Actor Engagement in Online Communities: A Practice-Based Approach

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Abstract

Despite extensive interest by academics and practitioners to understand and harness actor engagement (AE), empirical work offering insights into how and why actors change their engagement over time are limited and extant empirical research mostly focuses on the individual level of AE and fails to address its social aspects and the effects of A2A interactions. Therefore, this research is a response to both a managerial and a theoretical need for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the AE process in an online community, while accounting for the social aspects of AE and the effects of A2A interactions. Drawing on practice theory, this thesis sets out to explore the dynamics of engagement through the engagement practices of members in an online community, identify the full spectrum of engagement states, and changes in such states over time.

The objectives of this study are twofold. First, **to advance the conceptualisation of AE by adopting a practice-based approach**. Second, **to demystify the dynamics of the AE process and the effects of A2A interactions on such a process**. The context of the study is the for-profit community ExpatWoman.com (www.expatwoman.com), which is independently owned and funded mainly by advertising.

The researcher's philosophical stance is that of a social constructivist, hence social constructivism is the paradigm underpinning this thesis. To achieve the above two aims, the methodology of netnography is deemed suitable to study the selected online community, where non-participant observation of the Dubai forum is used and complemented by participant observation of offline meetups organised by the community.

Summarising the main implications for theory and practice, this thesis contributes from a theoretical perspective by enriching and advancing our understanding of AE in the context of online communities in four ways. First, it advances the AE conceptualisation by adopting a practice-based approach, hence supplementing its S-D logic-based foundational perspective with practice theory and demonstrates that the latter can provide a useful lens for empirically exploring AE. Second, it enhances the AE dimensionality by providing empirical support for the need to include a fourth (social) dimension. Third, by using longitudinal data, this study is

one of the first to empirically explore the dynamics of the AE process in an online community and to provide empirical evidence of the engagement conceptualisation proposed by Chandler & Lusch (2015) as comprising of two fundamental attributes: connections and dispositions. Fourth, unlike most of engagement studies to date, this research considers not only positive relationships but also negative experiences, and further explores the under-researched concept of disengagement by differentiating between naturally occurring and induced disengagement.

As for the practical contributions, the managerial implications emerging from the findings are primarily relevant for the growth and survival of online communities as well as for starting one. It also presents a better understanding of AE that can better guide the development of organisational strategies and tactics to maximise the benefits of this highly promising concept. Therefore, this thesis aims at suggesting some tactics to better manage the engagement platforms in specific, and the engagement process in general in the context of online communities. It also responds to calls to explore AE outside the more established B2C setting (e.g. Hollebeek et al. 2016a) and contribute to the wider online community literature by focusing on a community of interest, which represents a substantial proportion of online communities and which has been under-explored in comparison to the more researched brand communities (Hartmann et al. 2015; Weijo et al. 2014), hence can allow marketers to better capitalise on the significant opportunities that such communities can present.

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Publications

The following publications are related to and arising from research carried out for this PhD:

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2. Winklhofer, H., El Kolaly, H., & Peters, L. (2017, June). *Exploring Consumer Engagement in online communities – A Practice-Based Approach*. Paper presented at the 5th Naples Forum on Service, Sorrento Naples, Italy. http://www.naplesforumonservice.it/public/index.php?node=202&nm=5th+Naples+Forum

3. El Kolaly, H., Peters, L., and Winklhofer, H. The Dynamics of Member Engagement in Online Communities – A Practice Based Approach. Submitted to *Journal of Service Research* 29 April 2018.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Online communities have become extremely popular social environments (Seraj 2012; Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015), where people exchange resources such as information and advice about common interests (Chan & Li 2010; Chiu et al. 2006; Hartmann et al. 2015). Their interactive capabilities exponentially increased consumers' opportunities to communicate not only with firms (Deighton 1996; Hoffman & Novak 1996; Steinmann et al. 2015), but also with other consumers through customer-to-customers (C2C)[1] interactions (Adjei et al. 2010; Libai et al. 2010). It has empowered consumers (Cova & White 2010; Harrison et al. 2006; Pires et al. 2006; Shaw et al. 2006) by allowing them to create and share their own content and experiences, and to participate in value creation (Hoyer et al. 2010; Malthouse et al. 2016; Nambisan & Baron 2009). Most importantly, such interactivity reinforces what Cova (1997) termed the "linking value" which extends beyond the consumption of products or services and is based on the experience of being part of the community itself (Chan & Li 2010; Mathwick et al. 2008). This in turn has led to the emergence of a different consumption form that is socially embedded and is based on the community experience rather than the use value of products or services (Cova et al. 2007). Overall, online communities provide not only functional but also social benefits to their members (Dholakia et al. 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Wirtz et al. 2013).

At the same time, the rising phenomenon of online communities has not been ignored by marketers who soon realised the necessity to accommodate this emerging consumption mode and to harvest the substantial benefits that can be achieved from the efficient capitalisation of the growing power of such communities (Algesheimer et al. 2010; Bernoff & Li 2008; Zwass 2010). Chan & Li (2010, p.1034) explain that while online communities consist of members that are not only consumers, such communities are "*implicitly or explicitly structured around consumption and marketing interests*", and thus offer tremendous opportunities for marketing (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006; Muñiz & O'Guinn 2001). Such benefits include the efficient and

[1] The term C2C will be substituted by the term A2A later on in this document as will be explained.

convenient fast dissemination and sharing of information (Wasko & Faraj 2000; 2005) and innovation (Jeppesen & Frederiksen 2006; Kozinets et al. 2008; Lakhani & Von Hippel 2003), the ability to influence members' perceptions and actions (Adjei et al. 2010; Butler et al. 2002; Muñiz & Schau 2005), getting customers' feedback and their evaluations of new offerings (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Zwass 2010), decreasing customer service costs due to peer-to-peer problem solving (Mathwick et al. 2008; Moon & Sproul 2008; Wiertz & Ruyter 2007), and the opportunity to form long-lasting relationships with loyal customers (Franke & Shah 2003; Kim et al. 2008; Wirtz et al. 2013).

Initially, online community literature focused primarily on brand communities, defined as: "*a specialized, non-geographically bound, online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand's consumers*" (De Valck et al. 2009, p. 185, as quoted in Brodie et al. 2013, p.105). As Thomas et al. (2013, p.1011) note, "*research tends to privilege the dyadic relationship between a defined producer (e.g., firm or brand) and a community*". However, they explain that such dyadic view is incapable of capturing the more interconnected nature of many online communities where "*multiple producers*" (i.e. many firms/brands) can be simultaneously involved. Thomas et al. (2013, p.1011) further highlight that online communities are becoming more of "*interconnected network*[s] *of heterogeneous actors*" rather than "*series of dyads*" (i.e. brand communities), where members sharing a common interest can engage with multiple firms/brands related to such interest, rather than being limited to one firm/brand[2]. This type of online communities is labelled "communities of interest" by Armstrong & Hagel (1996). Kozinets (1999, p.254) defines such communities as: "*affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities*".

Recently, online communities of interest have become increasingly popular (Hartmann et al. 2015). As Weijo et al. (2014, p.2077) explain, "*online communities have become organic aggregate meeting-places not necessarily focused around a brand but rather around loosely connected consumption interests and lifestyles*". Similarly, Hartmann et al. (2015)[3] advocate focusing on such communities for the study of practices instead of brand communities which have been the prime focus of previous practice-based research (e.g., Schau et al. 2009, Habibi

[2] Thomas et al. (2013) explore a distance running community where multiple specialty stores and multiple manufacturers of running shoes and apparel are involved.
3 Hartmann et al. (2015) investigate value-creating practices in a gardening community where multiple brands related to gardening are involved.

et al. 2014; Hollebeek et al. 2017). In fact, more attention has been recently directed to the study of communities of interest within the academic marketing literature (e.g., Keeling et al. 2015; Närvänen et al. 2013; Seraj 2012). Marketing today depends on the formation of successful alliances with powerful online communities of interest. The winners are those with the deepest understanding of such communities and the growing power of its members (O'Sullivan 2015; Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015; Weijo et al. 2014), who are highly social and communitarian (Chan & Li 2010; Cova & Cova 2002; Cova et al. 2007).

However, the mere existence of an online community is no guarantee for its success (Bateman et al. 2011; Hartmann et al. 2015; Moan & Gossieaux 2010). As Worthen (2008) notes, many online communities fail to engage enough members. Hollebeek et al. (2017) further demonstrate that the ability of an online community to attract new members and retain existing ones depends on the existence of a group of highly engaged members. Those members willingly contribute time and effort by continuously providing the community and its members with resources, whether information or social support (Mathwick et al. 2008; Wasko & Faraj 2005). They constitute the "social core" (Rheingold 1993) of the community, without which it ceases to exist (Balasubramanian & Mahajan 2001). Therefore, **engagement** is vital for the prosperity and sustainability of an online community and is considered the main driver of its success.

In fact, **engagement** has become a buzzword in the marketing field that has recently attracted rising interest from both practitioners and academics (Brodie et al. 2011a; 2016b; Leckie et al. 2016). Managers realised that developing and enhancing customer/consumer engagement is a strategic imperative for fostering customer relationships (Vivek et al. 2012; Hollebeek et al. 2016b), essential in developing sustainable competitive advantage, driving sales growth, and increasing profitability (Bijmolt et al. 2010; Kumar & Pansari 2016; Pansari & Kumar 2017). Consequently, practitioners took the lead in attempting to understand engagement. This was followed by growing attention from marketing scholars (e.g., Bowden 2009; Higgins & Scholer 2009; Pham & Avnet 2009), who addressed the phenomenon using different engagement-based concepts (see Appendix 1 for a review) such as customer engagement (e.g., Brodie et al. 2011), consumer engagement (e.g., Brodie et al. 2013), community engagement (e.g., Algesheimer et al. 2005), customer brand engagement (e.g., Hollebeek 2011), brand engagement (e.g., Hollebeek & Chen 2014), advertising engagement (e.g., Wang 2006), and more recently actor engagement (AE) (e.g., Chandler & Lusch 2015). The adoption of such more generic concept

of AE, defined as "*both the actor's disposition to engage and the activity of engaging in an interactive process of resource integration within a service ecosystem*" (Storbacka et al. 2016, p. 3008), reflects a new trend where the initial customer-firm dyadic focus is being replaced by a broader networked perspective. In line with this new direction, AE is the engagement concept (i.e. the term) used in this thesis to further advance the study of engagement from such broadened actor-to-actor (A2A) orientation (Vargo & Lusch 2011) by being one of the first empirical research to adopt such view.

The need to understand the AE process from a network perspective has been repeatedly acknowledged in literature to accommodate the highly-networked nature of today' business environment and service ecosystems that involve multiple interactions among numerous actors (e.g., Dessart et al. 2016; Li et al. 2017; Maslowska et al. 2016). However, it was not until recently that engagement research started to shift from a focus on dyadic relationships and individually based engagement, where customer/consumer engagement with a brand is the prime focus, to adopt a broader perspective of engagement in service ecosystems (Brodie et al. 2016a; Hollebeek et al. 2016a). While these networked aspects impact all online communities regardless of size, larger online communities are disproportionally affected as they can no longer be managed through human interaction alone. Large communities resemble big data environments and a meaningful user/member management system will necessitate identification of patterns or practices that could lead to conflict or a decrease in engagement levels for individual members. Data scientists have already at their disposal techniques that would help identify members using tools such as conversation analysis, syntactic, lexicon-based text mining rules or sentiment analysis (Burnap et al. 2015) but require the guidance from marketers to make effective use of these tools. Therefore, a better understanding of the dynamics of member engagement (AE) is necessary to anticipate and/or influence changes in an online community.

Furthermore, AE has been identified in literature as a process which is dynamic and iterative, and comprising of varying states (Brodie et al. 2011a; Dessart et al. 2016; Hollebeek et al. 2014b; Marbach et al. 2016), yet empirical work exploring the dynamics of the AE process and its different states in a network context is limited (Li et al. 2017; Alexander et al. 2018). This thesis attempts to bridge this gap and advances the understanding of AE by taking a practice theory approach (practice-based approach hereafter), where practice theory refers to the "*collection of accounts that promote practices as the fundamental social phenomenon*"

(Schatzki 1996, p.11). A practice-based approach focuses on activities and processes (Vargo & Lusch 2016), making the AE construct more observable and manageable. Therefore, in order to empirically explore the dynamics of the AE process from such a practice perspective, first, a complete array of all possible engagement practices undergone by all members need to be identified, including the less active members. This is in contrast to the practice-based engagement studies to date (e.g., Brodie et al. 2013; Habibi et al. 2014; Hollebeek et al. 2017) that focused solely on practices undergone by the most active members who are typically the minority of any online community (De Valck et al. 2009). Second, since the AE process is composed of varying states, in order to understand the dynamics of the AE process, the different engagement states should be identified and the effects of the A2A interactions explored (the A2A interactions reflect the network perspective, which involve many-to-many interactions among multiple members/actors). Hence, this thesis also contributes to our theoretical understanding of AE by responding to the need to empirically investigate two of the foundational premises posited by Brodie et al. (2011a), namely; that engagement states occur within a dynamic and iterative process of service relationships that cocreate value, and that it occurs within a specific set of situational conditions generating differing engagement states. It contributes to marketing practice by providing an understanding of the dynamics of the engagement process that can help to operationalise the techniques mentioned earlier, and hence to better manage online communities.

1.2. Research Objectives and Questions

Against the above background, the objectives of this thesis are twofold:

1. Advancing the conceptualisation of AE by adopting a practice-based approach.
2. Demystifying the dynamics of the AE process in an online community and the effects of A2A interactions on such process.

These were used to formulate, in turn, the following research questions to be empirically addressed:

1. What are the AE practices in the online community under study?
2. What are the various engagement states identified in the online community under study? What are the effects of the A2A interactions on such states?

To address the second research question, an engagement state is broken down into its constituent properties: an actor's disposition and connections (Chandler & Lusch 2015; Storbacka et al. 2016).

1.3. Research Methodology

The complexity of AE in an online community context and the scarcity of empirical research called for the use of qualitative methods to accommodate the exploratory nature of this study. The researcher's philosophical stance is that of social constructivism; such worldview considers knowledge to be rooted in the interactions (Creswell 2012) or practices (Burr 2003) that exist between people and their environments.

A netnographic methodology (Kozinets 2002) is selected as it allows for the collection of rich relevant data in its natural setting, and hence the exploration of the dynamics of the AE process in an online community via engagement practices and A2A interactions. As context, the online community ExpatWoman.com (www.expatwoman.com) is chosen. It is a for-profit online community, which is supporting women and families taking on new expat challenges and connecting women worldwide, independently owned and funded mainly by advertising.

This thesis uses longitudinal data, which allows for the investigation of the dynamics of the AE process and its development over time (Hollebeek et al. 2016a). Data was collected via ongoing non-participant observation which ensures unobtrusiveness, and hence increases authenticity and integrity. Furthermore, the online data was complemented and substantiated via participant observation in offline meetups organised by the community.

Since this research adopts a practice-based approach for studying AE, an inductive thematic analysis was employed; where themes are identified from the data rather than attempting to fit

the data into a coding frame that pre-existed based on literature. Furthermore, the analysis process was iterative, and both data collection and analysis were carried out until saturation (Goulding 2002; Strauss & Corbin 1998). Finally, member checks (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994; Hirschman 1986; Lincoln & Guba 1985) were conducted on regular basis to ensure the trustworthiness of emerging findings and interpretations.

1.4. Thesis Outline

This thesis is composed of six remaining chapters, summarised as follows:

Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the development in engagement research from its initial conceptualisations to the recent introduction of the AE concept, while indicating the definition of AE used in this thesis. This is followed by an overview of the S-D logic, being the current theoretical foundation of AE. Next, it presents an introduction of the practice theory, which is the supplementary theoretical lens adopted in this thesis to further advance the AE conceptualisation, and further highlights its adequacy for this research. Lastly, the application of practice theory in marketing in general and for the study of engagement in specific is discussed.

Chapter 3 presents the adopted research approach while highlighting its adequacy and appropriateness for this study. The research approach is described in terms of the research paradigm (social constructivism), the selected methodology (netnography), and the chosen methods (observational methods). Next, the procedures for data collection (non-participant and participant observations) are explained, followed by a discussion of ethical measures and quality considerations, with special emphasis on reflexivity.

Chapter 4 explains the adopted data analysis approach, which is inductive thematic analysis, and how it is applied to achieve the research objectives. This is followed by a review of the two phases of data analysis used to address the above mentioned two research questions; the first phase involves the identification of the various AE practices in the community under study, while the second phase aims at identifying specific engagement states and any change in state over time.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the first phase of analysis. It discusses the nine empirically identified engagement practices, which are subsequently organised into three thematic categories: 1) cognitive engagement practices (composed of two practices: *learning* and *sharing*), 2) emotional engagement practices (composed of three practices: *venting*, *empathising*, and *appreciating*), and 3) social engagement practices (composed of four practices; *welcoming*, *chatting*, *governing*, and *demarcating*).

Chapter 6 reviews the second phase of analysis where the dynamics of the AE process is investigated. It starts by discussing the use of the A2A interactions modes as observable indicators which can reflect the alignment of actors' dispositions and connections, where three modes are identified; no interaction, positive A2A interactions mode, and negative A2A interactions mode. It further explains the use of the configuration of the elements of practices as a determinant of the mode of interaction; where congruent elements of practices lead to a positive A2A interactions mode, while incongruence in such elements yields a negative A2A interactions mode. The chapter then proceeds by providing a practice-based framework which explains the AE process, and how an actor's adopted practices and the A2A interactions mode can lead to one of six engagement states based on the actor' dispositions and connections. Finally, each of those states is discussed in terms of dispositions and connections.

Chapter 7 presents the discussion and conclusions of the thesis, where the theoretical contributions and the managerial implications of the research are highlighted, the limitations of the study are discussed, and avenues for future research are suggested.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, the research background, the research problem, and research objectives were introduced. These were reached based on a thorough literature review that is summarised in this chapter which sets the conceptual and theoretical background underpinning this thesis by providing a critical overview of relevant literature and introducing key concepts. In order to do so, four bodies of literature were reviewed: engagement, S-D logic, online community, and practice theory.

The chapter covers the following main points. First, it presents the development in the engagement conceptualisation and how the concept has evolved into the AE concept used in this thesis. Second, it provides an overview of the S-D logic, being the theoretical foundation of the engagement conceptualisation mostly adopted to date, while highlighting the relationship between S-D logic and engagement. Finally, it introduces the practice theory and discusses its relevance to the study of AE.

2.2. The Engagement Concept: From Practice to Academia

The last decade has witnessed an increasing interest from practitioners and marketing scholars in the concept of engagement (Brodie et al. 2016a; 2016b; Leckie et al. 2016). This can be attributed to its positive impact on profitability (Bijmolt et al. 2010; Pansari & Kumar 2017) due to its significant potential benefits (Li et al. 2017) which include the advancement of customer relationships (Hollebeek et al. 2016b; Verhoef et al. 2010; Vivek et al. 2012), gaining competitive advantage (Kumar et al. 2010; Kumar & Pansari 2016), the significant roles played by engaged customers in new product development (Hoyer et al. 2010) and in product/service innovation (Füller et al. 2009; Nambisan 2002; Sawhney et al. 2005), the dissemination of positive word-of-mouth (Brown et al. 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Libai et al. 2010), and value cocreation (Hoyer et al. 2010; Jaakkola & Alexander 2014; Storbacka et al. 2016).

Attempting to reap such benefits, practitioners were the first to explore the promising concept of engagement (see Appendix 2 for a review of engagement conceptualisations in business practice literature). Subsequently, the emerging concept attracted the attention of marketing scholars (e.g., Bowden 2009; Higgins & Scholer 2009; Pham & Avnet 2009). Such rising interest, both in practice and academia, led the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) to place customer engagement (CE) on top of its research priorities for 2010-2012. Responding to the MSI call, the *Journal of Services Research* dedicated a special issue titled "Customer Engagement" in 2010 to CE, and hence a more vigorous interest in the topic started in marketing academia. It is worth noting that "Engagement" remained on the MSI priority list for 2012-2014 and for 2014-2016.

2.3. Conceptualising Engagement

Engagement has been conceptualised in various ways. Table 2.1 provides an overview of the different engagement conceptualisations and dimensionality presented in marketing and management literature, where two main research streams are identified: (1) a unidimensional, and (2) a multidimensional.

Table 2.1: Engagement Conceptualisations and Dimensionality in Management and Marketing Literature

Authors	Concept	Definition	Dimensionality
Algesheimer et al. (2005)	Community Engagement	the consumer's intrinsic motivation to interact and cooperate with community members	Multidim.: C*, E*, B*
Patterson et al. (2006)	Customer Engagement	The level of a customer's physical, cognitive, and emotional presence in their relationship with a service organisation	Multidim.: C*, E*, B*
Wang (2006)	Advertising Engagement	A measure of the contextual relevance in which a brand's messages are framed and presented based on its surrounding context	Multidim.
Bowden (2009)	Customer Engagement	A psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which customer loyalty: 1) forms for new customers of a service brand, and 2) may Be maintained for repeat purchase customers	Multidim.: C, E, B*
Gambetti & Graffigna (2010)	Consumer-Brand Engagement	A complex concept strongly influenced by psychological, social, interactive, relational, experiential, and context-based components.	Multidim.: B, S*
Higgins & Scholer (2009)	Engagement	An individual's state of being involved, occupied, fully absorbed or engrossed in something (sustained attention), generating the consequences of a particular attraction or repulsion force.	Multidim.: C, B, E*
Pham & Avent (2009)	Engagement	A motivational state related to involvement and absorption of attention inferred from a pattern of action or withdrawal with respect to a target object.	Multidim.: C*, B
Sprott et al. (2009)	Brand Engagement	An individual difference representing consumers' propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves	Unidim.: B
Kumar et al. (2010)	Customer Engagement	Active interactions of a customer with a firm, with prospects and with other customers, whether they are transactional or non-transaction in nature	Unidim.: B
Noland & Phillips (2010)	Stakeholder Engagement	A type of interaction that involves recognition and respect of common humanity and the ways in which the actions of each may affect the other of each may affect the other	Unidim.: B
Phillips & Macquarrie (2010)	Advertising Engagement	Modes of engagement are routes to persuasion, with "persuasion" defined as positive outcomes modes for the brand—including the strengthening or intensification of brand experience	Multidim.

Table 2.1: Continued

Authors	Concept	Definition	Dimensionality
Scott & Craig-Lees (2010)	Audience Engagement	Consists of cognitive effort and affective response	Multidim.: C, E*
Van Doorn et al. (2010)	Customer Engagement Behaviour	Customer's behavioural manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers	Unidim.: B
Brodie et al. (2011a)	Customer Engagement	A psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive cocreative customer customer experiences with focal agent/object in focal service relationships	Multidim.: C, E, B
Hollebeek (2011a)	Customer Brand Engagement	The level of an individual 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	Multidim.: C, E, B
Vivek et al. (2012)	Customer Engagement	The intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organisation's offerings and/or organisational activities, which either the customer or the organisation initiate	Multidim.: C, B, E, S
Franzak et al. (2014)	Brand Engagement	A set of behavioural outcomes that result when customers meaningfully interact with a product	Unidim.: B
Hollebeek et al. (2014)	Consume Brand Engagement	Consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions	Multidim.: C, B, E
Hollebeek & Chen (2014)	Brand Engagement	The level of a consumer's cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions	Multidim.: C, B, E
Jaakkola & Alexander (2014)	Customer Engagement Behaviour	the customer provision of resources during non-transactional, joint value processes that occur in interaction with the focal firm and/or other stake-holders, thereby affecting their respective value processes and outcomes	Unidim.: B
Sarkar & Sreejesh (2014)	Active Customer	the degree to which the individual is willing to spend time, energy, money, and other resources in the brand beyond those expended during actual	Mulitdim.: C, B

Table 2.1: Continued

Authors	Concept	Definition	Dimensionality
Vivek et al. (2014)	Customer Engagement	CE goes beyond purchase and is the level of the customer's (or potential customer's) interactions and connections with the brand or firm's offerings or activities, often involving others in the social network created around the brand/offering/activity	Multidim.: C, B, E, S
Chandler & Lusch (2015)	Actor Engagement	Alignment of connections and dispositions	Multi: C, B, E
Isaac et al. (2015)	Engagement	A multilevel construct that emerges from the thoughts and feelings about one or more rich experiences involved in reaching a personal goal	Multidim.: C, B, E
Brodie et al. (2016a)	Actor Engagement	AE reflects an actor's disposition to provide investments in practices which extend beyond what is fundamental to exchange transactions, through reciprocal interactions between actors including individuals, groups, networks, and machines/technologies	Multidim.: C, B, E
Dessart et al. (2016)	Consumer Engagement	The state that reflects consumers' individual dispositions toward engagement foci, which are context-specific. Engagement is expressed through varying levels of affective, cognitive, and behavioural manifestations that go beyond exchange situations	Multidim.: C, B, E
Storbacka et al. (2016)	Actor Engagement	Both the actor's disposition to engage, and the activity of engaging in an interactive process of resource integration within a service	Multidim.: C, B, E

*Notes: Engagement Dimensionality; C is cognitive, E is emotional, B is behavioural, and S is social. * Inferred from the research, rather than being explicitly stated.*
Compiled by author; Sources: Brodie et al. (2011a), Hollebeek et al. (2014), Dessart et al. (20

2.3.1. Unidimensional Perspective

One stream of research considered engagement from a customer management perspective and adopted a unidimensional (behavioural) conceptualisation of the construct (e.g., Jaakkola & Alexander 2014; Pansari & Kumar 2017; Verleye et al. 2014). These studies followed Van Doorn et al.'s (2010) narrow CE conceptualisation, which focuses solely on the behavioural aspects of engagement and considers it to be "*a customer's behavioural manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers*" (p.254).

2.3.2. Multidimensional Perspective

Another research stream considered engagement from a multidimensional perspective and viewed it as a psychological state (e.g., Hollebeek 2011; Morgan & Wilson 2010; Vivek et al. 2012), while Bowden (2009) described it as a psychological process that drives customer loyalty.

By successfully consolidating diverse views and insights not only from marketing but also from various academic disciplines, Brodie et al. (2011a) offered a broader and multidimensional (behavioural, cognitive, and emotional) conceptualisation derived from an S-D logic perspective, hence emphasising the interactive cocreative experiential nature of CE. Brodie et al. (2011a) consider CE to be a psychological state occurring within a dynamic and iterative process of service relationships that cocreate value. By explicitly exploring the conceptual foundations of CE and differentiating it from other relational concepts (such as participation or involvement), their conceptualisation significantly advanced engagement research by providing a strong foundation for its further development, and hence has been widely adopted in literature. They provide five fundamental propositions (key themes) to define the CE conceptual domain, which represents the scope of the construct (Jarvis et al. 2003; MacKenzie & Podsakoff 2003; MacKenzie et al. 2005), hence offering a common anatomy of CE. The five propositions are discussed below.

2.3.2.1. The Focal Engagement Subjects and Objects

The first proposition suggests that CE is a psychological state which is context dependent and requires interactions or relationships between subject (e.g., customer) and specific object (e.g., brand). Furthermore, Brodie et al. (2011a) suggest that CE can extend beyond the duality of customer/firm interactions, and it is such broader perspective that has been increasingly adopted in recent literature, as will be further elaborated in section 2.6. below. Concerning the subject of engagement, customers have been the prime focus of engagement studies. However, academic attention has been lately directed to other stakeholders and their roles (e.g., Hollebeek et al. 2016b; Jaakkola & Alexander 2014).

As for the object of engagement, literature to date considered the brand as the prime focal engagement object (e.g., Franzak et al. 2014; Hollebeek 2011a; Sprott et al. 2009). Other engagement objects considered in literature include advertising (e.g., Calder et al.2009; Philips & McQuarrie 2010), and work/employee engagement (e.g., Bakker & Xanthopoulou 2009; Kumar & Pansari 2016). Moreover, some recent studies attempted to address engagement with multiple engagement objects (foci) simultaneously, such as brand and community (e.g., Dessart et al. 2015; 2016). This is in addition to recent attempts to consider engagement in various contexts, including retailing (Vivek et al. 2014), public transport system (Jaakkola & Alexander 2014), healthcare (Keeling et al. 2016; Verleye et al. 2014), tourism (So et al. 2014), business-to-business (Guesalaga 2016; Hollebeek 2017; Jonas et al. 2018; Vivek et al. 2016), information communication technology (ICT)-mediated environments (Breidbach & Brodie 2017), and online/social media (e.g., Azer & Alexander 2018; ; Viswanathan et al. 2018; Yang et al. 2016). The latter is the context further investigated in this study, and hence key engagement studies in the marketing and management literature in an online/social media context are reviewed in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2: Engagement Studies in an Online/Social Media Context in Marketing and Management Literature

Authors	Concept	Context	Purpose of the Study
Cadler et al. (2009)	Online Engagement	Online media	To explore the relationship between online engagement and advertising effectiveness
Mollen & Wilson (2010)	Engagement	Brand website	To investigate the online experience from practice and academia
Abdul-Ghani et al. (2011)	Engagement	Online auction website	To provide emic and etic interpretations of engagement with a consumer-to-consumer (C2C) online auction site
Gummerus et al. (2012)	Customer Engagement	FB brand community	To study the effect of customer engagement behaviours perceived relationship benefits and relationship outcomes
Sashi (2012)	Customer Engagement	Social media	To examine practitioners' views
Brodie et al. (2013)	Consumer Engagement	OBC	To explore the nature and scope of consumer engagement in OBC
Wirtz et al. (2013)	Brand-Customer Engagement	OBC	To investigate OBC from both consumer and companies perspectives
Kuo and Feng (2013)	Brand Community Engagement	OBC	To identify how the interaction characteristics of brand community affect the perceived benefits of community members
Habibi et al. (2014)	Brand Community Engagement	FB brand communities	To investigate brand communities based in social media
Wallace et al. (2014)	Brand Engagement	FB	To explore consumer engagement with self-expressive brands
Baldus et al. (2015)	OBC Engagement	OBCs	To identify motivations affecting participations in OBCs
Hollebeek et al. (2014)	Customer Brand Engagement	Social media	To develop a Customer Brand Engagement scale in social media
Dessart et al. (2016)	Consumer Engagement	OBCs	To develop a multi-focal scale
Malthouse et al. (2016)	Engagement	Social media site	To investigate the effect of consumer engagement in user generated content on actual buying decisions

Table 2.2: Continued

Authors	Concept	Context	Purpose of the Study
Marbach et al. (2016)	Online Customer Engagement	Social media	To investigate the role of personality traits and perceived value on online customer engagement
Schivinski et al. (2016)	Consumer Engagement	Social media	To measure consumer's engagement with social media
Solem & Pedersen (2016)	Customer Brand Engagement	Social media (FB)	To examine regulatory fit as a key driver of customer brand engagement and brand value experience
Yang et al. (2016)	Brand Engagement	Social media	To explore behavioural manifestations of brand engagement
Hollebeek (2017)	Business Customer Engagement	B2B social media	To investigate business customer engagement, as expressed through social media and/or other B2B engagement-platforms
Hollebeek et al. (2017)	Virtual Brand Community Engagement	Luxury OBC	To develop a refined typology and process model of OBC engagement practices
Bowden et al. (2017)	Consumer Engagement	OBCs	To explore both positively and negatively valenced consumer engagement with multiple engagement objects
Breidbach & Brodie (2017)	Actor Engagement	Social media	To explore the dynamic process of multi-actor engagement networks
Mathwick & Mosteller (2017)	Online Reviewer Engagement	Online reviewing community	To identify the factors that motivate online reviewer engagement
Azer & Alexander (2018)	Engagement Behaviour	Trip advisor	To examine negatively valenced influencing behaviour in an online context
Islam et al. (2018)	Customer Engagement	OBCs on FB	To advance the research on consumer engagement in OBCs
Viswanathan et al. 2018	Consumer Engagement	Social media	To study consumer engagement in the context of TV shows

Notes: OBS refers to online brand communities, and FB refers to Facebook.

2.3.2.2. The Dynamics of the Engagement Process

The second proposition emphasises the importance of interactive cocreative experiences as the conceptual base for CE and highlights the dynamic and iterative nature of the engagement process as comprising of various states (Hollebeek et al. 2014; Vivek et al. 2014; Dessart et al. 2016; Marbach et al. 2016). The dynamic nature of the CE process has been repeatedly acknowledged in the literature (e.g., Brodie et al. 2013; Chandler & Lusch 2015; Maslowska et al. 2016). Furthermore, Li et al. (2017) consider the investigation of the engagement dynamics as a paramount priority for the advancement of its conceptualisation, yet empirical work exploring these dynamics is limited (Hollebeek et al. 2016a).

Moreover, most of the engagement research in marketing is cross-sectional in nature, providing a snapshot of the phenomenon, hence fails to explore the dynamics of the engagement process and its development over time (Hollebeek et al. 2014). Instead, several scholars recommend the use of longitudinal data (e.g., Bowden et al. 2015; Hollebeek et al. 2016b; Leckie et al. 2016). A preliminary attempt is provided by Li et al. (2017), yet more longitudinal research is still needed.

2.3.2.3. Antecedents and Consequences

The third proposition posits CE as a central concept within a nomological network of other relational concepts, hence emphasising that CE is to be considered in conjunction with other associated relational concepts, such as participation, involvement, commitment, and trust that are proposed as CE antecedents and/or consequences. Van Doorn (2011) and Brodie et al. (2011a) explain that due to the iterative nature of the CE process, some consequences can subsequently act as antecedents. The engagement antecedents and consequences were further explored by Leckie et al. (2016) and Pansari & Kumar (2017).

2.3.2.4. Dimensionality

The fourth proposition establishes CE as a multidimensional construct (comprising of three dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional), where the expression of certain dimensions is context specific, depending on the specific subject(s) and object(s) involved. In other words, CE can be manifested cognitively, emotionally, and/or behaviourally depending on the exact situation. However, Dessart et al. (2016, p.405) note that there is still disagreement regarding the number of dimensions and their compositions, and hence the dimensionality of CE "*remains unclear*". While Brodie et al.'s (2011a) tripartite dimensionality remains the dominant in marketing literature to date, some scholars (e.g., Abdul-Ghani et al. 2011; Vivek et al. 2014; Wallace et al. 2014) advocate the need to include a social dimension. Moreover, Gambetti et al. (2012) note that the social dimension did not yet reach its full potential in engagement studies and merits further attention. They further demonstrate that from practitioners' perspective engagement is mostly associated with social aspects.

Furthermore, both Brodie al. (2016a) and Breidbach & Brodie (2017) acknowledge the social nature of engagement and highlight the need to consider the social context, yet they limit the construct dimensionality to Brodie et al.'s (2011a) established three dimensions. Similarly, Dessart et al. (2016) emphasise the importance of the social aspect of engagement and note that "*engagement is by nature social and interactive*" (p.400), yet still exclude the social dimension from their suggested conceptualisation and continue to adhere to the three recognised dimensions. Their justification for dropping the social dimension is that "[it] *is not very adaptable to all engagement contexts …To illustrate, most consumers tend to be physically alone when interacting online*" (p.406).

However, there are two concerns regarding the validity of Dessart et al.'s (2016) above argument. First, according to Brodie et al. (2011a), the dimensionality of a construct is part of its conceptual domain, which "*defines* [its] *scope and delineation*" (p.257), yet not all of the dimensions should be expressed in all situations, as they are context-dependent. Therefore, removing a dimension while being expressed in some contexts renders the conceptualisation incomplete. Second, the provided illustration is rather unsound, considering that the social dimension is even more relevant for online engagement as suggested by Vivek et al. (2014). In

addition, online interactions actually supplement the social behaviour in the physical world, hence while being "*physically alone*", consumers interact with others online and consider online communities a great source of social interactions (Kozinets 1999). In fact, the social nature of online communities has been long established in literature (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia 2002; De Valck et al. 2009; Chan & Li 2010). Perhaps a social dimension is not as prominent in some other settings (e.g., B2B), yet it should be included in the construct conceptualisation since it is expressed in some contexts.

2.3.2.5. Engagement Levels

The fifth proposition recognises the existence of varying CE levels across different engagement states. Brodie et al. (2011a) suggest that the CE level varies with time, and it typically starts by being low then increases with favourable interactions. They further consider the CE states to reside on a continuum ranging from non-engaged to highly engaged, yet this has not been empirically investigated to date. Furthermore, they argue that a state of non-engagement[4] typically occurs before and after the engagement process, and can also take place during dormancy periods, which are temporarily inactive periods of a particular interactive experience. Moreover, they acknowledge the possibility of having negative expressions of engagement, yet they limit it to a dissociation from the object of engagement. However, Van Doorn (2011, p.281) highlights a possibility of a "*dark side*" of engagement that extends beyond non-engagement where negative forms of engagement can also take place (e.g., negative word-of-mouth). Explaining the difference between disengagement and negative engagement, Maslowska et al. (2016) refer to the former as the withdrawal from a relationship, hence no investment in resources and no engagement behaviours are involved. Whereas the latter involves investment of resources and display of negative behaviours (e.g., disseminating negative reviews) as it refers to the negative manifestations of the engagement, where an actor becomes actively engaged in exhibiting unfavourable feelings, thoughts, and/or behaviour related to the object of engagement (Hollebeek & Chen 2014)[5].

[4] Brodie et al. (2013) replaced the term non-engagement with the term disengagement.
[5] Hollebeek & Chen (2014) focused on brand engagement and defined negative engagement in this context as: "*consumers' unfavorable brand-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during focal brand interactions*" (p.69).

Prior engagement studies have focused mostly on positive service relationships, considerably less attention has been paid to negative experiences and the resulting disengagement and/or negative engagement (Hollebeek et al. 2016a). As Jaakkola & Alexander (2014) note, actors dropping out (i.e. disengaging) and the factors that deter engagement merit more exploration. Moreover, Brodie et al. (2011a) note that the prime focus of engagement research in marketing has been the positive forms of engagement. Exceptions would be the recent preliminary investigations by Azer & Alexander (2018); Bowden et al. (2015), Dolan et al. (2015), Hollebeek & Chen (2014), Juric et al. (2016), Li et al. (2017; 2018), and Maslowska et al. (2016). These studies offer initial insights regarding disengagement and negative engagement, yet little remains known regarding negative experiences and their impact on engagement/disengagement (Hollebeek et al. 2016a).

Having reviewed Brodie et al.'s (2011a) five fundamental propositions of their S-D logic-based engagement conceptualisation, which is theoretical underpinning of this research, an overview of S-D logic is deemed necessary before moving further.

2.4. S-D Logic: An Overview

The S-D logic was proposed by Vargo & Lusch in (2004) as an alternative lens to the previously established goods-centred model of exchange, referred to as 'goods-dominant logic' (G-D logic), that marketing has inherited from economics. The G-D logic focused on operand resources (which are "*resources on which an operation or act is performed to produce an effect*" (Vargo & Lusch 2004, p.2)), embedded value (value in exchange), and transactions. In contrast, S-D logic offers a broader perspective of markets which is service-centred. Service as used by S-D logic is defined as "*the application of resources for the benefit of other actors*" (Lusch & Vargo 2011, p.37), hence offering a transcending conceptualisation of service (Vargo & Lusch 2017). For S-D logic, operant resources ("*which are employed to act on operand resources*" (Vargo & Lusch 2004, p.2)), value cocreation (referring to "*the joint integration of resources by the multiple actors associated with an exchange*" (Chandler & Vargo 2011, p.35)), and relationships are central. Therefore, by making the customer endogenous to value creation, S-D logic shifts from the previously established output orientation of G-D logic to a process orientation (Edvardsson et al. 2011; Merz et al. 2009).

Since its introduction, S-D logic has been widely adopted; the seminal article introducing this logic was cited more than 11,900 times to date[6] (Google Scholar 2018) and has been subject to conceptual refinement. As Vargo & Lusch (2017) highlight, S-D logic has been an evolving project that focused from its beginning on identifying and extending apparent convergence in the evolving marketing thought, rather than offering radically new ideas, and has been founded on a base built by many scholars. For instance, the concept of cocreation has been advocated by Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2000) for several years prior to the introduction of S-D logic and has been initially defined by Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004, p.8) as the "*joint creation of value by the company and customers*". Furthermore, the progress of S-D logic was enabled also by a community of active scholars (Vargo & Lusch 2016; 2017).

The original eight premises introduced in 2004 were refined and expanded to ten in 2008 (Vargo & Lusch 2008), where the importance of resource integration to value cocreation has been further emphasised, and the experiential and idiosyncratic nature of value has been clarified. Hence, the contextual nature of value and value creation has been highlighted and was subsequently further explored by Vargo (2009), Vargo et al. (2009), Chandler & Vargo (2011), and Akaka et al. (2013).

Furthermore, two significant S-D logic advancements were introduced in Vargo & Lusch (2011). The first was the formal adoption of a generic actor-to-actor (A2A) orientation, replacing the initial dyadic (firm-customer) perspective. This A2A view acknowledges that value cocreation involves a complex and dynamic system of actors where every actor is a value cocreator. The second is the introduction of a 'service ecosystems' perspective which provides a useful lens for studying value cocreation and systems (re)formation (Vargo & Akaka 2012), which has been identified as the unit of analysis for value cocreation (Vargo & Lusch 2017). A service ecosystem is defined as a "*relatively self-contained self-adjusting systems of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange*" (Vargo & Lusch 2016, p.10). This service ecosystem approach considers resource integration among multiple actors as the base for studying value cocreation with emphasis on the social context (Vargo & Akaka 2012), hence adopts a network perspective for understanding value realisation and cocreation (Vargo & Lusch 2017). Such service ecosystem view allows for the development of a multi-level conceptualisation of

[6] Last checked on 15/03/2018.

context, permitting the exploration of the same phenomena (e.g., value cocreation) from different levels of aggregation, namely from a micro, meso, and macro-level (Chandler & Vargo 2011; Vargo & Lusch 2017).

S-D logic was further updated in Vargo & Lusch (2016). Some of the ten foundational premises were modified; four were elevated to axiom status, indicating their significance, and an eleventh premise was introduced (FP11, which also represents the fifth axiom) recognising the role of institutions. According to Vargo & Lusch (2017, p.49), institutions are "*the humanly devised rules, norms, and beliefs that enable and constrain action and make social life at least somewhat predictable and meaningful*". Whereas institutional arrangements refer to "*higher-order assemblages of interrelated institutions*" (Vargo & Lusch 2017, p.49). Such institutions and institutional arrangements are the focus of most recent S-D logic research. Moreover, Vargo & Lusch (2016) further highlight the role of context in understanding value cocreation. They emphasise the need to consider the larger system of resource-integrating actors and their institutional arrangements, because those actors are in fact part of a larger dynamic service ecosystem that extends beyond the firm-customer dyad to further include the actors' communities and other stakeholders (Merz et al. 2009). Table 2.3 provides an overview of the development of the foundational premises of S-D logic from its introduction to date.

Table 2.3: Evolution of S-D Logic

FP*	2004	2008	2016 *Updated FP* ➡	*Axiom Status*
FP1	The application of specialised skills and knowledge is the fundamental unit of exchange.	Service is the fundamental basis of exchange.	No change	Elevated to axiom 1
FP2	Indirect exchange masks the fundamental unit of exchange.	Indirect exchange masks the fundamental basis of exchange.	No Change	No
FP3	Goods are distribution mechanisms for service provision.	No Change	No Change	No
FP4	Knowledge is the fundamental source of competitive advantage.	Operant resources are the fundamental source of competitive advantage.	Operant resources are the fundamental source of strategic benefit.	No
FP5	All economies are service economies.	No Change	No Change	No
FP 6	The customer is always the co-producer.	The customer is always a cocreator of value.	Value is cocreated by multiple actors always including the beneficiary.	Elevated to axiom 2
FP7	The enterprise can only make value propositions.	The enterprise cannot deliver value, but only offer value propositions.	Actors cannot deliver value but can participate in the cocreation and offering of value.	No
FP8	Service-centred view is customer relational.	A service-centred view is inherently customer oriented and relational.	A service-centred view is inherently customer oriented and relational.	No
FP9		All social and economic actors are resource integrators.	No change	Elevated to axiom 3
F10		Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined.	No change	Elevated to axiom 4
FP11			Value cocreation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangement.	Elevated to axiom 5

Note: FP refers to Foundational Premise.

Source: Adapted from Vargo & Lusch (2016, p.8).

Overall, the refinements reflect an adoption of a broader perspective to further establish S-D logic as a more general theoretical framework (metatheory), and the foundational premises were consolidated into axioms to provide a more concise delineation of such premises. Currently, S-D logic is expressed in terms of five core foundational premises (the total number of foundational premises to date is 11) referred to as axioms (see Table 2.4), from which the remaining premises can be derived (Vargo & Lusch 2016).

Table 2.4: The Five Axioms of S-D Logic

Axiom	Description
Axiom 1/FP1	Service is the fundamental basis of exchange.
Axiom 2/FP6	Value is cocreated by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary.
Axiom 3/FP9	All social and economic actors are resource integrators.
Axiom 4/FP10	Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary.
Axiom 5/FP11	Value cocreation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements.

Source: Vargo & Lusch (2017, p.47).

2.5. Service Logic (SL) vs. S-D Logic

Admitting that S-D logic has succeeded in attracting unprecedented attention to service research (Grönroos 2011b), Grönroos (2006) proposed the service logic (SL) as an alternative to the S-D logic. While believing that the two have many common aspects; both considering service as a perspective rather than an activity (Grönroos & Ravald 2011; Grönroos & Helle 2010; Grönroos & Gummerus 2014), Grönroos (2011b) advocates the use of the term SL rather than S-D logic. He considers the use of the phrase 'service-dominant' as "*confusing and moreover, creates the wrong impression of what this perspective is all about. The use of the expression 'service-dominant logic' may be due to a misinterpretation or a less constructive redefinition of the dominant logic construct*" (Grönroos 2011b, p. 284).

Perhaps the main points of divergence between the two logics relate to the understanding of the value creation and cocreation processes and the roles of the customer and the supplier/firm in such processes (Grönroos 2011b; Grönroos & Voima 2013). According to the proponents of the SL logic, the S-D logic "*is based on a metaphorical view of co-creation and value co-creation*" (Grönroos & Gummerus 2014, p.206), and its premises "*do not fully support an understanding of value creation and co-creation in a way that is meaningful for theoretical development and decision making in business and marketing practice*" (Grönroos 2011b, p.279). Grönroos (2011a) explains that from an S-D logic perspective (as per the earlier versions of the logic e.g., Vargo & Lusch 2004; 2008), the customer is a cocreator of value. Whereas from an SL perspective, the customer is the creator of value and the supplier is primarily the facilitator of the customers' value creation process who can get the opportunity to become involved in such a process as value cocreator during interactions with the customers, depending on the quality of such interactions (Grönroos 2011a; 2011b). Grönroos (2011a) further emphasises the difference between the two logics in terms of the firm's role concerning value propositions. He considers such a role to be limited in the S-D logic to the provision of value propositions, hence being limited "*to making promises of potential value*", whereas in the SL logic it extends during interactions to "*directly and actively influence the customers' value fulfilment as well"* (p.246).

A major drawback of the SL logic is its focus on a dyadic perspective (customer-supplier/firm) of service "*without taking into account the network context in which they often occur*" (Grönroos 2011b, p.280) and the many-to-many interactions that take place among the various stakeholders (Gummesson 2006; 2008). As Gummesson (2008, p.326) explains: "*It is not enough to focus on just one party, the customer as in marketing management, or two parties, the dyad customer-supplier as in relationship-based* approaches". However, the SL remained focused on a micro-perspective and emphasises the differences in roles between the customer and the firm/supplier (Grönroos & Voima 2013). Grönroos (2011b, p.6) argues that "*when stepping down from a macro theory level, service means different things in the provider sphere as compared to the user sphere (Grönroos, 2008, p.300). Providers/sellers and users/buyers have diverging and sometimes even conflicting goals*". Similarly, Grönroos & Voima (2013) highlight such differences in terms of three value creation spheres (provider, customer, and joint), where the actions of the firm and the customers differ from one sphere to another, and accordingly the type of value creation and cocreation also varies.

