred to as "we-intentions" to participate, has been empirically proved as functions of both individual determinants (positive anticipated emotions and desires) and community influences (social identity).	/
Cova and Pace (2006, p. 1089)	Any group of people that obtain a shared interest in a brand and create a social universe rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary, and hierarchy.	Firm hosted community (Convenience product- my Nutella The Community)	Case study	Online brand communities are discussed as a new form of sociality and customer empowerment, within which customers exhibit their own expression of product through marks and rituals linked to the brand.	This paper draws on a model specialised in studying brand communities and customer empowerment in a firm-hosted convenience product community, which extend the validity and reliability of previous online brand community propositions.

Porter and Donthu (2008, p. 115)	An aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact based on a shared interest, where the interaction is supported or mediated by technology.	Firm hosted community	Online survey	The efforts of a virtual community to provide quality content and foster member embeddedness have positive effects on customer beliefs about the community sponsor.	This paper empirically examines the influence of sponsors' efforts on customers' beliefs, which will further influence customers' trust towards a firm-hosted virtual community.
Wirtz et al. (2013, p. 224)	The network of relations between providers and brand consumers who attach a certain value to engaging in a relationship with both providers and with the other users.	-	Literature review	Four OBC dimensions are concluded as brand orientation, internet-use, funding, and governance and three antecedents are proposed to influence customer brand engagement in an online community setting.	It extensively discusses online brand community from both consumers' and organisations' perspectives. However, no empirical evidence is offered to prove the model's validity.
Fisher (2019, p. 281)	Internet based platforms for communication and exchange among individuals with shared interests.	-	Literature review	Drawing on stakeholder theory and social capital theory, the author investigates the advantages, strategies, and characteristics of companies that contribute to a positive correction between their involvement in an online community and their overall performance. Information benefits, influence benefits, and solidarity benefits are addressed to explain how companies can take advantage of OBC.	This study systematically develops a conceptual framework investigating how online brand community benefit firm performance. However this study mainly focus on managers' perspectives and no empirical evidence is offered to prove the model's validity.\

2.4 Customer engagement in an OBC

Interactivity and value co-creation compose the core of OBCE through community members' learning, sharing, influencing, advocating, socialising, and co-developing activities (Yuan, Lin and Zhuo, 2016; Yuan *et al.*, 2020; Brodie *et al.*, 2011) . Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann (2005) firstly introduced the concept of "engaging with a community with shared interests" to the marketing field and defined brand community engagement (BCE) as "member's intrinsic motivation to interact and cooperate with community members" (p. 21). This definition focused on describing BCE as a merely attitudinal construct, which might neglect the behavioural aspect of engagement practice. Therefore, Wirtz *et al.* (2013) refined BCE as an identification with the OBC that culminates in interactive participation in the OBC (Brodie *et al.*, 2011).

In the same year, Brodie *et al.* (2013) adopted the netnographic approach to explore the dynamics of online brand engagement in a health and fitness virtual community and conceptualised a model examining customer engagement's multidimensionality. Findings of this research profoundly reveal a sequence of positive brand outcomes derived from CE, which includes enhanced customer loyalty, satisfaction, and brand trust. To enrich the contextual understanding of BCE, Kumar and Nayak (2018) described BCE as customers' altruistic behaviours towards other community members, dynamic participation in group events, and voluntary actions in support of community-endorsed initiatives to increase community value for oneself and others. This definition comprehensively illustrates the manifestations of engagement behaviour and emphasises the impact of engagement on increasing value for the customers (Ray, Kim and Morris, 2014; Zheng *et al.*, 2015; Kumar and Kumar, 2020). As indicated in Yuan *et al.* (2020) study, interaction among community members contributes to brand affinity and brand relationship development (Casaló, Flavián and Guinalíu, 2007; Habibi, Laroche and Richard, 2014), which makes the online brand community a powerful and reliable platform for consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-brand communications. In the following section, antecedents, consequences, and participation practice typology of online brand community engagement will be elaborated upon to address key conceptualisations of OBCE in previous marketing studies.

2.4.1 Online brand community engagement practices

Owing to its interactive and co-creative capabilities, the online brand community makes it an appropriate domain for researchers to conceptualise customer engagement (Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould, 2009; Hollebeek, Juric and Tang, 2017; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018). By observing and summarising what community members do, researchers can come up with novel research ideas and make contributions to existing knowledge (Van Heerde *et al.*, 2021). A distinct difference has been drawn in the customer engagement literature between engagement as a motivational state and engagement as a set of behaviours towards a brand (Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018). In order to generate a comprehensive framework summarising existing approaches in which individuals engage on digital platforms, Eigenraam *et al.* (2018) reviewed existing CE literatures and categorised these approaches into five themes of digital engagement practices (fun practice, learning practice, customer feedback, work for a brand, and talk about a brand). At a later phase, this consumer-based taxonomy has been empirically examined and served as a foundation for future OBCE research.

Reckwitz (2002, p. 250) defines practice as "routinised ways in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood". Under this definition, brand-related practices refer to a sequence of repetitive activities/behaviours executed by a group of individuals in a brand community context over time. According to Dholakia *et al.* (2009), virtual/online brand community engagement practices (V/OBCEPs) have the power to establish, maintain, and strengthen social bonds among community members through interactions that go beyond just brand-based communications. Moreover, in later studies (Gummerus *et al.*, 2012a; Ma and Chan, 2014), V/OBCEPs are examined to help community members build a shared sense of purpose, vision, and meaning, which increases members' perceptions of belonging and homogeneity in comparison to members of other groups, and increases community commitment.

Drawing on social practice theory, Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould (2009) reviewed extant literatures of brand community engagement in conjunction with data collected from nine online communities to conceptualise four OBCEP themes, through which consumers achieve values beyond those the brand creates. Four themes of practices are identified and described as social networking (welcoming, empathising, and governing), impression management (evangelising and justifying), community engagement (staking, milestoning, and badging) and brand use (grooming, customising, and commoditising) (Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould, 2009). First,

social networking practices focus on understanding community members' specific approaches to create, enhance, and sustain social bonds with other users (Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould, 2009). These behaviours strengthen the social or moral ties within the society and largely function in the intangible realm of the emotions. Since these practices are not purely developed upon branded traits, the bonding developed through daily or weekly communications enables customers to retain friendships beyond brand boundaries (Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould, 2009). Second, *impression management practices*, which include evangelising and justifying, aim to cultivate positive perceptions of the brand in the social world outside the brand community. Specifically, community members act as altruistic ambassadors and voluntarily spread positive words of the brand to other people outside the community. Third, practices that encourage members' growing participation with the brand community are known as *community engagement practices,* which comprise staking, milestoning, badging, and documenting. Although these practices use the term "engagement", they are different from the focus of "customer engagement" in this research because they only focus on activities which activate individuals' participation level. This set of practices enables community members to distinguish themselves from subsets of members and provides them with social capital. Fourth, *brand user practices*, which consist of grooming, customising, and commoditising, lead to how the focal brand is used. These practices occur when members elaborate on their speciality and personal needs while using the branded products or services.

Within these practices, intraconnections and interconnections work comprehensively to improve the value perceived by customers. The term "intraconnection" pertains to interactions among practices that have a shared objective, whereas "interconnection" refers to interactions among practices stemming from different themes. To illustrate, the use of badges, which represent milestones, not only enhances customer engagement level but also fosters brand utilisation by transforming the product into a commodity, thereby providing customers with added value beyond the initial purchase. In Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo (2004) research, virtual brand community engagement practices (VBCEP) are anticipated to provide consumers with five broad segments of values. First, *purposive value* indicates consumers' desire to acquire informative knowledge regarding the product/service (Zhou *et al.*, 2013), which reflects more cognitive and rational consumer motivations. Second, *self-discovery value* is found in people's intrinsic desire to explore their interests and learn about themselves through a series of social interactions. Third, *interpersonal connectivity value* is centred on people's need to connect with others who share the same consciousness to receive social support. Fourth,

entertainment value reflects consumers' desire to acquire positive emotions, such as pleasure and excitement, while engaging within online brand communities (Teichmann *et al.*, 2015). Lastly, *self-enhancement value* reveals consumers' desire to improve social status or gain acknowledgement from social peers through engaging with virtual brand communities (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002).

Although more attention has been paid to studying practice theory in social sciences, this perspective has only been adopted in the marketing literature recently (Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Hollebeek, Juric and Tang, 2017). Even though OBCEPs largely reflect people's behavioural engagement, practices nevertheless have significant underlying cognitive and emotional foundations, which might be neglected in primary practice related studies. Therefore, to fulfil the gap, Hollebeek and colleagues adopted a netnographic approach to reconceptualise virtual brand community engagement practices (VBCEP) (Hollebeek, Juric and Tang, 2017). Examining the existing findings proposed by Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould (2009), they empirically developed an eight-component OBCEP typology to guide future research. These practices, which comprise "greeting", "regulating", "assisting", "celebrating", "appreciating", "empathising", "mingling", and "ranking", contribute to maintaining the community's vision and strengthen shared community consciousness. Table 3 lists the definition and examples of online brand community practices in previous key literature.

Table 3 Definition and examples of online brand community practices adapted from Hollebeek, Juric and Tang (2017) and Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould (2009)

Category	Practice	Description
Social networking	Welcoming	Welcoming and guiding new members, helping them integrate into the community, and providing support in their brand education and socialisation within the community.
	Greeting	Politely welcoming new members and responding with pleasure to their joining and novel/future participation in the community.
	Empathising	Offering assistance and encouragement to fellow members, both in relation to brand-related trials and/or personal matters unrelated to the brand.
	Governing	Expressing and communicating the anticipated behaviours and conduct within the brand community.

Impression management	Evangelising	Sharing positive information about the brand, motivating others to engage with it, and enthusiastically promoting it to others.
	Justifying	Providing reasons or justifications for investing time and effort in the brand, both internally to community members and externally to outsiders and less active participants.
Community engagement	Staking	Acknowledging diversity among members of the brand community, highlighting both differences and similarities within the group.
	Documenting	Detailing the brand relationship journey in a narrative way.
	Milestoning	The practice of acknowledging significant events in brand ownership and consumption.
	Badging	The practice of converting milestones into symbolic representations.
Brand use	Grooming	Nurturing the brand or organising the most effective usage patterns.
	Customising	Adapting the brand to meet the collective or individual needs. This encompasses all endeavours to modify the product's factory specifications for improved performance.
	Commoditising	Distancing/approaching the marketplace. A valence behaviour regarding the marketplace.

2.4.2 Antecedents of customer engagement in an OBC

Former studies have identified several antecedents and factors that motivate OBCE from a macro perspective (Bazi, Filieri and Gorton, 2020; Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Wirtz *et al.*, 2013). For instance, Wirtz *et al.* (2013) identify three broad types of online brand community engagement antecedents.

First, brand-related factors include the customer's brand identification and the brand's symbolic function to the individual. Brand identification is a social construct that involves the integration of perceived brand identity into self-identity, which is similar to the concept of self-brand connections addressed by Escalas (2004). Self-brand connections are defined as "the operationalisation of the self-congruity mechanism in a framework in which the union between the consumer's identity and the brand's personality or image is determined"(Moliner,

Monferrer-Tirado and Estrada-Guillén, 2018, p. 389). Such identification may be a precursor to the customer's involvement and community affiliation. Under the lens of self-verification theory, individuals are motivated to verify, confirm, and maintain their self-identity (Elbedweihy *et al.*, 2016) by approaching the consumption situation that reinforces the self-concept (Moliner, Monferrer-Tirado and Estrada-Guillén, 2018). When people acknowledge specific brand identity as the extended self, they have high intrinsic motivations to engage in interpersonal conversation and cooperate with other members (Harrigan *et al.*, 2018). In other words, a strong self-brand connection encourages customers to consume products with distinct brand narratives (Harrigan *et al.*, 2018) and seek out to interact with other users who share the same enthusiasm (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013). For brands with explicit symbolic meaning, such as Apple, Nike and Tesla, the existence of online communities potentially reinforces the value of brands by providing a venue for members to express their devotion (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008).

At a later point, this connection is also conceptualised as brand intimacy in Simon and Tossan (2018) study. They believe that an individual's affiliation with a brand is not built upon a single event, but is developed through accumulative interactions over time. When a customer perceives a high level of intimacy towards a brand, he/she has more intentions to engage in open communications and commit to remaining in a relationship with a specific brand. Compare to perceived utility, brand intimacy is proved to serve as a stronger predictor of continuance intention of community engagement (Lee and Kwon, 2011). Despite the significance of self-brand connections to brand performance, limited knowledge is known regarding how self-band connections motivate engagement from different dimensions (Johnson Dretsch and Kirmani, 2014). To close this gap, Bowden and Mirzaei (2021) built upon self-schema theory (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010) and empirically examined the role of self-brand connection on the dimensionality of customer engagement within two comparative digital approaches of brand communication, namely consumer initiated online community and digital content marketing practice.

The result aligns with past findings by addressing self-brand connection significantly influencing all dimensions of customer engagement. From the cognitive perspective, individuals are more likely to select brands with clear narratives to connect to while dealing with specific cognitive schemata (Naumann, Bowden and Gabbott, 2020). For instance, Harrigan *et al.* (2018) used the Lonely Planet platform as an example to account for

connections between brand narratives (i.e. consumer-generated travel journals) and consumers' cognitive demands (i.e. seeking for genuine destination reviews). Positive experiences accrued from information processing lead to people's continuance intention of engaging with the brand (Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012; Vivek *et al.*, 2014). When consumers actively participate with a sense of purpose, they are more prone to experience positive emotions and specific feelings (Schmitt, 2012; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). As social exchange theory suggests, people will only invest resources when the brand creates value for them. Based on the above evidence, self-brand connection is demonstrated as an effective predictor of customer engagement in service context.

Second, social factors include social benefits and perceived social identity. Similar to a traditional community, the OBC facilitates community contact that offers its members a broader range of social and affective benefits (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001; Wirtz *et al.*, 2013). Community members can easily interact with both the brand and peers, thus increasing their chances of developing relational knowledge about the brand. Prior studies have revealed the importance of constant interactions on increasing sense of similarities within community members, which describes the degree to which a brand's customers perceived themselves as similar in attitudes, behaviours, and expectations related to their brands (Xiang *et al.*, 2016; Shen *et al.*, 2010; Simon and Tossan, 2018). Through seeking help and providing support to fellow members, customers gradually establish bonds with others. These bonds strengthen their feelings of affiliation with the brand and, in return, enhance their engagement willingness in the OBC (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013; Lin, Fan and Chau, 2014). As social identity theory suggests, psychological membership in different social groups contributes to an individual's self-identity. These identities have been maintained and reinforced via between-member interactions and in-group/out-group social comparisons (Hughes and Ahearne, 2010). Subsequently, when a specific community identity helps a member to achieve positive self-esteem, he/she is more willing to participate in community activities.

Third, functional drivers include utilitarian benefits, uncertainty avoidance, information quality, and rewards. In Dholakia *et al.* (2009) research, utilitarian benefits are directly extracted from answering questions, providing suggestions, introducing new knowledge, and other information-based support that a member receives from an OBC. They also propose information as the core of members' knowledge exchange and quality of information plays an important role in influencing people's perceived benefits. According to Porter and Donthu

(2008), members learn more efficiently when they have access to comprehensive and up-do-date information, and the OBC excels at fostering interactive learning and communications for the acquisition and integration of knowledge. In comparison to brand-related and social drivers, functional benefits are mostly derived from direct interaction with the community itself and exclude social connections with other social beings. In consequence, companies frequently adopt financial incentives, such as loyalty points, raffles, and price discounts, to trigger extrinsic motivations and facilitate active community participation (Chan *et al.*, 2014). This aligns with the insight introduced by Wirtz *et al.* (2013) of saying explicit normative incentives, such as requests for adherence to solidarity and reciprocity norms or contributions on a common goal, make the community's normative standards more apparent and, consequently, activate or heighten members' senses of obligation.

Apart from the above three categories of antecedents, some researchers examined OBCE from a micro perspective and identified it as a motivational state of existence (Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018). On this perspective, it is believed that people are aiming to achieve certain needs, goals or obtain resources through interacting with the brand representatives and other brand users (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). In this case, involvement, which refers to a customer's perception of the objects based on their own needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985) has been widely studied as a critical construct in influencing customer engagement (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014; De Vries and Carlson, 2014; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018; Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012; Dwivedi, 2015). Other than solely understanding people's behavioural intention, involvement is recognised as a cognitive, affective, or motivation construct in indicating an individual's state of mind. Specifically, a highly involved customer is more inclined to invest thoughts, emotions, and efforts into his/her preferred brand (Bowden, 2009), which in turn foster customer engagement. In line with former research, Harrigan *et al.* (2018) included CE multi-dimensionality while investigating the impacts of brand involvement on customer engagement on social media platforms. At a cognitive level, when a consumer perceives a higher level of involvement towards a brand, where viewing it as interesting, relevant or needed, he/she is more likely to relate and contribute knowledge in open communications. Affectively, the extent to which a consumer enjoys engaging with a brand is dependent on the extent to which they reflect a brand as exciting, appealing or fascinating (Gummerus *et al.*, 2012b). Lastly, from a behavioural perspective, the degree to which a consumer prefers to engage with one particular brand above others is related to how significant or needed he/she perceives a brand to be (Pansari and Kumar, 2017).

Furthermore, to gain deeper insights into the underlying rationales behind individuals' engagement behaviour, it is necessary for researchers to adopt relevant motivational theories across diverse disciplines. The term 'motivation' refers to elements that affect human behaviour and can either encourage or deter people from engaging in specific behaviours (Mpinganjira, 2014). One of the most widely acknowledged motivational theories in CE studies refers to self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2000). It is a macro theory that demonstrates connections between motivation, psychological needs, and well-being in social settings. SDT proposes that individuals have naturally evolved to be intrinsically motivated, engaged, and developmentally-oriented through integrated process (Japutra, Higueras-Castillo and Liebana-Cabanillas, 2022). It makes the erroneous assumption that these traits are part of what makes people human and cannot be developed through learning. Under SDT assumptions, human behaviour is regarded as proactive and growth-oriented (Deci and Ryan, 2012). Specifically, a person's participation in various activities supporting motives depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological requirements, which refer to autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Previous studies address that by satisfying these psychological demands; people's OBC involvement may increase by boosting their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Kelley and Alden, 2016). Intrinsic motivations are defined as actions driven by self-interest that produce internal achievement or perception, such as happiness or other positive sentiments (Yang, Asaad and Dwivedi, 2017), while extrinsic motivation refers to utilitarian incentives that individuals achieve to obtain after taking certain actions. These incentives include money, praise or other tangible resources derived from the external world (Yang, Asaad and Dwivedi, 2017).

In Bilro and Loureiro (2021) study, OBCE is discussed as a practical approach for individuals to receive hedonic (such as fun, enjoyment, entertainment, friendly environment or social status) and utilitarian rewards (monetary rewards, time-saving, deals or incentive, merchandise or prizes). Drawing upon SDT and the motivation measurement scale developed by Baldus, Voorhees and Calantone (2015), the authors' framework empirically examined how intrinsic (passion, connection, and self-expression) and extrinsic (seeking assistance, information, and validation) motivations affect hedonic and utilitarian needs fulfilment, and how these fulfilments influence individuals' subjective well-being and brand advocacy. It has been proved that intrinsic motivations are significant in driving individuals' OBCE through

satisfying both hedonic and utilitarian rewards. Within the intrinsic motives, the self-expression dimension, which indicates people's capabilities of expressing themselves freely, emerges as the most important aspect. Contrarily, extrinsic motives are examined to have a limited association with utilitarian rewards and are not significantly related to hedonic benefits. This is contrary to the results of previous studies, which reveal that people connect with others in OBCs to resolve issues relating to a product or service (Wiertz and De Ruyter, 2007), to share interests (De Valck, Van Bruggen and Wierenga, 2009), and to create affinities (Cova and Pace, 2006).

Similar propositions have been spotted in Thakur (2018) research that suggests that motivations stem from rational and emotional drivers. Rational drivers focus on the utilitarian perspective, which involves facts, logic, and quality; while emotional factors, which also refer to hedonic motives, are more subjective and involve the pursuit of pleasure, fun, and beauty (Mpinganjira, 2014). According to Schwartz and Bardi (2001), emotion is a significant component in influencing people's decision making and the positive or negative outcome will leave a further impact on decision makers' feelings. For example, in the study proposed by Pansari and Kumar (2017), emotion is described as an element resulting in indirect engagement, which includes referring, influencing, and providing feedback. By adopting the trust-commitment theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), customer engagement is considered to occur only after a relationship is formed between customers and brands. When a relationship pertains to emotional bonding, it will consequently progress to a later status as "engagement". Under this lens, in comparison to cognitive evaluation, emotion is recognised as a more effective tool in predicting people's behaviour. Dove's "real beauty sketches"(Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Dessart and Pitardi, 2019), with a total of 114 million views in 2015 (Kolowich, 2015), to some extent validate the credibility of the above propositions. Experts explain the reason accounting for the most shared video is because "the video elicited the intense emotional responses of 'warmth', 'happiness' and 'knowledge' from its target audience and thus motivating them to share with their friends and families." (Pansari and Kumar, 2017, p. 295)

In Van Heerden and Wiese (2021) research, six basic motives have been extracted from the literature (Kwon, D'angelo and Mcleod, 2013; Tsai and Men, 2013) to account for consumers' motivations for engaging in Facebook brand communities. These motives have been further segregated into the above two categories - utilitarian motivations (information, remuneration, and convenience) and hedonic motivations (brand likeability, interpersonal utility, and

entertainment). After the developed framework was applied to a wide spectrum of community respondents, hedonic motives were shown to be stronger than utilitarian motivations, which may be indicative of engagement connectedness.

This result is in line with the finding proposed by Osei-Frimpong (2019) and contrasted with that found in Pelletier and Blakeney Horky (2015) and Parker and Wang (2016) research. Specifically, since customer participation in social brand interaction is self-driven, it is suggested to be enjoyable, entertaining, and fascinating. Therefore, posts that are visually appealing, rather than just informative, or content that evokes an emotional response like emphasising a brand's CSR initiatives, could be more effective. Furthermore, within the proposed hedonic motivations (Van Heerden and Wiese, 2021), 'brand likeability' was revealed to have the strongest impact and brand enthusiasts are perceived to have a higher level of brand love and want to share their passion for the brand with other people. Additionally, Van Heerden and Wiese (2021) also used motivation-hygiene theory (Herzberg, 2017) to account for the insignificance of utilitarian motives in affecting people's participation on Facebook communities. Other than leaving no impacts on people's OBCE on Facebook communities, utilitarian motivations (i.e. easy to use, informative, and rewarding) serve as a basis to entice people to join. While SDT provides researchers with a theoretical foundation in comprehending the causes and effects of individual intrinsic motivations to engage in the OBC, it emphasises the behavioural aspect of engagement, which simplifies individuals' cognitive and affective perceptions. To fulfil this gap, more researchers are adopting use and gratifications theory (U&GT) to uncover cognitive and affective needs, which people try to achieve throughout engagement procedures.

The U&GT was introduced by Elihu (1974) to examine theoretical elements of user motivations for media usage and selection with an emphasis on intrinsic psychological needs (Stafford, Stafford and Schkade, 2004). When a consumer's unique demands are met by a medium, he/she is more likely to utilise that same medium in the future (Hausman and Siekpe, 2009). With technological advancement, the U&GT has been adapted and applied in a more emergent media context such as social networking sites (SNSs) (Pai and Arnott, 2013; Phua, Jin and Kim, 2017).

Numerous motives explaining why people consume web-based media have been found in earlier studies. For instance, Ko, Cho and Roberts (2005) outlined a set of motivations for

individuals utilising the Internet including information-seeking, convenience, entertainment, and social interaction. In the context of online platforms, information gratification pertains to the website's ability to furnish valuable and supportive information (Luo, 2002; Choi *et al.*, 2016; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). Chen, Clifford and Wells (2002) discovered that informativeness holds the greatest sway over users' attitudes toward websites, encompassing their satisfaction with the site. Convenience assesses the users' perception of the website's simplicity, intuitiveness, and user-friendliness (Srinivasan, Anderson and Ponnavolu, 2002; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). Kim, Ma and Kim (2006) also noted a positive correlation between website convenience and user satisfaction, influencing the intention to make purchases on the website. Entertainment gratification gauges the extent to which users find a website enjoyable and entertaining (Luo, 2002; Choi *et al.*, 2016; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000), with this aspect contributing significantly to the formation of a positive attitude, satisfaction, and loyalty. As the online context integrates a series of instant communication features, individuals also use social media to satisfy their social interaction needs. According to Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), social interaction measures the degree to which users engage with others, express their social identity, and interact with fellow users on the website. Numerous studies, including those by Huang *et al.* (2007) and Pentina, Prybutok and Zhang (2008) have identified social interaction as a powerful motivator for website usage and emphasised that individuals leverage technology to connect with others and establish relationships with those who share similar interests. In a more recent study, Whiting and Williams (2013) proposed ten causes of why people use social media in general. These causes include connection, information seeking, leisure, entertainment, relaxation, expression of opinions, communication utility, convenience utility, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge of others.

However, the fundamental issues with these earlier investigations are their applications of quantitative and questionnaire-based methodology. By quantitatively analysing 'gratifications', these studies fall short in their attempt to thoroughly investigate abstract ideas. When attributes and concepts are factor analysed to produce higher-level constructs, the results may vary greatly if the underlying basic motivations behind the traits are not comprehended (Wolfinbarger and Gilly, 2003; Pai and Arnott, 2013). More specifically, methods like factor analysis, which shows the fundamental functions of attributes, are of little utility because the exposed orthogonality does not provide connections to the end state of the chain, which refers to gratification under the lens of U&G theory. Therefore, by considering Katz's (1974) gratifications to be equivalent to Gutman's (1988) ends, Pai and Arnott (2013) combined the

ideas of U&GT and the means-end chain (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) to uncover the hidden motivation behind people's adoption of SNSs. Four types of gratifications (ends) were identified: belonging, hedonism, self-esteem, and reciprocity.

Pai and Arnott (2013) revealed that people used social media to satisfy their needs for communication and cooperation with others. Belonging, which encompasses the terms of friendship, affiliation, intimacy, identification, and being loved as synonyms, has been acknowledged in extensive anthropology (Hill and Dunbar, 2003), sociology (Doyal and Gough, 1984), and psychology research (Cacioppo, Berntson and Decety, 2010). According to Cacioppo, Berntson and Decety (2010), humans can only exist in a web of relationships since they are inherently social creatures. People, therefore, value the capacity to share private information via SNSs features, which enable them to upload photos, participate in instant messaging, and play interactive games.

Hedonism, which involves positive emotions such as 'happy', 'fun', 'interesting', and 'entertaining', derives from the combination of the customisation feature of one's own page and visiting the content created by others. Customisability, as a result of creating a sense of uniqueness, frequently entails effort to create pages that people want to browse for their own curiosity, to spread gossip, to offer interesting new facts, and to leave comments on the pages of other people (Pai and Arnott, 2013). This finding has been affirmed and enriched in Lim and Kumar (2019) study by discussing hedonic motives as significant predictors of an individual's commitment level of brand online social networking (BOSN) sites. It is, therefore, recommended that BOSN should be a playful activity in which people can participate in.

Accordingly, users' capacity to generate 'self-publicity' by personalising their own profiles and landing sites leads to the development of self-esteem (Pai and Arnott, 2013). Specifically, the distinctiveness of users' profiles and admiration for their popularity are the foundations of respect received from peers. This supports Flanagin and Metzger (2001) assertion that one reason for people's Internet usage is to improve their social status within a crowd, such as to feel important or to influence others. In later research proposed by Zhou *et al.* (2023), self-esteem has been specified to a collective setting and has been proved to play a mediating role in affecting the relationship between brand community social responsibility and brand commitment. Compared to personal self-esteem, collective self-esteem stresses the sense of self-worth, satisfaction, attachment, and respect that individuals feel in their group (Shang and

Sargeant, 2016), thus reflecting the distinction between "ours" and "theirs". This finding expanded the scope of research on the U&GT to a wider community setting and delved into how collective self-esteem shapes individuals' sense of unique group identity that sets them apart from others. This group identity strengthens individuals' level of commitment to the community and their willingness to contribute to its intellectual development.

The last value refers to reciprocity, also defined as the desire to give back. It derives from the trust developed over time in both interpersonal communications among SNSs users and users' memberships within the community (Pai and Arnott, 2013). More specifically, users gain valuable insights through commenting on posts, exchanging and generating ideas, and establishing trust in the mutual support of in-group members through frequent viewing and engagement with in-group members' pages. It also has been noted that a small group provides a more effective environment for building trust, compared to a network-based community where members mainly focused on the venue and only have shallow connections with one another (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004). Although the technology advancement has enriched the social presence of OBCs and users perceive mutual understandings towards a brand, people remain hesitant to use the platform for interactions that are highly personal and revealing without a certain degree of trust in the reciprocity of others (Pai and Arnott, 2013).

The aforementioned theories have established strong foundations for future research to explore the underlying reasons behind people's engagement in online behaviour and content creation. However, the findings from previous studies are scattered and do not offer a comprehensive picture, leaving room for future research to develop a comprehensive framework to explain people's motivations for engaging in OBCE, especially from a micro perspective. Thus, the following section provides more in-depth understanding of personal value in the OBCE context.

2.4.3 Consequences of customer engagement in an OBC

Scholars have also explored the consequences of online brand community engagement (OBCE) (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013; Yuan *et al.*, 2020; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). The consequences of customer engagement can be viewed as customers' direct or indirect contributions to the company. Firstly, OBCE can boost a company's organisational performance by increasing sales and profits (Pansari and Kumar, 2017), raising purchases and brand usage intentions (Harrigan *et al.*, 2018), and heightening brand equity through enhanced customer relationships

(Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014). As discussed above, an online brand community enables consumers to exchange and have access to branded traits without time and geographical boundaries, which further encourages them to contribute thoughts and emotions through consumer-to-consumer or consumer-to-brand communications. As suggested by Hollebeek (2011a), consumers who engage with a brand are likely to develop attitudes from beliefs more quickly than consumers who are not engaged. While these attitudes are favourable, they in turn inform further behavioural actions, which refer to brand usage intent in Harrigan *et al.* (2018) study (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017). This proposition has its roots in social exchange theory, where the tangible (i.e., money) and intangible resources (i.e., knowledge, relationship with other community members) obtained by a consumer through engaging cognitively, affectively and behaviourally with a brand, lead them to interact with that brand further (Harrigan *et al.*, 2018) for reciprocate purposes. In Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014) study, effect and activation are found to be more important in determining user intent in comparison to cognitive engagement.

Secondly, OBCE improves brand-related outcomes including brand evaluation, satisfaction, loyalty, and brand advocacy (Bowden *et al.*, 2017; Hollebeek, Juric and Tang, 2017; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019; Naumann, Bowden and Gabbott, 2020; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018; Yuan *et al.*, 2020). In Bowden (2009) study, OBCE was described as a sufficient determinant in driving brand satisfaction, while OBCs meet or exceed consumers' expectations in meeting their goals (Woisetschläger, Hartleb and Blut, 2008). Specifically, consumers tend to acquire knowledge and increase social interactions with other parties through participating in an OBC. Consumers are found to pay more attention to brand communications and invest more time reflecting on past brand encounters when they acquire informative knowledge that satisfies their utilitarian needs (Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021). This reflects the cognitive dimension of CE and implies the role of CE in improving customer satisfaction and other relevant constructs, such as generating positive WOM and retaining loyalty in product/service consumptions (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). According to Odin, Odin and Valette-Florence (2001), brand loyalty is defined as " a repeat purchasing behaviour in conditions of strong sensitivity to the brand" (p.78), which implies that customers place great value on the brand in question instead of repurchasing due to simple product/service attributes. Existing studies on the relationship between engagement and loyalty demonstrates that brand engagement strengthens loyalty with strong psychological ties (Dwivedi, 2015; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014). One of the main drivers of the existence of these communities and the development of brand loyalty appears to be the capacity

of brand communities to foster vivid and interactive connections between the brand and community through repeated interactions (Brodie *et al.*, 2013) and active content creation. Previous research suggests loyalty and engagement as constructs that perceive high complexity; however, little knowledge exists in knowing the individual impact of each engagement dimension of customer engagement on loyalty. To fill in this gap, Dessart, Aldás-Manzano and Veloutsou (2019) conducted a quantitative research in identifying the role of the individual CE dimension on brand loyalty development and proposed that affective engagement, followed by behavioural engagement, are found to be more powerful in predicting loyalty to cognitive engagement. This finding is aligned with the study conducted by Dwivedi (2015). Specifically, brand affection and attachment have a positive impact on brand usage intent, while a consumer's cognitive processing fails to do so (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014). As a consequence, cognitive engagement appears to contribute less to promoting brand loyalty.

Thirdly, OBCE generates customer-related outcomes such as facilitating WOM (Naumann, Bowden and Gabbott, 2020), knowledge contribution (Ray, Kim and Morris, 2014), and commitment and brand advocacy (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013). According to Azer and Alexander (2018), customers are more willing to take the viewpoints of other customers as authoritative information, compared to brand-initiated communications. It is because customers could adhere to a shared obligation to notify others in order to lower service risk and minimise their dependency on conventional marketing communication (Azer and Alexander, 2018; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). By including the valence of CE, the effectiveness of positive CE in encouraging users to participate in WOM, by sharing their experiences as an unofficial "spokesperson" with others, has been examined (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Sashi, Brynildsen and Bilgihan, 2019). Specifically, positively engaged customers generally have positive attitudes towards the company (Molinillo, Anaya-Sánchez and Liébana-Cabanillas, 2020) and are more likely to leave post-purchase reviews, suggest and commend their favourable service providers, and frequently persuade others to participate with the focal brand and the larger brand community (Islam and Rahman, 2016). When these customers feel satisfied with perceived benefits/values provided by the brand, they would generate positive WOM to acknowledge their sense of satisfaction in their relationship with the brand. Surprisingly, in Hollebeek and Chen (2014) study, negative CE has been proved to perceive a stronger driving impact on WOM. This phenomenon may occur due to the heightened emotional intensity of negative CE and the subsequent contagious effects they have, including feelings of hatred, dislike, and contempt towards an organisation and its reputation (Dolan *et al.*, 2016).

Consequently, it can be observed that the strong emotional connection arising from CE strengthens customers' inclination to engage in word-of-mouth (WOM) communication and promote the brand further through referrals.

As discussed, the OBC serves as an efficient tool in generating positive interactions between customers and companies and it is important for marketers to incorporate specific cultural settings into OBCE strategy design (Fisher, 2019). As a consequence, more and more attention has been paid to analyse OBCE in comparative markets to examine the generalisability of existing propositions.

2.5 Cultural values

Culture has been one of the most researched phenomena in social sciences and scholars have described culture as an important factor in influencing people's emotional processing of their social surroundings that further affects their behaviours (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2011; Mccort and Malhotra, 1993; Samaha, Beck and Palmatier, 2014; Baumgartner and Steenkamp, 2001). Based on such a background, it is imperative for managers to acquire knowledge about specific cultures before they develop suitable marketing strategies to communicate with target audiences and satisfy their needs. This sort of managerial application enables researchers to examine the validity of existing theories or models in different cultural environments, thus distinguishing their extent of generalisability (Gupta, Pansari and Kumar, 2018). As OBCE has been discussed as a complex construct earlier, it is worth taking cultural values into account while investigating people's engagement preferences.

2.5.1 Defining culture

Unlike other macro influences, culture has been recognised as a relatively abstract construct. As one of the earliest definitions, culture refers to "the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habit acquired by a man as a member of society" (Mccort and Malhotra, 1993, p. 97). This definition provides a profound theoretical foundation for future researchers to study the impacts of culture on other aspects. In line with this, Usunier (1996) placed more focus on describing culture as the sum of people's behavioural standards and patterns that are shared by a social group. This definition discussed culture as a collective phenomenon across society and sharedness is the key distinguishing cultural phenomenon from individual phenomenon. Upon these consensuses,

Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2005) refined culture as the shared mental programming that sets apart individuals belonging to different groups.

Culture is a complex concept, and it significantly influences an individual's value system formation directly and indirectly (Mccort and Malhotra, 1993). Within McCort and Malhotra's (1993) research, culture is assumed to leave direct impacts on forming society symbols as well as normative forces. These construct meanings are later transmitted through constant communications among individuals and extensively affect the individuals' intrapersonal constructs such as perception, motivation, categorisation processes, and cognitive structure (Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Berry *et al.*, 1997; Mccort and Malhotra, 1993). In other words, people interpret their experiences based on their prior developed cognitive structure and, thus, the associated performance will potentially enforce existing cultural knowledge or amend it. Although culture is relatively stable and consistent, it remains changing accordingly. These changes derive from either people's intrinsic desires to progress or external forces to revolute such as technology innovation.

2.5.2 Cultural values dimensions

In 2017, De Mooij (2017) reviewed previous cross-cultural studies and demonstrated several dimensional models of national culture as invaluable frameworks for researchers. These dimensional models facilitate deeper insights into international marketing and further explain consumer behaviour differences in a global marketing context. Widely cited frameworks in marketing studies include Hofstede's six-dimensional model (Hofstede, 1980), GLOBE model (House, Javidan and Dorfman, 2001), Schwartz's value model (Schwartz, 1992; 1999), and Yoo's individual-level cultural model (Yoo, Donthu and Lenartowicz, 2011).

2.5.2.1 Hofstede's cultural model

As one of the most applied models in international marketing studies, Hofstede's cultural model (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2005) has been applied to explain consumer behaviour differences in multiple subjects such as Internet shopping (De Mooij, 2017), new product development (Stremersch and Tellis, 2004), perceptions of advertising appeals (De Mooij, 2017), and relationship marketing (Samaha, Beck and Palmatier, 2014). Hofstede's cultural model incorporates the dimensions of individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty

avoidance, masculinity/femininity, long term/short term orientation, and indulgence/restraint (Hofstede, 1980). Table 4 lists more information about Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions.

According to Soares, Farhangmehr and Shoham (2007), Hofstede's (1980) cultural model is useful for researchers to formulate hypotheses for comparative cross-cultural studies via applying national scores in investigating social surroundings at the macro level. For example, Madupu and Cooley (2010) adopted Hofstede's individualism/collectivism dimension in analysing consumer's motivations in participating in online brand communities in the U.S. and India. However, this study lacks empirical evidence to prove its validity. To fulfil this gap, Roy *et al.* (2018) empirically tested the influence of service fairness, value-in-use, and affective trust on customer engagement behaviour (CEB) in two different cultural settings to further draw a conclusion that the CEB structure is consistent across individualist and collectivist countries.

Table 4 Summary of Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980)

Dimension	Definition	Example
Collectivism/Individualism	The extent to which people rely on in-group members to support themselves as well as their immediate family in exchange for loyalty.	Collectivism: in a collective country, people's identity is based on the social system to which they belong. Individualism: individualistic-low context communication with explicit verbal communication (Consumers get to the consuming point fast).
Power Distance	The extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.	

Masculinity/Femininity	Achievement and determination are recognised as dominant values in a masculine society, while compassion and desires for quality of life are recognised as main values for a feminine society.	Masculine society: male and female roles are differentiated. The product demonstrating status, such as jewellery and luxury goods, is proved to have good sales in such a society. Feminine society: males and female roles might overlap.
Uncertainty Avoidance	The degree of which people feel threatened by unexpected incidents and try to avoid these situations.	Strong (High) uncertainty avoidance: rules and formality are needed to structure life. Consumers are less open to accept innovation. Weak (Kolowich) uncertainty avoidance: more open innovations and more willing to try new stuff. People tend to have more positive attitudes towards life.
Long/short term Orientation (L/STO)	The degree of which a society displays a proactive future-oriented perspective, rather than a controversial historic focus.	LTO: includes innovativeness, proactivity, and progression. STO: includes personal steadiness and stability, respect for tradition, and the pursuit of peace of mind.

Although Hofstede's cultural model has won attention from both practitioners and academics, it received extensive criticisms from other researchers (De Mooij, 2015). Specifically, this model was primarily developed as a result of a consultancy project and lacked empirical

examination (Javidan *et al.*, 2006). In Javidan *et al.'s* (2006) comparative study, Hofstede's cultural model is critiqued as too simple for researchers to come up with critical results. The wide application of Hofstede's cultural model is also problematic as it limits further development of other potential dimensions based on stronger theoretical support. Another criticism refers to the outdated practicality of the framework as the cultural values have been gradually enriched over time (De Mooij, 2015). Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers apply a wider range of cultural models dependent on their specific research question of interest such as the GLOBE model shown below.

2.5.2.2 GLOBE cultural model

The GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness) model is one of the most widely used models in cross-cultural studies (De Mooij, 2018). The goal of GLOBE is to complement earlier cultural models by developing an empirically-based theory aiming to conceptualise, describe, and predict the impact of certain cultural variables on leadership and organisational behaviour. After examining middle managers from 951 organisations in 62 societies, nine cultural labels are demonstrated as uncertainty avoidance, power distance, two types of collectivism, gender egalitarianism, assertiveness, future orientation, performance orientation, and human orientation (House, Javidan and Dorfman, 2001).

2.5.2.3 Schwartz value model

The psychologist Schwartz (1992) measured values both at the individual and the society levels. This resulted in ten motivational value types at the individual level labelled as hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, universalism, self-direction, and stimulation. At the society level, seven different value types are labelled as embeddedness, intellectual, affective autonomy, hierarchy, egalitarianism, mastery, and harmony.

Different from Hofstede's (1980) and GLOBE's (House, Javidan and Dorfman, 2001) cultural models, Schwartz (1994) cultural dimensions are focused on examining individual's values and further develop average value hierarchies. Preceding researchers argued that it is difficult to distinguish the extent to which personal values hierarchies differ in society since individuals form or change their values based on current economic development and personal events. This makes it difficult for researchers to examine a group of people's values in different social settings (Inglehart, 1997; Lee *et al.*, 2011). To fulfil this gap, Schwartz and Bardi (2001)

suggested that although people will perceive different opinions on certain subjects, their value structures will still reflect their value compatibility and conflicts to some extent. In other words, personal value will leave direct influences on people's attitude and further leave impacts on their behaviours. Under such a theoretical background, Schwartz's value model has been widely applied in studying multiple subjects such as altruistic behaviour (Lönnqvist *et al.*, 2006), life satisfaction (Hofer, Chasiotis and Campos, 2006), and ethical decision making (Fritzsche and Oz, 2007). However, very little study is specialised in the marketing field, which could addresses a gap for future studies.

Lee *et al.* (2011) undertook Schwartz's (1999) value model and introduced the concept of 'consumption' as their contextual foundation. Lee *et al.* (2011) clustered ten individual values into two main dimensional representations, which are openness-to-change versus conservation and self-enhancement versus self-transcendence. Through their studies, two similar subgroups in different cultural settings are examined and the findings proved the validity of Schwartz's cultural model in predicting people's personal value priorities. Their studies not only contributed further to Schwartz (1994) cultural model regarding research samples (students and teachers for Schwartz's sample), but also proved the validity of Schwartz's model at a macro-level.

Previous work provides future researchers with evidence that Schwartz's value (1999) model is applicable in predicting people's personal value and is related influence on people's attitude development (Lee *et al.*, 2011; Schwartz and Bardi, 2001). These results will be valuable for further study regarding the value system in a global context. Most of the current cross-cultural studies are based on Hofstede's (1980) cultural model and this model is developed without solid theoretical support (Javidan *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, it is not the best approach to account for the complexity of people's value formation and other associated effects on causing behavioural differences. The GLOBE model extensively enriched Hofstede's cultural dimensions and optimised the model's theoretical foundation (Javidan *et al.*, 2006). However, it is more specialised in understanding cultural influences on leadership qualities, which is not the most suitable model in studying an individual's engagement performance in online community surroundings.

2.5.3 Cultural values and consumer behaviour

In previous literatures, cultural values differences have been proved to have great impacts in a series of marketing considerations, including social media adoption (Tsai and Men, 2017), sustainable behaviour (Minton, Kahle and Kim, 2015), self-concept (Pekerti and Thomas, 2015), product ownership (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002), adoption to innovation (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002), technology acceptance (Ashraf, Thongpapanl and Auh, 2014), consumer satisfaction process (Morgeson Iii, Sharma and Hult, 2015), customer lifetime value (Kumar and Pansari, 2016b), and other related marketing constructs. Table 5 lists the relevant papers of cross-cultural marketing studies and explicitly identifies researchers' focus on cultural dimensions, related marketing constructs, and affiliated findings.

With the advancement of information communication technology, many marketing researchers have shifted their focus from traditional markets to virtual markets, which enrich the existing knowledge in an online environment. For instance, Lin and Kalwani (2018) drew on signalling theory to develop a conceptual model. Their model specialises in studying the influence of cultural values on eWOM signalling and projection. Within their studies, culture has been quantitatively examined as a critical factor in affecting the extent to which eWOM perception influences projection in service exchange. The dimension of uncertainty avoidance within the model is suggested to account for this phenomenon. However, since this study simply applied Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension model as its theory support, it might neglect the complexity of an individual's cognition development and simplify the nature of consumer's referral behaviour. This proposes a gap for future studies.

Apart from understanding consumer's motivations of generating eWOM, a significant concept within social media marketing-customer engagement is examined in a global context within Gupta, Pansari and Kumar's study (2018). Based on existing knowledge of Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, Gupta, Pansari and Kumar (2018) designed a comprehensive model investigating the nature among concepts of cultural values, level of customer involvement, brand value. and convenience. Although this research extended the existing customer engagement model (Pansari and Kumar, 2017) to a global context, it does not have any empirical evidence to prove its validity, which cultivates an opportunity for future research.

It can be noticed that even though culture has been explicitly discussed in past marketing studies from different perspectives (organisation/ individual), most of them mainly applied Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension as their theoretical support. This could pose limitations

of simplifying the inherently complex nature of national culture and neglect the chemistry among diverse cultural components as well as their associated effects on consumer behaviour. Subsequently, it will be valuable to criticise the existing cultural values models and generate a deeper understanding of how national culture influences consumer behaviour, particularly customer engagement in an online community setting. Table 5 lists the key findings in prior cross-cultural marketing studies and explicitly identifies the research focus on cultural dimensions, related marketing constructs, and affiliated findings.

Table 5 Selected literatures of cross-cultural studies

Author	Culture dimension	Marketing construct	Key findings	Research type
Steenkamp, Ter Hofstede and Wedel (1999)	Hofstede (1980); Hofstede and Bond (1988) Individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity	**Consumer innovativeness:** The predisposition to buy new and different products and brands, rather than remain with previous choices and consumption patterns (Hirschman, 1980).	1) Consumers in more individualistic and more "masculine" countries tend to be more innovative. 2) Innovativeness was found to be lower in national culture emphasising uncertainty avoidance. 3) The negative relation between resultant conservation and innovativeness was stronger in high uncertainty avoidance countries. 4) The negative effect of consumer ethnocentrism was stronger in countries that were relatively more collectivistic.	Empirical
Madupu and Cooley (2010)	Hofstede (1980) Individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity	**Participation behaviour** **Brand community characteristics**	1) The "giving information", "social-integration", "self-discovery" and "status enhancement" motives are proved to be stronger in collective cultures, while the "receiving information" motive is proved to be stronger in individualistic cultures. 2) Three proposed community characteristics are different in different cultures. For instance, the feelings of consciousness of moral responsibility are stronger in collectivist cultures.	Empirical
De Mooij and Hofstede (2011)	Hofstede (1980, 1991) Individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance	**Adoption and Diffusion of Innovations** **Complaint**	**1) Product Ownership** For instance, people from low uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to present more active attitude towards health and invest more on fitness-related products.	Systematic literature review

| | | | 2) **Adoption and Diffusion of Innovations**
People from lower level of uncertainty avoidance cultures are more open to innovations and more willing to adopt new technologies while people from strong uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to act more conservatively in innovation adoption.

3) **Complaint**
People from collective cultures are less likely to complain when they experience problems in public, but they prefer to complain in groups. | |
| Gupta, Pansari and Kumar (2018) | Hofstede (1980)

Individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and long/short term orientation | **Customer engagement:**
The mechanics of a customer's value addition to the firm through direct and/or indirect contribution (Pansari and Kumar, 2017, p. 295).

Involvement:
A customer's involvement refers to the degree of connection a customer has in regard to a brand deriving from his/her implicit needs, values, and benefits obtained from the brand (Zaichkowsky, 1985).

Customer satisfaction:
A customer's satisfaction is defined as the extent to which customer-perceived | Relevant cultural dimensions have been applied to discuss the impact of national culture on the proposed relationship between emotion as well as satisfaction and CE through a series of marketing constructs such as involvement, brand value, and convenience.

Several significant propositions were raised. For instance, uncertainty avoidance is recognised as an important dimension in affecting customers' demands for convenience and further influencing customers' brand value perception. Moreover, individualism/collectivism remains a dominant dimension in predicting all types of marketing activities, such as involvement and convenience. | Conceptual |

		positive outcome with a brand associated with the brand feature (Oliver, 2014). **Convenience** refers to the time and effort that customers consume in the purchase or use of a product (Brown, 1990).		

