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# **Corporate Impression Formation in Online Communities - A Qualitative Study**

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## **ABSTRACT**

***Purpose:*** This study aims to evaluate elements of corporate communication in online communities (OCs) and their influence on corporate impression formation. Interactive online platforms such as OCs are growing. Companies are discovering their importance and increasingly include OCs in their communication activities. The present study identifies the underlying components relevant to successful corporate communication in OCs, and further explore if and how online community members (OCMs) expect companies to communicate with them, explaining how corporate impressions are formed.

***Design/methodology/approach:*** A qualitative research method was chosen, consisting of two stages. In stage one, seventeen expert interviews with academics

and practitioners were conducted, and in stage two, twelve OCMs were interviewed to clarify the concepts and gain new insights.

***Findings:*** The study gains new knowledge relating to corporate communication in OCs and image formation. Specifically, the authors identify and confirm important key constructs in corporate impression formation in OCs, namely, relevance of messages, communication style, social context cues, affiliation, perceived similarity, source credibility and interpersonal communication. Furthermore, a conceptual model is proposed on the relationship between communication elements relevant in online communities and their influence on corporate impression.

***Theoretical and practical implications:*** The study helps to refine existing concepts of corporate impression formation in OCs. It is suggested that understanding how corporate impression is formed in OCs helps companies to participate in virtual networks, improving their corporate impression.

***Keywords:*** Online communities, corporate-image, corporate-communication, computer-mediated communication, social-networks, impression formation.

## **Introduction**

In traditional face-to-face communication, two or more individuals form impressions by focusing on a number of different nonverbal cues. In the interactions that occur through virtual communication platforms, such as an online community (OC), the type of communication is significantly changed. Instead of developing impressions through nonverbal communication, individuals need to base personal opinions on verbal (text-based) and linguistic cues (Tanis and Postmes, 2003). In addition, individuals in OCs produce and re-produce their identities in order to create a favourable impression ('image'). Such identity production in virtual spaces is also relevant for companies. However, scholars identify that companies, engaging in OCs, lose control over the information flow concerning their company, as their messages compete with user-generated content (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). Companies, interacting with their audiences, thus, emphasise on continuous dialogues. These companies view their marketing communication as relationship communication, in which the sender and receiver are partners (Grönroos, 2012), aiming to create a positive corporate image (e.g. Barich and Kotler, 1991).

Corporate image formation has several implications: first, it shapes customer behaviour (Bolger, 1956); second, it influences buyer attitude towards a company's sales person (Cohen, 1967), product (Brown, 1998) and new product evaluation (Aaker and Keller, 1993); finally, it provides a competitive advantage that cannot easily be imitated (Brown, 1998). Researchers note that understanding how corporate impression is formed in OCs lead to new online communication strategies and improved management of online communications (Stern *et al.*, 2001).

To date, studies focusing on corporate impression formation in OCs are in their infancy. The present study suggest that more needs to be conducted to determine how individuals base their impressions on others when meeting through the computer rather than face-to-face. The explosion of blogs, discussion forums and social networking sites provide many opportunities for studying the process of impression formation. The study thus aims to explore how online community members (OCMs) form impressions about a company that is using OCs for corporate communication activities. It posits that corporate impression formation in OCs has its peculiarities and companies need to better understand this phenomenon in order to positively influence their corporate image. This is particularly important, as companies today communicate with a new generation of customers, for example, those who grew up with interactive digital technology. In addition, customers are now well-informed individuals, who have unlimited access to information (Qualman, 2009) putting emphasis on connectivity, speed and interaction, which challenges traditional marketing tactics. The Nielson Report (Nielsen, 2012), entitled ‘Global Trust in Advertising and Brand Messages’, shows that European consumers report high levels of trust in recommendations from people they know (89%) and consumer opinions posted online (64%). This report suggests that trust in traditional paid advertising messages is declining while confidence in the online community is increasing (Nielsen, 2012).

The rest of the paper is laid out as follows: it starts by reviewing the literatures on self-presentation, corporate identity, corporate image and computer-mediated communication (CMC). It subsequently discusses the research design and methods. The paper then compares conceptualisations from the literature with findings and outline concluding remarks, which are fruitful to future research.

## Theoretical background

Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation describes how individuals or groups perform an expression of themselves to others. It states that expressions are usually intended to form a favourable and amicable impression (Laughey, 2007). Goffman (1959) further notes that everyone plays a multiplicity of roles in different social stages. For each audience, the individual offers a rather different version of himself or herself. Scholars suggest that this identity production is also observed online (e.g. Balmer and Greyser, 2006). People are generating profiles on digital platforms, which may be seen as digital bodies displayed to the online publics (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). These digital identities are used to manage an individual's impression on the digital stage (Melewar and Akel, 2005). However, it is not just individuals. Companies are also concerned with identity production in the virtual space (Balmer and Grey, 2000). Their persona is known as *the corporate identity* and *corporate image*, and has been studied by a multitude of scholars (e.g. Melewar and Saunders, 2000; van Rekom and van Riel, 2000).

Corporate identity is a broad term and defined as "*a key element, which gives a business identity its distinctiveness and relates to the attitudes and beliefs of those within the organisation*" (Balmer, 2001, p. 254). According to Topalian (2003, p. 1120), "*a successful corporate identity is a 'living' identity; a tangible reality that is a true representation of an organisation and its aspiration which 'breathes' and changes with that organisation over time*". This axiom encapsulates the context of the present study and underlines the objectives and context. It is suggested that companies must adapt to changes related to the rise of online communication platforms, and adopt a dynamic (lived) identity. Hence, companies must be well

acquainted with ‘new’ environments and audiences such as OCs.

The idea of *corporate image* is not novel. Research on corporate image can be traced back to Gardner and Levy (1955) who originally introduced the concept of ‘image’. Boulding’s (1956) seminal work, in which he conceptualised corporate image, suggests that instead of relying on reality, people tend to rely on their perceived images (De Chernatony *et al.*, 2000). For example, Cornelissen (2000, p. 120) proposes that, “*an image is a perception of a receiver of his or her received projection of the corporate identity and own reflections of interpretations of various attributes from various sources*”. This study views the construct of corporate image following this definition, and thus, investigates the impressions of a company that OCMs form, when interacting with a company-representative in an OC.

Building on the concept of corporate image, the term *corporate impression* is utilised due to the following reasons:

- First, it is noted that various groups of stakeholders form different impressions of a company. Each group has different contacts, which influence their impression formation. In online communities, it is not the ‘company persona’ (or corporate image), but a company representative, who communicates and influences the audience. Thus, in this study, the focus is on the impressions formed by OCMs during their interaction with the company representatives’ communication activities (Hallier, 2013).
- Second, as defined by Brown (1998), corporate images are *immediate impressions* about a company built on an individual level. Along the same lines, it seems legitimate to base the description of the *immediate impression*

an individual forms about a company during the online community interaction, thus extending on the corporate image construct (Hallier, 2013).