In contrast, the S-D logic has been "zooming out" and the focus on the network perspective is evident in the more recent developments of S-D logic (e.g., Vargo & Lusch 2016, 2017) with the adoption of an A2A orientation (Vargo & Lusch 2011) which requires moving "*from a single-minded concern with restricted, pre-designated roles of "producers"/ "consumers", "firms"/ "customers""* (Vargo & Lusch 2016, p.6). This provides "*a more holistic, dynamic, and realistic perspective of value creation, through exchange, among a wider, more comprehensive (than firm and customer) configuration of actors*" and "*reveals additional structural details that are not apparent from a more dyadic, micro-level view, but which, at the same time, make the micro-level phenomena more understandable*" (Vargo & Lusch 2016, p.5). The development of S-D logic over the years aimed at increasing its generalisation. According to Vargo & Lusch (2016) "*S-D logic becomes an even more general and transcending theoretical framework*" which is "*applicable to all exchange*" (p.18). This has been achieved through the adoption of the more generic A2A perspective (Vargo & Lusch 2011) and the emphasis on institutions and institutional arrangements (Vargo & Lusch 2016, 2017).

Based on the above review, the researcher believes that the S-D logic provides a better alternative than the SL as a metatheory for the study of engagement for several reasons. First, S-D logic adopts a network perspective (Vargo & Lusch 2016, 2017), in contrast to the SL dyadic perspective as explained above. Such broadened view is especially useful for this study due to the networked nature of online communities, which involve many-to-many engagement. Furthermore, it provides a plausible mechanism for the study of engagement from a broadened perspective with interactions among multiple actors (further discussed below in section 2.7). Second, the institutional perspective of the S-D logic is highly consistent with the practice-based approach adopted in this study. According to Vargo & Lusch (2016, p.18) "*a natural epistemological fit*" exists between S-D logic and practice theory, both having a "*process orientation*", making it highly adequate for this practice-based study of AE and the dynamics of its process. Third, the A2A orientation and the network perspective of S-D logic permit the exploration of AE from a meso-level of analysis (the online community), which is the level of aggregation investigated in this thesis. This is in contrast to the SL micro-level of analysis (dyadic customer-firm) (will be further discussed, see section 2.7). Fourth, as explained above the SL differentiate between the roles of different actors (i.e. the role of the customer vs. the role the firm/supplier). However, the researcher believes that such differentiation fails to reflect

the dynamic nature of interactions in an online community where no predesignated roles are assigned to any actor, since members tend to adopt various roles, including the role of the moderator (which represents the firm), hence role reversal may even take place. Therefore, S-D logic represents a better option in this regard since it advocates moving away from predefined roles, and it better accommodates the changing roles that members may adapt in an online community. Finally, it is worth noting that Brodie et al.'s (2011a) widely adopted conceptualisation of engagement also draws on S-D logic rather SL logic as a metatheoretical perspective for the conceptual foundation of engagement construct, hence choosing S-D logic is in line with the most prominent engagement studies.

In the next section, the relationship between S-D logic (metatheory) and engagement (midrange theory) is explained. According to Vargo & Lusch (2017), the future development of S-D logic, is highly dependent on the advancement of midrange theories. Therefore, below midrange theories are explained, how AE is considered a midrange theory for S-D logic, and how advancing the conceptualisation of the midrange theory of AE would in turn help in shaping and refining the metatheory of S-D logic.

2.6. The Relationship Between Engagement and S-D Logic

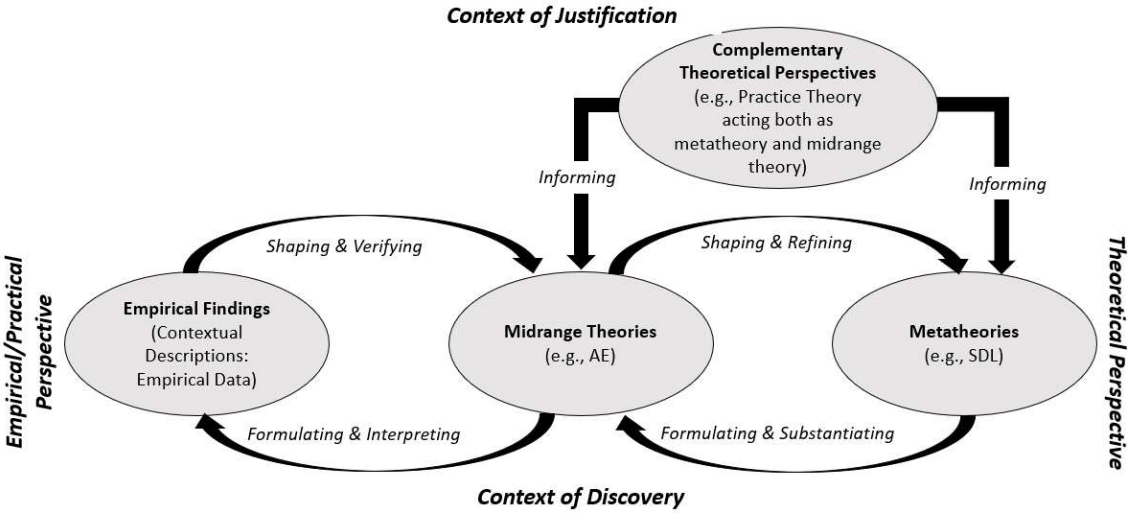
2.6.1. Engagement as a Midrange Theory for S-D Logic

Perhaps it is still debatable whether S-D logic is to be considered a general theory of marketing and/or the market, yet there is no doubt that its development over the years has achieved successful major steps in this direction and that it has the grand/general outlook of metatheories (Vargo & Lusch 2016; 2017). However, metatheories are broad and abstract in nature, which hinders their empirical investigation and application in practice, hence S-D logic has been criticised for being dominated by metaphorical concepts (e.g., cocreation) (Grönroos & Voima 2012; Leroy et al. 2013) with "*little meaning to practicing managers*" (Brodie 2014, p.88).

Therefore, there is a need for another intermediary body of theory, which is referred to as middle range (midrange hereafter) theory, "*to act as a bridge between general theory* [i.e. metatheories] *and empirical research*" (Brodie et al. 2011c, p.80), and engagement is proposed

as such a bridging midrange theory for S-D logic by Brodie et al. (2011b). Midrange theories not only bridge the gap between theory and practice by bringing metatheories closer to fulfilling the needs of marketers and managers, they also establish connections between the formulation of a theory and its verification, thus further strengthening the metatheory development by bringing it closer to business practice and enabling it to be operationalised (Brodie et al. 2011c; Brodie 2014) (See Figure 2.1.)

Figure 2.1: The Relationship Between S-D Logic and Engagement



Sources: Adapted from Brodie et al. (2011b) & (2011c)

2.6.2. Engagement as a Microfoundation for Cocreation

In a similar vein, Storbacka et al. (2016) and Hollebeek et al. (2016b) draw on the microfoundational concept of engagement to advance the explanation and application of the macrofoundational S-D logic and its more abstract constructs such as cocreation (Foss 2009). Microfoundation research is a growing trend in strategic management (Felin et al. 2015) that significantly help aligning theory with practice by acting as a bridge between the macro concepts, which are rather abstract, and empirical investigation (Gavetti 2005). As Storbacka et al. (2016) explain, while it is difficult to empirically observe value cocreation, engagement is observable and hence more manageable.

Therefore, S-D logic (metatheory/macrofoundation) informs, and in turn is being informed by, the development in engagement (midrange theory/microfoundation) theorising (Brodie et al. 2011c; Storbacka et al. 2016) as shown in Figure 2.1. In fact, a major advancement in engagement research has been the recent adoption of a broader perspective of 'actor engagement' (AE), which was facilitated by the newly established A2A orientation in S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch 2011), as will be further discussed in the next section.

2.7. Advancing Engagement Research: From CE to AE

The need to understand engagement from a network perspective has been repeatedly acknowledged in literature to accommodate the highly-networked nature of today's business environment and service ecosystems that involve multiple interactions among numerous actors (e.g., Chandler & Lusch 2015; Dessart et al. 2016; Maslowska at al. 2016). Yet, it was not until recently that engagement research started to shift from the predominant dyadic relationships and individually-based engagement, where customer/consumer engagement with a brand/firm is the prime focus, to adopt a broader perspective of engagement in service ecosystems (Brodie el al. 2016a; Hollebeek et al. 2016a; Storbacka et al. 2016). For instance, adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective, Jaakkola & Alexander (2014) and Verleye et al. (2014) investigated customer engagement behaviour, whereas Jaakkola et al. (2015) and Hollebeek et al. (2016b) explored customer engagement when multiple stakeholders are involved. Appendix 1 provides a chronological overview of the most prominent engagement studies in marketing and management literature, and the corresponding engagement-related concepts. The adoption of the more generic concept of actor engagement (AE) can be noticed in the most recent literature, reflecting a new trend where the initial customer-firm dyadic focus is being replaced by a broader network perspective (e.g., Alexander et al. 2018; Breidbach & Brodie 2017; Li et al. 2017; 2018). This shift in the engagement research paralleled the S-D logic evolution (see section 2.4.), where an A2A orientation and a service ecosystem view has been adopted (Vargo & Lusch 2011), hence paving the way for the engagement concept to develop accordingly. As Vargo & Lusch (2016, p. 6) explain "*this perspective* [i.e. A2A] *reveals additional structural details that are not apparent from a more dyadic, micro-level view, but which, at the same time, make the micro-level phenomena more understandable*". Therefore, the evolved metatheory of S-D logic enabled the development of engagement theorising by providing a

mechanism for explaining engagement of multi-actors within broader service systems, where a service system is defined as "*a network of agents and interactions that integrate resources for value cocreation*" (Ng et al. 2012, p.4).

A major development milestone in the engagement research and its shift from a dyadic to a network perspective was the article by Chandler & Lusch (2015), where they first proposed the concept of AE. Drawing on the evolved S-D logic and its recently adopted A2A perspective, they significantly advanced the engagement research by considering multiple actors in a broader service system and positioned the broader concept of AE as the central phenomenon which connects the various actors in a service system. Furthermore, they focused on the role of value propositions in service systems and defined it as "*invitations from actors to one another to engage in service*" (Chandler & Lusch 2015, p.6), and considered service experience to be "*many-to-many engagement*" defined as "*the ongoing and dynamic alignment of the connections and dispositions of many actors*" (p.13). Most importantly, they conceptualise the properties of engagement as comprising two core attributes: 1) the connections of an actor, and 2) the dispositions of an actor. These two fundamental AE properties (see sections 2.7.2 and 2.7.3 respectively) provide a plausible mechanism to empirically investigate the dynamics of the engagement process. The AE perspective was further extended by Storbacka et al. (2016) to include non-human actors (machines). Reflecting on such advancements, Brodie et al. (2016a) officially introduced the more general concept of AE to replace CE, hence shifting engagement research from the limited dyadic perspective to a network perspective which involves many-to-many engagement and networked relationships in broader service systems. Furthermore, they broadened the conceptual domain of engagement to be applicable to any actor (human and non-humans) in service systems, while focusing on the role of institutions and institutional arrangement. Most importantly, by drawing on Chandler & Lusch (2015), they further highlight the centrality of an actor's dispositions and connections for the study AE.

Alexander et al. (2018) explain the existence of multiple levels of aggregation that can be used to study AE. They further highlight that engagement research to date has mostly adopted a micro-level of analysis (dyadic CE) where the prime focus is the relationships of individual actors (customers) with certain focal objects (e.g., brands or firms). However, the advancement of the engagement research requires a zooming out, where "*the broader context within which*

the individual operates and the effects thereof on engagement" (p.334) need to be considered from various levels of aggregation (micro-, meso-, macro, and/or meta-level of analysis). They posit the study of AE in a community context at the meso-level of aggregation. Therefore, this thesis aims at advancing the AE conceptualisation by presenting an initial attempt to move from the established micro-view (the dyadic CE) to a higher level of aggregation by focusing on a meso-level of analysis. Alexander et al. (2018) further explain that "*the nature of institutions depends on the level of zooming out*". However, they consider institutions at the meso-level (i.e. community norms and rules) as the most relevant for the study of the behavioural aspect of AE, hence further highlighting the importance of analysing AE at a meso-level. Having explained the level of analysis examined in this study (i.e. meso-level), and before moving further to discuss the fundamental properties of AE (i.e. connections and dispositions), the definition of the AE construct as used in this thesis is provided next.

2.7.1. Defining AE

Since the engagement concept has recently transpired in marketing literature, attention regarding its conceptualisation as a separate construct was limited at first (Brodie et al. 2011a; Van Doorn et al. 2010). Therefore, the terms "engage" and/or "engagement" have been widely used in management and marketing research without being systematically defined (e.g., Fleming et al. 2004; Sawhney et al. 2005; Whelan & Wohlfeil 2006).

Only recently, marketing academics attempted to define various engagement-based concepts, such as customer engagement behaviour (Van Doorn et al. 2010), customer engagement (Brodie et al. 2011a), community engagement (Algesheimer et al. 2005), brand engagement (Hollebeek & Chen 2014), and the most recent construct of AE (Chandler & Lusch 2015). To date, there is a lack of consistency regarding both the terminology and definition of engagement (Brodie et al. 2016b), hence reflecting the nascent state of the engagement research in the marketing field (Dessart et al. 2016) (see Table 2.1 above for an overview of the various definitions offered by academic literature in the fields of management and marketing for multiple engagement-based concepts). However, convergence is expected to take place with the recent introduction of the AE construct since it encompasses all other engagement-based concepts, and is applicable to all stakeholders within any service system (Brodie et al. 2016a).

This thesis adopts the AE construct and an A2A orientation, which allows for the incorporation of a 'service systems' view of generic actors embedded within an institutional structure (i.e. the online community) (Brodie et al. 2016a) for two main reasons. First, such broadened perspective can provide richer insights into how a specific actor (which is a member of an online community) may engage then would be possible from the dyadic perspective of CE. Second, this study advocates the need for consistency in terms of the terminology used in engagement research. It is worth noting that at an earlier stage in this thesis, CE (consumer engagement) was the engagement concept used. However, the drawbacks of such a dyadic perspective soon started to appear and the researcher was not comfortable with the use of the CE term. The analysis was not limited to the posts of the members and it further included posts by the admin (representing the management of the online community). Hence, the more generic AE construct seemed to be more suitable in reflecting the dynamic nature of interactions in the community under study where no pre-designated roles are assigned to any actor (Vargo & Lusch 2016). This research draws on Storbacka et al. (2016, p. 3009) and defines AE as:

> **"*Both the disposition of actors to engage, and the activity of engaging in an interactive process of resource integration within the institutional context provided by a service ecosystem.*"**

This definition is selected not only for its comprehensiveness but also for its relevance to the practice-based approach adopted in this study. Having defined AE, the two fundamental properties of AE (i.e. connections and dispositions) are discussed next.

2.7.2. Connections

Connections are considered the external properties of engagement and refer to "*service experiences from the past continuously joining actors over time*" (Giddens 1984, as quoted in Chandler & Lusch 2015, p.10). Service draws actors together, those actors build up a repository of exchanges over time, where the present experience is continually influenced by the past (Granovetter 1985; Holt 1998).

Chandler & Lusch (2015) further classify connections into temporal and relational connections, both having a key role in understanding engagement dynamics. This is because actors are situated and positioned in time and space (Giddens 1984), and their social identities are intertwined with such social frameworks. It is such positioning within a specific social system and with reference to certain rules/norms that permits the routinisation of actions (Fuchs 2003), hence the enactment of (engagement) practices. Orlikowski & Yates (2002, p.696) state: "*By examining when people do what they do in their practices, we can identify what temporal structures shape and are shaped (often concurrently) by members of a community; how these interact; whether they are interrelated, overlapping and nested, or separate and distinct; and the extent to which they are compatible, complementary, or contradictory*". Thus, practices are rooted in both temporal and relational connections. Li et al. (2017, p.747) further explain that the two forms of connections are interrelated as they "*can sometimes be intertwined because relationship among actors also carries a temporal dimension*".

2.7.2.1. Temporal Connections

The first type of connections are temporal connections, which consider how present and future experiences are affected by past interactions and experiences, hence representing the influence of time (Chandler & Lusch 2015). Time is "*a scarce resource*" which greatly affects the possibility of an actor's engagement (Etgar 2008, p.100)[7]. The significance of time for social practices, hence engagement practices, is further highlighted by Orlikowski & Yates (2002, p.686) who argue that "*temporal structures emerge from and are embedded in the varied and ongoing social practices of people in different communities… such temporal structures powerfully shape those practices in turn*".

Moreover, Medlin (2004) advocates that future time holds many possibilities, each of which shapes our present experience to an extent and in turn offers new alternative futures. As Peters et al. (2012, p.738) explain: "*Future time is an elusive creature that changes even as we attempt to understand it*". Thus, engagement cannot be understood when instances are considered in isolation and instead, need to be viewed as ongoing and changing in terms of an actor's connections (Chandler & Lusch 2015). Similarly, Li et al. (2017) demonstrate the accumulative

[7] Etgar (2008) focuses on engagement in co-production.

nature of an actor's experience and how engagement in the past and present affect in turn future engagement, hence further emphasising the significance of adopting a longitudinal approach for studying the dynamics of AE. They further highlight Storbacka et al.'s (2016) argument that temporal connections involve considerations related to the regularity, frequency, and duration of engagement.

2.7.2.2. Relational Connections

The second type of connections are relational connections, which refer to: "*the connections through relational space that emerge from service experiences with many actors*". They encompass the social roles taken by actors who are involved in a service experience (Chandler & Lusch 2015, p.10), where a role refers to "*socially defined expectations of individuals' behaviours in particular social positions*" (Colton 1987, as quoted in Edvardsson et al. 2011, p.337). Each social role corresponds to specific set of practices connecting one actor to other actors via interactions that are changing and so are the adopted social roles (Akaka & Chandler 2011; Healy & McDonagh 2013). Such social roles controls expectations for encounters and service exchange (Solomon et al. 1985; Li et al. 2017) and lead to certain social position (Baker & Faulkner 1991) which refers to "*a set of value-creating relationships or links connected to a particular actor*" (Baker & Faulkner 1991, as quoted in Li et al. 2017, p.747).

Furthermore, social roles act both as conduits in social systems, and mechanisms by which a single service experience can potentially influence many different actors and vice versa, how many different actors may influence a single actor (Chandler & Lusch 2015). Most importantly, the roles adopted by actors affect their integration of resources and their engagement with other actors in a system/network (Li et al. 2017). Moreover, an actor is capable of taking on various roles (Diamond et al. 2009; Fournier & Li 2009; Healy & McDonagh 2013), which may change with time (Edvardsson et al. 2011), hence reflecting the evolving nature of relational connections (Chandler & Lusch 2015; Li et al. 2017).

2.7.2.3. Connections and Social Capital

Connections are vital to understanding engagement, because such connections may help the building of social capital. Social capital is well established across a wide range of disciplines and interpreted in various ways (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998). Interpreted through Bourdieu's (1986) work, it includes both the structure of the relationship network as well as the actual and potential resources rooted within such a network.

Engagement has been repeatedly discussed in social capital literature, where it is mainly considered a prerequisite for social capital development (Mathwick et al. 2008). For instance, Onyx & Bullen (2000) assert that the development of social capital in online communities necessitates the willing and active engagement of members. While Wasko & Faraj (2005) propose that it is the interaction and mutual engagement in the community that generate relationships, which in turn are the main source for social capital production. Also, Mathwick et al. (2008) further suggest that social capital is fostered in online communities by the culture of proactive engagement that exists in such communities, and that it is the continuing community engagement that ingrains the normative influences, which in turn build the social capital. They also emphasise that the social support system and information resources that are derived from social capital are the outcomes of community engagement and define social capital as: "*an intangible resource from which instrumental and expressive benefits will flow, benefits that are available at the individual or communal level, embedded in and accumulated through a specific social structure and governed by relational norms of voluntarism, reciprocity, and social trust*" (Mathwick, et al. 2008, p.834).

The above definition highlights the significance of three norms that govern interactions and the development of connections in online communities: 1) voluntarism, 2) reciprocity, and 3) trust. These three were found to act as social norms that offer some sort of social control, which leads to a highly efficient social system requiring minimum formal policing (Coleman 1988; Onyx & Bullen 2000; Mathwick et al. 2009). The three norms are further elaborated next.

Voluntarism

Voluntarism is about the "*commitment of time and effort that is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization*" (Wilson 2000, p.216). Mathwick et al. (2008) affirm that the culture of voluntarism in online communities is even more genuine, due to the freedom of participation without any influence from social expectation or public appearance, which is all part of the "*spontaneous sociability*" culture (Fukuyama 1995) fostered by online communities.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is considered as one of the most significant normative influences that govern online communities (Chan & Li 2010; Mathwick et al. 2008; Schade et al. 2005). It refers to the "*mutuality of gratification*" (Gouldner 1960, p.168), and in psychology to the "pro-social behaviour" (Reno et al. 1993). According to Chan & Li (2010, p.1034), it is defined as: "*voluntary and discretionary behaviours in terms of giving help to not only those who help the giver but also other members in the virtual community who need help and who would provide assistance on request*".

It corresponds to a sense of shared obligation and a general moral code to reciprocate benefits received from others when needed (Onyx & Bullen 2000; Wasko & Faraj 2005; Wiertz & Ruyter 2007). This is because recipients of benefits tend to sense a feeling of indebtedness (Dahl et al. 2005), which motivates them to reciprocate such benefits in order to reduce such feeling (Chan & Li 2010; Gouldner 1960; Wiertz & Ruyter 2007). Hence, reciprocity can simply be referred to as "*favors given and received*" (Wasko & Faraj 2005, p.43). It also acts as a stabiliser of the community (Chan & Li 2010; Giesler 2006), as it makes an individual's collective efforts rewarding, and thus ensure the continuity of contributions, because of the belief that the support and benefits provided to a member of the community will be returned when needed at certain point in the future (Onyx & Bullen 2000; Wasko & Faraj 2005; Wiertz & Ruyter 2007).

Trust

Trust is a complex construct (Hardin 2001; 2002) that is considered crucial for successful marketing relationships (Doney & Cannon 1997; Morgan & Hunt 1994; Moorman et al. 1992; 1993), and an essential element for effective online interactions and voluntary cooperation between strangers in online communities (Ridings et al. 2002). The fact that members must depend on anonymous strangers for advice and support tremendously increases the uncertainties and risks involved that may erode trust (Reicheld & Schefter 2000). This led the MSI to place the exploration of "*Trust between people and their institutions in social networks*" on top of the research priorities for 2012-2014, as the development of trust in the online environment is considered "*foundational for the future of marketing*" (MSI 2012). In an online community, members trust other individuals or institutions even without previous interactions or expected subsequent relationships (Hardin 2001). Therefore, trust in an online context is considered as "*a willingness to take risks in a social context based on a sense of confidence that others will respond as expected and will act in mutually supportive ways*" (Onyx & Bullen 2000, p.24).

Trust and reciprocity are highly related (Ostrom 2000). It is believed that in an early stage of a relationship, trust is established based on the existence of the norm of reciprocity (Newton 1997). It then develops with time as a history of positive experience (positive past connections) starts to develop, leading to the further strengthening of trust in the community and its members, even though some of which are strangers as long as they are associated to the group, and the concerns about the risks involved diminish (Wasko & Faraj 2005). Both reciprocity and trust in online communities are considered generalised norms governing online interactions and justifying the risk of entering into exchanges with strangers, even in the absence of a relationship history (Hardin 2001; Mathwick et al. 2008; Wasko & Faraj 2005). They create a general "*expectation that members are to help each other whenever possible, even if they do not receive an immediate reward in return*" (Mathwick et al. 2008, p.842). Moreover, these norms stand against "*free riding*" (Constant et al. 1996; Smith & Kollock 1999; Wellman & Gulia 1999), also known as "lurking" which refers to "*passive participation*" (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015, p.9). This makes the knowledge flow one-way and providers of such knowledge are taken advantage of, hence may feel unfairness that may lead them to stop their contributions with time (Mathwick et al. 2008; Wasko & Faraj 2005; Wiertz & Ruyter 2007).

Having discussed the actors' connections, which are the external properties of engagement, the dispositions are reviewed next.

2.7.3. Dispositions

Dispositions are considered internal engagement properties, being internal to an actor. They refer to "*the internal proclivities, or psychological states, of an actor*" and involve an actor's specific needs, interests, goals, and purposes (Chandler & Lusch 2015, p.11) that can be personal and/or collective (Li et al. 2017). As Storbacka et al. (2016) and Li et al. (2017) note, all engagement conceptualisations in marketing acknowledge the significance of the actors' internal dispositions and their impact on the engagement process.

While being internal, dispositions affects the way actors behave, and hence are reflected in the practices they carry out (Peters 2016). In other words, an understanding of actors' dispositions can be reached by observing the practices they perform, hence further highlighting the usefulness of adopting a practice-based approach for the study of AE.

Chandler & Lusch (2015) explain that connections are neutral on their own, while it is the dispositions of actors that guide how they adapt their connections (through service experiences) to their needs and goals in order to reinforce a certain past, to highlight a specific present, or to reach a unique future. Therefore, connections and dispositions are interrelated and iterative, such that a change in the circumstances of an actor will alter established practices and connections, which may in turn alter their dispositions. In addition, initiating and being influenced by these changes in practices, as a change in disposition, will also alter the connections they are embedded in. Chandler & Lusch (2015) maintain that connections and dispositions need to be aligned for engagement to take place. Hence, connections are reproduced as long as they are felt to be useful for actors, who may have a disposition to maintain a beneficial present situation. Once connections cease to serve them, actors attempt to restore such connections or seek different ones that would better serve their purposes and help them achieving the future they aspire (Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Robins et al. 2005).

Following this logic, and building on Chandler & Lusch (2015), Storbacka et al. (2016, p.3015) define a disposition as "*as a capacity of an actor to appropriate, reproduce, or potentially innovate upon connections in the current time and place, in response to a specific past and/or toward a specific future*". Based on Emirbayer & Goodwin (1994), Li et al. (2017, p.748) provide a rather simpler definition for actors' dispositions: "*actors' capacity to utilize their connections regarding their personal or collective interest (or both)*". They further highlight that it is the actors' dispositions which influence how to draw on connections and how to utilise them as resources (Akaka & Chandler 2011). Dispositions affect the choice of "*when and how to engage*", hence "*actors with different engagement dispositions will choose to engage with other actors in different ways*" (Li et al. 2017, p.748). However, it is worth noting that dispositions are context-dependent; they "*may not show themselves all of the time but may be subject to conditions, and might only be observable under certain*" (Peters 2016, p.3004). To illustrate, Peters (2016) provides an example of a person who can speak a foreign language and not use it all the time, yet may use it when on a trip to a country where it is the mostly spoken language.

Having reviewed the development of the engagement conceptualisation and how it evolved from CE to AE, and having discussed the two main fundamental properties of AE (connections and dispositions of an actor) proposed by Chandler & Lusch (2015), the next section presents practice theory, being the complementary theoretical perspective adopted in this thesis to further advance the theorising of AE.

2.8. AE and Practice Theory

2.8.1. Practice Theory: An Overview

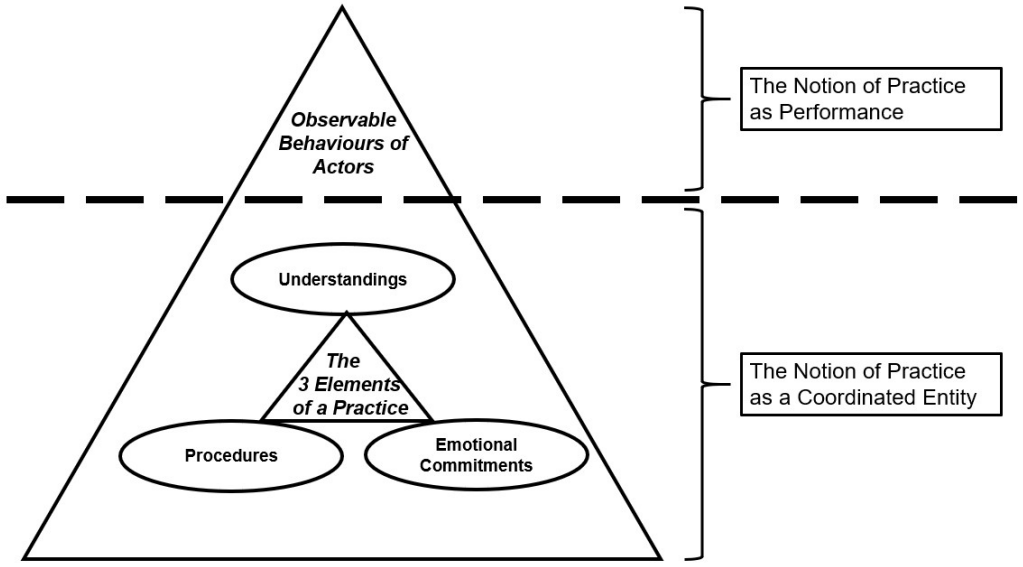
Theories of practice are highly heterogeneous (Schatzki 1996; Warde 2005), as different scholars offer analyses that vary considerably; e.g., Bourdieu (1976 & 1990), De Certeau, (1984), Giddens (1984), Reckwitz (2002), and Schatzki (1996). The term "practice theory" is a "*loosely defined research stream*" (Vargo & Lusch 2017, p.55) that refers to accounts of social systems that promote practices as the fundamental social phenomenon (Schatzki 1996), where a practice is defined as "*a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are*

handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood" (Reckwitz 2002, p.250).

As Vargo & Lusch (2017) note, practice theory has been embraced as both a metatheoretical perspective and a midrange theory, hence it can inform the AE theorising from these two levels via two routes (see Figure 2.1). Firstly, practice theory can advance the study of AE indirectly by acting as a metatheory that is capable of further advancing the S-D logic due to its institutional orientation (Vargo & Lusch 2016; 2017), which in turn helps formulating and substantiating the midrange theory of AE (Brodie et al. 2011b). Secondly, by acting as a midrange theory, practice theory can directly inform the AE conceptualisation by providing a plausible route to empirically investigate AE (e.g., Hollebeek et al. 2017; Schau et al. 2009) by observing the performance aspect of the AE practices to infer about its constituent elements as further explained below.

According to Schatzki (1996, p.90), there are two main notions of a practice: 1) practice as a coordinated entity, and 2) practice as performance. The latter concerns the performance aspect of a practice in which it is necessary to carry out and perform the practice for its actualisation and sustainability (Hartmann et al. 2015; Woermann 2012). Schatzki (1996, p.90) further affirms that an analysis of practices must provide "*an account of action*", since a practice is defined as routinised/repeated activities/actions (Hollebeek et al. 2017; Vargo & Lusch 2016). Spurling et al. (2013, p.21) further explain that the performance notion of practice refers to the observable actions which are frequently referred to as "behaviours". They depict a practice as an iceberg, with the observable behaviour (performance notion of practice as explained above) occupying the tip of the iceberg and the notion of practice as a coordinated entity being the submerged part (see Figure 2.2.).

Figure 2.2: The Two Notions of a Practice



Source: Adapted from Spurling et al. (2013, p. 8).

Moving to the notion of practice as a coordinated entity, Schatzki (1996, p.89) states that a practice from this perspective is seen as a "*temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings*". In other words, a practice is a coordinated entity of doings and sayings which is both temporally and spatially orientated, linked and coordinated in three ways: 1) through understandings (knowledge of what to say and do), 2) procedures (explicit rules and instructions), and 3) emotional commitments (emotionally charged ends and purposes). Schau et al. (2009) consider these three to be the anatomical components of a practice, while Echeverri & Skålén (2011) refer to them as the elements of a practice. The latter further demonstrate that the nature of an interaction is determined by the configuration of the elements of practices taking place during such interaction. They conceptualise such configurations as being either congruent (i.e. a match) where a similar comprehension of practices is held by those enacting them, or incongruent (i.e. a mismatch) where such convergence is absent.

2.8.2. Studying AE from a Practice Lens

Adopting an overall practice lens to study AE can accommodate not only a behavioural dimension (through the performance notion of practice) but also cognitive dimension (through

understandings and procedures) and emotional dimension (through emotional commitments). As for a social dimension, Schatzki (1996) posits practices as the baseline of sociability. Similarly, Reckwitz (2002) and Nicolini (2009) emphasise that practices are inherently social, while Warde (2005) explains that a practice perspective focuses on social competences. Moreover, according to Vargo & Lusch (2017, p.55) "*the social*" is constituted of practices. A practice perspective attends to "*the instituted conventions of collective culture*" (Warde 2005, p.146), as it moves away from individuality and subjectivity, and instead highlights the communality in a group (Schau et al. 2009). Practices thus constitute the basis for understanding actions and activities of any phenomenon (Schatzki 1996). It expands the analysis to a social level and focuses on the interactions among involved actors (Vargo & Akaka 2012), as Grönroos & Voima (2013, p.140) explain "*interactions are situations in which the interacting parties are involved in each other's practices*".

However, practice theory can still account for individuality as it is neither holist nor individualist (Schatzki 1996; Warde 2005), instead it provides a balance between social order and individuality by accommodating particularities, diversities, and complexities in a group (Warde 2005). In other words, a practice perspective highlights the routine and convention in collective consumption while recognising the unique and dynamic nature of consumption for each individual (Schau et al. 2009). Social order and collective identity are achieved through shared knowledge and understanding of practices, allowing more actors to obtain more value from communities as it makes actions repeatable and reproducible by offering the know-how and how-to that allow replication (Schau et al. 2009).

Therefore, a practice theory approach advances our understanding of AE in several ways. First, it is highly useful in guiding the AE research in the adoption of a network perspective with interactions among multiple actors. In fact, Vargo & Akaka (2012) highlight that interactions have been the centre of the study of practices. Second, it can greatly help to better explore the social aspects of AE where research to date is limited. Schatzki (1996, p.11) posits that practices are "*the central social phenomenon by reference to which all other social entities such as actions, institutions, and structures are to be understood*". Accordingly, Vargo & Akaka (2012) advocate the need to study "practices" in order to gain a better understanding of any social activity (e.g., engagement) within a service system. Third, it is especially beneficial for studying the dynamics of AE as it can help explain processes (Vargo & Lusch 2016).

Furthermore, practices are dynamic by nature. According to Warde (2005, p.141), this can be attributed to their "*internal logic of operation*", as in numerous occasions people adapt to various conditions, experiment and even improvise, hence practices hold in them "*the seeds of change*".

Having reviewed the practice theory, its application in marketing and management literature is discussed next.

2.8.3. Practice Theory in Marketing and Management Literature

Imported from sociology, practice theory has been repeatedly adopted in marketing and management literature (see Appendix 3 for an overview). A rising interest in the study of practices and the adoption of a practice-based approach in marketing and management academia can be noticed in the past 20 years (Mason et al. 2015).

This rising interest led the *Journal of Marketing Theory* to dedicate a special issue in 2008 "*to advocate the adoption of a practice-based approach to the study of markets and marketing*" (Araujo et al. 2008, p.5). Similarly, in 2011 the *Scandinavian Journal of Management* published a special issue "*to promote the application of practice theory in marketing studies*" (Skålén & Hackley 2011, p.190), since it is expected to decrease the "*practice theory-gap*", and hence increases the relevance and practical value of marketing theories (Mason et al. 2015, p. 1). Furthermore, S-D logic research has drawn extensively on practice theory since the adoption of the A2A orientation (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al. 2012; Vargo & Akaka 2012; Vargo & Lusch 2017). According to Vargo & Lusch (2016), strong links exist between S-D logic and practice theory, both sharing a process perspective. They further explain that practices, which are routinised activities, are in fact institutions. This institutional orientation of practice theory makes it highly useful in advancing S-D logic toward a true theory of the market (cf. Vargo 2007), and thus arguably closer to strategic and tactical application (Vargo & Lusch 2016).

Few relevant studies to date have identified specific engagement practices in the context of online communities. The first was Schau et al. (2009), who identified a subset of four

engagement practices (documenting, badging, milestoning, and staking) while investigating the broader value creation practices in brand communities. However, these four practices do not consider nor reflect the multidimensional nature of AE as presented by Brodie et al. (2011a). Habibi et al. (2014) further investigated the manifestation of Schau et al.'s (2009) previously identified practices in two Facebook brand communities. Hence their study suffered the same limitation as Schau el al.'s (2009) in terms of not fully considering the multidimensionality of AE.

In contrast, Brodie et al. (2013) address such multidimensionality and suggest that the AE process is composed of a set of five sub-processes: "learning", "sharing", "advocating", "socializing" and "co-developing" that acknowledge cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions but lack the social dimension. Nevertheless, by scrutinising these sub-processes it becomes evident that they are in fact practices. A similar viewpoint is shared by Jaakkola & Alexander (2014) who also consider the sub-processes identified by Brodie et al. (2013) as engagement practices.

Most recently, Hollebeek et al. (2017) refine Schau et al.'s (2009) four-component model of brand community engagement practices. Their model comprises "greeting", "regulating", "assisting", "celebrating", "appreciating", "empathising", "mingling" and "ranking", yet it is limited to a single online luxury brand community, hence the generalisability of their findings is limited. Moreover, it is based on a sample of the most active 20 members and focuses primarily on the behavioural aspect of engagement (Van Doorn et al. 2010).

Finally, Breidbach & Brodie (2017) explore the AE practices while accounting for the multidimensionality of the construct. While their study is less relevant since it focuses on AE practices in the sharing economy, they still provide a very useful discussion of AE that may be applicable for any context. They explain that AE practices arise from the interactions among actors on some engagement platforms. Moreover, drawing on Storbacka et al. (2016), they further suggest that AE practices are in fact "*processes where the actor's disposition to engage leads to engagement activities that can be characterized by observable engagement properties*" (Breidbach & Brodie 2017, p.767).

Against this background, a more comprehensive investigation is needed to explore AE in the context of online communities with all its dimensions (cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and

social). This thesis aims to move beyond the well explored behavioural facet of engagement. Instead, it sheds light on the other less explored aspects by identifying a complete array of all possible engagement practices undergone by all members including the less active members, and not just those observed in the most active members, who are typically the minority of any online community (De Valck et al. 2009).

2.9. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, relevant literature was critically reviewed to highlight the gaps that this research attempts to fill and to review key concepts used in this thesis. The various conceptualisations of engagement were presented, and the existence of various engagement-related concepts in marketing and management literature was highlighted. Furthermore, the shift from a dyadic to a network perspective was discussed, where the initial construct of CE was recently replaced by the more encompassing AE construct, which is the engagement-related concept adopted in this thesis to study many-to-many engagement in an online community context. Special emphasis was directed to the two fundamental attributes of engagement as proposed by Chandler & Lusch (2015): connections and dispositions.

To date, Brodie et al.'s (2011a) multi-dimensional engagement conceptualisation is the most adopted, hence its five fundamental propositions and its underlying theoretical foundation, which is the SD- logic, were also reviewed. The literature review suggests that to further advance the AE theorising, complementary theoretical lens needs to be adopted, and this thesis advocates the use of practice theory for this purpose. Therefore, an overview of practice theory is presented, its application in marketing literature in general and for the study of AE in specific is discussed, and its adequacy for this research is highlighted.

Based on the above review, the following two main gaps are identified in literature. First, the adoption of complementary theoretical perspectives is needed for the further development of AE research, and while practice theory seems to be highly promising for this purpose, practice-based AE studies are limited despite repeated recommendations for its use (e.g., Brodie et al. 2011a; Hollebeek et al. 2016a). Second, the dynamics of the AE process remains unclear to date and empirical work exploring such dynamics is limited, especially longitudinal studies to better explore the development of AE over time as opposed to the dominant cross-sectional engagement research (Hollebeek et al. 2016a; Maslowska et al. 2016). To addresses these gaps,

two research questions were formulated to guide the empirical work and the remainder of this thesis.

1. What are the AE practices in the online community under study?
2. What are the various engagement states identified in the online community under study? What are the effects of the A2A interactions on such states?

In the following chapter, the methodological choices are discussed.

Chapter 3

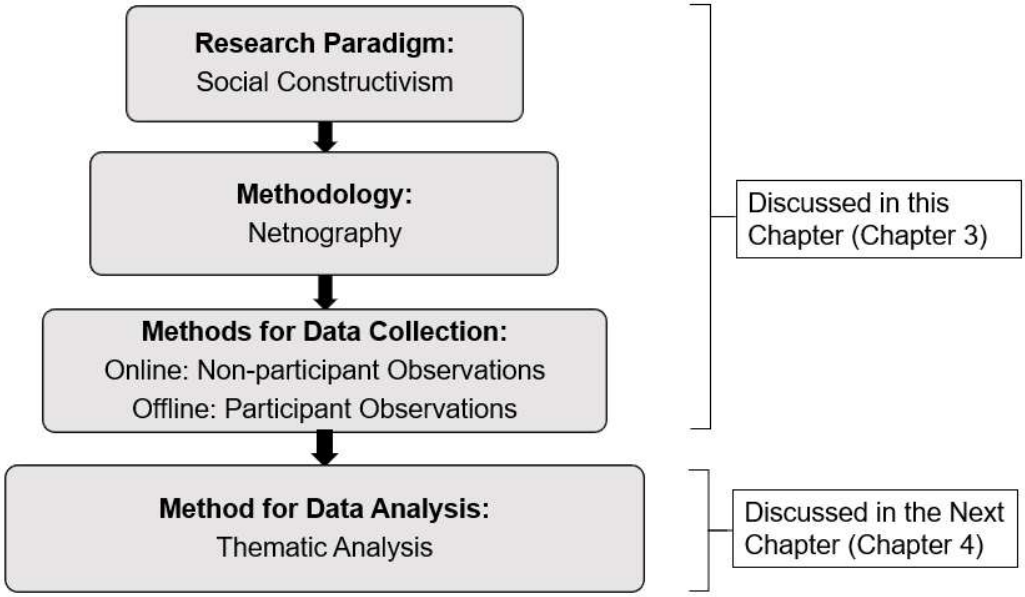
Methodology

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the adopted research approach will be presented and its adequacy and appropriateness will be highlighted. A research approach corresponds to the plans and procedures that underline a research project (Crotty 1998). It provides a perspective about the study and presents information spanning from broad philosophical assumptions underpinning the research (research paradigm), to the chosen methodology, to the corresponding methods for data collection and data analysis (Creswell 2012). However, the latter will be discussed in the next chapter (chapter 4). The research approach depends not only on the researchers' background and experiences but also on the nature of the research topic under study and the type of research question(s). Figure 3.1 depicts the adopted research approach for this thesis.

Figure 3.1: Summary of the Adopted Research Approach



The chapter proceeds as follows: the researcher's paradigmatic position (i.e. the research paradigm underpinning this thesis) is presented (section 3.2.), this is followed by reviewing the selected methodology (section 3.3.). Next, the research setting is introduced (section 3.4.),

followed by a discussion of data collection (section 3.5.), where the unit of analysis (section 3.5.1.) and the selected methods of data collection (section 3.5.2.) are explained. Finally, ethical measures are discussed (section 3.6.), and considerations for ensuring quality and rigour in the study are addressed (section 3.7), with special emphasis on reflexivity (section 3.7.5.).

3.2. The Researcher's Paradigmatic Position

A research paradigm is defined as a "*basic set of beliefs that guides action*" (Guba 1990, p.17), it represents the researcher's philosophical perspective which provides a lens or a worldview regarding the nature of reality and knowledge (Guba & Lincoln 1994; Lincoln et al. 2011). As Creswell (2012) explains, researches are guided by philosophical assumptions, which include beliefs and views about: ontology (relating to the nature of reality), epistemology (considering what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), axiology (referring to the role of values in the research), and methodology (which are the research procedures). Such assumptions are in turn folded into interpretive frameworks, which are commonly known as research paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Guba & Lincoln 1994, Lincoln & Guba 1985). Therefore, a paradigm is composed of "*interlocking philosophical assumptions*" (Greene & Caracelli 1997, p.6), which include specific ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological beliefs.

Researchers in social science are offered a wide array of different paradigms to choose among. Table 3.1 provides a summary of the five most prominent paradigms (positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and relevant positions, pragmatism, and social constructivism) in terms of their constituting assumptions. The present researcher's philosophical stance is that of a social constructivist, hence the paradigm underpinning this thesis is social constructivism, which is also referred to as "interpretivism" (Creswell 2014) or "constructionism" (Burr 2003; Gergen 1985). According to Holstein & Gubrium (2008), the terms "constructivism" and "constructionism" are used interchangeably. However, the latter is more relevant to the field of psychology (Burr 2003), whereas the former is more used in management and marketing, and hence it is the term adopted in this thesis.

Table 3.1: The Five Most Prominent Research Paradigms in Social Sciences

Paradigm	Ontology	Epistemology	Axiology	Methodology
Positivism	Single reality, apprehensible through the use of scientific methods.	Dualism (knower/known). Objectivist.	Value-free.	Experimental/hypothesis verification. Mainly quantitative methods.
Post-Positivism	Critical realism: "real" external reality but understood probabilistically and imperfectly.	Modified dualism/ objectivist/ reality only approximated and findings just probably true.	Researchers' value and biases are to be controlled.	Modified experimental/ hypotheses falsification. Critical multiplism. Possibility of including qualitative methods.
Critical Theory (and Relevant Positions)	Historical realism: shaped over time based on cultural, social, political, economic, gender/sexual, ethnic/racial values and preferences.	Subjectivist/ transactional The findings are value-mediated, research can change the reality.	Diverse values, yet the standpoint of different communities need to be highlighted.	Dialectical and dialogical: a dialectical dialogue between the researcher and the participants is needed.
Pragmatism	Reality is what is practical and useful, what "works".	Employ mix of research tools, as needed, both objective (deductive) and subjective (inductive).	Values need to be discussed since it affects the interpretation of results.	Mix of qualitative and quantitative methods as needed in each stage of the research.
Social Constructivism	Multiple realities: socially constructed through interactions and individually perceived.	Subjective, co-constructed reality (between the researcher and the participants).	Individual values are respected and negotiated.	Use of inductive methods such as observational methods, interviews, and text analysis.

Sources: Creswell (2012), Denzin & Lincoln (2011), Guba & Lincoln (1994), and Lincoln et al. (2011).

As Teddlie & Tashakkori (2009) explain, if paradigms are to be depicted as a continuum, constructivism would be at the opposite extreme of positivism. Cunliffe (2008) traces back the origins of this paradigm to the fields of: primarily sociology, sociology of knowledge, and social philosophy. More specifically, Holstein & Gubrium (2008) argue that the term "social construction" was first mentioned by Ward (1905) in the *American Journal of Sociology* while discussing social structures and their evolution. However, it is Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1966) seminal book "The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge" that provided the foundation for the spread of this theoretical orientation not only in sociology but also to other disciplines (Cunliffe 2008; Hacking 1999; Holstein & Gubrium 2008) (see Appendix 4 for examples of prominent social constructivist studies from different disciplines).

There are various accounts offered by the proponents of this paradigm. Such heterogeneity is highlighted by Edvardsson et al. (2011, p.333) who label this theoretical orientation as "*social construction theories*" and consider it a lens that can be "*used to interpret the social world and to enhance understanding of how actors on a societal, group and individual level create, realize, and reproduce social situations and structures*". In fact, Burr (2003, p. 2) argues, based on Gergen (1985), that there is no definition and no one feature that can identify a constructivist position. Similarly, Holstein & Gubrium (2008, p.5) consider it to be "*too diverse and diffuse to define*", and instead portray it as "*a rubric for a mosaic of research efforts with diverse - but shared - theoretical, methodological, and empirical groundings*".

Burr (2003) further explains that for an approach to be considered as social constructivist[8], it needs to be based on one or more of the following assumptions. First, constructivists tend to adopt a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge and understanding of the world; they encourage the challenging of the commonly accepted beliefs and understandings (Gergen 1985). Second, they believe that knowledge and inquiry are historically and culturally specific, hence conceptions change with time and from one culture to another (Gergen 1985). Third, they consider that it is through social processes that knowledge is sustained (Cunliffe 2008; Gergen 1985). Therefore, a current accepted version of knowledge is the product of the

[8] Burr (2003), who belongs to the field of psychology, uses the term social constructionist.

interactions and social practices between people sharing a specific culture at a particular time. Fourth, constructivists view knowledge and social action as highly connected (Burr 2003).