2.5.4 Personal values and OBCE

Values are the end result of the evaluative process and are regarded as key cognitive components that inspire and motivate behavioural responses (Zeithaml, 1988). They are thought to be the most fundamental aspect of a person's belief system and the most abstract of the social cognitions (Homer and Kahle, 1988) that serve as models for producing attitudes and behaviours (Bagozzi, Bergami and Leone, 2003). According to Schwartz and Bilsky (1987), values are cognitive representations of specific universal human needs such as biological needs, the desire for social contact, and the social institutional expectations on individuals. Since values are culturally ingrained, they are universal and stable enough to serve as the guidelines or standards regulating behaviour, perceptions, and personality traits (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987), which transcend multiple circumstances. In his later studies, Schwartz (1992) defined personal values as a desirable objective that varies in importance and acts as a person's compass in life. Under this lens, personal values have drawn academics' attention in recent years (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988; Kim, 2020; Marbach *et al.*, 2019) and have been described as crucial in shaping not just consumers' purchasing decisions, but also how they experience consumption (Holweg, Luo and Oliver, 2009). When forming attitudes or making decisions about a brand, many cognitive processes centre on the value system of the consumer. Moreover, individual values also organise the brand meaning that is stored in the knowledge structure of consumers. Marketers are becoming more aware of the influence that human values have on customer decision making and understanding consumers' values and value systems is one of the most effective methods to engage and connect with them. Theories of personal values, thus, played an important role in explaining the driving forces behind particular behaviours and attitudes in existing marketing studies (Jeng and Yeh, 2016; Mai and Olsen, 2015; Marbach, Lages and Nunan, 2016).

Although there are many viewpoints discussing personal values, Schwartz and Rubel (2005) listed six key elements that are frequently present. First, values are a set of beliefs that, when activated, are specifically connected to affect and elicit emotions. Second, values refer to desirable goals that spur action and conduct. Particularly, people take actions in pursuit of their objectives, which are sparked by the desire to bring about a value-based action. Third, values transcend specific actions and situations, which make them distinct from attitudes and norms (which emphasise specific actions, objects or situations). For example, if a person values

honesty and obedience, it will show in how they behave and react in a variety of contexts including work, social situations, and communications. This expands on the idea that an individual's personal values guide his/her daily decision making and serve as a set of rules and criteria for evaluating people, actions, and events. In addition, Schwartz and Rubel (2005) also assumed that people's values are ranked according to their importance to them, and this hierarchy identified them as unique individuals. This feature accounts for the dramatic value differences between individuals. Lastly, behaviour and action are influenced by the relative importance of various values. An individual's behaviour typically can be associated with more than one value. The compromise between competing values is what guides behaviour; these values influence action only to the extent that they are applicable in a given situation and important to the individual.

Derived from above presumptions, a sequence of scales demonstrating people's values has been developed. As the first comprehensive scale of human values applied to a marketing discipline, Rokeach (1973) Value Survey determined that values evolve along two separate dimensions: the personal objectives that one may have and behaviour that an individual may exhibit to achieve these objectives. Two levels of values were identified as terminal values, which indicate the desirable end state of existence, and instrumental values, which refer to the ideal modes of conduct through which terminal values can be achieved. Table 6 lists eighteen instrumental values and eighteen terminal values.

Table 6 Rokeach Value Survey (1973)

Instrumental values	Terminal values
Ambitious	A comfortable life
Broad-minded	An exciting life
Capable	A sense of accomplishment
Cheerful	A world at peace
Clean	A world of beauty
Courage	Equality
Forgiving	Family security
Helpful	Freedom
Honest	Happiness
Imaginative	Inner harmony
Independent	Mature love
Intellectual	National security
Logical	Pleasure
Loving	Salvation
Obedient	Self-respect

Polite	Social recognition
Responsible	True friendship
Self-controlled	Wisdom

The use of scales to measure values has faced criticism due to various limitations, including the loss of information caused by ranking orderings, the absence of ties, the demanding nature of the ranking process, and the applicability of values to real-life situations (Homer and Kahle, 1988). To address these concerns, Kahle, Beatty and Homer (1986) introduced the List of Values (LOV) scale and conducted an empirical evaluation using a national random sample. While previous studies have identified external and internal values as the two dimensions of values, Kahle, Beatty and Homer (1986) emphasised that certain value loadings may be context-specific, even though the dual dimensions generally remain consistent. In 1992, the Schwartz (1992) introduced another significant value scale, identifying ten basic human values, including power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, compassion, conformity, tradition, and security. These values are normally presented with a circle structure displaying their interconnections and can be segregated into two higher-order constructs, namely self-enhancement (i.e. achievement, power) versus self-transcendence (i.e., universalism, benevolence) and openness to change (i.e. self-direction, stimulation) versus conservation (i.e. tradition, conformity, security). Numerous investigations demonstrate that the Schwartz (1992) set of ten values is characterised by a logical equilibrium between scope and completeness and that the motivating purposes listed in the survey are representative of all societies (De Clercq, Fontaine and Anseel, 2008). For studies involving respondents from different cultures, this is of utmost relevance.

As previously stated, personal values guide the formation of an individual's personality and regulates a person's behaviour. As Marbach *et al.* (2019) stated, the values that influence an individual's online engagement can vary due to differences in customs, traditions, and beliefs, which are rooted in religious or family values and these can vary among individuals who were born in different countries. Even within the same cultural context, there can be significant differences in the extent to which individuals adhere to specific social norms and customs.

In this regard, the dimension of self-enhancement, derived from Schwartz's (1992) value dimensionalities, may play a critical role in shaping the relationship between personality traits and OBCE. People who perceive self-enhancement values are more motivated to seek social

status and prestige and they want to appear successful and competent according to social norms (Roccas, Schwartz and Amit, 2010). In other words, they are more focused on their own interests and desires and are more likely to engage online in order to gain attention and showcase their achievements. Their goal is to enjoy life and have fun, which accounts for their engagement preferences with FHOBCs.

Additionally, conservation is recognised as another personal value that is relevant to online engagement. According to Roccas, Schwartz and Amit (2010), conservation values convey a person's drive to avoid unpredictability and instability. People who value conservation stick to ideas, rituals or traditions that could have an impact on their online involvement; therefore, they do not support autonomous action and are less open to new experiences. As a result, conservation may diminish the connection between personality traits and online engagement, which is contradictory to self-enhancement value. To be more specific, people who perceive self-enhancement value regard engagement in online activities as efficient practices to fulfil their desires for success and social power. Their online community engagement guarantees that they can share their knowledge or display their skills, keeping others informed about their personal accomplishments or social influence (Marbach *et al.*, 2019).

The above scales have focused on discussing values from a macro perspective, which has its roots in sociology theories. Specifically, in the macro practice, a categorisation scheme is paired with survey research methodology to group respondents into predetermined categories. This practice systematically examined people's value orientations from a large number of samples; however, it fails to consider the influence of socio-economy development on value formation from an individual perspective. To fulfil this limitation, it is necessary to adopt a micro point of view, which is rooted in psychology, in understanding the nature of personal values. Based on means-end theory, the micro approach upholds that achieving one's personal ideas is a desired end goal and that particular behaviours aid in making this happen. A hierarchical sequence of three interconnected levels, attributes, consequences of use, and values, can be used to depict how this end point is accomplished (Modesto Veludo-De-Oliveira, Akemi Ikeda and Cortez Campomar, 2006). More details will be elaborated upon in the following chapter.

2.6 Limitations of previous work and gap in the literature

As discussed above, CE has been widely explored by academics and practitioners in recent years with regard to its theoretical roots (i.e. relationship marketing, service-dominant logic), antecedents (i.e. involvement, self-brand connections, and perceived social benefits), and consequences (i.e. profitability, brand loyalty, and satisfaction). Although recent studies have recognised the multi-dimensional nature of CE (Lim and Rasul, 2022), more focus remains on understanding CE from a behavioural perspective, which limits researchers' understandings of individuals' cognitive and affective perceptions during the engagement process. Cognitive engagement in extant studies is operationalised in two dimensionalities, namely attention (cognitive resources allocated to the engagement object) and absorption (immersive status with the engaged object) (So, King and Sparks, 2014). According to Rothbard (2001), both attention and absorption are motivational constructs affecting individuals' engagement willingness with the brand, in which absorption is associated with the intrinsic motivations leading to additional interest-based explanations. In addition, absorbed consumers are more likely to be completely focused, joyful, and engrossed, which benefits the company's relational performance. While cognitive engagement has been primarily adopted as the focus in understanding the development of brand love in the field of tourism and hospitality (Shin and Back, 2020) and its research is still in its infancy stages in the marketing domains. A similar problem happens to affective engagement. Although affective engagement was raised as the strongest determinant driving customer loyalty in OBCs in Dessart and Duclou (2019) recent study, it lacks a holistic review and the components derived are fragmented. These limitations, thus, draw on gaps for this thesis, which is to comprehensively understand CE in OBCs from a three-dimensional perspective.

Secondly, underpinning a series of motivational theories, consumer value has received more emphasis from academics in understanding individuals' decision making. Despite proposed insights, there is a dearth of research examining consumer value and consumer behaviour from an integrated, comprehensive, and holistic viewpoint (Wang *et al.*, 2017). Apart from the initial studies proposed by Van Doorn *et al.* (2010) and Brodie *et al.* (2011), the majority of research specialising in CE or online community participation mainly adopted quantitative methods to empirically examine the interrelations among a small number of predetermined values and factors or are based on a single theoretical perspective of customer value isolation from other theoretical views. This results in restricting the study's contribution because it only looked at a small portion of the community engagement variables. Therefore, it is valuable to adopt a qualitative approach to generate a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of

consumer value driving CE in an OBC. However, most qualitative studies in CE are specialised in summarising the practices of CE (Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould, 2009; Hollebeek, Juric and Tang, 2017; Eigenraam *et al.*, 2018) and neglect the intrinsic motivations rooted in personal value theory. In additional, the research of how community features/characteristics affect individuals' engagement level from a micro perspective is scarce. Without paying much attention to intermediary links between the characteristics of online communities and the benefits consumers derive from using these platforms, these elements have only been explored in isolation. These limitations, thus, address the second gap for this thesis to fulfil, which is to develop hierarchical connections between community attributes, benefits perceived, and ultimate personal value, which individuals obtain by drawing on means-end theory.

Lastly, studying CE in an international context has become more popular in recent years (Gupta, Pansari and Kumar, 2018; Steinhoff *et al.*, 2022; Hollebeek, 2018b). Research that examined potential boundary conditions on customer engagement recognises the significance of national culture as an element. For instance, Hollebeek (2018a) argued that customer-focused antecedents, such as customers' motivationally driven dispositions towards engagement or engagement styles, probably differ depending on local culture norms. In addition, Gupta, Pansari and Kumar (2018) discussed the success of business-related antecedents, such as proactive engagement initiatives, which may differ depending on which cultural dimensions are dominant in a given region. The likelihood that these factors have an impact also appears evident given that earlier research has linked culture to important effects on the effectiveness of international marketing (Samaha, Beck and Palmatier, 2014). With technological advancement, online brand communities appear to be standardised regarding their functionality and social presences; however, it is suggested that practitioners adapt to target market culture and create a more appropriate community environment for relationship development. Although the above studies addressed the significance of national culture on an individual's CE performance, most of them employed Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions to examine the relationship between constructs, which potentially simplify the complexity of engagement and neglect the micro perspective of culture perceived. In this case, it is necessary to focus more on an individual's value, which serves as a moral standard guiding his/her behaviour with social entities and Schwartz's (1992) value dimension has been selected. In addition, most CE studies are conducted either in developed markets (such as the U.S., Germany, Spain and the UK) or emergent markets (such as China, India, and the Middle East); however, little knowledge exists in comparing developed markets and emerging markets in the context of

relationship marketing. These limitations address the third gap for this thesis to fulfil, which is to compare CE in OBCs in both developed and emerging markets and uncover the hidden values driving people's OBCE.

Based on the above gap justifications, this thesis aims to identify what drives individuals to engage in an online brand community in a collective cultural background. Thus, three more specific objectives have been addressed:

1. To identify the customer engagement similarities and differences in two selected online brand communities in both China and the UK through conducting non-participatory observations to generate an understanding of OBC dynamics.
2. To uncover community attributes and consequences that result in specific consequences of engaging in an OBC context.
3. To explore how personal values in collective cultural backgrounds relate to these consequences from cognitive, affective, and behavioural perspectives.

A sequence of research questions is proposed :

1. What are the similarities and differences in CE in Chinese and UK OBCs?
2. How do personal values embedded in collective cultural backgrounds relate to these differences from a customer's perspective?
3. What is the relationship between personal value and CE with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions?

2.7 Chapter summary

This section has reviewed the existing literature on online brand communities, customer engagement, and cultural values. To date, the predominant focus of customer engagement research has been on its definitions, theoretical underpinnings, and multidimensionality. Although extant knowledge has validated the importance of customer engagement on an organisation's financial as well as operational performance, the concept is mostly discussed as a holistic concept and limited to a behaviour perspective. By taking the context into consideration, more and more researchers have introduced an online brand community while studying customer engagement due to the emergence of the Internet and other communicational

technologies. OBCE antecedents (brand-related, socially-related, functional drivers, involvement, and emotion) and consequences (organisational performance, brand-related, and customer-related outcome) are critically reviewed. Yet, no study has comprehensively explored the hidden motivations of engagement derived from cultural differences within the context of online brand communities. To fill this gap, this thesis has embraced the personal value concept proposed by Schwartz (1992) as the theoretical lens to undercover the potential impacts of cultural values on people's engagement decision making. Through the review of existing literature, opportunities for future research have been identified including an examination of virtual customer engagement differences in China and the UK and an exploration of the hidden motivation driving these differences.

3. Research methodology and research design

The purpose of this chapter is to present a methodology that will achieve the research objectives and, therefore, fulfil the existing knowledge gap within current academic literature. Starting by examining different philosophical positions, this research ultimately selects social constructionism/interpretivism perspectives based on their compatibility with the research questions and makes a case for more pluralistic research throughout the wider field of marketing.

By reviewing extensive ethnographic literature, this chapter also outlines the purpose and methods of conducting anthropological studies in marketing settings. Considering the virtual environment, modification required for implementing ethnographic approaches in electronic environments are discussed. Followed upon, the adopted research techniques, referring to participant observation and in-depth laddering interview, are thoroughly examined in a later section of this chapter. By outlining the theoretical underpinning and the practical applications in previous studies, these methods are systematically reviewed and further employed to understand how people perceive their interactions with others in online communities. The conventional weaknesses of contemporary methodologies are considered and the ramifications of these issues during the research process are examined. In the penultimate section of the chapter, a series of specialised ethical concerns have been justified and relevant solutions have been provided to ensure the research quality (reflexivity, credibility, confirmability, and transferability) of this thesis.

3.1 Research philosophical approach

Research philosophy refers to the critical examination of the grounds for fundamental beliefs and an analysis of the basic concepts adopted in the expression of such beliefs (Crossan, 2003). In line with this definition, Saunders (2011) defines research philosophy as a system of beliefs and assumptions about developing knowledge in a specific field. These assumptions include beliefs regarding the realities the researcher confronted (ontological assumptions), knowledge development (epistemological assumptions), and the extent the researcher's value influences his/her research process (axiological assumptions) (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). In consequence, it is important for academics to select a suitable research philosophical position, develop specific research rationale, and answer proposed research questions accordingly.

3.2 Ontology

As mentioned above, ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, which has implications for epistemology and the approaches in which researchers interpret the reality methodologically. Two main viewpoints of ontology are discussed as realism and idealism (conventionalism). According to Rose, Spinks and Canhoto (2014) and Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), ontological realism is concerned with the existence of mind-independent reality, while ontological idealism affirms the objective existence of society, but at the same time, believes that it is the cognitive interpretation that makes it meaningful to human beings. Derived from these two main tenets, two main research philosophical positions are proposed as positivist (objectivism) and interpretivist (subjectivism) (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

Positivism incorporates the assumptions of the natural science and believes that the social reality that we investigate is external to people's values. In other words, the positivist contends that there is only a single and objective reality (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015), which can be simply dissected into dependent and independent variables. Under this tenet, researchers are required to be external to the realities being studied and focus on facts, look for causality and fundamental laws, break down complex phenomena into simplest components, develop hypotheses and test them through using 'scientific' approaches (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2012). After reviewing previous marketing studies specialising in community engagement, the positivist tradition has been prevalent in much of the work conducted within this area (i.e. Hammedi *et al.* (2015)). From the researcher's perspective, this approach is too rigidly 'black and white' to deal with subjects as ambiguous as people's values and might simplify the complexity of social phenomenon due to the adoption of reductionist practices.

Conversely, interpretivism asserts that social reality is composed of perceptions and subsequent actions of social actors (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). They believe that the reality can only be 'experienced' not 'observed', and there exists several equally valid constructions of reality rather than a single absolute fact. As a more radical version of interpretivism, social constructionism holds the same belief as interpretivism that meaning is generated and negotiated by social actors, but is distinct itself in its focus on language and interaction as meaning-mediating mechanisms. Additionally, it conveys the contradictory impression that

ideas, although being socially constructed, correspond to things that are physically exist in the world which are reflected in our knowledge.

As discussed in chapter two, the purpose of this thesis is to shed light on how personal values influence people's decision making with respect to online brand community engagement in different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is more suitable and valuable to adopt a social constructionist approach to comprehend people's understanding of engagement with their own interpretations.

3.2.1 Social constructionism

Social constructionism, demonstrated as one of the most dominant forms of interpretivism, investigates how objectives, such as organisations, industries and even a whole society, are composed by different subjectivities such as human experience and social interactions (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). In social constructionism, the reality is interpreted through language and culture and is 'waiting to be discovered'. That is, the objects and the environment in which these objects exist are considered as both social constructions and active participants in the process of meaning making (Crotty, 1998). In accepting that reality is socially constructed, the researcher is required to gain access to 'experience', 'meanings', and 'process' issues, especially as they pertain to the individuals. As discussed in chapter two, the concepts as shared rituals and traditions, brand-orientation, internet-use (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013), consciousness of kind and interactions resemble the reality of the online brand community. However, for these constructs and meanings to be valuable to the whole community, they must be authorised and interpreted by the community members.

From a positivist perspective, the relational phenomena derived from computer-mediated environments, such as an online community, is an objective existence and the researcher attempts to factualise this by accessing a large number of responses, whereas the social constructionist approach offers a more reflective and subjective understanding of the experiences and meanings (Berger and Luckmann, 1967) surrounding relational engagement in a virtual context. By adopting social constructionist approaches, the researcher can generate a more thorough and in-depth understanding of complex interactions that investigate engagement constructions and the ways in which they are experienced rather than observed. With this knowledge in mind, it is compelling for the researcher to conduct a more qualitative

study of exploring customer engagement in online communities built on the principle of social constructionism.

3.3 Epistemology

Epistemology refers to assumptions about knowledge, which includes the standards justifying the accuracy, practicality, and legitimacy of knowledge and how the information is conveyed to others (Burrell and Morgan, 2017; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Interpretivists assert that knowledge is constructed by humans as they interpret their experiences of and in the world (Given, 2008; Pascale, 2010), as opposed to positivists who strive to uncover universal facts and laws guiding social behaviour. In other words, an interpretivist researcher believes that the society, which is composed of people and social interactions, is continually changing and, thus, requires himself/herself to study a situation in detail including historical, geographical, and socio-cultural contexts to understand how realities are being experienced (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). To acquire in-depth knowledge, an interpretivist aims to obtain access to the evolved interpretations that participants make of their experiences, and cultural contexts in which their viewpoints and beliefs are formed (Hiller, 2016).

In studying reality from this perspective, individuals and society co-constructed the reality and cannot be understood separately. Individual behaviour is thus influenced by a series of reflective, socially understood meaning of both internal and external incentives, other than forces from the environment. Aligned with the research purpose of this study, which is to explore how personal values relate to customer engagement in different cultural backgrounds, it is valuable to uncover the meaning of engagement behaviour towards people and the specific community environment where these meanings are nurtured. Instead of surveys and questionnaires, naturalistic approaches, such as ethnography and in-depth interview, are more efficient in accomplishing this goal and capturing meaning elicited throughout the research process.

3.4 Ethnography

Ethnography is a methodology, a conceptual framework based on foundational principles (O'reilly, 2009). It involves various methods that required sustained, direct involvement with individuals in the context of their daily lives and cultural surroundings. According to Kozinets (2002), ethnography is recognised as an open-ended research practice and is valuable to explore the complex nature and culture within certain communities through a series of participation and observations, which is to say that ethnography focuses on observation, interpretation, understanding, and representation (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). Unlike other qualitative methods, ethnography has been acknowledged as highly flexible, and thus, been widely applied in studying the nature of different countries, races, cultures, and other aspects in past decades (Kozinets, 2002).

3.4.1 The advantages of an ethnographic approach

A series of advantages of ethnography is addressed as follows. Firstly, researchers can establish a deeper understanding of the selected people and community, organisation, and its associated culture in a broader context (Myers, Well and Lorch Jr, 2013). Secondly, it enables researchers to observe and identify the contingencies emerging from participants' daily interactions in a natural setting (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Thirdly, it provides researchers with an insider's point of view to understand and investigate certain phenomena at a micro level (Brewer, 2000). Lastly, it is suggested that researchers can conduct ethnographic studies in a longitudinal timeframe and, therefore, they can constantly develop new understandings throughout the research process (Myers, Well and Lorch Jr, 2013). Although ethnography provides marketing academics with an invaluable approach to explore certain aspects, a few limitations are addressed in the following section.

3.4.2 The limitations of an ethnographic approach

Firstly, similarly to other longitudinal research, it is common for ethnographic studies to experience time constraints. To acquire a comprehensive understanding of the research domain, ethnographers must keep their research timeframe flexible and open, which may range from a few weeks to several years. As a result, completing doctoral research employing ethnographic approaches within a typical timeframe, which normally lasts for four to five years, can be difficult in such situations (Hoholm and Araujo, 2011). Secondly, the two primary concerns in ethnographic research are causality and generalisation. Ethnographers emphasise that each

study is unique and different methods and focuses are employed to comprehend a particular phenomenon. Therefore, applying the findings to a broader population requires adopting the concept of naturalistic generalisation. This notion, as defined as by Shadish (1995, p. 420), involves presenting sufficient detail to enable the audience to determine if a case is similar enough to another instance to permit generalisation. This will be further discussed in the subsequent section 3.9.2. Thirdly, one issue that some critics raise about ethnographic research is the question of validity, but many ethnographers dismiss this concern arguing that it is more a matter of knowledge claims than of the methodology itself. In addition, some researchers who embrace constructionism paradigms reject the use of positivist frameworks that are not compatible with their perspective. To avoid potential confusion, it is necessary for ethnographers to clarify the background of the research and list evidence to account for specific occasions. Lastly, it is crucial for ethnographers to consider the practical utility of the research findings since the study targets a diverse audience of both practitioners and academic scholars. In this thesis, the practical application of these findings will be demonstrated using personal construct theory and means-end chain analysis, which will be clearly explained in the findings chapter.

As this thesis focuses on examining how individuals engage with online brand communities and utilises computer-mediated conversations as a primary source of data, an adapted form of ethnography known as virtual ethnography or netnography will be employed. Like conventional ethnography, netnography enables the researcher to study cultural practices and norms within a particular community in the digital realm. The following section will provide a comprehensive explanation of netnography.

3.5 Netnography

Information communication technology has developed greatly in the past decade and has been widely used across multi disciplines; researchers are finding new approaches to understand the complexity behind certain human behaviour in the online context and the unique virtual culture. Consequently netnography, an adapted presentation of ethnography, has been introduced by Kozinets since the 1990s to explicitly explore the diversity of social interactions in an online community setting and further facilitate a deeper theoretical understanding (Healy and Mcdonagh, 2013; Mardon, Molesworth and Grigore, 2018; Thanh and Kirova, 2018).

Aligned with the very principles of ethnography, which is contextual-sensitive, netnography is defined as a method that uses publicly available information in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decisions of consumer groups (Kozinets, 2002). Since netnography is a naturalistic method, it requires researchers to develop knowledge based on an objective description in natural settings and minimising the researcher's influence on the activities of the people who are studied (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). Such features enable researchers to develop meaningful interpretations of the rich data captured through the researcher's in-group observations without artificial interruptions (Kozinets, 2010).

Since netnography involves computer-mediated conversations and a large quantity of textual data, a few features have been identified to differentiate it from traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2002). These features are field site accessibility, increased communicative variety, communication connectedness across multiple forms, auto-archiving, and ethical consideration (Kozinets, 2015a; Kozinets, Dolbec and Earley, 2014). In addition, compared to the traditional ethnography, netnography is specialised in studying specific online consumer groups and the revelatory depth of their online communities. Therefore, it is more context-focused and, as long as the textual data contain abundant richness and are fully interpreted, researchers are able to develop valuable insights into the research field.

3.5.1 Similarities and differences between the traditional ethnographic approach and netnographic approach

Similarities of approach

Operating under the same theoretical foundation of social constructionism, a netnographer utilises online communications as a data source to develop an ethnographic understanding of the research culture or phenomenon. In other words, a researcher needs to acknowledge the cultural identity of online participants instead of defining them as sole digital presence. To achieve this goal, the netnographer may need to employ techniques similar to those used in traditional ethnographies, such as interviews, descriptive statistics, field notes, videography, and other related techniques, in which participant observation remains a significant cornerstone for understanding the specific cultural context in an online setting (Miller and Slater, 2020).

Despite the critical contextual differences from traditional ethnography, the focus of netnographic studies remains the consideration of the relationship the researcher has with the community. It is important for the researcher to become immersed in the studied group and

familiarise himself/herself with the grounded knowledge aligned with the research question. As proposed by Kozinets (2002) in his most cited paper, netnography is inherently flexible and can be tailored to the interests and expertise of the individual marketing researcher. They can take advantage of diverse approaches to develop new understanding of the studied community constantly, while conducting unobstructive observations.

Following a review of the online community literature for emergent patterns, it can be noticed that to align closely with the needs of online cultural studies, critical amendments should be made to existing traditional ethnographic methods. For example, instead of analysing physical interactions within the studied nature, it is more important for the researcher to rely heavily on the predominant, text-based communication and identify the implicative knowledge from words, punctuation, emojis, and other relevant content published online.

Differences of approach

Since netnography is specialised in understanding culture in cyberspace, it involves a unique research nature distinctive from traditional ethnography. For instance, four major themes for areas of incongruity between approaches are addressed by Whalen (2018) as sample type, data collection technique, level of disclosure, and data analysis approach.

Firstly, it is important for researchers to differentiate an online community from a collection of online communications while conducting netnographic studies. Although the Internet has provided researchers with invaluable sources to explore the secrets behind certain behaviour online, they might neglect the interactive nature of a community and, thus, miss the richness of interactions between community members. For instance, Shakeela and Weaver (2016) studied a tourism incident that was posted on YouTube by using textual discourse analysis evaluating reactions and commentary from worldwide viewers. Although these conversations seem to lend themselves to ethnography, they may ignore the long-term perspective of community nature, thus leading to decreasing data richness (Whalen, 2018). In this instance, netnographers should conduct research which goes beyond analysing textual posts and proactively captures the interactive dynamics, including comments, likes, and online conversations between individuals from a long-term scale. Additionally, it is suggested for netnographers to consider the physical setting addressed by the brand and the roles of users who are immersive in the community to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research context. Additionally, in line with the tenet of social constructionism, it is important to apply

a series of criteria while defining an online community including multi-user interactions, shared social environments, co-inhabitation with others, group specific norms, and others (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012; Kozinets, 1998; Whalen, 2018).

While ethnography incorporates many data collection techniques, such as individual interview, surveys, and historical document analysis, participant observation is recognised as the most essential approach of collecting data (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012). According to Whalen (2018), participant observation requires ethnographers to be deeply immersed in the community, embracing themselves with temporary community identity and engaging with cultural members persistently. This sentiment is presented in Kozinet's (2015b) study, and he states "simple observational downloads, web-crawling, or data mining, are insufficient without researcher participation. The presence of the researchers' experience in research representation is key" (Kozinets, 2015b, p. 243).

Despite these views, most current netnographic research advocates for non-participant observation methods that avoid active involvement with the studied community. Owing to the high level of anonymity in a virtual context, it is more practical for researchers to be a 'lurker' while generating naturalistic findings through abundant existing online conversations (Kozinets, 2002; Fisher and Smith, 2011). By doing so, the researcher can develop valuable insights about the studied subject without causing bias. However, this may result in some significant limitations as suggested by Goulding, Saren and Lindridge (2013) such as lack of control for participant selection and insufficient clarification of central themes. Therefore, to retain a balance between naturalistic mechanics and finding objectivity, it is suggested that netnographers conduct member checks before data collection, which helps to refute potential researcher bias (Wu and Pearce, 2014a; Shenton, 2004).

With respect to the level of disclosure, it remains a critical issue for netnographic studies. Some researchers argue that it is essential to fully disclose the researcher's presence and intentions online, while others believe it is not necessary to do so in publicly accessible spaces. Specifically, they believe that full disclosure would negatively influence community participation and unconsciously change the organic nature of studied context, especially for those who focus on sensitive topics (Langer and Beckman, 2005; Osman, Johns and Lugosi, 2014; Whalen, 2018). In a different interpretation, Goulding, Saren and Lindridge (2013)

defined the level of perceived risks towards participants as the key criteria for necessity for consent. Further ethical practice applied in this study will be elaborated in a later section.

Lastly, netnographic studies emphasise interpreting behaviours and existing conversations online without verbal interactions with community members, which results in significant analysis technique differences from physical ethnographic approaches. Due to the geographical restraints, netnographers cannot observe tonal shifts, pauses, cracked voices, eye movements, and other physical interactions (Kozinets, 2006); instead, they need to capture the implicative meaning from textual posts as well as punctuation, which refers to the only approach for community members to self-represent themselves. Despite little verbal communication, netnography enables researchers to analyse and investigate the collected online interactions through the research process since all data are stored on the cloud, which enhances the quality of the findings. To generate a more comprehensive understanding of the data, it is recommended to incorporate both qualitative data analysis software (i.e. Nvivo12) and manual analysis techniques while developing themes from collected textual data.

3.5.2 The advantages of a netnographic approach

Compared to the traditional ethnography, netnography possesses some unique merits (Mkono, 2013). Firstly, as this thesis is concerned with the impact of personal values in a collective cultural background on consumer/customer multi-dimensional engagement in online communities, it is helpful for the researcher to develop a richer understanding of the context where the engagement takes place in a less intrusive approach (Kozinets, 2015a). Secondly, thanks to the emergence of the internet along with increased anonymity (Murray and Fisher, 2002), individuals are more inclined to openly express their thoughts and attitudes in an online setting (Mkono, 2013). These authentic responses provide opportunities for netnographers to gain a deeper insight into community members' motives, concerns, and behaviour from a more naturalistic point of view (Kozinets, 2015a).

Apart from the above academic advantages, there are several practical and functional benefits of conducting virtual ethnography including being less time-consuming and less costly compared to traditional ethnography. Since the data involved are mostly archived textual data captured online, it is more efficient for researchers to access the data repetitively and, thus, generate new knowledge from the constant engagement. Furthermore, due to the lock down

restrictions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it is less risky for the researcher to travel internationally by adopting netnography as the main method for data collection.

Specifically related to this research, compared to the other qualitative approaches, such as interview, focus group, and others, netnography provides a more open-ended approach (Kozinets, 2002) to study the nature of online brand communities including its infrastructure and associated social interactions. With a primarily inductive approach, the researcher enters the selected community with limited knowledge and does not know what to expect in the following research process. Since ethnography is a method specialised in explicating patterns of action from a cultural and social perspective (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), it is more applicable for the researcher to uncover the hidden 'secrets' behind certain engagement behaviour in an online community context. Setting limits on the process of collecting data could result in missing specific insight or information.

As discussed in Kozinets's (2015a) study, the epistemological value of netnography is delivered from its ability to provide a human-level interpretation, acknowledge the humanity that operates behind the technology, and understand the desire for social interaction that underlines online communication. These principles align with the social constructionism propositions suggested in the previous discussions as the society is constructed by people and affiliated interactions.

3.5.3 The limitations of a netnographic approach

While the Internet provides a good contextual setting for ethnographers, a few limitations remain challenging resulting from its inherently complex and multidimensional structure (Roberts, 2015). Firstly, since the nature of online community is constantly updating, it is important for researchers to remain engaged for a significant amount of time to explore the potential richness from the textual data. In the case of this study, for example, an oversight of small details could result in a significant limitation of contextual understanding, especially while the community construction is relatively complex.

Beyond the constant engagement, according to Kozinets (2015a), netnographers also need to cope with varieties of mixing data, which implies the challenges brought by sorting, classifying, and understanding vast amounts of information. Besides, considering the observational data of this research are limited to textual data, there might be a loss of layers of meaning due to the

little verbal communication including speech tones, body language, and facial expression. A further limitation that exists for the researcher is adapting himself/herself to the selected technological medium and keeping in mind that there could be a significant difference in expression from community to community(Kozinets, 2015a).

Although the Internet provides netnographers with an interactive social space to value specific virtual community culture, it is difficult for the researcher to verify the profiles of the participants, and thus impacting the authenticity of the research findings (Mkono, 2013; Morgan, 2008).

As a review of the literatures on online brand communities revealed, the researcher's decision making on community selection criteria is not always made explicit or otherwise is based on intrinsic interests (Kozinets, 2002). The following section examines in depth the selection process based on customer engagement meeting the ethical challenges identified in the previous chapter and the selection of a sample from the chosen community. It starts by justifying the community selection process followed by the data collection as well as analytical techniques used.

3.6 Community selection

As suggested by Kozinets (2002), it is vital to include a series of standards while selecting target communities to observe ahead of data collection and analysis. Within Kozinets's (2002) pioneering study, few community selection standards are introduced. Firstly, it is recommended to focus on communities that have frequent and extensive postings with detailed information as this enables the researcher to gain a thorough comprehension of the community. Secondly, communities with large numbers of posters are recommended. With a large user base, more between-members interactions allow the researcher to explore the hidden meaning of specific community behaviours (Kozinets, Dolbec and Earley, 2014). After community selection, a sequence of specialised skills will be applied as entrée, data collection procedure, and data analysis approach, which will be further explained in the following sections.

The above description presents the criteria that were used to select the most appropriate online brand community for this study. It can be noticed that the richness of data has a significant impact in generating valuable insight into the research context. Therefore, this study has selected a health and fitness community as the focus, thanks to its high involvement level,

diverse topics, and sizable user base (Dessart and Duclou, 2019). This study is conducted in a comparative manner: two firm-hosted online communities both in China and the UK were selected as Keep and MyFitnessPal (MFP). From an empirical perspective, both Keep and MFP offer an online platform on which users can exchange fitness knowledge, share fitness journeys, search for motivations, and socialise with other like-minded people through multi-thematic discussion boards. Furthermore, both communities offer mobile application versions to simplify the user experience, which enables users to upload descriptive content alongside the visual demonstrations. This richness of data can be used effectively for the purpose of this study as it is in line with the exploratory nature of its objective.

In addition, it is useful to note that both Keep and MFP are open-source communities, indicating that individuals do not need to pay any fees to become members or share content with the community. Therefore, it is valuable for the researcher to identify more varied content and reach out to more potential interview participants.

3.6.1 Entrée - accessibility of the community

Once the online community has been selected, it is anticipated that the netnographer will develop a plan for how the research will be conducted and how he/she will present him/herself to the community. Under the ethical guidance of conducting netnographic research (which will be explained in section 3.10), the researcher has outreached to site moderators of both Keep and MFP on specific discussion boards as well as a number of community members. A message containing the researcher's real identity, research purpose, and potential contribution was sent through the direct message portal. After a series of considerate discussions, the researcher was approved to show her presence on the discussion boards and recruit potential participants from Keep.

However, due to the strict regulation of posting on MFP, the researcher was not allowed to publish any information related to participant recruitment on publicly accessed discussion boards, which added to the difficulties of data collection. To solve this problem, the researcher has constantly communicated with site moderators and committed to improving the community experience by applying the knowledge generated from the project. Eventually the researcher was approved to observe the community under the condition of showing her presence and asking for consent before using community members' posts as part of the data.

3.7 Phase one: Online community observation

The process of participant observation is a significant aspect of conducting netnography in selected communities; the researcher can gain access into the collective identity and possess a deeper understanding of the community ahead of individual in-depth interviews (Kozinets, 2015a). Without active participant observation, the analysis of netnographic data may be seen as more similar to coding a secondary resource data than conducting ethnography (Whalen, 2018), which can result in neglecting the theoretical basis of conducting studies in anthropology. Although digital records such as postings, images, and videos provide invaluable insights into the research context, they cannot stand alone without the interactions and interpretations provided by participant observations (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012).

Therefore, it is suggested that researchers constantly update their knowledge about the selected communities and familiarise themselves with the community settings, with the aim of gaining a holistic understanding of the environment in which the certain phenomena take place (Kozinets, 2010). This practice is in line with the sentiment proposed by Kozinets (2015a) in his more recent publication as "simple observational downloads, web-crawling, or data mining, are insufficient without researcher participation. The presence of the researchers' experience in research representation is key" (p.243). Agreeing with Kozinets, Dolbec and Earley (2014) distinguish participant observation and immersive involvement as vital elements in generating a deeper understanding of community in virtual spaces.

Despite these views, Whalen (2018) criticised the most current netnographic studies that do not include participant observation, with researchers advocating for non-participant observation methods of data collection. To eliminate the limitations brought by non-participatory observation, it is suggested that researchers interact with community members and ask for clarifications of the constructs derived from the data analysis process (Whalen, 2018; Wu and Pearce, 2014b). Proximity to the daily communication between community members provides the opportunity to gain insight into the unforeseen aspects of the phenomenon in question. Moreover, the researcher has developed her own profile on both selected communities, constantly posting fitness and health-related content to gain trust with observed community members and further interact with them through the direct message portal. Through observing the participant behaviour of community members in this thesis, the

researcher can develop valuable contextual understanding of the community's collective identity via a series of between-members interactions.

3.7.1 Data collection

The observation spanned from 1st January 2021 to 31st March 2021. To develop a more diverse understanding of the selected communities, the scope of observational data extended beyond fitness-related discussions to encompasses a spectrum of topics such as "introduce yourself", "chit-chat", "fun and games", "motivation and support", and others. During the observational period, community activities, conversations between community members, and users' profiles disclosed on the discussion boards are recorded for further analysis. Given the substantial user base and the richness of posts within the chosen communities, employing a web crawler proved to be a more efficient means of systematically collecting daily updates.

Field notes were recorded along the way and, initially guided by concepts identified in extant literatures, but not confined to them. As the observation progressed, the researcher continuously refined field notes by documenting observations and reflections on evolving dynamics. Any noteworthy comments or behaviour from community members were copied and interpreted immediately in the research journal as this thought to have a positive impact on idea generation.

As the observation advanced, a discernible saturation point in the data emerged, marked by repetitive responses after three months. In consequence, a total of 5689 textual posts from Keep and 4875 textual posts from MFP were systematically captured for further analysis during this three-month observational period.

These reflections and reactions enable the researcher to familiarise herself with the research context and enrich her knowledge of the online community beyond the findings from past literatures. In addition, these data also benefit the researcher in building contextual knowledge, including understanding the community infrastructure, nature, community member profiles as well as familiarising with the language used among members. At a later stage of the research, these fieldnotes function as references for the researcher to cluster postings into different observational categories, thus aiding the process of individual interviews. Since this thesis focuses on understanding customer engagement from three dimensions, postings captured from

both communities are classified into three master themes as cognitive engagement, affective engagement, and behavioural engagement in which sub-groups are created to include all valuable codes.

The above observational categories derived from naturalistic postings as well as the field notes are helpful to guide in-depth one-to-one interviews because the researcher has equipped herself with a relatively solid understanding of how the general community relates to some specific topics (Kozinets, 2002). From this portion of data collection, a general understanding of the community is gathered. A list of constructs and key indicators applied in the second phase of data collection has been developed via thematic analysis. Once all responses are coded, significant items will be further discussed through one-on-one interviews. To ensure the validity and reliability of the themes interpreted from the naturalistic data, revisions will be made if there is divergence from the respondents.

3.7.2 Data analysis technique

All textual postings and reflective field notes were captured on a daily basis during the non-participatory observation by using Microsoft Excel and then imported weekly into Nvivo 12 for manual analysis. Since the data collected from Keep are written in Chinese, the researcher has analysed the original data, but coded the significant responses into English themes and synthesise them with the data collected from MFP. Utilising software of this nature helps the researcher to develop a more comprehensive relationship with the data and provides the researcher with an organised platform to thematically and conceptually analyse the conversations (Bell and Bryman, 2007). To generate a more complete picture of the selected communities, all observational notes are read and analysed in lines, through which significant ideas and concepts are developed throughout the whole analysis period.

At this stage, template analysis is employed to categorise the observational content into themes within the multi-dimensional construct of customer engagement outlined in chapter two. In alignment with the philosophical position of this research, the social infrastructure of online brand communities as well as social roles involved in daily interactions, is systematically analysed. According to King and Brooks (2016), template analysis is a generic method evolving within the broader context of thematic analysis, especially within approaches that emphasis research in real world. The application of template analysis involves seven steps:

familiarising with data, initial coding, clustering, creating an initial template, refining the template, implementing the final template, and developing the final report (King and Brooks, 2016). Within the seven steps, four main processes are involved in this stage of data analysis:

(1) Data familiarisation

In line with typical qualitative analysis methods, the initial phase of Template Analysis involves becoming familiar with the dataset. In order to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of the research context, the researcher would thoroughly read through the entire dataset at least once before advancing to the subsequent stage of data analysis.

(2) Initial template generating and data reduction

This phase includes processes such as coding, clustering, and formulating the initial template. Throughout this phase, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding have been applied. The open coding involves reading through the data and organising statements from the members of the community that are related to each concept. While this study utilised a deductive categorisation approach, any emergent categories were also considered when deemed applicable to the research (Cova and Pace, 2006). To efficiently sort out patterns from a large chunk of data, the tool 'word counts' was used. 'Word counts' involves a process similar to classic content analysis and acknowledges the limitation of reducing meanings and experiences to a numerical form. However, this method can still provide "deeper interpretations of the meanings in the original corpus of qualitative data" (Ryan and Bernard, 2000, p. 777) and is helpful in identifying themes, concepts, and constructs presented in the data.

Since this study did not follow a grounded theory approach, existing OBCE typologies and practices (Schau, Muñiz Jr and Arnould, 2009; Hollebeek, Juric and Tang, 2017; Muniz and O'guinn, 2001) were used as *a priori* themes to facilitate the categorisation of relevant content (Habibi, Laroche and Richard, 2014). Following the suggestion of King and Brooks (2016), employing *a priori* theme becomes beneficial when the importance of a particular issue in relation to a research question is well established. Given that the research question in this thesis focuses on comprehending the relationship between personal values and CE with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, adopting CE multi-dimensionalities as pre-determined themes facilitated the grouping of collected responses. To reduce the likelihood of *a priori* themes causing an undesired "blinking effect" in subsequent analysis (Brooks and

King, 2014), it became imperative for the researcher to iteratively revise the grouping of codes. This iterative process allowed for more refined interpretations and aimed at capturing the most significant patterns and concepts within the dataset.

Lastly, selective coding was employed by examining the field notes and choosing examples that demonstrate the different themes in the context of each community. The data collected from the communities over the three-month period was subsequently drawn together to create an initial template for subsequent analysis. This template encompasses the fundamental elements of online brand communities, identifying patterns and relationships inherent in the data derived from each community.

(3) Applying and developing the template

The purpose of this phase is to refine the initial template and apply the modified template for the whole dataset analysis. After creating an initial template, the researcher applied it to the data, marking relevant segments with codes related to thematic categories. If the initial template did not fully incorporate new data, modifications were made, including inserting new themes, redefining existing ones, or merging themes. The process involved multiple interactions, continually refining the template until a satisfactory 'final version' was achieved. However, the 'final version' template still needed further refinements as ongoing engagement with the data may reveal deeper insight. As suggested by King and Brooks (2016), the researcher documented the development of the template, including numbering, dating, and noting changes made, providing a basis for interpretation and structuring research findings. The systematic nature of Template Analysis serves as an audit trail, demonstrating the quality of data analysis.

(4) Presenting template analysis findings

The objective of this phase is to select the most appropriate presentation to display the template analysis findings. Three approaches are introduced by King and Brooks (2016). The first approach involves individual case studies followed by a discussion of similarities and differences. This approach is advantageous for providing clear insights into individual perspectives but may become repetitive with a large participant pool. The second approach structures the account around main themes identified, using quotes to exemplify reasoning. However, it risks over-generalisation and lacks holistic understanding of individual

participants. The third approach combines thematic presentation with a few case studies, balancing insights from individual cases with overarching themes. The challenge lied in selecting cases that fairly represent overall themes in the dataset. Given the fact that there were only two selected cases as Keep and MFP, the first approach was adopted and the findings was shown in linear presentation (see chapter four).

In summary, the key objective of the first phase was to obtain information from discussion threads in a range of brand-related OBCs to provide context for the concepts outlined in the literature and identify any new themes that may emerge.

3.8 Phase two: Semi-structured in-depth interview

As part of netnography, in-depth interview is recognised as an appropriate data collection tool to facilitate more insightful knowledge from individuals' experiences (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). Therefore, after participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interview has been conducted within selected community members in both Keep and MFP. Overall, 40 in-depth interviews were conducted and recorded for further analysis. Compared to structured and unstructured interviewing, semi-structured interview gives researchers both overall question structure and flexibility in making adjustments through the interview process, and thus has been widely applied in prior marketing qualitative studies (Myers, Well and Lorch Jr, 2013).

3.8.1 Means-end theory

In line with the epistemology position of this research, which is social constructionism, it is more valuable to adopt a micro approach to understand personal values in a collective cultural background as it leaves room for flexibility in data collection and does not summarise the personal values for the research participants.

The means-end chain model is based on four fundamental assumptions about consumer behaviour (Gutman, 1982). Firstly, values, acknowledged as a desirable end-state of existence, lead individuals to make decisions. Secondly, people would group diverse value satisfiers from products/services into sets or classes to reduce the complexity of decision making. Additionally, Gutman (1982) discussed that all consumer actions have consequences and consumers are likely to associate particular consequences with particular actions.

As discussed in previous marketing studies, means-end chain theory is valuable in exploring the hidden motivations of certain behaviours and enables researchers to relate specific product/service attributes to individuals' personal values. Although a more complex means-end chain model, including six items named as concrete attributes, abstract attributes, functional outcomes, psychosocial outcomes, instrumental values, and terminal values, has been designed at a later stage, it is criticised by academics and marketing researchers for its impracticality in most business applications (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). Thus, a more common and simplified version will be adopted in this thesis as "attributes- consequences-values" (Mitchell and Clark, 2020).

Within the construction of Reynolds and Gutman (1988) means-end model, attributes are recognised as the most concrete level concept, which refer to the features of products or services perceived by consumers (Reynolds and Olson, 2001b), while values are identified as the highest conceptual level. When it comes to online brand community, a series of features discussed in prior studies, such as shared rituals/traditions, consciousness of kind, and moral responsibility, are demonstrated as attributes in this specific context of interest. Aligned with the theoretical tenant of means-end theory, the combination of these attributes (means) and the importance of these attributes determinate specific community members' behaviour (end), which further relates to the second level of construct in the means-end model, consequences.

Consequences are defined as any result accruing directly or indirectly to the individual from his/her behaviour (Gutman, 1982). Consumers are willing to select products or services with certain attributes to achieve desirable consequences and manage to eliminate certain attributes to avoid undesirable consequences. Two levels of consequences are sufficient for most marketing analysis, referred to as functional consequence and psychological consequence (Reynolds and Olson, 2001b). To be more specific, if a consumer achieves direct or tangible benefits after consuming products/services with particular features, these benefits are regarded as functional consequences (e.g. a laundry pod removes the unpleasant odours). In turn, functional consequences can lead to higher level, more personal consequences that are more affective or emotional, which are defined as psychosocial consequences (Reynolds and Olson, 2001b).

The most abstract level within the means-end model is values. Rokeach (1968) classifies values into two types: as terminal and instrumental value. Precisely, instrumental values are those that

guide an individual's daily life and are less associated with a person's being (Rokeach, 1968). Alternatively, terminal values are those that define an individual and inspire them to perform throughout their life (Rokeach, 1975).

The Means-End Chain (MEC) approach has yielded positive results in the fields of marketing such as sustainable consumption and advertising (Lundblad and Davies, 2016). As people have placed more emphasis on leisure and social media consumption in recent years, some scholars have used MEC in the field of destination decision (López-Mosquera and Sánchez, 2011) with social media usage (Jeng and Yeh, 2016; Pai and Arnott, 2013). Despite wide application in existing studies, MEC draws on a few criticisms with the traditional means-end chain paradigm. First and foremost, there are issues with the method's fundamental psychological and philosophical presumptions. According to proponents of the means-end hypothesis, the value maps generated by laddering techniques describe the intrapsychic processes of an individual's decision making. Product attribute, psychological consequences, and values are viewed as units of knowledge and the ordered relationships among these units are seen as inference-based judgements. This viewpoint has been broadly acknowledged by researchers in the information-processing school of consumer research since it has been evident. The principles of social psychology and cognitive psychology, notably social cognition and attitude theory (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993), serve as the foundation for information-processing studies. Other than considering their validity and ontology, these traditions assume the existence of internal psychological states and processes and make an effort to understand how they represent, elaborate, and relate to people's behaviour.

Secondly, means-end theory has been criticised for lacking a suitable theoretical foundation (Grunert and Grunert, 1995). This criticism has been mainly directed at practitioners who have failed to recognise its origins. To fulfil this limitation, Kelly's (1991) *Personal Construct Psychology* serves as one of the theoretical foundations for means-end analysis. Under the lens of *Personal Construct Psychology*, individuals have their own worldview and are likely to be capable of reflecting on and controlling their behaviour by developing rules or theories. A means-end researcher, such as Kelly, believes in the "person-as-scientist" analogy and deems that consumers' means-end chains embody their individual beliefs about how various components of the physical world relate to their lives (Gengler, Klenosky and Mulvey, 1995; Gruber *et al.*, 2008). The approach applied in this thesis is clearly connected to the academic fields of cognitive psychology, motivational theory, and value theory.