As more and more people are using online communication platforms, there is a growing importance in understanding the communication and subsequent impression formation on OCs. Researchers identify four elements that influence the impression formation process of an OCM: the company representative, other community members, the message itself and the virtual platform. To distinguish the four elements and their attributes, corporate impression is explained by two characteristics, namely, functional and emotional (Kennedy, 1977; Martineau, 1958). Functional characteristics are tangible and easily measured, while emotional characteristics are based on psychological dimensions such as attitude or feelings toward a company. Thus, in the context of OCs, the study classifies the following attributes into the four elements that influence the image formation (Table 1), as described next:

***Table 1: Relevant attributes of corporate impressions in the context of OCs***

| <b>Elements</b>         | <b>Functional attributes</b>  | <b>Emotional attributes</b>  |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Company-representative  | Social context cues (e.g. Walther, 1992)<br>Affiliation (Warnick, 2004)                               | Perceived similarity (e.g. Dellande and Gilly, 1998)<br>Source credibility (e.g. Goldsmith et al., 2000) |
| Other community members | Interpersonal communication   | Interactivity (e.g. Dellaert, 2000)  |
| The message itself      | Relevance of message (Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2004)<br>Informal communication (Roed, 2003) |  |
| Virtual platform        |   | Social presence (Short et al., 1976)   |

*Source: Developed for the present study*

It is acknowledged that the concepts of corporate identity, corporate image and

corporate impression are complex with many antecedents and consequences depending on varying research contexts. The present study focuses on a single dimension of the corporate identity concept, namely, corporate communication. Due to the OC context, the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is considered, which includes new communication conditions. The earliest CMC studies used the term “cues filtered out” (Short et al., 1976) concluding that people were not able to form any impressions with the elimination of nonverbal cues (Culnan & Markus, 1987). Since then, however, with the increased sophistication of the Internet, research has demonstrated that the individuals interacting via CMC form well-developed impressions based on other criteria than nonverbal cues. Walther (1996) found that even with fewer social cues, CMC does form impressions, although this may be not as immediate as face-to-face communication. He termed this the “social information processing” approach, which assumes that people who are interacting through CMC still has the need to form social relationships. They create simple impressions and test them over time. The CMC cues include factors such as emoticons, the participants’ screen names, descriptions and the dialogues in which they engage (see “social context cues”, “affiliation” and “social presence” in Tables 1 and 2). Other cues are the “linguistic style” (see “informal communication” in Tables 1 and 2), which includes lexical diversity, word power and verbal immediacy, and the “paralinguistic cues”, such as typographical marks (capital and lowercase letters) and exclamation marks (Walther, 1996).

According to Williams and Moffitt (1997, p. 237) online communication and impression are not solely created by the company, but is determined by “*both environmental and personal factors of the audience member*”. For example, as messages posted by a company are shared and discussed with all OCMs, the

interaction happens at practically the same time. Thus, an individual's impression formation is affected by both the interaction with other influencing sources as with personal factors (see "interactivity" and "interpersonal communication" in Tables 1 and 2). In addition, Bhattacharjee & Sanford (2006) suggest that the quality of an argument (information) is even more important (see "relevance of message" and "source credibility"), as they consider that everybody can easily publish unverified content nowadays. Finally, to further explore individuals' interactions in an OC, the study includes the theory of homophily (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954). The theory suggests that it is easier to communicate with individuals that are perceived to be similar (Dellande & Gilly, 1998). This is in line with Brown and Reingen's (1987, p. 354), who suggest that, "a fundamental principle of human interaction is that people tend to interact with others who are like themselves" (see "perceived similarity" in Tables 1 and 2). In summary, Table 2 presents the communication elements in CMC and their relation to the current research.

**Table 2: Key constructs in corporate impression formation in OC**

| <b>Construct</b>                     | <b>Definition</b>   | <b>Author(s)</b>                         | <b>Relation to current study</b>  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b><i>Relevance of messages</i></b>  | Individuals face information overload and have become very selective about what kind of information they are reading.<br><br>Scholars emphasise the importance of relevance in an "over-communicated virtual world. | Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2004) | It is suggested that the more relevant the message, the more favourable the image OCMs have of the company. |
| <b><i>Informal communication</i></b> | Scholars indicate that OCMs expect a nondirective writing style.<br><br>Online community users tend to share more openly their viewpoints and are more honest. This tendency  | Roed (2003)                              | Messages, written in informal communication are positively related to the company's image.                  |

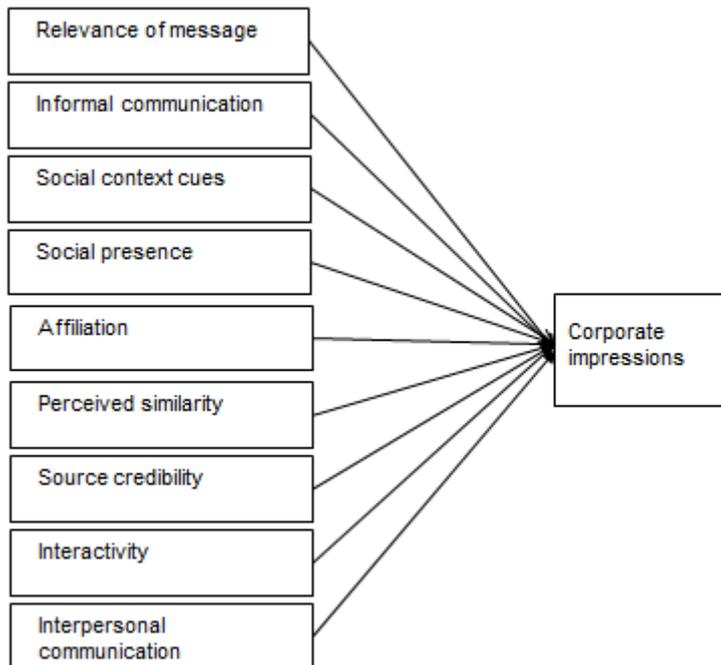
|                                    |   |   |  |
|------------------------------------|---|---|--|
|                                    | might be due to the greater anonymity of computer-mediated communication.   |   |  |
| <b><i>Social context cues</i></b>  | <p>In mediated communication, as suggested by the theory of social context cues, nonverbal cues are absent or strongly attenuated.</p> <p>Thus a certain “paralanguage” such as the use of emoticons, has been created and people have learned to verbalise nonverbal cues.</p>   | Carey (1980); Dubrovsky et al. (1991); Lea and Spears (1995); Sproull and Kiesler (1986); Walther (1992)                      | The more social context cues that are transmitted to the OCM, the more favourable the image they have of the sender.   |
| <b><i>Social presence</i></b>      | <p>The Social Presence Theory focuses on the idea that if there is little social presence, the communication is more impersonal.</p> <p>The lack of social context cues deprives the communicators of the sense of actual physical presence and negatively influences a communication.</p>  | Short et al. (1976)   | It is posited that the higher the perceived social presence of the company representative, the more favourable the image OCMs have.  |
| <b><i>Affiliation</i></b>          | <p>Users want a website to present transparent information on who runs the site, how to reach those people, the site’s privacy policy, and other factors related to site authorship and sponsorship.</p> <p>The affiliation to a company can provide the company-representative with the needed expertise about the subject the OCMs are interested in.</p> | Warnick (2004)  | The study suggests that the better a company-representative discloses his/her affiliation to the company, the more favourable the images community-members have about the company. |
| <b><i>Perceived similarity</i></b> | <p>Studies suggest that representatives of a company who are similar to the customer are more influential than representatives who are dissimilar.</p> <p>The theory of homophily suggest that it is easier to communicate with</p>   | Dellande and Gilly (1998); DeShields and Kara (2000); Gilly et al. (1998); Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954); Price et al., (1987) | The greater the perceived similarity of the company representative, the more favourable the image they have of the company.  |