Elaborating on the basic assumptions introduced above, a constructivist worldview considers knowledge to be socially generated and affected by the individuals' cultural and historical settings. Hence, constructivists emphasise the importance of context for investigating any phenomenon in order to understand the cultural and historical norms of participants (Bryman 2015; Creswell 2012; Crotty 1998). From a constructivist stance, individuals seek to understand the world by developing subjective meanings of their experiences; such meanings are multiple and varied. Social constructivists believe that "*reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the processes in which this occurs*" (Burger & Luckmann 1991, p.13). Put differently, there are multiple changing realities, which are socially constructed, through interactions with others, and are dependent on individuals' perceptions; an accepted knowledge or a social construction of the world supports and sustains certain patterns of social actions, while excludes others (Burr 2003). Therefore, constructivists aim at developing subjective multiple meanings of experiences to unveil the complexity of views (Creswell 2012; 2014; Lincoln et al. 2011; Mertens 2010).

Moreover, researchers from this perspective consider themselves not just "*presenters*" of realities but "*inventors*" who inter-subjectively construct the realities they are studying (Cunliffe 2003, p. 988). They recognise that their interpretations are influenced by their own experiences and backgrounds, so they tend to position themselves in the research in order to acknowledge their impact on interpretations (Creswell 2012). This point will be further discussed in terms of reflexivity (see section 3.7.5.).

Most importantly, interactions and practices are key in this paradigm, as stated by Cunliffe (2008, p.132): "*Knowing* [from the perspective of social constructivism] *is sustained and created in multiple interactions and social practices*". Therefore, such worldview is highly useful for this practice-based study of AE and the dynamics of its process, where the focus is on the A2A interactions. In fact, social processes (hence practices) and interactions were the prime focus of Berger & Luckmann's (1966) influential work. As Burr (2003) further explains,

people construct their own versions of knowledge through their social interactions and practices. Moreover, Creswell (2012, p.25) notes that the interactions among individuals in terms of "*processes*" are fundamental for undergoing research from this perspective, whereas Sanders et al. (2007) and Bryman (2015) posit the actions of social actors at the core of constructivist research. Furthermore, the centrality of "practices" to social constructivism is further highlighted by Crotty (1998, p.42) who states: "*all knowledge* [from a social constructivist perspective]*, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context*". Having reviewed the philosophical assumptions underpinning this research, the adopted methodology is discussed next.

3.3. The Selected Methodology

Methodology refers to the procedures or strategy that will be followed in conducting a research. More specifically, it entails the logic behind the selected methods and the plan of action that will be used to reach the desired outcomes (Crotty 1998). The choice of the appropriate methodology to use is guided by the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research on the one hand and by the research objective(s) and research question(s) on the other hand.

Research from a social constructivist perspective is an inductive endeavour, where meanings are generated from field data (Creswell 2014; Crotty 1998), hence a qualitative methodology is needed. Qualitative research is an inquiry approach for exploring the meaning ascribed by individuals or groups to a phenomenon or a problem. It allows for the capturing of expressive information that cannot be conveyed through quantitative methods (Silverman 2009), and emphasises the importance of representing the complexity of a setting or a situation by focusing on the context of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell 2012).

Qualitative research is primarily inductive in nature, where data is usually collected in its natural setting (Lincoln & Guba 1985), and the researcher relies on data analysis and interpretation to build general themes from particulars (Creswell 2012). It is highly

recommended for studying emerging concepts, where previous research is limited (Creswell 1994), as in the case of this research. Interestingly, Gambetti & Graffigna (2010) specifically recommend the adoption of a qualitative approach for studying the multi-faceted AE construct, they consider qualitative methodology to better suit engagement studies "*because of its ability to explore subtle nuances of social phenomena and integrate perspectives from different disciplines to bring new insight and understanding of the marketing environment*" (p. 822). For a qualitative research, the methodology follows an inductive approach that is emerging and shaped by the collected data (Creswell 2012; Crotty 1998).

Furthermore, a constructivist worldview considers knowledge to be rooted in the interactions that exist between people and their environments. Therefore, since this study aims at exploring the dynamics of the AE process in an online community via engagement practices and A2A interactions, the interactions of actors within an online community need to be observed, analysed and interpreted. This calls for the use of research methodology that allows for the collection of rich relevant data in its natural setting, which is the online environment. Therefore, netnography is selected as the appropriate methodology to investigate AE in this context.

Netnography is a qualitative interpretive research methodology developed in the late 1990s by Robert Kozinets to study online communities of consumption and social groups. It is currently a well-established technique in the marketing field, with detailed guidelines that ensure its rigour (e.g., Kozinets 2002; 2010; 2015), and has been adopted by an increasing number of prominent researchers who have proved its capability and reliability. It is currently considered "*one of the most important research tools*" (Chao et al. 2015, as quoted in Kozinets 2017, p.2). To date, Kozinets' (2002) article "The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities" in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, where netnography was formally introduced, is cited 3223 times[9]. Moreover, all top-tier marketing and management journals have published articles that used it. Appendix 5 provides an overview of the most prominent netnographic studies, not only in marketing but from various disciplines. Netnography is a type of ethnography adapted to the study of online communities by accommodating for the complexities of computer-mediated fieldwork and the contemporary

[9] This number was last checked on the 5th of Feb 2018. The number was 3195 in December 2017, and in July 2017 it was 2937, compared to 1376 in April 2013. The increasing trend of the adoption of netnography is evident from the continuous increase in the number of citations.

line social world (Jupp 2006; Kozinets 2010; 2015). It aims at exploring cultural and/or social phenomena in online communities by analysing the communication and interactions among the community members. Like ethnography, netnography allows the researcher to observe consumers (actors) in their natural environment, which is the online community. Yet it is simpler, faster, and less costly than ethnography. It is also less obtrusive and more naturalistic than other techniques such as focus groups and interviews. Moreover, it is expected to generate more honest accounts due to the nature of the computer-mediated communication, which offers an option of anonymity to participants and thus a sense of liberation in contrast to face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, netnography offers unique opportunity for an ongoing access to the original data set and the informants in a specific online social situation, and hence is particularly useful for understanding ongoing consumption patterns and interactions of an online group (Kozinets 2002; 2010; 2015). Therefore, it is highly adequate for this study in order to investigate the A2A interactions and the AE dynamics.

Moreover, while being primarily based upon textural discourse observation, Kozinets (2002; 2006; 2010) clarify that netnography can still be used to study the social practices of an online group. Based on Wittgenstein's (1968) work, Kozinets (2002, p.64) suggests that "*the posting of computer text is a social action, a communicative act*". Therefore, netnography can also accommodate for the performance notion of practice (see chapter 2, section 2.8.1.). Moreover, Schau et al. (2009) successfully used netnography to investigate the value creation practices in an array of brand communities, Närvänen et al. (2013) applied it to explore discursive practices in a community of interest, and Hollebeek et al. (2017) employed it for the study of engagement practices in a luxury brand community. Having reviewed netnography as the selected methodology, the research setting is presented next before proceeding with discussing the data collection.

3.4. Research Setting

The aim of this study is to explore AE in an online community context. However, before introducing the specific community investigated in this research, the concept of online communities needs to be reviewed first.

3.4.1. Online Communities: An Overview

To better understand the online community phenomenon, a historical overview is needed. Originally, communities were limited by geography and consisted mainly of individuals who share intentions, interactions, and activities at a specific place or geography (Kaufman 1959). With the emergence of modernity, these markers were diluted and a loss of community was experienced, and communities in their traditional forms were destroyed; individuals drifted away from communities and became more concerned with the self (Cova 1997). However, with the widespread of the internet, the geographic restrictions were freed, and re-emergence of communities occurred, where connections are no longer to places but rather to people (Muñiz & O'Guinn 2001). This was achieved through the emergence of "virtual" or "online" communities, which is a concept that was introduced in 1993 by the internet pioneer Howard Rheingold and refers to "*social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace*" (Rheingold 1993, p.5).

Online communities have become eminently popular environments where people exchange resources such as information and advice about common interests (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015). Their interactive capabilities have exponentially increased the opportunities for consumers to communicate with firms (Dolan & Goodman 2017; McMillan & Hwang 2002; Song & Zinkhan 2008;), and with other consumers through C2C (A2A) interactions (Adjei et al. 2010; Chan & Li 2010; Libai et al. 2010). It has empowered consumers by allowing them to create and share their own content and experiences, and to participate in value creation (Centeno & Wang 2017; Cova & Pace 2006; Fisher & Smith 2011). Most importantly, such interactivity reinforces what Cova (1997) termed the "linking value" of C2C (A2A) bonds. Such bonds extend beyond the consumption of products or services, are socially embedded, and are based on the experience of being part of the community itself (Chan & Li 2010; Cova et al. 2007; Mathwick et al. 2008). Overall, from the members' perspective, online communities provide members with functional and social benefits (Kuo & Feng 2013; Seraj 2012; Thomas et al. 2013).

From the firm perspective, online communities offer significant benefits such as decreasing customer service costs due to the peer-to-peer problem solving (Wiertz & Ruyter 2007; Mathwick et al. 2008), sharing of information and innovation (Von Hippel 2001; 2005; Von

Hippel & Krogh 2003), getting the customers' feedback on new offerings (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Zwass 2010), and creating stronger relationships with customers (Dessart et al. 2016; Kim et al. 2008). Having reviewed the concept of online communities, the selection of the specific community that would be investigated is presented next.

3.4.2. Selecting the Online Community to Study

All prior practice-based research that investigated engagement in an online community context focused solely on brand communities. However, these form just a subset of online communities (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015; Thomas et al. 2013). Many online communities are non-brand related; where members are united by common interest instead of a specific brand. These have been termed as "communities of interest" which are becoming increasingly popular (Hartmann et al. 2015; Thomas et al. 2013; Weijo et al. 2014) as previously discussed (see chapter 1, section 1.1.), and their significance has been recently identified in online community literature (e.g., Kelling et al. 2015; Närvänen et al. 2013; Seraj 2012), yet AE is not explored in this context to date.

Attempting to fill this gap, the focus in the selection was on communities of interest that are non-brand related. The selection of the specific community of interest to investigate is a critical decision (Adjei et al. 2010; Kozinets 2010; 2015), where two selection criteria need to be met. First, Muñiz & O'Guinn's (2001) three community markers (consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and shared moral responsibility) should be present. Second, Kozinets (2010, p.89) provides another netnographic selection criteria, where the selected community/forum needs to be:

1) *relevant* to the research question(s)
2) *active*, where communications are regular and recent
3) *interactive*, with high communication rate between participants (equivalent to A2A interactions)
4) *substantial*, with high traffic of postings and large number of participants
5) *heterogeneous*, where a number of different participants exists
6) *data rich*, reflecting the availability of detailed and descriptive rich data

3.4.3. The Selected Online Community: ExpatWoman.com

After a thorough research to meet all criteria, the online community of ExpatWoman.com (http://www.expatwoman.com/) (EW hereafter) was selected. Even though EW seemed to be a very promising choice, its potential to be the context of the research was thoroughly explored before taking the selection decision. This was achieved by undergoing an exploratory netnography where the website with all its different sections and various forums were observed, and the majority of the EW organised offline meetups were attended. By the end of two months of exploration and prolonged discussions with the thesis supervisors, the researcher was confident that EW can be a great context for this study.

Established in 2002, EW is a for-profit online community for female expats, independently owned and funded mainly by advertising, dedicated to connecting and supporting expat females and their families worldwide as expressed by their welcome statement:

> "*We're a free and friendly site for expat women around the world who are already living abroad or looking to make the move. We have in depth websites for popular expat destinations, as well as essential guides for every country in the world. We've also got global forums for you to join and get real life tips and advice. Let us help you on your expat journey!"* (ExpatWoman.com 2017).

At first, EW was focused on the United Arab Emirates and the Middle East. Then in 2014, driven by its enormous success, it has gone global in order to connect women worldwide, and by 2016 it involved 240 countries. It is currently one of the largest and most popular female and family focused expat website, and one of the biggest information websites in English language in the Middle East; with more than 460,000 unique visitors per month, and more than 1.3 million monthly page views (Alexa 2017).

EW not only fulfils both Muñiz & O'Guinn's (2001) and Kozinets' (2010) criteria, but it also covers a wide range of various topics, such as work, education, entertainment, money, wellness, pregnancy & children, food, and fashion. This is in addition to providing a classified section. Therefore, the EW website covers almost all topics related to adults (especially women) day to day life, rather than being limited to expat life. Such wide variety increases the interest in the community and in turn, increases the application of the research findings and contributions

since the EW community can basically be considered more or less a general consumption group who are interested in all topics related to women and family.

EW is an information sharing website that also allows members to form social bonds. It hosts several forums for different countries/cities with high expat percentage, hence acts as an engagement platform (Breidbach et al. 2014; Frow et al. 2015; Ramaswamy & Gouillart 2010). Engagement platforms are "*physical or virtual touch points designed to provide structural support for the exchange and integration of resources*" (Li et al. 2017, p.746). Forums (also referred to as bulletin boards) are considered the most established and most suitable form of online communities for marketing research (Adjei et al. 2010; Kozinets 2007; 2010). A forum offers a platform for members of an online community to participate in discussions that interest them by posting and/or responding to other members' textual messages. Therefore, a forum is the means though which members can collectively communicate and interact, and hence is the focus of this study.

The discussion takes the form of interrelated messages or posts forming a conversation between participants and is referred to as a "thread" (Chan & Li 2010; Kozinets 2002), which is defined as "*the initial discussion board posting by a respondent and all the replies to that message*" (Adjei et al. 2010, p.640). Simply put, a thread is composed of an initial post and its replies. Threads are presented in a chronological order on the forum home page with the most recent at the top of the list.

EW forums are public; all posts are publicly available data that are accessible without membership, and where authors use pseudonyms. A thread is available for viewing on the EW website for 6 months on average from the date of its last post. It is also worth noting that sending private messages (PM) is another means of communication between members in forums that is one-to-one and private. However, this feature is disabled in some of EW forums, including the Dubai forum, which is the context of the study as explained next.

The Dubai EW forum (https://www.expatwoman.com/dubai/forum/dubai-northern-emirates) was chosen to be the context of this thesis for three reasons. First, it is the most active forum on the EW website (with more than 85% of Dubai total population being expats). Second, the researcher is an expat herself living in Dubai since 2008 and has been following the EW community ever since. This long involvement with the community was deemed highly

beneficial in offering potential for a unique netnographic research (Kozinets 2001; Weijo et al. 2014). Klein & Myers (1999) also emphasise the importance of the researcher's understanding of the research setting and its background in order to better interpret the data and "*to seek meaning in context*" (p.73).

Third, the Dubai forum[10] organises regular offline meetups and occasional events, hence members can engage not only online but also offline, which creates an even more unique perspective to the study of AE. Furthermore, such organised meetups provided a great opportunity to be in direct contact with members and to regularly take their opinions and feedback regarding the emerging findings, especially since PM is disabled in the Dubai forum. In total, EW hosts more than 200 regular meetups in Dubai that are divided into two groups: adults only and mums' groups. The latter is further divided into two subgroups; one for mums-to-be and mums with babies, and another for mums with toddlers. The adults only meetups follow a schedule, where every week day is designated for one specific location in the city, where a different group is formed that is mostly composed of ladies from this neighbourhood and usually has its unique style.

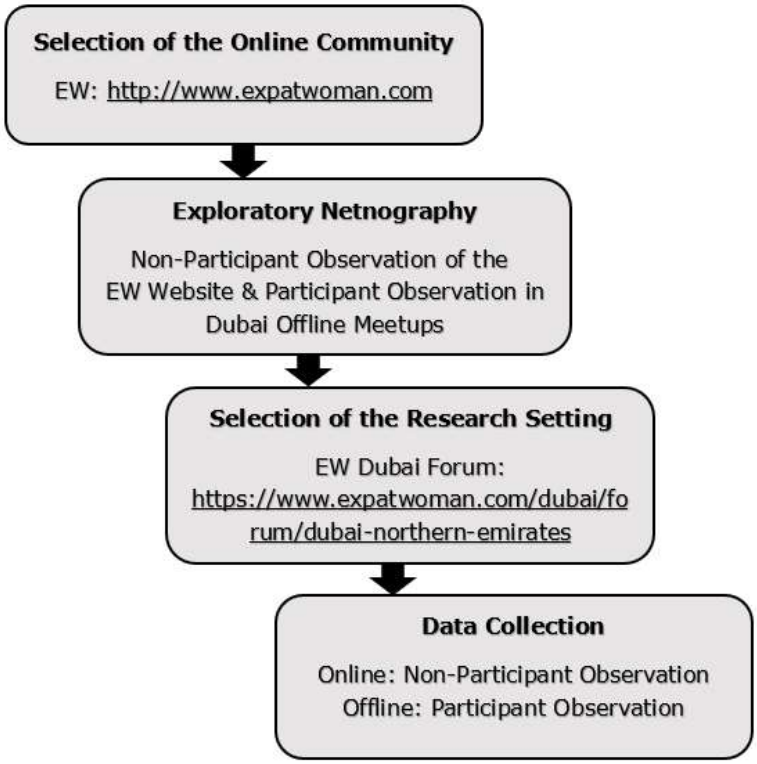
Fourth, the level of activity on the EW Dubai forum provides a great balance between being highly active yet still manageable as compared to other online communities that were considered during the selection (e.g., mumsnet.com), hence making it possible to study the entirety of the Dubai forum, instead of focusing on specific threads. This is expected to lead to more comprehensive findings, as all activities (posts) in the forum under study can be investigated during the data collection period. Hence, it permits the identification of a complete array of possible engagement practices carried out by all members including the less active members. This is in contrast to the practice-based engagement studies to date (e.g., Brodie et al. 2013; Habibi et al. 2014; Hollebeek et al. 2017) that focused solely on practices undergone by the most active members who are typically the minority of any online community (De Valck et al. 2009).

[10] Dubai is the only city where members are offered the opportunity to engage both online and offline via organised meetups. Such gatherings are not arranged in other EW cities.

3.5. Data Collection

Having introduced the selected community, the steps followed from the selection of the community to the start of the actual data collection are depicted in Figure 3.2. However, before discussing the selected methods for data collection, the unit of analysis needs to be discussed.

Figure 3.2: Steps Adopted from Selecting the Community to Data Collection



3.5.1. Unit of Analysis

This research uses longitudinal data, which allows for the investigation of the dynamics of the AE process and its development over time (Hollebeek et al. 2016a). The separate thoughts and actions of the individual in the forum constitute the *unit of empirical observation* (i.e. as evidenced by what, and if, members post). These posts evidence the temporal and/or relational connections of an actor. They also evidence the internal or psychological state of the actor (i.e. their disposition).

However, since the objective of this study is to understand such dynamics from a practice perspective, the focus needs to be the collective shared patterns of interaction and engagement rather than the separate actions or thoughts of individual consumers (Närvänen et al. 2013; Halkier & Jensen 2011). Yin (1994) maintains that the unit of analysis may be an individual, social groups, events, or other abstract entities. Therefore, the *unit of analysis* is the discussion thread with its constituent posts.

Thus, the units of observation are treated as part of a greater whole, the thread. This approach helps to contextualise action and supports the tenants of a practice theory approach by expanding the analysis to a social level which can account for multiple interactions among multiple involved actors. This also follows Kozinets' (2010, p.133) recommendation that in netnography every post should be treated as a social act, where the meanings and the context of such acts are to be understood, without needing to know "*who*" is doing "*what*".

3.5.2. Data Collection Methods

Having identified the unit of analysis, the selected methods for data collection are summarised in Table 3.2 and detailed below.

3.5.2.1. Observational Methods: Non-participant Vs. Participant

In order to investigate the dynamics of the AE process and its development over time, longitudinal data is needed (Hollebeek et al. 2016a), which is best collected via ongoing observation of the forum under study. However, a decision is needed regarding the type of observational method to use; whether non-participant or participant.

Netnography is highly flexible in terms of the degree of participation in observation. It can be purely observational and non-participant or it can involve high level of participation (Kozinets 2006; 2010; 2017).

Table 3.2: Data Collection Methods

Data Collection Phase	Methods Used	Collection Time Frame	Collected Data Timeline
Phase 1	a) Online: Non-participant observation of the Dubai forum.	August 2015 - April 2016	March 2011- April 2016
	b) Offline: Participant observation at Dubai EW organised meetups.	November 2015 - November 2016	November 2015 - November 2016
Phase 2	Follow-up non-participant observation	September 2016 - November 2017	January 2011 - November 2017

Appendix 5 provides examples of prominent articles from different disciplines that adopt solely non-participant observation and others which combine non-participant with participant observation. It is evident that non-participant observation is more common. Similarly, Mkono & Markwell's (2014) review of netnographic studies in tourism indicate that passive non-participant netnography is the dominant approach. Furthermore, some scholars argue in favour of purely observational netnography (e.g., Colliander & Wien 2013; Oakes et al. 2013; Wu & Pearce 2014), and recommend that such an observational mode should be the norm for netnography to ensure unobtrusiveness, and hence increases authenticity and integrity (Langer & Beckman 2005).

The key strength of non-participation is the minimisation of the researcher's effect on the collected data to avoid its contamination, which is especially crucial for a practice-based research due to the emergent and self-perpetuating nature of practices, where the researcher intervention can lead to seeding practices[21] (Schau et al. 2009), hence resulting in misleading findings. Moreover, non-participant observation helps avoiding possible hostility, cautious attitudes or negative responses from community members (Catterall & Maclaran 2002; Närvänen et al. 2013) that are becoming more common due to the increasing number of researchers attempting to study online communities, and to some associated negative experiences (Kozinets 2010).

[21] "Seeding of practices" refers to deliberate stimulation and promotion of certain practices (Schau et al. 2009).

3.5.2.2. Collection of Online Data: Non-participant Observation

Based on the above, and primarily to ensure unobtrusiveness in order to increase authenticity and integrity, the selected method for the collection of online data was ongoing non-participant observation. Online data was collected in two phases, corresponding to the two research questions respectively.

Phase 1 of Online Data Collection

In the first phase, in order to identify the AE practices, all messages that members posted on the Dubai forum were observed starting August 2015 until April 2016, when saturation was reached (Goulding 2002; Strauss & Corbin 1998); additional data did not provide new insights (Bowen 2008; Charmaz 2003; Morse et al. 2002; Strauss & Corbin 1990). Symon & Cassell (2012, p.44) define data saturation as: "*the point at which no new information or themes are observed in data*", and it is considered "*the key to excellent qualitative research*" (Morse 1994, p.147, as quoted in Symon & Cassell 2012, p.44).

According to Harding (2013), considering a population in its entirety (in this case all members postings in the data collection time frame) is in fact the ideal scenario in data collection. Furthermore, while the time frame of the collection of online data was August 2015 to April 2016, Kozinets (2006; 2010) emphasises that in non-participant observation, the data is not to be stripped out of its cultural and communal context, which should be thoroughly understood by the researcher in order to be able to provide a thick description, since it is the essence of netnography. Therefore, it was decided that when a post is created during the data collection time frame, yet is a continuation or a revival[22] of an older thread, the relevant thread is studied in its entirety from its starting date, since the unit of analysis is the thread and not the individual post, and also to fully understand the context of such newer posts in their respective original threads.

In total, 1080 treads were directly copied from the forum, where each thread is composed of a number of posts (the longest observed thread had 97 posts), and the timeline of the analysed threads is March 2011 to April 2016. Therefore, this study uses archival data defined as: "*data*

[22] The revival of a thread takes place when a member searches the archives by a key word, and hence gets relevant old threads, which can then be revived via new posts.

that the researcher directly copies from pre-exiting computer-mediated communications of online community members, data that she is not directly involved in creating or prompting" (Kozinets 2010, p. 98), such threads are no longer available[23] on the forum.

Having identified the array of all engagement practices observed in the Dubai forum using the data described above, the focus of the analysis then shifted to the second objective, which is to demystify the dynamics of the AE process, via a second phase of analysis which started off using the data already collected. However, as the analysis progressed in this second phase, it became evident that more data is needed, hence a second phase of data collection was carried out, as detailed below.

Phase 2 of Online Data Collection

Carefully chosen data was needed to further advance the preliminary insights gained from the initially collected data explained above. Specifically, the profiles[24] of some members needed to be reviewed and all threads where those members posted were examined, in order to further investigate the development of the AE process as will be discussed in the findings (see chapter 6). Such follow-up observations started in September 2016 and continued until November 2017, and the timeline of the collected data for this phase is January 2011[25] to November 2017.

As Kozinets (2002) explains, using data which is carefully selected in netnography is similar to purposive sampling in marketing-oriented ethnography (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994; Lincoln & Guba 1985; Wallendorf & Belk 1989). The aim of this strategy is the analytic depth rather than representativeness or transferability, and it has been widely adopted in prior netnographic studies (e.g., Chan & Li 2010; Füller et al. 2007; Jayanti & Singh 2010). Purposive sampling is the form of non-probability sampling that is most frequently used in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman 1994; Symon & Cassell 2012). It is a selection

[23] As previously explained, a thread remains available for viewing around 6 months on the forum, unless it is revived.
[24] A member profile includes information regarding the registration date, the total number of posts to date, in addition to all posts created by that member and their corresponding threads. However, as the forum clears periodically its archives, no data prior to January 2011 was available in such profiles at the time of data collection.
[25] The EW community clears its old archives, hence at the time of data collection, the oldest available archived data were from January 2011.

technique that depends on the researcher's judgment in choosing the sample which will best serve the purpose of the research (Jupp 2006; Symon & Cassell 2012).

3.5.2.3. Collection of Offline Data: Participant Observations

Since engagement in the Dubai forum was found to extend beyond the online environment due to organised offline meetups, the online data needed to be complemented with offline observations in order to develop a full picture of AE in the community under study (Kozinets 2010). The importance of considering the participants interactions both online and offline, rather than being limited to the online context, for the development of a richer netnographic research has been repeatedly highlighted (e.g., García-Álvarez et al. 2015; Kozinets 2015; 2017). Therefore, the researcher was a participant observer at more than 50 of the EW organised gatherings in Dubai from November 2015 to November 2016, including: (1) regular meetups each lasted around 2 hours and (2) occasional events each lasted 4 hours on average, where the group dynamics were observed, questions were asked, and field notes were recorded.

Such offline observations were also used to substantiate and support the consistency of the online analysis, hence increasing the findings' reliability (Cova & Pace 2006). It enabled the researcher to get regular feedback about the emerging findings, hence member checks (Belk et al. 1989; Hirschman 1986; Lincoln & Guba 1985) were conducted on an ongoing basis to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of interpretations. Symon & Cassell (2012, p.207) highlight the importance of member checking for ensuring the quality of qualitative research in general and define it as: "*testing the researcher interpretation of the data with the research participants throughout the research process (e.g. by discussing emerging results with various interest groups within the research) to check that the participants' views have been accurately captured and to add additional material*". More specifically, the benefits of conducting member checks in netnographic studies have also been emphasised (e.g., Brown et al. 2003; Kozinets 2002; Muñiz & Schau 2007).

Furthermore, the attendance of such gatherings reflects in the analysis "*the participative component*", which is considered the "*hallmark of interpretive depth*" (Kozinets et al. 2010, p.73). Therefore, the adopted data collection approach combines the benefits of non-participant observation with that of community participation. In fact, the merits of participation in

netnographic research have been repeatedly highlighted (e.g., Kozinets et al. 2010; Schembri & Latimer 2016; Wang et al. 2017) in order to better understand the context and culture of the community; similar to "*tribal-dance-joining*" in case of ethnography (Kozinets 2006, p.282). In addition, such participation allows the formation of direct relationships and connections with the community members (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder 2011), and to gain their empathy (Muñiz & Schau 2005). It also provides the researcher with the opportunity to seek further details and clarifications from participants when needed (Hemetsberger 2006). Another reason worth mentioning here is that at an early stage of the research project, offline gatherings were attended in an attempt to recruit volunteers for interviews (Muñiz & O'Guinn 2001). However, as the research progressed, conducting formal interviews was deemed unnecessary due to the richness of the data collected via informal conversations with community members during the gatherings, both one-to-one and in group settings, lasting from 15 minutes to more than an hour a piece.

Interestingly, Kozinets (2010) explains that participation doesn't have to be in all of the community activities, and that involvement in some of the activities is enough. Therefore, by adopting a strategy similar to that of Habibi et al. (2014), Hamilton & Hewer (2009), and Kozinets et al. (2010), where participation is not in the focal source of online data, the selected approach for data collection guarantees the authenticity and integrity of the results, while still benefiting from community participation. Having discussed the data collection approach followed in this study, ethical considerations are discussed next.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

In conducting this research, the researcher followed the ethical guidelines set by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Nottingham. This is in addition to adhering to online research ethical recommendations provided not only by the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess & Association of Internet Researchers 2002), but also by other internet research handbooks such as Buchanan (2004), Fielding et al. (2008), Hewson & Stewart (2016), and Markham & Buchanan (2012). Furthermore, Kozinets' (2002; 2010; 2015) netnographic ethical considerations were also followed.

There are two main ethical concerns in netnographic research. The first is whether an online forum is to be considered a public or a private domain. The second is the informed consent in cyberspace. It has been established that if access to content is not restricted by any means and do not require any membership, then this content is considered as public domain, and the use of such public postings do not require informed consent (Oakes et al. 2013). The online data used in this study are solely public and all posters are aware of this fact.

Moreover, following the most conservative approach regarding informants' confidentiality, all pseudonyms used by EW members are altered when reported in this document to ensure complete confidentiality (Kozinets 2015). Furthermore, this study uses archival data and the analysed threads are no longer available on the EW website. This corresponds to the fourth degree of concealment, which is the maximum protection level for online data used in research (Kozinets 2010). In addition, only non-participant observation was used in collecting the online data, hence any possible ethical issues that may be related to online participant observations were avoided. Instead, participant observations were limited to the offline meetups where individual participant consent was directly obtained.

3.7. Ensuring Research Quality

In this section, some quality considerations will be discussed. It proceeds with a general overview of the issue of quality in qualitative research and the various assessment criteria. This is followed by a discussion of the notion of criteria from a constructivist perspective. Next, the assessment criteria most relevant to this study are discussed, and the way they are addressed in this research are presented, with special emphasis on reflexivity.

3.7.1. Quality Assessment in Qualitative Research

The issue of the qualitative work assessment (i.e. what can be considered as good quality research) has been widely considered by many prominent scholars (e.g., Gephart 2004; Savall et al. 2008; Seale et al. 2004). Perhaps the rising concern about quality in the qualitative research community can be demonstrated through the feature topic in The *Journal of Organization Research Methods*, in 2008 dedicated to "*Determining Quality in Qualitative Research*", where 33 proposals were submitted, of these 22 were invited to submit full articles, of which only 4 articles were selected for publication (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008, p.419).

Over the past years, various assessment criteria and quality lists have been proposed (Seale 1999). Some of these criteria were derived from methodological and epistemological principles, while others were derived from practice and empirical analysis (Symon & Cassell 2012). Some scholars developed criteria aimed at general applicability (e.g., Guba & Lincoln 1989; Tracy 2010), others criticised this view and argued that criteria should be paradigm specific (e.g., Amis & Silk 2008; Johnson et al. 2006). Taking it to an extreme, some relativists opposed the idea of having any set assessment criteria (e.g., Bochner 2000; Schwandt 1996; Smith & Hodkinson 2005). They argue that since there is no absolute "*truth*" against which qualitative research can be judged, then no criteria can be considered as certain or privileged (Symon & Cassell 2012, p.218).

The existence of such different views and debates regarding evaluation criteria can be attributed to the methodological pluralism in qualitative research, which is a classification that include a diversity of research activities where researchers may adopt various philosophical commitments (Johnson et al. 2006; Prasad & Prasad 2002) as previously presented in Table 3.1. In fact, it is this pluralism that complicates the task of determining quality, since the assessment of a qualitative research depends upon the philosophical assumptions underpinning it (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008). However, this is not to be considered a problem, but rather an indicator of the vitality and richness of qualitative research (Amis & Silk 2008). Since constructivism is the paradigm underpinning this research, the assessment of a research quality from a constructivist stance is discussed next.

3.7.2. Quality Assessment Criteria and Constructivism

From a constructivist perspective, assessing research quality and having set criteria is rather problematic (Guba & Lincoln 1994). This is due to the element of relativism that constructivism entails (Seale 1999), making the idea of fixed criteria quite inappropriate, since any evaluation criteria is more or less socially constructed (Smith & Deemer 2000; Smith & Hodkinson 2005).

However, the usefulness of having criteria which is relevant to the applied methods at hand is not to be undermined (Symon & Cassell 2012). As Tracy (2010) explains, in order to develop and excel beginners in any craft heavily depend in their apprenticeship on rules and core values, which are communicated through criteria. Moreover, the lack of evaluative criteria or

guidelines renders the notion of good research rather elusive. This in turn can cause a legitimacy problem for qualitative research when compared to the mainstream quantitative camp (Johnson et al. 2006).

3.7.3. Quality in the Proposed Research: A Pragmatic View

Perhaps a pragmatic solution to this unresolved issue of quality criteria from a constructivist perspective would be to adopt the notion of criteria-in-use, suggested by Pratt (2008) and Easterby-Smith et al. (2008). They recommend that researchers need to benefit from the currently used criteria in the relevant field, but stay away from rigidly following any list, as this may hinder or constrain the flexibility and creativity, which are the essence of qualitative research (Seale 1999). This parallels Symon & Cassell's (2012) suggestion that researchers need to be aware of existing criteria relevant to the research at hand, in order to either apply these criteria or argue persuasively against it. Therefore, the criteria used in netnographic research and the way they are addressed in this research are discussed in the following section.

3.7.4. A Netnographic Criteria for Quality

Considering quality in netnography, Kozinets (2010) explains that evaluating a netnographic work is highly challenging, since the novelty of Internet research adds to the complexity of qualitative research assessment. However, he offers a "netnographic criteria", which is composed of ten quality standards that can be considered as a pragmatic toolkit to be applied freely and flexibly. He further explains that these criteria offer no direct or simple solutions, and contradictions may even exist between some of its constituents, encouraging netnographers to creatively discover their own way. Kozinets' (2010) criteria are based on empirical and practical considerations. Also, in developing it, he attempted to accommodate various philosophical positions. However, following Denzin & Lincoln's (1994; 2005) classification, Kozinets (2010) focuses on four main positions: positivist, post-positivist, postmodern, and post-structural. It may seem rather unrealistic to attempt to cater for such various, and even contradicting, philosophical views. However, offering such harmonised criteria agrees with Seale's (1999) suggestion that practicing researchers should not restrict themselves to specific criteria promoted by one perspective (i.e. philosophical school or paradigm) within qualitative research. Instead, researchers are encouraged to benefit from them all because "*social research is a craft skill, relatively autonomous from the need to resolve philosophical disputes*" (p.465).

Having introduced the netnographic criteria and its underpinning logic, it is further elaborated below by reviewing its ten constituents.

The first criterion is **coherence**, which refers to "*the extent to which each recognizably different set of interpretations in the netnography is free from internal contradictions and presents a unified pattern*" (Kozinets 2010, p.163). This is a basic criterion that should be present in any interpretive work. In this study, coherence was insured through multiple iterations of analysis, where the recurrent aspects of the data were identified, and any disconfirming cases were further investigated. Furthermore, the analysis and interpretation were periodically reviewed by the two supervisors who ensured that no internal inconsistencies exist. In instances where inconsistencies were noticed, more rounds of analysis were carried out by the researcher to ensure that the sources of such inconsistency were identified and accounted for in the emerging findings. This approach bears similarity to "negative case analysis", which refers to "*refining analysis through a consideration of those cases that do not fit the original interpretation until the researcher has arrived at the most inclusive explanation possible*" (Symon & Cassell 2012, p.207). Such an iterative process continued until no more inconsistencies were identified by both the researcher and the supervisors. This approach can be considered as a sort of investigator triangulation (Bryman & Bell 2007) where more than one researcher reviews the same work. However, such triangulation was restricted to the judging of the overall coherence, since the analysis and interpretation were done solely by the researcher.

The second criterion is **rigour**, which is a challenging priority for qualitative researchers due to the need to balance the "*(often) conflicting need to develop new concepts inductively while meeting the high standards for rigor demanded by our top journals*" (Gioia et al. 2013, p.17). Rigour, from a netnographic perspective, is defined as "*the extent to which the text recognizes and adheres to the standards of netnographic research*" (Kozinets 2010, p.164). As previously explained (see section 3.3.), netnography is currently an established methodology with set standards and guidelines covering all its steps, starting with the selection of the community, moving to data collection and interpretation, in addition to ethical guidelines (Kozinets 2017). Rigour was considered in this thesis by dedicating considerable time to review all the available netnographic guidelines (e.g., Kozinets 2002; 2010; 2015) and ensuring that they are being followed in every step of the study in order to guarantee a rigorous research approach. Furthermore, the researcher was always keen on keeping the adopted analytical approach in line with the principles of mainstream qualitative data analysis (e.g., Arnould & Wallendorf

1994; Miles & Huberman 1994; Spiggle 1994), and ensuring that a methodological fit (Edmondson & McManus 2007) is maintained throughout the research. Therefore, the selection of the appropriate methodology and methods to use was guided by the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research on the one hand (i.e. the constructivist paradigm and its corresponding ontological and epistemological beliefs), and by the research objectives and research questions on the other hand.

Literacy is the third criterion, reflecting "*the extent to which the netnographic text recognizes and is knowledgeable of literature and research approaches relevant to the inquiry*" (Kozinets 2010, p.165). In other words, literacy refers to the need for the researcher to be aware of important studies which used netnography, and to be familiar of how it has been applied in such studies in order to benefit from previous experiences that helped making netnography an established methodology, and hence be in a position to properly and efficiently use it. Literacy was ensured by conducting a thorough review of all prominent articles that adopted netnography (see Appendix 5). This methodological literature review started before data collection, and hence it greatly assisted in better understanding the various netnographic techniques and how to apply the general guidelines in practice. Furthermore, the relevant netnographic studies were revisited as needed throughout the various stages of the research; data collection, analysis and interpretation, and representation of the findings.

Groundedness is the fourth criterion and refers to "*the extent to which the theoretical representation is supported by data, and the links between data and theory are clear and convincing*" (Kozinets 2010, p.166). According to this criterion, a netnographer is required to provide enough relevant evidence to support the study's claimed theoretical contributions. This is highly relevant to research from a constructivist stance, since claims and knowledge must be grounded in the fieldwork data (Creswell 2012; Kozinets 2010). This criterion bears similarity to Spiggle's (1994, p.501) criterion of "*adequacy*" which focuses on assessing "*how grounded in the data the representation is*". Groundedness was achieved in this study through the adoption of an inductive approach in data analysis and interpretation, where the findings emerged from field data. Also, this criterion is further reflected in the presentation of the findings via the extensive use of data illustrations which are provided to support every aspect of the results.

As for **innovation**, which is the fifth criterion, it is defined as "*the extent to which the constructs, ideas, frameworks and narrative form of the netnography provide new and creative ways of understanding systems, structures, experience or actions*" (Kozinets 2010, p.162). This criterion is addressed in terms of the theoretical and managerial contributions of this thesis (see chapter 7, sections 7.3 and 7.4 respectively). Kozinets (2010) also suggests that in the best netnography cases, innovation is not limited to the advancement of knowledge in terms of research findings. It can extend to the use of technology in presenting the results with creativity and artistry, such as creating interactive or dynamic hyperlinked netnographic works. However, this is considered out of the scope of the current study, which will adhere to the conventional netnographic guidelines, due to the academic nature of this research. Hence, this criterion will only focus on knowledge advancement, which is similar to the "innovation" aspect suggested by Spiggle (1994).

Resonance is the sixth criterion, which refers to "*the extent to which a personalized and sensitizing connection with the cultural phenomenon is gained*" (Kozinets 2010, p.162). This criterion emphasises the importance of considering feelings and emotions. The researcher's personal experience (being an expat in Dubai since 2008) greatly helped in this regard, as it significantly increased the ability to understand and interpret members' feelings and emotions. Moreover, such aspects were addressed in the online context by giving careful attention to the use of emoticons, where an emoticon is "*a representation of a facial expression such as a smile or frown, formed by various combinations of keyboard characters and used in electronic communications to convey the writer's feelings or intended tone*" (Oxford Dictionaries 2017). The use of emoticons greatly improved the interpretation of non-verbal communication by clarifying the intended tone and helped substituting for body language existing in face-to-face communications. As for offline data collection, the researcher tried her best to continuously attend to non-verbal cues and conveyed emotions, and to record it as part of the fieldnotes, which were used as part of the data in the analysis, hence ensuring that all such non-verbal emotional aspects are included in the interpretation.

The seventh criterion is **verisimilitude**, which is defined as "*the text's ability to reproduce or simulate, and map, the "real"*" (Kozinets 2010, p.168). While the use of the world 'real' can lead to a long debate, this criterion simply aims at achieving "*a believable and lifelike sense of cultural and communal contact*" (Kozinets 2010, p.162), where a good netnography should be able to thoroughly convey the community's culture. This criterion exhibits a level of similarity

to the more general criterion of "*validity*" which refers to "*whether the researchers see what they think they see*" (Flick 2009, p.387), and its parallel term "credibility" which was offered by Guba & Lincoln (1989) as a more suitable alternative for naturalistic inquiry. This criterion is perhaps best explained by Symon & Cassell (2012, p.206) who state: "*rather than trying to find the best fit between interpretation and reality, the researcher tries to demonstrate a good fit between "constructed realties of respondents and the reconstructions attributed to them" (Guba & Lincoln 1989, p.237)*". In other words, this criterion reflects the ability of the final account to actually convey the perspectives and experiences of the participants. On the one hand, the researcher's prolonged involvement with the community and being an expat in Dubai for almost 10 years greatly helped in understanding the community's culture. On the other hand, the researcher was aware of the danger of "*going native*" (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, p.87), and the risk of giving more weight to her own perceptions and experiences than to those of the community members. Therefore, the researcher was keen on getting regular feedback of community members (i.e. member checks) regarding her interpretations and the emerging findings.

Praxis is the eighth criterion, which is "*the extent to which the text inspires and empowers social action*" (Kozinets 2010, p.171). It reflects the importance of keeping a pragmatic eye on the social implications of information communication technology (ICT), its impact on global society, and how it can empower social action and activism. Unfortunately, it was not possible to apply this criterion as no relevant data were collected. However, inspired by this criterion, the researcher was continuously looking for corresponding instances, which led to further consider the concept of social capital, and the relational norms of voluntarism, reciprocity, and trust in the context of AE. Such concepts were found to be beneficial in informing and enlightening the analysis as will be further highlighted while discussing the findings (chapter 5 and chapter 6).

The ninth criterion is **intermix**, which requires the netnographic representation to account for the various social interaction modes, both online and offline. This criterion attends to the increasing intermingling that exists between the online and offline worlds, offering significant and interesting areas to research. In fact, this is highly relevant to this thesis, since engagement in the forum under study extended to the real-world. Therefore, guided by this criterion, the researcher was keen to observe the members' offline interactions by attending the EW organised offline meetups instead of limiting the observations to the online context.

Lastly, the tenth criterion is **reflexivity**, which Kozinets (2010, p.169) considers it to be "*the extent to which the netnographic text acknowledges the role of the researcher and is open to alternative interpretations*". Due to the significance of reflexivity for qualitative research in general and for this constructivist study in specific, it will be further discussed in a separate section below.

3.7.5. Reflexivity

3.7.5.1. A General Overview

The concept of reflexivity in management research has been gaining importance with the rising acceptance and use of qualitative methods (Alvesson 2003; Cunliffe 2003; Johnson & Duberley 2003). While literature offers various conceptualisations and definitions for reflexivity, a rather simple definition is provided by Symon & Cassell (2012, p.72) as "*an awareness of the researcher's role in the practice of research and the way this is influenced by the object of the research, enabling the researcher to acknowledge the way in which he or she affects both the research process and outcomes*". Today, it is no longer acceptable for a qualitative researcher to be "*the omniscient, distant writer*" (Creswell 2012, p.214), who "*try to play God*" (Richardson & Pierre 2005, p.961).

As Cunliffe (2003) explains, reflexive scholars (e.g., Burrell & Morgan 1979; Chia 1996) consider any form of inquiry to be paradigmatically confined. Therefore, a principal task of reflexivity is to uncover the philosophical assumptions underlying the study (Holland 1999), and to get to know the relationship between such philosophical stances and research practice, since it is those positions and beliefs that will, in turn, affect the research process and its outcomes (Johnson & Duberley 2003).

However, reflexivity should not to be considered a burden that adds to the research complexity. In fact, a reflexive approach to research can offer valuable insights. First, a reflexive stance guards the researcher against the rather naïve assumption that reality will naturally be revealed out of data (Alvesson 2003). Second, it encourages the researcher to think creatively and raises the potential for a critical exploration of richer and deeper explanations and understandings of empirical material and experiences, as reflexivity encourages the researcher to further challenge the produced interpretations (Alvesson 2003; Cunliffe 2003).

3.7.5.2. Reflexivity in the Proposed Research

Having reviewed the concept of reflexivity, this section will highlight the reflexive approach adopted in this thesis. Interestingly, many aspects of reflexivity are rooted in the main premises of social constructivism, such as: "*accepting the tentative, inter-subjective, and multiply-constructed nature of explanation*" (Cunliffe 2003, p.1000). Constructivist researchers tend to position themselves in the study in order to acknowledge the impact of their own personal experiences on their interpretations (Creswell 2012). Exploring the relationship between philosophical commitments and reflexivity, Johnson & Duberley (2003) propose three generic reflexive approaches based on different ontological and epistemological assumptions. Following their classification scheme, and since a constructivist stance entails a subjective ontological and epistemological positions, the relevant reflexive approach for this study would be the deconstruction/hyper reflexivity. It refers to "*the deconstruction of deconstruction*", where no "*text can ever be stable or settled*", since every deconstruction reveals an "*alternative social construction*" that in turn should be "*reflexively questioned*", creating never ending cycles of further deconstructions (Johnson & Duberley 2003, p.1287).

However, it is evident that this reflexive approach is rather problematic, especially when adopted in a PhD thesis that should be finished within a limited time frame. Instead, this research adopts Alvesson's (2003) "reflexive pragmatism". Pragmatism in this context refers to the willingness to suspend some doubt and use the material in the best possible way to achieve results. This approach encourages limiting radical scepticism and balancing endless reflexivity with a sense of accomplishment, due to pragmatic limitations such as that of time (Alvesson 2003). In accordance with Seale (1999), Alvesson (2003) suggests that reflexivity requires a reasonable dose of epistemological and methodological awareness, without getting deeply engaged in philosophical arguments that may have negative impact on the research process by hindering practice. Alternatively, a reflexive approach should aim to exert all possible efforts to consider subject matter from various angles without privileging a priori favoured view, and to work with empirical data creatively and flexibly in a dynamic way, while avoiding "*a simple theory/method divide*" (Alvesson 2003, p.26).

Looking back at Kozinets' (2010) definition of reflexivity (see section 3.7.4. above), it seems that he actually adopts Alvesson's (2003) openness to alternative interpretations and integrates it with the common view about reflexivity, being an awareness of the researcher's role. Hence,

Kozinets' (2010) conceptualisation of reflexivity is highly relevant to the reflexive approach adopted in this thesis. Such reflexive approach was maintained throughout the study, and the use of field notes and analytical memos greatly helped in this regard, as the researcher recorded regularly all her thoughts, comments, and reflections, and made sure to include them in the analysis.

3.8. Chapter Summary

Before proceeding with the empirical work, the researcher needs to take several methodological decisions, and to choose best possible options from a range of alternatives. This chapter discusses such selections.

The researcher's philosophical stance is that of social constructivism. The centrality of interactions among actors and practices for such paradigm (Burr 2003; Cunliffe 2008) makes it highly adequate for this thesis. A netnographic methodology (Kozinets 2002) is selected as it allows for the collection of rich relevant data in its natural setting, which is the online community, and hence permits the exploration of the dynamics of the AE process in an online community via engagement practices and A2A interactions. The specific online community to investigate (i.e. the context of the study) was a critical decision were two selection criteria needed to be met: 1) Muñiz & O'Guinn's (2001) community markers and 2) Kozinets' (2010) netnographic criteria.