Lastly, means-end chain analysis has been criticised for frequently minimising the significance of context (Walker and Olson, 1991). Many existing studies using this methodology are criticised for mostly ignoring the social context in which meanings are created instead of the "ideographic category" of the person (Bell, Bannister and Fransella, 2004). In addition, these researches are also criticised for failing to acknowledge the temporal nature of grid elicitation, the predominant perceptual pathways, and the hierarchy value maps constructed. Specifically, the data should be acknowledged as being time-specific and that knowledge claims tend to assume the stability of meaning systems across participants. Based on the proceeding discussions, it is recommended that researchers carefully define the research context. In the case of this thesis, the central focus is on CE in the OBC. The knowledge claims put forth in this study highlight the subjective evolution of meaning stability over time.

Although previous studies have investigated elements that motivate participation in online brand communities (Jin *et al.*, 2015; Pedeliento, Andreini and Veloutsou, 2020), there is limited knowledge about how the identified constructs are linked from a micro perspective. It is beneficial to adopt a means-end chain approach to explore the desired goals of community members and, at the same time, organise the identified constructs into perceptual pathways to understand their behaviour in nature. To reveal the explicit relationship between product/service attributes and higher-level goals of consumers, the classic laddering technique has been developed in conjunction with the means-end model that draws on insights from motivation and cognitive psychology (Gutman, 1982; Jüttner *et al.*, 2013).

3.8.2 The Laddering Technique

Laddering refers to a detailed, one-to-one interviewing technique used to discover how consumers interpret the attributes of products/services into meaningful associations with regard to themselves (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). It is the earliest method of collecting qualitative data within means-end theory (Hinkle, 1965) and recognised as one of the most practical techniques in designing interviews. The purpose of the interviews is to reveal an individual's motivation for choosing a particular product/service (Russell *et al.*, 2004). It is valuable for studies that specialise in understanding connections between product/service and personal value from a micro perspective; it is aligned with the epistemological lens of this research, which suggests the reality is constructed by individuals' interactions in a specific cultural context. By directly probing consumers with questions like "Why is that important to you?" or

"What does it mean to you?", researchers can find connections between a range of attributes, consequences, and values.

Two forms of laddering are widely applied: hard laddering and soft laddering (Grunert and Grunert, 1995). Hard laddering enables respondents to build the ladders themselves by collecting information in a hierarchical order of attributes, consequences, and values on each level. It is normally conducted through approaches like telephone, e-mail or self-administered questionnaire, which ensures lower cost and time efficiency (Jägel *et al.*, 2012; Jeng and Yeh, 2016). However, this technique is more suitable to apply while approaching a bigger sample scale (typically larger than fifty) (Hofstede and Bond, 1988) and it might simplify the research context without the appearance of the researcher. Thus, in previous marketing studies, soft laddering has been found to reveal a more detailed picture of perceptions and beliefs (Reynolds and Olson, 2001b) and is recognised as the most commonly used laddering method for interviews (Russell *et al.*, 2004), despite taking more time and requiring a higher level of interview skills (Scholderer and Grunert, 2005). Soft laddering is conducted by in-depth one-on-one interview with an open question approach, through which respondents can provide answers without restrictions, and researchers can obtain information by using the free elicitation method in a natural setting. Based on the interview transcription and audio files, the researcher will construct ladders following a unique format of "attribute (A), consequence (C), value (V)" to uncover the motivations behind certain decision-making behaviour. Therefore, the soft laddering technique is applied in the later stage of interview design, given the focus it places on eliciting underlying motivations for choices and then linking these choices to personal values under a collective cultural background.

Despite its wide application in previous marketing studies (Xiao, Guo and D'ambra, 2017), laddering and pyramiding strategies have drawn a number of criticisms, which are considered while designing the research. According to Reynolds and Olson (2001b), the laddering approach has two main drawbacks. Firstly, the respondents might not understand why an attribute or a consequence is important to them, which results in failure in uncovering personal values. Secondly, the respondents might find some questions too difficult or personal to answer, leading to "avoidance behaviour". This is undoubtedly a barrier for the researcher in uncovering deeper level meanings of an individual's engagement preferences in a virtual community setting.

Laddering has also received criticisms based on the types of responses evoked from participants. Specifically, when multiple consequences or values correspond to two or more possible ladders, it is challenging for the researcher to deal with the situation. The viewpoint document the different responses and continue with the ladder technique by sequentially exploring each answer (Reynolds and Olson, 2001a) appears to be supported by most researchers. The 'leading' aspect of the laddering technique has also drawn criticism, notably in relation to the awkward line of inquiry manner of asking "why?" repeatedly (Cohen and Warlop, 2001). In this case, it is important for the researcher to inform interviewees of the purpose of the laddering technique ahead of data collection to eliminate individuals' negative emotions, such as feeling bored or confused, during the interview process. To generate meaningful and representative means-end chains, the researcher needs to reconstruct individuals' responses into simplified codes, aggregate them into ladders, and display dominant value chains by including a cut-off point. While these techniques have been proved to effectively demonstrate a general image of the research subject, they somehow sacrifice some precision in favour of parsimony (Cohen and Warlop, 2001).

While the above criticisms are focused on discussing the "leading" nature of a probing technique, a series of new challenges have emerged for laddering researchers to consider due to the wide application of online methods to conduct the interviews. Firstly, it is more challenging for the researcher to recognise and interpret non-verbal cues from respondents, such as head nodding, murmurs of approval, and smiles, to identify respondents who they have been listening and paying attention (Gruber *et al.*, 2008). This is important to retain interactive communications between the researcher and respondents, which further affects their willingness to share. Secondly, it is difficult for the researcher to decide when to end the laddering, especially when respondents share personal stories containing additional details, instead of directly answering the probing "why" questions (Gruber *et al.*, 2008) . Since respondents are not familiar with the laddering process, they prefer to share a piece of personal story to explain why they made specific decisions. Therefore, researchers need to capture key concepts from the conversations and evaluate if the constructs are enough to generate ladders based on existing knowledge cultivated in the observational stage.

Apart from the above solutions, a series of practical techniques is suggested in extant literatures to guide the successful proceeds of laddering interviews (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988).

- Creating a situational context: this strategy entails asking questions while considering a particular circumstance. It is useful to phrase questions starting with "what will you do when … happens?".

- Postulating the absence of a product/service: this strategy is employed to "unblock" respondents who are stuck at a particular level and to persuade them to think about what it would be like to live without a product/service by offering substitutes.

- Third-person probe: when people have problems identifying or expressing their own motivations, it is useful to ask them about how others they know might feel in a comparable situation. This is practical in dealing with situations when respondents find some questions too personal to answer.

3.8.3 Sampling

According to Reynolds and Olson (2001b), soft laddering analysis requires a sample size of at least twenty to generate a more representative finding. Since there are strict posting regulations on MFP, it was difficult for the researcher to recruit participants publicly from the discussion boards. Therefore, after generating knowledge about the community and recognising the most active users, the researcher added them as friends in the community ahead of participant recruitment. In the first round of interview participant recruitment, a short direct message was sent to selected active community members observed in the first phase. The message provided basic information about the project, including the researcher's name, research background, research objective, and financial incentives of participation in plain language. In addition to the message, a consent form authorised by the researcher's University was sent to stimulate potential participants' willingness to take part in an audio interview via a Zoom/Microsoft Teams/Tencent meeting. In a six-month participant recruitment from February 2021 to August 2021, a total of fifty-three invitation messages were sent on Keep while sixty-eight invitation messages were sent on MFP. Fifteen confirmations of participation were received from Keep users, whereas there were only five confirmations received from MFP due to its higher level of privacy. At a second stage of participant recruitment, the researcher used snowball sampling to recruit more participants who shared the same interests as the initial participants.

3.8.4 Interview process

Based on the constructs and categories identified within the non-participatory observation, each interviewee will be asked a series of laddering questions. To be more specific, the researcher will start the interview with questions such as "What do you like about this community?" or "What features of this community motivate you to participate?". If the respondent mentions the community has a "calorie recording function", the interviewee may be asked "How does the calorie recording function influence your participation in the community?" or "Why is calorie recording function important to you?".

These questions will link the attribute identified to a consequence. For example, if the interviewee responds that the "the closed-off nature of the community" enables them to share freely within the community, he/she will be asked "why is sharing freely important to you?" or "what does sharing freely mean to you?". Thence, if a ladder is obvious, the interviewee will be asked further "why" questions to link consequences to a higher-level construct, which refers to personal value in this study, until a full ladder is achieved. However, it is challenging for the respondents to come up with valid responses themselves accounting for certain behaviours. To address the difficulty in responding during interviews, a variety of techniques will be used. One effective technique for the researcher to use is third-person probing when sensitive topics arise, to alleviate any anxiety that participants may have about sharing personal stories (i.e., "why are you willing to disclose a medical condition in a publicly accessed area?"). Besides, it is helpful to provide scenarios based on the respondent's answers. For instance, if a participant fails to answer the question "why is an informative message is useful to you?", it is useful for the researcher to clarify the term by giving examples of usefulness, such as content containing figures or factual evidence from authorised sources, which enable them to relate to their own experiences and provide more accurate responses. Finally, a series of standard phrases can be used to help participants feel more comfortable and generate a deeper understanding with respect to their engagement intention (i.e. "I understand that this question may seem trivial, but it is an important part of the research that I must adhere to" or "Please keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Although the question may seem silly, it is part of my role as a researcher to ask it. And, please bear in mind, the conversation will be disclosed anonymously").

By the end of each interview, respondents will have been asked for their input on the experience and confirm if they had any additional thoughts on the study or the selected community.

3.8.5 Data analysis

3.8.5.1 Generating ladders and codes

Step 1: Become familiar with the data chunk by reviewing the audio transcripts and identify key passages throughout the process. The codes are discovered alongside the analysis other than those that are pre-determined.

Step 2: Conduct open coding interview by interview and label each data chunk with a code. The purpose of coding in means-end chain analysis is to allow aggregation of responses given in participants' own words by grouping them into a common denominator (Kilwinger and Van Dam, 2021).

Manually identify and sort attributes (i.e. features/functions of the community), consequences (i.e., fast lost/muscle gain/ socialising), and values from each interview and arrange them in the form of an A-C-V ladder. The codes generated by the interview are organised and simplified in Code Book via reducing duplicated codes after analysing every five interviews. Based on the simplified codes, the interview data are then recoded and the ladders are inspected within the interview script two to three times for completeness. Under the guidance developed by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), it is important to focus on identifying the relationship between elements instead of the elements themselves and ensure the ladders develop out of the research purpose rather than researcher influence.

Step 3: On the separate form where the ladders are recorded, classify all responses into attribute, consequence, and value levels and then compile all primary codes into three individual lists.

Step 4: From those three lists, primary codes and categories are identified through contextual analysis, both for the ladders and the key elements presented in the observation data that help to summarise the attributes, consequences, and values. Crosschecks are made between manually generated code lists and word lists derived from word frequency tools in Nvivo12. This practice ensures that the researcher makes no assumptions or misinterpretations of the context of meaning the respondent tries to convey. Any changes, after checking with the interview participants, are applied to the original lists of primary codes.

Step 5: The ladders and primary codes are clustered into different themes. To ensure the findings' accuracy and objectivity, these themes are distributed to the interview participants for confirmation. Any changes will be added in the theme list after consultation. Once all ladders are placed into the appropriate themes, the primary codes are revaluated in context and organised into master codes for that specific theme. De-duplication takes place, removing coding ladders that exactly match, within one respondent's data. Afterwards, numbers are assigned to each master code to develop the Implication Matrix and Hierarchal Value Map (HVM) at a later stage. These two significant procedures help the researcher to identify the collective patterns across participants and distinguish the differences in responses. Through a series of analysis, the resemblances between ladders derived from participants from each community help guide the researcher to realise the pathway connecting specific attributes to personal values, whereas the differences between selected communities enable the researcher to answer the research question in a collective cross-cultural background.

3.8.5.2 Constructing implication matrices from the means-end chain

Followed by the coding process at the first analytical step, an implication matrix is created to bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative aspects of the laddering technique at a later stage (Veludo-De-Oliveira, Ikeda and Campomar, 2006; Devlin, Birtwistle and Macedo, 2003). The purpose of the implication matrix is to represent the respondents' ladders in the aggregate and provide a quantitative overview for hierarchical value map development. Such a matrix is normally square with a size reflecting the number of elements that one is trying to map, within which two types of relationship will be displayed as direct relationships and indirect relationships (Reynolds and Olson, 2001b). Direct relationships indicate the relationship between two adjacent elements justified in an individual ladder, whereas indirect relationships refer to the connection between two non-adjacent elements identified in an individual ladder.

At the initial coding stage, all master codes of attributes, consequences, and values are issued with numbers and these numbers will be placed in rows on the top (attribute, consequence, and value) and columns on the side (attribute) in the implication matrix. Then, looking at the ladders by themes, the frequency that an attribute leads to one given consequence directly/indirectly is recorded, and the number is placed into the box where the attribute and consequence meet. The numbers are presented in fractional form with direct relationships to the left of the decimal and the indirect relationships to the right of the decimal (Reynolds and Olson, 2001b). The same

practice applies while linking a consequence to one given value until the relationship between every construct on the matrix has been accounted for.

In the study proposed by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), a question is raised about whether to include every instance of a relationship among elements mentioned by a respondent or count a relationship only once for each respondent regardless of how many times it was mentioned. Researchers who advocate counting all the mentions argue that the number of times one element links to the other accounts for how strongly these two elements are associated. Although it is easier to keep the count simple, by recording a relationship only once per individual might neglect the focus for each respondent. Therefore, this thesis will record all the counts of relationship during analysis to ensure the accuracy and objectivity of the study.

3.8.5.3 Constructing hierarchical value maps from the implication matrix

The implication matrix discussed above can explicitly reveal the direct/indirect connections between elements from a quantitative perspective. To visualise these connections and present the dominant relationships between constructs, a hierarchical value map (HVM) is needed at the third stage of analysis. The main purpose of HVM is to summarise and represent the strongest related data from a collection of ladders, which are generated in the first stage. Through reconstructing chains from aggregate data, a HVM allows the researcher to simply identify how a given attribute delivers higher-level consequences and how these consequences relate to even more abstract level personal values. To avoid confusion, Reynolds and Gutman (1988) suggest the term "ladders" refers to the elicitations from individual respondents, while the term "chains" is used in reference to sequences of elements that emerge from the aggregate implication matrix (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). Displaying the data as a HVM allows the researcher to view each unique pathway from attributes to values, which represents the perceptual orientation with respect to the phenomenon under study.

The first step of constructing a HVM is to set several different cut-off points, which determine whether a linkage is plotted in the HVM. The use of multiple cut-offs permits the researcher to evaluate several solutions, choosing the one that appears to be the most informative and most stable set of relationships (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). Within Reynolds and Gutman's (1988) study, three to five relations, given a sample of 50 to 60 individuals, is suggested as ideal cut-off points. Considering the overall sample size of this research is only 40 and to ensure the

complexity of the final presentation, this thesis will adopt two relationships as the cut-off points to distinguish the more informative links between elements. Since the complexity of the elements under different themes varies, the researcher will set cut-offs individually for each theme to make a compromise between retaining information and creating manageable maps. Once the cut-offs are set, the researcher needs to build up the map from the chains extracted from the implication matrix.

The five different relationships between adjacent elements should be fully understood before plotting the associations on a map. These are A-D, N-D, A-I, N-I, N-O relationships. The most efficient way of constructing a HVM is to start in the first row for which there is a value at or above the decided cut-off levels, which refer to two or three times in this study. This process will repeat in the similar fashion till it reaches the end of the chain. Having plotted all relationships on a map, the number of direct and indirect relationships that elements have with other elements, both in terms of other elements leading into them and in terms of their connections to higher order elements, will be displayed on the lines linking them. For this study, an individual HVM is generated for each community by applying the practices discussed above and producing a visual representation of the most widely referred attributes, consequences, and values.

Afterwards, it is useful to transform the output into dominant perceptual orientations to simply visualise the relative strength of association from attribute to personal values. In addition, through comparing the dominant perceptual orientations between selected communities, the researcher can further distinguish the differences of community attributes preferences in two different cultures as well as the hidden motivations contributing to these differences. Table 7 summarises the key points of the research design.

Table 7 Summary of research design

Ontology	Social constructionism
Epistemology	The reality is constructed by individuals and interconnections between people. The researcher needs to obtain access to the evolved interpretations that participants make of their experiences, and cultural contexts in which their viewpoints and beliefs are formed.
Methodology	Netnography (non-participatory observation and in-depth laddering interview)

Research context	Online brand community- fitness related (Keep and MFP)
Data collection	Phase one: Non-participatory observation of online posts Phase two: Twenty one-on-one soft laddering interviews within each community
Data analysis	Mean-end chain theory Thematic analysis

3.9 Research quality

In former ethnographic studies, ethnographers have been explicitly criticised by Positivists for not producing objectifiable results, and thus restricting the validity of proposed findings. Despite the fact that different ethnographers might generate different insights towards the same topic, more and more literatures have included research quality in qualitative research to ensure the 'validity' and 'reliability' of research outcomes (Stake, Denzin and Lincoln, 1998).

Therefore, an alternative set of evaluation criteria is suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (2008) to guide qualitative researchers to establish the research trustworthiness and further enhance the quality of their research (Audet and D'amboise, 2001; Mays and Pope, 1995). The sequence of criteria includes reflexivity, credibility (over validity in quantitative study), transferability (over generalisability), and confirmability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

3.9.1 Reflexivity

Reflexivity pertains to the practice of critically reflecting on oneself as a researcher, which involves considering personal biases, preferences, and preconceptions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Korstjens and Moser, 2018). It extends to examining the dynamics of the research relationship, including the connection with respondents and how the connection may influence participants' responses. In prior qualitative studies, reflexivity entails a thorough exploration of one's conceptual framework, preconceptions, and values, and an understanding of how these factors impact decisions made throughout all phases of research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). Acknowledging the significance of self-awareness and reflexivity in data collection, analysis, and interpretation is crucial for qualitative researchers. In other words, the essence of reflexivity lies in making the relationship and impact of the researchers on the participants explicit (Jootun, Mcghee and Marland, 2009). Consequently, incorporating reflexive notes alongside observations, interviews and data analysis becomes imperative.

In this study, reflexivity is ensured through the adoption of journaling, self-interview and member reflection. Specifically, during the phase one observation, a research diary was employed to document ideas, insights, thoughts, and knowledge developed throughout the observational period. Given the non-participatory nature of the observation, the researcher refrained from actively engaging in daily interactions within the selected communities, thereby minimising potential biases arising from preconceptions. The journalising method helps the researcher in recognising her learning process during the observational period and illustrates how this knowledge shapes her design of interview questions and participant recruitment for the second phase of data collection. A comprehensive explanation of the observational process is provided in section 3.7, offering readers a clear perspective of the context.

For phase two interview, self-interview and member reflection methods were adopted to ensure the reflexivity (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023). To align with this approach, the researcher, prior to the second phase of data collection, conducted a self-interview. The detailed transcription and analysis of this self-interview facilitated a continuous comparison of the researcher's experiences with those of the participants (Gentles *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, reflexive notes were concurrently generated during data collection, capturing aspects observed during the interview and reflections made during transcription and analysis. These notes also included the researcher's personal reactions to the environment and the connection with the interviewees (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Lastly, the method of member reflection, regarded as a nuanced way to engage with participants (Ravenek and Rudman, 2013), was implemented upon the completion of data collection. Interview participants were re-invited to engage in a fifteen-minute discussion with the researcher to assess whether the interpretations appropriately reflected their thoughts once the initial analysis was finished. This approach recognises that data and interpretations are contextually constructed, and participants may modify their perspective or introduce new interpretations upon re-engagement (Ravenek and Rudman, 2013).

3.9.2 Credibility

According to Golafshani (2003), both quantitative and qualitative researchers need to test and demonstrate considerable credibility for their research. Whilst the credibility of quantitative research is dependent on instrument construction, in qualitative studies, the researcher himself/herself is involved as an important part in generating credible findings. Throughout the

research process, a few questions are placed to guide researchers to establish certain trustworthiness for their study.

- Does the researcher answer the question that he/she is supposed to answer?
- Are multiple perspectives of evidence used?
- Are all available data considered?

In addition to this, since the main objective of ethnographic studies is to understand reality from a research participant's angle and to cultivate an insider's vision (Brewer, 2000), the individuals within the specific research context are the only ones who are eligible to criticise the credibility of research results. Thus, applying a 'member check' is suggested as a crucial technique in ensuring the credibility of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In the case of this study, by sharing the summary report with interview participants, the researcher can modify the overall conceptualisation as well as the proposed categorisations according to the respondents' feedbacks with respect to the data, analytic categories, and interpretative expressions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Since the data are derived from the community members, such an approach ensures content validity and conceptual clarity. According to Perreault Jr and Leigh (1989), the interrater reliability index is discussed as important in ensuring the research credibility. In earlier means-end chain study, peer review is utilised to explore more insights into the topic and avoid potential bias arising from the researcher's familiarity with the subject (Sankaran and Chakraborty, 2021). By triangulating the research findings, the researcher will not only enhance her research credibility, but also embrace more knowledge derived from the richness of data.

3.9.3 Transferability

Is this research generalisable to wider contexts? Do the concepts derived from the study have relevance to other settings? These two questions imply the significance of generalisability as an important criterion in evaluating the value for a certain study. Generalisability, which assumes the ability to apply specific results to a wider population, has been recognised as one of the main objectives in prior positivist research (Merriam, 1998). Unlike positivist assumptions, qualitative research aligned with social constructionism mainly involves studying individuals in particular contexts, which makes it difficult to develop generalisability applied to a broader population. As a consequence, it is important for the researcher to include enough

contextual information ands clarify the research settings while presenting the results to audiences. As proposed by Shenton (2004), by receiving abundant contextual information, readers are more likely to perceive a proper understanding of the research and, thereby, enable them to relate the proposed findings to their realistic situations.

3.9.4 Confirmability

Confirmability, as defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2008), refers to the extent to which other researchers can validate the findings of a study, emphasising the need to establish that both data and interpretations are clearly grounded in the data (Shenton, 2004; Anney, 2014). To ensure confirmability, researchers are advised to implement an audit trail, which transparently outlines the steps taken from the initiation of the research to the development and reporting of findings.

In this study, a comprehensive account of the research design and its execution is provided in sections 3.7 and 3.8, enabling readers to gain a thorough understanding of the chosen methods and their efficacy. Moreover, it is crucial to document a decision trail at each research stage, offering evidence of choices made concerning theoretical and methodological aspects throughout the study (Ryan, Coughlan and Cronin, 2007; L. Haven and Van Grootel, 2019). To fulfil this purpose, the researcher has engaged an expert specialising in brand community and means-end chain to review a sequence of records, from community selection, access to the selected communities, observational presence, data sampling, reflective notes, code book for analysis, data management, and other material needed throughout the research process. These approaches facilitate the expert to work as an auditor in examining the transparency of the research path.

3.10 Ethical issue

Having explored the research strategy and associated methods, the purpose of this section is to examine in detail one of the main concerns of research in virtual communities: research ethics. It starts with considerations of different options that researchers can adopt and identifies the common uses and abuses of ethical codes of conduct. The dilemmas of research in the virtual context are then explored and the key premises of ethical conduct are considered. Following the University of Reading's research ethics protocols, the researcher presents the modifications to traditional ethnography adopted in this thesis, which meet emerging challenges mentioned

in previous studies. This section concludes by discussing some key ethical issues encountered by netnographers.

3.10.1 Informed consent

According to Rose, Spinks and Canhoto (2014), it is important for researchers to inform participants about the research design before the data collection, thus assisting the participants to decide whether or not to participate. By doing this, researchers can achieve considerable transparency and honesty of the collected data. This study involves non-participatory observation and in-depth interviews, which address a few ethical considerations for the researcher.

With respect to non-participatory observation, some netnographers argued that without informed consent, the researcher cannot achieve transparency and honesty, as suggested in prior ethnographic studies (Kozinets, 2010; Bruckman, 2006; Hudson *et al.*, 2016); while other academics argued that the awareness of the researcher can influence the normal behaviour of those being observed, thus undermining the validity of research outcomes (Kozinets, 2010). In the case of this research, although it involves non-participatory observation, all the textual data were collected via publicly assessed online communities, either on social network sites or on mobile devices, and the data were mainly descriptive texts related to engagement performance. This approach implies low risk for the community respondents of exposing themselves in the proposed findings. Thus, it is valid to include some representative postings in the final presentation.

Despite the conflicts raised above, it is essential for researchers to obtain informed consent for interviews since it clearly involves human practice. Therefore, all the research respondents were informed about the study in advance of the interviews including the use of their data, the level of privacy protection, the presentation of the conversations, and other aspects. An electronic copy of the consent form, designed in accordance with the University's guidelines, was distributed and signed off by every participant. Besides, in order to perceive a lower level of research risk, no participants were recruited under the age of 18 or above the age of 65.

3.10.2 Confidentiality and security of data

Netnography involves a sequence of significant data including interview transcripts, reflective field notes, and secondary archival data derived from participant observation. It is important for researchers to be aware of issues relating to anonymity and confidentiality and they should ensure participants' privacy through a series of essential techniques (Rose, Spinks and Canhoto, 2014).

Anonymity

Compared to large-scale quantitative studies, it is more difficult for qualitative researchers to ensure the anonymity of participants since the data sample is relatively small. Therefore, it is suggested that particular attention is given while presenting the research outcomes and researchers should exclude any information implying participants' identities. Various techniques are helpful to protect anonymity such as applying pseudonyms, replacing specific job titles with generic job descriptions, and adopting a cloaked presentation while showing their contributions. In the case of this research, as participant information was anonymised, any personal data irrelevant to the research objectives has been deleted and would not be displayed in the final discussion.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality relates to the protection of the data provided by participants (Rose, Spinks and Canhoto, 2014). To prevent the unexpected exposure of collected data, all the data mentioned above have been stored on the University's server under a password protection and is anonymised. By doing this, information related to personal privacy, including participants' age, gender, income and working titles, can be well protected.

3.10.3 Trust

As mentioned in the previous section, this study has adopted non-participatory and in-depth interview to explore the nature of customer engagement in an online brand community context. Unlike traditional ethnography, the researcher did not have direct interactions with community members within the observational stage, thus, it was important for the researcher to establish trust with the participants prior to the in-depth interviews. Kozinets (2010) suggested all netnographers fully disclose his/her presence and clarify their research interests during any research interactions. Therefore, before the observation, the researcher of this study disclosed her presence on the public discussion board and informed community members of her research intention. In addition to this, ahead of the in-depth interviews, private messages had been sent

to the potential participants and information such as the researcher's real identity, research background, reasons for approaching, and general interview questions have been included.

To build up the trust with the research participants, all interviewees for this study have been given complete transparency regarding the research agenda and ongoing progress. In adhering with previous assumptions, prolonged engagement would have enhanced the trust between researchers and participants, thus ensuring access to richer data. However, the researcher also experienced a certain level of distrust from the potential participants due to the geographical barrier as well as privacy concerns. To fix this problem, the researcher contacted the admin or moderator of different discussion boards and equipped them with the information about the study as well as the financial incentives offered by the researcher. With the help of the moderators, who perceived a higher level of credits within the community, more community members were willing to engage in the interview section.

3.10.4 Key ethical issues in online research

Although the Internet has provided researchers with great opportunities to generate rich data from diverse sources, two particular issues have been raised in previous netnographic studies (Rose, Spinks and Canhoto, 2014; Kozinets, 2010). Firstly, if a researcher interacts with community members and uses the discussions between them as sources of data without informed consent, such practices are against the principle of transparency and honesty that will further ruin the trust developed over time. Secondly, although people are posting content in the public domain online and, hence, it is potentially available for use, it remains a conflict for researchers to use these postings for analysis. This is because these postings are not published for research purposes and presenting these data without informed consent will make the respondents' personal information more vulnerable.

To mitigate the impacts of above ethical issues, the researcher has adopted a few approaches under the guidance of Kozinets (2010). Firstly, all these interactions observed are publicly available messages and postings presented on an individual's personal profile would not be included. Secondly, all the community members are subject to a cloaked representation, through which their engagement-related performance is mentioned, but the individuals' names, online pseudonym, and other identifying information are excluded. Considerable adjustments

have been applied while presenting quotes because this approach ensures the anonymity and enables the researcher to develop conceptualisations in a more naturalistic way.

3.11 Chapter summary

This chapter has critically discussed the researcher's philosophical position and introduced a series of analytical and interpretation approaches applied in this study. To correspond with the research objectives and better understand the motivation behind social beings' interaction in virtual settings, social constructionism was selected as the overall philosophical standpoint to support the further data collection and analytical technique decision. Under the theoretical lens of social constructionism, netnography has been selected as the main method to explore customer engagement in selected brand communities, which, in this study, refer to MFP and Keep in this study.

Given that netnography is in line with the basic propositions of ethnography, it is recognised as the best method in understanding community culture in a virtual context. Owing to the unique online environment, relevant content was placed to explain the similarities and differences between netnography and traditional ethnography and a series of online community selection criteria was addressed in accordance with the pioneering paper published by Kozinets (2002). Afterwards, both advantages and drawbacks of the netnographic approach have been proposed and specific issues related to online cultural studies have been considered. A set of ethical guidelines has also been provided in this chapter.

Following the above theoretical discussions, specific details regarding the two phases of data collection were given. At the initial stage of this research, the researcher has conducted unobstructive participant observation to familiarise herself with both communities studied. Although both communities are publicly accessible, the researcher has evaluated the potential risks perceived by participants and obtained consents from community moderators and some community members, who are likely to publish sensitive posts, ahead of the data analysis.

Then, in-depth interviews were conducted among active members recruited from the selected communities. The laddering technique was applied aligned with means-end theory in designing the interview questions. By following the analysis guideline proposed by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), community members' motivations behind certain engagement behaviour in

online communities were identified. Two comprehensive hierarchical value maps that present the linkage between community attributes and personal values were generated. Through comparison, the researcher can understand the differences between community members engagement performance in two distinct cultural backgrounds. The penultimate section of the chapter outlined a set of evaluation standards proposed by Kozinets (2010) alongside the other qualitative literature to assess the findings of this study.

4. Observational findings

Online brand communities are constructed by a community infrastructure (i.e. user profile, reward system, forum, and e-commerce platform), social roles (i.e. moderator, authorised user, active participant, and 'lurker'), and between members' interactions (i.e. cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement). In the following chapter, the observational findings will be explained in detail incorporating some distinct evidence captured from the first phase of data collection.

4.1 Community infrastructure

Previous research has highlighted the importance of exploring the characteristics of brand communities and their influence on CE (e.g. Brodie *et al.*, 2013), as these characteristics shape a customer's overall perception of a brand community. The subsequent sections discuss five key attributes of the selected communities, which include user profiles, reward systems, forums, moderators, and discussion boards.

4.1.1 User profile

In this study, user profile is identified as a critical element in defining a user's social identity and authenticity. To refute the research bias discussed in chapter four, it is necessary for the researcher to conduct authenticity checks before immersing him/herself into the research field. Both Keep and MFP users can create their own fitness profile by filling in their basic information (including username, age, and gender) as well as setting up their fitness goals in order to approach users who share similar interests. More importantly, both platforms equip users with a fitness recording portal to witness their cumulative achievements alongside their fitness journey. These features enable users to reflect who they are in a protected virtual environment and connect with users who relate to their fitness aspirations.
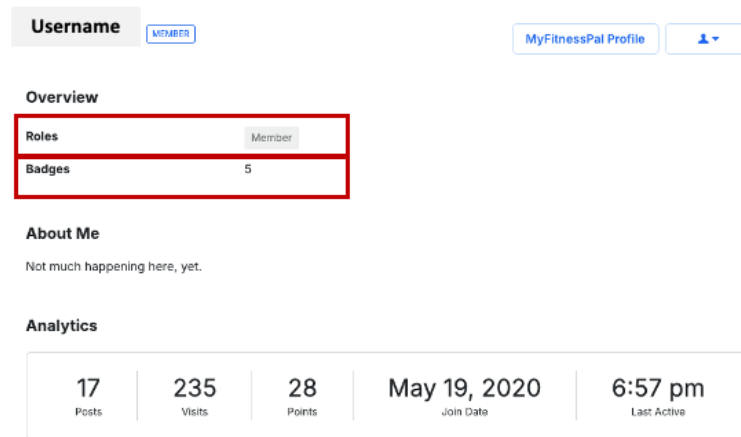
Figure 1 User profile interface- MFP
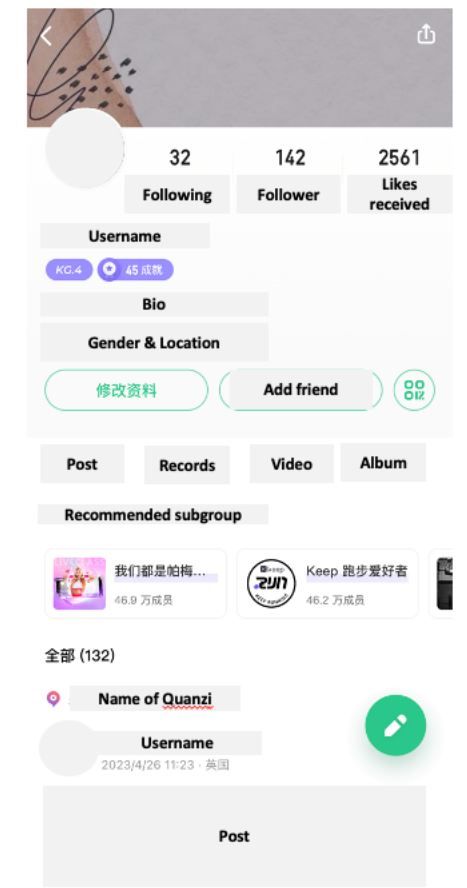
Figure 2 User profile interface - Keep

There are a few distinct differences between Keep and MFP, which potentially influence a user's engagement behaviour in practice. For instance, the Keep interface is designed in a social media framework and community users can see the number of followers and people who they

are following. There is also a separate section to show the total number of likes and comments received, which is used as a construct in identifying the status of users' involvement. Apart from presenting their fitness achievement on their personal profile, other users can also check other individuals' posts, videos, and images by clicking the category link shown on the publicly accessed profile (see figure 2). Whilst Keep input a lot of social features in developing a user profile, MFP focuses more on creating a fitness-driven community with less focus on the social perspective. To be more specific, as some MFP users addressed in their personal profile, they will not approve a friend request unless the requesting user has a full profile with specific fitness goals (see figure 1). In addition, MFP users cannot access other users' posts, food diaries, and log threads until he/she adds the person as a friend. Keep's interactive interface enables users to generate content in a more creative approach and further close off the distance between members due to the lack of intimacy; whilst MFP eliminates the community's social features and manages to provide users with a safe environment to accomplish their fitness goals.

4.1.2 Reward system

Reward is recognised as a crucial driver for customer engagement in online communities (Islam and Rahman, 2017). It is noticeable that both platforms take advantage of a reward system to encourage users to participate in branded activities and interact with other users. In the context of this research, badges have been widely used when community members have finished certain tasks and achieved milestones alongside their fitness journey. These badges are symbols reflecting members' involvement level and provide users with social benefits (such as peer recognition, affinity, and reputation building) as well as psychological benefits (such as membership and entertainment) (Islam and Rahman, 2017).

Keep segregates badges into two categories, which are named "milestone" and "commemorative coins". Milestone badges are awarded to users when they have obtained certain achievements and it is an important element in clarifying users' roles as well as their involvement level within the community. It is common to see Keep users share their milestone badge on their personal profiles and express their happiness in achieving a certain status. On the other hand, by incorporating a gaming element, Keep rewards users with a commemorative coin badge when they have accomplished challenges designed by the brand. To better enhance users' physical experiences, Keep also offers users offline badges through the post. For example, to celebrate new year of 2021, five special commemorative coin badges were

awarded to Keep users who have exercised constantly and posted progression pictures in accordance with the company's requirement. In competing with peers, users were extremely keen to use the Keep exercise programme during the Chinese New Year holiday and shared their progress on the discussion threads. This practice effectively encouraged users to participate in community activities and brought them psychological benefits by creating positive emotions throughout the process. These positive emotions, which include happiness, joy, and excitement, can be seen in the user-generated posts, for example: "*it is the badge that acknowledged my hard work and motivated me to continue the fitness journey, whilst I wanted to give up*" (Keep user 338). Other community members, who shared similar interests, normally congratulated him or her achievement and spread the positivity by sending encouraging words like "*well done*", "*keep going*", and "*we can do this*".

Regarding MFP, badges are awarded based on users' content creation behaviour. These badges are named "anniversary", "insightful", "helpful", "hugs", "busy bees", "be you" and others. Similar to the milestone badge from Keep, the anniversary badge on MFP is awarded for the purpose of celebrating a user's engagement with the community. Through this badge, individuals can easily identify experienced users from newer members. Besides, "insightful", "inspiring", and "helpful" badges were observed as crucial determinants of information quality. More specifically, users who are awarded these badges are normally recognised as high-value content creators and have been praised by other community members. In response to people's posts, users can quickly engage by using the reaction button shown below each post, which includes features such as "like", "hug", and "disagree". Once the users have received a certain numbers of these reactions, they would be rewarded with specific badges.

To better reflect members' interactions within the community, both Keep and MFP present these badges on users' profile and other members can access them publicly. Keep users can easily check other members' workout progress by clicking the milestone badges, which are displayed next to their usernames. However, compared to Keep users, MFP users are less likely to take the initiatives of sharing their badges on their personal profile. The reason for this is because MFP users can only access other users' profile after adding them as a friend and there is less opportunity for community members to interact and communicate. Although this setting allows MFP users to have more privacy, it might weaken the interactive nature of the online community.

In general, the reward system motivates the community members to participate in brand-related events and through introducing various badges, the bonding between the brand and community members has been prominently enhanced.

4.1.3 Forums

The community is broken down into a variety of different forums and within each forum there is a list of topics with a corresponding discussion board. In both communities studied, the forums are solely created by brand moderators and are titled with general headings. Although the forum titles varied between these two communities, the general content observed was similar and could be segregated into health, diet, chitchat, lifestyle, and other areas.

MFP adopts the traditional forum format and brand moderators are responsible for creating and managing the content published by other community members. To navigate the user to the appropriate discussion boards and be aligned with the community focus, these forums are segregated into three main categories as "Health, Wellness and Goals", "Social Corner", and "MyFitnessPal Information", which will be elaborated in a later section.

Under each forum, any community members with an account can create his or her discussion thread under the guidance of community regulations. As mentioned on MFP's officiate site, site administrators are not responsible for reviewing the post and it depends on the community members to supervise the content and report it if the posts are misplaced. This practice implies the trust/bonding developed between brand and users over time. Each discussion board is titled with a specific topic demonstrating the major posting content and enabling other users to search and interact. To approach potential interviewees for the second phase, the researcher generated a post in the "Chit-chat" forum with the title "I need your help", showing her presence and research purpose. Although this post has not violated the community regulations, it received a few negative responses from other users since they declared the "Chit-chat" discussion board as a purely socialising space, and they were not willing to be involved in any research programme. One user even suggested the researcher should take down the post and place it in the "Health and Fitness" forum, which might be more relevant and helpful to recruit participants.

With respect to Keep, another focus of this study adopts a more interactive and engaging forum approach to enable users to share information, to ask questions, and log exercise. Within the community sector, users can choose and join "quanzi" (Chinese for "group") based on their self-interest. Unlike MFP, which has both publicly accessed forum and groups, Keep users mainly engage in "quanzi" with other members, which is more closed-off by grouping individuals who share similar interests. By doing so, community members can minimise the risks of being exposed to stranger users and better protect their privacy, especially in some gender sensitive discussion threads such as "We are 'Pamela' girls", which is specialised for female users in doing cardio exercise. After joining a specific "quanzi", they can share pictures, videos and ask questions in the group, which shares similar practices as MFP. In each forum, five sections, named as discussion, sign in, recommended post, workout plan, and weekly rank, are shown to navigate users to the appropriate field to generate posts or find the content that they are interested in reading. To develop a user-friendly community environment, Keep users need to obey the regulations proposed by brand moderators. Inappropriate posts are removed immediately by brand moderators and users will be kicked out of the forum after receiving three warnings. Political topics, offensive material, commercial promotion, and unauthorised disclosure are considered as inappropriate content.

After reviewing posts from both communities, it is interesting to find that the focus of users' engagement performance is significantly associated with their involvement level. To be more specific, since newer users are not familiar with the community settings, they are more likely to ask questions about the community functionality and establish basic understandings of how to interact with other members. When they are equipped with knowledge in either fitness or the community, they are more likely to share their experiences and apply expertise in helping others. For instance, one MFP user posted a question about how to add friends on the "Introduce yourself" board and a number of senior community users gave specific instructions by replying to the posts. Although a discussion board hosted by MFP official representatives is in place for community feature-related questions, users are more willing to propose questions in user domain forums. The same practice also applies to Keep. Although company staff are responsible for solving customers' inquiries, they lack the capacity to respond to each post punctually.

4.1.4 Moderators

For both Keep and MFP, two types of moderators are assigned to manage the communities. On the one hand, a set of official representatives are employed by the brand to keep the community secure and provide users with an enjoyable environment to engage and interact with other users. On the other hand, a group of senior users, who perceive higher status within specific forums, are nominated as volunteering moderators or spam moderators in assisting brand official representatives to manage daily interactions. The official representatives and spam moderators are eligible to remove inappropriate content via the back desk operations whereas volunteering moderators are not empowered to do so. However, these volunteering moderators are encouraged to report inappropriate posts and they receive higher attention from the other users than normal users.

Both Keep and MFP take advantage of senior users' experiences, but the way in which they recruit volunteering moderators is explicitly different. For example, MFP announced the list of moderators on one of the discussion boards without disclosure of the nomination process, while Keep publicly announced the recruitment procedure at the top of each forum and users could apply for the moderator position through the link provided by brand representatives. Furthermore, the quantity of moderators in these two communities varies. Keep employs two to three volunteers to manage one forum, while there are only four volunteering moderators on MFP to manage the whole community.

With respect to the duties shouldered by the moderators, there are distinct differences between official representatives and volunteering moderators. Firstly, to promote the brand and related activities, official representatives are responsible for creating contests or campaigns from time to time to encourage community users to generate content and share their aspirations. For example, a discussion board titled "Share your 2021 new year solution" was published by MFP employees on 31st December 2020 and advocated people share their fitness or life goals for 2021. Secondly, the brand representatives are also responsible for announcing community feature updates and responding to inquiries proposed by normal users. Despite the fact that both communities perceive a large user base, due to the limited number of staff, it is highly dependent on the senior members or volunteering moderators to answer some basic questions and solve conflicts raised in the discussion threads.

Compared to the official representatives, volunteering moderators or senior members in the communities might be given more respect by ordinary users since they share general membership. More explicitly, other than official representatives, who are employed by the brand to perform a task, volunteering moderators or senior members have been actively participating in community developments and involved in the day-to-day conversations. They share a similar sense of belonging to the community as other users and put effort into maintaining a positive and interactive community environment. Furthermore, it is noticeable that community users prefer relatable language when it comes to interactions and that accounts for the phenomenon in which posts generated by senior members receive higher attention than official representatives.

4.1.5 Discussion boards

As indicated in section 4.1.3, both communities are composed of diverse forums with content related to fitness, diet, workout, and healthy lifestyle. After reviewing the posts generated by users in both communities, it is evident that similar interests towards a brand and desire to improve self-performance are two key elements connecting users in the selected virtual environment. Because of this, most of the discussion boards are brand centric and relevant to the fields designed by the brand. If a post runs out off track from the original topic or violates the community regulations, normal users often report it and volunteering moderators will step in to guide the conversation back to the original topic or suggest the violating user creates a new discussion board for further conversations. Establishing a balance between natural conversations and regulated nature is, therefore, pivotal to the community's management as even though users do nourish the community's content with diverse opinions, it may not be in line with or relevant to the discussion. However, excessive regulation would also inhibit the growth of ideas and constrain the users' freedom of expression.

In paying close attention to both communities, it is apparent that there are four categories of posts on the discussion boards. They include knowledge exchanging (i.e. The "*Open University has several free courses that explains the basic pretty well*" MFP user 212), personal story sharing (i.e. *"I've made a 21-day challenge health group with some of my Facebook friends. Each month this year, we'll pick a different healthy habit to build together."* MFP user 169), questioning (i.e. *I don't know how to add people, can you guys help me?*), and daily logging (i.e. "*Been going 66 days strong in this new lifestyle change!"* MFP user 85). After a user

creates his/her user profile, introductory discussion boards, such as 'Introducing yourself' or 'Newbie's logging', are usually visited to familiarise himself/herself with the community environment.

4.2 Community social roles

The existing literature has observed that different members of an OBC perceive it in various ways, and the member type can act as a moderator in members' online community engagement (e.g. Kumar, 2019; Mathwick, Wiertz and De Ruyter, 2008). According to netnographic paradigm, consumers' identities are shaped by the roles they play within their respective communities (Caliandro, 2016; Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011). Considering this perspective, Kozinets proposed a compelling model categorising consumers into four types: Devotee, Insider, Newbie, and Mingler (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). These four "ideal types" distinguish themselves through varying levels of engagement and expertise they contribute to the community. Based on existing categorisation, the following sections delve into how active users, authorised users, and lurkers utilise the OBC to interact with the brand and other community members.

4.2.1 Active user

Active participants are members who have been regularly contributing to the development of a unique community culture (Sun, Rau and Ma, 2014). They perceive a high level of involvement and can be easily identified by the post number or login time, which are displayed next to the username or on the personal profile.

In paying close attention to both communities, active participants are recognised as value co-creators who perceive higher status in the community and are respected by the normal users. Some active participants even received the 'community expert' title authorised by the brand, which distinguish their explicit contributions from normal users. According to Keep, users who have published more than six posts per week in specific areas, such as fitness, yoga, diet, running, outdoor activities, etc., are eligible to apply for this title. By observing the posts generated by active users, their passion for the brand determines the additional efforts they put into developing an interactive community nature and keeping the community alive.

Many of the active participants are the most experienced users in the community and, in some scenarios, they volunteer to act as a brand representative to promote the community and answer proposed questions. These questions are normally generated by junior users, asking for suggestions with respect to workout planning, diet approaches, and community functionality. Thanks to their expertise in fitness and experiences in using the community, active participants always answer the questions with detailed explanations and are praised by the addressed members. However, for the simple questions or questions without any context, this group of users is less likely to respond, regardless of whether or not the question has been answered. Therefore, it is important for new users to include specific background information while composing questions if they want high quality responses from senior members.

In addition, while providing suggestions to newer users, active participants also share their stories with the brand and encourage them to take full advantage of the platform by providing relevant links or posts published on the community site. These posts diversify the content coverage and improve the content quality, which is described as the 'booster' of community engagement performance in this study.

4.2.2 Authorised user

Aside from the brand moderators and active participants, there is a special group of users in Keep who are authorised by the brand as accredited trainers and are also named as key opinion leaders (KOLs) or key opinion consumers (KOCs). These users are not officially employed by the brand but are responsible for promoting the branded products and play important roles in keeping the community engaged. Unlike the active participants, KOLs or KOCs are required to obtain fitness qualifications to publish content. For example, if a user wants to be accredited as a workout expert on Keep, he/she needs to provide documents, such as ACE, NASM, NSC, ACSM certificates, as evidence of obtaining expertise in workout aspects. Although MFP has generated similar content published by authorised personal trainers or nutritionists, it was criticised by users due to its irrelevant information and formal wording. On the contrary, the authorised users on Keep normally incorporated their unique personalities into content creation, which makes the content professional and fun to read. As a consequence, it is common to observe that authorised users obtain a large number of followers in the community. Meanwhile, it is frequent to find authorised users developing their micro community on other social media platforms such as WeChat. To protect users' privacy and enable them to interact in a secure

environment, it is forbidden for authorised users to reveal any personal information on publicly accessed areas, thus limiting deeper bonding development among users. The extension of relationship reflects the enhancement of affective connections between Keep users and provides them with possibilities of exchanging ideas with others upon the mutual affiliation towards the authorised user.

Beyond sharing personal experience, these authorised users have more privileges in designing training programmes and, unlike the official programmes generated by the brand, this customised content is preferred by a wider range of users. In general, the involvement of KOLs or KOCs not only accelerates the knowledge exchange, but also enhances the credibility of the community.

4.2.3 Lurker

According to Sun, Rau and Ma (2014), the term "lurker" qualitatively refers to a group of silent members, who do not contribute to the group, in an online community context . The criteria of defining a lurker are dependent on the nature of the specific community.

Both Keep and MFP are recognised as large online fitness communities that cover various topics. As a result, there is generally less user participation in comparison to other smaller communities. Through observing users' actions and incorporating existing knowledge of online behaviours, users who log in regularly, but generat less than five posts in three months, are recognised as lurkers in this study. Unlike active users who are consistently involved in brand discussions, lurkers are not easily noticeable in daily interactions due to their low-level participation. However, this phenomenon might change depending on the publicity of the disclosure as well as the time in which the users have been immersed within the community.