|                                    |   |   |  |
|------------------------------------|---|---|--|
|                                    | <p>individuals that are perceived to be similar. Similarity consists of congruency regarding demographic variables, beliefs, values, preferences, and lifestyle.</p>  |   |  |
| <b>Source credibility</b>          | <p>Source credibility refers to the credibility of the endorser, namely the company representative.</p> <p>There are two important dimensions of source credibility: (i) whether the source is believable (expertise), and (ii) whether the source has the public's best interests at heart (trustworthiness)</p> | <p>Goldsmith et al. (2000); Massey (2003)</p>   | <p>The study infers that the higher the company representative's credibility, the more favourable the images OCMs form of the company.</p> |
| <b>Interactivity</b>               | <p>Consumers want to participate actively in the conversation. These active consumers have been named 'prosumers'.</p> <p>Interactivity is characterised by increased involvement, control over the information exchange and the sense of presence.</p>   | <p>Ariely, (2000); Dellaert (2000); Shih (1998); Tabscott (1997); Toffler (1984)</p>  | <p>The more interactive the communication, the more favourable the image OCMs have of the company.</p>                                     |
| <b>Interpersonal communication</b> | <p>Communication among the OC members will influence the image formation process.</p> <p>Studies have shown that customers support and influence each other while exchanging information about a product</p>  | <p>Ahonen and Moore (2005); McAlexander et al. (2002); Stammerjohan et al. (2005)</p> | <p>It is posited that positive word-of-mouth has a positive effect on corporate impression.</p>  |

*Source: Developed for the present study*

Based on Table 2, the conceptual model presents the relationship between communication elements relevant in online communities and their influence on corporate impression, as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Conceptual model**



*Source: Developed for the present study*

## **Research design and method**

A qualitative research method is chosen, using an exploratory research approach. This approach helped the researchers experience actual situations and determine important OC elements, clarifying the concepts and adding new knowledge to corporate communication and identity management. The resulting outcome is a conceptual model on corporate impression in OCs. To achieve the study's research objective, netnography methods and expert interviews are used for the exploratory fieldwork. Netnography is a qualitative method that adapts the methods of ethnography to study online behaviour and cultures (Kozinets, 1998). The use of netnography is increasing (Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2002), and many scholars are studying online communities with the approach, including: the Citroën

brand community (Cova & Carrère, 2002) or Napster (Giesler & Pohlmann, 2003). Kozinets (2002) suggests several steps to rigorously apply the netnography method. Adopting these steps for the current study, the protocol is described in detail, next.

In the first stage of the fieldwork, a non-participatory method of netnography was initially utilised in order to gain insights into communication activities on the Swissmom forum. Then the participatory method was used by actively participating in the forum (Bernard, 2004).

Subsequently, in the second stage, expert interviews with academics and industry experts were conducted in order to gain new insights into the phenomenon of online communities and to test face validity of the proposed conceptual model. The researchers interviewed seventeen academics and practitioners, who are experts in the field of OCs and from different fields and industries with a strong connection to OCs. These industry experts were included due to the fast-moving field of study and the research thus relied on their advanced knowledge. The inclusion of academics was especially important to gain additional knowledge from a theoretical view as well as to test face validity of a proposed conceptual framework.

In the third stage of the netnography method, the researchers conducted: “*individual interviews with community members (via chat, e-mail, online focus groups, etc.)*” (Bernard, 2004, p. 56). Twelve OCMs, who regularly posted on the Swissmom community, were interviewed. The Swissmom online community (SMoM) provided a research setting relevant to the present study. SMoM serves as a source of information on topics such as fertility, pregnancy, childbirth and infant care. It provides advice on issues of law, money, work and shopping. The platform offers

over 3,500 pages of medical knowledge and answers to practical questions, as well as a vibrant forum for its members (Swissmom, 2011). Because the Swissmom Forum addresses a broad range of topics, including consumption-related discussions regarding products for children, this online community seems to be ideal to gain some additional knowledge about online communities and OCMs behaviour by using a qualitative approach. The aim of the OCM interviews was (i) to refine existing constructs of corporate impression formation in CMC, (ii) to gain a more comprehensive picture of CMCs impact, and (iii) to adopt CMC to the specific context of the Swissmom Online Community. Thus, the study gained an understanding of the relative importance of these concepts in a relevant context. Table 3 shows the individual steps and the actual adoption for this research.

*Table 3: Netnography steps and adoption to research*

| <i>Steps</i>                         | <i>Description</i>   | <i>Adoption to research</i>  |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Cultural entrée                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Develop specific research aim/question</li> <li>b) Search for appropriate online forum</li> <li>c) Observe the forum to obtain additional knowledge about the forum and its members.</li> </ul>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) The research aim has been outlined in the abstract, introduction and research design.</li> <li>b) An appropriate community was selected by entering key words to search engines such as google.com, Google groups, Yahoo!, egroups.com, lizst.com, and Technorati. Additionally, social networks such as Facebook, ecademy, Xing and LinkedIn were consulted. Further, scholars and experts were asked for their advice (Kozinets, 2002). This research resulted in the selection of the Swissmom community (additional description see page 19).</li> <li>c) Non-participatory and participatory observation in order to gain online community insights and to identify relevant and key online community members for interviews (Paccagnella, 1997; Kozinets, 1999, 2002; Bernard, 2004).</li> </ul> |
| Data collection and analysis         | For data collection the individual interview has been chosen   | All interviews were conducted on an individual basis by interviewing Swissmom members.   |
| Providing trustworthy interpretation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Triangulation</li> <li>b) Long-term immersion in community</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Triangulation is guaranteed by the combination with the expert interviews. Further research will investigate the phenomenon by using quantitative methods.</li> <li>b) The authors have been following Swissmom since it was selected.</li> </ul>  |
| Research ethics                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Research presence has to be fully disclosed</li> <li>b) Confidentiality and anonymity has to be ensured</li> <li>c) OCMs feedback have to be included</li> <li>d) Permission to quote postings has to be obtained</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) The authors disclosed themselves fully to the community.</li> <li>b) Further, the authors guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity to all participants.</li> <li>c) When community members added some comments or gave feedback to statements, that feedback was included.</li> <li>d) The authors got permission by the community members in question for publishing any messages that were quoted in the thesis.</li> </ul>  |