The selected community is ExpatWoman.com (EW), a for-profit online community for expats. Specifically, its Dubai forum was chosen for three reasons. First, it is the most active forum of EW community. Second, it offers a unique context to study AE since it provides its members with the opportunity to engage not only online but also offline by organising regular meetups. Third, the researcher herself is an expat living in Dubai for the past 10 years. Such personal experience was deemed beneficial in understanding the context of the study, and hence in developing a rich netnographic research (Weijo et al. 2014).

Focusing on the data collections methods, online data was collected in two phases via ongoing non-participant observation to ensure unobtrusiveness. In the first phase, all messages posted on the Dubai forum starting August 2015 until April 2016 were observed. Furthermore, when a message was posted in this time frame, yet is part of an older thread, the relevant thread was observed in its entirety. Hence, the timeline of the collected data in this first phase was from March 2011 to April 2016. As the analysis progressed, a second phase of online data collection was needed via non-participant observation of carefully selected threads, similar to purposive sampling. Moreover, participant observations in offline meetups organised by the EW community were also used to complement and substantiate the online data and the emerging findings.

Lastly, the chapter discusses ethical considerations and the measures taken to ensure quality and rigour in this thesis, while accounting for reflexivity. Having discussed the data research paradigm, the selected methodology, and data collection methods in this chapter, the data analysis approach is reviewed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

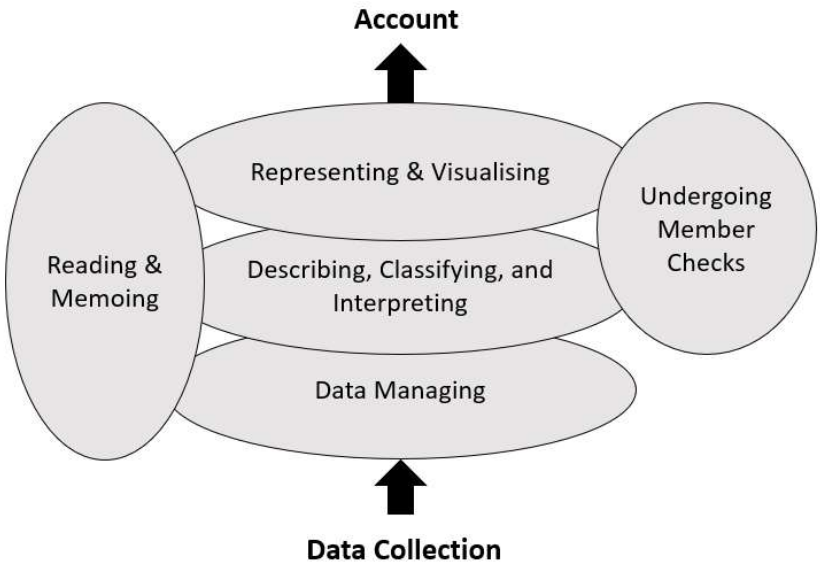
4. Data Analysis

4.1. Introduction

Having discussed the research approach in terms of the paradigm underpinning this thesis, the selected methodology, and the data collection methods in the previous chapter, the data analysis will be separately discussed in this chapter.

Qualitative data analysis entails the organisation and preparation of data, its reduction into themes through a coding process, the codes are then condensed, and finally the data and findings are reported and represented (Creswell 2012). As with any qualitative research, the data analysis process did not follow a linear approach. Instead, the activities were interrelated, and the process followed some sort of a spiral pattern, which Creswell (2012, p.183) refers to as "*the data analysis spiral*"; it starts with data collection and ends with the final account, after passing through various loops of analysis procedures or activities that are interrelated and may go on simultaneously (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: The Data Analysis Process



Source: Adapted from Creswell (2012, p. 183), modified to reflect the approach adopted in this thesis where; (1) the use of memos was throughout the process, and (2) member checks were regularly carried out.

Throughout the analysis process, the researcher was writing analytical memos as means of recording her ideas as they emerge. Kaplan & Maxwell (2005, p.42) define an analytical memo as "*anything that a researcher writes in relationship to the research, other than direct field notes or transcription*". Such memos are considered as significant analysis tool (Maxwell 2012) that permits the researcher to record his/her thoughts and perceptions during analysis by writing them down, hence facilitates analytical reflection and further analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994; Strauss & Corbin 1998).

4.2. Thematic Analysis

4.2.1. An Overview

Since the aim of this study is to demystify the dynamics of the AE process via shared engagement practices, thematic analysis was deemed appropriate as it entails the identification of patterns and communality found in data (Creswell 2012) rather than focusing on the behaviour of individual actors (Halkier & Jensen 2011; Närvänen et al. 2013). Hence it is highly compatible with the practice-based approach, which highlights the routine and convention in collective consumption (Warde 2005).

Thematic analysis is defined as "*a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data*" (Braun & Clarke 2006 p.6), where a theme is "*a pattern*" which exists in data (Boyatzis 1998, p. 4), and is relevant to the research question(s) and corresponds to a common idea or aspect of the phenomenon under study (Creswell 2012). In other words, thematic analysis entails the coding of data and its categorisation into broader themes (Boyatzis 1998). Creswell (2012, p.184) defines coding as the process of "*aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, then assigning a label to the code*". Saldaña (2015, p.24) further explains that a code in qualitative research generally refers to "*a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data*".

Thematic analysis is one of the most commonly used forms of analysis in qualitative research (Guest 2012), and it is considered "*a foundational method for qualitative analysis*" (Braun &

Clarke 2006, p.78). According to Holloway & Todres (2003, p.347) "*thematizing meanings*" is actually a generic skill that is shared across various qualitative analysis techniques. Some scholars (e.g., Boyatzis 1998; Ryan & Bernard 2000) suggest that thematic analysis should not be considered a separate method, but rather a tool that can be used across various analytic methods. However, Braun & Clarke (2006) strongly argue that thematic analysis is a standalone method which is highly flexible, and hence is suitable for a wide range of research. Interestingly, they consider it to be highly compatible with a constructivist perspective, making it even more suitable for this study. Moreover, thematic analysis allows the researcher to not only identify the relationships that exist among the emerging themes, but also to relate the empirical data to classifications that already exist in literature (Aronson 1994). Hence, the analysis can benefit from the findings of the existing AE exploratory research to date (e.g., Brodie et al. 2013; Hollebeek et al. 2017; Schau et al. 2009) and builds on it.

4.2.2. Inductive vs. Theoretical Thematic Analysis

Braun & Clarke (2006) identify two main types of thematic analysis. The first is inductive thematic analysis (e.g., Frith & Gleeson 2004; Patton 1990), where themes are identified from the data, and hence it follows a "*bottom up*" approach bearing some similarity to grounded theory and is being "*data-driven*" (Bran & Clarke 2006, p.83). In contrast, the second type is theoretical (deductive) thematic analysis (e.g., Boyatzis 1998; Hayes 1997), where a "*top down*" approach is followed and is guided by the researcher's theoretical interest, where he/she attempts to fit the data into a coding frame that pre-existed based on literature, hence is being "*analysis-driven*" (Bran & Clarke 2006, p.84).

Due to the exploratory nature of this research and the scarcity of previous empirical AE studies in the context of online communities (as highlighted in chapter 2) and following a constructivist stance (as discussed in chapter 3), an inductive "*bottom-up*" thematic approach was applied.

4.2.3. Themes Developed at a Latent Level

Prior to starting the analysis, a decision regarding the level at which themes are to be identified is required; whether it will be at the semantic (explicit) or at the latent (interpretive) level (Braun & Clarke 2006). As Boyatzis (1998, p.vii) explains, the former is "*identified at the manifest level (directly observable in the information)*", hence considers only the surface of the

data and its explicit meanings, whereas the latter further considers the underlying assumptions, ideas, and conceptualisations that shaped and informed the phenomenon under study. Braun & Clarke (2006, p.84) illustrate the difference between the two levels by portraying the data as a three-dimensional entity; "*an uneven blob of jelly*". They explain that a semantic analysis would seek to describe just the surface of that jelly in terms of form and meaning. Whereas a latent approach would go beneath the surface in an attempt to identify structures and features that gave the jelly that particular surface.

A latent level is thus chosen for this research for two reasons. First, the nature of practices is similar to that of the jelly described by Braun & Clarke (2006), where the underlying elements of a practice shape the surface, as depicted by Spurling et al.'s (2013); with the notion of practice as performance occupying the tip of the iceberg and the notion of practice as a coordinated entity being the submerged part (see chapter 2, Figure 2.2). A similar viewpoint is provided by Maller (2015) who explains that when a practice is performed, only the actions involved in that particular moment of performance that can be observed, rather than the whole practice entity with its three constituting elements. Therefore, a thorough study of practices requires an analysis that goes beneath the surface, and hence a latent level of thematic analysis is required. Second, Braun & Clarke (2006) emphasise that analysis at a latent level is more consistent with a constructivist perspective, which is the paradigm underpinning this research.

4.3. Steps Followed in Data Analysis

Even though the analysis process involved interrelated[27] steps rather than following a linear approach (see Figure 4.1), it will be presented below as sequential separate steps for the purpose of review.

Similar to data collection, the analysis was also divided into two phases, where each phase focused on one research question and involved several steps. As recommended by Saldaña (2015), in each step the coding method most suited to achieving the objective was applied. Saldaña (2015, p.107) emphasises the need "*to be flexible regarding the coding method(s) to use*" and to select the ones that "*will be most appropriate and most likely to yield substantive*

[27] Some of the activities were even carried out simultaneously.

analysis", and to mix and match methods as needed in order to answer the research question(s). Saldaña (2015) further explains that the researcher should "*carefully consider which coding method(s) may generate the types of answers you need, based on the forms of questions you pose*" (p. 109), and labels this approach "*pragmatic eclecticism*" (p.107). The steps used in data analysis and the corresponding coding methods are summarised in Table 4.1 and will be further detailed next.

Table 4.1: Summary of Data Analysis

Phase 1: Identifying the AE Practices and Grouping them into Themes		
	Analytical Activity	**Method Used**
Step 1	Initial Coding	First Cycle Coding: Process Coding
Step 2	Hierarchical organisation of initial codes a) Detailing broad codes via the identification of "children codes" b) Grouping similar activities under a relevant practice by identifying "meta-codes"	a) Subcoding b) Second Cycle Coding: Pattern Coding
Step 3	Testing the viability of the identified practices	Meta-analytic review: Provisional Coding
Step 4	a) Developing themes b) Refining the themes	a) Categorisation of codes b) Patton's (1990) dual criteria
Phase 2: Demystifying the Dynamics of the AE process in terms of Different Engagement States		
Step 1	Preparing the data for further analysis by grouping them into 3 categories based on the A2A interactions mode	Preliminary round of First Cycle Coding: Structural Coding
Step 2	Initial Coding	Another round of First Cycle Coding: an open approach of Initial Coding (similar to open coding in grounded theory studies)
Step 3	Identifying the various engagement states	Second Cycle Coding: Axial Coding
Step 4	Investigating changes in engagement states over time	Follow-up observations of selected members' profiles

4.3.1. Phase 1: Identifying the Engagement Practices

The first phase of analysis addressed the first research question, hence aimed at identifying the various engagement practices in the Dubai forum by carrying out the analytical activities discussed below.

4.3.1.1. Generating Codes

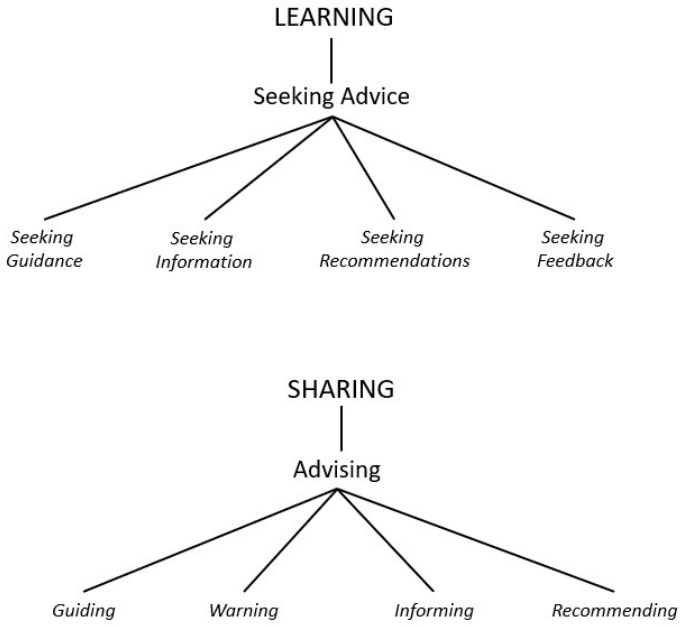
Following the thematic analysis guidelines (e.g., Boyatzis 1998; Braun & Clarke 2006), the first step was to become familiar with the whole data set. This was followed by Initial Coding as a First Cycle Coding Method with the aim of identifying the various engagement practices. As Saldaña (2015) explains, the term "Initial Coding" was used by Charmaz (2014) to refer to "Open Coding". However, Saldaña (2015, p.165) advocates the use of the former as "*it implies an initiating procedural step in harmony with first cycle coding processes*". Such Initial Coding "*breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examines them, and compares them for similarities and differences*" (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.102).

Saldaña (2015, p.165) suggests that Initial Coding can be rather general and follow "*an open-ended approach*" or it can follow a more specific coding method as needed. Since the focus at this stage is the identification of engagement practices, Process Coding is deemed the best Initial Coding method to adopt. This method of coding (also referred to as "Action Coding") employs gerunds only and aims at identifying actions and observable activities in data (Charmaz 2002). It is particularly suitable for studies that "*search for the routines*" (Saldaña 2015, p.159), hence is highly useful for coding practices and their constituent activities.

The result of this stage was an extensive list of codes. This was followed by rounds of iterations for refinement. Following the guidelines offered by Saldaña (2015, p.314) and Silver & Lewins (2014, p.227), some codes were deemed conceptually similar, hence were merged. Others were dropped out for being redundant or marginal. Furthermore, the codes needed to be organised as a hierarchy; two codes in particular ("seeking advice" and "advising") were found to be too broad and do not reflect neither the richness of the relevant data nor the different ways in which

such activities are performed in the EW community. Therefore, Subcoding[28] was carried out, where a Subcode is defined as: "*a second-order tag assigned after a primary code to detail or enrich the entry, depending on the volume of data you have or specificity you may need for categorization and data analysis*" (Saldaña 2015, p.134). Gibbs (2008, p.74) further explains the hierarchy of Subcoding as follows; the most general code is labelled "*parent*" and the Subcodes are called "*children*", and those who share the same parent are referred to as "*siblings*". Further analysis revealed that the codes "seeking advice" and "advising" while being parents of some other codes, they are in turn Subcodes of the "learning" and "sharing" codes respectively. Figure 4.2 depicts the Subcoding process in the form of a tree diagram, and hence demonstrates how Subcoding was used to establish a hierarchy of codes.

Figure 4.2: Tree Diagrams of the "Learning" and "Sharing" Codes

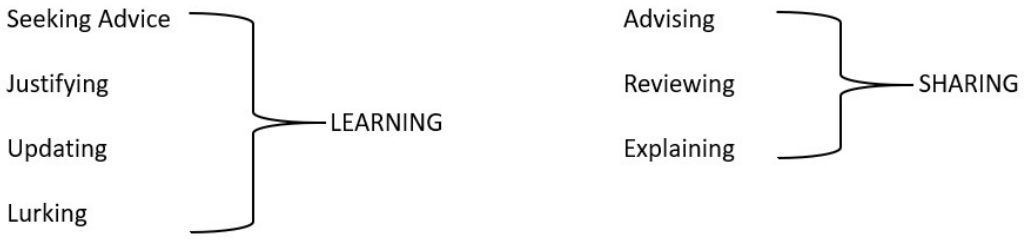


Having developed a hierarchy through Subcoding, the list of primary codes was reviewed to assess if further refinement is needed in order to reach the final list of identified practices. At this point, it became clear that some of these codes are not practices and are just activities within a practice (Saldaña 2015, p.314).

[28] Saldaña (2015, p.133) identify other terms used in methods literature to label a Subcode which reflects "*a primary code tagged with another"*. Such terms include: "secondary coding", "nested coding", "embedded coding", and "joint coding".

Since the aim here was to group similar activities under a relevant practice, Pattern Coding was chosen for Second Cycle Coding. Pattern Coding refers to the identification of "*a category label ("meta code") that identifies similarly coded data*" (Saldaña 2015, p.394), where in this case the meta code (Pattern Code) represents a practice which is formed by assembling initial codes of related activities, as illustrated in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3: The Formation of Pattern Codes



The Second Cycle Coding led to a more concise list of nine engagement practices: *learning*, *sharing*, *venting*, *empathising*, *appreciating*, *welcoming*, *chatting*, *governing*, and *demarcating*. See Table 4.2 for definition of these codes.

Table 4.2: Definitions of the Final List of Coded Practices

Code	Definition
1) Learning	Attempting to gain knowledge and cognitive skills. It involves acquiring the initial insights by searching old threads and lurking, seeking advice when needed with justification, and providing feedbacks as the learning progresses.
2) Sharing	Providing knowledge and experiences, whether as a response to an inquiry or voluntarily. It can involve the provision of guidance, warning, information, recommendations, and feedback.
3) Venting	Expressing negative feelings and emotions about general concerns or personal issues.

4) Empathising	Expressing understanding of the feelings and emotions of other distressed members, being sympathetic, and providing encouragement when needed.
5) Appreciating	Expressing positive emotions and gratitude for the community, its members, and its resources, whether information or social support.
6) Welcoming	Greeting new members, reaching out to them, encouraging them to further participate, and helping them to dispel possible anxieties about active participation and to blend in.
7) Chatting	Interacting for entertainment and fun in the form of non-functional conversations which may include witty remarks, jokes, and humorous comments.
8) Governing	Regulating the community by ensuring that the norms and behavioural expectations within the community are met at all times, and taking proper actions in cases of violations.
9) Demarcating	Delineating a specific domain of engagement and selecting a specific sub-group to socialise with.

4.3.1.2. Testing the Viability of the Identified Practices

Before moving further, following in Schau et al.'s (2009) footsteps, a meta-analytic review was performed to test the viability of the identified practices, by situating them in extant literature and identifying examples of corresponding behaviour within data previously analysed for various theoretical purposes. Therefore, the adopted analytical approach integrates the benefits of meta-analysis with those of primary data collection. Furthermore, such an extensive literature review was deemed useful for studying practices, since a practice-based approach highlights the routine and convention in collective consumption (Warde 2005). Hence, reviewing prior works to identify recurring activities and processes that may be related to the nine identified practices was considered beneficial in this regard.

Due to the scarcity of empirical practice-based AE research in the context of online communities, the review further included empirical articles investigating collective consumer behaviour and/or community participation in an online community context that were published

in top journals of marketing, management, and information systems. The review involved articles including but not limited to: *Journal of Service Research*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Sciences*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *Marketing Theory*, *Psychology & Marketing*, *Advances in Consumer Research*, *Journal of Business Research*, *MIS Quarterly*, *Decision Support Systems, International Journal of Information Management,* and *Journal of Services Marketing.* In total, 67 articles were identified; of which 49 articles (73%) contained enough material to code as engagement practices. In 47 of these 49 articles (96%), evidence of one or more of the identified practices was found, hence proving that they are extremely robust[29] (Farley et al. 1995). An overview of these 67 articles is provided in Appendix 6.

It is worth noting that only 5 articles[30] explicitly examined practices. In all other studies, only instances of behaviour that correspond to the nine practices were observed. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the nine engagement practices with illustrations from the current data and corresponding instances from prior research obtained from the meta-analytic review.

For the purpose of this meta-analytic review, Provisional Coding was carried out (Saldaña 2015). This coding method uses a predetermined list of codes, which are the nine identified engagement practices in this case. Therefore, data (from the 49 articles with enough material to code as practices) were assigned to the corresponding practices.

[29] In Schau et al.'s (2009) meta-analysis: 52 articles were reviewed; of which 37 articles (71%) contained enough material to code as practices, and in (35%) of these articles corresponding evidence was found.

[30] Schau et al. (2009) identify 4 engagement practices while examining the value creation practices in brand communities, and Habibi et al. (2014) investigate those practices in the context of Facebook brand communities. Hartmann et al. (2015) also investigate value creation practices, but while accounting for both active and passive participation. Hollebeek et al. (2017) is the only study which focuses solely on AE practices. As for Närvänen et al. (2013), they explore discursive practices. In all other studies, only instances of behaviour that correspond to the 9 practices were observed, and connections to those practices were merely implicit.

Table 4.3: The Nine Identified Practices and Prior Research

Category	Practice	Description	Instances in Prior Research	Illustrations from Current Data
I)Cognitive	*Learning*	Acquiring cognitive competencies by undergoing the following activities: seeking advice (guidance, information, recommendation or feedback), justifying, updating, and lurking.	-Nelson & Otnes (2005): Brides-to-be soliciting information and advice in preparing their cross-cultural weddings. -Wasko & Faraj (2005): Members of a legal forum seeking advice from other lawyers. -Hemetsberger & Reinhardt. (2006): Members of open-source communities learning and building collective knowledge. -Füller et al. (2007): Members of basketball shoe forums seeking feedback on their designs and innovations. -Mathwick et al. (2008): Members of a P3 community seeking information from others working on the same problem. - Hamilton & Hewer (2009): Members of salsa forum taking advice from salsa lovers from all over the world. -Adjei et al. (2010): users of 2 online forums for woodworking equipment learning about certain products. -Chan & Li (2010): In a Chinese women's forum, members seeking advice about every important life stage. -Jayanti & Singh (2010): Members learning about their health conditions, seeking advice, and reporting on actions taken -Fisher & Smith (2011): Indiana Jones fans learning all things Indy is the priority. Also, a member who produces Indiana Jones accessories relying completely on the community for direction in the creation of his products. -Seraj (2012): members learning all the new developments and latest news of the aviation industry.	<u>Seeking advice</u>: -Seeking guidance: "A7: I am in a turmoil about what to do! All advice and opinions/experiences gratefully received! […]" (16/11/2015). -Asking for information: "A8: Hi, does anyone know of any table top sales coming up soon?" (27/10/2015). -Asking for recommendation: "A9: Can anyone recommend a brunch […]" (11/10/2015). -Asking for feedback: "B9: […] I'd love to get an honest feedback of […]" (06/12/2015). <u>Justifying:</u> "PB: Hello, Sorry if there is already a thread or two

I)Cognitive (cont.)	*Learning (cont.)*		-Brodie et al. (2013): In a fitness forum, members seek expert information about the different aspects of vibration training. -Närvänen et al. (2013): Seeking information and feedback from more experienced members in an LCHF lifestyle forum. -Johns & English (2014): Mumsneters seeking advice and asking for recommendations and feedback about products. -Weijo et al. (2014): SU Members posting to ask whenever they seek any information on anything. Dessart et al. (2015): learning is central for online community participation.	on this subject […]" (05/01/2016). <u>Updating:</u> "C4: Hi All, Update from me today" (19/01/2016). <u>Lurking</u>: "C5: […] this is my first post after a couple of years of "lurking" […]" (21/01/2015).
I)Cognitive (cont.)	*Sharing*	Actively contributing to knowledge cocreation within community through the provision of relevant information and experiences through advising (guiding, warning, informing or recommending), reviewing, and explaining. It can be a response to another member's learning practice, or it can be voluntary sharing.	-Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001): Assisting fellow members in the use of the brand (Ford Bronco, Macintosh, and Saab) and sharing brand-related information. -Nelson & Otnes (2005): Intercultural brides sharing advices, information and recommendations while preparing their cross-cultural weddings. -Wasko & Faraj (2005): Members sharing their knowledge and legal experiences with other lawyers. -O'Reilly et al. (2007): Students using a university forum to provide feedback on course issues. - Adjei et al. (2010): users of 2 online forums for woodworking equipment sharing information about certain products. -Fisher & Smith (2011): Sharing ideas, innovations and feedbacks on Indiana Jones related products -Seraj (2012): aviation enthusiasts and professionals sharing technical communications and the newest developments in the industry	<u>Advising</u>: -Guiding: "SL: Legally you don't have to let anyone in ever. Even your landlord has to give you notice to come and inspect the property" (07/01/2016). -Warning: "C6: 2 hours ago, our pay pal account been hacked and even changed our primary email to a total fake account […] Ladies don't leave funds in your account, don't access internet from public internet […]. Take care and stay safe." (07/08/2015).

I)Cognitive (cont.)	*Sharing* *(cont.)*		-Brodie et al. (2013): Fitness experts sharing information, personal experiences, recommendations, and feedbacks. -Scaraboto & Fischer (2013): Fatshionistas sharing information and reviews of the plus-sized garments in the market, in addition to sharing ideas about how to make the best out of the limited available fashionable options. -Dessart et al. (2015): members of Facebook groups sharing experiences and information. -Giesler (2006): Sharing personal music collections with other Napster users. -Füller et al. (2007): Sharing innovations in basketball shoe forums and providing feedback on the designs of fellow members. -Mathwick et al. (2008): Wikis sharing their knowledge in a P3 community. -Hamilton & Hewer (2009): members of a salsa forum sharing their salsa experiences -Chan & Li (2010): Sharing personal experiences, advice, information, feedbacks, and opinions about cosmetic products. -Seraj (2012): members sharing happenings and ideas in the aviation world, experiences about airlines and routes, and feedbacks about photography equipment. -Närvänen et al. (2013): Experienced members providing advices (information & guidance), and sharing tips and opinions about LCHF lifestyle. -Thomas et al. (2013): members of North American distance running community sharing insider knowledge and experiences with informed audience	-Informing: "WN: Netflix in the UAE!!! Woo-hoo! I just saw the news and thought I would put it out there!" 07/01/2016) -Recommending: "C7: I would thoroughly recommend […] The guys who come and hang the curtains have good attention to detail and service is excellent." (04/10/2015). "TA: Dr […] She is mentioned in many threads here on EW. C8: I second DR […] was fantastic. SL: I second Dr […] We have been seeing her for years - Brilliant Dr!" (10/06/2015). <u>Reviewing</u>: "C9: My daughter has been in […] I am pretty happy. I went through a lot of nurseries in JLT but found their facility to be the best" (27/12/2015)

I)Cognitive (cont.)	*Sharing (cont.)*		-Habibi et al. (2014): Jeep and Harley-Davidson Facebook communities sharing brand-related stories and news, experiences about deals, and answering questions about how to better use their vehicle -Johns & English (2014): Mumsnet members reviewing products and providing feedbacks. -Weijo et al. (2014): SU community's known posters providing the best answers to all needed inquiries -Hollebeek et al. (2017): assisting other members of the luxury brand community by answering their queries	<u>Explaining:</u> L1": Use your shop and ship address in the shipping details and not billing as the payment won't go through. […]" (06/11/2015).
II)Emotional	*Venting*	Expressing negative emotions, complaining about unfavourable experience(s) or voicing concerns (general or personal). It usually reflects the need for emotional and moral support.	-Kozinets (2001): A star trek fan venting about media misrepresentation. -Nelson & Otnes (2005): members venting about the difficulties they are facing in planning their weddings, and sharing their concerns about immigration, employment, and discrimination. -Scaraboto & Fischer (2013): Fatshionistas expressing their frustration and anger about being marginalised in the fashion industry, the poor designs they are offered, and not being featured in fashion magazines.	"D6: […] feeling awful! […] I am really worried that my body is unable to adjust to the heat […] I have wanted to move to Dubai for ages and now that I have it seems to be going horribly wrong 😟 […]" (09/10/2015).
II)Emotional (cont.)	*Empathising*	Understanding and sharing the feelings of others and lending them emotional support when needed. It helps creating a sympathetic warm atmosphere and moral bonds	-Nelson & Otnes (2005): Brides-to-be providing each other with emotional support and empathy. -Hamilton & Hewer (2009): In a salsa forum, members are getting support and encouragement from salsa lovers from all over the world -Mathwick et al. (2008): Wikis empathising with frustrated newbies who are struggling in a P3 community. -Schau et al. (2009): StriVectin Members empathising about aging. Gamin Experienced users encouraging frustrated new	"L1: I can understand your fear and frustrations, I thought I was raving mad when the shocks and tingling were happening and I said nothing to anyone in case they thought I was a lunatic […] You just need to be patient and that in itself can be a

II)Emotional (cont.)	*Empathising (cont.)*		users and reassuring them. Jones Soda members feeling empathy to those who are feeling nostalgic for the old days. -Jayanti & Singh (2010): The empathetic connection prevailing in illness forums greatly help the newly diagnosed to navigate their treatments. -Brodie et al. (2013): Members feeling emotional gratification from the empathy they experience in the community -Närvänen et al. (2013): Members needing empathy and peer experiences to overcome the challenges encountered while adopting the LCHF lifestyle. -Thomas et al. (2013): members of North American distance running community deriving social benefits from the presence of other empathising members -Habibi et al. (2014): Jeep and Harley members lending emotional support to each other -Hollebeek et al. (2017): members empathising with a member whose mother got diagnosed with cancer	challenge! ☺" (09/11/2015). "SF: […] I can understand what you are going through as I went through the same as soon as my feet hit the ground here […] give yourself time and your mojo will be knocking on the door."  (10/10/2015). "P1: You need time to make this your home Hope you will feel at home soon here in Dubai" (01/10/2012).
II)Emotional (cont.)	*Appreciating*	Expressing gratitude and appreciation towards the community, its members, and its resources (whether information or socio-emotional support)	-Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001): New Mac user expressing appreciation for the sharing of valuable information. -Nelson & Otnes (2005): Cross-cultural brides-to-be appreciating the support and help provided by fellow members. -Giesler (2006): Napster users appreciating the benefits gained from the peer-to-peer music file sharing -Alon & Brunel (2007): Members of babycenter.com appreciating the warm, respectful and inviting nature of the forum, and the support they are receiving from other members.	"D7: […] Thank you ladies for your contributions. You have boosted my confidence and I am ready to wander into the new place with your support and guidance" (09/08/2015). "D8: Thanks for your support. If it weren't for your site, I would had embarked on a journey of no return […] God bless

II)Emotional (cont.)	*Appreciating* *(cont.)*		-Füller et al. (2007): Members expressing gratitude for those who share their innovations and for providing feedbacks. -Mathwick et al. (2008): Members appreciating the knowledge sharing, the well-whishing is governing - Hamilton & Hewer (2009): members complimenting and praising each other for inspiring posts -Chan & Li (2010): Members of a Chinese women's forum expressing appreciation for the valuable advices and guidance, and the great impact that community had on their lives. -Fisher & Smith (2011): Members appreciate getting to know like-minded people and developing friendships, in addition to admiring the generosity of fellow members and the great values they share. -Seraj (2012): Members appreciating the high quality of information, and consider it the best source of information. Members are keen on appraising the contributors and showing them respect for their contributions to the community. -Brodie et al. (2013): Members of a fitness forum expressing gratitude for the valuable knowledge they gained. -Närvänen et al. (2013): Members of an LCHF lifestyle forum appreciating the information shared and the guidance offered -Thomas et al. (2013): members of North American distance running community appreciating running experiences -Habibi et al. (2014): Jeep Facebook community Members appreciating the company's effort -Hollebeek et al. (2017): members appreciating the community	you for your help." (20/01/2016). "SB I love your positivity, it's infectious, I got excited just reading your post. There does seem to be an excellent expat community […]" (05/12/2015). "E1: I was very blessed by you all and very thankful. Look forward to seeing y'all again and meeting new women." (06/01/2016) "L9: […] forum like this is great because you will have the experience of other expat ladies who will you the 'heads up' on [...]" (09/09/2012). "SV: Thank you very much, for support and helpful reply. Your post gives me hope!" (03/11/2015). "L3: Love this sisterhood...reminds me a bit of being at Uni." (17/12/2015).

III)Social	*Welcoming*	Greeting new members and making them feel welcomed. It aims at encouraging members to further participate and at helping them to fit in and to belong.	-Muñiz & Schau (2005): Old newton users welcoming new users and directing them to useful community resources. - Alon & Brunel (2007): Member of babycenter.com expressing how fellow members made her feel welcomed. -Mathwick et al. (2008): In P3 community, core members recognising the importance of attracting and retaining newbies, they ensure that their experiences are enjoyable. - Hamilton & Hewer (2009): in a salsa forum, newcomers receiving welcoming posts -Schau et al. (2009)*: New members finding forums of brand communities (StriVectin, Garmin, and Lomo & Holga) so welcoming and inviting. -Fisher & Smith (2011): During Indiana Jones conventions, special attention is given to neophytes where evangelical members are very willing to educate them. -Närvänen et al. (2013): In an LCHF lifestyle forum, entry barriers are lowered by designating a special section for beginners. Experienced members tutor the newcomers and help them to mix with the community -Scaraboto & Fischer (2013): A founder of a forum dedicated for fat fashion welcoming new members and emphasising that the community is open to all fatshionistas, from all cultures and all backgrounds. -Thomas et al. (2013): members welcoming new/transient runners. The race directors and the charities welcoming recreational runners -Habibi et al. (2014): welcoming new members -Hollebeek et al. (2017): welcoming new members	"E2: Hello there, Good luck with moving to UAE! […] don't worry - you'll find these products here as well... Gotta say.... You made my day with your question! ," (20/01/2016). "FI: Welcome and all the best on your new adventure! […]" (26/09/2015). "L3: Good questions AND...welcome to Dubai! […] E3: Welcome to Dubai […]" (12/11/2015), "LC: […] WE LOVE YOU PUCK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Welcome to EW!" (2014/04/17),

III)Social (cont.)	*Chatting*	Engaging in non-functional interactions and discussions that are primarily for entertainment purposes. It involves sharing personal opinions and views about non-functional topics. It can also include humorous comments and jokes. Overall, it helps developing social relationships among members.	-Brown et al. (2003): Fans sharing brand stories (Beetles and Star Wars brand communities). -O'Reilly et al. (2007): Some students are more relational, aiming to establish bonds with other students via hobbies. Fisher & Smith (2011): The priority of Indiana Jones fans shifts with time to an emphasis on relationships, friendships and the social experience. Old members visiting the forum just for the company and to exchange jokes. -Nimrod (2011): Members of seniors' communities exchanging jokes, and sharing entertaining/funny resources -Brodie et al. (2013): Fitness forum members engaging in non-functional interactions. -Giesler (2006): Napster users emphasise the fun aspect of sharing music and use their music collections to develop social relationships with other users. -Mathwick et al. (2008): Core members being more interested in socialisation, which brings with it companionship and belongingness, and considering each other as family. -Seraj (2012): members playing online games for fun., exchanging jokes, and sarcasm, making the interactions more playful and enjoyable. Connecting beyond the primary goal of knowledge sharing as the community provide them with an entertaining stage, hence creating social ties among members. -Habibi et al. (2014): Jeep devotee members interacting regularly and becoming friends -Hollebeek et al. (2017): members interacting socially beyond the community's focal brand or topic of interest, developing friendships and organising offline meetings and events	"CP: I need to stay up for another 2 hours (visitors). Someone had better have a good drama up their sleeves. Or an entertaining story. <settling in to arm chair with vino> […] E6: The post about pilot's terms and conditions is worth a read though, that could kick off soon!" (07/12/2015). "DZ: If anyone shops at Greenheart.... then don't buy any of their new Pana Chocolate bars unless you want to stuff your face with the whole bar in one sitting. […] E8: […] I bought 5 last night and yes, oh my word, this is seriously good. I just had the whole chocolate mint box." (06/04/2015).

III)Social (cont.)	*Governing*	Articulating the behavioural expectations within the community. It entails providing explicit directions to assert the community norms. It aims at ensuring that trust is not violated at any point, and hence keeping the community a safe environment.	-Giesler (2006): In Napster, member articulating the specific rules and conventions to be followed in economic rivalries. -O'Reilly et al. (2007): Standing against any student violating the norm of not criticising a professor in a university forum. Mathwick et al. (2008): Core members emphasising the norms of voluntarism, reciprocity and trust, and standing against any violations to the expected code of conduct. -Schau et al. (2009)*: Jones Soda Members reminding each other that flaming is not allowed and that they should stick to constructive criticism and positive comments. StriVectin members considering the provision of support and the creation of positive environment the pillars of the community and that it is the responsibility of all members. Xena: Members are expected to deal with disagreements in a gentle manner and to keep it within the confines of the community. Nimrod (2011): Members gently reminding any player who deviate from the rule of "following the game" to stick to it. -Seraj (2012): the community culture is governed by moderators who are from the community members (self-governance). They screen all posts ensuring quality standards, and blocking irrelevant, incorrect, or inappropriate posts. -Närvänen et al. (2013): Reinforcing the rule of "reflexive questioning of all knowledge" where no informational source is deemed superior and keeping a supportive and constructive atmosphere at all times. -Scaraboto & Fischer (2013): Explicitly articulating the one cardinal rule that it is not allowed under any condition to discuss diet or weight loss.	"Admin: As per our forum rules you can appreciate why we must ensure censorship on this forum, as we are based in this region. We always encourage our members to express their views, but in a way that may not be deemed disrespectful or insulting." (05/11/2015) "Admin: There is no private messaging on our forum. We recommend if you want to meet up with users that you choose to do so through one of our organised coffee mornings." (29/12/2015). "AB: I don't want this thread to turn into a law followers vs law breakers thread. So let's leave it at that […]." (09/10/2015). "L8: Have u heard of cosmo?! keep it G rated ladies!" (21/01/2016). "C9: Last time I checked this was expat woman

III)Social (cont.)	*Governing (cont.)*		Habibi et al. (2014): Jeep Facebook community members stopping those who share irrelevant posts. Hollebeek et al. (2017): existing members of luxury brand community instructing new members about the community rules and norms and warning them about the implications of non-compliant behaviours	not survey monkey. Admin: Our thoughts exactly" (28/01/2016).
III)Social (cont.)	*Demarcating*	Delineating the specific domain of engagement and socialisation. It entails recognising variance within the community membership, and highlighting intragroup similarities and differences.	-O'Reilly et al. (2007): Students identifying commonalities with other students in order to form smaller study groups. -Schau et al. (2009)*: Garmin: The existence of various users' subgroups (runners, trekkers, geocachers, builders, and everyday drivers). Xena: members identifying with the mainstream or the subset. - Habibi et al. (2014): Jeep Facebook community creating sub-communities (e.g., Jeep Grand Cherokee Owners), and Harley also creating sub-communities based on geographic location -Weijo et al. (2014): two of the authors (also members) were able to find niches within the community	"E9: looking for people who adore their little dogs as much as me […] (03/03/2015). "F1: Are there any Vegans on here […] I am a new vegan 🙌 […]" (08/11/2015). "F2: […] Looking to see if there are any other Kings FS1 mums […]" (09/07/2014).

4.3.1.3. Developing and Refining Themes

Having tested the viability of the nine identified engagement practices, they were then grouped into themes. Saldaña (2015, p. 39) labels the identification of themes as "*themeing the data*", and further explains that a theme is "*an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection, but it is not something that is, in itself coded*". Similarly, Creswell (2012, p.186) views a theme as "*a common idea*" formed by the aggregation of several codes.

The developed themes were further reviewed and refined using Patton's (1990) dual criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity to ensure coherence of data within each theme and distinct variances between different themes. At this point, some themes that seemed at first as distinct turned out to be highly similar and hence were merged. Moreover, the practices with associated coded activities (the meta-codes identified via Second Cycle Coding as discussed above), namely *learning* and *sharing* practices, were classified as sub-themes within an overarching theme, to give structure and hierarchy. Visual representations in the form of thematic maps were used to organise the refinement process (Braun & Clarke 2006). The progression of such refinement is depicted in Figure 4.4, where only the initial and final maps are presented for the purpose of illustration and comparison.

Interestingly, the refinement process resulted in three themes that are directly related to three of the engagement dimensions: functional practices (cognitive engagement dimension), emotional practices (emotional engagement dimension), socialisation practices (social engagement dimension). The latter provides empirical support for the need to include a fourth (social) dimension to Brodie et al. (2011a)'s engagement conceptualisation. As for the behavioural dimension of engagement, based on Wittgenstein's (1968) work, Kozinets (2002) explains that the mere act of posting is in itself a social action, a behavioural practice. Hence, all identified practices show a behavioural dimension of engagement, as they all involve posting. Therefore, the analysis supports the conceptualisation of engagement as constituting of four dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and social.

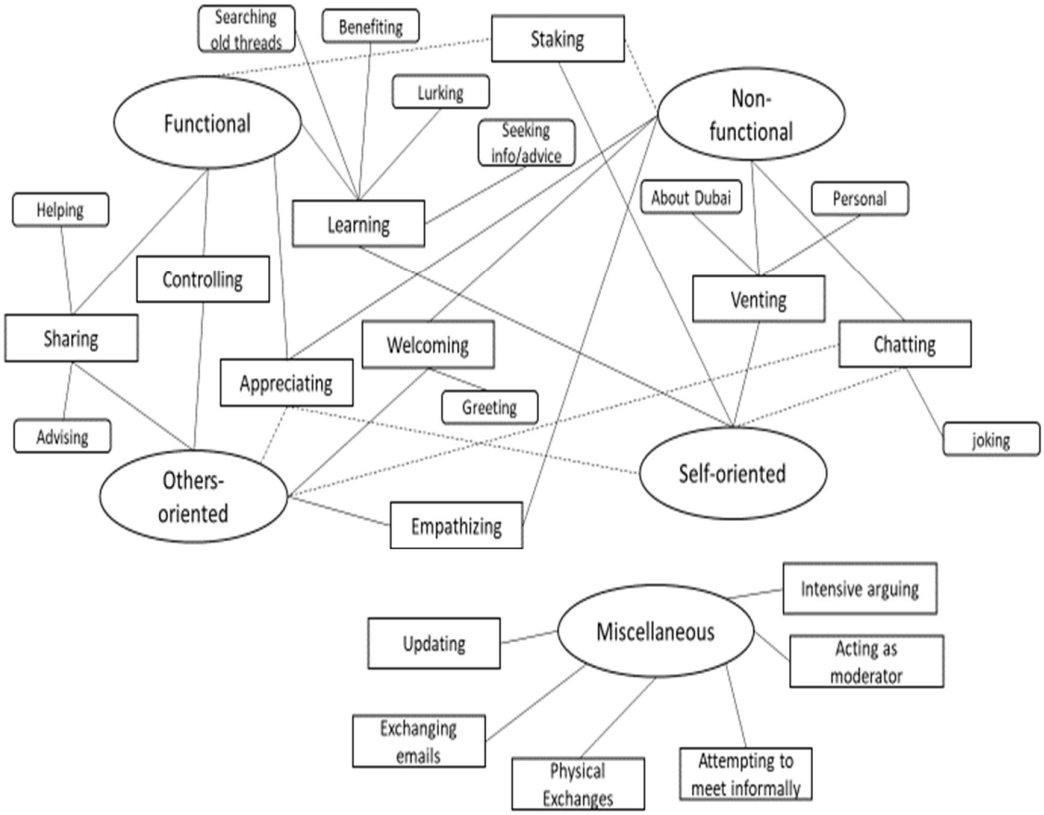
4.3.1.4. Defining and Naming Themes

Braun & Clarke (2006) explain that once the refinement process leads to a satisfactory thematic map, the next step would be to define and name the identified themes. The former entails

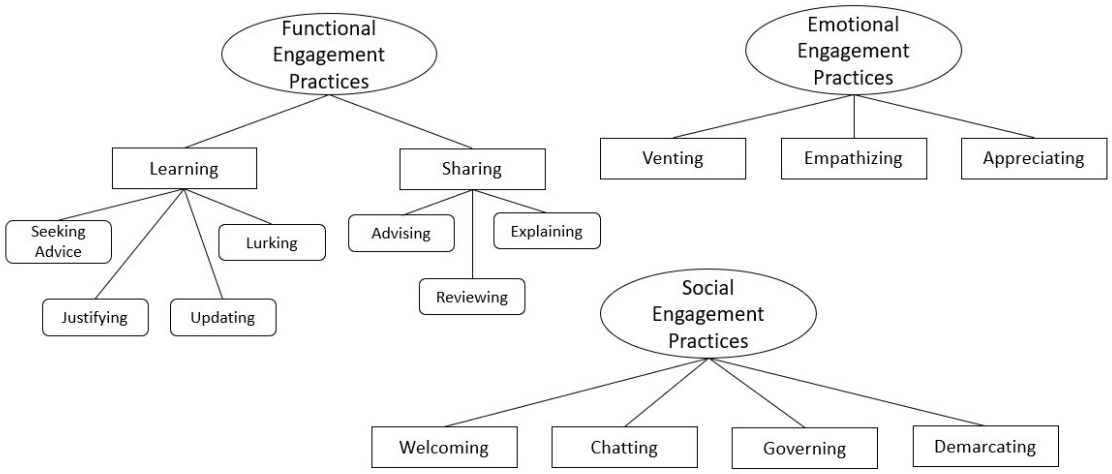
highlighting the essence of each theme and what data aspect it captures, while the latter requires assigning to themes the names that will be used in the final analysis rather than the working titles used up to this point. They further recommend that names need to be indicative of what the theme is about. At this point, the working titles were changed to names that were deemed more reflective of each theme's essence. The theme "functional practices" was named "cognitive engagement practices", while the theme of "emotional practices" was changed to "emotional engagement practices", and finally the theme of "socialisation practices" was assigned the label of "social engagement practices".

Figure 4.4: The Progression of Thematic Maps

A) The Initial Thematic Map

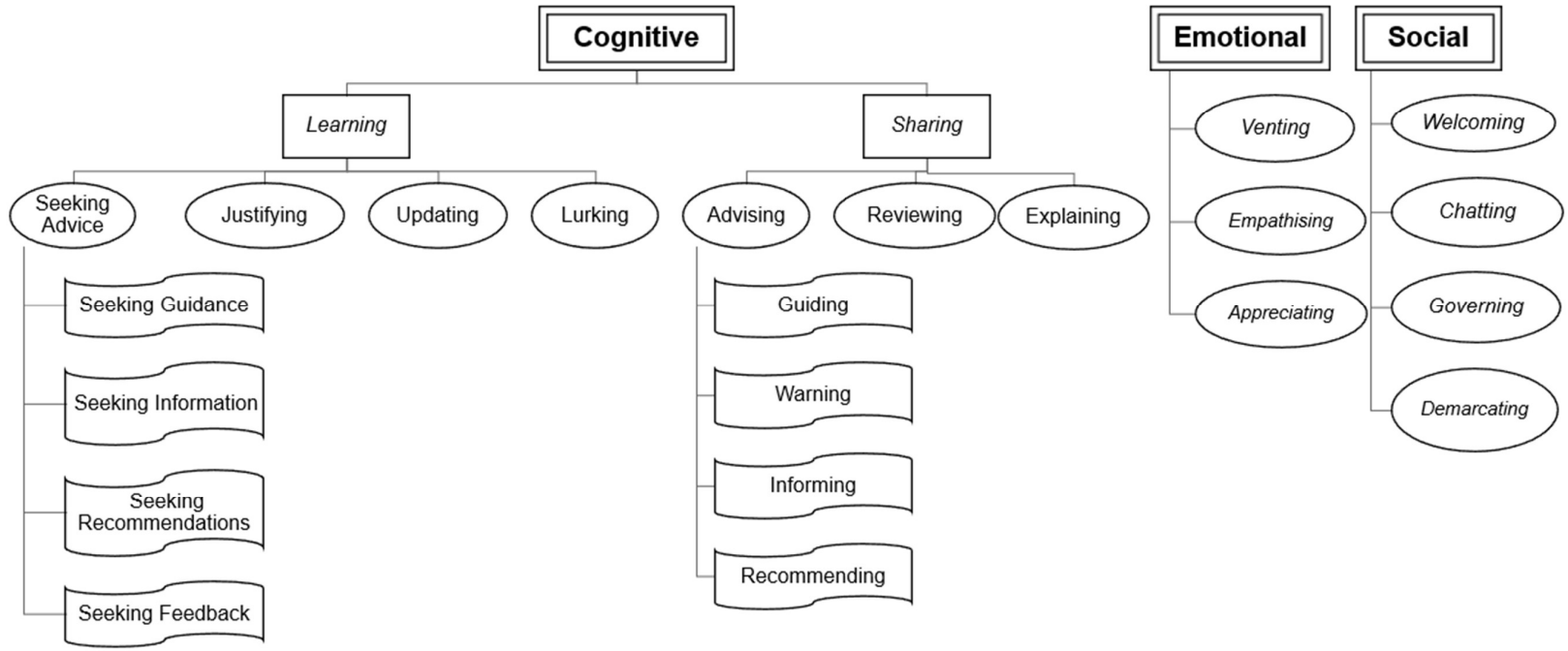


B) The Final Thematic Map Showing the Final Three Themes



Hence, the nine identified engagement practices were organised into three thematic categories: 1) cognitive engagement, 2) emotional engagement, and 3) social engagement practices. The final coding scheme of this phase is depicted in Figure 4.5, where the three thematic categories, the corresponding practices (shown in italic), and constituting activities are presented. The findings of this phase will be further discussed in the next chapter (Chapter 5).