Specifically, during the observation period, the researcher added thirty members from both Keep and MFP to better understand their engagement performance in a restricted accessible space. Although some of these users rarely posted content in publicly accessed forums or were involved in conversations with other members on discussion boards (this could be fulfilled by putting usernames in the search tab), it was common to find them regularly updating their food diaries and adding other like-minded users as friends on their personal profiles. Moreover, out of consideration of retaining users, both Keep and MFP adopted the reminder features to notice

members when their friends have achieved certain milestones. For instance, messages like "*Congratulate XXX for logging in daily this week!*" or "*XXX is running, let's cheer up*" were automatically sent to users. It is more likely for lurking users to interact with other members through the use of 'like' and 'cheer up' buttons, which was frequently observed in this study. This contrast explicitly indicates the critical aspect of context publicity and the importance of interaction technology. When a user publishes content in public forums, he or she is not assured of receiving positive responses and might experience potential risks of revealing their personal information. These considerations would eliminate their willingness for active interactions. By authorising members' virtual identities through observing personal profiles and shared activities, lurking users are more confident in generating content and establishing their social presence. Additionally, usability of technology provides lurking users with opportunities to acknowledge people's achievements and send motivations without further commitment.

On the other hand, the time in which users immerse themselves within the community dictates the extent of their commitment. As indicated in Rau, Gao and Ding (2008) study, lurking users tend to have low verbal and affective connectedness with other members. As a result, they disregard themselves from the group (Sun, Rau and Ma, 2014). At the initial stage of participation, users prefer to 'take' than 'give'. They tend to use the community as a practical tool to satisfy their fitness demands such as weight loss, muscle building, and calorie counting. Therefore, it is difficult for these users to build affective connections with other people. Once they are familiar with the community features and topics under discussion, they are more comfortable to propose questions and respond to people's posts. These practices are important in building a lurking users' sense of belonging because they enable him or her to find members who are in the same boat.

4.3 Community interaction

4.3.1 Cognitive engagement

According to Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014), the cognitive dimension of customer engagement emphasises an individual's experiences, interests, and attention towards a focal engagement object, which refers to online brand community in this study (Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021). Specifically, in line with the proposition posed by Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas (2015), two critical cognitive engagement elements, attention and absorption, have

been adopted to guide the researcher to categorise the observational findings. A few distinct general practices common to Keep and MFP users highlight the uniqueness of specific community culture.

Attention refers to the cognitive resources that an individual allocates to an engagement object (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Shin and Back, 2020). In the context of this study, attention is demonstrated in the practices of asking questions, seeking suggestions, and setting up goals. After reviewing posts from both communities, it is interesting to find that newer users are more likely to ask questions and seek answers compared to the experienced users. Specifically, during the observational period, approximately eighty-seven discussion threads were initiated by members with fewer than ten post records on MFP, specialised in proposing 'feature suggestions and ideas'. These questions are normally about calorie counting, diet arrangements, approaches to be accountable, and community functionality. By doing so, newer community members are proactively searching for community-related information and equip themselves with the fundamental knowledge for future involvement.

Since senior users in both communities have a better understanding of the community culture and functionality, they are willing to spend time in answering new users' questions. In addition, it is common to find that, other than posting the questions on specialised discussion boards created by the brand representatives, users are more willing to propose questions in user domain forums. This phenomenon critically implies the user-driven community nature and emphasises the importance of content relevance. Compared to detailed, but non-relevant, information published by brand representatives, users have favourable attitudes towards the straightforward answers written by other community members, who might share similar concerns.

When an individual's question has been answered, he/she always showed gratitude to the respondents by saying "*thank you*", "*I appreciate this venue as a resource for holding myself accountable*" or "*It has been immensely helpful*". This practice is not compulsory, but is conducted by users as a normal acknowledgement, which plays a key role in maintaining a supportive environment. The newer users are appreciative of the resources that people share in the community. Following users' appreciation, senior members always replied with friendly comments like "*you are welcome*", "*I am happy to help*", and encouraged them to continue the

fitness journey. These positive interpersonal conversations are built on users' mutual affinity for the brand and a shared interest in living a healthy lifestyle.

Apart from asking questions, it is also common for users to set up goals and seek suggestions alongside their fitness journey. By doing so, users can keep track of their fitness progress and incorporate their speciality with the intelligence co-created with other individuals to satisfy their personal desires of either maintaining weights or body building. When users are more familiar with the community environment, they have more confidence in sharing personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences with other like-minded community members. According to Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas (2015), this state of immersive participation is identified as the "absorption" phase. In this phase, individuals are recognised as perceiving a higher level of positive emotions and are fully concentrated while interacting with the brand and other community members (Shin and Back, 2020). Although showing gratitude towards the community is an evident phenomenon in selected communities, experienced users (absorbed community members) are observed to put more effort into creating content and posting longer articles reflecting their fitness progress. As indicated in Figure One, experienced users having accumulated more than 10,000 posts, responded to a question posted by a new member, seeking fitness advice tailored to a specific age range. In addition to presenting various approaches for information and knowledge, these experienced users share personal stories to encourage the new member to explore different exercises and take advantage of the specialities displayed within the community.
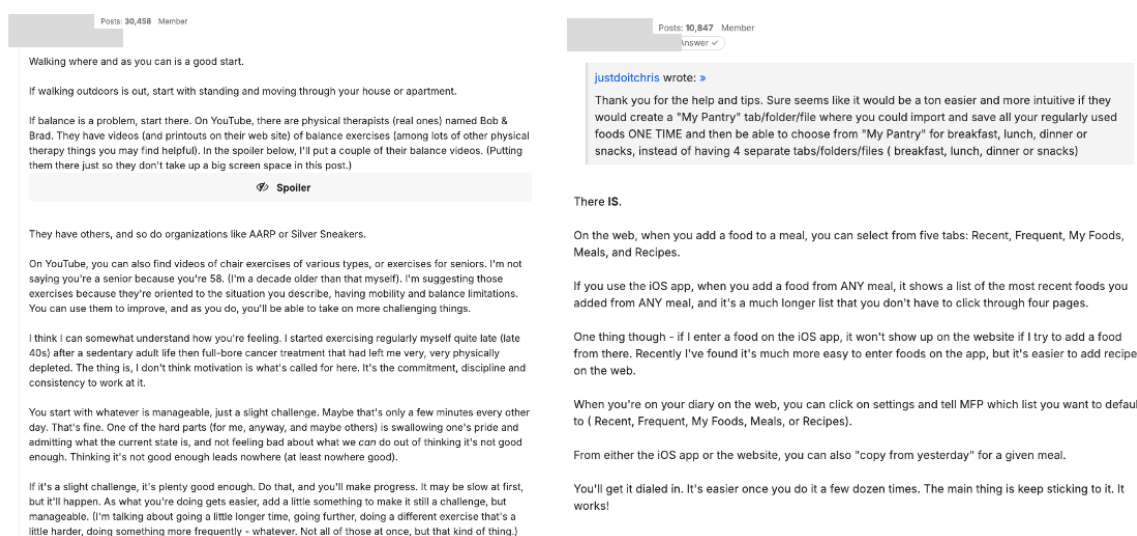
Figure 3 Caption of experienced users posts

With individuals' proactive contributions, the community content has been greatly enriched. For instance, to celebrate the brand's seventh anniversary, Keep created a discussion thread named "Keep is seven years old!" and advocated users share their personal stories with the brand. One authorised user expressed his favourable attitude towards the community and thanked the people who offered him professional knowledge and encouragement throughout the four-year journey. He said "*Honestly, I really like this platform and I appreciate all the company and help offered by the other Keepers… The past four years in this community witnessed my progress from a complete newbie to a professional blogger. I would like to enrich my fitness knowledge through future studies and bring more inspirations to others*" (Keep User 289). Similar content is observed in MFP under the forum of 'getting started', where a new member asked for nutrition advice with respect to how to set goals for saturated fat and non-saturated fat. One experienced user with more than seven thousand posts left him/her a comment with five long paragraphs explaining the rationale behind nutrition tracking alongside some functional websites. He/she said "… *Some sites like Cronometer making logging and seeing the result easier, but this is only the case if you are eating mostly whole foods, because of the packaging limitations. Also, they don't have the fun forums to chat on like we do here (referring to MFP)!* (MFP User 129)". In turn, the enquirer sent gratitude by saying " *Thank you so much XXX, awesome😊. I appreciate all the great input and education here from you… five paragraphs, thanks for your time! It'll take me a while to 'get' some of what you're talking about, haha!* (MFP User 130)"

4.3.2 Affective engagement

Affective engagement denotes a consumer's degree of positive brand-related affect in a particular consumer/brand interaction (Rather and Hollebeek, 2021). It comprises two important elements, which are called enthusiasm and enjoyment (dedication and passion (Dwivedi, 2015)), accordingly (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2016). In particular, enthusiasm emphasises an individual's intrinsic level of excitement with respect to the engaging partner (the brand), while enjoyment focuses on demonstrating pleasure and happiness derived from interactions with engagement individuals (other community users or brand representatives). After observing both communities, it is common to find community members expressing their emotions and feelings in the conversations with other users once

they are immersed with the community environment. These emotions can be segregated into two main categories: high positive valence and high negative valence.

High positive valence refers to users' positive emotions derived from the conversations with either the brand or other community users. These emotions include appreciation, admiration, happiness, joy, determination, excitement, inspiration, and positivity. Within these diversified positive emotions, appreciation and admiration are built upon users' bonding with the brand, which implies the intrinsic level of engagement. It is common to observe senior users showing expressions of gratitude and admiration towards the brand community through posts, for instance: "*It has been in a blink of an eye that I have been using Keep for three years. The past three years brought me a lot of surprise and excitement. It is those encouragements that make me more convinced of the power of discipline… I love Keep and Keep makes me stronger!*" (Keep user 743) or "*I've found posting every day on MFP has kept me accountable and I press play even on the days I'm not feeling it… I feel loads fitter and in better shape already*" (MFP user 518). Apart from showing favourable attitudes towards the brand, community users also expressed happiness while interacting with other users, especially when the person felt supported. Comments such as "❤️ *I have you all now, my new fam* ❤️" (MFP user 32) or "*You guys are awesome & inspiring*" (MFP user 56) were consistently identified throughout the conversations. These emotions are highly relatable to the propositions of affective engagement addressed by Rather and Hollebeek (2021). Especially, users have shown positive emotions towards the brand community's unique culture in most scenarios. This phenomenon is distinctively outstanding within the Keep community because most users were observed to show positive aspects of their life and rarely disclosed negative content in the publicly-accessed space.

However, like most conditions, anomalies inherently do exist where high negative valence is prominent. In this study, high negative valence concerns negative emotions perceived by community users through the display of anxiety, desperation, confusion, and frustration. Although most of the content shown in the community were generally positive, it was not uncommon to see users expressing negative emotions of failing to achieve certain goals in either fitness journey or work occasions. In one scenario, a brand moderator created a discussion thread related to the audience's stories as well as new year solution on MFP. One user exhibited signs of anxiety indicating that her goals were too nebulous to achieve, which

left her in despair when she realised that she did nothing to achieve her goals (MFP user:89). Comments such as *"I got frustrated after working out for three months, three to six times a week, with no results"* (MFP user 369) and *"I have tried a couple of things, but not working and really struggling"* (MFP user 285) all exhibited the same traits. These negative emotions were also spotted in Keep while users cannot accomplish their targets. For example, under a discussion thread named 'set up a goal when you feel demotivated', a user exhibited signs of frustration and self-hate for her eating disorder illness. She said *"I have been trapped in a vicious cycle of binge eating and purging for over half a year now. I feel like there's no hope for me anymore. I'm becoming increasingly self-conscious. Even though I'm not hungry, I can't control myself. I keep stuffing food into my mouth, secretly eating alone in my room, and then running to the bathroom to induce vomiting. I'm too afraid to talk to my family or friends about it. I feel ashamed of myself... As I grow older, I become more and more affected by casual comments from others about my weight, and I can't get over it myself. Now, I'll set a small goal for myself: to eat without purging! Starting tomorrow, I'll keep track!"* (Keep user 41).

In addition, disagreement towards certain posts also elicited users' unpleasant feelings such as confusion and hurtfulness. In one scenario, one MFP user received a few disagree reactions from other users and complained that *"Why someone disagrees with what I said is totally confusing to me and hurtful. So, if you come back and read this, at least say what you're disagreeing to or about"* (MFP user 99). This statement was widely noticed by others and raised discussions regarding topics with no consensus. Most members showed empathy to the addressed user and critiqued the needlessness of clicking the a "disagree" button outside of the 'Debate' forum (MFP user 156). However, some users argued that a supportive community is not about delivering 'candy-coated' messages, but to deliver constructive information, which is beneficial in improving an individual's fitness performance.

4.3.3 Behavioural engagement

Behavioural engagement reflects the consumers' intentions to engage in specific brand-related activities (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014) and emphasises a consumer's level of energy, effort, and time dedicated towards an engagement focus, which refers to online brand community in this study, beyond transaction (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021). Its manifestations can take the form of greeting and sharing

(Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2016) (knowledge exchanges), supporting, and socialising behaviour.

In paying close attention to both communities, it is common for new users to greet the other members and make their presence known by introducing their personal background and fitness goals and when they start to use the community (see figure 4).
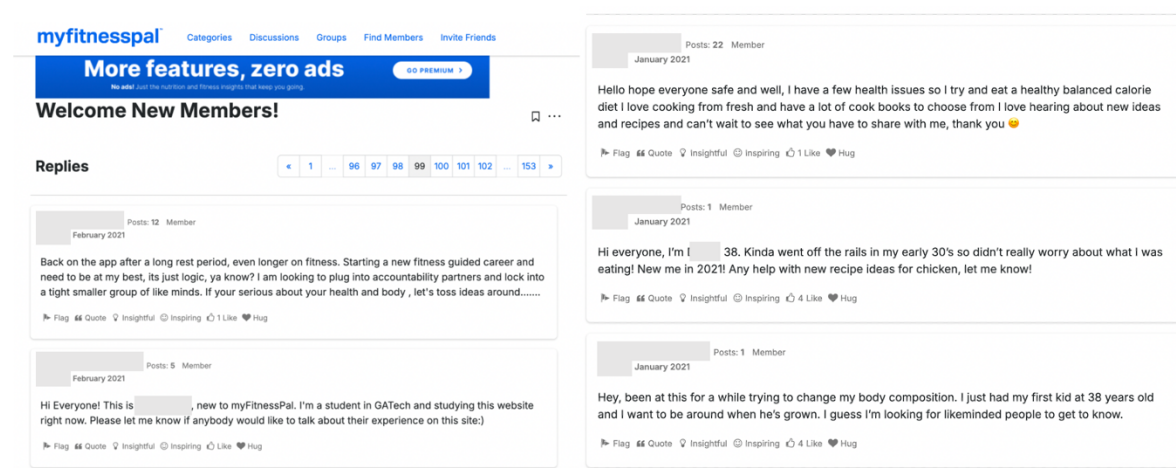
Figure 4 Caption of new member greeting- MFP

In response to these posts, existing members always showed genuinely welcomed them and wished them success in achieving their goals. This interactive nature enables the users to continue using the community as a supportive source and later dedicate more time and efforts to inputting knowledge.

With respect to the sharing behaviours shown, the exchange of knowledge is identified as the main expression in this study. In Sloan, Bodey and Gyrd-Jones (2015) research, an individual's commitment level and sharing intentions are highly relevant to his or her perceived positive emotions towards the engagement foci. In other words, an individual's sharing behaviour is elicited after he or she fosters an emotional connection with the brand. This explains why active and authorised users tend to exhibit higher emotional value and publish longer posts. In return, volunteering moderators would pin these as recommended posts and encourage other users to share their own content to enrich the credibility of the community. Furthermore, authority and authenticity were identified as critical determinants for the users' willingness to respond. According to Rieh (2002), authority of information is defined as the extent to which users

thought the information was credible, trustworthy, reliable, official, authoritative, and amateurish. In the context of online communication, authority is used to evaluate "who is speaking", whilst authenticity is used to assess "what is being said and how is it being delivered" (Huang *et al.*, 2011). Aligned with these propositions, posts that contained scientific evidence and related pictures were observed to receive more attention and discussions between community members. Aside from sharing recipes under the Keep forum "Sharing three meals a day", authorised users have imparted interesting facts on diet and exercise through instances like "*It is important to include high protein food in your breakfast such as milk and egg… Milk and egg are both rich in protein and calcium, which can strengthen the body's immune system… It has been scientifically proved that the most ideal time for breakfast would be 7:00am to 8:00am because the gastrointestinal functions the best at this time*" (Keep user 341). In addition to content credibility, emojis were observed to be another critical element in gaining members' attention. This reinforces the interconnection between members, especially within the Keep community. This is in line with findings addressed by Rodrigues *et al.* (2017), which describe emojis as a more appealing, nuanced, and meaningful construct in comparison to text and emoticons. Specifically, users can convey complex emotions through emojis, which reflect their personality in a virtual setting. This nourishes the playful and authentic nature of community interactions.

Apart from exchanging ideas on diet and exercise, keeping oneself accountable is another important mission of an individual joining an online fitness community. During the Covid-19 period, it was common to see people expressing anxiety about gaining additional weight due to limited access to exercise facilities. Lack of physical company contributes to the popularity of people seeking for motivation in the online context. Feeds such as "*Need more friends to keep me on track*" (MFP user 358), "*Would love to see like-minded people's progression too so we can cheer each other on*" (MFP user 563), and "*Love seeing what others are doing for motivation*" (Keep user 128) were frequently spotted. As discussed in the cognitive engagement section (4.3.1), people took advantage of the community to track their progress and be informative regarding various fitness aspects. These practices are valuable in building a group of active users who perceive a favourable attitude towards the brand and provide an opportunity for newer users to find accountable fitness partners.

4.4 Chapter summary

The findings from the first phase of the observational findings have been presented in this chapter. During this phase, the researcher made observations of the selected communities and equipped herself with contextual understanding of the research focus. By having knowledge of the cultural background of the communities, the researcher can better interpret the responses given by the participants during the interviews in the second phase of research. In the next chapter, the summary of the individual interviews and key findings, following with the application of the means-end approach, will be presented.

5. Laddering interview findings

The purpose of this chapter is to display key findings from the second phase of the research process - in-depth laddering interviews. These interviews are designed to understand what values drive FHOBC member engagement actively from different cultural backgrounds. A brief overview of this research phase is presented followed by the subsequent findings composed of five key themes.

5.1 Overview of individual interviews

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the optimal number of respondents for in-depth laddering interviews to unearth desired constructs is thirty to thirty-five; any more raises the risk of repeated data. Consequently, forty-five active community members (twenty-five from Keep and twenty from MFP) were invited to take part in the study's interview process after they confirmed their interest by responding to the recruitment notes disclosed to the community members. To enhance their understanding of the study, each respondent was sent detailed information regarding the interview alongside specific ethical guidelines, participants was designed according to the University's regulations (see Appendix X). Additionally, they were informed that the laddering interview would last around an hour and were asked to confirm that they could devote that time. This approach can prevent respondents from dropping out in the middle of the interview and ensure that the individuals were dedicated to the study. Ultimately, the interviews were scheduled with forty out of forty-five members (twenty from Keep and twenty from MFP) who responded to the inquiry.

All interviews were conducted online through Teams or Zoom. Before the formal interview, the researcher first conducted profile checks of the respondents to ensure they were the actual account owners. Respondents were asked: "what is your profile name?", "when did you last log in?", and "which pages do you normally visit?". Following the respondents' detailed responses to these inquires, the researcher cross-checked them versus the data presented online. By doing so, the researcher can protect herself from prospective fraudsters and guarantee the validity of the data. Once the respondent passed the profile check, he/she was reminded of the research's purpose and informed that his/her responses would be disclosed anonymously in the findings of this thesis (see Appendix D). Since the interviews need to be recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis, the respondents were also asked for their consents to

archive the interview records. The researcher also used this time to start interacting with the respondents in an effort to put them at ease and create a "light" environment for people to share.

The laddering interview is a primary data collection method that aims to elicit information about an individual's life that he/she might not be aware of (Reynolds and Olson, 2001b). During the interview process, the respondents are firstly asked to describe what they normally do within the selected communities. Equipped with the respondents' answers, it is more effective for the researcher to remark on the specific manifestations of engagement for later probing questions. Questions such as "what are the features of the community that appeal to you?" or "what do you like about the community?" were further proposed. Normally, participants provided valid attributes accounting for their preferences of using the community. For instance, respondents described the community as "supportive" or "helpful with a lot of knowledgeable users". These key words/phases have been captured and recorded as attributes for later discussion.

Once the initial attributes were identified, the following line of questions focused on the consequences fulfilled by the attributes provoked previously. Respondents were, thus, guided towards a more in-depth level of questioning so they can concentrate on the causes behind their attribute preferences. Questions such as "Why is it important to you?", "What does it mean to you?", and "Why do you think it is important for the community to possess this feature" were posed by the researcher to uncover the connection between attributes and consequences for each interview participant. If the respondent found questions difficult to answer, they were repeated or rephrased to "What will you do if the attribute does not exist?"; however, the questions were never compelled to provide a particular response, thus reducing research bias and ensuring the validity of findings. To elicit a higher abstract level of personal values, the researcher kept probing the subject about why particular consequences are important to them and how the fulfilment of those consequences influence them personally. As Reynolds and Gutman (1988) addressed, it is necessary for the researcher to pose questions at the greatest level of abstraction to understand an individual's cognitive structure, which is fundamental in making sense of an individual's perception towards certain objects. This process was repeated until the respondents could not give further elaborations or the optimal outcome was obtained. The field notes created from phase one's observations help at this point to contextualise the responses and facilitate deeper conversations between respondents and the researcher.

However, a few critical issues emerged throughout the interview process and a series of solutions was applied to eliminate the negative influence. Firstly, it was common to find that a respondent may have never considered a given circumstance and, thus, was unable to concisely articulate the reasons for the decision or, perhaps, the questions were too personal to feel comfortable in answering, which resulted in negative responses. In this scenario, it is effective for the researcher to reply a pertinent piece of personal story to ease the respondent's anxiety and make him/her more comfortable in continuing the conversation. This method allows the researcher to connect with the interviewee, thus bringing the communication back on track. Secondly, in line with the criticism discussed previously in the methodology chapter, not every consequence can be connected to a value since respondents frequently struggle to articulate the relationship between the two components. In this case, it is effective to adopt the negative laddering technique by asking the respondent to imagine what would happen if the consequence expected was not satisfied. Thirdly, the "why" questions may lead to the emergence of artificial abstraction levels as the respondents try to look for rationales to support their responses, which potentially affects the naturalistic setting of the interview. The researcher took this into account by carefully monitoring the amount of repeated questioning so as not to exhaust the respondent and mislead them to look for any answers to satisfy the researcher. Additionally, to ensure precise understanding of interviewees' responses, the researcher constantly conducted a communication check by asking "What you mean is…, is that correct?". At the end of the interview, each participant was asked if they had any questions or comments about the interview before the distribution of the findings for their feedback and discussion. An overview of the interview schedule can be seen in Table 8 and Table 9.

Table 8 Overview of interview schedule (Keep)

Respondent	Community	Ladders	Data points	Interview time (min)
R1	Keep	10	75	68
R2	Keep	16	42	63
R3	Keep	15	64	89
R4	Keep	15	74	81
R5	Keep	15	52	71
R6	Keep	11	28	63
R7	Keep	22	65	70
R8	Keep	12	52	70
R9	Keep	11	62	55
R10	Keep	13	72	75
R11	Keep	11	59	73
R12	Keep	12	57	68
R13	Keep	16	36	75

R14	Keep	13	33	70
R15	Keep	17	35	80
R16	Keep	10	29	49
R17	Keep	8	21	60
R18	Keep	11	22	55
R19	Keep	10	20	55
R20	Keep	12	18	55
Total	Keep	260	916	1345

Table 9 Overview of interview schedule (MFP)

Respondent	Community	Ladders	Data points	Interview time (min)
R1	MFP	20	94	63
R2	MFP	12	54	56
R3	MFP	12	44	68
R4	MFP	9	39	82
R5	MFP	12	56	65
R6	MFP	19	47	63
R7	MFP	15	32	54
R8	MFP	11	28	62
R9	MFP	20	45	64
R10	MFP	12	35	58
R11	MFP	7	14	45
R12	MFP	13	20	65
R13	MFP	23	37	80
R14	MFP	17	29	55
R15	MFP	15	30	51
R16	MFP	14	28	60
R17	MFP	15	35	55
R18	MFP	12	22	58
R19	MFP	13	36	53
R20	MFP	16	43	63
Total	MFP	287	768	1220

On completion of all the interviews were finished, the data was transcribed and logged into the qualitative research tool NVIVO for subsequent analysis. Under the laddering interview interpretation guideline suggested by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), the interview data were initially coded by the researcher upon extant knowledge of the research subjects (i.e. customer engagement, participation, online brand community, personal values). The researcher further developed individual ladders that reflect the relationships between community attributes, consequences, and personal values. After concluding coding procedure, it was evident that a number of recurring themes had formed from the individual interviews. The most often mentioned themes from the ladders were visibly reflected in the dialogues using NVIVO's categorisation tools. These themes refer to sharing, socialising, helping others, and self-advancement.

In the initial coding stage, more than a thousand constructs have been captured and placed in the order of attribute-consequence-value. To generate a more comprehensive depiction of the data, it is effective to categorise the ladders into themes. It worth noting some ladders transcend across different scenarios and can be categorised into different themes. Within each theme, separate value maps were produced for each community, along with an overall value map for both (one overall HVM, one Keep HVM, and one MFP HVM), to discover the underlying motivations driving CE in OBCs and to take cross-national differences into account. In line with the objective of qualitative content analysis to reveal patterns, themes, and concepts of social reality, the findings of the interviews were organised into themes in order to make sense of the enormous amount of data. These themes both represent the respondent's individual motives for engaging in an OBC and help the researcher gain better knowledge of the overall concept of the community.

5.2 Findings

The following sections present the findings of the second phase of study, which uncovers the relationship between attributes, consequences, and personal values in the context of OBCE. Four main themes are proposed to describe the unique nature of the selected communities and explain how individuals interpret their engagement behaviours. These themes are not exclusive from one another and there a certain level of overlap exists.

5.2.1 Findings: Sharing

The 155 ladders (85 from Keep and 70 from MFP) made refer to aspects of sharing within the selected communities (see Appendix F for the implication matrix and Appendix J for the Master Codes). As the HVM for sharing demonstrates (in Figure 7), nine key attributes were reported, which include support, closed-off, shared experience, nature of content, mutual interests, records, relevancy, in the same boat, and east-to-use (in Table 10).

Table 10 Overview of attributes, consequences, and values from theme 'Sharing'

Attribute	Consequence	Value
Ease-to-use (M) In the same boat (M) Relevancy (M) Records (K)	I am not alone (M) New idea (M) Relatable (M) Save time and energy (M)	Goal-achieving (M) Inspirational (M) Inclusive (M) Knowledgeable (M)

Mutual interests (K)	Joy (K)	Make life easier (M)
Nature of content (D)	Admiring (K)	Sense of community (M)
Shared experience (D)	Learning (D)	Influence others (K)
Closed-off (D)	Feel comfortable to share (D)	Self-satisfaction (K)
Support (D)	Motivation (D)	Sense of accomplishment (K)
		Sharing (D)

(D) refers to constructs mentioned in both communities.
(K) refers to constructs mentioned in Keep.
(M) refers to constructs mentioned in MFP.

HIERARCHICAL VALUE MAP: SHARING- KEEP (N ≥ 2)

VALUES

| Sense of achievement | Influence others | Happiness | Motivating | Confidence | Sharing | Recognition | Sense of accomplishment |

2 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 2

CONSEQUENCES

Joy | Attention | Satisfy curiosity | Admiring | Learning | Feel comfortable to share | Understanding

2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2

ATTRIBUTES

SUPPORT | NATURE OF CONTENT | SHARED EXPERIENCE | CLOSED-OFF | MUTUAL INTERESTS | RECORDS
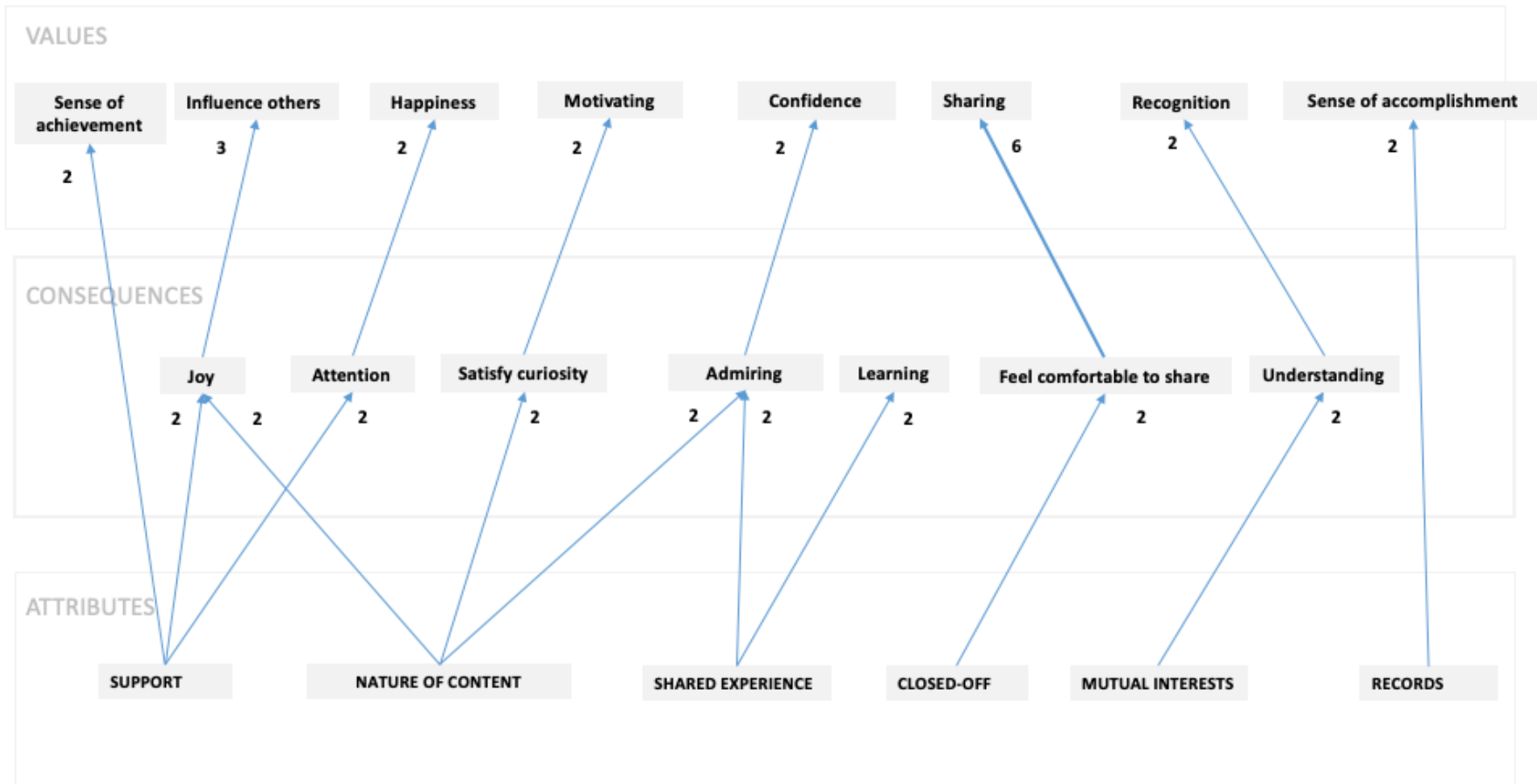
Figure 5Hierarchy-value-map: theme Sharing - Keep (n≥2)

HIERARCHICAL VALUE MAP: SHARING- MFP (N ≥ 2)
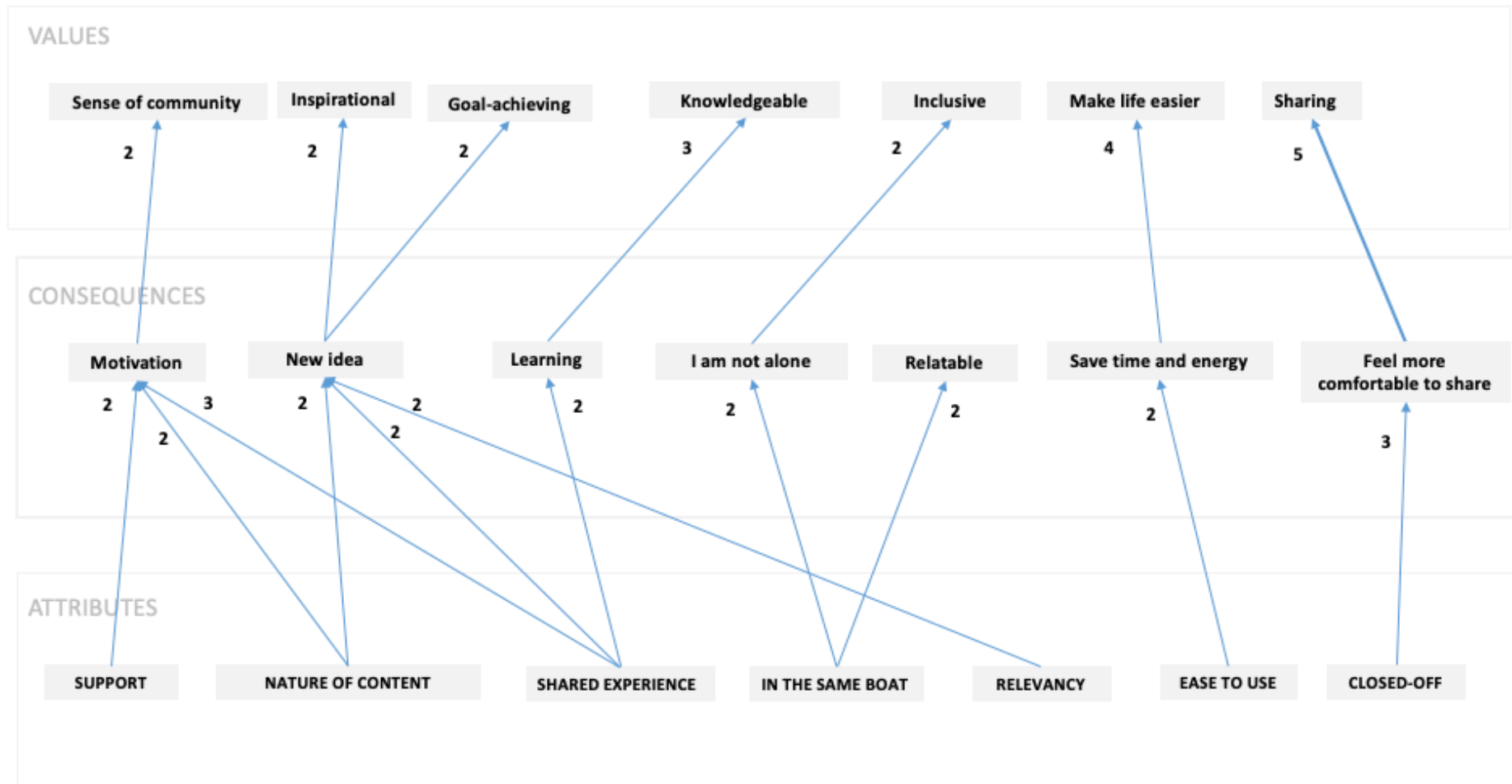
Figure 6 Hierarchy-value-map: theme Sharing - MFP (n≥2)

HIERARCHICAL VALUE MAP: SHARING- OVERALL (N ≥ 2)
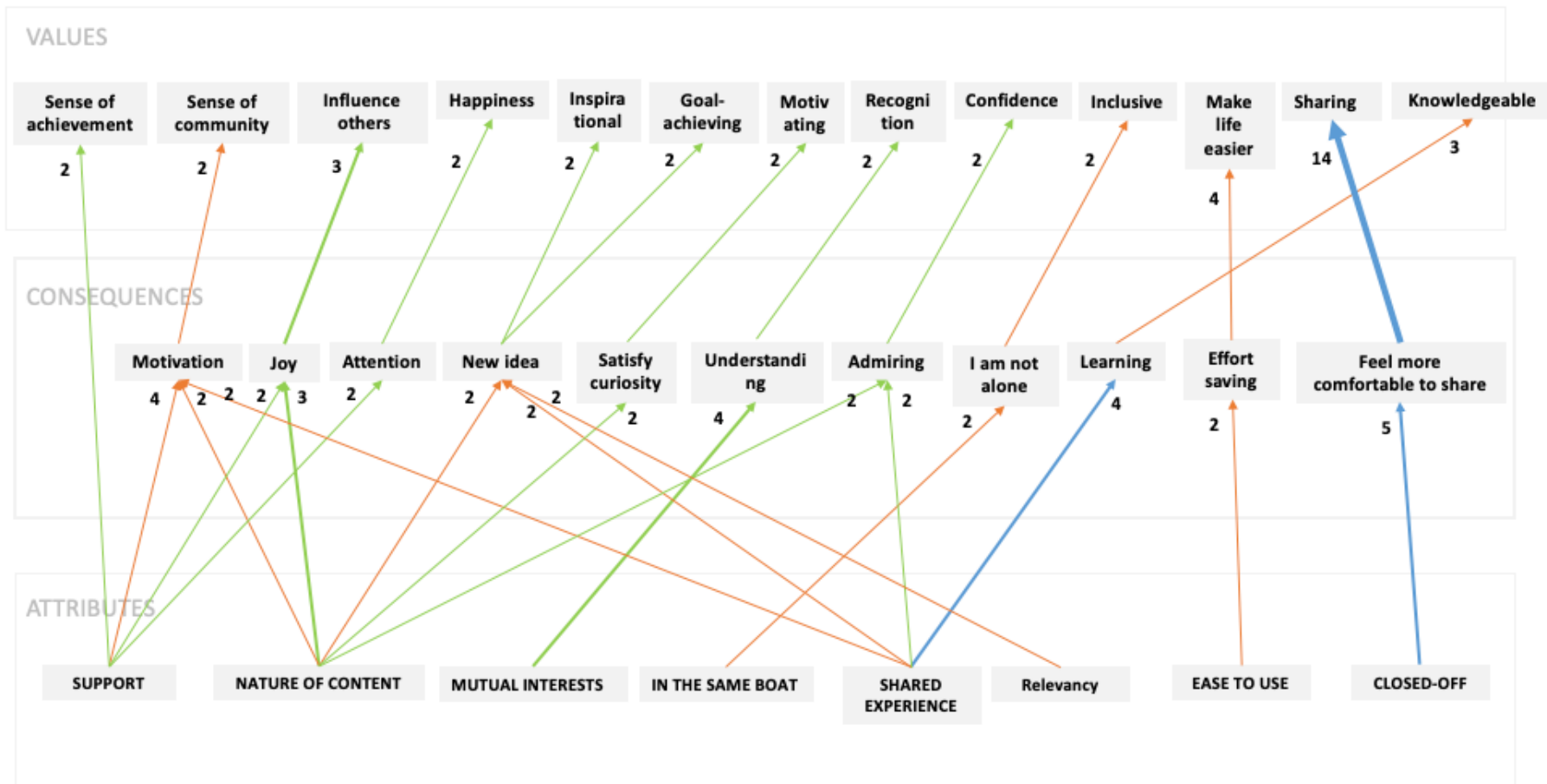
* Orange line outlines the patterns of MFP, green line outlines the patterns of Keep, and Blue outlines the mutual patterns of both communities.

Figure 7 Hierarchy-value-map: theme Sharing - Overall(n≥2)

The 'closed-off' community feature provides the first attribute of sharing. Both Keep and MFP users favoured the exclusiveness of the community and differentiated it from other social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Wechat and Weibo, as it develops a separate virtual space for fitness enthusiasts. This feature eliminates the potential risks of community members encountering people who they know in real life, thus ensuring a secure environment, which in turn leads to a higher level of willingness to share. This, therefore, fulfils the value of 'sharing'.

"*For example, not all people on Weibo or Wechat are interested in doing sports, so there is no focus for me. But if you are using Keep, everyone is posting fitness-related content, which makes me feel like my sports photos should be posted here.*" (Keep, Respondent 12).

"*I think the most important thing is that it is separate from my circle of life. It gives me a space to meet people who I don't know in my real life, and I don't have any pressure in leaving a bad influence by posting photos showing my abs. No one judges here because this is a pure fitness community.*" (Keep, Respondent 2).

"*It's just all women who have probably been through exactly what I've been through at a different point in their life, it's been easier to share personal stories… I don't want to put like lots of private things like that on Facebook. I quite worry about what I put on that.*" (MFP, Respondent 5).

Sharing through the offering of 'support' is recognised as another important attribute in this theme. Delivering support takes similar forms in both communities, which includes sending likes and encouragements, leaving positive comments, and showing appreciation.

As shown in the HVM (see Figure 5), providing support leads to the fulfilment of the values of 'influence others', 'sense of achievement', and 'happiness' by satisfying individuals' desires for 'joy' and 'attention' in Keep, and it leads to the fulfilment of the value of 'sense of community' by increasing people's motivation level in MFP. This implies that Keep users focus more on the reciprocal perspective of receiving support, either from a cognitive or emotional perspective. As one respondent indicates "*When people give me credits for what I have done, I feel a strong sense of achievement*" (Keep, Respondent 2). This was also found in another participant's response by saying "*When I post my workout updates later, many people*

give me likes and comments, which makes me happy unconsciously. It feels different when you are recognised by others" (Keep, Respondent 11). On the other hand, MFP users highlighted the impact of support in giving them motivation, which results in an increased level of 'sense of community'.

"*Like positive comments will reassure them and pick them up and motivate them to keep going. And I know if, like, I posted something and someone commented 'oh, well done, keep going', that would keep me motivated and think I'm actually doing okay. All these positive connections will drive me to engage more*" (MFP, Respondent 1).

"*I posted some of my own things. It's most of my own food and a lot of people say that looks nice, looks like a good idea... It kind of makes you feel a lot more inclusive. They give me more desire to post things like that and find more people on there*" (MFP, Respondent 8).

'Shared experience' is demonstrated as the third mutual attribute in both communities resulting in community engagement. Other than posting articles specialised in professional fitness knowledge, shared experience emphasises the personal aspect of the content, either through creating or browsing the information. As shown in the Keep HVM (Figure 5), it consequently leads to increased levels of admiring and learning, which in turn satisfies the values of 'building confidence'.

"*I think it is due to my extroverted personality that I really enjoy sharing things with others and communicating with them. After posting my workout updates, normally I receive a lot of praise and encouragement from other members, which makes me even more enthusiastic about doing it... Frankly speaking, I hope to not be unnoticed or overlooked in my work, daily life and even social activities, and I want to be seen by others in every area... When you receive more praise, it naturally boosts your confidence*" (Keep, Respondent 9).

When it comes to MFP, shared experience is considered as a window for users to acquire new ideas and learning, thus leading to the values of 'being inspirational', 'being knowledgeable', and 'goal-achieving'.

"*I'm curious about other people's journeys because there are people like me who again are trying to either lose weight, trying to gain some muscle, trying to do and eat the right things.*

And I was curious to see how other people did it. And maybe there are things that I could learn from them… I guess it's about being part of the community from afar… We can experience other people's lived experiences so that you can learn from other people" (MFP, Respondent 7).

The 'nature of content' serves as another mutual attribute accounting for people's online community engagement. This concept comprehensively describes all elements included in the user-generated content including its valence, wording, frequency, and style. In Keep, the nature of content subsequently leads to an increased level of joy, admiring and satisfies individuals' curiosity in knowing the world, which in turn satisfies the values of 'influence others', 'being confident', and 'motivating'. Most Keep respondents are more likely to create and share content that contains positive elements, rather than content that expresses negative emotions or frustrations, such as complaints and judgemental responses. This trend is consistent with Keep's concept of bringing positivity from fitness to life. Through this positive content creation and sharing, the Keep respondents aim to positively influence others by bringing happiness and encouragement to members who may be in need of support.

"*I don't want to post frustrating content, which might leave a bad influence on fellow users, and this is the reason why I barely post anything negative. When you are happy, people around you can also feel your happiness and will follow you; similarly, sad and negative emotions will also affect people around and I don't want to do that*" (Keep, Respondent 11).

Regarding the consequence of 'satisfying curiosity', Keep participants highlighted the importance of gaining additional insights into a particular issue, rather than solely learning new things from others. This differs slightly from the responses provided by MFP users as discussed earlier.

"*For example, if someone used to be overweight, but later became a handsome guy with a great figure, I am curious about how they feel and their emotional changes throughout the whole process… Although I don't have overweight concerns, I believe exercise is tightly related to personal norms and through reading these transformation posts, I can see more of these spiritual aspects of fitness*" (Keep, Respondent 19).

Although the 'nature of content' is also identified as an important factor in understanding why MFP users share their thoughts with others, it leads to the consequence of 'acquiring new ideas' and satisfaction of the values of 'being inspirational' and 'goal-achieving', which is different from what has been observed in Keep. It is interesting to find that while MFP perceives similar concepts in building a positive community environment for people to engage, respondents emphasised the practical aspects of the created content and rarely sympathised with the emotional aspect of the articles.

"When I noticed that other people in the community were posting their workout routines, I decided to try some new exercises myself, as I had been sticking to the same routine for a while. Seeing what other people were doing and learning about their fitness goals is inspiring, and it motivates me to step out of my comfort zone and try new combinations of workouts" (MFP, Respondent 1).

Apart from the attributes mentioned above, there are a few specific differences that have been discussed between Keep and MFP. Interestingly, a direct relationship is found between the attribute of 'records' and value of 'sense of accomplishment' in Keep. The login feature of the platform enables Keep members to record their workout status and share it with people who perceive similar routines with ease on personal profiles. This consequently leads to a stronger sense of accomplishment by tick boxing the daily exercise task. Although MFP perceives similar functionalities with the open diary, it is not common for MFP users to share it in publicly accessed area because some respondents consider fitness issues as highly personally-related.

"*There was a time when I would basically exercise every day; through clocking in every day I develop a sense of accomplishment*" (Keep, Respondent 1).

"After completing my exercise, I have a routine of taking pictures. Other than posting on Weibo or WeChat, I feel that it is more appropriate to upload the pictures on Keep as a record of my fitness journey or to simply express my post-workout feelings. Regardless, I always take photos and share them after exercising because it gives me a strong sense of accomplishment" (Keep, Respondent 12).

Another notable distinction is that Keep users described 'having mutual interest' as an important attribute affecting their intentions to share, while MFP participants frequently refer to being 'in the same boat'. Having mutual interests leads to an increasing level of understanding, which further satisfies the value of 'being recognised'. As discussed earlier, Keep is a closed-off community that specialises in grouping individuals with fitness demands. Therefore, it becomes less challenging for community members to encounter individuals who share similar interests and build a common understanding regarding contentious fitness-related topics, as well as shared ideas and knowledge.

"I feel like there's also the fact that my parents cannot understand me… and I need someone to corroborate that, someone who understands, and be able to show my parents that I'm doing something in a reasonable way" (Keep, Respondent 4).

"People who love exercising are the ones who will use Keep, which means that at least the people who use this platform share something in common with you… If I post something on it, the people in this community will better understand the sentiment behind my message and recognise my contributions in bringing more knowledge to others" (Keep, Respondent 20).

'In the same boat' covers responses such as "people with the same goal", "people like me", and "people share similar journey/struggles" and it leads to the consequences of 'I am not alone' and 'relatable'. These consequences satisfy the values of 'feeling inclusive'.

"There's obviously other people who wanted to achieve their goals as well. So it's really nice to be part of that community (MFP, Respondent 7). *"You're finding out that there are people doing the same exercise as me. I'm not alone, like it's a very encouraging place, and it really, like, motivates you to keep going back on it… I definitely felt better about working out because I knew that there would always be people behind me to catch me if I fail"* (MFP, Respondent 4).

Lastly, 'ease of use' accounts for the increased level in time and effort saving that, in turn, results in the value of 'make life easier'. Some respondents described themselves as busy social beings and ease of use is important for them to reduce unnecessary time in filtering information to read and, thus, making their life easier.

"I'm such a person that I have little time. I'm busy with work and family, so I would prefer a single source that is supplying all the information. I need a supply of credible information" (MFP, Respondent 2).

To summarise, the constructs of nature of content, shared experience, closed-off environment, and support are identified as significant attributes leading to respondents' sharing behaviour. Both Keep and MFP community members valued the ability to share thoughts freely in a secured environment, and they also viewed 'nature of content' (i.e. valence, wording, and layouts) as well as 'shared experience' as crucial for learning and improving fitness efficiencies. Regarded as intangible user-focus intelligence, shared experience is highly acknowledged by the interview participants in acquiring new ideas. However, Keep users were more focused on sharing emotional elements, which includes admiration and appreciation in order to boost other users' confidence level and improve their wellbeing status, while MFP users placed more emphasis on acquiring new ideas and knowledge for self-improvement. Support was also seen as an important factor in promoting positive emotions and encouraging sharing behaviour. When individuals exchange uplifting messages and receive encouragement, it leads to a series of positive emotions, such as joy and excitement, which influence others to embrace a healthier lifestyle. Some MFP respondents also viewed these positive responses as motivators to grouping with people who share similar interests, thus increasing their inclusiveness and sense of community.

Despite the common chains, certain patterns are found to differ significantly. Firstly, Keep users place a strong emphasis on having mutual interests and keeping records of their sharing intentions. Keep provides a diverse online platform where users can connect with others who share similar interests and discuss topics that may be difficult to broach in person. Rather than simply sharing content, Keep users were found to place more emphasis in winning social recognition within a large group of people and were more interested in demonstrating their proficiencies. Through sharing their fitness achievements, other users can recognise the efforts as well as contributions to which they are committed, thus improving their status in the community. On the other hand, while MFP users expressed their desires to be inclusive within the community, they placed less attention on building social identities while conducting sharing behaviour; instead, they regarded sharing as an effective approach to acquire new ideas and improve self-performance.