|               |   |   |
|---------------|---|---|
| Member checks | Some or all of the results are shared with the members for additional insights, feedback and information exchange | <p>The following process for member-check is recommended: (i) Contact 10 OCMs who post most frequently on the forum for feedback, (ii) contact 2-3 posters of each member category, (iii) contact 10 randomly selected posters (Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2002; Giesler &amp; Pohlmann, 2003).</p> <p>The member-check was conducted, however, only three Swissmom members could be found to comment on the findings.</p> |
|---------------|---|---|

*Source: Adapted from Kozinets, 2002*

A purposive sampling was applied where the interviewees were selected on the basis of their ability to contribute to our specific concepts (Burns and Grove, 2001; Corbin and Strauss, 1990). It was recognised that the experts' views were very important as they provided a broader perspective on OCs across varying research contexts while the OCMs' views were community-specific. In other words, the experts provided an outside view, while an inside view was provided by OCMs. Experts will be hereafter called 'Expert-Interviewees' and OCMs as 'Community-Interviewees'.

For this research, asynchronous online interviews were conducted, which is one of the methods listed in the pool of netnography methods (Bertrand, 2004). Meho (2006) suggest that asynchronous online interviews include the use of email for conducting qualitative research. It is a method with several advantages, namely (1) its ability to reach people who are geographically dispersed; (2) its electronic format helps users avoid transcription errors (Meho, 2006); (3) the anonymity increases self-disclosure (Tidwell and Walther 2002); (4) it facilitates a closer connection with interviewees' personal feelings, beliefs and values (Mann and Stewart 2000); and (5) provides the opportunity for thorough reflection and editing of the messages (Levinson, 1990). A main reason for our approach is that experts and OCMs felt more comfortable being interviewed online since the web is their business tool.

### **Stage one – expert interviews**

The respondents were selected via social network communication websites based on criteria such as interest, job title and business category, thus allowing the researchers to generate a sample with OC experts. In addition, academics were selected on the

basis of their relevant background, including their published work (articles or books about OCs), and any involvement in OC projects. The questionnaire was initially distributed to 32 participants, however, eight participants did not respond, while another seven participants did not fully complete the interview, and thus, could not be included in the study. Table 3 summarises the sampling frame.

**Table 3: Nature of interviewees' business and job titles**

| <b>Nature of business</b>                             | <b>Number of participants</b> |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Academia  | 5                             |
| Consultancy Online Media, Social Media, OCs           | 3                             |
| Public Relations                                      | 2                             |
| Web Agencies  | 3                             |
| Companies using OCs                                   | 4                             |
|   |                               |
| <b>Job title</b>                                      |                               |
| Research Associate / Research Assistant / Lecturer    | 2                             |
| Senior Lecturer / Professor                           | 3                             |
| Online Marketing and/or Community Manager/ Consultant | 4                             |
| CEO and/or Partner                                    | 4                             |
| Senior Manager / Director                             | 4                             |

*Source: Developed for the present study*

During data collection, an interview guide and a thorough description of the CMC constructs were included, as questions sent via email must be more self-explanatory (Meho, 2006). The interviews started with general unstructured open-ended questions such as, "Could you please describe what is important for having a successful communication in an online community: (i) in general, and (ii) if a company would like to be accepted as an online community member?" This was followed by semi-structured questions, based on the key communication elements such as relevance of messages, informal communication, social context cues, etc. (see Appendix A). To clarify responses, follow-up questions were sent by email. According to the participants' feedback, it took about half an hour to complete our questionnaire and depending on the amount of follow-up questions, additional time

was spent on the interviews. The data were analysed using NVivo7.

### **Stage two – community member interviews**

The stage two interviews were conducted with OCMs from the Swissmom OC. This OC was launched in summer 2003, and is, to date, the biggest Internet portal focusing on babies and children. About 8,770 members post regularly on the forum and no other website has such a high amount of users in one country. Swissmom has 900,000 monthly visitors (on peak days they have sometimes reach up to 40,000 visitor sessions) and the discussion forum counts about 6,000 new posts daily. OCMs share their thoughts and knowledge about their consumption of specific baby products. Companies such as Bayer, Schering, Andreabal, Medinova, Johnson & Johnson, Nestlé, Weleda, Iromedica, Babybutt, Hologic, Dr. Dünner and Coop use this community for advertising purposes (Swissmom, 2011).

The Swissmom forum is relevant for the study due to the substantial online interaction among its stakeholders, namely, OCMs, companies, sponsors, moderators, doctors, educators, etc. The Swissmom Baby Gallery and its week-by-week pregnancy calendar (with relevant topics and a pregnancy ‘countdown’) are very popular. Its forum, [swissmomforum.ch](http://swissmomforum.ch), allows (expecting) parents to share and exchange information with their peers. Members ask and answer questions and provide help in numerous areas (Swissmom, 2011). The forum is monitored by moderators, who ensure that no abuse occurs and the tone remains friendly among the members (Swissmom, 2011). A small team of dedicated women founded the website [swissmom.ch](http://swissmom.ch) with the idea of providing information to others on pregnancy and parenting issues. Today, the SMOm team consists of an editor-in-chief who is a

doctor, a pharmacist, an educator, a mother's advisor, a lawyer, a nutritionist, a lactation consultant, a journalist and a marketing manager to keep the [swissmom.ch](http://www.swissmom.ch) project successful (Swissmom, 2011).

The interview questions were developed based on existing impression formation and CMC literature. A pre-test was conducted with two academics and three OCMs. To ensure transparency, the study's aim was posted in the forum and interviewees were requested. Within three days, 16 interviewees were found. The researchers distributed the questions via email, as advocated and extensively applied by scholars (e.g. Kennedy, 2000; Lehu, 2004; Meho and Tibbo, 2003; Murray, 1995, 1996; Murray and Sixsmith, 1998). Based on existing impression formation, media theories and CMC literature, interview questions were generated (see Appendix B). The interviews started with general questions regarding corporate impression formation such as: "Which words would you use to describe a company-representative?" and "Which words would you use to describe a company-representative's messages?". Next, open-ended questions about the criteria influencing corporate impression formations were used. Examples of questions were: "What leaves (i) a negative and (ii) a positive impression about a company-representative?" and "How should the message of a moderator be (characteristics and communication behaviour) in order for you to get (i) a positive and (ii) a negative impression?". Finally, the researchers asked questions relating to the key constructs of corporate impression formation in OCs (see Appendix B). Two of the 16 interviewees did not respond; another two did not fill in the questionnaire properly nor did they reply to the follow-up questions. They were thus excluded from the research. According to the interviewees, it took them about 45 minutes to fill in the questionnaire.