Figure 4.5: The Final Coding Scheme



Notes: The AE practices are labelled in italic, where all lower codes represent constituent activities, and the higher codes are the 3 thematic categories (abbreviated to fit in the figure).

4.3.2. Phase 2: Demystifying the Dynamics of the AE Process

Having answered the first research question by identifying the various engagement practices and organising them into three thematic categories as discussed above, the focus shifted to the second objective of this thesis, which is to demystify the dynamics of the engagement process in the online community under study. For this purpose, the second research question needs to be addressed by identifying the various engagement states and the effects of A2A interactions on such states.

As discussed in the literature review, the AE process is comprised of varying states (Brodie et al. 2011a). Therefore, to understand the dynamics of such a process in the EW community, the various engagement states need to be identified, and any change in state over time needs to be investigated. Moreover, Chandler & Lusch (2015) consider AE as an alignment of connections (past and future) and dispositions (past, present, and future). The progression of a member's engagement state, thus, depends on such connections and dispositions which need to be aligned for engagement to take place, resulting in an ongoing and dynamic process of alignment (or possibly misalignment[31]) when many actors are involved (Chandler & Lusch 2015). However, such alignment is rather abstract and difficult to observe empirically. Instead, the analysis draws on practices of individual actors and the responses they receive from other members of the community (A2A interactions) as observable indicators that can reflect the alignment of connections and dispositions, where alignments are associated with positive A2A interactions. The use of observable constructs to investigate more abstract concepts and theories has been recommended by Storbacka et al. (2016).

The study captures a more comprehensive picture of all possibilities, differentiating between three modes of A2A interactions: positive, no interaction, and negative, rather than being limited to positive interactions which has been the prime focus of engagement research to date. Therefore, the first step in this second phase of analysis was to organise the initial data set into three categories based on the A2A mode (positive, no interaction, and negative) as a preparation for identifying the various engagement states. For this purpose, a preliminary round

[31] Resulting from negative engagement iterations as will be further discussed in chapter 6.

of First Cycle Coding was carried out, in the form of Structural Coding. According to Saldaña (2015), this form of coding is an elemental coding method used to lay a foundation for future cycles of coding, and its prime function is to "*initially categorize the data corpus to examine comparable segments' commonalities, differences, and relationships*" (p.142). This is achieved by acting "*as a labelling and indexing device, allowing researchers to quickly access data likely to be relevant to a particular analysis from a larger data set*" (Namey et al. 2008).

Once the data were organised into three categories, another round of First Cycle Coding[32] in the form of Initial Coding was carried out. Although the aim was to identify specific engagement states as mentioned above, at this stage it was not clear how such states can be identified from the data. Therefore, in contrast to the specific type of Initial Coding used in phase 1 (Process Coding was used to identify the engagement practices), a more open approach of Initial Coding was adopted which is similar to Open Coding used in grounded theory studies to accommodate the complexity of the main objective of this phase, which is to explore the AE dynamics. Such an open approach allows "*to remain open to all possible theoretical directions*" suggested by the researcher's interpretation of the data (Charmaz 2014, p.114), hence creating "*a starting point to provide the researcher analytic leads for further exploration*" (Saldaña 2015, p.166).

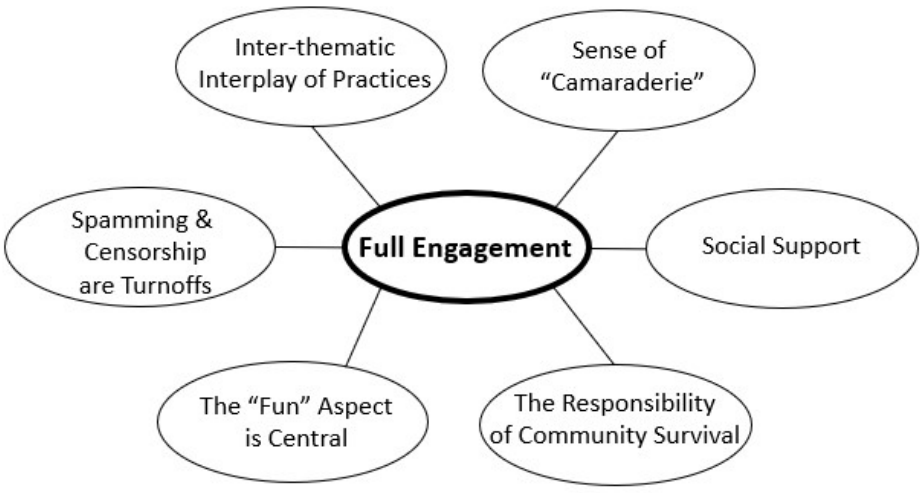
Therefore, data in each of the three categories were analysed using such an open approach of Initial Coding until respective saturation had been reached. At this point, it became clear that more data is needed as detailed in chapter 3, section 3.5.2.2. In fact, Saldaña (2015) suggests that Initial Coding can be useful in notifying the researcher that more data is required for building and supporting emerging concepts and theories. The newly collected data was also coded following the same open approach of Initial Coding. This step added to the long list of Initial Codes, yet identification of distinct states was still not possible. Therefore, it became evident that a Second Cycle Coding method is needed at this point in order to link "*seemingly unrelated facts logically*" (Morse 1994, p.25), and hence (hopefully) obtain from the Initial Codes the various engagement states.

[32] It is worth noting that Saldaña' s (2015) label of "First Cycle Coding" stems from the exploratory nature of such coding methods, and not an indication of the actual number of the coding cycle. For instance, the second phase of analysis involved two rounds of First Cycle Coding.

Axial Coding was selected as the Second Cycle Coding method, since this method of coding expands the analysis from initial coding, while aiming to "*strategically reassemble data that were "split" or "fractured" during the initial coding process*" (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.124, as quoted in Saldaña 2015, p.328). Therefore, Axial Coding was performed on the list of Initial Codes until saturation, and graphical representations were used to visualise the emerging Axial Codes and their respective constituent codes (Saldaña 2015). Figure 4.6 provides an example of such illustrations, where the Axial Code "Full Engagement" is depicted. Analytical memo writing is central to Axial Coding, where the researcher attempts to clarify four elements: 1) "*the contexts*" (settings), 2) "*the conditions*" (routines), 3) "*the interactions*" (exchanges between actors), and 4) "*the consequences*" (the outcomes of the previous three elements) (Saldaña 2015, p.333). Strauss & Corbin (1998, p.136) explain that saturation in Axial Coding is judged in terms of these four elements.

This phase resulted in six specific states, namely, full engagement, functional engagement, engagement recovery, reductive engagement, dormancy, and disengagement. Finally, changes in engagement states over time were investigated via follow-up observations as explained in the data collection (see chapter 3, section 3.5.2.2.). The findings of this second phase of analysis will be detailed in Chapter 6.

Figure 4.6: An Illustrative Axial Code



4.4. Chapter Summary

This chapter explains the data analysis approach used in this thesis. Inductive thematic analysis was the selected method for data analysis. It involves finding communality and identifying patterns in data (Creswell 2012). Hence, is highly useful for a practice-based approach, where the focus is the routinised activities (Ward 2005).

The analysis was composed of two phases, each corresponding to one research question. Following Saldaña's (2015) recommendation, various coding methods were used (see Table 4.1), where for each step, the coding method most suited to achieve the objective was applied. In the first phase, the various engagement practices in the community under study were identified. Following several iterations of coding, nine engagement practices were identified, and their viability was tested via a meta-analytic review (Schau et al. 2009). The nine practices were then organised into three thematic categories: 1) cognitive engagement practices, 2) emotional engagement practices, and 3) social engagement practices. These map onto the engagement dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and social. As for the behavioural dimension of AE, this thesis draws on Kozinets (2002) who regards the mere act of posting in itself a social action, thus resembling a behavioural practice. Therefore, the nine identified practices reflect the behavioural dimension of engagement through the act of posting.

The second phase aims at exploring the dynamics of the AE process in the EW community, hence various engagement states need to be identified, and any change in engagement state over time depending on actors' connections and dispositions which need to be aligned for engagement to take place (Chandler & Lusch 2015). Since this alignment is difficult to observe empirically, this thesis proposes instead the A2A interactions modes as observable indicators that can reflect the alignment of connections and dispositions, where alignments are associated with positive A2A. To be more comprehensive, all three A2A interactions modes were considered (positive, no interaction, and negative), and data was fitted into these three categories. This was followed by more coding iterations which resulted in six specific states: full engagement, functional engagement, engagement recovery, reductive engagement, dormancy, and disengagement. Having explained in this chapter the adopted data analysis approach, with its various steps and relevant coding methods, the findings are presented in the following two chapters; the findings of the first phase of analysis is presented next in chapter 5, followed by the findings of the second phase of analysis in chapter 6.

Chapter 5

Findings I: Identifying the AE Practices

5. Findings I: Identifying the AE Practices

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the first phase of analysis (see Chapter 4, section 4.3.1.). The three thematic aggregates of engagement practices are explained and the practices that members perform in relation to each of those practices are detailed with data illustrations.

As explained in Chapter 4, nine engagement practices were inductively identified from data (see Chapter 4, Table 4.3 for summarised descriptions and illustrations) and were subsequently organised into three thematic categories: 1) cognitive engagement practices, 2) emotional engagement practices, and 3) social engagement practices. These map onto the engagement dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and social. As for the behavioural dimension of AE, based on Wittgenstein's (1968) work, Kozinets (2002) explains that the mere act of posting is in itself a social action, thus resembling a behavioural practice. Hence, drawing on the latter, all identified practices reflect, through the act of posting, the behavioural dimension of engagement. Moreover, Hollebeek et al. (2017) explain that adopting a practice-based approach inherently involves the behavioural dimension of engagement in all identified practices. Next, the three thematic categories and their constituent practices are detailed.

5.2. Cognitive Engagement Practices

First, cognitive engagement practices are highly utilitarian and related to the fulfilment of the forum's main function, which is to facilitate information and knowledge exchange. It is composed of two practices: *learning* and *sharing*. Both were identified by Brodie et al. (2013) as engagement sub-processes, yet the analysis demonstrates that they are in fact complex engagement practices with specific elements (understandings, procedure and emotional commitments) as presented in Table 5.1, and each consisting of several activities as discussed below and as depicted in Figure 5.1. Similarly, Jaakkola & Alexander (2014) consider Brodie et al.'s (2013) sub-processes as engagement practices.

Table 5.1: The Elements of the Nine Identified Practices

Practice	Understandings *(Knowledge of what to say and do)*	Procedures *(Explicit rules and instructions)*	Emotional Commitments *(Emotionally charged ends and purposes)*
Learning	The forum is primarily for information exchange. Members are free to ask for any inquiry or advice as long as it is based on a genuine need and free from pretention or unethical motives such as spamming (i.e. indirect advertising, where one member pretends to ask for a recommendation, so another replies by advertising).	Members need to get acquainted with the forum (via lurking) before starting to post. Researching is required prior to asking any question, to make sure that the needed information is not already available in previous threads. While seeking advice, the situation need to be explained and if further information or clarifications are required, they are to be provided. Also, updates are to be shared when available. It is recommended to avoid questions related to controversial topics. The multicultural nature of EW is to be respected in all inquiries, in addition to the laws of the hosting country.	The purpose of *learning* is to benefit from fellow members. This practice is initially charged with a feeling of confusion. Anxiety and worry may also be experienced in some cases. While sad emotions can exist when the advice needed concerns hardships or serious problems. As the *learning* progresses, negative emotions are replaced by more positive emotions such as relief and and satisfaction. leading to a feeling of incurred moral obligations, repayable by contributing to the community via *sharing.*
Sharing	Members *share* their knowledge and experiences if deemed relevant and useful. Requested inquiries are to be assumed as genuine and stemming from real need unless proven otherwise. Positive attitude and constructive attitude is to be maintained at all times. Different views and opinions are to be *shared* (when needed) and respected, without anyone claiming knowledge superiority.	Members seeking help are to be encouraged without intimidating them. Hence, *sharing* should be free from flaming (i.e. criticism, judging or aggression). Only valid, honest, and reliable information or advices are to be *shared* and should be free from hidden motives (such as advertising). Also, it needs to be clarified whether the offered advice is based on facts (hence sources are to be provided) or personal experiences, so reliability can be judged. If better guidance can be provided elsewhere, the inquirer should be advised to seek this direction.	Members find themselves committed to *share* their knowledge and experiences, and to participate in the cocreation of the communities information resources. *Sharing* can be guided by a sense of moral obligation, due to a feeling of indebtedness, hence reflecting a norm of reciprocity. It can also be voluntary, hence reflecting a sense of voluntarism. *Sharing* is full of positive emotions, such as caring and helping. It makes the member feels cooperative, constructive, and resourceful.

Table 5.1: Continued

Practice	Understandings *(Knowledge of what to say and do)*	Procedures *(Explicit rules and instructions)*	Emotional Commitments *(Emotionally charged ends and purposes)*
Venting	During times of distress, members can resort to the community for comfort and consolation, and to fulfil the need for *venting* their negative emotions.	Members are free to express their negative emotions, and share their concerns and negative experiences. as long as they are not offending other members or cultures. Comments and suggestions from others attempting to mitigate the problem at hand are to be positively received.	The main purpose is to seek emotional support when needed. This practice is charged with negative emotions that vary in intensity depending on the situation or the concern. Stress, sadness, irritation, frustration, and anger are the most common emotions related to *venting*. In some instances, it involves loneliness, feeling hopeless, and helpless. Whereas in more serious cases, feelings of depression and despair can be experienced.
Empathising	A sympathetic warm atmosphere is to be maintained, where members provide each other with emotional support when needed and offer those going through difficult times a shoulder to cry on.	Members are to express their understanding for the feelings of members in distress and show concern. Encouraging comments are to be offered. Also, similar experiences are to be shared if it will help providing reassurance. In addition, possible solutions and ideas to mitigate the negative impact of the situation are to be suggested.	The aim is to reassure fellow members having problems that they are not alone, to alleviate their negative emotions and distress, and to provide them with hope and optimism. It is charged with feelings of empathy, sympathy, compassion, care, and consolation.
Appreciating	Members acknowledge the benefits they are gaining from belonging to the community (both information and social support) and express their gratitude for all the help, advice, and support they are receiving from the community and from fellow members.	Expressing gratitude for the offered help and support. Responding positively to all offered advices. Expressing positive emotions towards the community and fellow members when applicable.	The aim is to assure members who *share* or *empathise* that their efforts are appreciated, and hence motivate them to continue. It involves positive emotions of gratitude and admiration, while being thankful and motivating.

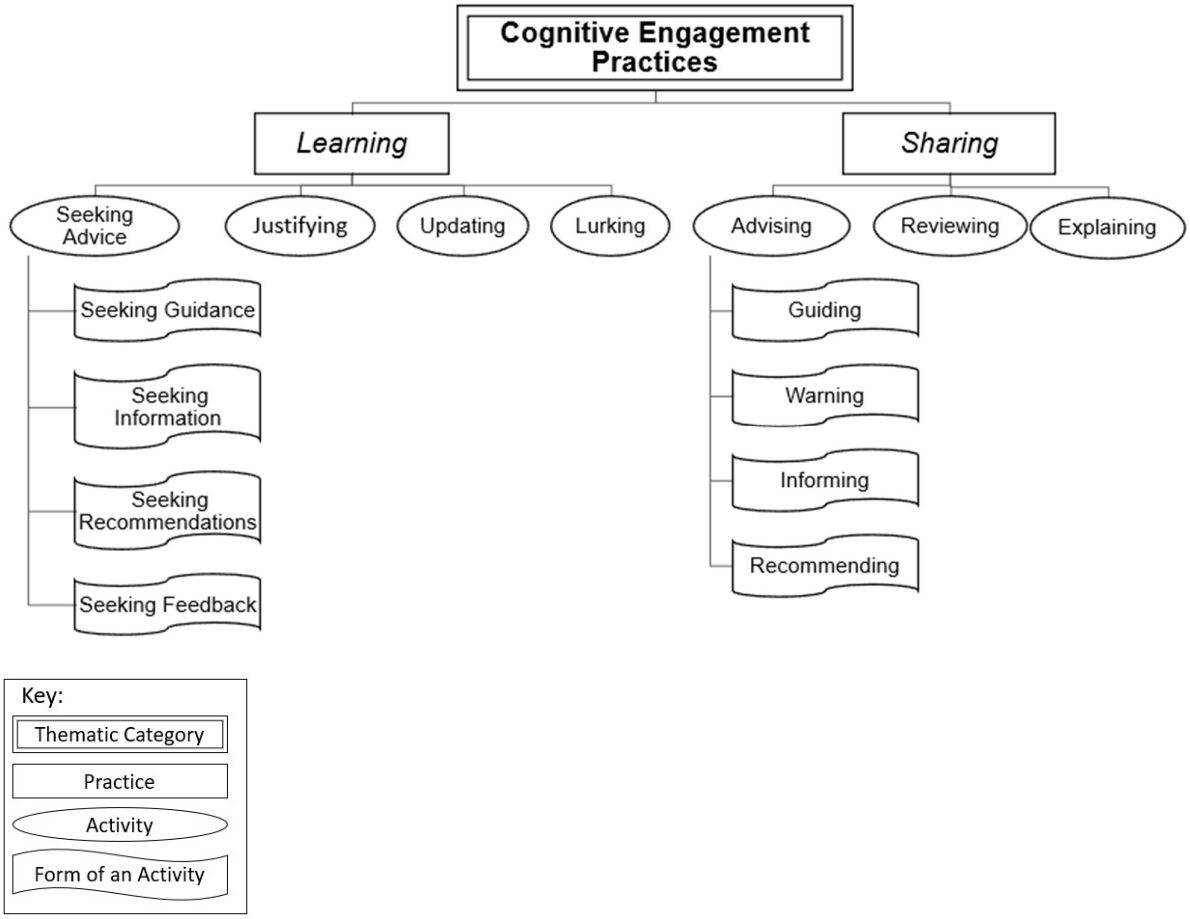
Table 5.1: Continued

Practice	Understandings *(Knowledge of what to say and do)*	Procedures *(Explicit rules and instructions)*	Emotional Commitments *(Emotionally charged ends and purposes)*
Welcoming	Members are aware that the vitality and continuity of the community require the infusion of new blood. Hence, newbies are to be encouraged to come out of the lurking mode and actively participate in the community.	Members are to help newbies dispel possible anxieties about active Participation; making them feel welcomed, and helping them to blend in. It is important to make newbies feel that members are reaching out to them. This is achieved by greetings and welcome messages, followed by attempts to answer their inquiries. Responses are to be friendly and preferably positive to encourage further participation and should be free from any flaming (i.e. judging, criticism) to avoid intimidation.	The aim is to lower the entry barriers and make the forum inviting and encouraging for newbies to actively participate. Hence members should commit to treat newbies in a friendly, warm, welcoming, and inviting manner .
Chatting	Members may socialise with each other by engaging in non-functional interactions as long as they follow the norms of respectful communication. Such interpersonal interactions strengthen relationships among members.	It involves exchanging non-functional posts in a respectful manner. It may also include jokes, humorous and witty comments, Understanding the multicultural nature of EW is a prerequisite for chatting to avoid possible misunderstandings which cause conflicts. Controversial topics are to be avoided.	The prime purposes of *chatting* are fun and entertainment. Hence, it is charged with positive emotions, such as amusement and enjoyment.
Governing	Members are expected to follow the community rules and regulations, to adhere to the accepted norms of behaviour, and to maintain respect at all times. Trust is not to be violated at any point.	The rules and regulations should be carefully reviewed prior to active engagement. Members should refrain from exchanging personal information. In case of violations (e.g., advertising) the admin warns violating members. In extreme cases, the admin can delete posts or even ban members. Members who spot suspicious activities (e.g. spamming) are to notify the admin. Disrespect is not to be tolerated at any time.	The admin is committed to reinforce the rules and regulations. Hence, in case of noncompliance, the reaction is strict and uncompromising. Also, all members should be committed to ensure that all interactions are guided by the norms of trust and respect. Therefore, *governing* is charged with feelings of care, and guided by a sense of moral responsibility towards the community.

Table 5.1: Continued

Practice	**Understandings** *(Knowledge of what to say and do)*	**Procedures** *(Explicit rules and instructions)*	**Emotional Commitments** *(Emotionally charged ends and purposes)*
Demarcating	In such an open community, members recognise and appreciate their heterogeneity. Members can choose to engage and socialise with the community as a whole or can limit their engagement to a sub-group based on some common basis. However, engagement with the whole community is recommended and is deemed more useful.	Members who practice demarcating start by searching for commonalities. between themselves and others in the community. This is followed by further interacting and socialising with the identified sub-group, hence strengthening the bonds within the subgroup.	The goal is to engage with like-minded. A higher sense of belonging to the relevant sub-group is experienced, where feelings of closeness and intimacy are shared. However, members outside the sub-group may feel excluded.

Figure 5.1: The Thematic Category of Cognitive Engagement Practices



Observations reveal that cognitive engagement practices are the most common AE practices in the EW forum. This further supports Dholakia et al.'s (2004) and Wirtz et al.'s (2013) argument that members participate in large online communities (such as EW) primarily for functional reasons. It is also in agreement with Gummerus et al.'s (2012) view that most members of online brand communities use it to gain information about the brand, and further extends this view to non-brand related online communities. Moreover, the results of the meta-analytic review (see Chapter 4, Table 4.3) further supports this finding since it is evident that the two practices (*learning* and *sharing*) forming this cognitive engagement category are the most common practices in prior online communities' literature as well. Those two practices are explained next.

5.2.1. Learning

Learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and cognitive skills (Brodie et al. 2013; Dessart et al. 2015; Hemetsberger & Reinhardt 2006). Dessart et al. (2016, p.410) define *learning* as "*the act of seeking content, information, experiences, ideas or other resources*". It provides the member with functional/utilitarian benefits (Bone et al. 2015; Dhalokia et al. 2009; Mathwick et al. 2008), and includes the following activities: seeking advice, justifying, updating, and lurking.

5.2.1.1. Seeking Advice

Seeking advice is the most common activity of the *learning* practice. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004, p.41) define it as: "*obtaining advice on how to resolve problems*". Members were found to seek each other's help and advice in all sort of matters, whether related to expat issues or to general women's concerns (health, family, children, and work). Similarly, De Valck et al. (2009) note that members seek information and advice when needed.

The needed advice can be as trivial as asking about route direction, wondering about certain food recipes, or asking about where to buy a certain product as in the following post:

> "KC: Does anyone know where I can buy Mochi Ice cream in Dubai? […]" (19/10/2015).

Also, members seek advice regarding serious issues, and in some cases may even depend on their fellow members' guidance to help them take important decisions, which can be related to work as in the next example:

> "AS: […] any help/advice would be much appreciated. Long story short, I have a company which I want to close down here […]" (11/08/2011).

It can also be a relationship advice as shown in the following post from a member who is facing marriage problems:

> "LK: I am looking for divorce/separation advice. My husband has been physically and mentally abusive for quite some time. I am looking for a Lawyer that will offer free consultation […] Please help, any advice would be greatly appreciated." (28/03/2015).

It is also common to seek advice in issues related to children. The following post is from a member who just discovered that her son needs special help:

> "AW: The school has asked me to get a shadow teacher for my son […]. Where do I even start with this? […] Any advice is greatly appreciated. I am desperate to help my son be happy again […]" (28/09/2011).

It is important to note that while the original posters (OP hereafter) in the above two examples were primarily seeking advice (cognitive engagement practice), they also needed emotional support via *empathising* (emotional engagement practices, see section 5.3). However, for the purpose of making the analysis clearer and to avoid unneeded complexity, throughout this chapter each post is used to uniquely illustrate a specific type of practice, while the reality is far more complex, where a single post can (and often do) involve more than one engagement practice. This supports the observation that the engagement process is composed of an interplay of various engagement practices and provides empirical evidence regarding the complex nature of practices, where people can engage in multiple practices simultaneously as suggested by Warde's (2005) (will be further discussed in chapter 6).

Focusing on the cognitive activity of seeking advice, whether the advice sought is pertaining to a trivial or a serious issue, the advice seeking activity can be in the form of seeking guidance or seeking information, recommendations, or feedback.

Seeking Guidance

A member seeks guidance when facing a situation or a problem, and needs help from fellow members (especially those who faced similar experiences) in order to manage such a situation, select the best course of action to follow, and hopefully solve the problem at hand. The following is posted by a member who is facing marital problems:

> "BZ: With no one to go to, with no family or friends that could help, I turn to you hoping I can be guided […] I need help please […] In a divorce here I would stand no chance...where to go […] I don't know who can help...who can make light for me...do I go to the police, do I follow him, do I run?...Please help me...I see no options, and I would die if I lose my kids." (26/03/2014).

Also, members seek guidance when they are facing a difficult decision and are confused. They hope that others can shed light on the situation by sharing their experiences and views, perhaps discuss the pros and cons of such a decision, and hence put them in a better position to take a more informed decision. The following is an excerpt from a long thread where the OP is facing a hard decision of whether to drop her career and follow her husband in his relocation to Dubai or leave him to travel alone and continue with her job:

> "AA: I am wondering if there are any women on here that moved to Dubai to live with their husbands even though they had to leave behind their jobs and careers. At the moment I'm struggling a lot to decide what to do […] How did other women who are or were in the same situation deal with this? How did you make your decision? […]" (12/06/2015).

Moreover, members seek guidance when they are not sure about the course of action that should be adopted in a certain situation, or what needs to be done, especially when it is related to something new for them (e.g., new pregnancy, new job, new medical condition). Hence, being guided by others who have more experience with similar situations is considered very useful. This agrees with Alon et al.'s (2001) findings from a mothers-to-be forum. To illustrate, the following post is from an EW member who wants to resume work after a long gap:

> "SV: It has been 10 years since I last worked. I feel like a dinosaur. I probably look like one too. Now, I need some help. I want to be prepared before I start a job hunt. For those ladies who work, what advice can you give someone like me? And others who may be in HR, do you still recruit someone with such a long gap in their resume, if yes, what steps did they take that made them a potential employee despite the drawbacks? […] Pleeaase help!" (02/11/2015).

Seeking Information, Recommendations or Feedback

Seeking advice can also involve seeking information (Mathwick et al. 2008; Närvänen et al. 2013), recommendations (Johns & English 2014; Martin & Woodside 2011; Zhang & Hitchcock 2017) or feedback (Füller et al. 2007; Mathwick & Mosteller 2017). These types of activities are simpler than seeking guidance and are less emotionally charged. It usually involves simple questions requiring simple answers. Focusing on the activity of seeking information, the following excerpt is typical in this regard:

> "TK: Can anyone help me with finding a place that will certify a photocopy as a true copy of the original? […] Is there a notary that would do this? […]" (07/09/2013).

Although some of the required information may be obtained through a Google search, members prefer asking the community as they consider it a more valuable information source. This can be attributed to the personal experiences involved, and for getting responses which are more specific and more relevant. This bears similarity to De Valck et al.'s (2009)[35] argument that the impact of online forums on shaping consumers' preferences, and on the decision process is stronger than the effect of wikis and databases due to the shared expertise and experience. It is

[35] De Valck et al. (2009) focused their study on the cooking decision process in a virtual community dedicated to culinary matters.

also in agreement with Seraj's (2014) findings from an online aviation community whose members consider it the most reliable information source. The following excerpt highlights how members consider the EW as a superior source of information.

> "SS: […] Half the responses on the 7 Days [the name of a popular newspaper in Dubai] letters pages seriously have you baffled.
> AM: […] EW is full of useful information […]
> SF: Genuinely accurate information is hard to come by at times in Dubai" (13/11/2015).

As for seeking recommendations or feedback, such forums are considered a great place for word-of-mouth both positive and negative (Brown et al. 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Kozinets et al. 2010; Libai et al. 2010), and in the EW forum it is usually related to schools, outings, doctors, and various service providers in Dubai. The difference between seeking recommendations and seeking feedback is that the former reflects the need for suggestions, whereas the latter is required when the inquirer already has some references which need to be assessed and evaluated based on personal experiences. To illustrate the difference, in the following two posts both OPs are seeking recommendations:

> Illustration 1:
> "SA: I am looking for a gum disease specialist. Please let me know if you know someone reliable with reasonable prices […]" (11/10/2015).
>
> Illustration 2:
> "DA: Hi and Happy New Year SL! You've recommended a travel agent on here a few times, I've been looking through your 127 pages of thousands of posts to try and find her details but no luck yet. Could you please let me know her details if you still have them?" (06/01/2015).

Whereas in the two posts below, both OPs are seeking feedback:

> Illustration 1:
> "SY: I am considering a tummy tuck and have heard some good things about Dr. […][36] Anyone here who has had a recent tummy tuck done by her? Are you happy with the results? […]" (09/01/2016).
>
> Illustration 2:
> "SG: Feedback required for […].com … Hi Ladies was checking the Ship & Shop and came across […] online ... does anyone use it? any feedback for this shipping company? I registered free but not sure of the service... any advice is welcome. Thank you" (03/03/2015).

[36] All names of doctors, companies, shops, etc. are omitted from data illustrations for ethical concerns.

5.2.1.2. Justifying

Justifying is another *learning* activity, which refers to a member's attempts to justify her need for inquiring by proving that enough effort has been exerted in researching prior to asking, and hence her inquiry deserves to be addressed and answered. Such research helps avoiding seeking information that is already available. Therefore, it motivates fellow members to respond since it assures them that their time and effort will not be wasted on answering the same questions over and over. Instead, they are assured that they will be answering new queries that will increase the community's overall knowledge and information resources. Without justifying, the OP can end up getting no response or she may get advised to review the old threads instead of being offered any new insights as in the following example, which is a reply to an OP asking about travel vaccinations without justifying:

> "SY: There are a lot of threads about this. If you put holiday jabs or travel vaccinations into the search post above there is lots of stuff to read through." (16/11/2015).

A common way of justifying is to revive a relevant old thread and post the needed inquiry as its continuation. It automatically proves that the poster has already reviewed the archives yet still requires further advice and help. Also, it helps combining relevant information in one thread, thus making it easier for other members to search the same topic, while increasing the overall informational value of this thread, and updating it. The importance of having discussions about one subject combined in the same thread has been previously highlighted by Seraj (2012, p.219) who explains that the moderators of an online community monitor all discussions in order to ensure that new posts are added to relevant threads (when applicable) to ensure that "*discussions are not diluted in various threads*", hence increasing the quality of content. In the following illustration, an EW member who needed to inquire about an arthritis specialist resurrected a relevant thread initiated in 2012 and posted the following as its continuation:

> "LI: Hi Ladies, I'm digging up a very old post here as I was doing a search, but just wanted to know about Dr. […] , is this the same doctor who has her own clinic on beach road? […]" (21/01/2016).

In other cases, the member seeking the advice just starts a new thread but still writes a justification sentence. The following post is typical in this regard, where the OP starts by justifying before explaining the situation:

> "LS: Hello everyone, Apologies for me asking a question as my first thread, but I wonder if anyone can help me. I know there are quite a few threads on this already but from what I can see they are quite old and there's nothing more recent. I'm wondering if anything has changed […]" (18/01/2016).

5.2.1.3. Updating

Moving to the next *learning* activity, updating is when a member provides updates about her *learning* practice at hand, by reporting the progress and the results of following the provided advice, and asking for further clarifications if needed. Hence, step by step guidance can be offered through further *sharing* from other members to help the OP progress in *learning*. To illustrate, a member was suffering from constipation and piles, and was advised to exercise and to follow a certain nutritional plan, and in the following excerpt she provides updates by reporting her progress in following the advice and asks for more information:

> "BU: Today I was thinking that will not give up on this disease & fight back...though I'm a huge meat & rice lover but it's time to be vegetarian […] next week I'm joining Pilates class also...I already drink lots of water but even one meaty dinner makes my life worse...now I'm working on eating more fiber […] But from where can I get magnesium? ... how frequently should I use this drink...what kind of procedure your husband went through. Was it banding?" (09/10/2015).

5.2.1.4. Lurking

The last identified *learning* activity is lurking (Preece et al. 2004; Schlosser 2005) which refers to a member's passive engagement in the community, where one observes without actively participating via posting (De Valck et al. 2009; Hartmann et al. 2015; Muntinga et al. 2011). Member undergoing lurking are referred to as "lurkers" (Mathwick 2002; Ridings et al. 2006; Edelmann 2016). According to Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz (2015), this form of passive engagement (i.e. lurking) requires further exploration, especially since it "*seems to be the most popular online behaviour*" (Edelmann 2016, p.165).

Lurking was found to allow newbies to develop a basic understanding of the community norms, and hence be prepared for active engagement. Both Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) and Wasko & Faraj (2005) suggest that a minimum level of shared understandings is a prerequisite for an engagement in a meaningful knowledge exchange, hence lurking is useful in this regard. It provides newbies, who are new members in an online community (Kozinets 1998; Mathwick et al. 2008), with the basic knowledge needed prior to posting (i.e. shifting from passive to active engagement (Ridings et al. 2006)), and introduces them to the relevant practices. Also,

it allows them to learn more about the discussed topics and thus avoid making redundant posts. Members may refer to their lurking activity in their first post as they shift to active engagement, as in the following two examples:

> Illustration 1:
> "BI: Hi, this is my first time to join the forum. I am always reading the forum since 2009 but never tried to ask […]" (14/12/2015).
>
> Illustration 2:
>
> "MI: Hiya. New to this forum! (but I guess I've been a lurker for a time)  […]" (27/11/2015).

Another evidence of lurking was observed when comparing the number of replies a post receives to the number of views. The latter always exceeds the former, indicating high lurking activity. For instance, one post had 72 replies while the number of views was 10840, where another got 35 replies and 11271 views. Finally, it is worth noting that lurking is not limited to newbies and the initial stage of the AE process, it can still occur in later stages (will be further discussed in chapter 6, section 6.4.5.).

5.2.2. Sharing

Sharing is the second cognitive engagement practice. Dessart et al. (2016, p.410) define it as "*the act of providing content, information, experiences, ideas or other resources*". *Sharing* involves the active contributions of members to knowledge cocreation within the online community (Brodie et al. 2013) through the provision of relevant information and experiences (Bone et al. 2015; Kleijnen et al. 2009; Närvänen et al. 2013). Therefore, it exhibits a level of theoretical similarity to Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) "assisting" practice.

It can be a response to another member's *learning* practice, or it can be voluntary *sharing* (Bettencourt 1997; Rosenbaum & Massiah 2007; Wasko & Faraj 2005) of important information or warnings that are deemed useful for the whole community, hence reflecting high norm of voluntarism, and is typically driven by the norm of reciprocity (Chan & Li 2010; Mathwick et al. 2008). *Sharing* includes three activities: advising, reviewing, and explaining, each is further elaborated below.

5.2.2.1. Advising

The first identified *sharing* activity is advising, which can be in the form of guiding, warning, informing, or recommending.

Guiding

The first observed from of advising is guiding. Members try to guide those seeking advice by helping them to choose the best course of action, and to follow it by providing step by step guidance and directions. Sometimes it can be in the form of offering a to-do-list as in the following excerpt from a long post, which is a reply to an OP that lost her cat and do not know what to do:

> "NM: […] we used to have a to do list when you lost your pet but I can't seem to find it, so here is a bit of a list:
> - Have loads of flyers made with a big picture and the word REWARD in big letters across the top […]" (02/09/2015).

The next excerpt is another example of providing a to-do-list for reducing fever offered to an OP seeking advice about her sick child:

> "GR: […] I trained as a nurse and here's what we do in hospitals: 1. Tepid Sponge Bath-- Every 15 minutes soak a bath towel and squeeze out excess water in a basin/bowl […]" (25/06/2012).

In other cases, the guidance is in the form of professional advice that is offered for free and supported by facts if possible (such as regulations or laws). The following post is a reply from a member that regularly helps with legal issues to an OP who was complaining that her employer insists on keeping her passport against her will, and hence was seeking advice on how to deal with the situation:

> "SL: Show this to your company:
> It is absolutely not acceptable – or legal – for anyone to retain a person's passport. Technically a passport is owned by the government that issues it, not even the individual, so any organisation that seeks to hold someone's passport is illegally withholding government property. In 2002 the UAE Ministry of Interior issued a circular that stated "As the passport is a personal document that the law obliges its owner to keep and show when required by the governmental authorities, it is not allowed for any party to detain the passport except by the official parties with a judicial order and according to the law. Consequently, it will be considered as an illegal action to detain the passport in the UAE except by the governmental parties" […]" (17/01/2016).

The following is another example where an OP was seeking advice from any professional Human Resources (HR) specialist in Dubai regarding a problem with her previous employer that refuses to provide her with an employment certificate. The respondent even took the time to write on behalf of the OP the letter that she should send to the HR team:

> "AB: Dear HR,
> I appreciate that you do not have records of my employment, but as I have sent you the proof of my employment, shown in your sponsorship of me, I hope that you can appreciate that I am legitimately a former employee […]
> Sincerely,
> NAME" (23/11/2015).

In other situations where the needed advice is concerning a personal decision, members still try to help the OP by providing guidance on how to arrange her thoughts and offer her the needed insights to be in a better position to take an informed decision. They try to share relevant experiences, discuss the pros and cons of possible alternatives, and may even provide a list of questions to help the OP take her decision as illustrated in the following post, which is a response to a working mom who needs to decide whether to accept a full time offer or to keep her current part time job:

> "DA: This is such a personal choice but the questions to ask yourself are:
> - Does the new job opportunity excite you other than the extra income?
> - How will the children get home from school and to ASA's?
> - Are you certain your current role will end? […]" (16/11/2015).

Finally, if members fail to provide the needed guidance, they still try to direct the OP to where she can seek help by pointing her to another more relevant entity (such as a relevant government office) as in the following example where the OP is having a complicated divorce case:

> "KP: […] You should consider getting a consultation with a lawyer in order to know exactly where you stand.
> RW: […] I have friends (non-Muslims) who have divorced in the UAE. There are a lot of misconceptions and rumours about what happens, who gets what, etc. I suggest you go down to the Dubai Court (the Family Matters Section, as you mentioned) and ask to speak to a counsellor/judge who will be able to advise you on the procedure […] You will get independent advice, free of charge, about the process from the Court officials […] just take yourself down to the Dubai Court next to Maktoum Bridge and ask. BTW, parking is a nightmare so either go early in the morning (7am) or take a cab." (22/02/2015).

In other instances, the OP is even directed to another more relevant forum, as shown in the following post, which is a reply to a mother asking about some Indian schools, hence is directed to other forums for Indian mums:

> "HM: Since both these schools are Indian schools you might get more feedback on them on the Indian mum forums such as […]" (14/10/2015).

Warning

The second form of advising is warning. Members try to *share* any knowledge or experiences (mostly negative) that can help others avoid possible danger, problems, or unpleasant situations. This parallels Sundaram et al.'s (1998) and Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) argument that consumers may engage in negative word-of-mouth for altruistic reasons (i.e. the concern for others). As Sundaram et al. (1998, p.530) explain: "[The] *motive for engaging in NWOM communication was to prevent others from experiencing the problems that they had encountered. The motive was to help others by warning them about negative consequences of a particular action*."

Warning can be a response to a member seeking advice, as in the following excerpt, which is a reply to an OP asking about private lenders:

> "AR: […] My advice would be stay away from this route as these brackets are usually operated by unscrupulous ruthless individuals who will ensure they get their pound of flesh and also make your life a misery should there be any issues […]" (07/11/2015).

The following is another example were a member wrote a very elaborate and detailed post to warn the OP who was asking about chiropractor by *sharing* her personal negative experience:

> "JJ: I had a really bad experience with a chiropractor in Dubai and would like to share my story. Sorry for the long post, but research is a must before you go to a chiropractor […] watch out for the obvious signs of fraud […] A lot of damage can be caused by chiropractic, some people have died through the manipulation (strokes can and have occurred) […] I don't want anybody to go through this torment […]" (02/10/2015).

Warning can also be voluntary, where a member initiates a thread in an attempt to help fellow members avoid risks or negative experiences, reflecting a high sense of voluntarism in the community (Fukuyama 1995; Mathwick, et al. 2008; Wilson 2000). Warnings can be general (not limited to expat life in Dubai) as illustrated in the following post regarding food choking hazards for children:

> "SS: I am sure many of you have heard yet again of another tragedy involving a little child choking on a single grape in the UK […] Please mums, dads, grandparents and maids please all remind each other the importance of slicing these grapes length ways before putting them in little ones' lunch boxes […] Please pass message to primary schools and nurseries so they remind and warn parents of these dangers when packing their little ones lunch box […]" (14/10/2015).

In other instances, the warnings can be more specific to negative incidents in Dubai, as in the following excerpts regarding suspicious/criminal activities:

> Illustration 1:
> "SR: There has been a warning issued from 2 schools in the Umn Suqeim/Safa area, about 2 men in a grey sedan with AD[39] license plate; the two men allegedly approached a young student today; luckily the student ran away. Please be careful!" (26/10/2015).

> Illustration 2:
> "CL: Daylight robbery WARNING… My husband was stopped by 2 men in white car showing police ID. […] He got his wallet back but it was missing money from it.....they drove off before he could get his around what had happened. This happened today in daylight on […] Metro station. A very worrying state of affairs having lived in the Middle East for nearly 6years and always found it very safe, disappointed that something like this happened." (24/12/2015).

Informing

Informing is the third form of advising, where a member *shares* knowledge by providing needed relevant information and facts. It is usually a response to a member's seeking information (*learning* practice). The following post is illustrative; it is a reply to an OP asking about the restrictions on taking fruit back to UK:

> "GE: Seems to be ok as per this website https://www.gov.uk/guidance/personal-foodplant- and-animal-product-imports. Below is the extract of the section that is relevant, you just have to limit it to under 2kgs […]" (27/04/2016).

Similar to warning, informing can also be voluntary; where a member initiates a thread just to *share* some information that is deemed useful for the entire community, further proving the existence of a high sense of voluntarism in the EW community and the keenness on developing the community's information resources by voluntary participating in its cocreation. The information that are most commonly shared voluntarily are holidays' announcements, new services or new brands recently

[39] Refers to Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates

introduced in Dubai or the UAE, any interesting offers or discounts that are currently in the market, and any useful updated information. The following posts are illustrative.

> Illustration 1: Holiday announcement
> "SL: 7 Days [the name of a newspaper] officially announced Thursday 15th as a holiday for private sector http://7days.ae/islamic-new-year-holiday-for-private-sector-announced/72477
> Happy long weekend" (11/10/2015)"
>
> Illustration 2: New service
> "WN: Netflix in the UAE!!! Woo-hoo!
> I just saw the news and thought I would put it out there!
> http://gulfnews.com/business/sectors/media/netflix-starts-beaming-into-the-uae-1.1649633"
> (07/01/2016).
>
> Illustration 3: Interesting offer
> "DI: Hi all,
> If you don't already know H&B (Holland and Barrett) have a really good offer on at the moment, well at least for the UAE anyway. I had a successful shop yesterday so wanted to share the news with you. The offer is on selected items, but there are quite a lot of selected items […]" (03/10/2015).
>
> Illustration 4: Useful updated information regarding car registration
> "HC: Updated car registration costs:
> I went last week and the costs have gone up
> Testing is AED120
> Registration is AED350
> Late fees are AED20 per month" (23/08/2015).

Recommending

Finally, the fourth form of advising is recommending. It is mostly a response to a member seeking recommendations. Recently, due to an increase in the number of spamming, which refers to a member (typically a newbie) pretending to be *sharing* a recommendation as if it is based on personal experience, while actually it is an advertisement (which is against the forum rules), voluntarily recommending has greatly decreased. This is due to members avoiding being misjudged as advertising (spamming) rather than providing an honest review, especially when coming from a newbie. Through recommending, members *share* positive word-of-mouth based on their positive experiences. Recommendations are usually regarding doctors, schools, outings, and service providers as illustrated below:

Illustration 1: The OP was asking for recommended dentists

" MD: Both me and my husband has done a lot of work with Dr. […] and she is absolutely amazing dentist with incredible experience) […] I highly recommend her to everyone I know (and don't know) […]" (20/05/2015).

Illustration 2: The OP was seeking a recommended florist

"CH: […] are brilliant, they have a few locations but I normally use the one on the Palm for same day delivery. Their flowers are gorgeous." (05/10/2015).

5.2.2.2. Reviewing

Having discussed above the activity of advising, the second *sharing* activity is reviewing, which is a response to a member's *learning* practice of seeking feedback. Similar to recommending, reviewing is mostly related to schools, outings, doctors, and various service providers. It is expected to be based on personal experience and is a prime source of word-of-mouth by *sharing* both positive and negative experiences, driven by altruistic motives (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Sundaram et al. 1998) rather than personal gains (as in the case of spamming). In the following excerpt, the poster provides a positive feedback on a company that imports fresh Christmas tress:

"RW: […] For me, it's by far the best value for money - you get a gorgeous, huge, dense, dark green tree with an amazing smell that lasts for ages. We finally took ours down in the last week of January and by then it had only lost about a third of its needles […]" (30/11/2015).

Whereas the following excerpt involves negative feedback about a hair dresser:

"OR: Don't go there, I had the worst cut last time. Their staff keeps coming and leaving. It's a revolving door […]" (01/11/2015).

5.2.2.3. Explaining

Finally, the third identified *sharing* activity is explaining. It entails clarifying certain information and shedding more light on a certain topic and is mostly in response to a member asking for further clarification as part of her *learning* practice of seeking advice, by requesting elaboration on a sought information. To illustrate, the following post is a response to an OP who is seeking clarification regarding attesting her marriage certificate in Dubai:

"RW: The attestation process doesn't vouch for the contents of a document. It is done simply to ensure (attest) that the documents are not fake, so the apostille stamp that you have doesn't count, unfortunately.

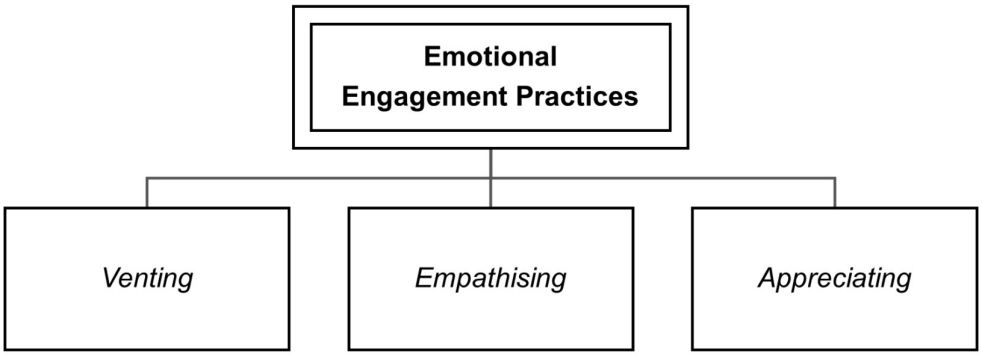
> Since the marriage certificate was issued by the Czech authorities, they have to vouch for the authenticity of the document […] Once that's done, the next step is […]" (14/10/2015).

Having reviewed the first thematic category (the cognitive engagement practices) and its two practices (*learning* and *sharing*) with their respective activities, the second group of engagement practices (the emotional engagement practices) is discussed next.

5.3. Emotional Engagement Practices

Emotional engagement practices focus on feelings and emotions, reflecting the affective nature of relationships between members. It is composed of three practices as depicted in Figure 5.2: *venting*, *empathising*, and *appreciating*. Undergoing such practices helps creating an emotionally-safe environment that encourages intimacy (Mathwick et al. 2008; McMillan & Chavis 1986). This group of practices creates a source of social support, which is defined in psychology as "*the perception or experience that one is loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligations*" (Taylor et al. 2004, pp. 354-55 as quoted in Rosenbaum & Massiah 2007, p.258).