5.2.2 Findings: Socialising

The 148 ladders (86 from Keep and 65 from MFP) made refer to aspects of socialising within the selected communities (see Appendix G for the implication matrix and Appendix K for the Master Codes). These ladders covered a few socialising scenarios and showed how individuals perceive the communities' social features and how they fulfil their hedonic needs. Communication between members, interactions (comments and likes), mingling, and making friends are some examples of these scenarios. As Table 11 indicates, two significant values are shared between the communities, which refer to bonding and friendship. Specific connections among attributes, consequences, and values are shown in Figure 8, Figure 9, and Figure 10.

Table 11 Overview of attributes, consequences, and values for theme 'Socialising'

Attribute	Consequence	Value
Like-minded people (M) Supportive (M) Support (M) Clique (K) Closed-off (K) Nature of content (K) Shared experience (K) In the same boat (D) Mutual interests (D) Diversity (D)	Assurance (M) Way to give back (M) Mingling (K) Attention (K) I am not alone (D) Learning (D) Meet more people (D) Make friends (D) Understanding (D)	Knowledgeable (M) Sense of community (M) Sense of belonging (M) Inspirational (K) Motivating (K) Happiness (K) Bonding (D) Friendship (D)

(D) refers to constructs mentioned in both communities.

(K) refers to constructs mentioned in Keep.

(M) refers to constructs mentioned in MFP.

HIERARCHICAL VALUE MAP: SOCIALISING- KEEP (N ≥ 2)

VALUES

Friendship   Inspirational   Bonding   Motivating   Happiness

4   4   2   2   2   2   2   2

2

CONSEQUENSCE

Make friends   Mingling   Learning   Understanding   Meet more people   I am not alone   Attention

2   3   3   2   2   4   2   2

3

ATTRIBUTES

CLOSED OFF   CLIQUE   MUTUAL INTERESTS   NATURE OF CONTENT   DIVERSITY   IN THE SAME BOAT   SHARED EXPERIENCE
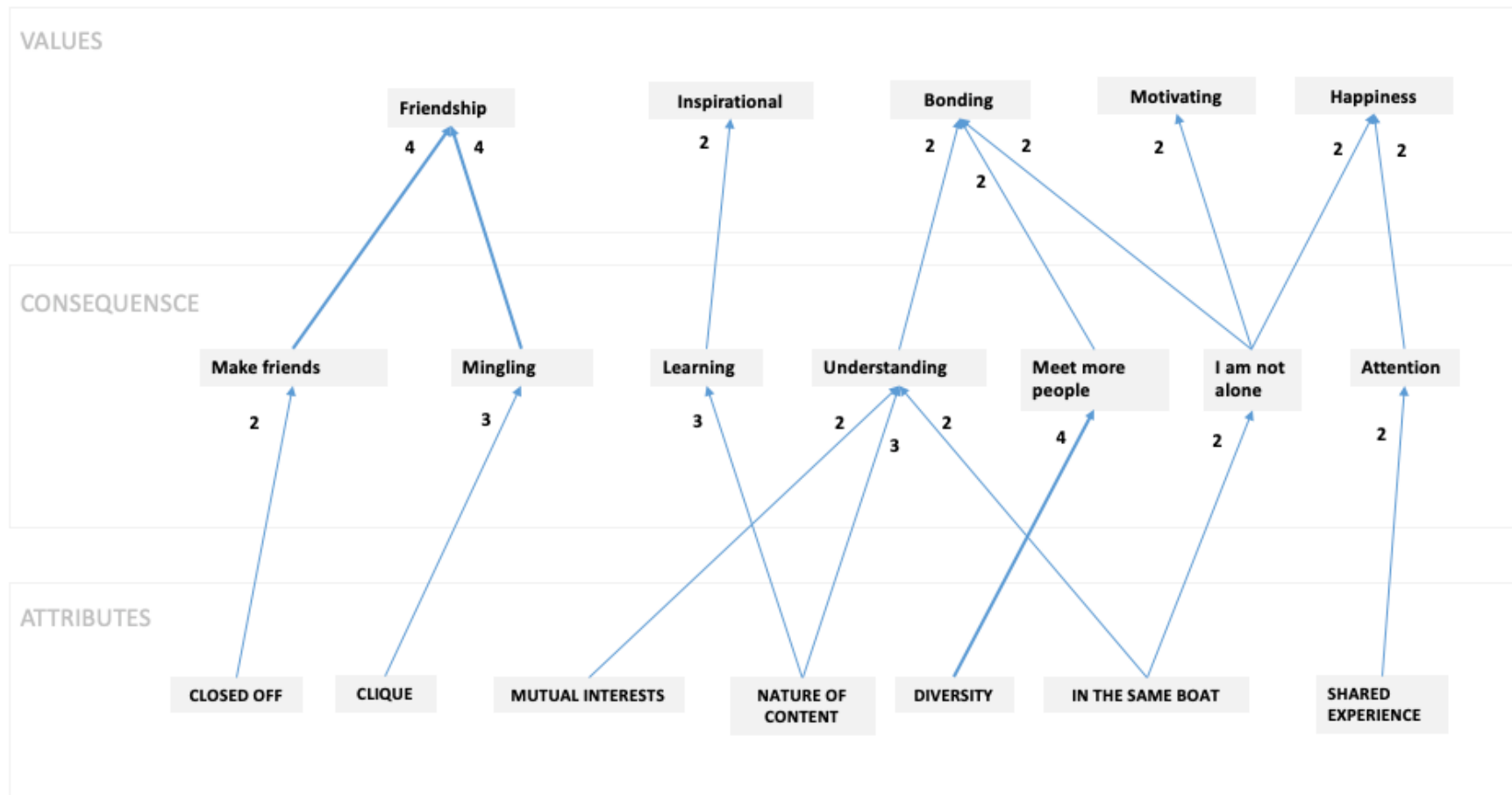
Figure 8 Hierarchy-value-map: theme Socialising - Keep (n≥2)

158

Figure 9 Hierarchy-value-map: theme Socialising -MFP(n≥2)

HIERARCHICAL VALUE MAP: SOCIALISING- OVERALL (N ≥ 2)
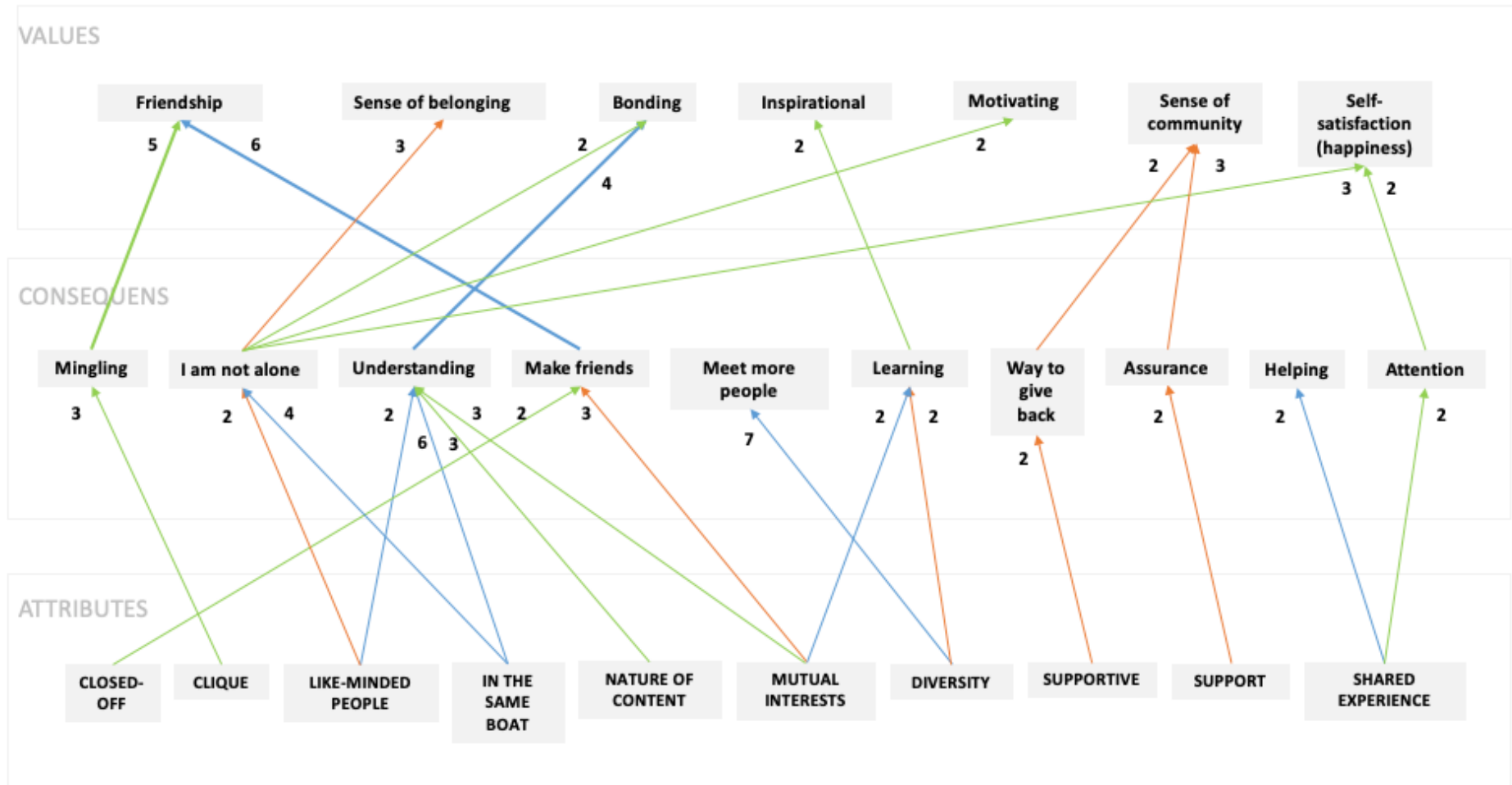
VALUES

Friendship — Sense of belonging — Bonding — Inspirational — Motivating — Sense of community — Self-satisfaction (happiness)

5 — 6 — 3 — 2 — 2 — 2 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 3 — 2

CONSEQUENS

Mingling — I am not alone — Understanding — Make friends — Meet more people — Learning — Way to give back — Assurance — Helping — Attention

3 — 2 — 4 — 2 — 3 — 2 — 3 — 2 — 2 — 2 — 2 — 2 — 6 — 3 — 7 — 2

ATTRIBUTES

CLOSED-OFF — CLIQUE — LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE — IN THE SAME BOAT — NATURE OF CONTENT — MUTUAL INTERESTS — DIVERSITY — SUPPORTIVE — SUPPORT — SHARED EXPERIENCE

* Orange line outlines the patterns of MFP, green line outlines the patterns of Keep, and Blue outlines the mutual patterns of both communities.

Figure 10 Hierarchy-value-map: theme Socialising - Overall(n≥2)

'In the same boat' represents an attribute that leads to the satisfaction of 'bonding', 'motivating', and 'sense of belonging' as values (feeling more connected to and able to relate to the community on a personal level) through the fulfilment of having company and developing mutual understanding. The interviews have shown that individuals who are 'in the same boat' often share similar life situations, whether it is a fitness journey or working status. When individuals meet others who are going through similar experiences, they tend to share more personal stories and are more ready for open conversations, which create a sense of closeness that is commonly difficult to replicate in a virtual setting. The sense of closeness fulfils people's desires to connect with a group and enables them to create certain identities differentiating from others.

"I saw your recruitment post in one of the forums and I had a strong feeling that I need to help you. Because you mentioned that you are a doctoral student and you're stuck in the participant recruitment process. I happened to run into the same position and at that time I can relate to you, you now? It's that I feel like a sense of bonding and I really want to help you out… I think maybe after this favour, we can be friends and calm each other down when we feel annoyed or stressed in the future" (Keep, Respondent 14).

"I think the most important thing I've got from the community is to know more people who share similar fitness concerns (A: in the same boat)*. You get a sense of that other people are struggling as well* (C: understanding)*. The marketing of things makes weight loss look easy, as if you can do this and this, and then almost, like, when you go from this size to this size, they don't really let on for how much hard work it is from A to B, whereas I think tracing other people's progress, you can see how hard they have had to work to get there. And you understand that you're not going get there overnight, and it makes it a little bit more everyday... You feel less of a failure for it taking time. I think that helps because you feel you're in with other people and not just people that you don't know them* (V: bonding)"* (MFP, Respondent 13)*.

Also, 'in the same boat' results in an increased level of company that, in turn, leads to the value of 'motivating'. It is surprising to find that many participants experienced negative emotions when attempting to find individuals in person who can truly understand their health-related concerns. Therefore, it is important for them to connect with individuals who share similar experiences and leverage the support received from others to accomplish their goals. As one

respondent indicated, "*Having those interactions makes you feel like you're with someone and that you're not alone, otherwise it would be really hard for me to continue achieving my goal*" (Keep, Respondent 1). This is also affirmed by another Keep respondent.

"*It is very common to see people encourage each other in the community and you can feel the attention which people place on you. With a lot of people sharing the same concern* (A: in the same boat)*, I feel like being with a big family where you can receive support* (C: I am not alone)*. We all have the same problem and then we all work together* (V: bonding)" (Keep, Respondent 4).

Furthermore, connecting with others who are 'in the same boat' also allows them to empathise with one another and become more aware of common fitness-related misconceptions.

"*(while browsing the forums) You get a sense that other people are struggling as well. The marketing of weight loss products often gives the impression that losing weight is easy and the process is reduced to following a few simple steps. However, when following the progress of others, it becomes evident just how much hard work and effort is required to achieve ideal results. By seeing the progress of others* (A: in the same boat)*, it becomes clear that change takes time and this realisation can help to reduce feeling a failure* (C: understanding)*. Feeling part of a community of people who share similar experiences also contributes to this sense of solidarity and belonging* (V: sense of belonging)*"* (MFP, Respondent 13).

In an OBC setting, 'diversity' is the second mutual attribute explaining individuals' socialising behaviour. This encompasses not only geographical diversity, but also a wide range of discussion topics. The aspect of diversity enables people to satisfy their desire to meet new people and acquire knowledge, which in turn fulfils their values of 'being knowledgeable' and building a 'sense of bonding' through connecting with others.

"*More and more people are joining the platform and through interacting with these people, I can feel that there are many people in different cities or countries who are actively working and living a positive life every day. All these will also leave a positive impact on me*" (Keep, Respondent 5).

"I greatly value the fact that this community embraces a lot of diversity. Before I became part of the community, I understood that it was not acceptable to body shame people for being overweight, but the community also taught me not to body shame women who are thick either. MFP has played a significant role in expanding my perspective and helping me to be more open-minded about various body types. This understanding is valuable for my fitness progression" (MFP, Respondent 9).

Having 'mutual interests' is the last sharing attribute in this theme; it results in making friends and understanding other members. In fitness community, having mutual interests refers to either having a similar fitness routine or sharing common life values. Unlike being 'in the same boat', having common interests highlights an individual's interests or preferred way of living, rather than finding fitness solutions, which can foster friendship via constant communication and create feelings of intimacy, trust, and mutual affection among participants.

"Generally speaking, people who tend to attract me are those who have some similarities with me, such as being a female and going through a transformation from a relatively chubby body shape to a slim and healthy one. This kind of transformation process is particularly appealing to me because I can relate to it more. I feel more inclined to approach and talk to such people and it is more likely for them to understand me… (Keep, Respondent 10)*… On Keep, we had a group where authorised users share similar fitness interests. Among us, there was a feeling of shared growth, as if we had all worked together. We started out as normal users of the Keep platform and gradually became recognised by the platform as official experts, earning the recognition of many people. If felt like we were comrades in arms* (Keep, Respondent 8)*".*

Apart from the shared attributes mentioned earlier, some differences have been identified that explain how people behave differently when building social connections in selected communities. One of these differences is the emphasis on 'support' and 'being supportive', which are crucial elements addressed by MFP participants who prioritise fulfilling their demands of returning favours to the community and seeking assurance while accomplishing their goals. This thesis distinguishes between two related concepts: 'support' and 'supportive'. 'Support' refers to a series of encouraging behaviours such as leaving compliments, sending likes, and boosting people's mood. These behaviours are normally described as one-off movements and reveal the recognitions generated by users towards other members' contributions. Being acknowledged by others, thus, helps participants to build confidence and

increase their willingness to shoulder shared responsibilities in helping people to achieve their goals.

"I enjoy expressing my appreciation for things I find impressive. For instance, when I come across something positive or something doing well, I show my support by giving them likes (A: support)*. I believe that these expressions of support can be a source of motivation for them. Complimenting people's posts can make them feel appreciated and recognised for their efforts* (C: assurance)*. I feel that by doing so, I am making a positive impact and contributing to my community by setting an example* (V: sense of community)*"* (MFP, Respondent 15).

On the other hand, 'supportive' reflects participants' overall perceptions of a positive community environment, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how people interact within the community. Upon accumulative knowledge exchange and emotional support, participants are more willing to return the favours to other users in need, thus satisfying their obligations to be retained as part of a community.

"I remember when I completed my first challenge on the platform and people were leaving comments and congratulating me for my achievement (A: supportive)*. So, sending words of encouragement is a way for me to repay the kindness I received from the community* (C: way to give back)*. Whenever I see people posting about their struggles, I make an effort to let them know that I can relate and support them. This creates a positive and supportive environment that encourages personal growth* (V: sense of community)*. I appreciate the supportive and friendly atmosphere on this platform, where I have not seen any negativity"* (MFP, Respondent 6).

Even though both communities have similar functions and promote a positive community culture, users of Keep placed more value on the 'nature of content' and 'shared experience' when it comes to generating mutual understanding, learning, and gaining attention from their social peers. These consequences further satisfy individuals' values of 'being inspirational', 'bonding' and 'happiness'. As indicated by a Keep user shown below, reading articles that focus on personal transformation brings to mind the dedication required to lose weight. This emotional connection helps the user feel more related to others and creates a sense of bonding over time.

"For example, some people may experience body image anxiety, starting off being particularly overweight or going through a journey of becoming slimmer (A: nature of content-transformational). *I feel like I can relate to these experiences at times… I think sometimes you can resonate with their emotions* (C: understanding)*, and it feels quite heart-warming because someone is sharing these experiences and you feel like you are not alone* (V: bonding)*"* (Keep, Respondent 12).

In addition, according to Figure 4, having a 'closed-off' environment and distinct social groups, or 'cliques', is an important attribute in bringing together like-minded individuals and allowing them to socialise in person. This results in the satisfaction of the value of 'friendship'. While online platforms enable communication between individuals from different parts of the world, most interrelations remain shallow. As a result, some Keep users, particularly those who are experienced, create their own cliques based on shared fitness goals, lifestyles or geographic location to facilitate deeper conversations. They expressed a desire to have more relaxed interactions with like-minded people within a smaller community and even meet up in person. These interactions to some extent satisfy their need for building genuine friendships with others.

"At that time, I joined a small group where I can find a lot of people at the same active level. I coincidentally met a few like-minded people, chatted quite well, and became friends on social media… I can't imagine that I even meet two of them in real life when I went on my business trip. I am very happy that I can know people who are appealing to me." (Keep, Respondent 10).

"After joining a smaller Keep group, I have more connections with other users who are also voluntary community moderators. This makes me realise that Keep not only exists online, but also offline by bringing people together through different activities. I am quite lucky to make some friends there and know some 'genuine' people." (Keep, Respondent 17).

MFP users have a common desire of connecting with others who share similar interests and they view finding 'like-minded' individuals as a crucial part of socialising. Nonetheless, in order to protect their privacy, respondents are hesitant to disclose too much personal information to others within a micro-community, which differentiates them from Keep users. These users feel that establishing a sense of camaraderie with others who hold similar beliefs

about specific topics, such as nutrition, fitness or controversial topics, can lead to a sense of bonding that resembles the 'cliques' mentioned by Keep respondents.

"I would rather engage with individuals who share my interests in education and are around the same age as me and, ideally, they are also from the UK. I prefer connecting with people from the UK because I can relate to them better. It is common to see people from America to discuss things, which are not relevant to me, such as the food they eat or the way they communicate. It's difficult for me to connect with them on a personal level. I believe you can better understand someone's sense of humour and perspective when you share similar cultural backgrounds" (MFP, Respondent 20).

In summary, the attributes of 'in the same boat', 'mutual interests', and 'diversity' have been identified as significant attributes contributing to users' social behaviour in online brand communities. Participants from both communities agreed that sharing the same condition helps them connect with others more efficiently in virtual settings and provides a sense of belonging and bonding to certain groups of people. Mutual understanding and empathy derived from interpersonal communications are also highly valued by respondents in addition to seeking informative tips to achieve their fitness goals. Since the context of this research is health/fitness-related, it is common for individuals to express negative emotions, such as anxiety and frustration, in publicly accessible spaces for assistance. In this case, the perceived empathy plays an important role in boosting their mood and improving their self-esteem.

The 'in the same boat' attribute implies the homogeneous nature of community interactions and plays a crucial role in fulfilling individuals' desires to be part of a group. Similarly, having mutual interests helps individuals generate shared understanding towards certain fitness-related topics, thus satisfying their demands in raising resonance with others and making friends with strangers in a virtual environment. The friendship developed may lead to offline engagement, which also satisfies respondents' demands for mingling in real life. Although 'having mutual interests' also implies a homogenous nature of OBCs, it neglects the intention of looking for problem solutions and people are only connected and communicate based on intrinsic interests.

The last important attribute acknowledged by both communities refers to 'diversity', which subsequently leads to a higher exposure of information and a wider range of users. Diversity is not only limited to different geographical locations but also refers to the diverse discussion

topics proposed by users. By connecting with people from multiple backgrounds and disciplines, community users can become acquainted with more people within the same interest context and satisfy their demands in building social ties with others.

Along with the shared patterns, a series of differences between the communities is addressed. Two important attributes addressed by Keep users are 'closed-off' environment and 'cliques' connecting like-minded individuals. By providing a relatively secure and enclosed environment, people's concerns of encountering people in real life have been eliminated, which subsequently increases their willingness to make friends with stranger users who perceive similar interests. These positive interactions further satisfy individuals' social demands in virtual settings and enable them to perceive a separate social identity within an online community. In addition to social desires, users also find practical content and social recognition important for fulfilling their emotional desires of being inspired and happy. On the other hand, MFP members value the supportive community culture and encouragement they receive from others on their fitness journey since it assures that what they are doing is appropriate and enhances their sense of belonging to certain groups.

5.2.3 Findings: Helping others

The theme 'helping others' pertains to the collaborative and supportive nature of members within a community and involves actions such as asking questions, receiving useful answers, aiding others, and sharing valuable ideas. The two-way altruistic communication highlights the difference between the theme of 'helping others' and 'sharing', as the former places emphasis on the benefits of exchanging knowledge over other forms of benefits. A total of 60 ladders (34 from Keep and 26 from MFP) were identified that relate to different aspects of helping others in the selected communities (see Appendix H for the implication matrix and Appendix L for the Master Codes). As Table 12 indicates, establishing a helpful social identity is shared between the communities. Specific connections among attributes, consequences, and values are shown in Figure 11, Figure 12, and Figure 13.

Table 12 Overview of attributes, consequences, and values for theme 'Helping others'

Attribute	Consequence	Value
In the same boat (M) Positive content (K) Relatable (K) Shared experience (K) Knowledge (D) Support (D)	Assurance (M) Make people happy (M) Motivating (M) Understanding (M) Way to give back (M) Educating (K) Acknowledgement (K) Helping (D)	Altruism (M) Benevolence (M) Sense of community (M) Bonding (K) Influencing others (K) Sense of achievement (K) Self-satisfaction (happiness) (K) Social identity (helpfulness) (D)

(D) refers to constructs mentioned in both communities.

(K) refers to constructs mentioned in Keep.

(M) refers to constructs mentioned in MFP.

Figure 11 Hierarchy-value-map: theme helping others - Keep (n≥2)

Figure 12 Hierarchy-value-map: theme helping others - MFP (n≥2)

HIERARCHICAL VALUE MAP: HELPING OTHERS- OVERALL (N ≥ 2)
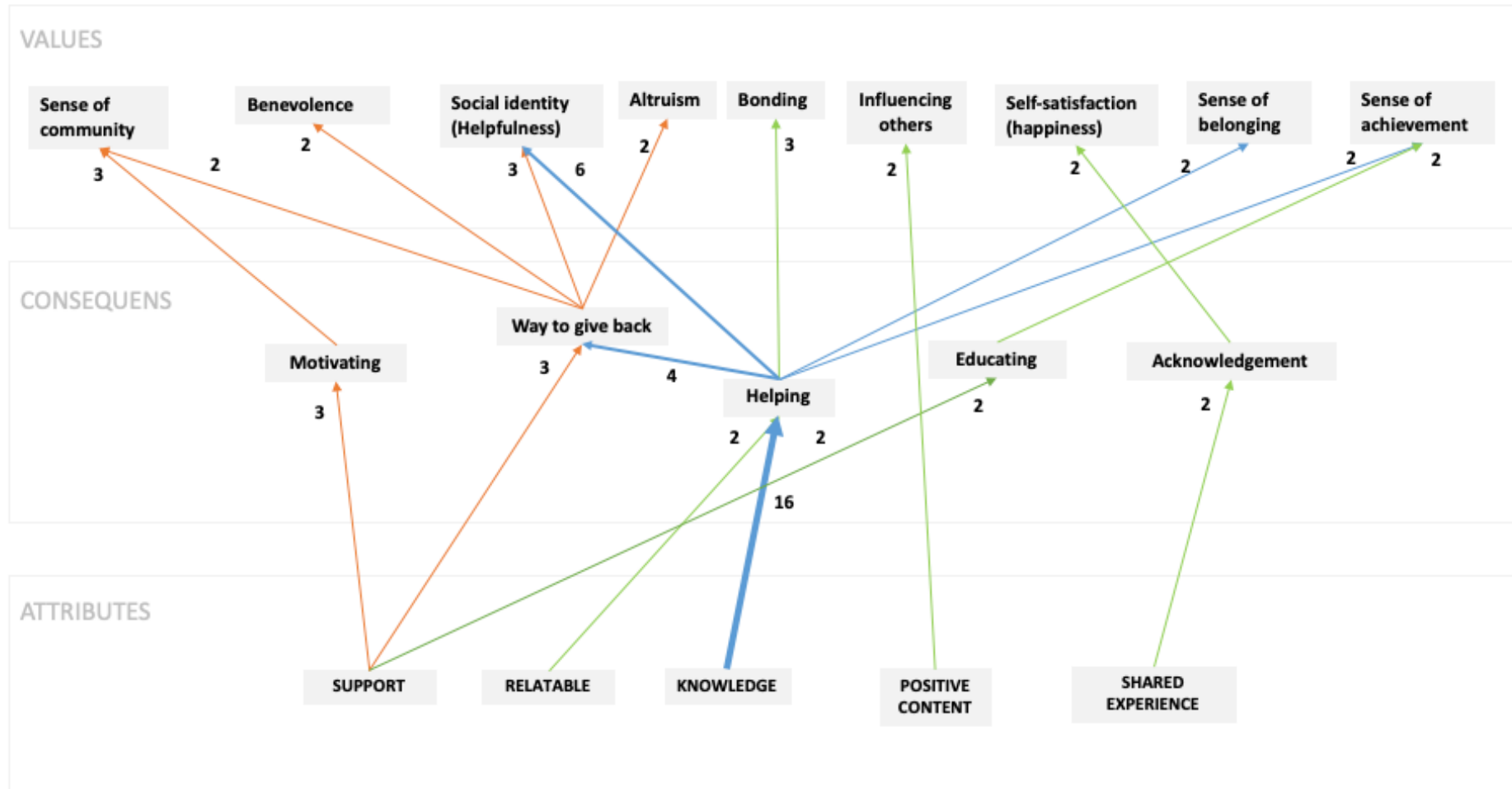
VALUES

Sense of community · Benevolence · Social identity (Helpfulness) · Altruism · Bonding · Influencing others · Self-satisfaction (happiness) · Sense of belonging · Sense of achievement

CONSEQUENS

Way to give back · Motivating · Educating · Acknowledgement · Helping

ATTRIBUTES

SUPPORT · RELATABLE · KNOWLEDGE · POSITIVE CONTENT · SHARED EXPERIENCE

* Orange line outlines the patterns of MFP, green line outlines the patterns of Keep, and Blue outlines the mutual patterns of both communities.

Figure 13 Hierarchy-value-map: theme helping others - Overall (n ≥ 2)

171

'Knowledge' is recognised as the most important attribute accounting for individuals' helping behaviour in both Keep and MFP communities. In this thesis, knowledge is defined as a summary of an individual's existing expertise with regards to fitness, nutrition, professional values, and life experiences. In Keep, acquisition of knowledge leads to a person's willingness to offer solutions to those in need, which in turn fulfils the values of being a helpful individual and forming bonds within the community. Several respondents consider "being able to help others" to be a crucial principle in creating a positive community and the feeling of being 'helpful' defines their social identity to some extent.

"If I have the knowledge and experience, which is applicable to other people, I am more than happy to share my thoughts because I don't want them to experience the same challenges as me. I just hope my words can somehow boost their efforts in achieving their goals" (Keep, Respondent 17).

"If you have any problems about fitness, many knowledgeable fitness enthusiasts will help you by providing credible solutions and relatable answers. Through a series of learning, you can go further in your fitness journey and you can receive encouragement and support from other members… To be honest, in real life, it is hard for me to find the appropriate people to ask for help and Keep provides me with a place to bond with others" (Keep, Respondent 10).

A comparable trend was observed in MFP, where 'knowledge' is recognised as an attribute enabling respondents to educate and help others. These outcomes further meet people's desires to be helpful and altruistic. Numerous respondents depict MFP as an *"educational"* and *"full of new ideas"* platform and they are eager to impart their knowledge and experiences with the community as a way of giving back. This could assist other members in reducing time and energy needed to achieve their objectives.

"I think nowadays the Internet is full of different conflicting ideas…It's very hard to find, like, real advice… Some people would say, I want to start running because running is the best cardio for losing weight… When I read these posts, I would post and say, actually walking is still very good or swimming or cycling. It's just about doing enough cardio to raise your heart rate. You don't have to be able to run. Like, in that instance, like I would share that with people because I think it's to help motivate them as well… I'm sharing my knowledge that has helped to keep

me on my fitness journey and hopefully help other people to stay on their fitness journey as well" (MFP, Respondent 3).

"Like over the past ten years, I've been through quite a lot, so I do think I have quite a few tips to share depending on what people are commenting… if someone commented on something that I do know a bit about, then I'll just comment below. For example, if someone was stuck at a certain stage of weight loss, I would suggest the person changes up the diet since your body got used to eating the same food… Like things that I've been told, just to try and pass it on... I don't really expect people would give me something in return" (MFP, Respondent 5).

"I like answering people's questions, if only to try and help other people. If no one else has responded, I'll try and give what knowledge I have to help people… So, basically just want to help other people. Because if I posted, I would want someone to do the same, and I would want someone to respond with their knowledge and what they do for them that works" (MFP, Respondent 1).

'Support' serves as another mutual attribute of helping others in both communities, encompassing not only practical resolutions to fitness-related issues, but also emotional support such as sending positive comments and encouragement. In Keep, providing support directly results in the consequence of 'educating' people, which ultimately leads to a sense of achievement. This relationship is closely related to the user's participation level and fitness journey within the community. As indicated in chapter five, new members often inquire about community features and fitness issues. In this case, experienced users feel obligated to educate them by imparting their knowledge and experience. When new members express gratitude by saying *"thank you for the help"*, it confirms the proficiency of experienced users and fulfils their needs for a sense of achievement.

"Sometimes when I see people were upset or unhappy with their condition, I would send some positive words to encourage them. These words might be either appropriate workout messages or methods. When I passed this information to people, I also conceive a certain level of sense of achievement… In Chinese culture, there is a phase 'hao wei ren shi' to describe a person who likes to teach others and I think I am one of those people. To be more specific, I find satisfaction in the success of others, especially when they follow my methods and instructions" (Keep, Respondent 7).

In the context of MFP, providing support does not satisfy individuals' desires to achieve a sense of accomplishment, but fulfils their demands of *"giving back to the community"* and assuring people of accomplishing their goals, which further satisfies the values of 'being a helpful person' and 'sense of community'. According to some MFP respondents, offering support is a means of showing gratitude to those who have helped them and contributing to building a better community. It is noteworthy that MFP users are inclined to assist others not just to demonstrate their own proficiencies, but also to fulfil their shared responsibility of promoting a healthy fitness mindset.

"I just applied to be a model without a second thought. I knew that would be relevant to some people and it might help some people… I guess (helping others) is what I do for a living… I'm realising more and more that I have a very big heart and I enjoy if not making people happy, then at lease not adding negativity to their life" (MFP, Respondent 4).

"It's like returning the favour and allowing people who never considered this to be like a viable option for them in fitness… When I see them posting negative comments and then I'm, like, hey, same here, I'm with you. Like we got to stick together in this… It helps create that kind of community atmosphere, being very supporting and very positive, like, I've never seen anything negative on there" (MFP, Respondent 6).

Additionally, many MFP respondents expressed the belief that *"helping others doesn't really cost anything",* explaining that they grew up in a culture that values helping people in need. As one respondent indicates "*I think I have the responsibility to help others if that will make them happy… I am not very self-centred. So, all I want to do is helping others… I would hate if someone was upset or something about their fitness journey or their eating. Like, I know how much even that one positive comment can make, like, change their day. And it's always the unexpected comments that, like, really picks you up and just makes you feel better*" (MFP, Respondent 1).

Apart from the above shared patterns, a few patterns are discovered to vary significantly. Firstly, 'shared experience' is recognised as an important attribute affecting people's helping intention in Keep. As mentioned earlier, shared experiences consist of practical advice on fitness or diet that are closely related to personal experiences. When users share their personal stories on

publicly accessible threads, other users read and appreciate them for their effectiveness. These positive responses provide the brand with persuasive evidence to invite users to design course, ultimately boosting individuals' self-satisfaction levels.

"You would get appreciation from other users when some of your experiences were widely shared. You would be invited to design courses for Keep whenever the views reached a particular threshold. You are, therefore, doing what you enjoy while also doing good for others, which makes me happy" (Keep, Respondent 1).

'Positive content' serves as the last attribute of helping others in Keep, which is distinct from the earlier patterns as it directly contributes to fulfilling the value of 'influencing others'.

"I used to have a period when I look down on myself. To make me feel better, I like to read more uplifting posts to boost my mood (A: positive content) *and remind me that there is still good thing happening in the world. When you find positive energy, you can persuade some people, especially those who are depressed, to change their situation and motivate them to be a better person* (V: influencing others). *I believe all this positivity somehow gives me assurance and I hope I can bring this positive energy to other people who are in the same boat"* (Keep, Respondent 1).

When it comes to MFP, respondents value the attribute of 'in the same boat' to satisfy their demands in looking for mutual understanding and company alongside their fitness journey.

"They are basically saying 'Is anyone in the same boat with me?'. We are all going to get through it, but they are doing it in the roundabout way with questions you know, and I think it just makes people feel that they're not alone (C: understanding)*"* (MFP, Respondent 13).

To summarise, the theme 'helping others' reflects the altruistic behavioural aspect of online community engagement. The attributes of 'support' and 'knowledge' are discussed as significant elements in affecting individuals' assistance behaviour. Knowledge, which demonstrates a person's intellectual capability, ensures community users can contribute valuable insights in resolving fitness-related issues. Other than simply copying and pasting messages captured online, respondents stress the importance of information practicality while responding to people's inquiries. They hope that these experiences can optimise other members'

performance, thus fulfilling their demands in maintaining a supportive and energetic community environment.

The respondents from both selected communities also regarded helping others as a valuable approach in building social identity as 'a helpful person'. It is noteworthy that helping behaviour is not limited to active participants, but also involves lurking individuals. On most occasions, lurking users only consume content rather than proactively contributing; however, some interview respondents are willing to respond to people's inquiries if they suspect people are in need and have the required knowledge. This is different from what has been observed in previous findings (Fernandes and Castro, 2020).

Although 'support' has been discussed as another important attribute accounting for people's willingness to assist others, it leads to a different fulfilment of values in the selected communities. In MFP, users regarded providing support as a practice of returning a favour to the community, which subsequently leads to the satisfaction of the values of 'altruism' and 'benevolence'. More specifically, after receiving a series of compliments, encouragements and assistance from the other users, MFP respondents feel obligated to return the knowledge to the crowd and hope these positive experiences can influence others in a positive way. On the contrary, Keep users regarded providing support as an effective approach to educate people, and, subsequently, increase their sense of achievement during the helping process.

Despite the aforementioned common chains, certain patterns are found to differ significantly. Firstly, Keep users emphasise the impact of content valence on their desires to influence others. Although both communities advocate embracing a positive lifestyle, Keep respondents are more inclined to promote the positivity to other members, thus making changes to the community dynamics. Instead, MFP members merely focus on grouping with people who share similar fitness or life conditions and hope to build shared understanding towards certain topics during the assistance process. This is also reflected within Keep users as they describe relatable content as a crucial element in affecting their intention to offer help. By providing personal experience, their desires to increase their self-satisfaction level and become a helpful person have been satisfied.

5.2.4 Findings: Self advancement

Table 13 lists the significant attributes, consequences, and values captured from both communities. As shown in Figure 16, three attributes at a cut off level of two or more relationships are identified in the selected communities, tracking, diversity, and shared experience. These attributes indicate the personal inclinations of individuals when choosing communities that can improve their own performance and enable them to take charge of their own development. Specific connections among attributes, consequences, and values are shown in Figure 14, Figure 15, and Figure 16. More details will be provided in the following sections.

Table 13 Overview of attributes, consequences, and values for theme 'Self-advancement'

Attribute	Consequence	Value
In the same boat (M)	Monitor intake (M)	Accountable (M)
Informative (M)	Helping (M)	Stay informed (M)
Nature of content (M)	Intellectual (M)	Make life easier (K)
Reliable (M)	Attention (K)	Sense of accomplishment
Summarising feature (K)	Effort saving (K)	(K)
Professionalism (K)	Make it interesting (K)	Self-esteem (confidence)
Free courses (K)	Visualise progress (K)	(K)
Tracking (D)	Acquiring new idea (D)	Goal achieving (D)
Diversity (D)	Educating (D)	Knowledgeable (D)
Shared experience (D)	Learning (D)	Inspirational (D)

(D) refers to constructs mentioned in both communities.

(K) refers to constructs mentioned in Keep.

(M) refers to constructs mentioned in MFP.

HIERARCHICAL VALUE MAP: SELF-ADVANCEMENT- KEEP (N ≥ 2)

VALUES

Sense of accomplishment	Goal-achieving	Make life easier	Knowledgeable	Inspirational	Confidence
2	2	2	3	2 2	2

CONSEQUENCES

Visualise progress	Effort saving	Educated	Make it interesting	New idea	Learning	Attention
7 2	2	2 3	3		2 2	2

ATTRIBUTES

TRACKING	SUMMARY	PROFESSIONALISM	FREE COURSES	DIVERSITY	SHARED EXPERIENCE
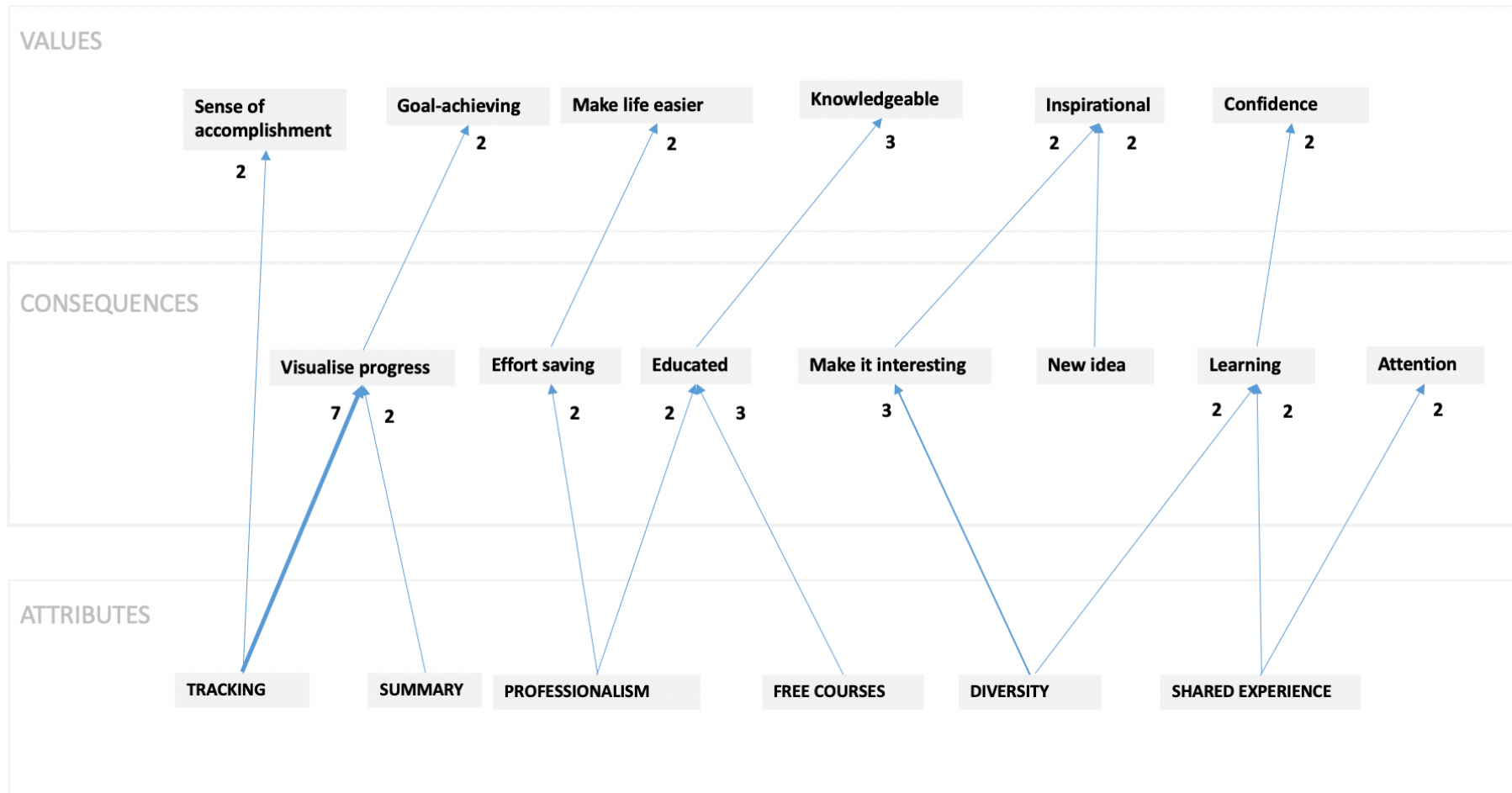
Figure 14 Hierarchy-value-map: theme Self-advancement- Keep (≥2)

HIERARCHICAL VALUE MAP: SELF-ADVANCEMENT- MFP (N ≥ 2)

VALUES

Accountable · Stay informed · Knowledgeable · Goal-achieving · Inspirational

2 · 2 · 2 · 4 · 2 · 3 · 5 · 4

CONSEQUENCES

Monitor intake · Educating · Learning · Helping · New idea · Intelligence

5 · 2 · 3 · 2 · 2 · 2 · 3 · 3 · 2

ATTRIBUTES

TRACKING · IN THE SAME BOAT · SHARED EXPERIENCE · INFORMATIVE · DIVERSITY · NATURE OF CONTENT · RELIABLE
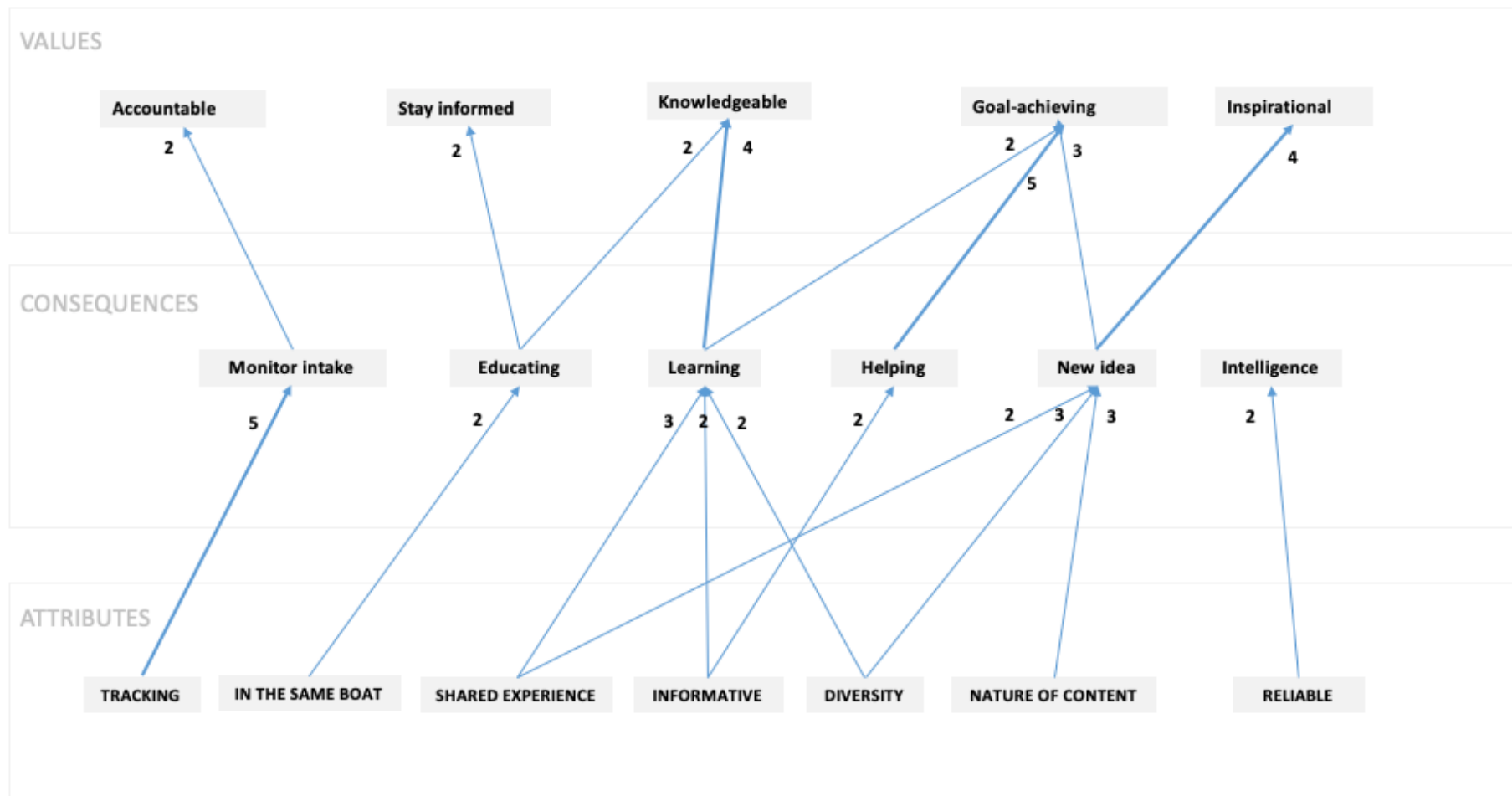
Figure 15 Hierarchy-value-map: theme Self-advancement- MFP (n≥2)

HIERARCHICAL VALUE MAP: SELF-ADVANCEMENT- OVERALL (N ≥ 2)
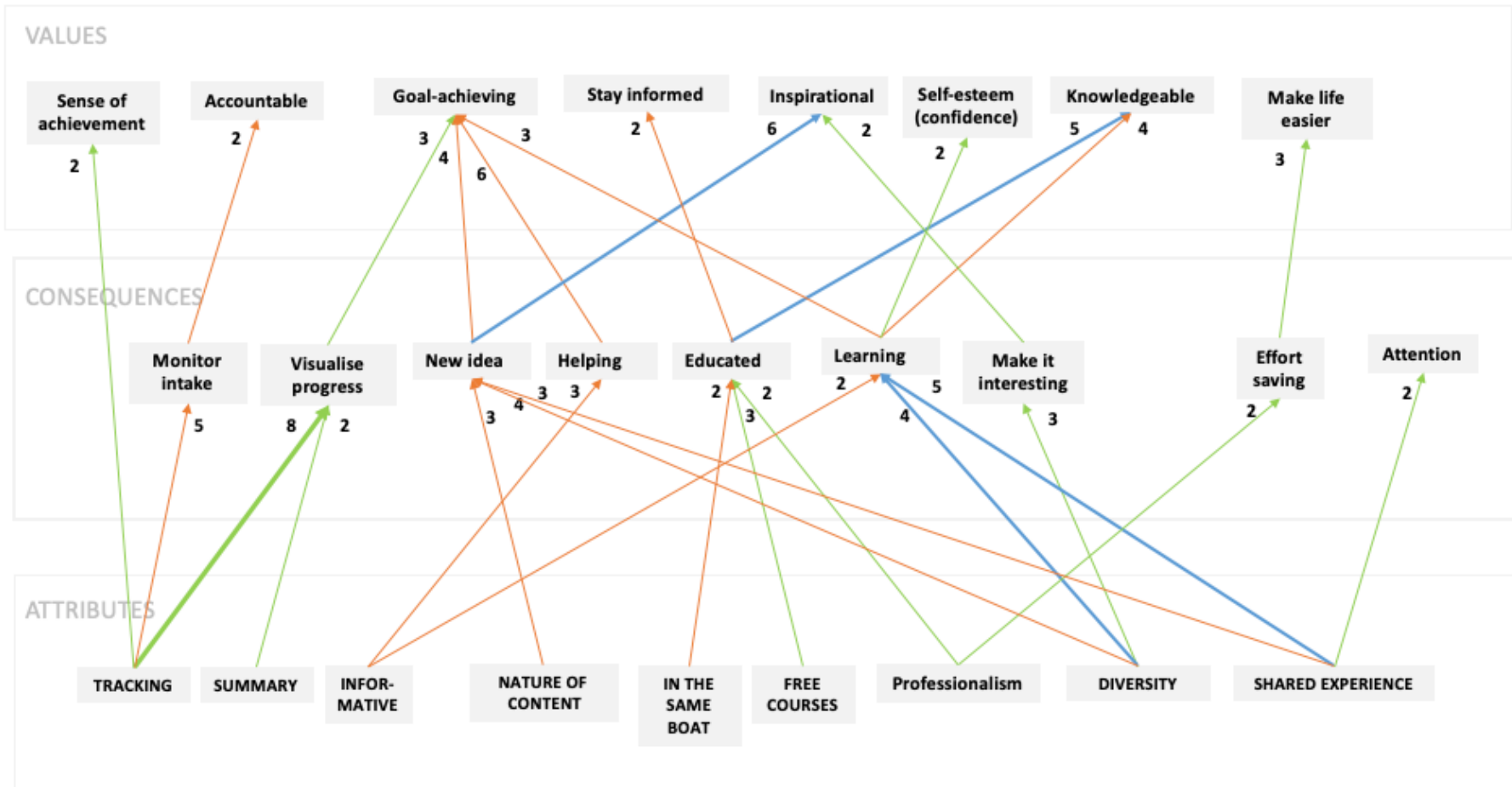
* Orange line outlines the patterns of MFP, green line outlines the patterns of Keep, and Blue outlines the mutual patterns of both communities.