## Data analysis

The interview data were analysed using NVivo7 software. The data analysis was guided by the key constructs found in literature (see Table 2) and associated theories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This included the initial list of variables and concepts. In order to be consistent with prior work, the categories were labelled in the same manner (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The data were grouped according to relevant codes and introduced a coding hierarchy (Table 4), including a principle category, a sub-category and a value. Items then were compared with those gained from literature.

*Table 4: Excerpt of coding book for the qualitative data analysis*

| <i>Categories</i>         | <i>Code</i> | <i>Value</i> | <i>Theoretical references</i>             |
|---------------------------|-------------|--------------|---|
| Interactivity             | INT         | +/-          | Walther & Tidewell, 1985, Liu et al. 2002 |
| Messaging frequency       | INT_MF      | +/-          |   |
| Messaging duration        | INT_MD      | +/-          |   |
| Relevance of contribution | REL         | +/-          | e.g. Kiesler et al., 1984                 |

*Source: Developed for the present study.*

The content was coded twice to establish stability, followed by tests for inter-coder reliability (Weber, 1990). In the next section, the findings are presented. Where appropriate, the paper provides a short discussion of the literature to complement the interviewees' opinions.

## Findings

## **General questions about OCs**

The researchers initially asked general questions to experts in order to gain new insights regarding OCs. These included why people use them, whether they influence them and whether companies are welcome in OCs. In addition, OCMs were also asked general questions regarding corporate impression formation.

*Reasons why people use online communities (OCs).* The findings in this section present reasons why people use online communities. It was found that people use OCs because they would like to find special interest communities and discover new friends. Results show that OC users enjoy the sensation of being linked and connected with others; they also liked having access to a network (Expert- 17). However, respondents also mentioned the need to talk anonymously (Expert- 2). Expert- 4 believes that people use OCs as an informal way to communicate. He believes that it is highly interactive and promotes the possibility to discuss with experts. Moreover, people use OCs for the same reason they take part in real communities such as networking in a private or business setting, communicating, entertainment, learning, contributing, promoting, and in general, interacting with other humans (Expert- 6). People also use OCs because they can find like-minded people to whom they can ask for help and advice (Expert- 10).

*Influence of the discussion in OCs.* In this section, it is clarified whether people are influenced by discussions taking place in OCs, as little influence suggest that companies should limit their use of OC for communication purposes. The researchers asked the experts questions relating to the influence that discussions have on OC users. According to Expert- 2, people may or may not be influenced by the

discussions in OCs, as it is a matter of the individual's character. Expert- 2 also believes that younger people are easier influenced than older and it depends on the kinds of OC they are in. Expert- 17, however, believes that people are very influenced by the discussions held or read in OCs. He notes that the community has more source credibility for commercial communication than classic media. This notion is shared by all expert interviewees. To stress the importance of OCs, an Expert interviewee stated:

*“Yes, first of all, because senders of the information are more real and tangible than channels that are perceived to be more official. Secondly, the informal style, the rapidness and the pull accessibility are the only media accepted by certain demographic groups”* (Expert- 5).

*Successful communication in an OC.* Findings provided important insights into successful communication in an OC. It was found that to create positive images, addressing successful communication is important. To describe important elements for successful communication in an OC, Expert- 2 stated that in the communication between community and company, candidness is everything. Expert- 3 asserted that for a company to successfully communicate in an OC, it must have good editors, who follow up on users' wishes and problems. One interviewee emphasised that:

*“The recipe is more or less to behave as they would in real life, reaping the benefits of digital communication. Openness is key to success. The more open an individual is, the more attention they will normally receive. One needs to understand that OC-communication is person-driven and not company-driven. It is important that individuals understand the need to learn how the communication works and not delegate their own representation in an OC to a subordinate or outsource it. Another key element is to release the desire for control of information”* (Expert- 6).

Next, in the following two questions, the issue of whether companies should use OCs or not is addressed, as existing opinions in both literature and practice differ.

*Companies' use of OCs for corporate communication activities.* Scholars note that OCs are a means for companies to communicate with their audiences in ways that have not been possible before (e.g. Kozinets, 1999). Companies are able to build relationships with stakeholders by creating a community around their brand and other company-specific interests (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997). This does not imply, however, that companies should try to control the information or conversations taking place in OCs (de Chernatony, 2001; Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2004; Locke *et al.*, 2001). OCMs should be addressed in such a way that acceptance is gained and a favourable corporate impression is created (Kozinets, 1999). Expert-3 believes that companies should use OCs for corporate communication activities. He notes that it is imperative to build a positive image and have a direct communication with the target group (Expert- 3). An Expert-interviewee stated:

*“If they want to survive, yes they should. They should act as they are positioned and as the corporation-strategy requires it: you can be very active and open (Apple) or very inactive and passive (Coca-Cola). But in both ways you have to know very well what’s going on in the Web 2.0.”* (Expert- 17).

In contrast to the above, one expert does not believe in companies participating in OCs. Expert- 2 stated that companies should not use OCs for corporate communication activities because, to be an active community member, they will need time. He was not sure if it makes sense for them to use OCs in company communication activities since “time is money”.

*Members' perceptions of a company engaging in an OC.* One expert believes that if company representatives participate in OCs *“it shows the community member that real people are working there and in the best case, the member feels understood and taken seriously”* (Expert- 1). It also *“increases the credibility of the company and the company will be perceived as open and interested in [its] customer's opinions. However it might also change the participant's style of communication. It might bring about more extreme views of participants since they perceive their voice to be heard. Also, the communication among the OCMs might be less, because questions can be addressed to the company representative”* (Expert- 4). An interviewee proposed that:

*“A company not taking part in discussions in OCs concerning themselves will often be perceived as old fashioned, unable to provide answers which are resistant to 'daylight' or just plain arrogant towards the customer”* (Expert- 6).

The researchers enquired three questions to the OCMs about their impression towards (1) a sender's message image, (2) the sender's image, and (3) the company's image. It was found that the majority of the interviewees stated that the impressions they form about the company-representative were based on the impressions from the message. All interviewees believed that these impressions form the impression they had of the organisation. In other words, most interviewees base their impressions on the company-representative's messages, which, in turn, influence their impressions of both the company-representative her/himself and company. This is illustrated by one OCM who stated, *“that the company-representatives' messages influence my impression of them. For example, if the company-representative behaves in a fair way, it influences the way I see the organisation”* (Community Interviewee- 3).