Figure 5.2: The Thematic Category of Emotional Engagement Practices



Social support encompasses both emotional support and companionship (Rosenbaum 2006; 2008; Yao et al. 2015). Literature has repeatedly acknowledged online communities as a significant source of social support for their members (e.g., Bagozzi & Dhalokia 2002; McKenna & Bargh 1999; Ridings & Gefen 2004). This study further explains that is through the adoption of the emotional and social engagement practices (see section 5.4.) that such

support is achieved, and the "linking value" (Cova et al. 2007; Chan & Li 2010; Mathwick et al. 2008) is reinforced.

Having introduced the thematic category of emotional engagement, the three practices forming this category (*venting*, *empathising*, and *appreciating*) are further elaborated below.

5.3.1. Venting

First, *venting* refers to the expression of negative feelings and emotions (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Nelson & Otnes 2005) about unfavourable experiences or concerns, and usually reflects the need for emotional support from other members via *empathising* (see section 5.3.2.). Observations reveal that members tend to feel better after *venting*, especially when they receive the needed support as illustrated in the following excerpts where the 2nd post in both cases is after getting *empathising* responses.

Illustration 1:

- 1st post; a member who is trying to get a divorce is *venting* about her situation: "CR: Very exhausting day unfortunately […] My options, minimal unless a. Pony up bunch of money b. Prepare to take drastic measures and potentially severe consequences later. It is what it is and I'm pretty much stuck  " (24/02/2015).

- 2nd post after she received several *empathising* responses: "CR: […] at least I do feel better being on the forum […]" (24/02/2015).

Illustration 2:

- 1st post; a member *venting* about feeling lonely and being let down by her friends on her birthday: "BO: I'm so sad today  It's my birthday this coming weekend and I'd been planning a brunch with some "friends" on Friday […] So instead I'm all alone on my birthday with no one to go out with. They keep letting me down for various reasons […] It just feels like I'm always making the effort but no one returns it, which makes me think maybe I'm just not a nice person! Just so sad as I really want to enjoy things in Dubai […] Just very sad and lonely today." (13/12/2015).

- 2nd post after received several *empathising* posts: "BO: […] You've made me feel better." (13/12/2015).

Similar findings are reported by Sundaram et al. (1998, p.530); while investigating the reasons for negative word-of-mouth, many respondents explained that they use it "*as an avenue to vent their anger*", and some respondents further expressed that such *venting* "*helped in easing their anger, anxiety, and frustration*".

Venting can be about general/common concerns faced by most expats living in Dubai, hence are shared by most members, such as missing home, the difficulty of succeeding in the driving test, and the high rent. Typically, such posts result in more members *venting* and others *sharing* suggestions on how to make the best out of the OP current situation in specific or of living in Dubai in general. The following excerpt is illustrative, where the OP is *venting* about the renting system in Dubai:

> "SS: Do they think we are made of money???!!! Am I on my own finding it hard to understand the reasoning behind the rental system here? A whole year's rent in advance! Agents 5% fee, plus a deposit which you can wait up to 2 weeks to get back after handing in your keys […] Why on earth do they not have a monthly payment system? […] They seem to look after the landlord more than the tenant. Who gets paid a year in advance to cover this rental cheque? I certainly don't 
>
> L3: I totally agree. This is the one area of living here that I find absolutely remarkable. A year in advance for an absentee landlord, terrible service from agents and poor quality of housing...leaks, broken AC... […]" (02/12/2015).

Venting can also be related to a personal matter, whether trivial or serious. The former typically lead to the social engagement practice of *chatting* (see section 5.4.2.) where members share their similar negative experiences in a light chat, reflecting the friendly nature of the forum. The following post is an illustration of a personal trivial *venting*:

> "CP: I'm trying to get rid of my jelly belly, been really good, until 5 mins ago. I just scoffed 2 chocolate bars for no reason! I wanted, I took, I ate. The first one was good, and with no guilt whatsoever I reached for the second and scoffed it! Why, oh why. Now I feel bad […]" (23/03/2016).

In other cases, it can involve more serious problems, when a member is experiencing hard time or a difficult life situation, reflecting the need for emotional support. Common examples would be *venting* about problems that are related to work, illness or relationships; whether with friends or with a partner (e.g., infidelity, divorce, separation), as illustrated in the following post:

> "SI: Heartbroken and hopeless. Broke up with my boyfriend after I found out he's been cheating on me. I feel so low, like I'll never be happy again […] Sorry, there really is no point to this post, I just needed an outlet to vent." (17/02/2016).

Members usually respond to this type of more serious *venting* by *empathising* (see section 5.3.2. below) and may attempt to mitigate the problem by suggesting solutions and courses of action (via *sharing*).

5.3.2. Empathising

The second emotional practice is *empathising*. Empathy is defined as: "*the ability to feel the emotional state of another*" (Post el al. 2002, p.55), whereas *empathising* as an AE practice refers to members expressing understanding of the feelings and emotions of other distressed members, and lending them emotional support when needed (Hollebeek et al. 2017; Schau et al. 2009). Interestingly, Schau et al. (2009) do not consider *empathising* as an engagement practice. Instead, they identify it as a social-networking practice. However, their work has been recently refined by Hollebeek et al. (2017) where *empathising* is classified as an engagement practice instead. Therefore, the findings from the EW community further support this latter view by specifically identifying it as one of the emotional engagement practices.

Empathising also includes offering reassurance and encouragement. It concerns the provision of affective resources and the creation of a sympathetic atmosphere where emotional support is offered when needed (Muniz & Schau 2011; Nelson & Otnes 2005). Members would feel they are not alone in their difficulties, and instead have fellow members to lend them a shoulder to lean on, being of significant value for an expat, hence reinforcing the moral bonds within the community (Rosenbaum & Massiah 2007; Schau et al. 2009). It is usually a reactive practice which entails responding to another member's *venting* practice, as illustrated in the following excerpts from very long *empathising* threads.

> Illustration 1: *empathising* with member "CR" who was *venting* about her divorce (see section 5.3.3. above)
>
> "BD: I really feel for you. I understand when you say you feel trapped and no way out.
>
> I know many people will say things along the lines of "if you really want out, you will" but I know that in some situations it isn't that easy […] all I can suggest is […] I wish you all the very best. will be watching to see how you get on." (23/02/2015).

Illustration 2: *empathising* with member "BO" who is sad and lonely on her birthday as she was being let down by her friends (see section 5.3.1. above):

"SQ: […] Dubai is a lonely place contrary to what people might think ..i get envious of people who have been social circles here and have brunches etc ..I don't mind meeting you too .. if that will cheer you up..

I have been there ..divorced , single and all but then I found my husband ... happy to listen  "

(14/12/2015).

5.3.3. Appreciating

The third emotional engagement practice is *appreciating*, which refers to members' acknowledgement of the benefits they are gaining from belonging to the community and the expression of positive emotions and gratitude for the community, its members, and its resources, whether information or social support (Hollebeek et al. 2017; McAlexander et al. 2002; Thomas et al. 2013). *Appreciating* was first identified by Holt (1995) as a consumption practice that involves responding emotionally to situations, people, and objects, and encompasses the full range of emotional responses both positive and negative. However, Hollebeek et al. (2017) recently identify it as an engagement practice and limit it to the display of positive emotions. This view is further supported by observations from the EW community. Hence, *appreciating* is limited to the positive emotions, whereas the negative emotions are assigned to the *venting* practice (section 5.3.1.). The following excerpts are illustrative where the community's resources and fellow members are *appreciated*.

Illustration 1:

"MU: Thank you girls!!! I love this Forum.... I love it when we show the support and care for each other... Whether it's shopping or finding a doctor... There are some of us that are there for all of us and that.... Is golden! […] 💝💝" (22/09/2015)

Illustration 2:

"AG: Dear Expat Woman,

I just wanted to say a big thank you. I have participated in the conference you have organized in collaboration with […] and... I got a job [..]

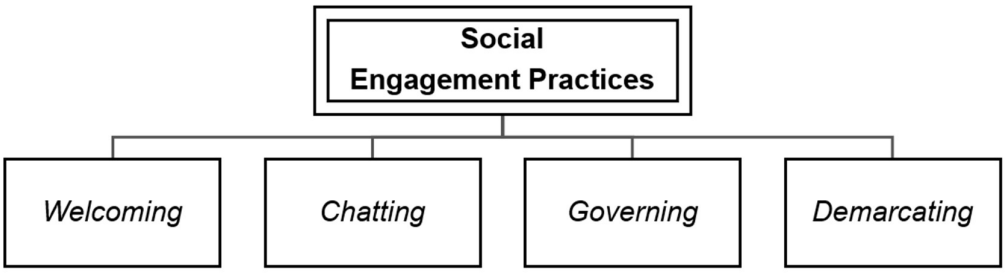
Once more thank you" (19/11/2015)

Having discussed the second identified thematic category of practices (emotional engagement practices), the third and final aggregate of engagement practices (social engagement practices) is reviewed below.

5.4. Social Engagement Practices

Lastly, the third identified thematic category is that of the social engagement practices, which are concerned with practices related to members' socialisation (Seraj 2012). Longmore (1998, p.53) defines socialisation as "*the processes of social interaction by which individuals selectively acquire the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, motives, norms, beliefs, and language of the group of which they are or will become members*". While prior work has focused on the interactive nature of engagement and characterised such engagement as social in nature and/or as socialising in behaviour (e.g., Breidbach & Brodie 2017; Brodie al. 2016; and Dessart et al. 2016; Brodie et al. 2011), this study defines the social dimension of engagement as that which socialises those involved into the norms and values of the wider community in which they are embedded. In other words, while the social aspect of engagement could be construed as the socialising nature of community interactions (and could be considered as cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural depending on the conceptual foundations of the study), the social dimension of engagement is defined in this thesis as that which reflects socialisation practices. Therefore, this thematic category is highly related to Brodie et al.'s (2013, p.111) sub-process of "socializing" which refers to "*two-way, non-functional interactions through which consumers acquire and/or develop attitudes, norms and/or community language*". It is composed of four practices as depicted in Figure 5.3: *welcoming*, *chatting*, *governing*, and *demarcating*.

Figure 5.3: The Thematic Category of Social Engagement Practices



Similar to the emotional engagement practices, social engagement practices provide members with social support. It further aims at creating, maintaining, and enhancing social bonds among members (De Valck et al. 2009; Seraj 2012), hence further adds to the community's "linking value" (Cova 1997). In fact, the two groups of engagement practices (emotional and social) are

highly interrelated; since socialisation brings with it emotional support and companionship, and both lead to the development of a sense of belonging and camaraderie (Chan and Li 2010; Mathwick et al. 2008; Nelson & Otnes 2005), hence the creation of a social support system (Wellman & Gulia 1999).

The analysis further reveals that this group of practices is mostly adopted by core members, who are long-term highly engaged members that value the community beyond its information resources (Mathwick et al. 2008). Core members form the community's social core, which is independent of functional or commercial interests (Balasubramanian & Mahajan 2001, p.109). The formation of a social core is well established in online communities' literature (e.g., Balasubramanian & Mahajan 2001; Mathwick et al. 2008; Rheingold 1993) and is further demonstrated by the following posts:

> Illustration 1:
>
> "HC: RW, SV, GE, CP et al.[42], we will all have something to talk about at the Ambassadors gaff at our usual Thurs night 'do' scoffing the choccies (we know how they are wrapped) […]" (10/11/2015)

> Illustration 2:
>
> "IR: […] questions posted got an answer (usually even cross posted) in a matter of minutes if not seconds. The reason for that was that the old permanent posters like SP, LV, LC, AN, SD, BY, DN, BM and myself and older posters of the sort were here every day. We would post news links and discuss them, ask opinions, have debates, have some cyber fun and banter and THEN, when newer non-permanent posters came along, we were there to answer their questions. So the board served its purpose in the end." (16/04/2014).

Typically, members would socially engage (i.e. carry out social engagement practices) at a later stage, after prolonged engagement in cognitive practices (will be further discussed in the next chapter). This agrees with previous research (e.g., Ahuja & Galvin 2003; Mathwick et al. 2008; Sonnemans et al. 2006) suggesting that extended information exchange would lead to socialisation. Newbies are found to be more concerned with informational resources and community affiliation is primarily based on knowledge exchange through engagement in cognitive practices. In contrast, it is the social dimension that comes to define a core member's experience. This finding demonstrates Bourdieu's view that "*exchange transforms the things*

[42] Pseudonyms of some core members.

exchanged … and the recognition of group membership which it implies, re-produces the group" (Bourdieu 1986, p.250).

As previously mentioned, the EW community in Dubai has gone offline by organising regular meetups and occasional events, which primarily focus on the social engagement practices, and provide members with the opportunity of interacting and socialising face-to-face. In fact, it is common for online communities to supplement members' online interactions with offline interactions, through meetups and/or events (Dhalokia et al. 2004; Kozinets et al. 2010). Similar approach has been adopted by several other online communities investigated in previous studies (e.g., Hollebeek et al. 2017; Kozinets 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002). Having presented an overview of the social engagement practices as a thematic category, its four constituent practices (*welcoming*, *chatting*, *governing*, and *demarcating*) are further elaborated next.

5.4.1. Welcoming

First, *welcoming* denotes the greetings of new members and has been previously identified by Schau et al. (2009) as a social networking practice. It also shows theoretical similarity to Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) "greeting" engagement practice. It further includes helping newbies dispel possible anxieties about active participation by reaching out to them, encouraging them to further participate, and helping them to blend in. It is the first practice that a member is exposed to when becoming actively engaged (as opposed to initial passive lurking), hence has significant impact on the progression of engagement thereafter. It involves responding to newbies with welcome messages, which creates a warm welcoming atmosphere as illustrated in the following excerpts. This is followed by attempts to answer the inquiries of the newbie in a friendly manner via the practice of *sharing.*

Illustration 1:

"LB: Hello EL! There is lots of helpful info on here and everyone is welcoming, I hope you get settled in ok and enjoy the new adventure 

SE: welcome to Dubai, it is a wonderful place except you are arriving before the summer  but you will get used to it

SU: Welcome to all the newbies - it's a fabulous experience!! We were fortunate enough to have a colleague of my husband living nearby to show us the ropes and before we moved I had an invaluable

email correspondence with a lovely EW poster...we all remember what it's like to be new so don't be afraid to ask  " (31/05/2012).

Illustration 2:

"CP: Welcome!! You'll make friends in no time don't worry. Especially at school - you'll find lots of people in similar circumstances so don't feel shy about putting yourself out there (so to speak)! Don't ever feel lonely as EW is always here for some virtual chit chat  […]

L3: Good Morning and welcome […] The community here is very varied and mostly very friendly and welcoming […]" (13/08/2015).

5.4.2. Chatting

Second, *chatting* denotes members' engagement in non-functional interactions, which Algesheimer et al. (2005, p.19) refer to as "*social interactions*". Therefore, similarity can be noted between *chatting* and Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) "mingling" engagement practice where members interact beyond the main focus of the brand community. It also parallels Holt's (1995) "socializing" practice where baseball spectators entertain each other through exchanging humorous comments.

Chatting is primarily for entertainment purposes rather than communicating information, similar to friends having a conversation, and involves informal discussions where personal views and opinions are exchanged about non-functional topics. It may also include witty remarks, jokes, and humorous comments (Yao et al. 2015), and is mostly practiced by core members who consider their fellow members as friends and the community as a source of fun and entertainment. It helps developing stronger social bonds among members and creates a sense of companionship (Rosenbaum 2006; 2008; Rosenbaum & Massiah 2007; Yao et al. 2015). The following excerpts are illustrative.

Illustration 1:

"CP: It's one of those days where you feel like something stodgy. Like a pie. 

GE: Fish, chips and mushy peas oh and Prosecco, just because it's Dubai

CY: Loving your style GE!

CP: Ah, but did you have them out of newspaper, or did you put them on a plate??? 

GE: Mine were on a plate, cooked with my own fair hands, straight from the freezer  " (2015/11/25).

Illustration 2:

SS: Am I the only one that is happy to have no sunshine for a change?

BS: After 8 months without any rain looks like I didn't miss it at all. Maybe because I am not British  Bring back the sun!!!!!!! 

LI: after living here for 8 years, there is nothing more exciting than to wake up and see a gloomy rainy day  it definitely doesn't rain here as much as it used to back in 2007/2008 […]" (13/11/2015).

5.4.3. Governing

Third, *governing* involves the determination of the behavioural expectations within the community and the provision of explicit directions to ensure that community norms are followed, monitoring that such expectations are met, and taking proper actions in cases of violations (De Valck et al. 2009; Kozinets et al. 2010). It has been previously identified by Schau et al. (2009) as a social networking practice. It also bears similarity to Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) engagement practice of "regulating". However, it is more encompassing than these two practices since it is not limited to the articulation or provision of norms and regulations to newbies, but it also involves the continuous monitoring of all members' behaviours (including long-term members) to ensure that the community norms are followed at all times and to take corrective actions when needed.

Governance, which "*refers to a system for organizing the rules that regulate people's behavior in a particular place*" (Forte et al. 2009, p.51) has been a central concern in online community research. It attracted the attention of several scholars (e.g., O'Mahony & Ferraro 2007; Seraj 2012; Wirtz et al. 2013). However, the topic remains underexplored, and hence was considered the first research priority in the special issue of the *Journal of Psychology & Marketing* dedicated for the advancement of online communities' research (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015). This issue included three articles (out of a total of eight) about governance in online communities that provided significant initial insights (Dinhopl et al. 2015; Husemann et al. 2015; Sibai et al. 2015), yet governance and conflict management (further discussed in chapter 7, section 7.4.5.) still merit further exploration (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015).

In the EW community, *governing* is practiced both by the forum admin and core members (further discussed in chapter 6). This is similar to Seraj's (2012) findings that in an online aviation community, the rules were governed not only by the site moderators but also by the members of the community themselves, hence creating a "*self-governed culture*" (p. 219).

While in the EW forum both the admin and core members engage in *governing*, they tend to focus on different aspects. The admin is primarily concerned with the reinforcement of the forum rules and regulations by standing against any violations such as exchanging personal information or advertising/spamming. The following comments are typical in this regard:

> Illustration 1:
> "Admin: Hello. Please use our classifieds section. You can refer to the classified and post the link on the forum. Forum rules prohibit advertising." (17/10/2015).
>
> Illustration 2:
> "Admin: Ladies, we'd love it if you could arrange to meet at our next Evening with ExpatWoman […] It will be a great opportunity for you all to meet and then exchange numbers and take it from there.
> As per our forum guidelines members are unable to share email IDs and personal contact details on our forum" (22/02/2016).

In contrast, core members are involved with *governing* the relational norms to stand against any misbehaviours in terms of flaming, which refers to "*an on-line (usually public) vicious, insulting verbal attack*" (Kozinets 1998, p. 9), or spamming[44]. Flaming and spamming represent cases where the norms of the *sharing* practice are not followed (further discussed in chapter 6). Therefore, in such instances core members undergo the *governing* practice to stand against such violations of relational norms that should be followed in all interactions, and to ensure that respect and trust are maintained at all times, hence keeping the community a safe, warm, and friendly environment. The following posts are illustrative:

> Illustration 1:
> "RT: […] I have just read the thread […] this cannot under any circumstances be labelled as just an opinion. It is a spiteful comment masked with politeness and constructed to read like a helpful fact. It appears to support intolerance and belittle the people it is directed at from an assumed position of superiority […]" (30/01/2016).

[44] Both the admin and core members carry out the *governing* practice to stand against spamming but for different reasons. The former considers it a violation of the forum rules, while the latter perceive it as a violation of the relational norm of trust.

Illustration 2:

"DM: I've seen a few posts where people have resorted to insulting rather than base their response on facts. The minute you starting letting your emotions carry away with you, no one will listen. Use facts and links to studies to convince people. Not playground banter […]" (15/10/2015).

5.4.4. Demarcating

Fourth, *demarcating* is the last identified social engagement practice, and refers to members delineating their specific domain of engagement, hence selecting a sub-group to socialise with. It has been previously identified by Schau et al. (2009) as an engagement practice but was referred to as "staking"[45]. However, the term seemed rather ambiguous, hence it is changed in this thesis to "demarcating". This practice involves social differentiation; recognising heterogeneity and variances within the community membership and highlighting intragroup similarities and differences. Members can choose to socialise with the community as a whole or can be limited to a sub-group based on some common basis.

The heterogeneity in online communities has been recently highlighted in literature (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015). Fournier & Lee (2009) were the first to identify that online communities are not homogenous. Such heterogeneity was further emphasised by Thomas et al. (2013) and Sibai et al. (2015). Furthermore, Dinhopl et al. (2015) develop a labelling scheme that members use as means of categorisation and differentiation. Specifically, their "reconstruction" label is relevant to the *demarcating* practice, where members use it "*to selectively exclude community members they do not perceive to be true to the label. With this strategy, consumption community members aim to demarcate insider/outsider boundaries*" (p.241). However, in the EW community, *demarcating* was not directed at differentiating insiders from outsiders. Instead, it was practiced on several bases to create more homogenous sub-groups, hence bearing more similarity to Schau et al.'s (2009) "staking" practice. It can be based on the member's circumstances since some members may prefer to socialise with others sharing similar conditions/life stage (single vs. married, pregnant and/or mums, working vs. staying at home). It can also be based on common interests (sports, hobbies, etc.), age group, or the member's origins (home country) as respectively illustrated below.

[45] "Staking" is the only practice of the nine empirically identified in this thesis that has been specifically identified by Schau et al. (2009) as an engagement practice. However, this term needed to be changed since it was unclear to anyone who reads it, and was mostly confused with "stalking".

Illustration 1: Based on conditions/life-stage

"VE: Any February/March 2016 Due dates? I just found out I'm expecting next year and as its a leap year I've found out its due on the 29th February hence the Feb/March due date title! I'm pretty sure it will not happen on this date but would love to connect with other mummies also due around this time […]

SN: Hey, I'm also due end of February 2016 first pregnancy for me too and not met any other mummies due around same time yet and would love to catch up with other mummies to be […]" (04/12/2015).

Illustration 2: Based on interests

"WD: I am a British lady and I have recently moved back to Dubai with my husband (I have been away almost 5 years). I really enjoy sewing/ quilting, card making and playing Mahjong. I live in the Marina and don't have access to a car. Are there any like minded ladies or a group in the area?

CL: I am like minded! Card making and sewing. Living in DIFC, no car […] (11/11/2015).

Illustration 3: based on age group

"GY: Is there anybody out there over 55 years of age?? […] Would like to know what the more mature women get up to over there […]

JS: Hello I'm in my sixties and there are plenty of more mature ladies here. The Expatwoman coffee mornings are a good start to meet other ladies and to find out what's going on. Then depending on your interests you will find many friendly ladies playing golf or tennis, or cards maybe at someone's house […]" (08/10/2015).

Illustration 4: based on origins

"LM: […] how many people there are on this forum from Aberdeen/Scotland? Do any of you attend the coffee mornings? I am looking to start coming along next week. Will hopefully see some of you there :-) […]")

LF: Me! Fit like? I won't be at the coffee mornings but there are lots of Aberdonians in Dubai […]" (26/10/2015)".

5.5. Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the findings of the first phase of analysis, where the three thematic categories and the practices contained within each are reviewed with data illustrations. Table 5.2 provides a summary of the nine identified practices and their definitions.

Table 5.2: Definitions of the Nine Identified Practices

Thematic Category	Practice	Definition
I)Cognitive Engagement Practices	*Learning*	Acquiring knowledge and cognitive skills.
	Sharing	Contributing to knowledge cocreation through the provision of relevant information and experiences.
II)Emotional Engagement Practices	*Venting*	Expressing negative emotions about unfavourable experiences or concerns.
	Empathising	Expressing understanding of the feelings and emotions of other distressed members, and lending them emotional support when needed.
	Appreciating	Acknowledging the benefits a member is gaining from belonging to the community, and expressing positive emotions and gratitude for the community, its members, and its resources (whether information or social support).
III)Social Engagement Practices	*Welcoming*	Greeting new members, reaching out to them, and encouraging them to further participate by dispelling possible anxieties about active participation, and by helping them to blend in.
	Chatting	Engaging in non-functional interactions and discussions that are primarily for entertainment purposes, rather than communicating information.
	Governing	Determining and communicating the behavioural expectations within the community, monitoring that such expectations are met, and taking proper actions in cases of violations.
	Demarcating	Delineating a specific domain of engagement and selecting specific sub-group(s) to socialise with.

First, cognitive engagement practices are highly utilitarian and related to the fulfilment of the forum's main function, which is to facilitate information and knowledge exchange; composed of two practices: *leaning* and *sharing.* The former refers to the acquisition of knowledge and cognitive skills, and includes the following activities: seeking advice, justifying, updating, and lurking. Whereas the latter refers to the active contributions of members to knowledge cocreation within the online community through the provision of relevant information and experiences, and includes the following activities: advising, reviewing, and explaining. Moreover, *sharing* can be a response to another member's *learning* practice, or it can be voluntary *sharing* of important information or warnings that are deemed useful for the whole community, hence reflecting a norm of voluntarism.

Second, emotional engagement practices focus on feelings and emotions, and reflect the affective nature of relationships between members. Undergoing such practices helps creating an emotionally-safe environment that encourages intimacy. It includes three practices: *venting*, *empathising*, and *appreciating*. *Venting* refers to the expression of negative emotions about

unfavourable experience(s) or concern(s), and usually reflects the need for emotional and moral support from other members. *Empathising* refers to expressing understanding of the feelings and emotions of other distressed members, and lending them emotional support when needed. It concerns the provision of affective resources, and further includes offering reassurance and encouragement. It creates a sympathetic atmosphere where emotional support is offered when needed, hence reinforcing the moral bonds within the community. It is usually a reactive practice entailing responding to another member's *venting* practice. *Appreciating* refers to acknowledging the benefits members are gaining from belonging to the community and expressing positive emotions and gratitude for the community, its members, and its resources (whether information or social support).

Third, social engagement practices are concerned with the members' non-functional interactions related to socialisation. It includes four practices: *welcoming*, *chatting*, *governing*, and *demarcating*. *Welcoming* denotes the greetings of new members. It further involves helping them dispel possible anxieties about active participation by reaching out to them, encouraging them to further participate, and helping them to blend in. Whereas *chatting* refers to engagement in non-functional interactions and discussions that are primarily for entertainment purposes, rather than communicating information. As for *governing*, it involves the determination of the behavioural expectations within the community and the provision of explicit directions to ensure that community norms are followed, monitoring that such expectations are met, and taking proper actions in cases of violations. Finally, in *demarcating* members delineate their specific domain of engagement, hence selecting specific sub-group(s) to socialise with. This practice entails recognising heterogeneity and variances within the community membership and highlighting intragroup similarities and differences. Having discussed the AE practices in this chapter, the dynamics of the AE process is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Findings II: Demystifying the Dynamics of the AE Process

6. Findings II: Demystifying the Dynamics of the AE Process

6.1. Introduction

Having identified the engagement practices and bundled them into three thematic categories in the previous chapter, the dynamics of the engagement process in the EW community will be examined in this chapter. It starts by explaining how the A2A interactions modes are used as observable indicators that can reflect the alignment of connections and dispositions while explaining each of the three A2A interactions modes: no interaction, positive, and negative (section 6.2.). The chapter then proceeds by presenting a practice-based framework that explains the AE process and its dynamics (section 6.3). Finally, the identified six engagement states are explained in terms of the actors' dispositions and connections (section 6.4.).

6.2. The A2A Interactions Modes: An Observable Indicator

Since the AE process is comprised of varying states (Brodie et al. 2011a), in order to understand the dynamics of such process in the online community under study the various engagement states need to be identified, and any change in state over time. Moreover, Chandler & Lusch (2015) consider engagement as an alignment of connections (past and future) and dispositions (past, present, and future). The progression of a member's engagement thus, depends on such connections and dispositions which need to be aligned for engagement to take place, resulting in an ongoing and dynamic process of alignment (or possibly misalignment) when many actors are involved (Chandler & Lusch 2015). Therefore, a thorough investigation of the dynamics of the AE process, how a specific state is reached and how the process progresses, requires attention to the actors' connections, dispositions, and their alignments.

However, this is rather abstract and difficult to observe empirically. Following Storbacka et al.'s (2016) footsteps in attempting to develop frameworks using observable constructs, this thesis draws on practices of individual actors and the responses they receive from other members of the community (A2A interactions) as observable indicators that can reflect the

alignment of connections and dispositions, where alignments are associated with positive A2A interactions. The study captures a more comprehensive picture of all possibilities, differentiating between three modes of A2A interactions: positive, no interaction, and negative, rather than being limited to positive interactions which has been the prime focus of engagement research to date. The three A2A interactions modes are explained below; starting with the no interaction mode, followed by the positive and negative modes.

6.2.1. No Interaction Mode

No interaction is the case when a member's post does not receive any reply, and its impact on a member's engagement has not been explored in the literature to date. Based on observations, there are several reasons for not answering a post, the most common of which is the lack of research before inquiring. This is caused by limited understanding of the norms of the *learning* practice by not undergoing the activity of justifying (see chapter 5, section 5.2.1.2.). Hence, the contributing members feel that such inquiries are not worth their time and effort as expressed in the following post: "*This forum is very helpful, we were all newbies at one time, but I must say some questions are easy answered on google. For example, where can I buy shoes (name a brand) … come on there are some really silly questions thrown at us at times*" (posted by SJ on 18/08/2014).

Another reason for not replying is the avoidance of inquiries regarding issues which may be against the laws of the hosting country that are rather strict, hence are censored by the admin as explained in the following post: "*We strive to keep the tone of the board friendly and welcoming and also within the law- hence deletions of what may be seen to be interesting but are controversial or argumentative posts, as well as requests we receive to delete certain thing*" (posted by the admin on 14/12/2014). This also related to a lack of understanding of the norms of *learning*, where such topics are to be avoided in the first place.

To illustrate, the following is an example where the OP is seeking advice regarding unmarried couple co-habiting, which is illegal in the hosting country, and hence did not get any reply at first. However, a member finally responded by explaining the reasons for the no response, and

attempted to answer the inquiry without debating, yet the post got deleted by the admin as was considered rather problematic from a legal perspective.

> "BO: Hi there, I am hoping there are some ladies out there that can offer me some advice please. I have been offered a re-location package through my Employer from the UK to Dubai. I currently live with my Partner of 3 years and we are not married. I am aware that it is illegal for unmarried couples to co-habit but I wondered if anyone has any actual experience of this? […] Any advice will be appreciated!" (09/10/2015).
>
> "AB: You haven't had responses because these threads often turn into big fights. There are two sides; 1. Why move to a country knowingly breaking a criminal law and 2. Lots of people do it, don't share the person. So I will just give you info. and Not include an opinion […]" (12/10/2015).

Moreover, members were found to be less keen on answering inquiries where recommendations or feedback are sought in order to avoid having their posts censored or being perceived as spamming (see chapter 5 section 5.2.2.1.). In the following excerpt a newbie *shared* a negative feedback, yet the responses she received illustrate both the sceptical attitude towards such activities (especially when coming from a newbie) and the problem of censorship (see section 6.4.1.3.):

> "BA: Back in July we condensed 10 years of life in Dubai to 15 precious boxes. We then trusted [name of a shipping company] with these dear items [….] This is their website [link] please avoid them at all cost.
>
> SC: Whilst I hope this post is well intentioned, and it does seem genuine, I do not think this is the appropriate place. I do not have a legal background but I think this is close to slander, and I would be careful in the way you have named this company in a public forum, in this country.
>
> TE: I am glad that admin didn't delete name of company. Whenever I write some review about any business, my thread was deleted 😠" (28/11/2015).

The fear of being perceived as a spammer is highlighted in the following post, where a member is trying to gain more credibility by explaining that she is not a newbie (as indicated by her profile), and that she is *sharing* genuine recommendations (for more illustrations see Appendix 7):

> "DO: Recently I have been asked by a couple of newbies advice on where to go and what to do to make settling in easier. I thought I would compile a list of some of the positive contacts I made over the last eight years and omit those that were total disasters. I had not posted on EW forum for the last couple of

> years so not surprisingly my passwords didn't work when I went to log on under username F5 (could have something to do with messing up the log on for lack of practice too) so understand that this is not a promotion of any one company just my Filofax of what worked for me […]" (04/11/2014).

Having explained the case of no interaction, the positive and negative A2A interaction modes are discussed next.

6.2.2. Valenced A2A Interactions: Positive and Negative Modes

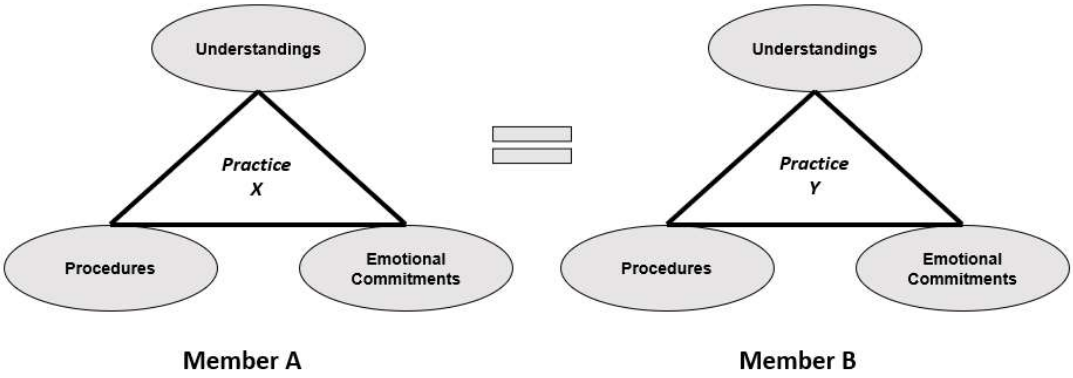
Drawing on Echeverri & Skålén's (2011) conceptualisation of congruent (matches) and incongruent (mismatches) elements of practices, the analysis reveals that the valence of the A2A interactions mode (positive or negative) depends in turn on the configuration of the elements of practices carried out by the interacting actors. The findings suggest that when members interact with congruent elements of practices (i.e. have similar comprehensions of practices) then a positive mode of A2A interactions takes place (see Figure 6.1A). However, when such elements of practices are incongruent, a negative A2A interactions mode is experienced (see Figure 6.1B). To illustrate, consider a basic interaction between just two members; member A is seeking advice (*learning* practice) and another member B responds, supposedly by providing the needed advice (*sharing* practice), a case of congruence or incongruence may take place.

6.2.2.1. Case of Congruence: Positive A2A Interactions Mode

In the congruence case, members A and B would have similar comprehensions about the elements of practices related to *learning* and *sharing*, where B would offer the needed advice without flaming (i.e. judging or criticism), and in return A receives the offered advice with thankfulness. The result in this case is a positive A2A interactions mode. This is the predominant observed mode in the community under study as indicated by a long-term member AN (registered since 03/10/2007 with 1175 total posts to date): "*A lot of women have come to this forum seeking help for all sorts of issues and EW users have helped and supported them. I think that there is much more positiveness than negativity on this forum*" (posted by AN on 26/01/2015) (for more illustrations see Appendix 7).

Figure 6.1A: Case of Congruence

Interacting with Congruent Elements of Practices → Positive A2A Interactions Mode



The elements of practices as descried in chapter 5 Table 5.1 are based on the community's norms of expected behaviour, following it would result in a case of congruence as in the following example (for more illustrations see Appendix 7):

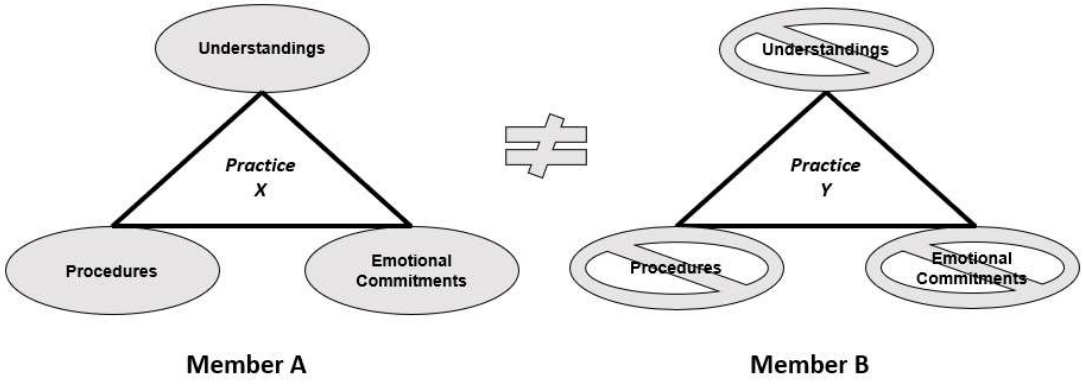
> "PB: Sorry if there is already a thread or two on this subject, but I searched "Sending money back to UK" and nothing came up [*Learning*: Justifying]. What is the best way to send AED savings to the UK for conversion to GBP? […] [*Learning*: Seeking information].
> GO: Rate is even better now than when I transferred about a month ago. I used […] and would recommend them […] [*Sharing*: Informing and recommending].
> PB: Thanks so much for the responses. Gained a lot of info and will definitely look into […] [*Learning*: Receiving the offered advice with thankfulness]" (06/01/2016).

6.2.2.2. Case of Incongruence: Negative A2A Interactions Mode

In contrast, interacting with a member who does not share the same norms would result in a case of incongruence. In this case, the inquiring member may get intimidated, may feel offended, and a negative mode of A2A interactions is thus experienced.

Figure 6.1B: Case of Incongruence

Interacting with Incongruent Elements of Practices → Negative A2A Interactions Mode



In the following illustration, instead of getting the needed information, the OP was faced with flaming. Flaming is one form of incongruent *sharing*. It takes place when the respondent does not follow the norms of the *sharing* practice, and instead verbally attacks (i.e. judges, criticises, or even insults) another member (for more illustrations see Appendix 7):

> "RO: Hi, can I ask some advice. It's so difficult the decisions you have to make with a teenager sometimes, my 15yr old daughter wants to go to a party on the Palm at someone's flat, with a boy from her school […] I told her she can go but we need to go in with her and meet the person holding this party and she got upset and said we would be embarrassing her ... I think that is a reasonable thing to do, she is only 15yrs old. Any mums, what would you do? [*Learning*: Seeking guidance]
> IZ: Yeah - great idea to let her go ... Just give her a pack of condoms and you will be fine!!!! [The norms of *sharing* are not followed: Case of incongruence concerning the *sharing* practice in the form of flaming]
> RO: Ok, IZ....Why do your comments always have to be so rude and harsh...I've noticed you are the first to jump straight on to a forum with something [The OP got offended]" (21/10/2014).

Reasons for Incongruent Sharing (Flaming)

In the above example, the incongruence took place since the norms of the *sharing* practice where not followed. The data suggests that incongruence can involve any practice once the norms of such practice are not followed. For instance, there are cases of incongruence related to the *governing* practice that were also observed (see section 6.4.1.3.), others involved *learning*, *empathising*, *welcoming*, and *chatting* as will be presented throughout this chapter. However, most of the observed cases of incongruence in the EW community were related to

the *sharing* practice, where two forms of incongruence were identified. The first is spamming, which refers to fake newbies pretending to be *sharing* (recommending), while they are actually advertising, which violates both the forum rules and the norm of trust for personal gains. The second type is flaming which involves judging, criticism, and even insults/offenses. The latter was found to be carried out mostly by long-term members who supposedly understand the relevant norms. Intrigued by this observation, the reasons for flaming needed to be explored. Therefore, the observed negative incidents were closely examined and the following reasons were identified.

The first noted reason is related to the nature of the forum, being highly heterogeneous with members from wide array of cultural backgrounds. This aligns with prior research (e.g., Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015; Thomas el al. 2013) that heterogeneity[69] in online communities can cause tension and conflicts (for more illustrations see Table 6.1). The following excerpt explains this point:

> "MB: I think there are a huge number of us very strong, independent, and capable women - both Muslim and Christian, interacting on this forum and therefore, there will always be crossed opinions - this is healthy debate and constructive criticism. However, there are a few very nasty posters who are always negative and see the world from only one point of view, western, Caucasian, Christian - there are other points of view, even in their home countries they wish to squash/ignore […]" (23/09/2014).

Observations reveal that such heterogeneity leads to incongruence since members from various cultural backgrounds do not share the same value system, and instead of respecting such differences, some members were found to consider their culture as superior. This is illustrated by the following post where such superior attitude is criticised (for more illustrations see Table 6.1):

> "RT: […] Some days I am can see why EW has gone quiet, it's because of some awfully judgmental people like DT and FD who must come around wagging their fingers in everyone's faces. It is so tiresome to always be told how perfectly they do things back where they are from […] I have been reading their high-handed baloney for years and I have no idea how long others have been suffering the same torture […] The fact is we can all learn from one another, no one race can claim to be doing things right all the time […]

[69] Heterogeneity in an online community context is defined as: "*the degree to which members differ from each other*" (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015, p.4)

> ETA: I am compelled to add that the phrase 'Being British/As I am from the UK' is NOT a caveat that will cancel out the gibberish that follows. The rest of your statement has the onerous task of standing up on its own based on logic, not geography" (27/01/2016).

Another reason for flaming concerns the tone of the forum and the tendency of some members to be opinionated, and hence their responses are rather harsh as will be further demonstrated later in this chapter while discussing the cases of incongruence experienced in the various states. In the following excerpt, the posters communicate this negative perception about some of the EW members (for more illustrations see Table 6.1):

> "DP: Was sat in a coffee shop the other day and 2 ladies behind me where discussing this website and the forum! One lady described the ladies that post on here as "Expat Dragons" She then went on to say that some of the things people post can be very mean so she calls them all dragons […]
>
> DK: Dragons??? It used to be EW witches LOL
>
> MO: Ha ha ha I was telling my very good friend back in England about this site […] He couldn't resist but go on and have a look at the forum. His words were something along the lines of … It's "really good actually but some of those women are just vile!" and he insisted that they were probably men posting just for laugh.
>
> IV: My husband called me a Rottweiler for my postings here...lol I do love it though...
>
> AJ: Dragons or witches this forum is best ... ok I get some who are ready to breathe fire […]" (05/09/2013).

Those opinionated members tend to *share* their opinions even when the inquiry concerns specific information, hence incongruence takes place. In the following post, a long-term member (SB: registered since 2004 with 11396 total posts to date) explains that it is common for some EW members to drift from the original inquiry and tend to *share* their personal opinions instead of the needed information.

> "SB: […]. So, the original poster asked for the quickest way to lose 5kg. ....a few people actually answered her question and then lots waded in with advice about why she should not do it or what she should do […] Gals on here tend to pontificate and totally drift from the actual question and if they disagree well heck.. you are in for lots of wrist slapping and advice, that you actually did not ask for lol […] The judgement on here comes for free" (29/12/2015).

Focusing on the viewpoint of such opinionated members, some of them express their views about *sharing* different opinions in the following excerpt and highlight some reasons for doing so (for more illustrations see Table 6.1). First, some consider the online forum a place where they can freely express their opinions (perhaps benefiting from the anonymity of posters on the forum) in contrast to offline interactions where they have to hold their opinions and behave more conservatively. Second, they believe that everyone is entitled to have an opinion and to *share* it (freedom of opinion). Third, they consider it part of posting on a forum and that people who get opinions different than their own should accept such views and benefit from it or should not post in the first place.

> "GU (opinionated member): Actually, it's because I run into so many completely annoying people all day and I always have to bite my tongue and be polite so when I'm online, it's a huge relief just to be able to say what I'm really thinking […]
>
> MG (opinionated member): […] Mostly those getting upset tend to be people posting something and rather than receiving supporting comments find themselves receiving views that differ greatly from their own […] I think to some degree if you are going to wade into a hot topic be very prepared to argue your side. If you don't think you can handle the heat then don't post!
>
> NR (opinionated member): OFGS! No wonder this forum is dying on its "backside". What's wrong with having different opinions and expressing them? […] Perhaps one should google their questions then and not post on a public forum? Isn't the whole point with having a forum is that you get different opinions and sides? […]" (30/01/2016).

However, the analysis further suggests that such harsh responses are hardly ill-intentioned as expressed in the following comment in defence of one of those opinionated members: "*Clearly some people here aren't familiar with GB' s* style *but her heart is in the right place* […]" (posted by DT on 02/02/2016). Instead, the prime concern of many of those members is the well-being of the inquirer who can be in trouble, and hence needs warning rather than empathy, especially when it involves legal concerns since the laws and regulations of the hosting country are rather harsh. This point is explained by one of those opinionated members:

> "PS: Some women are in a position they can be in very serious legal trouble, be it marriage, pregnancy (and lack of marriage certificate) hiring maids illegally etc, and need to be told, clearly and upfront, what's going on and what they need to do about it. This is a country with (not always clear) strict rulings, and when women have been here long enough to know what these laws/rules are, they will tell you. So if a woman gets pregnant out of wedlock by a married guy (hypothetically) then a pat on the back is not really the way to go" (26/01/2015).

Therefore, those opinionated members tend to perceive such harsh responses as "honest" opinions intended to genuinely help the inquirer as expressed in this comment: "*There are always some pearls of wisdom in posts which may sound harsh or critical*" (posted by M1 on 23/09/2014). This point is further explained in the following post:

> "DT: I've posted replies which I haven't meant to be offensive at all and genuinely thought I was being helpful and had someone take offence… I don't believe anyone is rude or unkind here just honest and sometimes maybe that's not what an OP wants to hear" (26/01/2016).

Another identified reason for a post being misjudged as flaming is the misinterpretation that can naturally take place online as expressed in the following post (for more illustrations see Table 6.1): "*The thing to remember about online forums, is that often people misinterpret the tone of someone's sentence because we are relying on words only and not facial expression, vocal inflections, etc*" (posted by CA on 17/01/2012). In fact, online misinterpretation is a major concern that has been repeatedly acknowledged in literature (e.g., McInnerney & Roberts 2004; Meho 2006; Purvis et al. 2011).

Lastly, instances of unjustified flaming were also observed, where the aggressive responses were unnecessary as expressed by some long-term members (for more illustrations see Table 6.1):

> "LO: While in general I very much agree with giving honest and forthright advice...I feel there are one or two on here who are rude for the sake of being rude and delight in the anonymity of the internet. […]"
>
> CM: […] We may be thinking of the same incidents, it was brutal and so uncalled for. This is how anonymity serves certain types of "personalities" and we are better off without them.
>
> LO: Like any forum, there are some "characters" over here. Some people are very helpful, and some...I struggle to describe. But, I would certainly advise being choosy about whom you pay attention to, much like real life I suppose." (06/12/2015).

A summary of the identified reasons for incongruent *sharing* in the form of flaming is provided in Table 6.1. below.