Figure 16 Hierarchy-value-map: theme Self-advancement- overall (n≥2)

The feature of 'tracking' is seen as a mutual key attribute of self-advancement. The tracking aspect of the application, which enables users to record their daily intake of food, water, and exercise, was highly complimented by the majority of both Keep and MFP respondents. In particular, by logging exercise and what they eat on the day, users are able to monitor their nutrition intake and visualise their progress periodically, thus helping them to develop healthy eating habits and be accountable for their ultimate goals.

"*I was using it as a running tracker because it could record your running journey. I feel the need to have an application to help me record it otherwise I might forget when I run and lose track of the progression that I have made*" (Keep, Respondent 12).

"*The main thing of using MFP is obviously keeping track of my calorie intakes. It makes you a lot more mindful of what you ate in the past and think about, okay, how can I change that?... I think that is one of the main reasons why it is so good because, if I log in calories and it says you have had enough calories for the day, then I know that I am on the right track as supposed*" (MFP, Respondent 8).

"*I use the progress markers… as I wanted to use it because I wanted to monitor my intake of calories and I think, as well, just being curious about the food I eat… to ensure that I can monitor what I am eating and then be accountable for what I'm eating*" (MFP, Respondent 7).

'Diversity' is recognised as another frequently cited attribute in both Keep and MFP, which subsequently results in the consequences of 'make it interesting', 'learning' and 'acquiring new ideas' in this theme. With respect to 'self-advancement', diversity refers to the international diversity of users and multiple variations of exercise categories. For MFP respondents, international accessibility of the community enables them to meet people from different cultural backgrounds and enriches the information resources for knowledge acquisition. By meeting up with individuals' needs in learning and acquiring new ideas, it eventually satisfies the values of 'goal-achieving' and 'being inspirational'. A similar pattern was found within Keep respondents regarding the contributions of geographical diversity to goal-achieving; more importantly, the abundant exercise variations lead to an increasing level of entertainment.

"*Through browsing diverse forums, I have a much better knowledge of fitness (A: diversity). What it means to be healthy isn't just being slim;. it's about hitting the nutritional goals and*

about intake and balance as well. It HELPS…having knowledge is the right word. The amount of information you have, it gives you the knowledge to kind of workout yourself… It really opens everything up to you on that; it's learning (C: learning)*… It's you learn about the side of things, and it's kind of about how it works* (V: being inspirational). *It's also learning about other people's status; that's always nice"* (MFP, Respondent 8).

"After joining the community, I have learned more variations of how to do crunches. Maybe I had the knowledge of how to do them previously, but never have a chance to practice them. In this case, those new learnt variations can add to my exercise schedule and make the plan more comprehensive and interesting" (Keep, Respondent 8).

Similar to the attribute of 'diversity', 'shared experience' serves as another distinct attribute leading to individuals' self-enhancement performance on both platforms. Through browsing shared experience created by other knowledgeable users in the communities, respondents can acquire knowledge about exercise, diet planning, and macro counting. This, thus, satisfies respondents' values of being 'knowledgeable', taking control of intelligence, and building confidence.

"*I like reading the popular posts shown in the forum. You can tell that people put efforts into drafting them. The content includes how to exercise each part of your body, how to plan your diet, and how to calculate your macros. Some people even make detailed plans of their exercise and share it with others. On most occasions, these posts will receive a lot of attention and, through discussions, I can learn something practical and get some inspiration of how to achieve my goal more efficiently"* (MFP, Respondent 19).

"When I get along with more people online, I talk to them with the intention of trying to gain new knowledge and try to understand how they feel (C: learning)*, such as their experiences and more personal stuff* (A: shared experience)*. From what they have told me, I can actively learn new things and try to apply them in achieving my fitness goals* (V: knowledgeable)*"* (MFP, Respondent 12).

Except for the above patterns shared between Keep and MFP, a few differences are identified and explained as follows. As shown in Figure 16, apart from taking initiatives to log food and exercise, most respondents also recognised discussions with people who are "*in the same boat*"

as an efficient tool to learn something new. Similar to the demonstrations addressed in the 'socialising' theme, 'in the same boat' indicates users' preferences of connecting with people who share common situations, either in a similar age group or they perceive similar fitness goals. The attribute of 'in the same boat' leads to both the consequences of 'educating' (actively passing on informative messages) and 'learning' (proactively processing information), which further satisfies the values of 'knowledgeable' and 'goal-achieving'. Interestingly, it is noticed that information produced by authorities (i.e. authorised nutritionists, doctors or fitness influencers) are not the only resources people would refer to and some respondents even criticised the unnecessary pressure brought by the fitness professionals.

"I have learned a lot about how desperate it is from what you actually learned, rather than what you think you need. You know obviously bigger people need less calories throughout and that kind of thing. I learned all that initially from the forums… I think the doctors have been setting me up to fail, whereas MFP had a lot more information and then even more through the members on the platform. I like it because it is more feasible… MFP can give you the information and, indeed, you have the directory of food so you know what nutrition they are providing" (MFP, Respondent 13).

"*There have been a couple of people here who share similar journey as you, either wanting to get fitter or become more muscular (A: in the same boat)... Most of them are very active and post a lot of different, like, recipes or food and exercise ideas. So, then there's always going to be sort of new information that I can see from them (C: learning)... I think you've got to have that self-motivation there, but also the online communities do help because you've got other people who have similar goals as you, which helps to keep motivated to stick to your goals (V: goal-achieving)*" (MFP, Respondent 3).

'Nature of content' is acknowledged as the last important attribute contributing to individuals' intentions to advance themselves for MFP respondents. Content valence, presentations, publishing frequency, wording, and tags are all categorised as the 'nature of content' to reflect people's preferences in satisfying their needs of 'acquiring a new idea' throughout their fitness journeys. Most respondents prefer to read posts with pictures to generate a direct reflection on the shared knowledge, thus enhancing their understanding of new ideas.

"I read the posts and try to understand if some people are sharing some meals or other information and the components that make up that meal… I try to explore new things by watching the pictures or videos… Through these new posts I could make food that has more protein with less time and effort. I try to get more variations for food recipes that are sufficiently tasty. This information is important as it provides me with new ideas and helps me achieve my goal." (MFP, Respondent 12).

Regarding Keep, the attributes of 'summarising feature', 'professionalism' and availability to provide 'free courses' are considered essential factors in motivating users to engage and fulfil their self-improvement desires. The summary feature, which focuses on illustrating an individual's overall performance over time, allows users to monitor their advancement and visualise the progress, which enables them to achieve goals more easily.

"Keep has the function of recording your training time and fitness hours, all with traces… This is important for me as it gives me an approximate estimation of how I will look like if I repeat the exercise 1000 times… also it does not need me to manually record the exercise. This function allows me to visualise my progress and trace back to the past to see how much more I need to do to ultimately achieve my goal" (Keep, Respondent 2).

With respect to 'professionalism' and availability to provide 'free courses', most Keep respondents value them as effective approaches in acquiring knowledge, and thus leading to the consequence of 'being educated'. This further satisfies people's desires to be knowledgeable within the fitness discipline.

"I am following an authorised user on the platform named 'shuaisoserious' who shares a lot of helpful fitness advice and helps me better understand how to manage my macro intake. As someone who specialises in this area, he likely has a certification like ACE (A: professionalism)*. Because I lack knowledge in this field, I prioritise this type of content and strive to fill in any gaps in my understanding* (C: educated)*. Fitness is a critical matter for me and, without a professional guideline, it's difficult to determine if I am on the right track or not* (V: being knowledgeable)*"* (Keep, Respondent 1).

"The courses that Keep provides free of charge were very helpful to me in providing guidance on some fundamental aspects. They furnished me with a wealth of knowledge regarding fitness such as the correct posture for each exercise, insights shared by other users, as well as dietary suggestions… All of this information helped me to make exercising easier to persist and spared me the trouble of having to search the internet for answers" (Keep, Respondent 20).

In summary, the 'tracking' function, 'diversity' and 'shared experience' are recognised as important factors that contribute to fulfilling people's aspiration for self-advancement. The ability to track progress and share fitness accomplishments through the tracking feature is discussed as an effective approach to recognise and celebrate milestones achieved by participants, which satisfies individuals' intrinsic desires to reach their goals. Participants also appreciate diversity, which encompasses a wide range of subjects and users from different locations as it brings affective benefits, such as joy and enjoyment, through making fitness more interesting. Moreover, community members learn about fitness specialities by reading stories as well as experiences shared by other users, which fulfils their desire for being knowledgeable.

Apart from the above mutual patterns shared between the communities, Keep members place focus on the credibility and authority of information shared on publicly accessed spaces. They consider content posted by authorised users to be reliable sources for improving their own performance, which fulfils the value of being 'knowledgeable'. It is noteworthy that, under a time-constrained circumstance, Keep users prioritise professionalism as a criterion when filtering content, which helps them achieve their goals more efficiently. Conversely, MFP users focus more on connecting with individuals who share similar challenges as well as life conditions to seek solutions to specific issues, ultimately fulfilling their need to stay informed within a large crowd. In addition, the nature of content, which elicits the valence of post content, allows users to gain new insights and ideas that reinforce their motivation and goals, ultimately satisfying their desire for being inspired and goal-achieving.

5.3 Chapter summary

This chapter has covered the research design and main findings for the second phase of the study: in-depth laddering interviews. The responses to the posted questions from a larger

community population have been reviewed, and four important themes, sharing, socialising, helping others, and self-advancement, have been addressed to comprehensively describe the nature of OBCE. The detailed analysis of insiders' conceptions of community engagement was then presented, followed by laddering and pyramiding to uncover attributes, consequences, and personal values towards certain engagement behaviours. The following, and final, chapter presents the researcher's discussion, while stressing the contributions made, and the implications and potential avenues for further study.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The proceeding chapter presents the findings obtained from examining the constructs of customer engagement as revealed during the individual interviews. The constructs were analysed and categorised into attribute, consequence, and value sequences in order to explore individual-level cognitive structures. To better understand the dynamics of OBCE, the four major themes that emerged from the data were then used to organise the study's findings.

This chapter, which serves as the thesis's epilogue, focuses on presenting the theoretical, methodological, and managerial contributions of this study. It commences with a general discussion on how the research findings relate to the existing literature. By revisiting the research questions, relevant discussions of the inferences made from the data are presented. The theoretical and methodological contributions are examined followed by the managerial implications. Finally, the rigour with which this research was conducted, study limitations, and any implications for future research are discussed.

6.1 Discussion of research findings

Building upon existing knowledge of customer engagement and online brand communities, this study adopted a micro perspective in understanding the power of personal values on an individual's engagement performance in a virtual community setting. The findings of this research lend credence to Kozinets (2002) contention by successfully applying the means-end chain to elucidate the meaning that people associate with OBC functions in the form of personal values. By linking specific community characteristics with perceived benefits, this study has demonstrated the significance of the online community and how it affects individuals' engagement intentions and behaviours, which has been well addressed in prior studies (Islam and Rahman, 2017; Yuan *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, through observing the daily conversations between members and conducting individual interviews, the research findings reinforce Kozinets' (2002) propositions of addressing the internet as an ideal space for researchers to expand on conventional consumer behaviour concepts, such as means-end chain, and gain a better understanding of individuals' cognitive structures while engaging in a virtual environment. This was demonstrated by effectively mapping out the attributes, consequences, and value sequence of respondent constructs through the process of laddering interviews.

Although there have been various studies examining the antecedents and motivations driving individuals' engagement in online brand communities, there has been a lack of comparable studies investigating how individuals' personal values, especially those shaped by different cultural backgrounds, influence their engagement with a focal brand as well as associated users. In Gupta, Pansari and Kumar (2018) research, culture has been demonstrated as an essential element in affecting people's preferences and tastes, which further leave an impact on how they interpret situations and develop emotional reactions towards different stimuli (Russell and Pratt, 1980). Drawing on a sequence of motivational theories and existing engagement propositions, the research findings have reinforced the significance of social aspects of online communities on people's decision-making process (Hammedi *et al.*, 2015; Kozinets *et al.*, 2010) and contribute to the field of consumer behaviour by broadening the understanding of customer engagement from an individual level.

6.1.1 Online brand community infrastructure

Through observing selected online communities in two contrasting cultural backgrounds, it is intriguing to discover that customer engagement with a particular brand and other members is greatly influenced by a series of community functions, which include user profile, reward system, volunteering moderators, user membership, and discussion boards. Firstly, the findings obtained from observations support the previous research by acknowledging that the user's profile can provide valuable insights into the source of communication. This enables the information receivers, i.e. general community users, to make more informed assessments of the communicator, who is the content poster, with regards to their credibility (Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022). In this case, the user profile acts as an "identity card" reflecting individuals' self-preferences, enabling them to associate with others who share similar consciousness. In addition, the research findings also reflect the social nature of online community engagement. In previous OBC studies, rewards are discussed as returns to customers' contributions (Braun *et al.*, 2016) and regarded as an important element in driving people to participate in OBC activities (Islam and Rahman, 2017). These rewards can be either financial, such as a monetary incentive to complete certain tasks, or psychological such as badges reflecting a member's participation level within the community. Drawing upon organisation support theory (OST) (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986), recognising the contributions of community members and offering rewards signify the brand's positive evaluation of their contributions and demonstrates the brand's dedication and trust in its contributing members

(Wayne *et al.*, 2002; Mousavi and Roper, 2023). In this thesis, community members are recognised as volunteering employees in bringing knowledge, resources, and values to the company and, by acknowledging and rewarding their contributions, organisations demonstrate their appreciation and concern for them, leading to increased emotional commitment and identification with the organisation, which is consistent with earlier studies (Marique *et al.*, 2013). As indicated in section 4.1.2, both communities were observed to take advantage of reward system to promote individuals' engagement level; however, different responses were given between the selected communities. It was observed that when receiving milestone rewards, Chinese users were more willing to share them in publicly accessible spaces and give the organisation with positive emotional responses. This could be explained by the differences of people's perceptions of labels and badges (Hanson, Jiang and Dahl, 2019).

Apart from generating insights from how community infrastructures influence people's engagement level, this thesis also examined community members' internal cognitive structure, which helps in establishing a clear connection between community attributes and personal values.

The research questions posted for this thesis have been stated as follows:

1. What are the differences in CE in Chinese and UK OBCs?
2. How do personal values embedded in cultural backgrounds relate to these differences from a customer's perspective?
3. What is the relationship between personal value and CE with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions?

Further explanations will be given in the following sections to analyse what personal values drive people's engagement behaviour and how personal values in collective backgrounds relate to different engagement patterns.

6.1.2 Sharing

Sharing, which is considered as a form of value co-creation (Chen *et al.*, 2018), emerged from the findings as a key driver of customer engagement. Earlier studies have discussed sharing as a key aspect of the cognitive dimension of CE, which refers to the shared norms, language,

understanding, and vision of a brand community that enable collective action (Kumi and Sabherwal, 2018). These cognitive constructs serve as a set of guidelines and criteria for meaningful behaviour that can facilitate the accomplishment of community objectives among members.

The research findings indicate that members who are most actively engaged in the community are those who are most likely to disseminate information and expertise, share valuable solutions with the broader community, and offer support to peers. To achieve a sequence of benefits, such as acquiring new insights, social recognition, appreciation, companionship, mutual understanding, and self-satisfaction, community members are inclined to contribute knowledge and exchange resources with others alike (see Table 10 for attributes, consequences, and values emphasise in both communities). Previous research has shown consistency with these findings, indicating how online brand communities are perceived as a platform for resource exchange (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Islam, Rahman and Hollebeek, 2018). Under the lens of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), individuals who participate in sharing knowledge within online communities may anticipate receiving both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits (Yan *et al.*, 2016), which are also referred to as economic and hedonic benefits in Akrout and Nagy (2018) study.

The research findings pertaining to the first research question "What are the similarities and differences in CE in China and the UK OBCs?" provide insights into the perspectives of respondents from both communities. The summarised findings are presented in Table 14, which highlights the similarities and differences in people's sharing behaviour from China and the UK.

It was evident that regardless of cultural differences, people perceived 'sharing' as a mutual value guiding their resource exchange behaviour. They acknowledged the importance of OBCs in acquiring new ideas, presenting novel opinions, and providing socio-emotional support to peers. Both Keep and MyFitnessPal have incorporated the functionalities that allow users to personalise their experiences, providing a diverse range of options and fostering a sense of inspiration and innovation among individuals. It is noticeable that both UK and Chinese respondents emphasise a closed-off environment in helping them fulfil the value of 'sharing' (see Figure 7) . This is consistent with earlier study posed by Kahn (1990), which suggests that an individual's level of engagement is directly affected by their sense of psychological safety. Referred to the absence of fear of being threatened, judged, or excluded, psychological safety

enables people to express themselves freely without worrying about any negative impact on their status, image, or career (Byrne, Peters and Weston, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2019). As many respondents indicated, a close-off community is crucial in ensuring them to share posts, images, and videos in a private and supportive environment, which effectively avoids malicious judgements. Furthermore, the research findings also highlight the crucial role of 'support' in motivating individuals to contribute their knowledge, which aligns with the insights presented by Rosenbaum and Massiah (2007). According to their study, consumers who receive social support are more likely to engage in reciprocating behaviours as a way of expressing their appreciation. Similarly, the research conducted by Wasko and Faraj (2005) also demonstrates that individuals who hold a prominent position within a network contribute significantly to the growth of online communities by actively assisting other members, including sharing their knowledge with them.

Despite the commonalities observed, certain patterns within the two communities show significant differences (see Table 14 and Figure 7）. For Chinese users, rather than simply sharing knowledge, they are more focused on gaining social recognition within a large group and showcasing their expertise. Many Keep respondents described the community as a supportive and helpful platform. By receiving recognition from individuals with 'mutual interest', their willingness to develop a good reputation and social status are boosted. According to Yang *et al.* (2016), reputation, referred to as an individual's perception of earning respect or enhancing status, plays a key role in affecting people's knowledge sharing behaviour. In the context of this research, Chinese users build up their reputation by demonstrating their valuable experience in workout, diets, and a healthy lifestyle. Having a positive reputation can provide a sense of mental or physical satisfaction and is believed to encourage knowledge-sharing behaviour. This is consistent with the study posed by Wang, Ma and Li (2015).

Furthermore, the research findings align with the principles put forth during the 66th United Nations General Assembly in 2012 (Zhou, Wang and Zhan, 2022), which suggest the pursuit of happiness and well-being as a collective goal for humanity. Akrout and Nagy (2018) also demonstrate that hedonic benefits emerge from multiple factors, including seeking relief from problems, experiencing aesthetic enjoyment, and deriving positive emotions such as pleasure, fun, and entertainment through interactions. These findings are consistent with the responses from Chinese participants, who expressed that contributing knowledge brings them happiness,

confidence, and personal growth by enhancing their skills and abilities. This phenomenon is closely related to individuals' desire to achieve a sense of self-worth, which stems from membership (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). It refers to how individuals perceive themselves as providing value to the community by sharing their knowledge (Bock *et al.*, 2005). Specifically, when people receive positive endorsement and recognition from peers through likes and positive comments (referring to 'support' in this theme), they feel more confident about their social status. This, in turn, motivates them to further engage with the community, as they realise that their knowledge sharing is meaningful to others (Liu *et al.*, 2019). In this study, Chinese users are motivated to share whey they believe is helpful and to realise their potential, fostering a sense of inclusiveness and achieving a sense of satisfaction through increased confidence, all within the framework of shared community norms.

As for UK respondents, MFP users expressed a desire for inclusivity within the community but placed less emphasis on building social identities through sharing behaviour. Instead, they recognised sharing as an effective means to acquire fresh ideas and enhance their own performance. This highlights the significance of values such as 'goal-achieving', 'being inspirational', and fostering 'a sense of community', which drives UK individuals to engage in sharing within OBCs (see Figure 6). This finding support previous research that examines community interaction through resource sharing satisfying people's functional (economic) needs, which includes information seeking, practical problem-solving, and evaluating brand-related promotions (Davis, Piven and Breazeale, 2014; Akrout and Nagy, 2018). Additionally, it is noteworthy that in addition to dedicating a significant amount of time to achieving fitness goals, UK respondents placed a strong emphasis on spending quality time with their families during their leisure hours. As a result, they highly valued the attribute of 'ease to use', considering the effortless environment as an advantage that encourages sustained engagement with the community. This aligns with earlier research suggesting that users' attitudes and continued usage of an online community can be enhanced by their perceptions of community usefulness and perceived ease of use (Tang, Chen and Gillenson, 2019; Chompis *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, the attribute of 'relevancy' can help individuals in filtering through enormous amounts of information and navigating what is essential for them.

In response to the third research question, " What is the relationship between personal value and CE with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions?", this theme explores the cognitive and behavioural aspects of individuals' engagement. Instead of expressing

affective traits such as joy or pleasure towards the brand, people are motivated to fulfil their instrumental needs through knowledge sharing and resource exchange with their peers. According to Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014), the cognitive aspect of customer engagement highlights an individual's experiences, interests, and focus on a central engagement object, which, in this study, refers to the OBC. Drawing on the proposition presented by Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas (2015), the researcher employed two important cognitive elements of engagement, namely conscious attention and absorption, to understand people's sharing behaviour in both China and the UK. As discussed in section 4.3.1, attention, pertains to the cognitive resources that an individual directs towards an object of engagement, demonstrated through actions such as asking questions, seeking suggestions, and setting goals. The underlying values driving these behaviours include 'sharing', 'goal-achieving', being 'inspirational', being 'knowledgeable', 'sense of accomplishment' and 'make life easier' (see Figure 7). When individuals become more immersed in the community, their motivation for knowledge sharing transitions from extrinsic to intrinsic, encompassing the desires to building reputations, gaining recogni;ion, and achieve a stronger 'sense of community'. These intrinsic motivations reflect as 'self-satisfaction', 'influence others', and 'sense of community'.

Table 14 presented below illustrates how the identified constructs in the theme of sharing specifically correspond to the three main research questions of this thesis.

Table 14 Key constructs corresponding to three research questions (theme sharing)

RQ1	What are the similarities and differences in CE in Chinese and UK OBCs? (see Table 10)	
	Keep (Chinese community users)	**MFP (UK community users)**
Similarities	Respondents perceive 'sharing' as a mutual value that guides them to distribute information and expertise within the communities. The attributes of 'nature of content', 'shared experience', 'closed-off', and 'support' are widely acknowledged as influential factors that shape individuals' intentions to share in both communities.	

	Keep users strive to attain values such as 'influence others, 'self-satisfaction', and 'sense of accomplishment' by generating positive content and exchange resources with peers in the community (see Figure 5). They not only acknowledge 'sharing' as an effective approach to exchange resources with like-minded people, but also takes it as a form to build a good reputation within the community and remark milestones during their fitness journey. 'Mutual interest' and 'records' are considered as two important attributes leading them to facilitate 'sharing' behaviour (see Figure 5).	MFP users strive to achieve two types of values through sharing knowledge with others: information-oriented values (such as 'goal-achieving', 'make life easier', and being 'inspirational'), and socio-emotional values (such as being 'inclusive' and 'sense of community') (see Figure 6). Their act of sharing is closely related to their desire to accomplish their goals and obtain a sense of belongingness. They consider 'ease-to-use' and 'relevancy' as important attributes in consuming appropriate content. 'In the same boat' is also seen as significant, as it helps them connect with like-minded individuals and fosters a 'sense of community' (see Figure 6).
Differences		
RQ2	**How do personal values embedded in cultural backgrounds relate to these differences from a customer's perspective?**	
	Keep (Chinese community users)	**MFP (UK community users)**
	Chinese users perceive 'sharing' behaviour as a means to elevate their social standing within the community. Their motivation stems from a desire to seek a higher reputation among their peers . By receiving recognition and acknowledgement from individuals who share similar interests, their drive to cultivate a positive reputation and achieve a higher social status is reinforced. They establish their reputation by showcasing their valuable experiences in areas such as	MFP users strive to achieve two types of values through sharing knowledge with others: information-oriented values (such as 'goal-achieving', 'make life easier', and being 'inspirational'), and socio-emotional values (such as being 'inclusive' and 'sense of community') (see Figure 6). Their act of sharing is closely related to their desire to accomplish their goals and obtain a sense of belongingness. They consider 'ease-to-use' and 'relevancy'

	workouts, diets, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle (see Figure 5: mutual interest-understanding-recognition and shared-experience-admiring-confidence). A positive reputation not only brings them a sense of mental and physical satisfaction but also serves as a compelling force behind their sustained knowledge sharing activities (Yan *et al.*, 2016).	as important attributes in consuming appropriate content (see Figure 6: shared experience-new idea-goal-achieving). Many respondents placed a strong emphasis on spending quality time with their families during their leisure hours, and a user-friendly community allows them to be accountable for their goals while reducing the time demands associated with complicated functionalities. The notion of 'in the same boat' is also seen as significant, as it helps them connect with like-minded individuals and fosters a stronger 'sense of community'.
RQ3		**What is the relationship between personal value and CE with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions?**
		This theme examines the cognitive and behavioural aspects of individuals' engagement in OBCs. Rather than expressing affective traits towards the brand, people are motivated to fulfil instrumental needs through knowledge sharing and resource exchange with their peers. Building on the proposition by Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas (2015), the researcher employed conscious attention and absorption as important cognitive elements to understand people's sharing behaviour in the OBC context in China and the UK. Attention involves the cognitive resources individuals direct toward engagement, demonstrated through actions such as asking questions, seeking solutions, and setting goals (see Section 4.3.1). The underlying values driving these behaviours include 'sharing' (mutual value shared between China and the UK), 'goal-achieving'(UK), being 'inspirational' (UK), being 'knowledgeable (UK), 'make life easier' (UK), and a 'sense of accomplishment' (China) (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). As individuals become more immersed in the community, their motivation for knowledge sharing transitions from extrinsic to intrinsic, encompassing desires to build reputations, gain recognition, and strengthen their 'sense of community'. These intrinsic motivations manifest as 'self-satisfaction' (China), 'influence other' (China), and a stronger 'sense of community' (UK).

6.1.3 Socialising

The findings show that a person's desire to socialise with others contributes to his/her engagement with an online brand community. This is consistent with Pai and Arnott (2013) research that attested people's needs for interpersonal communication drives their engagement behaviour in OBCs. In Brodie *et al.* (2013) exploratory study, socialising is identified as one of the five sub-processes of OBCE and is anticipated to provide five broad segments of values, in which interpersonal connectivity value and self-enhancement value are closely related to the socialising aspect.

In this thesis, socialising is defined as a series of interpersonal interactions that go beyond brand transactions and reflect a reciprocating nature between members. Regardless of cultural differences, respondents described selected communities as supportive and useful in helping them acquire a sense of bonding and friendship with people alike. Apart from exchanging brand-related information, respondents take good advantage of the platform to share achievements and confusions alongside their fitness journey, and in turn receive admiration and psychological support from peers. They mentioned that these social interactions help them create a long-term, committed relationship with affiliated members and make them feel inclusive within the community. In this theme, interactivity including the attributes of 'diversity', 'mutual interest', and 'in the same boat' plays a crucial role in fulfilling the social needs of member within the communities (see Figure 10). This is consistent with the literature addressed by Zhou *et al.* (2016) and Mousavi and Roper (2023) suggesting online community interactivity is a positive driver in enriching emotional embeddedness of consumers and drives the formation of virtual friendships. As proposed by Ridings and Gefen (2004), consumers need a space in which they can fulfil feelings of closeness, security, and fun through social interactions. Investigations into both communities not only indicate the functional aspect of the OBC where people can share problems and enquiries for branded information (Yan *et al.*, 2016; Fernandes and Castro, 2020), but also extend existing literature by discussing the importance of an OBC as an important space for social ties development. Through sending likes, direct messages, and positive responses, an individual's sense of belonging is fostered encompassing friendship, intimacy, and affiliation, which has been addressed in existing OBC literature (Pai and Arnott, 2013).

It is noteworthy that other than emphasising the structural properties, such as content richness, information accessibility, and navigability of the community, both Chinese and UK respondents preferred to consume relatable and inspirational content, which is different from previous findings that addressed the structure of media as a critical contributor to the capability to interact (Hausman and Siekpe, 2009; Chan *et al.*, 2014).

Owing to cultural differences, Chinese and UK community users perceived different opinions on certain community attributes (see Table 15). For instance, with respect to satisfying the values of friendship and sense of bonding, Chinese respondents stressed the importance of ensuring a secure social environment and identified 'closed-off' and 'cliques' as two essential elements in determining their level of engagement (see Figure 8). Prior relationship marketing studies concluded that people's lurking behaviour in the OBC came as a result of their lack of expertise and confidence to contribute (Mousavi and Roper, 2023). In this case, a closed-off setting and a specialised grouping feature are beneficial in eliminating members' perceived peer pressure and reducing their anxiety over uncertainty and information asymmetry in interpersonal communications. As the majority of Chinese respondents indicated, engaging in OBCs acts as an extension of their social identities. Therefore, they are more aware to avoid disclosing personal information, such as locations, occupations, and medical history, to strangers in the community, thus protecting self-reputation. As indicated in Zhang *et al.* (2021) research, people's psychological safety is essential for fostering their psychological ownership, which refers to the sense of bonding in this thesis. An anonymous and secure community environment effectively decreases members' psychological costs of participation and enables them to freely express their opinions, which further enrich existing OBCE literature (Chan *et al.*, 2014; Zhang *et al.*, 2021).

On the other hand, UK respondents perceive higher acceptance in an open virtual environment and focused on members' homophily by proposing 'like-minded', 'in the same boat', and 'mutual interests' as priorities in conducting socialising behaviour (see Figure 9). Through reacting to, commenting on, and posting content, individuals gained the benefits of making friends, sharing communal understanding, and learning, which further satisfy their desires to feel inclusive and develop friendship with strangers. In earlier studies, OBCs have been examined as a venue for advancing efficiency of social interactions (Lusch and Nambisan, 2015) and many UK respondents revealed the selected community as a valuable platform for them to group with families and people alike, and enhancing their accountability while

achieving their fitness goals. Specifically, the online community provides a venue where people can facilitate easy conversations with others and contribute to a sense of community identification. Through engaging in valuable and information-rich interactions, trust between members has effective developed leading to a sense of belonging.

As some respondents indicated, they prefer to input knowledge and facilitate conservations when they encounter people who share the same interests and culture with them. When they are more immersive in the community, they unconsciously perceive themselves as integral members of the platform and prioritise the collective benefits over their personal gains, which is consistent with the earlier study designed by Lin (2007), as members who have a strong sense of belonging are more inclined to invest their time and effort in participating in online communities. This phenomenon can be explained through the lens of the communal sharing model, which suggests people tend to engage in supportive behaviour when they share a common identity and feel a strong sense of perceived belongingness (Fiske, 1992).

While both Chinese and UK users are interested in developing friendships and a sense of bonding with others, Chinese users appear to place more focus on receiving emotional returns from peers, such as feeling happy, inspired, and motivated (see Figure 8). This supports earlier studies that suggest individuals express their affection and social regard for others in the community through conducting socialising behaviour (Chan and Li, 2010). According to Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006a), experiencing positive emotions such as delight and happiness greatly increases individuals' motivation to engage in a virtual brand community. In a subsequent study, Niedermeier, Albrecht and Jahn (2019) provided empirical evidence for the importance of customer happiness in motivating customer engagement and fostering customer loyalty. The research findings enrich their understanding and uncover a contrasting pattern where individuals' aspirations for happiness can actively drive their engagement within an OBC.

In response to the third research question, " What is the relationship between personal value and CE with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions?", this theme explores all three dimensions. According to Calder, Isaac and Malthouse (2013), the affective dimension of CE captures the overall and enduring emotional experiences of consumers in relation to the engagement focus. This dimension goes beyond momentary sensations, emphasising ongoing and repeated feelings (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014). When expressing their feelings

within an OBC, two complementary aspects are identified : enthusiasm and enjoyment. Specifically, enthusiastic customers, as described by Lanier and Hampton (2008), actively engage in social interactions, establish communication, acquire fundamental knowledge, and have positive experiences with the brand. The underlying values driving individuals' social behaviour in OBCs can be categorised into two types: the desire for connection and the desire for knowledge acquisition. One the one hand, the desire for connection is associated with values such as 'bonding', 'friendship', 'sense of belonging', 'sense of community', and 'happiness'. In fitness-related communities, people seek to connect with like-minded individuals, finding accountability and companionship from fellow members. Through providing affective responses such as appreciation and encouragement, community members foster strong social ties within the communities. On the other hand, the desire for knowledge acquisition is associated with values of 'inspirational', 'motivating', and being 'knowledgeable'. Within OBCs, people can obtain additional resources by sharing experiences and insights with peers from diverse backgrounds. This exchange of knowledge and information contributes to their motivation for continuous learning and improvement, which reflects the cognitive dimension of CE.

Table 15 presented below illustrates how the identified constructs in the theme of socialising specifically correspond to the three main research questions of this thesis.

Table 15 Key constructs corresponding to three research questions (theme socialising)

RQ1	What are the similarities and differences in CE in Chinese and UK OBCs? (see Table 11)	
	Keep (Chinese community users)	**MFP (UK community users)**
Similarities	Respondents perceive 'bonding' and 'friendship' as mutual values that guide them to socialise with people in the communities. The attributes of 'in the same boat', 'mutual interest', and 'diversity' are widely acknowledged as influential factors that shape people's intentions to facilitate communication and social interaction.	
	Keep users strive to attain values such as being 'inspirational', 'motivating', and	MFP users strive to attain values such as being 'knowledgeable', 'sense of

Differences	increase level of 'happiness' by generating communication and interaction with the brand and fellow users (see Figure 8). They highly value a secure environment in which they can freely express their opinions without miraculous judgement. Apart from acquiring knowledge from other like-minded users, Chinese participants expect emotional returns from the fellows including joy, pleasure, and acknowledgement.	belonging', and a stronger 'sense of community' by generating communication and interaction with the brand and fellow users (see Figure 9). They perceive higher acceptance to an open community environment and prioritise socialising with members who share similar interests, experiences, and cultures. They value connecting with like-minded people and those who are in similar situations, emphasising the importance of homophily in their social interactions.
RQ2	**How do personal values embedded in cultural backgrounds relate to these differences from a customer's perspective?**	
	Keep (Chinese community users)	**MFP (UK community users)**
	China has been consistently characterised as a collective nation in previous cross-cultural research. In this case, Chinese community users value strong interpersonal connections, maintaining a sense of connectedness, and minimising the distinction between the self and others (Aaker and Williams, 1998). In collective with high-context communication, the emphasis is placed on group bonds and harmony. In such cultures, holistic and harmonious outcomes are preferred over individualistic and analytical approaches (Park and Jun, 2003). In order to attain the positive outcomes of harmony, Chinese participants anticipate deriving happiness and motivation from interpersonal	Previous cross-cultural research has highlighted the prevalence of the independent self-concept in Western cultures, which is focused on the notion that individuals are inherently distinct and separate from one another (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). However, this study presents a contrast finding as people seek to fulfil a 'sense of community' and 'bonding' through socially interacting with others (see Figure 9). This deviation from the independent self-concept can be attributed to the unique context of the research, where it is challenging to establish real-life connections pertain to fitness-related matters.

	communication that revolves around shared interests of the brand (see Figure 8: mutual interests-understanding-bonding, in the same boat-I am not alone-bonding, closed off-make friends-friendship).
RQ3	**What is the relationship between personal value and CE with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions?**
	This theme addresses the relationship between personal value and customer engagement across cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions. The affective dimension, as explained by Calder, Isaac and Malthouse (2013), involves enduring emotional experiences related to the engagement focus (referred to OBC in this research). It encompasses ongoing and repeated feelings rather than one-off sensations. Enthusiasm and enjoyment are identified as two complementary aspects within the affective dimension (see Section 4.3.2). It is observed that participants from both communities are enthusiastic customers of both Keep and MFP. They actively engage in various social interactions, communication, and knowledge acquisition, leading to positive brand experiences. The underlying values driving individuals' social behaviour in OBCs can be classified into two categories: the desire for connection and the desire for knowledge acquisition (see Figure 10). The desire for connection is associated with values such as 'bonding' (both China and the UK), 'friendship' (both China and the UK), a 'sense of belonging' (UK), a 'sense of community' (UK), and 'happiness' (China) (see Figure 10). In fitness-related communities, individuals seek connections with like-minded peers for accountability and companionship. Affective responses, including appreciation and encouragement, play a role in fostering strong social ties between members. On the other hand, the desire for knowledge acquisition is linked to values such as 'inspirational' (China), 'motivating' (China), and being 'knowledgeable' (UK) (see Figure 10).

6.1.4 Helping others

The theme of 'helping others' exemplifies the supportive behaviour that characterises online community engagement. This theme aligns with previous research findings, which consistently

highlight the significance of helping behaviour in the literature on OBCE (Yan *et al.*, 2016; Liao *et al.*, 2022). By proposing questions, offering answers, sharing concerns, and providing support, a two-way mutually beneficial relationship has been developed between individuals. In marketing research, helping behaviour between consumers is regarded as a dimension of consumer citizenship behaviour (Mandl and Hogreve, 2020). Respondents from both selected communities described the OBC as a space for them to exchange information and guidance to solve practical problems and make well-informed decisions. This is consistent with previous research, which highlights the significance of helping others in reducing the time and effort required to search for solutions and increasing the value derived from the services (Thompson, Kim and Smith, 2016). Additionally, it has also revealed that perceived psychological support, such as appreciation of achievements or sympathy for personal concerns, is crucial in accounting for an individual's engagement level (see Figure 13: support-helping-social identity). This aligns with Hajli and Sims (2015) study who attest receiving kindness and affection from friends on a social network site can have psychological advantages for users that fulfil their psychological needs (Lin *et al.*, 2018).

Similar to interpersonal assistance, community members' helping behaviours are voluntary actions determined by their intrinsic motives, rather than obligatory commands (Bove *et al.*, 2009). This behaviour can establish and preserve interpersonal relationships and intimacy, which further enhance users' continued participation in brand communities (Dessart and Veloutsou, 2021). Drawing upon social exchange theory (Homans, 1974), customers who have a better understanding of the entire community and receive social support from peers are more inclined to produce a variety of positive emotions and feel obliged to return these affections to the community. This has been reflected in this thesis' findings as individuals who contribute to a community out of their desire to help others are those who have received either informative guidance or psychological support from peers.

The research findings addressing the first research question "What are the similarities and differences in CE in China and the UK OBCs?" shed light on the perspectives of respondents from both selected communities. Table 16 summarises the similarities and differences of CE in the selected communities. It was evident that regardless of cultural differences, people placed significant emphasis on the value of 'helping others' as a means of shaping their social identity as helpful individuals. Notably, this helping behaviour was not limited to active

participants but also extended to lurking individuals, which contrasts with previous research findings (Fernandes and Castro, 2020).

With respect to the attributes affecting individuals' willingness to help others, 'knowledge' and 'support' are well recognised by community members from both cultural backgrounds (see Figure 13 and Table 12). Respondents emphasised the importance of offering practical information and knowledge rather than simply copying and pasting content found online when responding to inquiries. Their intention is to enhance the performance of other members by sharing practical experiences, ultimately fulfilling the need for a support and vibrant community environment. This was also found in Yang *et al.* (2016) research.

In the marketing domain, knowledge can be classified into two forms: general and specific (Yan *et al.*, 2016). In this thesis, general knowledge pertains to nutrition and fitness information, which is considered easily accessible and publicly available. Since these resources are available to all members, community users merely have privacy concerns and have no reservations about sharing knowledge with others. As most respondents are experienced users, it is common for them to respond to new members' inquires related to platform features and community function. However, this is not applicable with respect to sharing specific knowledge. This is because specific knowledge is more personal, and context related. Although some users were observed to be open to disclosing their personal presence (including age, religion, and medical history) in public forums from both communities, it is uncommon for interview participants to share personal experiences unless they perceive professional qualifications or find individuals in similar circumstances. More interestingly, to prevent receiving unwanted judgements from peers, it is less likely for them to offer assistance by sharing personal stories, particularly regarding controversial subjects that may trigger negative emotions.

Despite the similarities discussed above, certain engagement patterns in the two communities exhibit significant differences (see Table 16). These differences will be explored in the following sections in response to the second research question: "How do personal values embedded in cultural backgrounds relate to these differences from a customer's perspective?". As for Chinese respondents, by offering assistance, they not only foster a reciprocal and supportive relations with other users, but also fulfil their desires of seeking for 'sense of achievement' and 'self-satisfaction' through showcasing their intelligence and earning acknowledgement from their peers (see Figure 11: knowledge-helping-sense of achievement,

knowledge-helping-self-satisfaction). It is consistent with former research addressed by Yan *et al.* (2016) who propose 'face' as a an important factor in driving Chinese users' knowledge sharing behaviour. In Chinese culture, face (referred to as 'mianzi' in Chinese) represents the respect, pride, and dignity acquired through social interactions. It encompasses the desire to protect and enhance one's positive social image, which significantly influences social interactions in Chinese society (Wan, 2013). Extending to OBC context, members actively create online identities and engage in self-expression to establish reputations, gain acceptance, and receive recognition from others. In this thesis, it can be noticed that self-expression plays a vital role in protecting and acquiring face for Chinese users. By showcasing their strengths and abilities, individuals earn respect and admiration from others (Huang, Davison and Gu, 2008). Therefore, helping behaviour in Chinese OBCs goes beyond establishing supportive relationships between individuals and serves as a means of self-expression. Chinese users emphasise that OBCs play a crucial role in alleviating feelings of isolation and facilitating learning about fitness and healthy lifestyle. As discussed above, sharing general knowledge involves responding to community features and fitness-related inquiries and demonstrates the contributor's wealth of experience and information. Although it is not common for users to share personal experiences related to controversial topics, sharing specific knowledge entails engaging in discussions about fears and anxieties experienced during their fitness journey highlighting contributors' generosity and kindness. When shared knowledge meets the expectations and helps improve the performance of other participants, the contributor is praised which further enhances their social identities and confidence level.

Additionally, this thesis also adds to existing OBC studies by discussing support as an important element in driving people's helping behaviour (Chi, Harrigan and Xu, 2021). According to social support theory (Shumaker and Brownell, 1984), community members feel supported when they perceive that they are being looked after and helped by other community members (Doha, Elnahla and Mcshane, 2019). While the attribute of 'support' was acknowledged as significant in motivating individuals to assist others, it manifests differently in the selected communities. In the Keep community, members perceive providing support as an effective means of educating others about suitable fitness-related content. When people reply to them with positive feedback and compliments, their social status within the community would be enhanced and their desires to obtain 'sense of achievement' would be satisfied.

As for UK respondents, 'altruism', 'benevolence', and 'sense of community' are identified as important values leading them to help others (see Figure 12). In preceding research, altruism is examined as a controversial construct in affecting people's engagement behaviour (Teichmann *et al.*, 2015). In the study conducted by Wang and Lai (2006), it was found that altruism does not appear to have a significant impact on online content contribution specifically aimed at solving technical issues. In fact, its influence may even be negative in the context of posting behaviour in brand communities hosted by companies (Teichmann *et al.*, 2015). However, the research findings in this study present a different result and support existing literatures that identify altruism as an important driving factor in affecting an individual's contribution behaviour (Kankanhalli, Tan and Wei, 2005). As discussed by Wong (2023), reciprocity is an important motivator for brand community engagement. Although altruism refers to the intention to benefit others, irrespective of social or motivational incentives (Price, Feick and Guskey, 1995), the respondents in this thesis still hoped that others can behave in the same manner to those in need and regard knowledge input as a 'way to give back'. This can be explained through the lens of indirect reciprocation. Unlike direct reciprocation, which revolves around self-interest or role-based behaviour, indirect reciprocation necessitates a collective mindset, unilateral giving, and a sense of shared responsibility and concern for the community's welfare (Flynn, 2005). According to Flynn (2005) indirect reciprocation has consistently been associated with social solidarity, trust, and norms of sharing and helping. As indicated by many UK respondents, MFP serves as a 'supportive' and 'helpful' platform for them to become accountable during their fitness journey. As a consequence, despite respondents not asking returns from the community, they still wished others to return an exchange (i.e. act of kindness or communication) to the crowd. Furthermore, it is intriguing to discover that a significant number of respondents from the UK affirm that helping others is ingrained in their family values and that they are raised in a culture that promotes helping people in need.

Moreover, as indicated by the UK respondents, receiving 'support' in the forms of compliments and encouragements positively affect their self-efficacy, which results in an improved sense of well-being, such as reduced fear of mistakes, increased confidence, and improved sense of social integration. These positive experiences subsequently create a feeling of responsibility towards giving back to the community, resulting in an individual's altruistic behaviour. Also, the attributes of 'mutual interests', 'like-minded', and 'in the same boat', which imply a homogenous nature among users, are all identified as influential elements affecting an

individual's helping behaviour within an online community. Through developing supportive conversations between members, community participants gradually perceive a sense of mutual obligation in sustaining a collaborative and supportive community atmosphere. Specifically, they contribute their knowledge and return positive emotions to the members who offer assistances out of self-interests. By providing necessary informative and emotional support, individuals can fulfil their desire to foster a positive and helpful community environment.

This theme explores the relationship between personal value and CE across cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions in response to the third research question. Within online communities, the concept of 'helping others' reflects the collaborative and supportive nature among members, demonstrated through actions such as seeking guidance, providing helpful solutions, offering socioemotional support, and sharing valuable insights. This altruistic behaviour is driven by a shared responsibility to maintain a supportive environment. According to Rather and Hollebeek (2021), affective dimension of CE is associated with consumers' positive brand-related affect. Compared to 'sharing', 'helping others' is not solely motivated by resource exchange but also intrinsically driven by people's trust and commitment to the brand, reflecting the affective dimension of CE. Regardless of cultural differences, the desire to be helpful is a fundamental value that drives individuals' knowledge sharing and helping behaviour. As indicated in section 4.2, variation in membership status influences how individuals offer help. New or lurking users tend to ask functional questions and passively receive knowledge, while more experienced users actively contribute specific knowledge and solutions. For more active users the values of 'altruism', 'benevolence', 'sense of community', and 'bonding' play crucial roles in driving their helping behaviour, integrating them into the community.

Table 16 presented below illustrates how the identified constructs in the theme of helping others specifically correspond to the three main research questions of this thesis.

Table 16 Key constructs corresponding to three research questions (helping others)

RQ1	What are the similarities and differences in CE in Chinese and UK OBCs? (see Table 12)	
	Keep (Chinese community users)	MFP (UK community users)

Similarities	Respondents regard 'being a helpful person' as a mutual value guiding them to offer assistance to others within the communities. 'Knowledge' and 'Support' are well recognised as two important attributes affecting people's engagement willingness.	
Differences	Keep users strive to attain values such as a 'sense of achievement', 'bonding', and 'self-satisfaction' by offering guidance and emotional support to others (see Figure 11). Their act of providing assistance not only establishes a mutually supportive relationship, but also allows respondents to demonstrate their intelligence and receive recognition from their peers.	MFP users strive to attain values such as 'altruism', 'benevolence', and 'sense of community' by offering guidance and emotional support to others (see Figure 12). Their act of offering assistance is closely related to their former received supports from the community. Through providing novel ideas and sending encouragements, MFP respondents are inclined to maintain a supportive and vibrant community environment.
RQ2	**How do personal values embedded in cultural backgrounds relate to these differences from a customer's perspective?**	
	Keep (Chinese community users)	**MFP (UK community users)**
	In Chinese OBCs, the act of helping others extends beyond building supportive relationships and takes on a form of self-expression. It involves the aspiration to safeguard and improve one's favourable social reputation, which has a significant impact on social interactions within China society (Wan, 2013) (see Figure 11: knowledge-helping-social identity, support-educating-sense of achievement). Chinese users recognise the significant role of OBCs in addressing feelings of isolation and promoting knowledge about	It is observed that a considerable portion of UK participants acknowledge the intrinsic nature of assisting others within their family values, indicating that they are brought up in a culture that encourages helping those in need. While altruism generally pertains to the intention of benefiting others without regard to social or motivational incentives (Price, Feick and Guskey, 1995), the participants in this research expressed a desire for others exhibit similar behaviour towards those in need

fitness. The constructs of 'face' (Yan *et al.*, 2016) and self-expression are employed to explain the underlying motivations behind Chinese user' helping behaviour.	and view sharing knowledge as a means of 'giving back' (see Figure 12: support-way to give back-benevolence, knowledge-helping-make people happy-altruism). This phenomenon can be understood in terms of indirect reciprocation.
RQ3	**What is the relationship between personal value and CE with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions?**
	This theme examines the relationship between personal value and CE in terms of cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions. Within online brand communities, the concept of 'helping others' reflects the collaborative and supportive nature among members. This altruistic behaviour encompassing actions such as seeking solutions and sharing knowledge, which reflects the behavioural aspect of CE (see Section 4.3.3). In line with the definition introduced by Rather and Hollebeek (2021), the affective dimension of CE involves consumers' positive brand-related affect. Apart from offering resources to solve problems, helping behaviour is also driven by intrinsic factors such as trust and commitment to the brand, reflecting the affective dimension of CE (see Section 4.3.2). Irrespective of cultural differences, the desires to be helpful serves as a core value driving individuals' helping behaviour (see Figure 13). The variation in membership status influences how individuals engage in helping others, with new or lurking users seeking information passively, while more experienced users actively contribute their expertise. For active users, values such as 'altruism'(UK), 'benevolence' (UK), 'sense of community' (UK) , and 'bonding' (China) play significant roles in motivating their helping behaviour and integrating them into the community (see Figure 11 and Figure 12).