## **Findings about communication elements**

Next, each of the conceptual model's key constructs is presented (see also Table 2). As it is important to have both the experts' opinions about the CMC elements from different fields (outside view), and also the OCMs' opinions of an OC (inside view), the findings from both groups are combined below. It is noted that since the majority of the Expert-Interviewees and OCMs considered the construct "social presence" not to be essential for image formation, it will not be elaborated on further. Furthermore, the construct "interactivity" was not seen as a condition of any OC, thus, it is neither described in detail.

**Relevance of messages.** An expert stated that: *"If the contribution (message) is well thought-out and of value for the community, it will have a positive impact"* (Expert-15). This is in line with the statement of an OCM who stated that, *"if a contribution is not relevant to me, it is not important and it sheds a negative light on the author"* (Community Interviewee- 2).

In discussing the relevance of messages, the CMC-literature highlights the lack of social context cues. Researchers propose that conversations in computer-mediated environments are assumed to convey less social context cues than face-to-face conversations (Short et al., 1976). The removal of nonverbal cues may actually increase attention to the message itself (Burgoon et al., 2002). Boyd and Ellison (2007) claim that contributions in digital spaces are persistent and searchable, stressing the importance of providing relevant messages, as community members might read and refer to earlier messages. These findings, thus, support the idea that the relevance of a message is of high importance in computer-mediated

environments. It is proposed that:

**P1:** A message has to be relevant to be read and taken seriously by the OCMs.

**Communication style.** Online contributions must speak the “language” of the target audience (Zerfass, 2005) and write in a conversational voice (Weil, 2006). Most experts agreed with this view. Expert- 2, for example, argued that the communication style needed for an OC depends on the user. On the one hand, if the user is private, a formal style is unnecessary; on the other hand, if the user is commercial (e.g. business to business), formal communication is used. The importance of communication style is also stressed by Expert- 3, who stated that having a direct communication style is important for successful communication in an OC. He further noted that direct communication helps to create an optimised target group. It was found that only half of the Community-Interviewees believed that communication style has an impact to image formation. This view contrasts the opinion of the experts. This might be because the experts took the companies perspectives, whereas the OCMs spoke as private users.

Existing literature supports communication style as an important construct for image formation. Adkins and Brashers (1995) analyse the effects of “powerful” and “powerless” language on small CMC groups. They propose two conclusions:

i) Language style significantly impacts impression formation in CMC groups.

Those who use a ‘powerful’ language style are thought to be more credible, attractive and persuasive than the ones using ‘powerless’ language.

- ii) Contrasting language styles resulted in more extreme perceptions than if users shared a common language style (Adkins and Brashers, 1995).

Based on the above discussion, it is suggested that:

**P2:** Messages on online communication platforms should be written in informal communication style in order to create a positive corporate impression on the audience.

***Social context cues.*** Most interviewees, both experts and OCMs, stated that social context cues are important. For example, an expert interviewee stated: *“Indeed, because it replaces the facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. It helps to know more about the sender, for example, by being able to set-up member pages or profiles. The more transparency and credibility a community offers, the more influential it is”* (Expert- 15). OCMs generally agreed on the importance of social context cues, however, they warned against an overflow of paralinguistics: *“Personal information about a moderator is very welcome, but I hate the use of too many paralinguistics. I mean it looks really silly if there are smilies in nearly every sentence”* (Community Interviewee- 9). Paralinguistic was only considered to be relevant by a minority of the OCMs. OCMs viewed additional information about the company-representative as an important factor.

These findings are consistent with that of former studies. Scholars suggest that the lack of social context cues in CMC can be overcome through “various linguistic and typographic manipulation, which may reveal social and relational information”

(Walther, 1995, p. 190). Paralinguistic cues, such as using capitals, are often context based. In e-mails, this is recognised as shouting (Adkins and Brashers, 1995). Reduced social cues in CMC allow senders to present themselves very selectively by carefully constructing messages. Receivers, in turn, tend to over attribute perceived similarities and create an idealised image of the sender (Walther, 1996). Therefore, based on the above findings, the study considers that:

**P3:** Social context cues are seen as important, however, overusing paralinguistic features such as capital letters or emoticons are not esteemed by everyone.

*Affiliation.* OCMs do not always appreciate companies participating in their community (Hogenkamp, 2007). This is one of the main reasons why participants must disclose their affiliation to the company. Interviewees emphasised that:

*“It depends how they behave. If they stick to the community rules it is ok, as long as they do not only want to sell something”* (Expert- 1).

*“Members in OC regard such things as honesty [...] as a precondition for communication in OCs”* (Expert- 13).

The evidence was consistent and based on the findings, it is concluded that:

**P4:** Company members are welcome in communities with the prerequisite that they stick to the community rules and disclose their affiliation to the company.

*Perceived similarity.* Most interviewees agreed that perceived similarity is an

important concept. Two interviewees stated that:

*“In virtual communities this still holds in my opinion. However, because we have less clues to derive our image of a participant of, the notion of similarity might be achieved easier (relative to dissimilarity)”* (Expert- 4).

*“I mean, what does similar mean? Yes, I prefer to speak to someone I think has the same interests and values than I have. I kind of trust this person more”* (Community Interviewee- 7).

Most of the experts stressed that in the context of OCs the following criteria related to “similarity” are important:

*“[...] Same interests, same values”* (Expert- 1).

*“[...] Similarity in the way of communication, so yes, expressions, style, maybe language ability and slang. Same values, if they become salient in the posts, maybe similar behaviour on the internet (including) links to pages one likes or finds useful as well or provides links that appear to be useful”* (Expert- 4).

The findings support previous studies, which suggest that perceived similarity between individuals is a key factor affecting the persuasiveness of word-of-mouth information (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Price et al., 1989; Gilly et al., 1998). The study, therefore, finds that:

**P5:** Perceived similarity is an important concept in communication activities in OCs.

**Source credibility.** Scholars conceptualise source credibility in two ways: corporate credibility and endorser credibility (e.g. Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000). The interviews

revealed that all experts stressed on credibility's importance. For example, two interviewees proposed that:

*"...Would you believe somebody not credible, without any expertise, or someone you just don't like at all?"* (Expert- 15).

*"Sure, if I do not trust the source, I have a negative impression about him. And if he works for a company, I also have a negative impression about the company he works for"* (Community Interviewee- 1)

The relationship between perceived source credibility and corporate impression is validated in numerous studies. Fombrun (1996) posits that corporate credibility is the extent to which consumers, investors, and other constituents believe in a company's trustworthiness and expertise. This is in line with Lafferty *et al.* (2002) who suggest that credibility makes up a significant portion of a corporation's image. Accordingly, it is proposed that:

**P6:** The significance of source credibility is underlined by the fact that the majority of the interviewees have declared its importance.

***Interpersonal communication.*** The importance of interpersonal communications is highlighted through the following statements by the expert interviewees:

*"As mentioned earlier, other consumer's points of view are often regarded as more valuable than that of the company."* (Expert- 6).