Table 6.1: Reasons for Incongruent Sharing (Flaming)

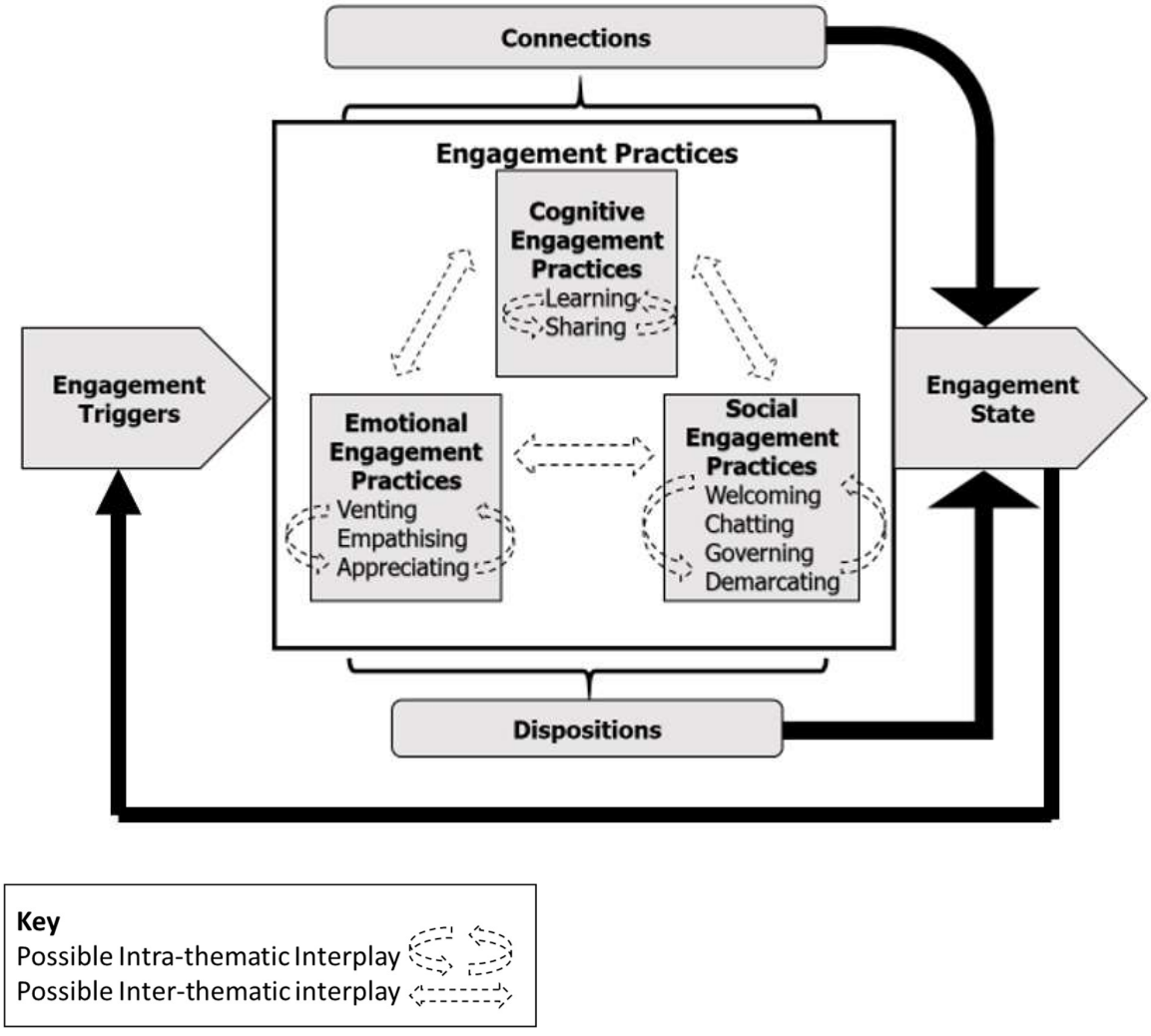
Reasons	Illustrative Posts
1) Heterogeneity of members: members not sharing the same value system due to their highly heterogenous cultural backgrounds	"DZ: I do also think that whether a post is nasty or not is very subjective and it's exacerbated on here by so many different cultures […]" (23/09/2014). DT: […] This is the nature of online forums - everyone wants to say their piece and on EW there is such a huge range of nationalities and personalities there are bound to be disagreements … […]" (18/08/2014).
2) Some members consider themselves from a superior culture	"CP: Why do so many people on this forum compare things here to "the UK". We are not in the UK […] Surely part of the experience of living abroad is to accept other people's cultural differences, whatever they may be […] People that are not able to do that and constantly compare things to their home country are not cut out for expat life" (30/01/2016).
3) Some opinionated members tend to *share* their personal opinions in a rather harsh way instead of providing the needed information	"S6: […] The woman asked a question and the holier than thousand, once again jumped in with unwanted opinions even to the point of saying that in the UK piercing a child's ears were looked upon as less than. […]" (29/01/2016). "RT: […] if you see what this forum was like a few years back the same posters complaining will find the playing field is filled with kittens compared to the absolute wildcats that used to be on here […]" (23/09/2014).
4) Getting opinions that differ significantly from their own	UM: Regarding criticism, I think the thing is others may see in your situation something that you as the writer cannot see, so often a criticism can be a real eye-opener, something you were in denial about or were avoiding, but others can see and they say it. It hurts but it can be very good for you […] So sometimes a harshness can be helpful. But this approach to the forum entails that you really want the problem resolving and you are prepared to look at your own actions critically, with the help of other people's criticisms." (12/11/2014).
5) Possible misinterpretation due to online communication	"DZ: […] We all have different levels of what is acceptable plus intent and tone don't always convey well on here […] I've also gotten on my high horse about postings only for it to transpire that I totally misinterpreted what had been said/meant." (26/01/2015). "DZ: […] the written word not always conveying the intent with which it was meant […]" (23/09/2014).
6) Instances of unjustified negative attitude (i.e. some members can be harsh and rude without justification)	"TB: […] Personalities on the board can change the rhythm and tone of the board, if it is sometimes not a very nice place to be, people will stay away. I believe that is what has happened to EW over the last couple of years and it has generally become quieter." (17/04/2014).

Having explained the A2A interactions modes and how the configuration of practices taking place during an interaction leads to either a positive mode (in case of congruence) or a negative mode (in case of incongruence), and further investigated the reasons for flaming (incongruent *sharing*), the dynamics of the AE process is explored next.

6.3. The AE Process: An Overview

The empirical results and the theoretical orientation enabled the outlining of a practice-based framework that explains the AE a process (see Figure 6.2)

Figure 6.2: The AE Process: A Practice-Based Framework



The model shows that the initiation of a member's engagement process is caused by a trigger, which is mostly the need for information or advice. This finding parallels Brodie et al.'s (2013) analysis in regard to the process being initiated by a trigger. The data indicates that such trigger is typically related to the forum's main function, namely obtaining information or advice regarding expat life in Dubai. This is consistent with prior research regarding the initial participation of newbies in online networks/communities being driven by specific goals that are task-oriented (Constant et al. 1996; Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006; Mathwick et al. 2008). Moreover, the iterative nature of the engagement process implies that through repeated, temporally dispersed interactions, engagement may re-emerge, albeit at different levels, across interactions over time (Brodie et al. 2011a). Thus, any AE process will start from some prior interaction that acts as a trigger (hence the arrow pointing back from the engagement state to the engagement triggers in Figure 6.2). This agrees with Li et al.'s (2017) finding that the engagement outcomes of an iteration (i.e. the current engagement state) acts as new conditions (i.e. triggers) for the following iteration. Moreover, and also in agreement with Bodie et al.'s (2013) findings, observations reveal that the AE process is dynamic and iterative in nature rather than following an orderly sequential progression over time, and involves an interplay of relevant practices. Based on a member's dispositions and connections, a member reaches one of six engagement states and undergoes the corresponding practices.

To illustrate how triggers (e.g., need for advice or information) initiate the AE process, the following is a newbie's initial post where she explains that she is new to the forum and that she needs advice. She then provides some relevant information followed by her inquiries (for more illustrations see Appendix 8).

> "FO: Hi all, I needed some advice and many of my friends have suggested expat women as a place full of good advice!!
> I am married for two kids- kids are 6 and 2.5 yrs. My husband has just been offered a job in Dubai with a reputable medical device company […] I have a few questions about the package and about relocation. Any help would be much appreciated […]
>
> A few questions… […]
> All in all any advice and tips would be hugely appreciated! Thank u" (07/03/2015).

To illustrate the dynamic nature of the process, a member's posts from various threads are presented next, where she is undergoing in each the relevant practices required to interact in

this particular case with no specific order as demonstrated by the posts' dates. The following two posts are from different threads where the member is seeking information (*learning* practice):

> "TS: Hello all, Is there a better frond to live on? […] What about the crescent - is –t too long in terms of commuting Downtown? If you live a couple of rows back, is it not generally a bit hot to bother walking to beach? Thanks" (11/12/2015).

> "TS: Still searching for the perfect location although we are narrowing it down thanks to some sensible advice but clearly travel times may be an issue and we have no idea what the norms are […] How long would it take to drive or get a taxi to say, the Mall of the Emirates? Is it very different if one travelled from the Marina Mall area or Jumeirah 3? Thanks" (02/12/2015).

Next, she is undergoing the *sharing* practice in two different threads:

> "TS: I always followed a child's lead and answered questions fully and openly […] I never really had to tell mine in a formal session as subject often cropped up when they were younger" (11/12/2015).

> "TS: HRT has its place but it is never without complications - menopause is a normal process and will eventually catch up with every woman. If you want something 'natural' (and there is little more natural than estrogen and progesterone for women) as a way of relieving menopausal symptoms try Black Kohosh and a chillow. NB Do not take Black Kohosh if using Tamoxifen." (02/12/2015).

Whereas in the following excerpt, she is *empathising* with another member:

> "TS: Sounds like some friends have forgotten their manners! […] Sounds like Dubai needs some surrogate grannies/mums to adults! […] I am quite good at tea and a sympathetic ear. Plus, I make good birthday cake. Next year maybe H2?
>
> PS It is not you – it's their lack of thoughtfulness and empathy." (14/12/2015).

Finally, she is socialising (*chatting* practice) in the following posts from two different threads:

> "TS: You sound like my type of person! […] I sew badly, play mahjong a bit better and would happily make cards over a mug of tea/glass wine. I am looking at a villa on Jumeirah beach, I think after reading advice on here" (11/11/2015).

> "TS: Coincidentally GE we also had fish and chips tonight. I was late back from work, it is freezing here so I decided we could treat ourselves. The high life indeed!" (25/11/2015).

The previous illustrations also provide empirical evidence for Warde's (2005) argument regarding the nature of practices and that people can engage in multiple practices simultaneously, hence undergo an interplay of practices. The analysis further indicates that such interplay can involve practices within the same thematic category (intra-thematic). In this type of interplay, practices work together toward their thematic function or goal. The interplay can also involve practices from different categories (inter-thematic), where cognitive, emotional, and social engagement practices are simultaneously prevalent, hence practices are integrated and engagement deepens. This parallels Schau et al.'s (2009) analysis regarding the operation of practices and how various practices can be combined in terms of intra-thematic or inter-thematic interplays.

First, to illustrate the intra-thematic interplay, excerpt where a member is undergoing both cognitive practices (*learning* and *sharing*) in the same thread is presented next, hence such member further increases the cognitive value of the thread by *sharing* the newly gained knowledge/experience (for more illustrations see Appendix 8):

> "MI: Hello ladies, I could really use your help. My wedding is in August and I did not buy the dress yet […] Could you recommend shops that I can go to in Dubai? My budget is up to […]
>
> Thank you!  [*Learning:* Seeking recommendations]" (19/01/2014).
>
> "MI: [name of a shop for wedding dresses] was a horrible experience! I thought weddings were supposed to be a joyous occasion, why are the consultants so grumpy? Their dresses are lovely but them not being helpful at all will definitely not make me go back there. It is off the list. [*Sharing*: Reviewing]" (25/01/2014).
>
> "MI: […] Thank you! I called [another shop for wedding dresses] and booked an appointment on Wednesday. I'll definitely come back to you ladies & brief you about my experience with them  [*Learning*: Updating]" (27/01/2014).

Second, the inter-thematic interplay of practices is illustrated by the following posts from the same thread where a member adopts practices from the various thematic categories (for more illustrations see Appendix 8):

"CR: I need to file for divorce. At least get it started. I will go first thing tomorrow morning, just need to know exactly where, what documents, etc. […] Thanks if anybody can offer a starting point [*Learning:* Seeking advice]" (22/02/2015).

"CR: […] Apparently the divorce decree would be easily obtained but anything pertaining to custody, no […] [*Sharing*: Informing] …Yeah I swear I'm in dead water. Really disappointing. Now I can totally see why everybody thinks I m just willing to put up with this  [*Venting*]" (23/02/2015).

"CR: Very exhausting day unfortunately [*Venting*] […] My options, minimal unless a. Pony up bunch of money b. Prepare to take drastic measures and potentially severe consequences later [*Sharing*]. It is what it is and I'm pretty much stuck [*Venting*]" (24/02/2015).

"CR: Thank you […] at least I do feel better being on the forum […] (*Appreciating*)" (24/02/2015).

As indicated by the previous illustrations, practices were found to be combined in complex ways affecting the development of AE process. This agrees with Storbacka et al.'s (2016) argument that AE is path-dependent in terms of the actor's experiences (past and present) and the engagement practices involved. Therefore, by focusing on practices of individual members and their connections and dispositions (being the two fundamental attributes of engagement), and the responses they receive from other members in the EW community (i.e. A2A interactions, being the observable indicators that can reflect the alignment of connections and dispositions), six specific engagement states were identified and are discussed next.

6.4. The Six Identified Engagement States

Figure 6.3 depicts the six states based on the associated A2A interactions mode, which in turn depends on the configuration of the elements of practices taking place during an interaction. Observations show that no interaction mostly leads to the same states as the negative interactions mode, albeit the impact of the latter is stronger. This is due to the disappointment experienced when one's posts do not get any reply, hence both no interaction and negative A2A modes are grouped together in Figure 6.3 and are referred to as "negative engagement iterations" or "negative experiences" in the following discussion. Similar viewpoint regarding

the disappointment experienced due to receiving no reply is identified by Hartmann et al. (2015, p.20) who explain that members may feel "*neglected*" due to getting no response, which "*evokes sadness and disappointment*".

Figure 6.3: The A2A Interactions Modes and the Resultant Engagement States

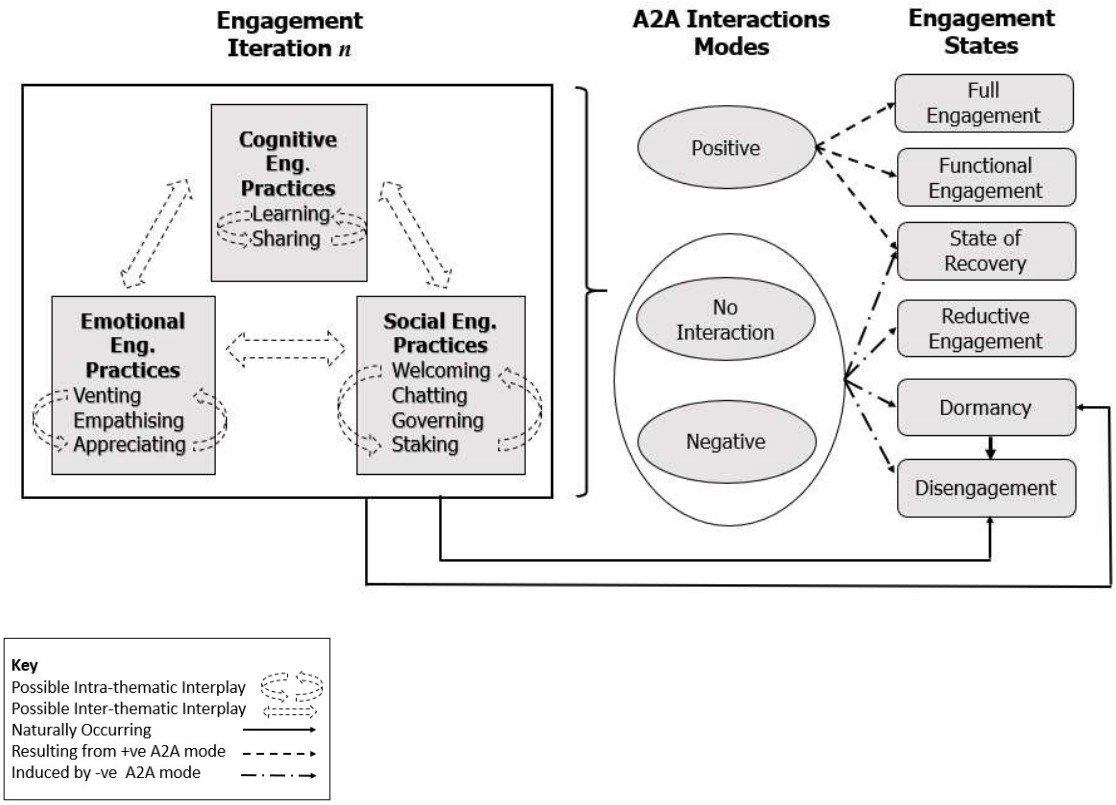
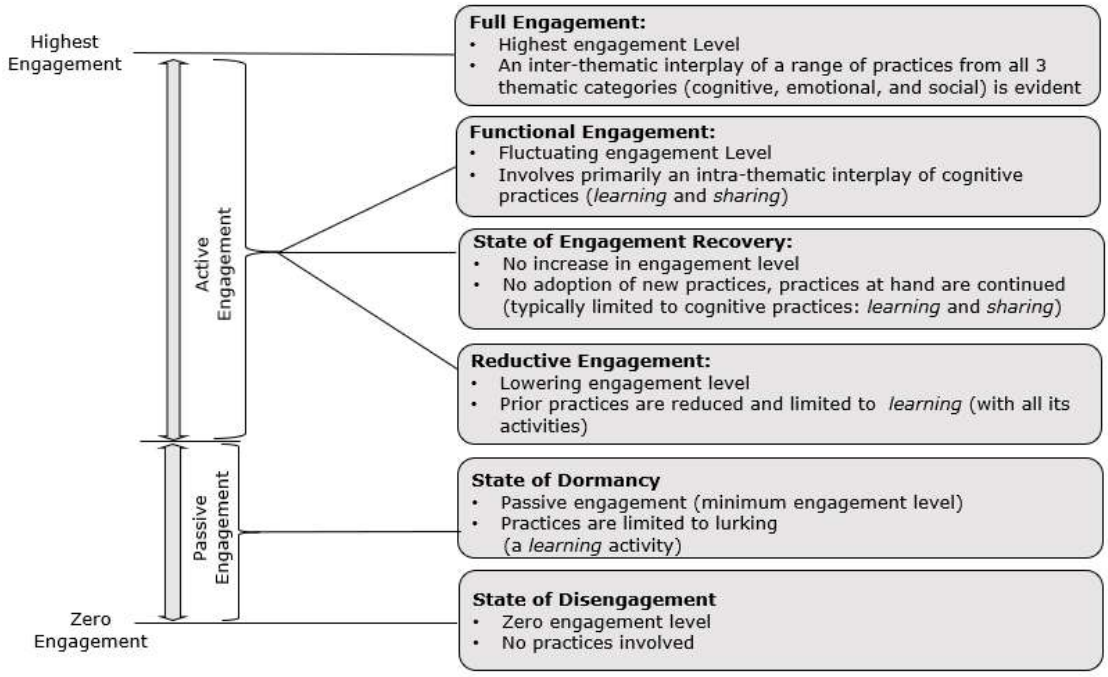


Figure 6.4 illustrates the six states as a spectrum based on the level of engagement and the relevant engagement practices, ranging from disengagement, with an engagement level of zero and no evidence of engagement practices, to full engagement where the highest engagement level is experienced and an interplay of a range of practices from all three thematic categories (cognitive, emotional, and social) is evident.

Figure 6.4: A Spectrum of the Six Engagement States



The remainder of the chapter explains the six identified engagement states, where for each an overview is presented first to introduce the state and shortly describes it, this is followed by a discussion of the state in terms of the members' dispositions and connections (both temporal and relational), and lastly the key points identified while discussing the state are summarised.

6.4.1. The State of Full Engagement

6.4.1.1. An Overview

The state of full engagement is the result of repeated positive iterations (caused by positive A2A interactions mode) and is characterised by the deepest (highest) engagement level, where an inter-thematic interplay of a range of practices from all three thematic categories (cognitive, emotional, and social) is evident. This state is mostly adopted by core members, who are long-term fully engaged members that value the community beyond its informational resources and also see it as a source of social support (Mathwick et al. 2008; Wellman & Gulia 1999), which involves emotional support and companionship (Rosenbaum 2006; 2008; Rosenbaum &

Massiah 2007; Yao et al. 2015). Hence, those members are more concerned with the social value and entertainment value of the community than its functional value. The community's social value provides the member with "*value of interpersonal connectivity*" including friendship and emotional support (Mathwick 2006, as quoted in Sicilia & Palazón 2008, p. 259). Whereas the entertainment value "*stems from fun and relaxation through playing or otherwise interacting with others*" (Dholakia et al. 2004, p.244).

In order to understand how this stage is reached, the path to becoming a core member is explored. In order to do so, some core members' profiles[70] were reviewed. Their posts suggest that, similar to most newbies, their engagement starts due to the need for information/advice as discussed above (see section 6.3.), hence undergo the *learning* practice. With time, they get involved in more practices, extending beyond the cognitive practices to further adopt emotional and social practices as well, and the dynamics of the process becomes more complex with an interplay of wider constellation of practices. This parallels Schau et al.'s (2009) view regarding the nature of practices, which function like apprenticeships (Lave & Wenger 1991) where their effects evolve over time as engagement deepens; newbies are recruited to new practices (Warde 2005) as the fit between their acquired skills and the community's repertoire of practices increases. It is such apprenticeship that leads a newbie to become a core member through progressive appropriation of various practices (Duguid 2005; Reckwitz 2002; Schau et al. 2009).

However, the membership length is no guarantee that this state will be reached, or put differently, not all newbies eventually become core members. Repeated positive engagement iterations will naturally develop a member's connections. Yet, it is an actor's dispositions that influence how to draw on such connections. Therefore, while Mathwick et al. (2008) used the membership length to differentiate between newbies and core members, the analysis shows that this would lead to inaccurate identification of core members, since not all long-term members become fully engaged (core) members due to a disposition to keep their engagement limited to the functional aspects of the community (further discussed in section 6.4.2). Instead, the findings suggest that a more accurate profiling can be achieved by adopting a practice perspective; where the membership length is further complemented with a consideration of the

[70] Each EW user has a profile where all the posts created by this member and their corresponding threads are archived.

practices adopted by a member. Accordingly, core members are the long-term members who undergo an inter-thematic interplay of practices from the various thematic categories.

6.4.1.2. Dispositions

The findings suggest that core members have a rather social disposition. The development of personal relationships and the existence of a reserve of social support which can be drawn upon when needed (via the emotional and social engagement practices) are essential to satisfy the needs of core members, who are keen on sharing a sense of companionship and camaraderie as expressed in the following excerpt from core members (for more illustrations see Appendix 9).

> "GN (core member): […] I figure that the people who seek information only from EW really miss out on some of the camaraderie many of us feel here. Their loss really. 
> AR (core member): […] Any 'relationships' we've built up on here over time are just icing, and sometimes the pure cake for why we stay on board...just that's not recognized as the function of this forum […]" (17/01/2012).

This supports Hennig -Thurau et al.'s (2004) finding that social benefits can be a prime driver for online engagement. As for the social support provided in the EW forum, it is provided via *empathising* as previously illustrated (see chapter 5, section 5.3.2.). More examples of the social support exchanged among core members were observed offline during the Wednesday weekly meetups held at "Wafi Mall"[71] and were recorded in the researcher's field notes. The first illustration concerns helping a mom with her baby, while it is an "adults only" group:

> "While this group is restricted to adults, I noticed the first time I attended that there was a baby that each lady held for a while, and even one of them gave him a bottle when was needed. I was very curious to know who is this baby, especially that the average age in this group was rather high, so my initial guess was that he should be the grandson of one of the attendees. However, at the end of the meetup I realised that he was the son of the lady who was sitting next to me (Monica) who was much younger than the other ladies, and was also the only one who did not attempt to hold the baby for the entire 2 hours of the meetup. Further discussions with Monica revealed that she has been attending this meetup prior to having kids (she now has a daughter who was 4 years old and the little boy who was 6 months old) and she

[71] The "adults only" meetups follow a schedule, where every day is designated for one specific location in the city, where a different group is formed that is mostly composed of ladies from this neighborhood and usually has its unique style (demonstrating the social practice of *demarcating*). However, the Wednesday group was very unique as it had regular members who have been part of this group for several years (some were there since the start of the EW meetups more than 10 years ago), and who are so committed to this specific group that they kept attending it even after moving to further locations where other meetups are organised.

considers the members of this group as her "*family away from home*" who supported her in every step of her expat journey since she came to Dubai as a young inexperienced newly-wed in 2009. Moreover, it turned out that she no longer lives in the neighbourhood, yet she would never think of switching to any other group just for the convenience of the location." (Researcher field notes: 02/12/2015).

A second illustration was also observed during the meetups of this same group, and concerns helping a member who had a serious operation:

> "I have been hearing a lot about Alexandra, who has been a regular member for more than 8 years, yet had lately a major back surgery, and hence was absent since I started attending. I was told that Alexandra's husband is very busy at work, and her kids live in the UK and have work commitments, hence she didn't have any family support during this hard time. Instead, she got all the support she needs from this EW group. They developed a schedule of visits where the "*regulars*" of the group would alternate in taking shifts to stay with her during her husband's working hours since she had no help at home and was unable to move for more than 2 months. They even used to provide her regularly with home-cooked meals. When I finally met Alexandra during a meetup after her recovery, she expressed her deep appreciation for the "*unbelievable support*" she received which surpassed her expectations as not even her own family would have done this if she was back home" (Researcher field notes: 09/02/2016).

The previous illustrations, both online (see chapter 5, section 5.3.2.) and offline, demonstrate that online communities can be a source of social support, where members share a feeling of camaraderie and companionship. This agrees with prior research (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia 2006; Nelson and Otnes 2005; Wellman & Gulia 1999). Furthermore, it parallels Mathwick et al.'s (2008) analysis that it is such support, coupled with this sense of camaraderie, that define the core members' community experience rather than the information resources.

The core members' social disposition is further reflected by their inclination towards entertainment and fun, which they consider as main drivers of their engagement as expressed in this post: "*I do agree, such entertaining threads are the reason for posters checking in on a regular basis*" (posted by a core member M7 on 20/08/2014). A similar viewpoint is provided by Gummerus et al.'s (2012) findings who emphasise the importance of entertainment and social benefits for members' engagement in Facebook brand communities. Similarly, Seraj (2012) explains that playful interactions create entertainment and social value which brings members closer and keeps them together. Furthermore, several scholars have highlighted the importance of both entertainment and social values as central motivational drivers for members' participation in online communities (e.g., Sicilia & Palazón 2008; Teichmann et al.

2015; Tonteri et al. 2011). The analysis extends these studies by specifically identifying the type of members that are mostly affected by the community's social value, namely core members. To illustrate, some core members express the significance of entertainment and fun in fostering their engagement in the following excerpt:

> "IZ: Back to OP - if this forum is JUST "where can I get a du sim card from" then it is very, very, very boring and the reaming 5 old time users will not bother checking in. Then you will have a bunch of newbies asking and trying to answer inane questions […]
>
> LV: To be honest, if the forum were only "where can I buy" or "where is the nearest" it would be as interesting (and as well used) as a single google page […] And if EW became no more than a totally bland information, then I suspect that the only users would be the relative newcomers, which would defeat the whole object of the forum, since without the old hands it would be the blind leading the blind" (20/08/2014).

Interestingly, one of the core members' main source of entertainment in the forum was found to be intense debating. The social disposition of core members led to a different and rather unique perception regarding negative interactions. For most members, negative interactions are predominantly related to incongruent *sharing* in the form of flaming (being criticised, judged, or insulted) (see section 6.2.2.2.). This may lead to a reduction in the engagement level that may reach the extent of becoming disengaged. As for core members, they are rather immune to flaming as they have developed 'thick skin' through prolonged interactions that have established strong connections as expressed in the following excerpt (for more illustrations see Appendix 9):

> "AN (core member): […] I can handle rudeness and snappiness […]
>
> SJ (core member): […] need thick skin coming on here at times ... just don't take everything literally...
>
> TB (core member): The best thing is not to take it too seriously […] it really is not real life and people shouldn't take things to heart too much, we've all been there and had a slating at one time or another and sometimes you do need a thick skin" (18/08/2014).

Instead, they mostly perceive intense debating, which typically involves flaming, as highly interesting and entertaining as expressed by a core member: "*I think people actually like a good cat fight - as long as they're not the subject!!* […] *people want the drama so even if they say they want a polite, respectful forum the truth is when they have it they get bored.... lol* […] *I think people actually like a good cat fight - as long as they're not the subject!!*" (posted by DT

on 22/09/2014). They refer to heated debates as TNT (Thursday Night Thread with topics being explosive like the TNT bomb and entertaining) and are continuously hoping for one to start as communicated in this post (see Appendix 10 for illustrations): "*its sooo boring on EW* […] *Oh what I would do for a TNT!*" (posted by L1 on 07/12/2015).

Similar viewpoint is expressed in the following excerpt from a discussion among core members concerning the forum, where they highlight the importance of heated debates and controversial topics for their engagement as it makes the forum more interesting (for more illustrations see Appendix 9):

> "DZ: Whilst I am never a fan of out and out nastiness and picking on people, the debates on here are what keeps things interesting and keeps people logging in and posting. I know I wouldn't bother looking in just to answer people's questions on where to find hot sauce and the best place to shop.
>
> SX: DZ hit the nail on the head – that's why we log on. That's what keeps it lively.
>
> ZY: The controversial topics keep people logging in to read, which in turn increases traffic to the site, keeping advertisers happy, and keeping the forum alive for us." (26/01/2015).

More evidence was observed regarding core members' appreciation for strong debating when some of them rejoiced at the controversy and heated debates that started to develop around an unusual and untypical new member (TS) whose attitude was deemed provocative. TS soon became the talk of most core members who expressed their excitement repeatedly (see Appendix 9 for more illustrative posts) as illustrated in this post: "*I love this thread so much that I don't care whether TS is real or not. It's hilarious. Keep it up. This thread has been the best in ages*" (posted by BL on 10/11/2015).

6.4.1.3. Connections

Temporal Connections

The state of full engagement results from repeated positive A2A interactions. Therefore, core members have a significant reservoir of past positive connections, which help them disregard possible present negative connections (i.e. negative interactions) with fellow members.

However, an exception was noted regarding the connections with the community management represented by the forum admin. Core members encountered series of interactions (past connections) that were tainted by a perception that the community managers only cares about the economic benefits, and that their understanding of the members' needs is rather limited. This perception led core members to become suspicious regarding some of the management decisions and actions, hence negatively affecting their current interactions (present connections) with the admin. Furthermore, such actions were found to cause demotivation to core members, hence negatively affecting their engagement with the community as a whole.

An example of the management decisions which are suspected by core members is the disabling of the private messaging feature (PM) on the forum, and the insistence on not to introduce it while using the members' security as justification. Observations reveal that the lack of PM is a major cause of demotivation for core members who repeatedly asked for its enabling as they mostly believe that the security issue is not the real reason. Instead, they consider it a tactic from management to ensure high attendance at the EW organised meetups (coffee mornings), which is a source of profit due to the attendance fees. This argument is further supported by the fact that PM is enabled in EW forums of other cities where no meetups are organised as expressed by a core member: "*Other forums manage quite well with private messaging and it isn't to the detriment of EW as a whole*" (posted by DT on 05/11/2015). Therefore, they believe that by disabling PM, managers ensure that attending the weekly meetups is the only way for one-to-one interactions between members, and also prevent using the forum to organise separate independent meetups. Observations support this view as the admin was found to always interfere whenever there is any mentioning of meetups or PM, in order to suggest attending the arranged EW coffee mornings even in cases where it is irrelevant or inconvenient. The following excerpt is typical in this regard (for more illustrative posts see Appendix 9):

> "L2: Hi B2... would love to meet up... just can't figure out how to send PMs on here 
>
> Admin: Hi ladies, there is no private messaging on our forum. We recommend if you want to meet up with users that you choose to do so through one of our organised Coffee Mornings
>
> B2: The coffee mornings aren't convenient when you're working and the evening meet ups you sometimes have, for me are at a really bad time in the month […]

Admin: We agree with you too. That's why we host an Evening with EW as well. We do them once a month. Just keep an eye out on this page for our upcoming one in January […]
B2: Hi Admin – maybe I wasn't clear. Those evening meetups you have are always within the first week/week and a half of the month and are only until 9. For some of us that work in Finance, there is no way we can get out […]
Admin: Yes, We understand. Keep an eye out as we are looking into this! We hope to see you at one soon!" (20/12/2015).

Such interventions from the admin are negatively perceived by core members (i.e. considered as negative interactions caused by incongruent *governing*), since it stops them to take socialising to the next level. This is expressed in the following excerpt where a member is asking about a specific Facebook group for American moms, and the admin interfere to advertise the EW coffee mornings instead. It also highlights how core members' present reactions (present connections) are affected by their negative past experiences (past connections) with the admin, and may even lead them to consider more accommodating alternatives such as Facebook groups and other forums, hence affecting the future of their EW engagement (future connections):

"A6: Hi, I'm from Texas and been in Dubai since 2011. I've recently heard that there is an American Moms in Dubai group. Could anyone help me find the group on FB or add me? Thanks in advance 😊

Admin: If you're keen to meet other American expats here in Dubai, feel free to come along to one of our coffee mornings and arrange to meet up there.

SH (core member): Sorry Admin, but is there anything more annoying that you do than break into conversations to advertise those meetups? I've been to them and never met another American. This woman is looking to meet a specific group of people ... if you want this forum to be useful and thrive, you would be better off backing away from advertising every time someone says something remotely linked to meeting up!
FD (core member): Well sadly the forum has to adapt and change as per what its members want. 'Social' media, where people can interact with one another, privately message, arrange meet ups, have a laugh etc are what people want and why other forums / FB groups are 'winning' at this. If it doesn't adapt, I'll just die and that's that.
LY (core member): Personally, I think this forum has had its day…. unless EW reinvent itself…perhaps start with private messaging…" (28/01/2016).

Furthermore, some members believe that the management's worries regarding the effect of enabling PM on the meetups' attendance are not justified as the women who post on the forum

are mostly different from those who attend the meetups as explained in the following excerpt where the negative impact of disabling PM is further highlighted:

> "SX: I find it especially frustrating not being "allowed" to share personal details, whether it be through PM or whatever. EW's answer to "I've just moved here, does anyone want to meet up?" is always "go to a coffee morning […] I understand safety concerns etc, but all you are doing is pushing people onto their community Facebook pages instead […]
>
> DT: […] In my experience the women who go to the coffee mornings don't post on the forum - in fact, when I went to a coffee morning, expecting to meet lots of women I knew through the forum, not a single one admitted to posting here and the host even claimed to never have even heard of it!! […] We want to know who we're chatting to, we want to be able to exchange details, chat privately or meet for coffee on our own terms" (26/12/2014).

Moreover, discussions with several members who regularly attend the meetups indicated that they share similar views regarding the disabling of PM and that they too consider the management concerns regarding possible negative impact on the attendance of the meetups as unjustified, since they would continue to attend such meetups anyway for two reasons. First, most of the members who attend the meetups prefer face-to-face socialisation over online interactions, and hence are rather not interested in the forum and its features. Second, they prefer such organised meetups over independent smaller gatherings that might be informally arranged via PM (in case it was allowed) as it provides an ongoing opportunity to meet larger number of new people, and this is considered very useful for expats living in a city with high expatriate turnover as Dubai.

Therefore, if the management responds to the members' persistent request and enables PM, the online socialisation would be greatly improved as the connections between the forum members would be further strengthened without negatively affecting the attendance of the meetups, since the attendees would still prefer face-to-face interactions. However, their insistence on disabling PM would just lead members to consider other forums. As expressed in the above illustrations, many of the forum core members already started to prefer Facebook groups/other forums which are more accommodating for one-to-one interactions, hence decreased their engagement with the EW forum or even got disengaged from the community altogether. This finding provides empirical support for Chandler and Lusch's (2015) argument that when an actor is unable to achieve the needed engagement with a certain service experience, this actor will start

considering other value propositions (competing forums and Facebook groups in the case of EW). The argument that actors would evaluate alternative value propositions to select the most attractive and most suitable for their engagement is further supported by Li et al.'s (2017) findings.

Observations also reveal that the lack of PM has led some members to bypass the forum rules and to take even higher security risks. Some members improvised a technique to overcome the restriction of no PM when they need to communicate with a specific member by temporarily posting their email addresses, and then removing it once the designated member confirms receiving it, unless it gets noticed by the admin first, and hence the post gets deleted. This technique is mentioned in the following post: "*One of the greatest mates I've ever met here in Dubai was through a sordid, illicit, nasty little email share and then the sneaky delete*" (posted by SX on 26/12/2014). Members even found a way to make it less obvious, hence not easily spotted by the admin; by subsisting the "@" with "at" and the "." by writing "dot" instead. The following excerpt is typical in this regard (for more illustrations see Appendix 11), yet the admin noticed the exchange since it was not fast enough, and hence these posts were deleted later on:

> "P2: I am online now. If you post it I will make a note and then let you know so you can delete it.
> MZ: My email address is MZ at gmail dot com Thank you.
> P2: MZ I have your email address and will contact you now if you want to remove it
> Admin: Ladies, we love to see our members helping each other out, but as per our forum rules, please do not share email IDs on the forum." (30/06/2015).

The illustration above indicates that despite the forum rules forbid the exchange of personal information, the exchange of email addresses has become a common informal norm via the improvised, albeit prohibited, technique. This supports Schau et al.'s (2009) view regarding the nature of practices being emergent and self-perpetuating. Moreover, it provides empirical evidence for Warde's (2005) argument that practices not only emerge but also develop and change. PM is not a practice per say, but it is part of the procedures of all practices as it affects the nature of communications between members, where currently all practices have to take place in public as opposed to giving members the option to undergo them on a one-to-one basis and in private. Therefore, this observation emphasises how online community managers need to accommodate the needs of their members in terms of practices; whether by allowing for

modifications in existing practices in terms of its constituting activities and/or the relevant norms and procedures, or by establishing new ones if needed.

Another example of the admin's actions that are negatively perceived by core members relates to excessive censorship, which also reflects how negative past connections with the admin can lead to core members' demotivation, hence negatively affecting both their present and future connections. Excessive censorship takes place when the admin does not follow the norms of the *governing* practice (i.e. incongruent *governing*). According to such norms (see chapter 5, Table 5.1), the admin is expected to warn members who are violating any of the community rules and may delete posts only in extreme cases of violations. However, the admin was found to misuse this practice in many instances and unjustifiably deletes posts, leading to unnecessary and rather excessive censorship, which hinders the free expression of opinion and the development of heated debates that are essential for core members' engagement (see section 6.4.1.2.). Such incongruence led to more negative perception regarding the role of the admin as highlighted by the following excerpt where some core members express their demotivation (for more illustrations see Appendix 9):

> "DT: Admin jump on threads to promote EW options only… too many posts or threads are still being removed (as I probably will be now)!! […]
>
> SH: Some of the Admin's actions make me wonder if they really understand the board they run […]
>
> AR: The whole point on having an active online ex-pat forum is to share ideas, thoughts and knowledge … It is what makes interaction stimulating and interesting. As with everything in life, people have different views which causes debate which can get animated at times. I can think of numerous threads where there has been lively, albeit intelligent debate which have been deleted by Admin - a lot of these threads had several pages of postings and were just deleted. Hence heavy censorship has the effect of i) deterring women from expressing different views and ii) preventing any kind of debate and iii) preventing women from putting in any effort into posting given the risk of the thread being deleted […]" (24/12/2015).

Relational Connections

Considering the relational connections, core members adopt certain roles that are vital for the community's survival and prosperity which they consider as their responsibility. This is

consistent with Mathwick et al.'s (2008) finding that the survival of the community is a main concern for its core members. The following excerpt is illustrative:

> "S1: Facebook Groups has taken over! But this forum still has a place I think. I hope it doesn't die out slowly. I am all in to keep it alive and kicking.
> FR: Definitely need to keep this place alive and kicking. My life depends on it. It really helped when I was a newbie whenever I need to know, find or ask for anything and advice of course" (22/01/2016).

Therefore, driven by a feeling of responsibility towards the community and fellow members, core members adopt the role of the mentor to newbies and less experienced members. This agrees with prior research where experienced users act as mentors to novices (e.g., Leigh et al. 2006; Mathwick et al. 2008; McAlexander et al. 2002). EW core members are highly dedicated to helping other members via *sharing*, which greatly adds to the community information resources as expressed in the following comment: "*Some women here seem so dedicated to the forum... and they have such great input, I mean real hard-core advice.....maybe being of real help to others is what keeps them around*" (posted by TW on 28/11/2014).

Similar viewpoint is expressed by Hollebeek et al. (2017) and De Valck et al. (2009) regarding core members' feeling of responsibility for the community and for less proficient members. The following excerpt is illustrative regarding core members acting as mentors for newer members and helping them with their *learning* process with issues related to the expat life and living in Dubai. The OP asked about things to do in Dubai that are inexpensive, and the core member replied by *welcoming* her then provided her with an extensive list of suggestions (12 different options), hence the OP was very thankful for such an extensive effort:

> "B3 (newbie): Hi, My husband and I have just moved to Dubai. We are in our late 20's and looking for things to do that are cheap or even free :o) Any suggestions would be very much appreciated
> DB (core member): Hi B3, welcome to Dubai! […] Here are some things to do which are cheap/free […] I am sure there are plenty more things people can suggest but if you're on a budget the above are a good place to start. Also pick up Time Out - they often have features about things to do around town on a budget. Enjoy!
> B3: Oh my goodness DB, thank you so very much. This is fantastic. Very kind of you to write that all out. Some really great ideas there!! Thanks again." (01/03/2013).

The mentor role also involves helping newbies with aspects related to the usage of the forum and providing any needed clarifications which can help those newer members in their socialisation process and to become more of insiders as illustrated below (for more illustrative

posts see Appendix 9). This parallels Mathwick et al.'s (2008) finding that the socialisation of newbies into the community is a prime concern for core members who are keen not only on attracting new members but also on retaining them and helping them to become core members in turn.

> "GL: Hi, I'm relatively new to this and trying to get my head around some of the acronyms and language used. I thought to myself 'there must be a lot of Tia's living in Dubai as that is how they signed off'. Now I realize that it is an acronym probably meaning thanking you in advance (or something like that). Can someone please explain some of the acronyms used for us newbies out there.
>
> EM: TIA - thanks in advance […] Then usernames are referred to with acronyms at times for fast reference. […] Schools can also be referred to by their acronym, for example EIS. Malls can be MCC (Mirdiff City Centre) […]
>
> GL: Thank you everyone - I now have a better idea of what is being said […] I am looking forward to connecting with people who I can have a laugh with" (2015/01/07).

When undergoing the *sharing* practice, core members may also adopt the role of the adviser (further discussed in section 6.4.2.3.). Similarity exists between the role of the mentor and that of the adviser since both involve *sharing*. However, the former stems from a feeling of responsibility towards newbies and less experienced users, whereas the latter involves responding to any inquiry from any member (even if more experienced).

EW core members also adopt the role of the learner by undergoing the practice of *learning.* Their inquiries can still be related to expat life and living in Dubai as expressed in this comment from a core member: "*Even after seven years here, they* [inquiries related to expat life] *do come up!*" (posted by DZ on 27/10/2015). However, it is more common for core members to inquire about general issues related to women and family. The role of the learner will be further discussed in section 6.4.2.3.

Another significant role adopted by core members is that of the moderator by adopting the practice of *governing*, hence helping the admin. This is similar to the role of the "governors" identified by Seraj (2012) in an online aviation community, where members also assist the community moderators in governing the rules, hence creating a "self-governed culture". In the EW community, while *governing* was carried by both the admin and core members, a

difference was noted between the two groups. The former was found to be primarily concerned with *governing* the rules and regulations of the forum, whereas the later focuses on *governing* the relational norms to ensure that trust and respect are maintained at all times.

A prime source of violation of relational norms is spamming (i.e. posters pretending to be *sharing* personal recommendations while they are in fact advertising). Spamming is one form of incongruent *sharing* (see section 6.2.2.2.). While core members are not negatively affected by incongruent *sharing* in the form of flaming, and they may even perceive it as entertaining (see section 6.4.1.2.), they are highly affected by incongruent *sharing* in terms of spamming and it represents a major source of demotivation as expressed in the following excerpt (for more illustrations see Appendix 9):

> "CP: After maybe 11 years of EW what has tipped me over the edge is the number of fake threads and posts. I can't bear to see any more 'new users' with fake questions that get one or two answers and suddenly there are pages and pages of the same thing.
> S2: […] if someone is violating the rules of EW, the regulars[72] are bound to get outraged. We come here to genuinely help each other, if someone will use that for their own business purposes, we are entitled to be annoyed.
>
> DT: [We] feel used and mocked... Why would you not expect posters to at least be real people??
>
> CM: Naturally there is a justifiable sense [to be upset] for those who took time out to help of having their time wasted and of being misled. They are real people who spent real time and effort giving real answers only to find the questions were completely spoof." (22/01/2016).

As expressed in the above excerpt, the demotivation that core members experience due to spamming can be attributed to the violation of the relational norm of trust by fake posters. This in turn led core members to become suspicious of newbies (incongruent *welcoming*) as explained in the following comment: "*Now each time a new post appears I check up* […] *Well I think most of you are doing the same now. Just losing trust in the forum. I always looked up on EW for genuine reviews and opinions, but now thanks to few posters everyone will think twice before spending time to give their opinion*" (posted by VZ on 25/02/ 2015). Hence, core members have become mostly sceptical about newbies and even aggressive towards some of them who are in real need for help and are not spammers. The following excerpt illustrates this sceptical attitude (for more illustrations see Appendix 9):

[72] The term "regulars" is used on the forum to refer to core members.

"S8: I'm sorry OP but something doesn't add up to me in all of this […]

BS: Something does not add up for me. The whole story seems to be a made-up one, to be honest […] Sorry, but the whole story seems just wrong" (20/10/2015).

Therefore, while the admin aims at *governing* the malpractice of spamming since it violates the forum's rules, core members also help in this regard by adopting the role of the moderator since it also violates the norm of trust. The following excerpt is illustrative where core members notify the admin and fellow members about spammers (for more illustrations see Appendix 9):

"KZ: SPAM alert – M2 reviving old threads. Just a friendly tip off Ladies 

CM: Her other half 'A1' also posts exclusively to recommend the same clinic for every thread that has anything to do with health or beauty […]

Admin: All gone now... Thanks for the heads" (18/03/2015).

Some core members even provided suggestions to solve the spamming problem as in the following post:

"KI: Just noticing there are a lot of dodgy spammers lately, maybe you could put a sticky at the top of the Dubai forum that was a dob-in-the-spam threads and people could cut and paste the links to each of them, then Admin could just keep checking it and delete […]

Admin: They've all gone now... Thanks for the heads up" (16/03/2014).

The role of the moderator is also adopted when conflicts arise among members, yet this is further elaborated in the state of engagement recovery (see section 6.4.3.).

Another role adopted by core members is that of the socialiser; by engaging in social engagement practices to obtain social value (Dholakia et al. 2004) and entertainment value (Sicilia & Palazón 2008) from the community. This role is actually the favourite for core members since socialisation and entertainment are the prime drivers of their motivation. This role exhibits similarity to the role of the "player" identified by Seraj (2012), where members in an online aviation community "*raise fun content, questions or commence entertaining*

discussions that attract many of the members and increase interactivity, generating further social value" (p.222). However, in Seraj's (2012) investigated community, the "*real players*" do not make "*irrelevant or sporadic funny comments*" (p.222), whereas in the EW community the socialisers tend to engage in all sorts of topics which are not relevant or beneficial to other members. Perhaps the difference can be attributed to the more professional nature of such aviation community, hence the purpose of entertainment is restricted to making discussions more interesting and increasing interactivity among members without drifting from issues related to aviation. The following excerpt highlights the significance of the role of the socialiser for core members' engagement, and in turn for the whole community, since core members will then be motivated to adopt their other more useful roles (i.e. the mentor, the adviser, and the moderator explained above).

> "RT: EW is my go-to site not only for the latest in Dubai which sometimes even the news sites are behind, but also just for some fun, banter, gossip and of course explosive TNTs, which are my favorite
>
> IR: Many moons, EW was fun and lively [….] Then, they tightened the rules! No chats, no fun, ban … etc …The board died!!!! Nothing was happening. Facebook groups replaced EW. Admin, thought, hmmmm.... Is cannot be good! They brought in the stars, the rating and the rest. Now the board has begun to liven up again, it is taking off again and this is the direction the Admin wants it to go. If there is no fun and chat between some regular members, eventually there will only be only new people asking questions for information with no one around to answer them! So let everyone have their fun and the board to serve its purpose." (16/04/2014).