6.1.5 Personal advancement

The findings in this theme support existing literature that suggests engaging in community sharing and exchange to improve professional skills significantly influenced an individual's willingness to actively participate in a firm-hosted OBC (e.g. Stock, Oliveira and Von Hippel, 2015; Lakhani and Von Hippel, 2004). According to Shin, Perdue and Pandelaere (2020), the increased interconnectedness among stakeholders provides opportunities for people generating

innovative knowledge in an OBC context. Notably, customers actively participate in service delivery process, indicating their potential to contribute to new service development and design through knowledge and expertise sharing. In this research, engagement in open innovation involves designing new workout programmes, sharing reliable workout information, and generating creative recipes, which serves as a source of product/service innovation. Online brand community members, being loyal and possessing extensive brand-related experience and knowledge, play a role akin to that of employees (Joo, 2020) in advancing innovation knowledge by sharing their opinions and ideas to enhance the quality of community experience (Carlson *et al.*, 2018; Lusch and Nambisan, 2015). Considering that knowledge transfer can effectively occur across various stakeholders at interorganisational level (Raisi *et al.*, 2020), brand customers can transfer knowledge within online brand communities by discussing, analysing, critiquing, and enhancing current brand offers as well as developing new ones.

In addition, the research findings highlight that community members are more likely to engage in knowledge sharing when they perceive a sense of empowerment and believe that their suggestions and opinions hold value both to the brand and to fellow community members. Keep and MF, through their innovative and interactive tracking and sharing features, provide customers with valuable opportunities for resource exchange. This exchange not only facilitates the sharing of inspiration, intellect, and knowledge, but also fosters a culture of continuous knowledge sharing, thereby maintaining the innovative and intellectual nature of the community. Within these online communities, knowledge and information in the form of 'share experience' are highly regarded and sought after. This finding is consistent with the approach/inhibition theory of power, which suggests that when customer feel empowered to make a difference, they are more motivated to actively express their opinions and insights (Anderson and Berdahl, 2002).

Regardless of cultural differences, it is evident that people's desires to become 'knowledgeable' and 'inspirational' play a significant role in driving their engagement behaviour (see Table 17). This underscores the significance of instrumental motivations, as noted in earlier studies, such as the need for seeking assistance, up-to-date information, and validation, in fostering interaction within a firm-hosted OBC (Bilro and Loureiro, 2021). As shown in Table 17, irrespective of cultural differences, the constructs of 'tracking', 'diversity', and 'shared experience' are recognised as crucial elements that contribute to fulfilling individuals' aspirations for self-advancement. The ability to track progress and share fitness achievement

through tracking feature is seen as an effective way to acknowledge and celebrate personal milestones, satisfying individuals' intrinsic desires to achieve their goals. This finding supports former research that suggest achievement-features (referred to 'tracking' in this study) are often associated with a cognitive style and goal-drive engagement (Xi and Hamari, 2020).

As discussed in sections 5.2.4 and 4.3.1, the 'tracking' feature in both communities involves activities like logging food and exercise, generating progress metrics, and displaying periodic achievements. When community members reach certain milestones, they are rewarded with symbolic incentives such as badges or emotional incentives like receiving likes and recognition from peers (see Section 4.1.2). Many participants highly appreciate this 'tracking' feature as it enables them to visualise their progress, learn more about nutrition, and hold themselves accountable for their goals. This observation aligns with the findings of Xi and Hamari (2020), who proposed that achievement-related features, including badges, challenges, mission, goals, leader boards, and progression metrics, are instrumental in structuring goals (Landers, Bauer and Callan, 2017), motivating effort investment (Baek, Yoon and Kim, 2015), and optimising consumer behaviour.

This phenomenon can also be understood within the framework of goal-setting theory (Latham and Locke, 2007), in which self-efficacy plays a vital role in motivating individuals to put in the necessary effort to achieve their goal in recurring goal-setting situations (e.g. having a healthy body or balanced diet) (Drèze and Nunes, 2011). Previous research has shown that successful goal achievement enhances self-efficacy, in turn, boosts individuals' confidence, particularly when the task is perceived as challenging and the attainment of the goal is uncertain (Dzewaltowski, Noble and Shaw, 1990). Furthermore, due to the substantial user base of both OBCs, participants highly appreciate the diverse interactions that encompass a wide array of topics and involve users from various locations. They specifically highlight the abundance of diversity as a source of instructional and emotional benefits, such as more programme variations and joy, which adds to the overall interest and engagement of the fitness experience. This finding can also be found in a study conducted by Verhagen *et al.* (2015), where they propose that having access to knowledge has a positive impact on the perceived cognitive benefits linked to engagement in a virtual community.

While there are common patterns shared between the communities, Keep members specifically emphasise the credibility and authority of information shared in publicly accessed spaces (see Figure 14: professionalism-educated-knowledgeable). They consider content posted by authorised users to be reliable sources for improving their own performance, satisfying their value of being knowledgeable. It is worth noting that , when time is limited, Keep users prioritise professionalism as a criterion for filtering content, enabling them to achieve their goals more efficiently (see Figure 14: professionalism-effort saving-make life easier). The findings align with earlier research that confirms the beneficial impact of information quality and source credibility on the usefulness of information (Zha *et al.*, 2018), and extend the research context to firm-hosted OBCs. In Zha *et al.*'s (2018) study, the credibility of sources in social media is defined as the degree to which individuals generating information on social media as seen as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and reliable. It serves as a significant indicator that helps consumers in assessing the reduction of perceived risk when considering new ideas. Since credibility is a multifaceted and intricate concept, it can be described in relation to various interconnected aspects, including accuracy, trustworthiness, reliability, authoritativeness, expertise, and objectivity (Rieh *et al.*, 2014). It is noteworthy that many respondents from the Keep community appreciate the contributions of authorised users, as it enhances their in-group identification with these users. As indicated by Fan *et al.* (2018), Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on distinguishing between in-group and out-group members, which influences individuals' preference for utilising credible resources to enhance their own performance. Moreover, it is intriguing to note that the desire to 'make life easier' significantly motivates individuals to actively seek resources that can optimise their skills and capabilities. This can be explained by the increasing social stress experienced by Chinese people due to their personal and professional lives.

In the case of UK respondents, they prioritise connecting with individuals who face similar challenges and share similar life conditions (see Figure 14: in the same boat-educating-knowledgeable, in the same boat-educating-stay informed). It is because people find it challenging to find people in real life who can relate to their fitness journey. Through connecting with individuals who share the same goal, they can seek specific solutions to their issues and fulfil their need to stay informed within a large community. Moreover, being 'accountable' plays a significant role in guiding people from the UK to optimise self-performance on a regular basis and improve skills and capabilities. 'The nature of content', which influences the emotional valence of posted content, allows users to gain new insights

and ideas that reinforce their motivation and goals, ultimately satisfying their desire for inspiration and goal achievement (see Figure 14).

This theme explores the relationship between personal value and CE across cognitive and behavioural dimensions in response to the third research question. The desire for self-advancement strongly reflects individuals' inherent drive to acquire knowledge and enhance their own abilities. According to Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014), the cognitive aspect of customer engagement highlights an individual's experiences, interests, and focus on a central engagement object, which, in this study, refers to the OBC. Drawing on the proposition presented by Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas (2015), the researcher employed two important cognitive elements of engagement, namely conscious attention and absorption, to comprehend people's knowledge sharing behaviour in both China and the UK. As discussed in section 4.3.1, attention, pertains to the cognitive resources that an individual directs towards an object of engagement, demonstrated through actions such as asking questions, seeking suggestions, and setting goals. The underlying values driving these behaviours include being 'knowledgeable', being 'inspirational', and 'goal-achieving' (see Figure 15). As individuals become more deeply involved in the community, their motivation for sharing knowledge and learning shifts from external factors such as acquiring fundamental information to internal factors, encompassing the desires to establish a reputation to increase self-esteem and be accountable for set goals.

Table 16 presented below illustrates how the identified constructs in the theme of helping others specifically correspond to the three main research questions of this thesis.

Table 17 Key constructs corresponding to three research questions (self-advancement)

RQ1	What are the similarities and differences in CE in Chinese and UK OBCs? (see Table 13)	
	Keep (Chinese community users)	**MFP (UK community users)**
Similarities	Respondents regard being 'knowledgeable', 'inspirational', and obtain a sense of 'goal achieving' as mutual values driving them to exchange knowledge and resources to meet their self-advancement needs. 'Tracking', 'diversity' and 'shared experience'	

	are well recognised as three important attributes affecting people's engagement willingness.	
Differences	Keep users strive to attain values as a 'sense of accomplishment' and increased 'self-esteem' by consuming user-generated content shown in the community (see Figure 14). They express that engaging in fitness-related discussions allowed them to express themselves, pursue their goals, and experience positive emotional state, ultimately leading to a sense of achievement.	MFP users aim to embody values such as accountability and staying informed by engaging with user-generated content within the community. They acknowledge the value of CE through seeking solutions as an effective means to enhance their professional skills and personal capabilities. The 'nature of content', 'in the same boat', and 'informative' are described as significant attributes that assist users in navigating the vast amount of content available within the community (see Figure 15).
RQ2	**How do personal values embedded in cultural backgrounds relate to these differences from a customer's perspective?**	
	Keep (Chinese community users)	**MFP (UK community users)**
	Chinese respondents highly value the contributions made by authorised users, as it strengthens their in-group identification with these users (see Figure 14: professionalism-educated-knowledgeable). According to Fan *et al.* (2018), Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on distinguishing between members of the same group and those outside of it, which influences people's inclination to rely on credible resources to improve their own performance. Moreover, Chinese participants' desire to	UK respondents acknowledge the challenges they face when trying to filter valuable information from a substantial amount of data shared within the community. Their desires to 'stay informed' ensures that they can acquire the necessary knowledge and skill sets to overcome obstacles and successfully accomplish their goals (see Figure 15: in the same boat-educating-stay informed).

	'make life easier' can be attributed to the growing social pressures experienced by Chinese individuals in both their personal and professional lives (see Figure 14: professionalism-effort saving-make life easier).
RQ3	**What is the relationship between personal value and CE with respect to cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions?**
	This theme examines how personal value relates to CE in terms of cognitive and behavioural dimensions. The desire for self-advancement strongly drives individuals to generate communication with peers and enhance their abilities. The cognitive aspect of CE, as explained by Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014), emphasises individuals' experiences, interests, and focus on a central engagement object. By drawing on the proposition by Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2015), the researcher utilises conscious attention and absorption, two crucial cognitive elements of engagement, to understand how people learn and acquire knowledge in China and the UK (also see Section 4.3.1). Attention, involves the cognitive resources directed towards the object of engagement, manifested through actions like asking questions, seeking solutions, setting goals, and learning. The underlying personal values driving these behaviour include being 'knowledgeable' (both China and the UK), being 'inspirational' (both China and the UK), and 'goal-achieving' (both China and the UK) (see Figure 16). As individuals become more familiar with the communities and establish fundamental understanding of the community dynamics, their motivation to share knowledge and learn transitions from external factors to internal factors. This shift encompasses the desires to establish a reputation for increased 'self-esteem' (China) (see Figure 14) and be 'accountable' (UK) (see Figure 15).

6.2 Contributions

This thesis makes contributions from three aspects: theoretical, methodological, and managerial. Each aspect is thoroughly examined and analysed in the following sections.

6.2.1 Theoretical contribution

Despite the increasing amount of research conducted on customer engagement and online brand communities, there are still gaps in our understanding regarding the factors that influence online community engagement and the consequences that arise. While these factors have been included in theoretical models (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Verhoef, Reinartz and Krafft, 2010), there is still a need for further empirical examination to provide a more detailed understanding of their impacts. By adopting a means-end approach, this thesis provides three theoretical contributions to existing literature.

Firstly, it demonstrates the efficacy of the personal values perspective in comprehending motivation for customer engagement. By categorising engagement patterns into four main themes, a sequence of personal values is identified as important drivers in persuading people to engage in online brand communities. As discussed in chapter two, previous CE and OBC studies have predominantly relied on S-D logic and social theories, such as social exchange theory, social identity theory, and social capital theory, to investigate people's engagement behaviour in online communities. Although valuable insights have been developed to understand the antecedents and consequences of customer engagement, little knowledge is evident in understanding how personal values affect an individual's motivation for engagement. To address this limitation, Marbach *et al.* (2019) developed a framework to comprehensively examine the moderating role of personal values in affecting the relationship between people's personality traits and perceived value from customer engagement. While their empirical findings support the important role of personal values (conservation and self-enhancement) in guiding people's behaviours, this study mainly adopted a quantitative approach to testify the causal relationship between the selected constructs, which might simplify people's cognitive process of engagement. To fulfil this gap, this thesis specifically investigates the impact of personal values on an individual's engagement behaviour from a micro perspective and identified a set of personal values that have not been previously explored in the context of OBCs.

Secondly, the developed means-end chain presents a novel theoretical approach to understanding the motivation for customer engagement in the online community context. By adopting a micro perspective, this research uncovers a coherent cognitive process that significantly influences an individual's engagement behaviour in a virtual community environment. In the thesis' findings, some constructs, which were previously considered independent, were explored and found to be interconnected. For instance, earlier studies have revealed functional drivers (such as promotional incentives and information richness) and perceived social benefits (social bonds) as two independent antecedents accounting for people's engagement behaviour. But the findings of this research have revealed that these two concepts are interconnected by satisfying individuals' desires to increase self-satisfaction while helping other community members. This advancement enhances existing knowledge of CE in the OBC context; past studies have predominantly examined individual elements, such as attributes, consequences, and values, in isolation as motivators. Without considering the interrelationships among these elements, researchers might not be able to interpret people's behaviour in an appropriate manner, which limits related theoretical framework development.

According to Gutman (1997), the means-end chain can be viewed as a hierarchy of goals, where the ultimate goal of value drives consumer behaviour. By successfully employing the laddering approach, the developed means-end chain framework managed to answer the research question of this thesis by emphasising the factors that prompt individuals to actively engage in a firm-hosted OBC. The motivation for active engagement stems from the fulfilment of personal values. This is apparent as each respondent expressed the personal values they sought to satisfy through their interactions, which are represented in the framework through the four identified themes. Additionally, this study also contributes to existing MEC literature by expanding the research context into relationship marketing, in particular online community engagement. As indicated in means-end chain, the cognitive process of motivating engagement begins with attributes, which provide contextual grounding for all other constructs within the means-end framework. In the case of this thesis, attributes encompassed the community environment (e.g. diversity, supportive, and closed-off), the characteristics of its users (e.g. like-minded, mutual interests, and in the same boat), and the nature of content. Through processing these attributes, individuals can, in turn, achieve certain consequences from engagement, representing hedonic, social, psychological, and functional needs within the means-end chain framework. These

needs emerged as outcomes of active engagement, ultimately leading individuals to fulfil their personal values.

In addition, from a customer's perspective, existing literature mainly utilised social identity theory and social exchange theory (e.g., Chi, Harrigan and Xu, 2021) to explain people's OBCE as a consequence of exchanging social resources in an online community context. However, given the diverse features and massive amount of branded information provided by online brand communities, it is crucial to discern which attributes specifically influence individuals' intention to engage and how they exert this influence. The adoption of means-end chain helps explain this. The connections developed among attributes, consequences (perceived values), and personal values shed light on the comprehensive cognitive process that individuals undergo when executing OBCE and demonstrates how different constructs are organised in an individual's minds. The research findings derived from the laddering interviews also revealed that all respondents presented at least one pathway leading to the highest level of abstraction, which justifies the importance of personal values in affecting people's engagement behaviours.

While previous studies have extensively examined the concepts of CE and OBCs, most research has focused on OBCs within social networking sites and has not taken users' membership into account. By recruiting members of different engagement levels and categorising engagement patterns into four main themes, this thesis contributes to the broader discourse by extending these concepts to firm-hosted online brand communities. It also adds to existing literature by exploring how personal values influence individuals' engagement behaviour in virtual environments.

Lastly, this thesis takes the cultural aspect into consideration and investigates if individuals across different cultural backgrounds achieve similar values when engaging in online communities. By conducting a comparative study in two contrasting cultural settings, this thesis builds upon previous findings in community engagement and delves deeper into how people interact with the brand and affiliated members in distinct ways. Unlike existing literature, which primarily relied on measurement scales such as Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, this thesis adopts an interpretative lens to explicitly explore the cognitive process that leads to an individual's engagement behaviour. Specifically, as addressed in section 5.2.2, earlier cross-cultural studies have emphasised the dominance of the independent self-concept

in Western societies, emphasising the idea that individuals are inherently distinct and separate from one another (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). However, this research introduces a contrasting discovery as individuals in the UK strive to satisfy a 'sense of community' and 'bonding' by socially interacting with others. This departure from the independent self-concept can be linked to the distinctive research context, where establishing real-life connections related to fitness-related concerns proves to be challenging. Therefore, by incorporating Schwartz's personal values, this study offers researchers a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanisms driving individuals' engagement in both developed and emerging markets and responds to the call for more understanding of CE across cultures (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016).

6.2.2 Methodological contribution

This thesis adds to the methodology of both ethnography and means-end chain by demonstrating their applications to the study of online brand communities. In past CE and OBC studies, these approaches have been used separately and their combination has been limited. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), theory and a conceptual framework can assist with guiding inductive research by directing the study towards the existing body of knowledge and offering an initial analytical framework. This thesis strengthens this claim by successfully conducting an ethnographic study that deviated from a conceptual framework derived from the literature.

This conceptual framework gave the researcher a starting point for the study process and defined its parameters, allowing her to concentrate on the relevant phenomena. The resulting data later supported the conceptual framework and added new constructs to the development of the OBCE motivation framework.

In addition, this thesis reinforces the notion that different methods within ethnography can complement each other. In this study, two phases of data collection were involved, in which the non-participatory observation was conducted to provide a contextual understanding of the selected communities and proved valuable for the second phase of individual interviews. This supports the idea of using multiple methods as the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the research context before conducting individual discussions. Furthermore, the completion of this thesis implies the consolidation of netnographic approaches in understanding OBC dynamics and provides contextual knowledge for subsequent laddering interviews.

This thesis also contributes to the methodology of the means-end chain approach. While the means-end chain has previously been used to understand consumer decision making and product choices, it has only been applied in understanding people's motivation towards OBCE and personal values have not been explored as a means that leads to individuals' engagement. Therefore, by adopting a micro perspective, this thesis has extended the application of means-end chain to a broader context and provided the researcher with profound insights into how community members associated community attributes with personal values that drove their engagement. In addition, the laddering procedure utilised in this thesis was undertaken purely online, which opens up new opportunities for its applications.

The data collection process and all associated correspondence for this study were exclusively conducted online. In order to guide future netnographic practices and to complement the ethnographic account that was maintained throughout the data collection process, methodological reflections and testimonials were acquired. The mechanics of using virtual communication tools, such as Teams/Zoom, for conducting interviews were also provided, which included the typical length of each interview and the quantity of constructs and ladders produced from each participant. The detailed documentation of the research process is intended to be a reference tool for future researchers, and OBCs will be further established as an appropriate context for conducting ethnographic research in virtual settings (Schembri and Latimer, 2016).

Lastly, this thesis contributes to the methodology of ethical practices in conducting online ethnography. Section 3.10 explained the ethical concepts used in this study after the researcher referred to existing ethical standards adopted by other authors. In netnography, it is necessary to communicate a set of ethical guidelines to research respondents, thus ensuring research rigor. In addition, it is also suggested that the researcher considers firms' guidelines while managing the data collection. For instance, it is suggested ethnographers disclose relevant details about the research before reaching out to potential respondents in extant anthropologist studies; however, this might violate the regulations published by the community with regard to potential scams. In this case, communications with community moderators or brand representatives are compulsory to ensure the success of the data collection. In addition, to ensure the quality of the research findings, section 3.9 discussed credibility and transferability as two essential criteria in evaluating the effectiveness of inductive studies. By applying these standards to this thesis,

it is hoped that other researchers would follow similar procedures in order to guarantee the calibre of work that is added to the literature. It is hoped that this process would be viewed as a helpful tool for researchers who are looking to perform high-quality studies and also gain acceptance as a valid method for researchers investigating an online community.

6.2.3 Managerial implication

The objective of this thesis is to uncover the driving forces behind individuals' engagement in a firm-hosted online brand community, focusing specifically on the role of personal values. By employing the means-end chain theory, an extensive list of attributes, consequences, and values were identified to account for people's engagement behaviour in online brand communities. This valuable knowledge offers corporations insights into how community members leverage the communal space and provides guidance for developing and sustaining a thriving community environment. By understanding the factors that contribute to a positive community experience, organisations can effectively manage user satisfaction and communicate these benefits to both current and potential community members. Furthermore, this research goes beyond a single cultural context by comparing two homogeneous online communities in different cultural settings. This comparison provides multinational companies with crucial insights into how individuals' engagement behaviours differ in developed and emerging markets, highlighting the significance of incorporating cultural dimensions when designing engagement strategies. In the following section, a sequence of managerial implications is addressed to assist multinational corporations in developing their self-hosted online communities.

Implications for online brand communities

By categorising the engagement patterns into four main themes (sharing, socialising, helping others, and self-advancement), insights into the motivating factors behind the engagement of community members have been well developed. It is suggested that community hosts prioritise the attributes they identify as important within each of the four themes and strive to maintain their presence in order to fulfil the ensuing consequences and address the underlying personal values. Given the extensive lists of attributes, consequences, and values, companies can focus their efforts on the elements that emerge as dominant perceptual pathways, as these represent a substantial portion of members' responses. Also, it is beneficial for companies to create

profiles of their existing and potential members and design different engagement strategies to satisfy their demands.

With a better understanding of what motivates consumers to engage within their specific community, companies can develop strategic marketing initiatives to effectively connect with their community users. In order to increase members' sense of community, it is suggested that companies create profiles of their existing and potential members. For instance, if a community consists mainly of members who are motivated by their ability to influence the brand, the focus should be placed on soliciting feedback and demonstrating how community suggestions shape the brand's trajectory. On the other hand, if members are driven by hedonic rewards, the community should offer special recognition and exclusive event access to foster engagement, which is, according to this research, more applicable to Chinese community members.

Firstly, for individuals who actively socialise and help others in the community, companies could acknowledge their contributions in co-creating community value and retain a friendly and supportive environment, where users can fulfil their desires of seeking a sense of bonding and inclusiveness. As shown in observational notes and in section 5.2.2, when active users perceive a high level of acknowledgements from peers, his or her self-esteem and self-satisfaction level will be drastically enhanced and, in turn, strengthen their sense of identity and belonging to the community. Therefore, it would benefit the companies to facilitate active members' stronger sense of psychological ownership of the community and develop a supportive network on the platform through organising events or offering exclusive benefits to them. These benefits could include giving them rights to design programmes alongside the company's existing services or products or issue them privileges to create personal fan pages within the community. By adopting these approaches, not only do people's empowerment level regarding the services provided by companies increase, but it also stimulates the process of product innovation. Additionally, for members driven by the desire to develop a helpful person social identity, it is important for companies to maintain an encouraging and supportive atmosphere where members can freely extend their assistance. By promoting a culture of mutual support and ensuring that the general membership actively contributes to helping one another, companies can facilitate a fulfilling and interactive experience for its members.

Secondly, for community members who are eager to achieve self-advancement, community hosts can create a dedicated space where users can engage with specialists to address

product/service-related inquiries. Additionally, companies can also offer professional resources and technical support to members in order to develop and enhance their professional skills, which could contribute to their personal and career advancement within the community. As some members comment on the community site to acquire knowledge about the brand, find solutions to their problems, and engage in self-education, it is crucial for community hosts to ensure that information shared within the community is accurate and the most up to date. By doing so, an environment of trust where members can confidently access reliable information can be fostered. By emphasising these aspects, brand managers or host companies can improve the overall community experience and promote professional development among its members.

Thirdly, for members who are seeking a sense of achievement and recognition from peers, it is beneficial for companies to implement a reward system composed of monetary incentives, reward points, labels, and badges. This publicly-displayed reward system would enable individuals, who value accomplishment, achievement, and recognition, to enhance their reputation within the community. To further recognise active users' contributions, host companies could recruit them as volunteering moderators in daily community management, including responding to people's inquiries for product solutions and providing emotional support. This approach allows members to assist each other instead of solely relying on community moderators and a culture of peer support and collaboration can be well developed. Additionally, instead of disseminating branded messages from the company's perspective, it is more meaningful to integrate brand-related elements in users' discussions, sharing and even questioning engagement. To achieve this, companies need to cultivate an environment that is appreciative, committed, and solution oriented.

Lastly, the findings of this study provide valuable insights to the members of the firm-hosted OBC, enabling them to develop a deeper understanding of their peers. Through follow-up discussions with the research participants, it is evident that some people found solace in realising that their fellow community members shared a similar level of commitment to the community. This enhanced understanding of fellow community members can have a positive impact on the overall sense of community and foster stronger connections among individuals who may have had limited knowledge about each other. It also contributes to the attribute of "shared interest" by creating a greater sense of connection and empathy among community members. Ultimately, this greater understanding of one's peers within the community fosters a stronger sense of belonging and camaraderie.

Implications for multinational corporations in building self-hosted online brand communities

First and foremost, this study offers multinational companies valuable insights into their core membership and recognises the significance of customer engagement in maintaining a two-way relationship with audiences. By identifying the attributes that resonate with the members' higher-level values, the host company can prioritise and enhance the elements of the community that contribute to a thriving community dynamic.

This study revealed that people's desires to achieve a sense of bonding, a sense of belonging, and a sense of community, are prominent in driving their engagement level within an OBC. As shown in chapter six, a supportive and encouraging environment is valuable to stimulate people's altruistic behaviours such as sharing knowledge and helping others. This understanding empowers community moderators to proactively shape the community space and foster an atmosphere that encourages a level of greater interaction. To improve the relationship with customers, it is suggested that companies recruit professional community specialists to create a safe, supportive, and friendly environment that promotes comfort and inclusiveness. Furthermore, it is also beneficial for the company to have regular conversations with volunteering community moderators and guide them in informing new members of community regulations to promote a positive and fulfilling community experience. Armed with the knowledge of which community attributes hold significance in facilitating an enjoyable environment, multinational companies can effectively manage user satisfaction and improve communication efficiencies.

As a sense of belonging was recognised as an important value in driving people's engagement behaviour (see section 5.2.2), it is crucial for companies to implement programmes that foster deeper connections among members. Given that friendship emerges as a prominent motivator for community members, companies can capitalise on this by organising meet-ups or activities for members residing in the same geographical area, thus facilitating meaningful off-line interactions. By doing so, the social aspect of community engagement can be enhanced and the distance between members will be effectively more enclosed. However, as the virtual environment is perceived with certain levels of uncertainty, people place more focus on evaluating users' authenticity (see section 5.2.2) when deciding to mingle with people offline.

To eliminate users' anxiety of encountering scammers, companies could conduct identity checks before hand and assign brand representatives to monitor events. This approach not only develops people's favourable attitudes towards the brand, but also increases their trust level in developing friendships with strangers in their online world, which benefits them in building social ties in virtual settings. Furthermore, allowing members to create profiles where they can share information about their interests and hobbies would also facilitate connections between like-minded individuals. Some people revealed that 'effort-saving' is an important construct that affects their participation level due to high time demands. In this case, pre-designed labels (i.e. 'weight-lifting', 'cardio', 'keto', 'running', and others) are proposed for people to select accordingly, thus effectively reducing their time and effort in creating personal profiles.

Secondly, community members are motivated to participate in an environment that offers some level of entertainment and emotional returns. When people are surrounded by like-minded peers, they are more likely to experience enjoyment and engage actively in community activities, which results in a more fulfilling experience for each individual. It is important for the community to provide a fun and engaging environment where members can both contribute to helping others and derive personal enjoyment and stimulation. As mentioned in section 4.1.2, badges are awarded to community members for their contributions and to some extent reflect their status within the community. To increase members' enjoyment and participation level, companies can take good advantage of live streaming technologies and enable people to compete with friends in real time while accomplishing certain tasks. By introducing elements of competition or challenges, companies can make the engagement experience more enjoyable and create a sense of fun and excitement within the community.

In addition, although there is already an existing reward programme within the selected communities, there is potential to expand it to cater to the high number of users who are motivated by recognition and acknowledgement, especially for Chinese users. As indicated in section 5.2.3, acknowledgements from peers not only increase people's self-esteem by boosting their confidence, but also bring them happiness by confirming their efforts. It is suggested companies introduce a variety of programmes or tasks tailored to users who perceive different participation levels. Upon completion, members can either earn visible badges that can be seen by the entire community or monetary incentives such as branded gifts or product promotion coupons. Since feeling appreciated and acknowledged are important outcomes that make members feel motivated, there could also be an option for members to nominate and award

badges to users who have made significant contributions in assisting others. This would enable helpful members to receive personal recognition for their valuable contributions and persuade them to conduct helping behaviour in following interactions. However, it is crucial to exercise control over the distribution of rewards to maintain their value and prevent dilution by ensuring they are not too common or easily attainable.

Lastly, it is important for companies to acknowledge the significance of the OBC in helping people find problem solutions and acquire knowledge. In this study, members expressed motivation through self-advancement, with an increase in self-esteem (confidence) and the opportunity to seek support and escapism from reality. To cater to members motivated in this manner, companies can maintain the community as an anonymous and secure space where individuals feel at ease to share their thoughts, seek advice, and receive feedback. Additionally, companies can also introduce a space for members to discuss controversial topics and collaborate to solve problems together with peers. By doing so, members can cultivate a shared sense of responsibility for the community's success and feel motivated to incorporate personal specialities to optimise other members' performance. As some respondents indicated, user-generated content is more appealing to read because they can relate to the author and co-create solutions towards a shared objective. In this case, encouraging members to support one another, rather than relying solely on a brand representative for solutions, fosters the development of a supportive network and improves communication efficiencies. However, it is crucial for companies to monitor users' activities and ensure all content is created under community guidelines.

Additionally, community members are also motivated by a desire for knowledge acquisition and self-advancement. To satisfy this motivation, companies can provide additional opportunities for members to engage in peer-to-peer learning. Members could be encouraged to propose topics of interest (not limited to branded products or services) and, if selected, they would have the opportunity to present these topics in publicly accessible forums within the community. To ensure that members receive appropriate information, companies can invite qualified experts to impart their knowledge in specific areas. Furthermore, brand managers can implement an education programme where members can exchange experiences regarding some trendy topics and issue the most active users with privileges to design courses. These initiatives would further strengthen the culture of mutual support and contribute to a more nurturing and collaborative community environment.

Apart from involving active users to input their knowledge and specialities, it is also meaningful to take lurking members into consideration and stimulate their psychological ownership development. To achieve this, managers should prioritise empowering lurking members by making them an integral part of the community and address their individual needs for personal fulfilment within the community. By fostering a greater sense of control in virtual environments (such as developing closed-off groups for specific enquiries, anonymous settings for asking questions, and avoiding auto connections with personal networks), the feeling of efficacy can be enhanced, which can motivate lurking users to actively and socialise. Despite the enormous scale of lurking members that exist in online communities, there is currently a lack of attention given to lurking users, as they are often viewed as insignificant visitors who do not contribute any value to the community. Managers could try to nurture a feeling of inclusivity and connection among community members by fostering a culture that promotes unity, closeness, and emotional intimacy. To achieve this, it is important for managers to acknowledge the barriers that exist between active and lurking members and develop community programmes that promote the idea of the community as a welcoming space for everyone. By creating such an environment, managers can facilitate a sense of belonging among lurking members and enhance their engagement within the community.

Furthermore, consumers can be pre-screened and selected for community interaction based on their motivational profiles. For instance, if a company aims to establish a subgroup within the community dedicated to generating ideas for new products, they can target consumers who prioritise up-to-date information and brand influence. This targeted approach is likely to result in increased involvement, improved idea generation, and overall better outcomes compared to randomly selecting community members or customers.

6.4 Limitations

In this section, the limitations and areas of weakness will be discussed.

This study follows an interpretive approach and is primarily an exploratory investigation conducted using qualitative methods. While this approach provides valuable insights, the sample size used does not permit making quantitative inferences about CE in a strict statistical sense. As a result, this study represents an initial step that can be further enhanced by

subsequent quantitative and confirmatory studies. To accurately present the participants' interpretations of reality, the researcher maintained objectivity by following a series of ethical and methodological guidelines, preventing excessive immersion in the participants' perspectives. However, the ladder data collection and analysis techniques are inherently vague, presenting challenges to researchers and drawing criticism for their subjective nature (Lin and Yeh, 2013). According to Maxwell (1992) and supported by fellow researchers in the interpretivist community, validity and objectivity are not necessarily inherent in all research approaches and methods. In consequence, this research starts and concludes with the researcher's personal reflection and testimony in relation to the study.

In addition, the theoretical framework underlying this research has certain inherent limitations, Critics argue that the means-end chain and laddering technique make assumptions about the respondent's mental ordering of associations, which can result in artificial constructs and false associations at higher levels of abstraction (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006a). However, based on the participants' natural progression from community attributes to consequences and values, and their ease in identifying personal values, the researcher observed no evidence of artificiality. It is important to note that the researcher does not claim to have uncovered the complete cognitive structures of individuals through the means-end chain process, but rather that it is offered a compelling glimpse into a portion of their cognitive structure.

Also conducting interviews using laddering technique involves eliciting personal aspects at different levels of abstraction through continuous probing, which can pose difficulties for respondents, making them either unable to articulate or unwilling to answer. Despite the researcher's application of various techniques suggested in the literature to address these challenges (see section 3.8.4), there may still be difficulties in bridging the gap from data to strategy to executional design and implications.

Furthermore, this study specifically focused on a fitness-cantered online community, which suggests that the findings are most applicable to similar fitness-themed FHOBCs. Researchers aiming to extend these findings to other online communities should be mindful of the differences in research settings. Lastly, to ensure confidentiality as required by ethical standards and the host firm's guidelines, a secondary coder was not utilised in the coding process. While the absence of multiple coders may be seen as a limitation by the wider qualitative research community for enhancing credibility, alternative methods were employed

in this study. Following Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommendations, the findings were returned to the respondents for confirmation, who were given the opportunity to provide feedback and share opinions. Considering the epistemological position of this research, which was mentioned in chapter three, it can be argued that external coders were not necessary and could potentially introduce bias, as they lack a grounded understanding of the community and its members.

6.5 Implication for future research

One potential avenue for further research considering this thesis' output is the replication of this study in diverse settings. Firstly, it would be intriguing to explore the same community but shift the focus towards the less engaged members. The existing literature highlights the diverse perceptions of OBCs among different members, and member type has been identified as a moderator influencing their participation (e.g. Kumar, 2019). It is commonly observed that many members initially join OBCs as lurkers and gradually transition into contributors (e.g. Zhou *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, active members may also transition into lurkers, reducing their contribution frequency over time. Given the variation in involvement and commitment levels among different membership types, it is important to gain insights into all members of the community and understand the motivating factors for each group. This knowledge would be valuable for both academics and practitioners in designing effective engagement strategies. Replicating the study in the same setting would allow for an exact replication of the methodology. Moreover, not having to control for setting differences would enable researchers to compare and analyse the behaviour of these different groups within the community, discerning the variations and determining the underlying reasons behind them.

Secondly, an additional opportunity for future research lies in applying this study to a completely different community, thereby enhancing the breadth of the findings beyond the current community. While this study could be applicable to any group of contributions within a community, it would be prudent to initially focus on the active members of the new community to establish a baseline for comparison. Anticipated variations in the results are expected when extending the study to other environments, considering that different communities may have different purposes. Given that this study's communities are firm-hosted OBCs focused on fitness, conducting research on a community centred on a different theme

would likely yield significantly different outcomes. Diverse attributes inherent to each community are bound to evoke distinct personal values among its members.

In order to enhance the depth and applicability of the identified themes in this study, conducting additional research would be highly beneficial. By doing so, the value and utility of these themes could be reinforced, establishing them as a valuable tool for comprehending community members across different contexts. Further investigation may reveal the need to refine or expand upon these themes in order to develop a more widely applicable framework for understanding the cognitive structure of engaged community members at an individual level.

Thirdly, another area that offers researchers with opportunities is the impact of membership duration on both participation levels and the associated benefits. New members typically have weaker connections to the community and their relationships with fellow members are not as developed compared to more experienced members. As new members engage with the community over time, they gradually cultivate interpersonal relationships and networks. However, it is likely that the perceived value of the community differs significantly between new members and long-standing members. New members may initially seek instrumental or information benefits from their engagement; while more experienced members may place greater value on maintaining friendships and reinforcing existing bonds within the community. Exploring the variations in value derived from participation based on the length of membership would shed light on this dynamic and provide valuable insights for community management and member engagement strategies.

Lastly, further research is warranted to examine the influence of demographic factors on engagement levels and the resulting consequences of engagement. Similar to the exploration of membership duration, it is also important to understand how certain demographic variables such as age, gender, and education may affect the relationship between community engagement and the values that are fulfilled through this engagement.

Both the academic and practitioner communities would benefit from conducting a follow-up study of this community, particularly if there have been changes in the community structure or processes. This subsequent investigation would serve as a baseline for comparison, allowing for an examination of how any alterations have affected the members and their satisfaction

within the community. Since the initial study focused on the community in its current state, any modifications to that state are likely to influence member perceptions and value orientations.

6.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has summarised and explained the key insights extracted from the study. It has re-examined the research questions that have driven this digital investigation, highlighted contributions made to the themes, and identified particular contributions made to the fields of theory, method, and practice. In its conclusion, it has listed the limitations and presented suggestions accordingly for a future research agenda.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO SAMPLE OF INSIDERS

£20 Amazon Voucher Give Away

Research Opportunity!

Are you an active fitness community member?

If yes, your knowledge on its community is valuable as part of understanding customer engagement in online brand communities.

I am currently recruiting interview participants who are actively using MyFitnessPal/Keep community (UK/China citizens needed). The interview will last for approximately an hour and you will receive an Amazon gift voucher worth £30 for your participation. The virtual interview involves conversing naturally as so what you normally do while engaging in the community, why you engage in online fitness community and how you are satisfied with it.

This project has been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee and given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. All data collected will be handled securely and presented in my thesis anonymously.

To emphasise, no additional use aside from the purpose of this research will be used.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please email Siyuan Yang, University of Reading, Henley Business School

s.yang3@pgr.reading.acuk

I look forward to hearing from you!

APPENDIX B

LADDER PER THEME

Theme Sharing

Number	Community	Participant	Attribute	Consequence	Value
1	**Keep**	**R1**	Take a record	/	Sense of accomplishment
2	**Keep**	**R1**	Support	Recognition	Sense of community
3	**Keep**	**R1**	Shared experience	Admiring	Self-satisfaction
4	**Keep**	**R1**	Nature of content	Reassurance	Influence others
5	**Keep**	**R1**	Diversity	Fun	Inspirational
6	**Keep**	**R1**	Comprehensive	Effort saving	Consistency
7	**Keep**	**R2**	Closed-off	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
8	**Keep**	**R2**	Large user base	I am not alone	Motivating
9	**Keep**	**R2**	Support	/	Sense of achievement
10	**Keep**	**R3**	Closed-off	Interaction	Inclusive
11	**Keep**	**R3**	Challenge	Rewarding	/
12	**Keep**	**R3**	Take a record	/	Sense of accomplishment
13	**Keep**	**R3**	Challenge	Influence others (V)	Make life meaningful
14	**Keep**	**R3**	Encouraging	Recognition	Sharing
15	**Keep**	**R3**	Nature of content	Joy	Influence others
16	**Keep**	**R3**	Support	Relatable	Sharing
17	**Keep**	**R3**	Encouraging	I am not alone	Sense of community
18	**Keep**	**R4**	Mutual interest	Learning	Motivating
19	**Keep**	**R4**	Closed-off	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
20	**Keep**	**R4**	Closed-off	Make friends	Sharing
21	**Keep**	**R4**	Anonymous	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
22	**Keep**	**R4**	Mutual interest	Understanding	Recognition
23	**Keep**	**R4**	Support	Joy	Happiness
24	**Keep**	**R4**	Support	Motivation	Recognition
25	**Keep**	**R5**	Live class	Interaction	Entertaining
26	**Keep**	**R5**	Live class	I am not alone	Inclusive
27	**Keep**	**R5**	Real	Motivation	/
28	**Keep**	**R5**	Shared experience	Attention	Recognition
29	**Keep**	**R5**	Shared experience	Learning	Self-improvement
30	**Keep**	**R5**	Diversity	Connection	Motivating
31	**Keep**	**R6**	Diversity	Interaction	Sharing

32	**Keep**	**R6**	Challenge	Rewarding	Motivating
33	**Keep**	**R6**	Anonymous	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
34	**Keep**	**R6**	Encouraging	Joy	/
35	**Keep**	**R7**	Take a record	Recognition	/
36	**Keep**	**R7**	Mutual interest	Supervise	Motivating
37	**Keep**	**R7**	Nature of content	Satisfy curiosity	Motivating
38	**Keep**	**R7**	Take a record	/	Sense of accomplishment
39	**Keep**	**R7**	Large user base	I am not alone	Inclusive
40	**Keep**	**R7**	Challenge	Rewarding	Sense of accomplishment
41	**Keep**	**R7**	Nature of content	Achievable	Self-improvement
42	**Keep**	**R7**	Mutual interest	Understanding	Recognition
43	**Keep**	**R8**	Real	Relatable	Sharing
44	**Keep**	**R8**	Nature of content	Admiring	Motivating
45	**Keep**	**R8**	Encouraging	Connection	Sharing
46	**Keep**	**R8**	Closed-off	Relatable	Bonding
47	**Keep**	**R9**	Shared experience	Admiring	Self-satisfaction
48	**Keep**	**R9**	Identity presence	Recognition	Professionalism
49	**Keep**	**R9**	Mutual interest	Supervise	Motivating
50	**Keep**	**R9**	Encouraging	I am not alone	Motivating
51	**Keep**	**R10**	Closed-off	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
52	**Keep**	**R10**	Take a record	Remark progress	Sense of accomplishment
53	**Keep**	**R10**	Support	Attention	Self-satisfaction
54	**Keep**	**R11**	Support	Attention	Self-satisfaction
55	**Keep**	**R11**	Nature of content	Joy	Influence others
56	**Keep**	**R11**	Take a record	Have a healthy life	Self-improvement
57	**Keep**	**R11**	Mutual interest	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
58	**Keep**	**R12**	Free course	Effort saving	Motivating
59	**Keep**	**R12**	Shared experience	Motivation	Self-satisfaction
60	**Keep**	**R12**	Professional	Helpful	Self-improvement
61	**Keep**	**R13**	Mutual interest	Interaction	Recognition
62	**Keep**	**R13**	Anonymous	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
63	**Keep**	**R13**	Diversity	Learning	Self-improvement
64	**Keep**	**R13**	Clear rationale	Effort saving	Self-improvement
65	**Keep**	**R13**	Support	Joy	Recognition

66	**Keep**	**R14**	Live class	Supervise	Entertaining
68	**Keep**	**R14**	Encouraging	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
69	**Keep**	**R14**	Nature of content	Satisfy curiosity	Motivating
70	**Keep**	**R15**	Diversity	Interaction	Sharing
71	**Keep**	**R15**	Challenge	Rewarding	Motivating
72	**Keep**	**R16**	Free courses	Achieve goal	Self-satisfaction
73	**Keep**	**R16**	Take a record	Connection	Professionalism
74	**Keep**	**R16**	Support	Joy	Sense of accomplishment
75	**Keep**	**R17**	Professional	Educating	Self-improvement
76	**Keep**	**R17**	Closed-off	Fun	Entertaining
77	**Keep**	**R18**	Personal interests	Attention	/
78	**Keep**	**R18**	Nature of content	Joy	Influence others
79	**Keep**	**R18**	Shared experience	/	Influence others
80	**Keep**	**R18**	Mutual interest	I am not alone	Bonding
81	**Keep**	**R18**	Closed-off	Understanding	Recognition
82	**Keep**	**R19**	Anonymous	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
83	**Keep**	**R19**	Encouraging	Joy	Sharing
84	**Keep**	**R20**	Professional	Helping	Self-improvement
85	**Keep**	**R20**	Nature of content	Admiring	Motivating
86	**MFP**	**R1**	Shared experience	Attention	Recognition
87	**MFP**	**R1**	Nature of content	Satisfaction	Bonding
88	**MFP**	**R1**	Closed-off	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
89	**MFP**	**R1**	Shared experience	Attention	Motivating
90	**MFP**	**R1**	Shared experience	New idea	Inspirational
91	**MFP**	**R1**	Shared experience	Learning	Knowledgeable
92	**MFP**	**R2**	Professional	Effort saving	Make life easier
93	**MFP**	**R2**	Ease-to-use	Effort saving	Make life easier
94	**MFP**	**R3**	Nature of content	New idea	Goal-achieving
95	**MFP**	**R3**	In the same boat	/	Goal-achieving
96	**MFP**	**R3**	Support	Motivation	Inclusive
97	**MFP**	**R3**	Ease-to-use	Effort saving	Live my value
98	**MFP**	**R3**	Support	New idea	Inspirational
99	**MFP**	**R4**	In the same boat	Understanding	Inclusive
100	**MFP**	**R4**	Shared experience	Learning	Inclusive

101	**MFP**	**R4**	Diversity	Meet more people	Inclusive
102	**MFP**	**R4**	Nature of content	More opinions	Self-satisfaction
103	**MFP**	**R5**	Closed-off	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
104	**MFP**	**R5**	Focused topics	Meet more people	/
105	**MFP**	**R5**	Shared experience	Motivation	Goal-achieving
106	**MFP**	**R5**	Nature of content	Helpful	Goal-achieving
107	**MFP**	**R5**	Open access	New idea	Self-improvement
108	**MFP**	**R5**	In the same boat	Understanding	Sharing
109	**MFP**	**R5**	Open access	Learning	Inspirational
110	**MFP**	**R6**	In the same boat	I am not alone	Inclusive
111	**MFP**	**R6**	Support	/	Make life easier
112	**MFP**	**R6**	Shared experience	Recognition	Self-satisfaction
113	**MFP**	**R7**	Shared experience	Remark progress	Live my value
114	**MFP**	**R7**	Nature of content	Reassurance	Bonding
115	**MFP**	**R7**	Focused topics	Effort saving	Make life easier
116	**MFP**	**R8**	Focused topics	New idea	Inspirational
117	**MFP**	**R8**	Support	Encouraging	Sense of community
118	**MFP**	**R8**	Nature of content	Motivation	/
119	**MFP**	**R8**	Ease-to-use	Effort saving	Inclusive
120	**MFP**	**R8**	Mutual interest	Understanding	Motivating
121	**MFP**	**R8**	Nature of content	Recognition	Motivating
122	**MFP**	**R9**	Anonymous	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
123	**MFP**	**R9**	Focused topics	Satisfy curiosity	Inspirational
124	**MFP**	**R9**	Diversity	Learning	Knowledgeable
125	**MFP**	**R9**	Diversity	More opinions	Knowledgeable
126	**MFP**	**R10**	Nature of content	Motivation	Inspirational
127	**MFP**	**R10**	Focused topic	Helpful	Goal-achieving
128	**MFP**	**R10**	Nature of content	Fun	Self-satisfaction
129	**MFP**	**R10**	Mutual interest	Encouragement	Sense of belonging
130	**MFP**	**R11**	Informative	Helpful	Goal-achieving
131	**MFP**	**R11**	Shared experience	Encouragement	Goal-achieving
132	**MFP**	**R12**	Nature of content	New idea	Make life easier
133	**MFP**	**R12**	Nature of content	New idea	Goal-achieving
134	**MFP**	**R12**	Nature of content	Learning	Self-improvement