*"I believe it influences the member in the same way comparable discussions in real life do, according to my personal experience"* (Expert- 14).

The results are consistent with previous studies, suggesting that the relationships

with and attitudes toward a company or brand depend fundamentally on the social interactions between the group members (Baumgarth, 2004). Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) propose that corporate impression is influenced by positive information received from intermediary sources. A surprising finding indicates that only a minority of the community respondents believed that interpersonal communication is relevant in terms of impression formation. This result may be explained by the assumption that OCMs believe that others do not influence them. Respondents often stressed that they were not influenced by other OCMs' messages, because they had their own point of views. The experts, however, were found to have a more objective point of view when assessing the influence of interpersonal communication. Based on the above discussion, it can be assumed that messages, which are posted by the company-representative, are influenced by the messages of other community members participating in this discussion. Hence, the study suggests that:

**P7:** The messages of the other community members influence the impression formed of the company-representative.

Overall, important and relevant elements in the CMC were consistently identified, as explained in the concluding section.

## **Conclusion**

The increasing interest in OCs heightens the need for a better understanding of people gathering in those communities. To date, researchers have tended to focus on subjects such as: (i) motivation to participate in communities, (ii) types of

communities, and (iii) communities' influence on customers' behaviours and perceptions. However, there has been little discussion about corporate communication targeting OCs. Even less research addresses the question of how corporate communication, targeting OCs, influences corporate impression formation. This exploratory study has attempted to fill this gap, by evaluating the elements of corporate communication in OCs and their influence on corporate impression formation. Important elements, namely, relevance of messages, communication style, social context cues, affiliation, perceived similarity, source credibility, interactivity and interpersonal communication were identified and confirmed. With those elements, a conceptual model was built and seven propositions to navigate successfully in the OC context were made.

In terms of the *theoretical contribution*, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate corporate communication activities in online communities by focusing on impression formation. The study advances the concept of communication by extending communication activities in OCs. It adds to the nature of uncontrolled communication (interpersonal communication), suggesting that on online platforms it occurs simultaneously to the controlled communication. Furthermore, elements of media theory and computer-mediated communication are linked with corporate impression formation. Thus, the research brings together various strands of theories and relates them to the present context.

The study provides various *practical implications*. Understanding how corporate impression is formed in OCs can help to reveal if and how shareholders expect members of companies to participate in virtual networks and how this affects corporate impression. The findings may conclude the on-going debate on whether

company-representatives are welcome in OCs or not. As suggested by Expert-3, if the participation of a company-representative is a real benefit, he or she will be accepted in the community. In other words, it is highlighted that if a company-representative acts as an expert, who adds real benefit to the community without using corporate speeches and trying to advertise their products and services, he or she will be accepted as a community member. The company-representative has a crucial role in terms of impression formation and needs to be selected carefully. A company must determine more systematically about which company-representative fits the online community in terms of their characteristics and writing style, and who might be genuinely interested in the issues discussed in order to provide additional knowledge to the online community members.

More research in this interesting area is encouraged, as there are numerous questions arising suitable for exploration in *future researches*. First, there are more general questions that could be investigated, such as how offline interactions and perceptions influence the image formation process in the online world. Second, in relation to the key constructs presented in Table 2, the following future research avenues should be considered: A further thorough investigation into the constructs in order to define, for instance, what makes a message relevant and what communication style is preferred. Finally, the proposed conceptual model should be refined and tested quantitatively.

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## A. Appendix – Expert Interview Questions

| <i>No.</i> | <i>Topic</i>        | <i>Literature</i>  | <i>Question<sup>1</sup></i>   |
|------------|---------------------|--|---|
| 1          | Argument quality    | Kiesler et al., 1984; Burgoon et al., 2002; Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2004; Scoble & Israel, 2006; Boyd & Ellison, 2007   | a) How important do you consider the relevance of a contribution to be? Why?<br>b) Do you think the content of a message might have an impact on the perception an OCM could have of a COR? Why?  |
| 2          | Argument quality    | Norton, 1983; Hansford & Hattie, 1987; Rice & Torobin, 1992; Roed, 2003; Zerfass, 2005; Scobel & Israel, 2006; Weil, 2006; Wright, 2006                                    | What sort of communication style is needed in an online community (e.g. formal, informal)? Why? Can you describe what a formal or informal communication style would be?  |
| 3          | Social context cues | Mehrabian, 1969; Short et al., 1976; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Walther, 1992, 1995, 1996; Walther, et al., 1994; Lea & Spears, 1992; Jacobson, 1999 | a) Do you think that the use of paralanguage (e.g. smiles, misspelling such as COOL [all capital letters]) is important in an online community communication? Why?<br>b) Do you think that it is important to receive some additional descriptions about the sender of a message in online communities (e.g. some personal description). Why?   |
| 4          | Social presence     | Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968; Short et al., 1976; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Argyle & Dean, 1965; Zerfass, 2005; Weil, 2006; Wright, 2006  | Do you think that the following factors are important in online communities? Why?<br>a) To get a good enough idea of how people at the other end are reacting.<br>b) To get a real impression of personal contact with the people at the other end?<br>c) To easily assess the other people's reactions to what has been said?<br>d) That the conversation provides a great sense of realism?<br>e) That one gets a good 'feel' for people at the other end?<br>f) That it is just as though all people are in the same room?<br>g) That people on the other end seem to be real? |
| 6          | Affiliation         | Warnick, 2004; Hogenkamp, 2007   | a) Online community members do not always appreciate companies participating in their community. How is your opinion about this statement?<br>b) Why would community members allow companies into their discussion?<br>c) What would be the premises for companies to be allowed in an online   |

<sup>1</sup> All questions generated by the researchers

|    |                                    |   |  |
|----|------------------------------------|---|--|
|    |                                    |   | <p>community?</p> <p>d) Do you think that if a company member participates in an online community discussion it should clearly disclose their affiliation to the company and why they are participating? Why?</p> <p>e) Do you think a company member should only disclose their affiliation to the company or also their status in this company (e.g. head of communication, marketing director, CFO, CIO, CEO). If yes, why?</p>   |
| 6  | Perceived similarity               | Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Evans, 1963; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Price et al., 1987; Dellande & Gilly, 1998; Gilly et al., 1998; DeShields & Kara, 2000   | <p>a) In general, it is suggested that it is easier to communicate with individuals that are perceived to be similar. Do you think this is the same in online communities or does this not really matter in online communities?</p> <p>b) Speaking about “similar”, how would you define “being similar” in the context of an online community? What criteria might be important to a person to perceive the other person as “being similar” (in an online community)? E.g. having the same interests, using the same expressions, sharing the same values, having the same preferences.</p> |
| 7  | Source credibility                 | McGuire, 1969; Ohanian, 1990; Belch & Belch, 1994; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Lafferty et al., 2002; Massey, 2003; Clow & Baack, 2004  | Do you think it is important to a person that the source (i) is believable, (ii) has some expertise, (iii) has the public’s best interest (trustworthiness), (iv) is attractive and (v) likeable? Why?   |
| 8  | Interactivity                      | Toffler, 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Rafaeli, 1988; Tabscott, 1997; Shih, 1998; Ariely, 2000; Dellaert, 2000; Liu & Shrum, 2002; Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2004; Sicilia et al., 2005; Wright, 2006; Bagozzi et al., 2007 | <p>a) Do you think interactivity is important in online communities? How would you describe interactivity in online communities?</p> <p>b) In the literature we can find three kinds of interactivity: human-machine, human-message and human-human interactivity. Which, if any, of this interactivity do you consider to be important in online communities and why?</p>   |
| 9  | Interpersonal communication        | Kozinets, 1999; Bickart & Schindler, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Baumgarth, 2004; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Gruen et al., 2006; Stammerjohan et al., 2005; Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Dwyer, 2007 | <p>a) How do you think does the discussion on the platform influence an online community member? Why?</p> <p>b) Do you think the discussion has a big influence? Why?</p>  |
| 10 | Motives for participating in an OC | Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002  | <p>a) How do you think does the perception in terms of user-message interactivity change if an OCM has mainly topic/brand related motives, compared to an OCM that has mainly community related motives? Why?</p> <p>b) How do you think does the perception in terms of user-user interactivity change</p>  |

|    |   |   |  |
|----|---|---|--|
|    |   |   | if an OCM has mainly topic/brand related motives, compared to an OCM that has mainly community related motives? Why?   |
| 11 | Motives for participating in an OC                        | Dholakia et al., 2004   | How important do you consider source credibility to be for an OCM that has mainly topic/brand related motives, compared to an OCM that has mainly community related motives? Is there any difference?  |
| 12 | Motives for participating in an OC                        | Simons et al., 1970; Walther, 1996; DeShields & Kara, 2000  | How important do you consider similarity to be for an OCM that has mainly topic/brand related motives, compared to an OCM that has mainly community related motives? Is there any difference?          |
| 13 | Motives for participating in an OC                        | Short et al., 1976; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002  | How important do you consider social presence to be for an OCM that has mainly topic/brand related motives, compared to an OCM that has mainly community related motives? Is there any difference?     |
| 14 | Motives for participating in an OC                        | Walther, 1996, 2001   | How important do you consider social context cues to be for an OCM that has mainly topic/brand related motives, compared to an OCM that has mainly community related motives? Is there any difference? |
| 15 | Attitude towards the company                              | Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Barich & Kotler, 1991; Balmer, 1995; Brown, 1998; van Riel, 1995; Mykytyn et al., 2005; Pina et al., 2008 | How do you consider a positive image to influence the attitude to the company of an OCM?   |
| 16 | Attitude → Intention to buy/recommend a company's product | Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Pina et al., 2008   | How do you consider a positive attitude to influence the intention to buy/recommend a company's products/services?   |
| 17 | Image → Intention to buy/recommend a company's product    | Pina et al., 2008   | How do you consider a positive image to influence the intention to buy/recommend a company's products/services?  |
| 18 | Image → influence on word-of-mouth.                       | Godes & Mayzlin, 2004   | How do you consider a positive image to influence word-of-mouth communication by OCMs?   |

Source: Developed for the present study.

## B. Appendix – Online Community Interview Questions

| <i>No.</i> | <i>Topic</i>           | <i>Literature</i>  | <i>Question<sup>2</sup></i>   |
|------------|------------------------|--|---|
| 1          | Relevance of message   | Kiesler et al., 1984; Burgoon et al., 2002   | How can the relevance of a message influence the impression you have about a company-representative ?   |
| 2          | Informal communication | Rice et al., 1992; Weil, 2006; Wright, 2006  | How can i) informal and ii) formal communication influence the impression you have about the company-representative?  |
| 3          | Social context cues    | Mehrabian, 1969; Short et al., 1976; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Walther, 1992, 1995, 1996; Walther, et al., 1994; Lea & Spears, 1992; Jacobson, 1999 | How can the use of paralinguistics influence the impression you have about the company-representative?<br>How can additional descriptions about the company-representative influence the impression you have about the company-representative?  |
| 4          | Social presence        | Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968; Short et al., 1976; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Argyle & Dean, 1965; Zerfass, 2005; Weil, 2006; Wright, 2006  | Do you think that the following factors are important in online communities? Why?<br>a) To get a good enough idea of how people at the other end are reacting.<br>b) To get a real impression of personal contact with the people at the other end?<br>c) To easily assess the other people's reactions to what has been said?<br>d) That the conversation provides a great sense of realism?<br>e) That one gets a good 'feel' for people at the other end?<br>f) That it is just as though all people are in the same room?<br>g) That people on the other end seem to be real? |
| 6          | Affiliation            | Warnick, 2004; Hogenkamp, 2007   | Online community members do not always appreciate companies participating in their community. How is your opinion about this statement?<br>Why would you allow companies into your discussion?<br>What would be the premises for companies to be allowed in an online community?<br>Do you think that if a company member participates in an online community discussion it should clearly disclose their affiliation to the company and why they   |

<sup>2</sup> All questions generated by the researchers

|   |                             |   |  |
|---|-----------------------------|---|--|
|   |                             |   | <p>are participating? Why?</p> <p>Do you think a company member should only disclose their affiliation to the company or also their status in this company (e.g. head of communication, marketing director, CFO, CIO, CEO). If yes, why?</p> |
| 6 | Perceived similarity        | Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Evans, 1963; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Price et al., 1987; Dellande & Gilly, 1998; Gilly et al., 1998; DeShields & Kara, 2000   | <p>How can the similarity of a company-representative influence the impression you have about him?</p> <p>How would you define similarity?</p>   |
| 7 | Source credibility          | McGuire, 1969; Ohanian, 1990; Belch & Belch, 1994; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Lafferty et al., 2002; Massey, 2003; Clow & Baack, 2004  | How does the credibility of a company-representative influence the image you have of a company-representative?   |
| 8 | Interactivity               | Toffler, 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Rafaeli, 1988; Tabscott, 1997; Shih, 1998; Ariely, 2000; Dellaert, 2000; Liu & Shrum, 2002; Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2004; Sicilia et al., 2005; Wright, 2006; Bagozzi et al., 2007 | In the literature we can find three kinds of interactivity: human-machine, human-message and human-human interactivity. Which, if any, of this interactivity do you consider to be important in online communities and why?                  |
| 9 | Interpersonal communication | Kozinets, 1999; Bickart & Schindler, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Baumgarth, 2004; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Gruen et al., 2006; Stammerjohan et al., 2005; Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Dwyer, 2007 | How can messages of other community members influence the impression you have about the company-representative?  |

Source: Developed for the present study.