135	**MFP**	**R13**	In the same boat	Understanding	Inclusive
136	**MFP**	**R13**	Shared experience	Reassurance	Sense of community
137	**MFP**	**R13**	Open access	Honest with yourself	Accountable
138	**MFP**	**R13**	Open access	Interaction	/
139	**MFP**	**R13**	Closed-off	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
140	**MFP**	**R14**	Nature of content	New idea	Goal-achieving
141	**MFP**	**R14**	Shared experience	Educating	Self-satisfaction
142	**MFP**	**R14**	Shared experience	Helpful	Inclusive
143	**MFP**	**R14**	Nature of content	Understanding	Make life easier
144	**MFP**	**R14**	In the same boat	Understanding	Goal-achieving
145	**MFP**	**R15**	Shared experience	Encouragement	Confidence
146	**MFP**	**R15**	Support	Encouragement	Sense of community
147	**MFP**	**R16**	Nature of content	Learning	Knowledgeable
148	**MFP**	**R16**	In the same boat	Recognition	Self-satisfaction
149	**MFP**	**R17**	Support	Motivation	Sense of community
150	**MFP**	**R17**	Mutual interest	Understanding	Bonding
151	**MFP**	**R17**	In the same boat	I am not alone	Inclusive
152	**MFP**	**R18**	Nature of content	Meet more people	Knowledgeable
153	**MFP**	**R18**	Nature of content	Feel comfortable to share	Recognition
154	**MFP**	**R19**	Shared experience	New idea	Motivating
155	**MFP**	**R20**	In the same boat	New idea	Goal-achieving

Theme Socialising

Number	Community	Respondent	Attribute	Consequence	Value
1	**Keep**	**R1**	Like minded	Supervise	/
2	**Keep**	**R1**	Support	Happy	Sharing
3	**Keep**	**R1**	Shared experience	Admiring	Happiness
4	**Keep**	**R2**	Secure	Feel safe	Self-protection
5	**Keep**	**R2**	Secure	Feel safe	Reputation
6	**Keep**	**R2**	Diversity	Meet more people	Inspirational
7	**Keep**	**R2**	Interaction	I am not alone	Motivating
8	**Keep**	**R4**	Nature of content	Understanding	Sharing
9	**Keep**	**R4**	In the same boat	I am not alone	Bonding
10	**Keep**	**R4**	Mutual interest	Motivation	Motivating
11	**Keep**	**R4**	Closed-off	Abuse	Sharing
12	**Keep**	**R4**	Closed-off	Make friends	Sharing
13	**Keep**	**R5**	Relevance	Chatting	Keep me positive
14	**Keep**	**R5**	Real	Trust	Friendship
15	**Keep**	**R5**	Diversity	Make friends	Friendship
16	**Keep**	**R5**	Live class	Chat	Encouraging
17	**Keep**	**R5**	Shared routine	Make friends	Friendship
18	**Keep**	**R5**	Diversity	I am not alone	Keep me positive
19	**Keep**	**R5**	Shared experience	Meet more people	Inclusive
20	**Keep**	**R5**	Shared experience	Attention	Recognition
21	**Keep**	**R6**	Support	/	Influence others
22	**Keep**	**R6**	In the same boat	I am not alone	Happiness
23	**Keep**	**R6**	Active level	Comparison	/
24	**Keep**	**R6**	Shared routine	I am not alone	Happiness
25	**Keep**	**R7**	Nature of content	Learning	Inspirational
26	**Keep**	**R7**	Support	Acknowledgement	Happiness
27	**Keep**	**R7**	Nature of content	Entertaining	Happiness
28	**Keep**	**R7**	Nature of content	Helpful	Knowledgeable
29	**Keep**	**R7**	Nature of content	Understanding	/
30	**Keep**	**R7**	Mutual interest	Chatting	Friendship
31	**Keep**	**R7**	Same location	Mingling	Make it fun

32	**Keep**	**R7**	Mutual interest	Win respect	Enjoyable
33	**Keep**	**R8**	Mutual interest	Mingling	Friendship
34	**Keep**	**R8**	Same location	Mingling	Bonding
35	**Keep**	**R9**	Encouraging	I am not alone	Motivating
36	**Keep**	**R9**	Diversity	Meet more people	Friendship
37	**Keep**	**R9**	Nature of content	More posts	/
38	**Keep**	**R9**	Interaction	Attention	Confidence
39	**Keep**	**R9**	Interaction	Acknowledgement	Sense of achievement
40	**Keep**	**R9**	Shared experience	Attention	Happiness
41	**Keep**	**R9**	Shared experience	Receiving support	Sharing
42	**Keep**	**R10**	Support	Attention	Happiness
43	**Keep**	**R10**	Nature of content	Understanding	Bonding
44	**Keep**	**R10**	Support	Acknowledgement	Recognition
45	**Keep**	**R10**	Clique	Mingling	Friendship
46	**Keep**	**R10**	Clique	Meet more people	Bonding
47	**Keep**	**R11**	Interaction	Make friends	Friendship
48	**Keep**	**R11**	Clique	Chatting	Bonding
49	**Keep**	**R11**	Closed-off	Make friends	Friendship
50	**Keep**	**R11**	Interaction	/	Confidence
51	**Keep**	**R11**	Support	Helping	Knowledgeable
52	**Keep**	**R11**	Personal	Trust	Friendship
53	**Keep**	**R11**	In the same boat	Understanding	Helpful
54	**Keep**	**R11**	Support	Joy	Happiness
55	**Keep**	**R12**	Knowledge	Learning	Confidence
56	**Keep**	**R12**	Nature of content	Learning	/
57	**Keep**	**R12**	Real	Acknowledgement	Recognition
58	**Keep**	**R12**	Clique	Mingling	Friendship
59	**Keep**	**R12**	Mutual interest	Understanding	Recognition
60	**Keep**	**R12**	Real	Helping	Self-improvement
61	**Keep**	**R12**	Mutual interest	Understanding	Sharing
62	**Keep**	**R12**	Diversity	Meet more people	Expand horizons
63	**Keep**	**R12**	Interaction	Improve performance	Confidence
64	**Keep**	**R13**	Diversity	Meet more people	Bonding
65	**Keep**	**R13**	Nature of content	Encouragement	/

66	**Keep**	**R13**	Interaction	Receiving support	Motivating
67	**Keep**	**R13**	Clique	Mingling	Friendship
68	**Keep**	**R13**	In the same boat	Improve performance	Bonding
69	**Keep**	**R13**	Mutual interest	Learning	Self-improvement
70	**Keep**	**R14**	Nature of interaction	Caring	/
71	**Keep**	**R14**	In the same boat	Understanding	Bonding
72	**Keep**	**R14**	Closed-off	Win respect	Confidence
73	**Keep**	**R14**	Like-minded	I am not alone	Happiness
74	**Keep**	**R14**	Like-minded	Make friends	Friendship
75	**Keep**	**R15**	Support	/	Influence others
76	**Keep**	**R15**	In the same boat	I am not alone	Happiness
77	**Keep**	**R15**	Active level	Comparison	Influence others
78	**Keep**	**R15**	Shared routine	I am not alone	Happiness
79	**Keep**	**R16**	Inspiring	Acknowledgement	Motivating
80	**Keep**	**R17**	Relevance	Helping	Sharing
81	**Keep**	**R17**	Traceable	Abuse	/
82	**Keep**	**R17**	Diversity	More posts	Inspirational
83	**Keep**	**R17**	Mutual interest	Make friends	Friendship
84	**Keep**	**R17**	Competition	Connection	Friendship
85	**Keep**	**R18**	Like-minded	Receiving support	Motivating
86	**Keep**	**R18**	Closed-off	Meet more people	Friendship
87	**MFP**	**R1**	Like-minded	Understanding	Bonding
88	**MFP**	**R1**	Knowledge	Helping	Bonding
89	**MFP**	**R1**	Support	Assurance	Sense of community
90	**MFP**	**R1**	Accessible	Flexibility	Bonding
91	**MFP**	**R1**	Closed-off	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing
92	**MFP**	**R1**	Mutual interest	Make friends	Bonding
93	**MFP**	**R1**	Relatable	Understanding	Confidence
94	**MFP**	**R1**	Diversity	Learning	Bonding
95	**MFP**	**R2**	Friendly	Motivation	Friendship
96	**MFP**	**R2**	In the same boat	I am not alone	Sense of belonging
97	**MFP**	**R2**	Friendly	Feel comfortable to share	Bonding
98	**MFP**	**R3**	Support	New idea	Motivating
99	**MFP**	**R3**	Anonymous	Feel comfortable to share	Sharing

100	MFP	R3	Encouraging	Feel comfortable to share	Recognition
101	MFP	R4	Like-minded	Flexibility	Confidence
102	MFP	R4	Knowledge	Helping	Confidence
103	MFP	R4	Encouraging	Way to give back	Benevolence
104	MFP	R4	Nature of content	Assurance	Recognition
105	MFP	R5	Like-minded	Feel comfortable to share	Motivating
106	MFP	R5	Mutual interest	Make friends	Friendship
107	MFP	R6	Like-minded	I am not alone	Sense of belonging
108	MFP	R6	Shared experience	Acknowledgement	Recognition
109	MFP	R6	Encouraging	Way to give back	Sense of community
110	MFP	R6	Encouraging	Receiving support	Motivating
111	MFP	R6	Relatable	I am not alone	Sense of community
112	MFP	R6	In the same boat	Assurance	Confidence
113	MFP	R7	In the same boat	Feel inclusive	Sense of belonging
114	MFP	R7	Knowledge	Learning	Recognition
115	MFP	R7	Nature of interaction	Feel inclusive	Bonding
116	MFP	R7	Diversity	Meet more people	Sense of belonging
117	MFP	R8	Like-minded	Connection	Friendship
118	MFP	R8	Nature of content	Acknowledgement	Motivating
119	MFP	R8	Mutual interest	Understanding	Motivating
120	MFP	R9	Encouraging	Learning	Knowledgeable
121	MFP	R9	Closed-off	Win respect	Sense of community
122	MFP	R9	Moderator	Way to give back	Altruism
123	MFP	R9	Diversity	Meet more people	Self-esteem
124	MFP	R9	Diversity	Learning	Knowledgeable
125	MFP	R10	In the same boat	Helping	Altruism
126	MFP	R11	Friendly	Helping	Altruism
127	MFP	R12	Knowledge	Motivation	Goal-achieving
128	MFP	R12	In the same boat	Understanding	Sense of belonging
129	MFP	R13	Same location	Mingling	Friendship
130	MFP	R13	Supportive	Motivation	Goal-achieving
131	MFP	R14	Friendly	I am not alone	Accountable
132	MFP	R14	Interaction	Way to give back	Sense of community
133	MFP	R15	In the same boat	Understanding	Bonding

134	MFP	R15	Shared experience	Helping	Self-satisfaction
135	MFP	R15	Shared experience	Helping	Sense of belonging
136	MFP	R16	Diversity	Meet more people	Inspirational
137	MFP	R16	In the same boat	Understanding	Goal-achieving
138	MFP	R16	Support	Motivation	Sense of community
139	MFP	R17	Support	Assurance	Sense of community
140	MFP	R17	Interaction	Assurance	Sense of community
141	MFP	R18	Like-minded	Understanding	Bonding
142	MFP	R18	Mutual interest	Assurance	Accountable
143	MFP	R18	In the same boat	Understanding	Empathetic
144	MFP	R19	In the same boat	I am not alone	Sense of belonging
145	MFP	R19	Realistic	Make friends	Friendship
146	MFP	R19	Friendly	Encouragement	Goal-achieving
147	MFP	R20	Support	Encouragement	Sense of community
148	MFP	R20	Support	Acknowledgement	Sense of community

Theme Helping others

Number	Community	Respondent	Attribute	Consequence	Value
1	Keep	R1	Positive content	Assurance	Influence others
2	Keep	R1	Shared experience	Acknowledgement	Self-satisfaction
3	Keep	R2	Knowledge	Helping	Self-identity (helpfulness)
4	Keep	R2	Active level	Make suggestion	Self-identity (helpfulness)
5	Keep	R3	Clique	Interaction	Problem-solving
6	Keep	R4	Knowledge	Helping	Self-satisfaction
7	Keep	R5	Relatable	Understanding	Sympathy
8	Keep	R6	Positive content	/	Influence others
9	Keep	R6	Relatable	Helping	Self-identity (helpfulness)
10	Keep	R7	Support	Educating	Sense of achievement
11	Keep	R7	Support	/	Sense of accomplishment
12	Keep	R7	Support	Educating	Sense of achievement
13	Keep	R8	Moderator	Way to give back	Recognition
14	Keep	R8	Clique	Helping	Sense of belonging
15	Keep	R9	Like-minded	Supervise	Motivating
16	Keep	R9	Shared experience	Acknowledging	Self-satisfaction
17	Keep	R10	Knowledge	Helping	Self-satisfaction
18	Keep	R11	Relatable	Helping	Self-identity (helpfulness)
19	Keep	R11	Knowledge	Helping	Self-identity (helpfulness)
20	Keep	R12	Shared experience	Motivation	Self-satisfaction
21	Keep	R12	Knowledge	Learning	Self-satisfaction
22	Keep	R12	Knowledge	Helping	Bonding
23	Keep	R12	Mutual interest	Encouragement	Self-improvement
24	Keep	R13	Mutual interest	Learning	Self-improvement
25	Keep	R13	Knowledge	Helping	Self-identity (helpfulness)
26	Keep	R14	Relatable	Understanding	Sympathy
27	Keep	R15	Support	Motivation	Sense of community
28	Keep	R16	Knowledge	Helping	Sense of achievement
29	Keep	R17	Shared experience	/	Influence others
30	Keep	R17	Knowledge	Helping	Self-satisfaction
31	Keep	R18	Helpful	Appreciation	Recognition

32	**Keep**	**R19**	Clique	Helping	Bonding
33	**Keep**	**R19**	Knowledge	Helping	Make life meaningful
34	**Keep**	**R20**	Helpful	Acknowledging	Self-satisfaction
35	**MFP**	**R1**	Knowledge	Helping	Bonding
36	**MFP**	**R1**	Support	Helping	Altruism
37	**MFP**	**R1**	Support	Assurance	Sense of community
38	**MFP**	**R2**	New idea	Learning	Knowledgeable
39	**MFP**	**R2**	Knowledge	Way to give back	Altruism
40	**MFP**	**R3**	Shared experience	Grateful	Motivating
41	**MFP**	**R3**	Knowledge	Educating	Self-identity (helpfulness)
42	**MFP**	**R4**	Knowledge	Helping	Altruism
43	**MFP**	**R4**	Support	Way to give back	Benevolence
44	**MFP**	**R5**	Helpful	Motivation	Goal-achieving
45	**MFP**	**R5**	Knowledge	Way to give back	Altruism
46	**MFP**	**R6**	Support	Way to give back	Benevolence
47	**MFP**	**R6**	Support	Way to give back	Sense of community
48	**MFP**	**R7**	Knowledge	Way to give back	Self-identity (helpfulness)
49	**MFP**	**R8**	Knowledge	Helping	Sense of belonging
50	**MFP**	**R11**	In the same boat	Encouragement	Self-identity (helpfulness)
51	**MFP**	**R12**	Knowledge	Helping	Self-identity (helpfulness)
52	**MFP**	**R13**	Knowledge	Helping	Sense of achievement
53	**MFP**	**R13**	Knowledge	Way to give back	Self-identity (helpfulness)
54	**MFP**	**R13**	In the same boat	Understanding	Bonding
55	**MFP**	**R14**	Mutual interest	Supporting	Accountable
56	**MFP**	**R14**	In the same boat	Understanding	Benevolence
57	**MFP**	**R15**	Support	Motivation	Sense of community
58	**MFP**	**R16**	Support	Motivation	Sense of community
59	**MFP**	**R17**	Support	Assurance	Sense of community
60	**MFP**	**R18**	Knowledge	Way to give back	Sense of community

Theme Self-advancement

Number	Community	Respondent	Attribute	Consequence	Value
1	**Keep**	**R1**	Tracking	/	Sense of achievement
2	**Keep**	**R1**	Professionalism	Educating	Knowledgeable
3	**Keep**	**R1**	Diversity	Make it interesting	Inspirational
4	**Keep**	**R2**	Summary	Visualise progress	Goal-achieving
5	**Keep**	**R2**	Diversity	Learning	Goal-achieving
6	**Keep**	**R2**	Large user base	Learning	Goal-achieving
7	**Keep**	**R3**	Free course	Educating	Goal-achieving
8	**Keep**	**R4**	Auto recommendation	New idea	/
9	**Keep**	**R4**	Tracking	Visualise progress	Goal-achieving
10	**Keep**	**R4**	Professionalism	Educating	Knowledgeable
11	**Keep**	**R4**	Tracking	Accomplishment	Bonding
12	**Keep**	**R5**	Shared experience	Attention	Recognition
13	**Keep**	**R5**	Shared experience	Learning	Sense of achievement
14	**Keep**	**R6**	Tracking	Visualise progress	Self-esteem
15	**Keep**	**R6**	Summary	Visualise progress	Make life easier
16	**Keep**	**R6**	Challenge	Visualise progress	Goal-achieving
17	**Keep**	**R7**	Free course	Educating	Knowledgeable
18	**Keep**	**R7**	Nature of content	Learning	Inspirational
19	**Keep**	**R7**	Nature of content	Helping	/
20	**Keep**	**R7**	Relatable	Understanding	Bonding
21	**Keep**	**R8**	Tracking	/	Sense of achievement
22	**Keep**	**R9**	Tracking	Visualise progress	Recognition
23	**Keep**	**R9**	Title	Attention	Professionalism
24	**Keep**	**R9**	Shared experience	Appreciation	Recognition
25	**Keep**	**R10**	Tracking	Visualise progress	Sense of achievement
26	**Keep**	**R10**	Informative	Helping	Goal-achieving
27	**Keep**	**R11**	Tracking	Visualise progress	Goal-achieving
28	**Keep**	**R11**	Shared experience	Attention	Self-satisfaction
29	**Keep**	**R12**	Free course	Effort saving	Make life easier
30	**Keep**	**R12**	Shared experience	New ideas	Inspirational
31	**Keep**	**R12**	Knowledge	Learning	Self-esteem

32	**Keep**	**R12**	Mutual interest	Understanding	Self-esteem
33	**Keep**	**R12**	Diversity	Make it interesting	Inspirational
34	**Keep**	**R13**	Diversity	Learning	Be a better self
35	**Keep**	**R13**	Professionalism	Effort saving	Goal-achieving
36	**Keep**	**R13**	Diversity	Make it interesting	Hedonic
37	**Keep**	**R14**	Informative	Educating	/
38	**Keep**	**R15**	Shared experience	Learning	Self-improvement
39	**Keep**	**R15**	Professionalism	Effort saving	Make life easier
40	**Keep**	**R15**	Diversity	New ideas	Inspirational
41	**Keep**	**R16**	Free course	Learning	Self-esteem
42	**Keep**	**R17**	Tracking	Visualise progress	Goal-achieving
43	**Keep**	**R19**	Free course	Educating	Knowledgeable
44	**Keep**	**R20**	Relatable	Achievable	Goal-achieving
45	**Keep**	**R20**	Tracking	Visualise progress	Goal-achieving
46	**MFP**	**R1**	In the same boat	Learning	Knowledgeable
47	**MFP**	**R1**	Shared experience	New idea	Inspirational
48	**MFP**	**R1**	Shared experience	Learning	/
49	**MFP**	**R1**	Reliable	Reassuring	Practicality
50	**MFP**	**R1**	Tracking	Educating	Knowledgeable
51	**MFP**	**R2**	Informative	Learning	Change life
52	**MFP**	**R2**	Reliable	Intellectual	Goal-achieving
53	**MFP**	**R2**	Diversity	Learning	Knowledgeable
54	**MFP**	**R2**	Relevance	Helping	Practicality
55	**MFP**	**R3**	Relevance	New idea	Goal-achieving
56	**MFP**	**R3**	Tracking	Visualise progress	/
57	**MFP**	**R3**	In the same boat	Learning	Goal-achieving
58	**MFP**	**R3**	In the same boat	New idea	Inspirational
59	**MFP**	**R4**	Shared experience	Review changes	Live my value
60	**MFP**	**R4**	Nature of content	Reassuring	Recognition
61	**MFP**	**R5**	Nature of content	Helping	Goal-achieving
62	**MFP**	**R5**	Open diary	New idea	Challenging
63	**MFP**	**R5**	Tracking	New idea	Goal-achieving
64	**MFP**	**R5**	Challenge	Competition	Motivating
65	**MFP**	**R5**	Open diary	Helping	Inspirational

66	MFP	R6	Challenge	Visualise progress	Self-satisfaction
67	MFP	R6	Shared experience	Helping	Goal-achieving
68	MFP	R6	In the same boat	Reassuring	Self-satisfaction
69	MFP	R7	Tracking	Monitor intake	Accountable
70	MFP	R7	Shared experience	Learning	Recognition
71	MFP	R7	Nature of content	New idea	Inspirational
72	MFP	R7	Challenge	Reassuring	Accountable
73	MFP	R7	Open diary	Monitor intake	Sense of achievement
74	MFP	R8	Tracking	Monitor intake	Accountable
75	MFP	R8	Diversity	New idea	Inspirational
76	MFP	R8	Diversity	Learning	Goal-achieving
77	MFP	R9	Informative	/	Knowledgeable
78	MFP	R9	Informative	Helping	Goal-achieving
79	MFP	R10	Nature of content	Visualise progress	Goal-achieving
80	MFP	R10	Nature of content	New idea	Goal-achieving
81	MFP	R10	Nature of content	Effort saving	Make life easier
82	MFP	R11	Relevance	Learning	Challenging
83	MFP	R11	Nature of content	Learning	Knowledgeable
84	MFP	R12	Tracking	Monitor intake	Knowledgeable
85	MFP	R12	Shared experience	Learning	Knowledgeable
86	MFP	R13	In the same boat	Educating	Knowledgeable
87	MFP	R13	In the same boat	Educating	Stay informed
88	MFP	R13	Shared experience	Educating	Stay informed
89	MFP	R14	Tracking	Monitor intake	Stay informed
90	MFP	R14	Challenge	Educating	Goal-achieving
91	MFP	R14	Relevance	New idea	Goal-achieving
92	MFP	R14	Informative	Learning	Motivating
93	MFP	R15	Mutual interest	Reassuring	Motivating
94	MFP	R15	Tracking	Monitor intake	Self-improvement
95	MFP	R16	Supportive	Helping	Goal-achieving
96	MFP	R16	Diversity	New idea	Knowledgeable
97	MFP	R17	Diversity	Inspiration	Knowledgeable
98	MFP	R17	Nature of content	Helping	Goal-achieving
99	MFP	R19	Diversity	New idea	Inspirational

100	MFP	R19	Shared experience	New idea	Motivating
101	MFP	R20	Diversity	Learning	Live my value
102	MFP	R20	Nature of content	Achievable	Knowledgeable
103	MFP	R20	Nature of content	Educating	Knowledgeable

APPENDIX C

PRIMARY CODES FOR ATTRIBUTES

No.	Construct	No.	Construct
A1	Accessible	A33	Meaningful
A2	Anonymous	A34	Mobile
A3	Authenticity	A35	Mutual interest
A4	Challenge	A36	Nature of content
A5	Clear rationale	A37	Nature of interaction
A6	Clique	A38	Not judgemental
A7	Closed-off	A39	Open diary
A8	Creative	A40	Personal interest
A9	Customised	A41	Portable
A10	Delight	A42	Positivity
A11	Diversity	A43	Privilege
A12	Ease to use	A44	Problem-solving
A13	Easy to navigate	A45	Professionalism
A14	Encouraging	A46	Ranking
A15	Entertaining	A47	Real
A16	Exclusive	A48	Record
A17	Fitness-related	A49	Relatable
A18	Focused topics	A50	Reliable
A19	Free course	A51	Reward
A20	Friendly	A52	Secure
A21	In the same boat	A53	Shared experience
A22	Informative	A54	Shared routine
A23	Interaction	A55	Simple process
A24	Interactivity	A56	Summary
A25	Isolated	A57	Support
A26	Knowledge	A58	Supportive
A27	Life-changing	A59	Tracking
A28	Like-minded	A60	Transformational
A29	Likes		
A30	Live class		
A31	Livestreaming		
A32	Logging		

APPENDIX D

PRIMARY CODES FOR CONSEQUENCES

No.	Construct	No.	Construct
C1	Acknowledgement	C33	Reassuring
C2	Admiring	C34	Receiving support
C3	Assurance	C35	Relatable
C4	Attention	C36	Relationship building
C5	Chats	C37	Rewarding
C6	Chatting	C38	Satisfy curiosity
C7	Communication	C39	Supervise
C8	Educating	C40	Supporting
C9	Effort saving	C41	Understanding
C10	Encouragement	C42	Visualise progress
C11	Feel comfortable to share	C43	Way to give back
C12	Feel happy		
C13	Feel safe		
C14	Give me clear guidance		
C15	Helpful		
C16	Helping		
C17	I am not alone		
C18	Inspiration		
C19	Intellectual		
C20	Interaction		
C21	Joy		
C22	Keep a habit		
C23	Learning		
C24	Make friends		
C25	Make it interesting		
C26	Make people happy		
C27	Meet more people		
C28	Mingling		
C29	Monitor intake		
C30	Motivation		
C31	New idea		
C32	Reassuring		

APPENDIX E

PRIMARY COES FOR VALUES

No.	Construct
A1	Accountable
A2	Altruism
A3	Be a better self
A4	Benevolence
A5	Bonding
A6	Friendship
A7	Goal-achieving
A8	Happiness
A9	Helpful
A10	Inclusive
A11	Influence others
A12	Inspirational
A13	Be a positive person
A14	Knowledgeable
A15	Make life easier
A16	Motivating
A17	Practicality
A18	Recognition
A19	Self-esteem
A20	Self-identity (helpfulness)
A21	Self-improvement
A22	Self-satisfaction
A23	Sense of accomplishment
A24	Sense of achievement
A25	Sense of belonging
A26	Sense of community
A27	Sharing
A28	Stay informed

APPENDIX F

IMPLICATION MATRICES

THEME SHARING

Implication matrix – Sharing (Overall)

No.	Construct	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10	V11	V12	V13
A1	Encouraging		1/0	1/0		1/0										0/1			0/1						
A2	Nature of content	2/0	1/0	3/0	1/0		2/0	0/1	2/1		1/0	4/0	0/1		0/2		0/4			0/2		0/2		0/2	0/4
A3	Shared experience	2/0			1/0		4/0		2/0	3/0		2/0	0/2	0/1		0/1	1/0			0/1	0/5	0/1	0/2		0/1
A4	Closed-off		5/0												0/1								01/		
A5	Anonymous		4/1																						
A6	Mutual interests		1/0			1/0	1/0		0/1		4/0		0/3		0/2				0/1						
A7	Diversity						2/0		0/1				0/1						0/1			0/2	0/1		
A8	Professionalism				2/0			2/0												0/1				0/1	
A9	Support			2/0					4/0	2/0		1/0	0/1	0/1					0/1		0/3		0/1	1/0	
A10	Records												1/0					2/1		0/1					
A11	In the same boat		0/1			2/0					3/0	1/0							0/1				0/3		1/2
C1	Admiring								1/0												2/0				
C2	Feel comfortable to share								1/0				1/0						14/0						
C3	Joy												1/0				3/0				1/0				
C4	Helpful														1/0	1/0							1/0		2/0
C5	I am not alone								1/0					1/0									3/0		
C6	Learning																			2/0		3/0	1/0		
C7	Effort saving										1/0												1/0	4/0	
C8	Motivation												1/0		2/0						1/0		1/0		1/0
C9	Attention												2/0									2/0			
C10	Understanding												2/0		1/0				0/1				1/0	1/0	1/10
C11	New idea													3/0										0/1	4/0

Implication matrix – Sharing (MFP)

		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8
A1	Shared experience	1/2		2/0		2/0			1/0		0/1			0/1	0/1	0/2		0/1
A2	Support	3/1									0/4					0/1	1/0	
A3	Nature of content	2/0		1/0	0/1	2/0			1/0	1/0		0/2		0/2			0/2	0/2
A4	Closed-off		3/0										0/3					
A5	Diversity			1/0												0/1		0/2
A6	Relevancy					2/0								0/2				
A7	In the same boat		0/1			1/0	2/0	2/0		1/0				0/1	1/1	1/3		
A8	East to use				2/0											0/1		
A9	Nature of interaction	0/1	1/0															
A10	Mutual interest	0/1					1/0			1/0		0/1						
A11	Focused topics				1/0	1/0			1/0					0/1	0/1		0/1	
A12	Accessible			1/0		1/0									0/1			
C1	Motivation					1/0	1/0					2/0		1/0		1/0		
C2	Feel more comfortable to share						1/0						5/0					
C3	Learning														1/0	1/0		3/0
C4	Effort saving					1/0										1/0	4/0	
C5	New idea													2/1	2/0		0/1	
C6	Relatable												0/1	1/0				
C7	I am not alone															2/0		
C8	Helpful													2/0		1/0		
C9	Understanding											1/0				1/0	1/0	

Implication matrix – Sharing (KEEP)

No.	Construct	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10
A1	Encouraging				1/0	1/0												0/1					
A2	Nature of content		2/0			3/0				0/1			2/0		0/4				0/1				
A3	Shared experience		2/0						2/0	1/0	1/0			0/1	1/0				0/1	0/3			0/1
A4	Closed-off			1/0	3/0													0/4					
A5	Anonymous				3/1													0/4					
A6	Challenge						3/0			0/1					1/0	0/1							
A7	Mutual interest	2/0		1/0	1/0				1/0	0/1		2/0		0/3				0/1					
A8	Live class	1/0		2/0																			0/1
A9	Professionalism							2/0											0/1				
A10	Support					2/0				1/0	2/0			0/1		1/1		0/1				0/3	
A11	Records													1/0		1/0	2/1	0/1					
C1	Supervise																				1/0		
C2	Admiring																			2/0	1/0		
C3	Interaction													1/0				1/0					1/1
C4	Feel comfortable to share																	9/0					
C5	Joy													1/0	3/0	1/0						1/0	
C6	Rewarding															1/0							
C7	Helpful																						
C8	Learning																		1/0		1/0		
C9	Motivation													1/0						1/0			
C10	Understanding													2/0									
C11	Relatable																	1/0					
C12	Satisfy curiosity																					2/0	

APPENDIX G

IMPLICATION MATRICES

THEME SOCIALISING

Implication matrix – Socialising (Overall)

		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8
A1	Mutual interest	3/0			3/0		1/0		1/0		1/0			0/1	0/3			1/1			
A2	Nature of content	3/0		0/1			2/0	1/0			1/0			0/1		0/1	0/1	0/1			
A3	In the same boat	6/0	1/0	3/1				1/0			1/0			0/4						0/1	0/4
A4	Supportive			1/0			1/0	1/0		1/0			2/0						0/2	0/2	
A5	Diversity			1/0	1/0		2/1			7/0				0/2	0/1	0/3					0/1
A6	Interaction		1/0	1/0	1/0	1/0					1/0		1/0		0/1			1/1	0/2		
A7	Support		1/0			2/0		1/0			2/0	1/0					0/1	0/1	0/5	0/3	
A8	Clique								3/0	1/0				0/2	0/3						
A9	Closed-off				2/0					1/0					0/1		0/3		0/1		
A10	Real				1/0			1/0							0/1						
A11	Knowledge						2/0	2/0				1/0		0/1							
A12	Like-minded	2/0		2/0										0/2	1/1			1/1		0/1	0/1
A13	Shared experience		2/0					2/0		1/0							0/1			0/3	0/1
A14	Friendly			1/0				1/0				1/0		0/1	0/1						
C1	Understanding													4/1			1/0	1/0			1/0
C2	Attention													0/1						2/0	
C3	I am not alone													2/0				2/0	1/0	2/0	3/0
C4	Make friends													1/0	6/0		1/0				
C5	Acknowledgement																	1/0		1/0	
C6	Learning													1/0		2/0					
C7	Helping													1/0			1/0			1/0	1/0
C8	Mingling													1/0	5/0						
C9	Meet more people													1/1	1/0	1/1			1/0		1/0
C10	Assurance																		3/0		
C11	Motivation														1/0				1/0		
C12	Way to give back																			2/0	

Implication matrix – Socialising (MFP)

		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10	V11
A1	Like minded				1/0		2/0		1/0					0/2			0/1		0/1	0/1	0/1			
A2	Knowledge	1/0		1/0				1/0						0/1				0/1				0/1		
A3	Support		2/0	1/0							1/0		1/0									0/1		
A4	Closed-off				1/0										0/1	0/1								
A5	Mutual interests		1/0			2/0	1/0							0/1					0/1		0/1			
A6	Relatable						1/0		1/0						0/1		0/1							
A7	Diversity							2/0			3/0			0/1						0/1		0/1	0/1	
A8	Friendly	1/0		1/0	1/0				1/0			1/0		0/1				0/1	0/1					
A9	In the same boat	1/0	1/0				4/0		2/0					0/1				0/1				0/1		
A10	Supportive	1/0		1/0	1/0			1/0		2/0	1/0	1/0			0/2			0/1			0/1	0/2		0/1
A11	Nature of content		1/0								1/0										0/1	0/1		
A12	Interaction		1/0							1/0				0/1	0/2									
A13	Shared experience	2/0									1/0									0/1		0/1		
C1	Helping													1/0								1/0		
C2	Assurance														3/0							1/0	1/0	
C3	Motivation														1/0			2/0	1/0					
C4	Feel comfortable to share													1/0		2/0					1/0	1/0		
C5	Make friends													1/0					2/0					
C6	Understanding													3/0			1/0	1/0		1/0	1/0			
C7	Learning													1/0								1/0		2/0
C8	I am not alone														1/0					3/0				
C9	Way to give back														2/0									
C10	Acknowledgement														1/0							1/0	1/0	
C11	Meet more people														1/0					1/0			1/0	
C12	Encouragement														1/0							1/0		

Implication matrix – Socialising (Keep)

		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12	C13	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10
A1	Mutual interests	2/0			1/0		1/0		1/0	1/0						0/2					0/1		1/0	
A2	Nature of content	3/0		0/1			2/0	1/0							0/1			0/1						
A3	In the same boat	2/0	1/0	1/1			0/1								0/3				0/1					0/1
A4	Diversity			1/0	1/0							4/0			0/1	0/1		0/2		0/1				
A5	Nature of interaction																							
A6	Interactivity		1/0	1/0	1/0	1/0										0/1	1/2						1/1	
A7	Support		1/0		2/0		1/0					2/0							0/1		0/1	0/1		0/3
A8	Clique								1/0	3/0		1/0			0/2	0/3								
A9	Closed-off				2/0							1/0				0/1						0/2		
A10	Secure										3/0													
A11	Shared routine				1/0											0/1								1/0
A12	Relevance							1/0	1/0											0/1		0/1		
A13	Real							1/0	0/1													0/1		
A14	Like-minded			1/0												1/0							1/0	0/1
A15	Shared experiences		2/0									1/0		2/0							0/1	0/1		0/2
C1	Understanding			1/0											1/1				1/0		1/0			
C2	Attention			1/0											0/1		1/0				1/0			2/0
C3	I am not alone														2/0					1/0		1/0	2/0	2/0
C4	Make friends															4/0								
C5	Acknowledgement																				1/0		1/0	1/0
C6	Learn something new											1/0					1/0	2/0						
C7	Helping																		1/0			1/0		
C8	Chatting														1/0					1/0				
C9	Mingling														1/0	4/0								
C10	Feel safe																							
C11	Meet more people														1/1	1/0		0/1						
C12	Feel happy																							
C13	Receiving support																							

APPLICATION H

IMPLICATION MATRICES

THEME HELPING OTHERS

Implication matrix – Helping others (Overall)

		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10	V11
A1	Support	2/0	1/0			3/0	3/0			1/0			1/2							0/1	0/6	
A2	Related		2/0						1/0							0/2						
A3	Shared experience		1/0				1/0	2/0				1/0					0/2	0/1				
A4	Clique		1/1		2/0										0/1				0/1			
A5	Helpful						1/0	1/0							0/1			0/1				
A6	Mutual interest			1/0							1/0											
A7	Positive content									1/0			2/1									
A8	Knowledge	1/0	16/0	1/0		3/3							0/2		0/1	0/8	0/1	0/2	0/2	0/3	0/1	
A9	In the same boat							2/0		1/0						0/1		0/1				
C1	Educating												1/1			1/0						
C2	Helping					4/0							2/0	1/0	2/0	6/2		1/1	3/0	1/2		
C3	Learning																1/0					
C4	Chats																		0/1			
C5	Way to give back		2/0											0/1		3/0				2/0	2/0	2/0
C6	Motivating																1/0				3/0	
C7	Acknowledgement																1/0	2/0				
C8	Understanding		1/0																1/0			1/0
C9	Assurance											1/0									1/0	
C10	Supporting		1/0													1/0						

Implication matrix – Helping others (MFP)

		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5
A1	Knowledge	7/0	0/1		3/3				0/1	0/3	0/1	0/4	
A2	Support	1/0	0/1	2/0	3/0	2/0				0/1	0/5		0/2
A3	In the same boat						1/0	2/0	0/1			0/1	0/1
C1	Helping		2/0		3/0				1/0	0/3		0/2	
C2	Make people happy									2/0			
C3	Assurance										2/0		
C4	Way to give back									2/0	2/0	3/0	2/0
C5	Motivating										2/0		
C6	Supporting											1/0	
C7	Understanding								1/0				1/0

Implication matrix – Helping others (Keep)

		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7
A1	Support	2/0						1/0			1/2					
A2	Relatable		2/0										0/2			
A3	Shared experience							1/0	2/0	1/0				0/2	0/1	
A4	Clique		1/1			2/0										0/1
A5	Helpful								1/0			0/1			0/1	
A6	Mutual interest			1/0	1/0											
A7	Positive content									2/1						
A8	Knowledge		9/0		1/0						0/1		0/4	0/1	0/2	0/1
C1	Educating										1/1					
C2	Helping					1/0	1/0				1/0	1/0	6/0		1/1	2/0
C3	Encouragement															
C4	Learning													1/0		
C5	Chats															0/1
C6	Way to give back											0/1				
C7	Motivating													1/0		
C8	Acknowledgement													1/0	2/0	

APPENDIX I

IMPLICATION MATRICES

THEME SELF-ADVANCEMENT

Implication matrix – Self-advancement (Overall)

		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10
A1	Tracking	1/0		1/0	8/0								5/0	0/2		0/1	0/1	2/1		0/1		0/2	0/1
A2	Professionalism	2/0							2/0					0/2								0/1	
A3	Diversity		3/0	4/0			4/0							0/2	1/5		0/1						
A4	Shared experience			3/0		2/0	5/0							0/1	0/2	0/2		0/1	0/1				
A5	Free courses	3/0					1/0	1/0						0/1			0/1			0/1	0/1		
A6	Nature of content			3/0	1/0		2/0	3/0	0/1			0/1		0/2	0/2		0/4				0/1		
A7	Relatable									1/0							0/1						
A8	Summary				2/0												0/1				0/1		
A9	Mutual interest									1/0		1/0								0/1			
A10	Informative	1/0					2/0	3/0						1/0			0/2						
A11	In the same boat	2/0		1/0			1/1					1/0		0/2			0/1		0/1				0/1
A12	Reliable										2/0	0/1					0/1						
A13	Relevance			2/0			1/0	1/0									0/2						
A14	Open diary			1/0				1/0					1/0		0/1			0/1					
A15	Challenge	1/0			2/0							1/0					0/2		0/1				
C1	Educating													5/0			2/0						2/0
C2	Make it interesting														2/0								
C3	New idea								1/0					1/0	6/0		4/0					0/1	
C4	Visualise progress															1/0	3/0	1/0	1/0	1/0	1/0		
C5	Attention															1/0			1/0				
C6	Learning													4/0	1/0		3/0	1/0		2/0			
C7	Helping														1/0		6/0						
C8	Effort saving																					3/0	
C9	Understanding																				1/0		
C10	Intellectual											1/0					1/0						
C11	Reassuring																		1/0				
C12	Monitor intake													1/0				1/0				2/0	1/0

Implication matrix – Self-advancement (MFP)

		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10
A1	In the same boat	1/1	1/0		1/0				2/0		0/2		0/1				0/1			0/1
A2	Shared experience	3/0	2/0								0/1	0/1			0/1	0/1				
A3	Reliable			2/0	1/0								0/1	0/1						
A4	Tracking		1/0				1/0	5/0	1/0		0/2		0/1					0/2	0/1	0/1
A5	Diversity	2/0	3/0							1/0	0/2	0/2	0/1							
A6	Informative	3/0				3/0			1/0		1/1		0/2		0/1					0/1
A7	Relevance	1/0	1/0			1/0				1/0			0/2	0/1					0/1	
A8	Nature of content	1/0	3/0		0/1	1/0					0/2	0/1	0/2			0/1				
A9	Open diary		1/0			1/0		1/0				0/1								
A10	Challenge						1/0						0/1		0/1					
C1	Learning										4/0		2/0		1/0	1/0			1/0	
C2	New idea										1/0	4/0	3/0		1/0					
C3	Intellectual				1/0								1/0	0/1						
C4	Reassuring												1/0	1/0		1/0				
C5	Helping												4/0	1/0						
C6	Visualise progress												1/0							
C7	Monitor intake										1/0							2/0	1/0	1/0
C8	Educating										2/0									2/0
C9	Being inspirational										1/0		1/0							

Implication matrix – Self-advancement (Keep)

		C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7
A1	Tracking			7/0								0/1		2/1	0/1	
A2	Professionalism	2/0						2/0		0/2						0/1
A3	Diversity		3/0			2/0			1/0		0/3					
A4	Shared experience				2/0	2/0			1/0		0/1	0/2		0/1		
A5	Free course	3/0				1/0		1/0		0/1			0/1		0/1	0/1
A6	Nature of content					1/0	1/0				0/1					
A7	Relatable												0/1			
A8	Summary			2/0									0/1			0/1
A9	Informative	1/0					1/0						0/1			
C1	Educated									3/0			1/0			
C2	Make it interesting										2/0					
C3	Visualise progress											1/0	2/0	1/0	1/0	1/0
C4	Attention												1/0			
C5	Learning										1/0		1/0	1/0	2/0	
C6	Helping												1/0			
C7	Effort saving															2/0
C8	New idea										2/0					

APPENDIX J

MASTER CODES FOR SHARING

Sharing- Overall

Attributes

1. Encouraging
2. Nature of content
3. Shared experience
4. Closed-off
5. Anonymous
6. Mutual interest
7. Diversity
8. Professionalism
9. Support
10. Records
11. In the same boat

Consequences

1. Admiring
2. Feel comfortable to share
3. Joy
4. Helpful
5. I am not alone
6. Learning
7. Effort saving
8. Motivation
9. Attention
10. Understanding
11. New idea

Values

1. Recognition
2. Being inspirational
3. Bonding
4. Sense of community
5. Influence others
6. Sense of accomplishment
7. Sharing
8. Self-improvement
9. Self-satisfaction (happiness & confidence)
10. Being knowledgeable
11. Inclusiveness
12. Make life easier
13. Goal-achieving

Sharing- MFP

Attributes

1. Shared experience
2. Support
3. Nature of content
4. Closed-off
5. Diversity
6. Relevancy
7. In the same boat
8. East to use
9. Nature of interaction
10. Mutual interest
11. Focused topics
12. Accessible

Consequences

1. Motivation
2. Feel more comfortable to share
3. Learning
4. Effort saving
5. New idea
6. Relatable
7. I am not alone
8. Helpful
9. Understanding

Values

1. Sense of community
2. Bonding
3. Sharing
4. Goal-achieving
5. Inspirational
6. Inclusiveness
7. Make life easier
8. Being knowledgeable

Sharing- Keep

Attributes

1. Encouraging
2. Nature of content
3. Shared experience
4. Closed-off
5. Anonymous
6. Challenge
7. Mutual interest
8. Live class
9. Professionalism
10. Support
11. Records

Consequences

1. Supervise
2. Admiring
3. Interaction
4. Feel comfortable to share
5. Joy
6. Rewarding
7. Helpful
8. Learning
9. Motivation
10. Understanding
11. Relatable
12. Satisfy curiosity

Values

1. Recognition
2. Influence others
3. Sense of achievement
4. Sense of accomplishment
5. Sharing
6. Self-improvement
7. Self-esteem (confidence)
8. Motivating
9. Self-satisfaction (happiness)
10. Inclusiveness

APPENDIX K

MASTER CODES FOR SOCIALISING

Socialising- Overall

Attributes

1. Mutual interest
2. Nature of content
3. In the same boat
4. Supportive
5. Diversity
6. Interaction
7. Support
8. Clique
9. Closed-off
10. Real
11. Knowledge
12. Like-minded
13. Shared experience
14. Friendly

Consequences

1. Understanding
2. Attention
3. I am not alone
4. Make friends
5. Acknowledgement
6. Learning
7. Helping
8. Mingling
9. Meet more people
10. Assurance
11. Motivation
12. Way to give back

Values

1. Bonding
2. Friendship
3. Inspirational
4. Knowledgeable
5. Motivating
6. Sense of community
7. Self-satisfaction (happiness)
8. Sense of belonging

Socialising- MFP

Attributes

1. Like-minded
2. Knowledge
3. Support
4. Closed-off
5. Mutual interests
6. Relatable
7. Diversity
8. Friendly
9. In the same boat
10. Supportive
11. Nature of content
12. Interaction
13. Shared experience

Consequences

1. Helping
2. Assurance
3. Motivation
4. Feel comfortable to share
5. Make friends
6. Understanding
7. Learning
8. I am not alone
9. Way to give back
10. Acknowledgement
11. Meet more people
12. Encouragement

Values

1. Bonding
2. Sense of community
3. Sharing
4. Self-esteem (confidence)
5. Goal-achieving
6. Friendship
7. Sense of belonging
8. Motivating
9. Recognition
10. Be a better self
11. Knowledgeable

Socialising- Keep

Attributes

1. Mutual interests
2. Nature of content
3. In the same boat
4. Diversity
5. Nature of interaction
6. Interactivity
7. Support
8. Clique
9. Closed-off
10. Secure
11. Shared routine
12. Relevance
13. Real
14. Like-minded
15. Shared experience

Consequences

1. Understanding
2. Attention
3. I am not alone
4. Make friends
5. Acknowledgement
6. Learn something new
7. Helping
8. Chatting
9. Mingling
10. Feel safe
11. Meet more people
12. Feel happy
13. Receiving support

Values

1. Bonding
2. Friendship
3. Self-esteem (confidence)
4. Being inspirational
5. Being helpful
6. Keep me positive
7. Recognition
8. Sharing
9. Motivating
10. Happiness

APPENDIX L

MASTER CODES FOR HELPING OTHERS

Helping others- Overall

<u>Attributes</u>

1. Support
2. Relatable
3. Shared experience
4. Clique
5. Helpful
6. Mutual interest
7. Positive content
8. Knowledge
9. In the same boat

<u>Consequences</u>

1. Educating
2. Helping
3. Learning
4. Chats
5. Way to give back
6. Motivating
7. Acknowledgement
8. Understanding
9. Assurance
10. Supporting

<u>Values</u>

1. Influence others
2. Sense of achievement
3. Sense of acknowledgement
4. Sense of belonging
5. Self-identity (helpfulness)
6. Self-esteem (confidence)
7. Self-satisfaction (happiness)
8. Bonding
9. Altruism
10. Sense of community
11. Benevolence

Helping others- MFP

Attributes

1. Knowledge
2. Support
3. In the same boat

Consequences

1. Helping
2. Make people happy
3. Assurance
4. Way to give back
5. Motivating
6. Supporting
7. Understanding

Values

1. Bonding
2. Altruism
3. Sense of community
4. Social identity (helpfulness)
5. Benevolence

Helping others- Keep

Attributes

1. Support
2. Relatable
3. Shared experience
4. Clique
5. Helpful
6. Mutual interest
7. Positive content
8. Knowledge

Consequences

1. Educating
2. Helping
3. Encouragement
4. Learning
5. Chats
6. Way to give back
7. Motivating
8. Acknowledgement

Values

1. Influence others
2. Sense of achievement
3. Sense of acknowledgement
4. Self-identity (helpfulness)
5. Self-esteem (confidence)
6. Self-satisfaction (happiness)
7. Bonding

APPENDIX M

MASTER CODES FOR SELF-ADVANCEMENT

Self-advancement- Overall

Attributes

1. Tracking
2. Professionalism
3. Diversity
4. Shared experience
5. Free course
6. Nature of content
7. Relatable
8. Summary
9. Mutual interest
10. Informative
11. In the same boat
12. Reliable
13. Relevance
14. Open diary
15. Challenge

Consequences

1. Educating
2. Make it interesting
3. New idea
4. Visualise progress
5. Attention
6. Learning
7. Helping
8. Effort saving
9. Understanding
10. Intellectual
11. Reassuring
12. Monitor intake

Values

1. Knowledgeable
2. Inspirational
3. Recognition
4. Goal-achieving
5. Sense of achievement
6. Self-satisfaction (happiness)
7. Self-esteem (confidence)
8. Make life easier
9. Accountable
10. Stay informed

Self-advancement- MFP

Attributes

1. In the same boat
2. Shared experience
3. Reliable
4. Tracking
5. Diversity
6. Informative
7. Relevance
8. Nature of content
9. Open diary
10. Challenge

Consequences

1. Learning
2. New idea
3. Intellectual
4. Reassuring
5. Helping
6. Visualise progress
7. Monitor intake
8. Educating
9. Inspiration

Values

1. Being knowledgeable
2. Being inspirational
3. Goal achieving
4. Practicality
5. Motivating
6. Social recognition
7. Self-satisfaction
8. Being accountable
9. Self-improvement
10. Stay informed

Self-advancement- Keep

Attributes

1. Tracking
2. Professionalism
3. Diversity
4. Shared experience
5. Free course
6. Nature of content
7. Relatable
8. Summary
9. Informative

Consequences

1. Learning
2. New idea
3. Intellectual
4. Reassuring
5. Helping
6. Visualise progress
7. Monitor intake
8. Educating
9. Inspiration

Values

1. Being knowledgeable
2. Being inspirational
3. Goal achieving
4. Practicality
5. Motivating
6. Social recognition
7. Self-satisfaction
8. Being accountable
9. Self-improvement
10. Stay informed