6.4.1.4. Summary of the State

Table 6.2: Summary of the State of Full Engagement

Dispositions	Temporal Connections	Relational Connections
• This state is adopted mostly by core members who have a rather social disposition. • They undergo inter-thematic interplay of a range of practices from all three thematic categories. • They share a sense of companionship and camaraderie. • Entertainment and fun are central to them • They are immune to flaming as they have developed 'thick skin'. • They consider intense debating a main source of entertainment.	• This state results from repeated positive A2A interactions, hence core members having a significant reservoir of past positive connections, which help them disregarding possible present negative connections (i.e. negative interactions) with fellow members. • This state is characterised by regular posting. • The future progression of core members' engagement is negatively affected by some of the admin actions: incongruent *governing* (excessive censorship and unjustified interference), and the insistence on disabling the private messaging (PMP feature, because it stops them to take socialising to the next level.	• Core members adopt certain roles that are vital for the community's survival and prosperity. • These roles include the role of the mentor for newbies, and the role of the moderator to stand against violations of relational norms. • This is in addition to adopting the more basic roles of the adviser and the learner (similar to all other members) when needed. • Also, they adopt the role of the socialiser, which is the favourite role for many core members due to their social disposition and the significance of entertainment and fun to them.

6.4.2. The State of Functional Engagement

6.4.2.1. An Overview

In the state of functional engagement, members engage with the community primarily for fulfilling its main function, which is to facilitate information and knowledge exchange. Therefore, in this state members engage in order to obtain functional value (Sicilia & Palazón 2008), which is also referred to as "purposive value" by Dholakia et al. (2004) who define as: "*the value derived from accomplished some pre-determined instrumental purpo*se" (p.244).

This supports Wirtz et al.'s (2013) view that the engagement of many members in online brand communities is driven primarily by functional benefits which are derived from the

community's information resources, and further extends their finding to non-brand related online communities. The data also suggests that it is the most commonly adopted state in the EW community, hence further supports Gummerus et al.'s (2012) finding that most members of online brand communities use it to gain information benefits about the brand. It is also in agreement with Wirtz et al.'s (2013) and Dholakia et al.'s (2004) argument that the reasons for participating in large online communities (such as EW) are mainly functional.

Functional engagement involves primarily an intra-thematic interplay of cognitive practices (*learning* and *sharing*), and hence engagement in this state is rather utilitarian in nature and the forum is perceived as an information board, as expressed in the following comments:

> "TL: EW is an **information** site not a chat room.
> AO: […] EW is what it says on the box, any entertainment value is purely secondary to what it proclaims is its primary function...an information board […]
>
> SU: EW is an "information board" not a chat forum […] If you want chat there are lots of other sites that really are forums ... The point of EW is to provide a place where you can ask a question and get replies based on personal experience rather than advertising or 3rd party info." (18/08/2014).

6.4.2.2. Dispositions

Focusing on the dispositions of members who adopt the state of functional engagement, it was interesting to observe that many members remain in this state for the entirety of their engagement process (those members will be referred to as functional members hereafter). In other words, full engagement is not a natural consequence of prolonged functional engagement. During the period of data collection via observation of the forum, it became apparent that some long-term members never engage in the 'chatty' or 'heated' threads in contrast to core members identified above. Intrigued by this observation, the profiles of those members were further analysed and it became evident that some long-term members may choose to limit their engagement to the cognitive engagement practices as expressed in the following post: "*I have been a member of EW for 5 years now, but am guilty of (ab)using the site for information exchange. Humble apologies and many thanks for information received in both the past and future*" (posted by CW on the 17/01/2014).

This further supports the previously mentioned argument (see section 6.4.1.1.) that differentiation among members should not be based solely on the membership length as suggested by Mathwick et al. (2008). Instead, the adopted practices should be also considered in order to achieve more accurate classification and profiling of members. This can be attributed to differences in dispositions where members with similar connections choose to engage differently. Ongoing positive engagement iterations would naturally develop a member's connections. However, functional members would limit the use of such connections to the fulfilment of their cognitive needs as their disposition is to view the forum strictly as a source of information. The following excerpt from a conversation between the researcher and a long-term functional member during one of the EW meetups is illustrative:

> "T1: I've been using the forum for quite a long time now, I started even before relocating back in 2010, it is so useful, I love it, there is no better place for the most relevant and most updated information related to Dubai […] I also try as much as I can to help the newer expats, and it took me sometime to be able to do so, not only because I didn't have as much information as I have now, but also cause I was not confident enough to do so, but I got there after some time […] But that is it…I only use the forum for information exchange, I know some ladies use the form to socialise as well, but I personally can't do so in an online forum, especially a public one. Call me old fashioned but this is me! […] I believe unneeded online chitchatting can just cause problems, and it often does! […] I prefer face-to-face socialisation, at least there is less chance for miscommunication." (Researcher field notes: 25/05/2016).

This is in contrast to fully engaged (core) members who draw upon such connections to also satisfy emotional and social needs (see section 6.4.1.2.). To differentiate between the dispositions of functional and core members, except from a long thread initiated by a functional member who is against using the forum for socialisation via *chatting* is presented next. The excerpt highlights the difference in perceptions between core and functional members in regard to the *chatting* practice. From the perception of the latter, *chatting* has negative impact on engagement and need to be limited and practiced in separate threads. In contrast, the former considers socialisation and fun essential for their engagement, and hence vital for the prosperity as previously discussed (see section 6.4.1.2.). Furthermore, while controversial topics and heated debates (TNT), were highly appreciated by core members, functional members perceive such instances as incongruent *chatting*, where according to the practice norms (see chapter 5, Table 5.1), controversial topics are to be avoided rather than embraced.

> "ND (functional member): A chat board, EW forum is turning into a chat board!! To go back into a thread and look for an answer, I have to sift through SO much nonsense typed by only a very small group of specific ladies  The EW forum will be out of business by people who are put off and stay

away due to the chatter and pollution of this otherwise informative forum […] Quality over quantity, ladies […]

DZ (core member): Guilty! Absolutely some threads are inane chatter but they are easy to avoid. If someone is asking for information or help they normally get that. I sometimes indulge in pointless chat but I also give information or advice when it is asked for - as do the other ladies who also chat. If the board was restricted to purely information only, no digressions or friendly asides allowed it would very slow on here. I rarely came here when practically no discussion was allowed […] It's still informative while having a laugh as well. […]. I am sure the TNT's were high quality  " (16/04/2014).

More contrast was observed between the two groups' dispositions in terms of their contrasting perceptions of *sharing* opinions and intense debating. While it was perceived by core members as highly interesting and even entertaining (see section 6.4.1.2.), functional members were found to negatively perceive it. They consider such instances as incongruent *sharing*, especially when opinions are *shared* and debated while the OP is asking for specific information as expressed in following excerpt from a conversation among functional members:

"NO (functional member): I think it's very annoying when posters come on and comment when the comment has no helpful information whatsoever. Especially when it's only serving to "fan the fire" in a debate, or putting their own opinion out there in a contemptuous way that is not relevant to the original query. If I have nothing helpful to add to a discussion, I don't say anything. When I do, I say something. Plus, I usually avoid the catfight threads because I don't like getting my posts ripped apart by people.

SU (functional member): Half the time the poster doesn't get their question answered anyway – just a load of b!tching, assumptions and pontificating on the merits of whether she actually needs whatever it is she's asked for and in some cases receive very harsh opinions...The thread then degenerates into the usual EW b!tchfest and gets deleted ... So you post a thread asking if it's reasonable to be upset that your husband forgot your birthday and receive a variety of responses, many of which are unsympathetic and some even suggesting that your marriage is in trouble …" (17/01/2012).

Functional members represent the majority of the forum. However, observations suggest that this can represent a threat to the continuity and prosperity of the EW community, since an expat's needs for information is not as strong as it used to be years ago as highlighted by the following post (for more illustrations see Appendix 12):

"TB: I think there are also some other reasons EW has changed in the 10+ years it has been running. In those days, there wasn't really anywhere else to ask things. (Does anyone remember the lady that used

> to have a column in 7 Days where you could ask her to find things and she would write back where to get it). Nowadays, people are generally not here for only 2 years like they were then. People stay here for longer. There's no such a high turnover of people needing information, and those that do need information would often google it, finding the information on EW or somewhere else. Or they would ask someone they have met, who has been here for longer so knows more than someone who just moved in last week. Most information is already 'out here' and is waiting to be found, rather than unknown. We still have newbies to Dubai, but their requirements in terms of information they need have been met (Look at all the info EW has gathered over the years and made part of their site)" (17/04/2014).

This post highlights the vulnerability of information communities where the majority of the members engage solely for information exchange. Therefore, managers of such communities need to also focus on fostering the emotional and social engagement practices of their members, since it leads to engagement that is not only deeper but also more lasting, as the case with core members. This finding supports Gummerus et al.'s (2012) view that entertainment and social benefits have the strongest impact on enhancing members' engagement, and hence should be the focus of online community providers and managers.

6.4.2.3. Connections

Temporal Connections

Regarding the temporal connections, a lack of regularity in terms of posting has been noticed with members adopting this state, which is also in contrast to core members who tend to refer to themselves as "the regulars" due to the regularity of posting. The data suggests that there is high fluctuation in the engagement level of most functional members. This can be attributed to the nature of engagement in this state being primarily functional/utilitarian. Therefore, functional members mostly tend to engage when they need information/advice (via *learning)*, and further reciprocate by *sharing* when they can. As a functional member explains: "*I pop in and out to ask questions. If I'm asking a question, I feel it's only fair that I scroll through other posts to give something back to the community and help if I can*." (posted by F3 on 11/11/2015) (for more illustrations see Appendix 12). Moreover, the field notes contain several instances where such lack of regularity was expressed by many members to the researcher during the EW meetups; they explained that they use the forum only when they need specific information.

Observations further reveal that functional members appreciate the fact that the participation in the forum is not limited to the regular users and that it is easily accessible. Hence, they engage by *learning* when needed and contribute by *sharing* when they can. The following post is illustrative:

> "SK: I like that EW is easily accessible. Part of what makes it so valuable is that people can just come online when they need to, ask a question, and get a fast response without too much effort or obligation involved. I don't think it should be limited to people who want to join in and contribute regularly – but I certainly agree that the people who do so are what keeps the boards alive. Having said that - anyone who post regularly is doing so presumably because they enjoy it - I don't feel the fact that someone receives information here obliges them to contribute regularly. I've never felt that a new poster is any less entitled to some info than a regular poster" (17/01/2012).

Relational Connections

Due to the utilitarian nature of this state, where members primarily undergo the cognitive engagement practices, members mostly alternate between two roles; the role of the learner (carrying out the *learning* practice), and the role of the adviser (carrying out the *sharing* practice). This is similar to De Valck et al.'s (2009, p.189) view that members in online communities can switch "*between the roles of information receiver and information sender*".

The role of the learner has been previously identified by Fournier & Lee (2009) and by a Özbölük & Dursun (2017), both focusing solely on online brand communities. The former defines the learners as "*members who enjoy learning and self-improvement*" (Fournier & Lee 2009, as quoted in Özbölük & Dursun 2017, p.375). Whereas the latter consider them to be "*the ones who have a beginner level or an ephemeral interest to the brand and join the community to seek for information*" (Özbölük & Dursun 2017, p.378). Furthermore, the role of the learner identified in this thesis has similar characteristics with the role of the "seekers" identified by Seraj (2012) in an aviation online community, who are members that "*look for information and ask for the contribution of other community members*" (p.219).

Observations reveal difference in proficiency in the role of the learner between newbies and long-term EW members. The former may ask ambiguous questions then disappear, hence incongruent *learning* takes place since the norms of the learning practice are not fully followed; where the inquirer is excepted to explain the situation and to provide any needed clarification

(see chapter 5, Table 5.1). In contrast, the latter mostly undergo the activities of justifying and updating while *learning* (see chapter 5, section 5.2.1.2. and section 5.2.1.3. respectively), and tend to further *share* the newly acquired knowledge/experience to increase the thread's value. The contrast between the two groups in the role of the learner is expressed in the next post:

> "K1: Some threads, where OP shoots out one vague question then disappears leave me with a feeling that they actually 'do not' come back to see the answers. Sometimes I feel like the thread 'hang in the air' and in real life I have a feeling like somebody asked me a question and before I answered they walked away. Which may not be the case but without any feedback from OP it just looks like a rude move. That's again messing reality with web but I hope you understand what I mean. To me it's more about the presence of the OP in the thread, owning it, giving feedback to answers. I don't care much about the tone – old timers and newcomers can be evenly disrespectful. The difference I feel is more in skills of owning the thread, leading the discussion, coming back to report on new developments ... I feel old timers just care more, they have built their name and reputation" (17/01/2012).

The view expressed in the above illustration further highlights the effect of the temporal connections on the enactment of engagement practices. It is also in agreement with Schau et al.'s (2009) observation regarding practices becoming more detailed as the membership length and the engagement level increase. In contrast, the following excerpt illustrates how newbies may initiate a thread to seek help then disappear while some members attempt to help, yet their efforts are wasted:

> "D2: Urgent help…Calling all my fellow expat ladies. I am in an awful predicament at the moment. Would value your urgent advice. I m a brit stuck here in Dubai.
>
> ND: What kind of predicament?
>
> TG: Is this the same predicament as your previous post? Did you try any of the suggestions on that thread? Perhaps if you expand on your problem a bit and outline what's happened since your last post we might be able to help." (29/09/2016).

As for the role of the adviser, it exhibits similarity to the role of the "educators" identified by Seraj (2012) referring to members whose "*main objective is to share the knowledge they have with the community and they are the main actors in content co-creation*" (p.222). The main difference between the role of the adviser and the role of the educator, is that the latter can only be practiced by experienced members (in topics related to aviation). This can be attributed to the more professional nature of that community and the specialised knowledge involved. In contrast, due to the non-technical nature of the EW community, less experienced members and

even newbies were also able to adopt the role of the adviser in some instances by *sharing* some relevant information and experiences, since the required knowledge can be rather simple and general (not limited to the expat life). Therefore, in the EW community all functional members (long-term and newbies) can adopt both roles; the learner and the adviser. The following excerpt illustrates the exchange of general information, where a long-term member is asking about some cooking tips, and many newbies replied to her by sharing their cooking experiences. Therefore, a role reversal takes place; where the long-term member is the learner while the newbie is the adviser.

> "CP [long-term member: the learner]: […] has anyone ever cooked their turkey like this and any tips? TS [Newbie: the adviser]: […] To stuff lift the skin and fill under that or serve stuffing separately […] then completely wrap in foil and cook in a slow oven for a good few hours […]" (23/22/2015).

Typically, a member joins the community due to the need for information (see section 6.3.) and starts to form connections with other members that can be drawn upon to satisfy this need, hence adopting the role of the learner. As a result of positive interactions via other members *sharing* practice, positive connections start to develop with fellow members and the newbie is motivated to undergo more engagement iterations as a learner, hence engagement is reinforced via repeated positive iterations. To illustrate, the first two threads initiated by a member are presented next where positive interactions in the first thread led her to further engage by starting a second one to ask for more questions, hence adopting the role of the learner in both:

> Excerpt from the first thread: "AI: I' m new to Dubai sort of. Moved in to one of the older-ish apartment in Downtown Dubai in Sept & need some recommendations on any maintenance companies that does aircon servicing, plumber, electrical & such […] Please do recommend me a "tried & tested" maintenance company. Thank you in advance." (13/10/2015).

> Excerpt from the second thread: "AI: Got a great tip on home maintenance from a post here so here's hoping for another one […] Would appreciate if I can get a few inputs. Thanks in advance! Cheers! 😉" (19/10/2015).

Guided by the norm of reciprocity (Chan & Li 2010; Mathwick et al. 2008), the member then starts *sharing* to reduce the feeling of indebtedness sensed due to the benefits gained via *learning* (Dahl et al. 2005; Gouldner 1960; Wiertz & Ruyter 2007). Hence, with time the learner is inclined to further adopt the role of the adviser and to participate in the cocreation of the community's information resources. To illustrate how a sense of reciprocity drives a

member to progress from being a learner to becoming an adviser (when possible), two posts by the same member are presented next. The OP received many positive responses to the first post that led her to voluntarily share her newly acquired experience in the second:

> Excerpt from the first thread: "R8: Hi ladies, I am new to this forum. Our family is from Singapore and we are moving to Dubai early next year […] My son has autism […] I am keen to put him in a mainstream school […] […] Do you have any suggestions/recommendations where I can register him? Is there any autism support group for mums in Dubai?" (*Learning*) (08/11/2015).

> Excerpt from the second thread : "R8: […] I am writing this to help every family who has a child with autism to find the right school... finding the right school is very very difficult … it took me and my husband months of calling and visiting schools to finally come up with the following list […] I really hope this list will help you guys…Good luck and if you need anyyyyy thing don't hesitate to contact me" (*Sharing*) (25/1/2016).

This analysis is in accordance with prior studies (e.g., Wasko & Faraj 2005; Mathwick et al. 2008; Chan & Li 2010) which have previously identified that members' contributions and *sharing* of knowledge/information in online communities are driven by reciprocity. The following are more posts that further highlight how *sharing* is guided by the norm of reciprocity (for more illustrations see Appendix 12):

> "SM: I got a huge amount of help from the Expat Woman (as she is known in our house) when we were considering moving here and once we'd arrived in Dubai. No question too basic or too stupid to be answered…and happy to return the favor." (17/01/2012).

> "BT: […] EW has helped me soooo many times...so I'm here now to help out ... cycle of life, Karma!" (20/06/2011).

6.4.2.4. Summary of the State

Table 6.3: Summary the State of Functional Engagement

Dispositions	Temporal Connections	Relational Connections
• Members in this state have a functional/utilitarian disposition. • They view the forum strictly as a source of information and use it to fulfill their cognitive needs (hence undergo cognitive engagement practices). • *Chatting* is negatively perceived by functional members. • They consider engaging in controversial topics and heated debates (TNT) as incongruence (related to the practices of *chatting* and/or *sharing*).	• This state is characterised by a lack of regularity in terms of posting, and high fluctuation in the engagement level. • This is due to the utilitarian nature of this state, hence members engage when need information or advice (*learning*) and further reciprocate we they can (*sharing*). • The membership length affects the proficiency of a functional member in *learning* (i.e. it affects proficiency in the role of the learner).	• Due to the utilitarian nature of this state members mostly alternate between two roles: the learner and the adviser. • Typically, the role of the learner is adopted first. • Guided by the norm of reciprocity, the role of the adviser then follows. • However, due to the non-technical nature of this forum, members can adopt the role of adviser at an early stage of their engagement since the required knowledge can be rather simple and general (not limited to the expat life).

6.4.3. The State of Engagement Recovery

6.4.3.1. An Overview

A member may opt for a state of engagement recovery when facing previous negative experience(s). Essential for adopting this state is that the member still perceives the community as beneficial, hence has a positive disposition to remain engaged in spite of concerns related to some past connections that came to exist due to previous instances of negative A2A interactions or no interaction. Put differently, the recovery state is an attempt to turn a negative experience around and to reconcile incongruence between members (in case of negative A2A interactions mode), and it is the member's disposition that drives such recovery efforts. During recovery, a member would refrain from endorsing new practices and would just undergo the already adopted ones, sceptically and with less motivation, while waiting for some sort of justice. It typically involves only cognitive engagement practices with an inclination towards *learning* rather than *sharing.*

The data also suggests that a state of engagement recovery exhibits conceptual resemblance to service recovery, defined as "*the actions a service provider takes in response to a service failure*" (Smith & Bolton 1998, p.65). Recovering members need to be treated by focal actors, who are "*actors aiming at designing or managing actor engagement with the intent of improving resource integration and value co-creation*" (Storbacka et al. 2016, p.3009), like customers who experienced service failure, and hence service recovery is needed. Service recovery literature emphasises the criticality of a firm's response to customers' complaints, where such response can either restore the customers' satisfaction and loyalty or aggravate the situation and drive the customers further away (Patterson et al. 2006; Smith et al.1999). Therefore, recovery encounters are considered "*critical moments of truth*" in the relationship between the service provider and the customers (Smith et al. 1998, p. 356), where effective service recovery can turn frustrated and angry customers into loyal ones (Boshoff 1997; Boshoff & Leong 1998; Michel 2001). Similarly, and as will be illustrated in the remainder of this state, observations indicate that recovering members are also at a critical stage of their engagement process. They are vulnerable and sensitive, and this state represents a crossroad for them; either to recover their engagement with the community or end up on the path towards disengagement.

6.4.3.2. Dispositions

An overall positive disposition to remain engaged is prerequisite for a state of engagement recovery. This state is primarily relevant to newbies rather than long-term (both core and functional) members as will be further elaborated while discussing the temporal connections (see section 6.4.3.3.). However, in this section, the reasons for why these two groups (core members and long-term functional members) typically do not opt for a state of recovery would be explored, by focusing on their respective dispositions.

First, core members do not need recovery when having conflicts with other members since they are capable of defending themselves, as demonstrated by the following illustration (for more examples see Appendix 13), and hence there is no feeling of injustice involved, and accordingly no moderating efforts needed. It is worth noting that after directing the post below to an

offender, the OP continued the conversation with other members and just ignored the offender thereafter.

> "DM: I do have to wonder why you said in your post this was your last attempt at convincing people but then calling them idiots? […] I didn't say whether my child was vaccinated or not. I clearly stated I was after information. So thank you for your information, but it was of no use to me." (15/10/2015).

To further illustrate how core members are unaffected by conflicts and that they may even perceive such conflicts as entertaining (see section 6.4.1.2.), the following excerpt is from a long thread (87 posts) initiated by a core member (GB) on 31/01/2016 to *vent* about her kids' school teacher who has mistaken her for the nanny. Instead of receiving the needed *empathising* responses, she was strongly criticised (incongruent *empathising*) and a heated debate took place for more than a month (the last post on this thread was on 08/02/2016). It is worth noting the GB herself was also offensive in several posts. This illustration is typical in regard to portraying conflicts among core members and how the debate intensifies then eventually calms down with no or minimum intervention from focal actors[73]. It can be also noticed from some posters' comments that they are enjoying the conflict (the full thread contains more exchange of jokes and sarcasm). It even led some of the core members who were less active due to being demotivated by the lack of interesting threads to engage as expressed by this comment: "*well, at least you brought all the old-timers*[74] *out of the woodwork!! Well done GB, and CP is happy now EW is back...* […] *This thread is making up for the last 6 months*" (posted by DT on 02/02/2016). Moreover, further analysis reveals that the engagement of GB was not affected by this debate based on two evidences. First, observing her other activities (i.e. posts) on the forum during this month, she was acting normally on several other threads where she has been undergoing inter-thematic interplay of various practices. Second, reviewing GB's final post in this excerpt, it is even more evident that the strong debate that just took place passed smoothly as she simply changed the topic of the conversation and asked about reviews for a car repair garage.

> "GB: […] I'm fuming, can't and won't let it go, I had this bad treatment many times over the years […]
>
> LV: Oh for god sake GB, what are you so cross about?? Would it be so awful to be mistaken for a maid??

[73] In this illustration some core members (CP and DT) attempted to lighten up the debate at some instances, hence reflecting minimum intervention.
[74] Referring to some core members who were less active lately.

OD: […] Totally overreacting if you ask me. Just let it go. Life is too short to be bothered by these things.

GB: You seem to really have issue with me OD […] As a classic victim blaming tactic you practice; to find a reason justify your personal attack […] I suggest you stay away from me […]

CK: GB is actually saying that she thinks a nanny is a second-class **human** and is horrified at the teacher daring to surmise that she might be one!!

GB: CK, you might not be aware that English isn't my first language, but you keep playing with words, twisting it to showcase how bad I am […] To recognize racist comment/treatment is easy for anyone who've been subjected to it […] I can tell from your words you never been on the receiving end of these words […]

CK: Oh GB, your English is just fine […] it is you trying to take back your real thoughts and throw a racism card again.... And seriously, you know NOTHING about my life and the abuse I have been on the receiving end of […]

GB: […] Sorry I don't want to know about your misfortune […]

CK: But you can come on here with your misfortune and expect us to sympathize […]

OD: GB I did not attack you personally […] As a member of this forum I'm entitled to give my opinion on each and every post. If you have a problem with that, or with any poster disagreeing with you, I suggest you direct your anger and rants elsewhere.

CP: GB, you are a long time EW'er and you know that here we don't always get the responses we'd like, that's the beauty of an open forum, replies from all angles. But I think you do take a lot of things to heart including probably a lot of the responses you have received. Just try to take things with a pinch of salt. […] How have things been with Ms Middle Age [referring to the school teacher] since your OP?

GB: She is being professional and I try not to interact with her at all, if it happens polite smile and I make sure that I'm extra polite so I don't leave anything for different interpretations […] May I ask if anybody have reviews on Iskandar garage in Ajman? Yes my car still broke down and I'm using rental car at the moment, I started hating this car, another poster not happy with my second hand car."

Second, focusing on long-term functional members, in contrast to core members, they negatively perceive conflicts and consider flaming as 'attacking' or even 'bullying'. However, using the forum solely for the fulfilment of cognitive needs (see section 6.4.2.2.) makes functional members act in a rather practical way, hence they tend to ignore such negative instances and to consider it "*part and parcel of posting on a public forum*" (posted by LY on 25/02/2015). As a long-term member explains: "*There are quite a few bullies on any forum.*

However, it's part of the course of joining anything online" (posted by X4 on 18/08/2014). The following excerpt further highlights the practical disposition of long-term functional members (for more illustrations see Appendix 13):

> "L3 (long-term functional member): If one can ignore those who shout loudest there are people on here who really do offer their best I think without the gleeful little daggers and they are worth seeking out. I also think, thankfully, they are in the majority.
>
> ZY (long-term functional member): Not everyone is a nice person. In real life if you cannot deal with someone you avoid them, on a forum you scroll past their posts. With the anonymity people also do tend to be more outspoken.
>
> B1 (long-term functional member): There are bullies on EW, just like there are in real life […] There are people from all walks of life, all circumstances, who post for all sorts of reasons. Frustration, loneliness, fun, boredom, information […] People can disagree with someone without having playground bullying tendencies. But then it wouldn't be real life, would it." (26/01/2015).

Having discussed why long-term members do no typically opt for a state of engagement recovery from a disposition perspective, this point is further elaborated below by focusing on the members' connections, where the contrast with newbies and their need for recovery is further highlighted.

6.4.3.3. Connections

Temporal Connections

The analysis suggests that past connections assist in explaining the different reactions to negative iterations (characterised by no or negative A2A interactions); the stronger the past connections are (repeated previous positive iterations), the easier it is to overcome present negative experiences without needing recovery. Observations reveal that long-term members (whether core or functional members) typically do not opt for a state of recovery since their reservoir of positive past connections allow them to disregard present negative connections (i.e. negative A2A interactions) as illustrated in the previous section. They are even less affected by not receiving any replies to some of their posts (i.e. no A2A interactions). This can be attributed to two reasons. First, their strong past connections allow them to disregard such instances and to take it lightly as expressed in this post from a long-term member: "*When I do*

post a thread, I hope to get a response and I'm grateful when I do … If and when I respond to someone's queries and don't get any feedback … so be it!! No sweat… I just MOVE ON" (posted by A2 on 18/01/2015). Second, their long experience with the community allow them to understand that perhaps their inquiry can be easily answered by a Google search, hence they tend to not take it personally as in the following example where a member does not receive any reply and decides to "*Google it*" instead:

> "SH: Anyone know a good place to get some Kimchi??
>
> ES (long term member): What is Kimchi?"
>
> (ES post was not replied, so after couple of hours she posted the following)
>
> ES: I shall Google it then  " (25/11/2015).

Therefore, a state of recovery was found to be more relevant for newbies. This can be attributed to several reasons. First, they have limited past connections to draw on facing negative iterations. Second, they lack the EW experience that can help them better understand the tone of the forum and the style/personalities of some of the members who can be rather opinionated (see section 6.2.2.2.), hence can be perceived as offensive. Third, some newbies can be inexperienced with the use of online forums in general and not just that of the EW forum. This further supports Weijo et al.'s (2014, p.2075) argument regarding the importance of being familiar with both; the community members and the use of forums in general, as explained by an EW core member in the following two posts:

> Illustration 1: The lack of EW experience
>
> "DT: […] I am always amused when these discussions [complaining about negative/aggressive attitudes] come from relative newcomers who don't know that some of the posters here have known each other and liked or disliked each other for several years!! Nature of the beast and all that..." (23/09/2014).

> Illustration 2: The lack of general experience in using forums
>
> "DT: I think part of the problem is that many women use EW as a source of information when they' re new or even before they move, but are not necessarily forum savvy. If you' re not used to the ways of message boards it can be quite a shock to see how some types of women "talk"" (07/09/2013).

Fourth, observations show that newbies are also more likely to be attacked. As a core member explains: "*We* [core members especially the opinionated ones] *only attack the new, the polite and the optimistic (the worst offender)*" (posted by RT on 18/08/2014). The aggressive attitude towards newbies is also communicated in this post: "*People complain how boring EW is then when new posters come along everyone starts being nasty*" (posted by LY on 27/11/2015). The following excerpt further illustrates this point (for more illustrative posts see Appendix 13):

> "AR: the prolific EW 'witchfests' are SOOOO prevalent (and they were pretty mythical back in the day when a new poster would be genuinely terrified in joining the board […]"
>
> C1: It's like some posters expect newbies to go through the forum ring of fire. The whole point of forums is to impart information, whether you're new or old – shouldn't matter." (17/01/2012).

The idea that newbies are more prone to attacks has been previously suggested in literature. Kozinets (1998, p.374) mentioned "*anti-newbies postings*" and "*trolling*", which is defined as "*the practice of trying to lure those who are unaware of the in-group's rules to reveal their ignorance*". The analysis further suggests that newbies are more likely to be attacked for two reasons. First, their inexperience can lead to strong debating, which is encouraged and fostered by core members for their own entertainment (see section 6.4.1.2.) as expressed by a core member: "*I'll admit though...I find the occasional EW inquisition funny when someone asks a pretty straightforward question and gets just roasted. You can't just ask for something on here sometimes without getting your intelligence contested, your morals questioned, your lack of UAE research (prior to moving here) criticized, your spelling corrected, and a host of other things*" (posted by BB on 20/08/2014). Second, the lately prevailing spamming has caused suspicious attitude towards many newbies (incongruent *welcoming*) as previously discussed (see section 6.4.1.3.). Therefore, newbies are more prone to experience injustice, hence requiring recovery efforts from focal members by adopting the role of the moderator as explained next.

Relational Connections

Newbies tend to experience injustice during conflicts, hence some focal actors need to take on the role of the moderator, focus on the emotional discontent of the offended member via *empathising*, and attempt to alleviate the frustration, or even anger, by standing against

offending members via *governing*, and hence help the offended member regain justice and recover engagement. This role is mostly adopted by core members (rather than the admin) who feel responsible for *governing* the relational norms in the forum (see section 6.4.1.3.), and hence are keen on helping offended members to successfully recover their engagement by attempting to reconcile incongruences. This finding supports the view shared by Wallace (1999) and Kim (2000) concerning the tendency of online community members to indicate to each other the code of conduct, making the interference of community managers unnecessary. Similarly, Seraj (2012) identifies a culture of "self-governance", where members share the governance responsibility with the moderators. It is also in alignment with McLaughlin et al. (1995) and De Valck et al. (2009) who emphasise the need to reproach offending members to ensure that they conform to the community norms. Moreover, it exhibits a level of similarity to Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) argument that the members opting for community leadership position (moderators)[75] tend to regulate the behaviour of other members and to warn against non-compliance.

Recovery efforts by core members are considered by the offended members as positive A2A interactions[76] (i.e. positive present connections), which may be capable of mitigating the impact of the previously experienced negative iterations (i.e. negative past connections), and engagement is recovered thereafter via more positive future iterations (i.e. positive future connections). Since negative experiences can result from either no reply (no A2A interaction mode) or negative responses (negative A2A interactions mode), the role of the moderator is discussed for each of the two modes separately next.

First, considering the no interaction mode, while its impact is easier to overcome compared to the negative mode, it still requires some focal members to step in and respond to the unanswered posts (by adopting the role of the adviser or the mentor). The following excerpt is illustrative where a newbie expresses her demotivation for not receiving any replies to previous posts, and subsequently got responses from some core members who apologetically justified the lack of prior response, and who then attempted to answer the needed inquiries. To analyse

[75] In the community investigated by Hollebeek et al. (2017), members are allowed to become moderators. However, in the EW community, this position is officially limited to the EW staff (the admin). However, core members tend to unofficially perform such role based on a feeling of responsibility towards the community.
76 Hence the arrow pointing from the positive A2A interactions mode in Figure 6.3 to the state of engagement recovery.

the effect of such recovery efforts, the subsequent posts of the offended newbie (N1) were observed; she continued for some time with the *learning* practice, which was then followed by *sharing*, hence indicating the success of the recovery efforts (for more illustrations[77]see Appendix 13).

> "N1: I am a little disappointed…I know everyone has busy lives […] but I've been looking through the threads on this forum and posted one myself and no one comments, I asked several questions about random things and they're not difficult to answer or so I thought, no one has helped with even one of them, but I've had over 300 views […] There are so many threads on here with 0 comments and honestly I'm disappointed. I had hoped that this website would help us […]
>
> D1: I know you must be feeling really excited about your move to Abu Dhabi and have loads of questions swirling around in your head. As SH mentioned, it is Ramadan at the moment so the board tends to slow down and people are gearing up to leave for the summer. The other thing is that most posters live in DUBAI so wouldn't be able to answer your questions about Abu Dhabi. I know I can't help you. I do however hope you find the answers soon. Good luck with the move
>
> HA: What questions do you have? While Dubai is a different place to Abu Dhabi, there are similarities between the both as expat life in the UAE can be similar across the board in most cases." (2016/06/14)

In contrast, several cases were observed where no one helped the demotivated newbie to recover engagement by answering the needed inquiry. The following illustration is typical in this regard (for more illustrations see Appendix 13); where a newbie repeats an inquiry, or complains from the lack of response, yet still doesn't receive any reply, and hence stops posting. This may indicate shifting to passive engagement (i.e. dormancy) or disengagement as will be further discussed (see sections 6.4.5 and 6.4.6 respectively), yet in both cases the newbie's engagement is not recovered. This further highlights the importance of the role of the moderator.

> "M4: I posted a few times and starting to get discouraged from lack of response. So please, if anyone has a remote idea that can help, shoot! if not, well  […] Can anyone share their experience with this sort of stuff […] I would appreciate a name or an address." (23/01/2016) (no reply was received).

Second, focusing on recovering from negative interactions, observations indicate that its negative impact on engagement is even stronger than the no interaction. Therefore, such

[77] The subsequent posts of all offended newbies in Appendix 13 were also observed and the same results were obtained, indicating successful recovery. Furthermore, analysis of all additional illustrations presented in the appendices led to the same findings reported in this chapter.

instances require even more moderating efforts to reconcile the conflict (i.e. the incongruence) between members, and to alleviate the impact of prior negative experience(s) as illustrated in the following excerpt where the OP is complaining from previous negative interactions (for more illustrations see Appendix 13). However, some core members stepped in (by acting as moderators) to stand against offenders, hence restoring justice and ensuring the offended member that offenses are not to be tolerated. Moreover, those core members tried to lessen the impact of the previous negative interactions by explaining to the offended member that they all faced similar negative incidents and advised the OP to ignore the negative and benefit from the positive. Furthermore, it is evident from the illustration that the offended member still considers the community as beneficial, hence has positive disposition to remain engaged, which in turn drives the recovery efforts. In addition, the importance of the focal actors' role (i.e. the role of moderator) for a successful recovery is evidenced by the change in the OP mood between the initial post and last post.

> "NL: Seriously??? I am being attached now for having a tattoo??!!!!! Y such negativity & hostility???
>
> LC: What were you "*attached*" to love??[78]
>
> OD: LC love, what is wrong with you. Yesterday you were denying non-British nationals the right to discuss your Royals and claiming to know it all, lecturing Genie on her understanding of etiquette. Today you are ATTACKING a newbie because her choice of words is not up to par with you undoubtedly superior knowledge of the English vocabulary. Your comment is totally uncalled for.
>
> SJ: NL don't take it personally, happens to all of us  Just take it all with a pinch of salt […] I had a look back a while ago on some comments made to me.....I said to myself I'm telling my mum!!!!!lol.
>
> MK: I totally agree especially a couple of posters that seriously need to get a life. All they do is post sarcastic comments and bully others just for fun.
>
> AN: EW is a very informative board and I think that it has helped so many people over the years. There are some unkind posters, but I don't think that there are more on here than in everyday life...
>
> NL: thank you guys soooooo much, nice to know that I am not the only 1 not liking LC's attitude & AN you're right, would be such a pity to leave such a gold mine for 1 or 2 unkind posters." (18/08/2014).

[78] The poster is making fun of the OP's typing mistake, where she typed "attached" instead of "attacked".

6.4.3.4. Summary of the State

Table 6.4: Summary of the State of Engagement Recovery

Dispositions	Temporal Connections	Relational Connections
• The member still perceives the community as beneficial (i.e. positive disposition to remain engaged in spite of concerns related to some past connections). • Member refrains from endorsing new practices and would just undergo the already adopted ones, sceptically and with less motivation, while waiting for some sort of justice (typically be more inclined to learning rather than sharing) • Core members do not need recovery as they can defend themselves and they are mostly unaffected by conflicts which they may even perceive as entertaining. • long-term functional members negatively perceive conflicts, but ignore them due to their practical disposition.	• The need for recovery is related to the past connections; the stronger the past connections are, the easier it is to overcome present negative experiences without needing recovery. • Therefore, recovery is more relevant to newbies rather than long-term members (both core and functional) since they have limited past connections, and not enough prior experience that can help in understanding the tone of the forum. • Newbies are also more likely to be attacked, due to their inexperience, and because they may be misjudged for spammers.	• To help newbies recovering from no A2A interactions mode, some focal members need to step in and respond to the unanswered posts by adopting the role of the adviser or the mentor. • Offended members require some focal members to step in a adopt the role of the moderator to stand against the offenders, hence the offended members gain justice and recover engagement.

6.4.4. The State of Reductive Engagement

6.4.4.1. An Overview

Members who previously were either fully engaged (core members) or functionally engaged (functional members) reach a state of reductive engagement as a result of extreme demotivation caused by significant negative experiences. This state is characterised by a decreasing engagement level, despite the actor still being disposed to remain engaged with the community as its resources, whether information or social support, are still deemed useful by that member. The member is gradually less motivated to contribute and a regression in the adopted practices takes place, hence this state can be considered the start of a gradual withdrawal from the community.

6.4.4.2. Dispositions

Both core and functional members may opt for a state of reductive engagement when strongly demotivated. However, their respective causes of demotivation vary since they have different perceptions concerning negative experiences. In other words, each group is more affected by specific types of incongruence (i.e. incongruence related to certain practices), and since this is directly related to each group's disposition, it is further elaborated in this section.

First, from a functional member's perspective, negative experiences are related to incongruent *sharing* in the form of flaming (see section 6.2.2.2.). Such negative responses are perceived as aggression or even 'bullying'. Therefore, reductive engagement is adopted when such incongruent cases are too significant (i.e. either too intense or too frequent) to ignore as expressed by a functional member who used to be more engaged: "*I have been attacked so many times that I hardly come on here anymore!!*" (posted by F5 on 22/09/2014)".

To further shed light on how a functional member reaches a state of reductive engagement, a case of incongruent *sharing* (in the form of flaming) is presented next. The OP was asking for specific information (where to get her daughter's ears pierced at a reasonable price). However, members started to judge her decision to pierce and to even post insulting comments (incongruent *sharing*). Soon enough, the thread turned into a fight between defenders and offenders where the OP contributed by only four posts after which she stopped responding, while the negative responses and the heated debate continued among other members. In her last post, she expressed her regret for posting this inquiry in the first place and that she did not expect that it will cause "*such fight*" and that she will be more careful in the future. This further highlights the negative perception of functional members towards intense debating and how they consider the *sharing* of opinions when the OP is asking for specific information as incongruent *sharing*, especially when it entails flaming (see section 6.2.2.2.). Further analysis of this OP's profile indicates that prior to this thread she was undergoing both *learning* and *sharing*. However, following this incident, her posts were limited to *learning* (seeking information) where the inquiries involved no controversy, and with a noticeable decrease in the rate of posting. The following excerpt illustrates the flaming (judging and criticism)

directed to the OP and the development of a fight between offenders and defenders (the full thread is composed of 77 posts):

> "TS: Why an intelligent parent would want to risk a child suffering the pain is still something I don't understand […] in UK they do tend to be associated with lower social economic groups […]
>
> DT: […] being British I find babies or young children with pierced ears totally bleurghhhhhh and would no way inflict such pain on my own children […]
>
> RT: Oh dear it's the old baby with pierced ears looks like a gypsy rant again. She didn't ask you how you felt about it, but here you are, telling her what should be done - according to you of course- in a long and completely unnecessary lecture that wasn't meant to change her mind as much as it was to shame and judge and get all high horsey.
>
> FD: No, sweetheart. I never told anyone what they should or shouldn't do – you came to that conclusion on your own […]" (2016/01/28).

Second, in contrast to functional members, core members were found to be mostly unaffected by negative responses (i.e. incongruent *sharing* in the form of flaming). Instead, they reach reductive engagement due to excessive demotivation caused by extensive negative experiences related to spamming (which is another form of incongruent *sharing*) since it negatively affects trust, and excessive censorship (incongruent *governing*) due to its negative impact on the entertainment aspect of the forum (see section 6.4.1.3). Demotivated core members were found to spend less time on the forum, and mostly limit their practices to intra-thematic interplays, with less motivation to *share*. The following excerpt is illustrative where core members discuss the sources of demotivation, the decrease in time spent on the forum, and the temptation to use Facebook or other forums which are more adaptive, yet it is evident from their posts that they still have positive disposition to remain engaged (for more illustrations see Appendix 14).

> "CP: (1) too many threads with replies from EW Admin directing people to research done by EW instead of letting other posters answer (killing threads!) (2) not enough fun (3) too many sleuth advertisers…my last post on this was deleted (not by me)!
>
> DT: […] the whole thing seems a shadow of its former self being soooo slow and dull, hence spending less and less time on EW … sorry, really wish I could find something positive to say – this place was such a help to me when I first moved here...But we are still here so I suppose that must say something!!
>
> AP: Forum a lot slower than what it used to be… no PM…I prefer to chat on Facebook groups now […] I still think it's a great and super helpful forum.

> CP: Other forums/FB groups are different in that they are there actively to encourage chit chat. EW has always discouraged chit chat and for that reason I am starting to be drawn to other places where I can freely chat/meet up" (28/12/2015).

6.4.4.3. Connections

Temporal Connections

This state is characterised by a decreasing engagement level and represents a gradual withdrawal from the community. It appears that such withdrawal is due to a perceived disconnect from other members caused by a rather permanent incongruence as opposed to the temporary incongruence experienced in the state of engagement recovery. This provides empirical support for Chandler & Lusch's (2015) argument that a decreasing engagement level is an indication that engaged actors have started to fall out of alignment, and further explains that it is due to incongruences in engagement practices that were not reconciled. The following post is illustrative:

> "LE: First year here: I was up to my neck in EW […] it was difficult to get info about the lay of the land so EW was my touchstone for that. Any questions? Answered. And yes, there were loads of inane threads, b!tchy chatter, backstabby behavior and naturally: bullying tactics. The old hands -- safe in their positions as doyennes of the Board – ruled, newbies were helped absolutely, but stupidity and stupid questions were treated with disdain … It was this sort of thing that made me feel this wasn't the place for me. I'd started, just, to make real-life friends and that was infinitely preferable to the cat house antics that raised their collective ugly heads, especially around TNT time. Fast-forward to now and I login, just barely, to ask questions." (17/04/2015).

Analysing LE's profile; she joined the EW forum on 14/11/2012 and her total number of posts to the date[79] is 899, yet the gradual withdrawal from the community is evident from the distribution of her posts over the years; in 2012 she posted 403 (in only one and half month since she joined EW on 14th of November), 345 posts in 2013, 113 posts in 2014, 32 posts in 2015, 6 posts in 2016, and none in 2017.

[79]The member' profile was last reviewed on the 7th of November 2017.

Relational Connections

The only role adopted in the state of reductive engagement is that of the learner. The previous negative iterations led to engagement practices being predominantly limited to just *learning* as the offended actor is no longer disposed to reciprocate by *sharing* personal experiences or opinions. From a community perspective, this state still leads a member to "seek advice", which could trigger *sharing* from other members, and hence further developing the community information resources (i.e. it still makes some other members adopt the role of the adviser or the mentor).

It is also worth noting that this state is reached due to recovery efforts that were not fully successful. Put differently, while some focal members attempt to mitigate a conflict by taking on the role of the moderator (see section 6.4.3.3.), their efforts may be not effective enough to lead to successful recovery, yet it still stops the offended member from reaching the state of dormancy or even disengagement, hence a state of reductive engagement is adopted instead.

6.4.4.4. Summary of the State

Table 6.5: Summary of the State of Reductive Engagement

Dispositions	Temporal Connections	Relational Connections
• Both core and functional members may opt for reductive engagement when strongly demotivated. • Yet, the respective causes of demotivation of the two groups vary. • Functional members are mostly demotivated by incongruent sharing (in the form of flaming). • Core members are demotivated by: 1)spamming (another form of incongruent sharing) as it affects trust, and 2)excessive censorship (incongruent controlling) as it affects entertainment and fun.	• This state represents a gradual withdrawal from the community. • A member is gradually less motivated to contribute and a regression in the adopted practices takes place. • Such withdrawal is due to a perceived disconnect from other members caused by incongruences in engagement practices that were not reconciled.	• The previous negative iterations led to engagement practices being mostly limited to *learning* as the offended actor is no longer disposed to reciprocate. • Therefore, the only role adopted in the state of reductive engagement is that of the learner. • From a community perspective, this state still leads to the further development of the community information resources since it triggers *sharing* from other member by responding to the needed inquiries (i.e. other members adopting the role of the adviser or the mentor).

6.4.5. The State of Dormancy

6.4.5.1. An Overview

A state of dormancy is defined as "*temporary state of inactive, passive engagement by individual consumers who have previously been more actively engaged with the online community*" (Brodie et al. 2013, p.110). The defining characteristic of dormancy is the lack of active engagement, hence there is almost no posting involved in this state (Peerce et al. 2004). However, a member may still choose to passively engage via lurking, hence lurkers are "*inactive, passive, peripheral or non-productive participants of online communities*" (Edelmann 2016, p.162). Past research has acknowledged that lurkers represent a large proportion of participants in online communities (e.g., Edelmann 2016; Preece et al. 2004; Schlosser 2005). Moreover, Hartmann et al. (2015) and Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz (2015)

highlight the need to investigate such passive forms of participation since the majority of the online community literature to date focuses primarily on the active forms of participation.

Evidence of a state of dormancy are presented in the following excerpts, where some members express periods of complete inactivity (i.e. no lurking) as in the first illustration or instances of lurking as in the second illustration. The latter provides empirical evidence for Riddings et al.'s argument (2006, p.331) that members tend to mention their lurking or to declare that they are "*delurking*" at some point.

> Illustration 1 (complete inactivity):
>
> "WK: Looooong time no been on the site! What's new?!? Who is still here?!!!
>
> CI: Hello WK! Welcome back
>
> WK: Good to see there are still some familiar faces around Have I missed much? […]". (28/03/2011).

> Illustration 2 (lurking):
>
> "BZ: me still around watching, not necessarily posting all the time". (16/04/2014).

Through further analysis of the data, two types of dormancy were identified; naturally occurring and induced[80]. The former is related to a member's disposition whereas the latter is related to a member's connections, and hence are further elaborated below in sections 6.4.5.2. and 6.4.5.3. respectively.

6.4.5.2. Dispositions

Naturally occurring dormancy takes place when a member who has been actively engaged becomes temporarily inactive due to personal reasons such as lack of time (e.g., being busy

80 Naturally occurring dormancy is indicated in Figure 6.3 by an arrow pointing directly from the box of engagement iterations to the state of dormancy, whereas induced dormancy is indicated by arrows pointing from the two modes (no interaction and negative A2A interactions) to the state of dormancy.

with work or during family vacations) as illustrated in this excerpt (for more illustrations see Appendix 15):

> "AM: Hope you've been well AN. I noticed you disappeared for a whole. C2 also went quiet […]
>
> AN: Yes, AM, I've been fine. I didn't actually disappear. I just went on vacation for a few weeks so I was not online. But now I am back in full force..." (05/09/2013).

Also, naturally occurring dormancy can occur due to circumstances beyond the member's control (e.g., sick child) as in the following example. The OP has been actively engaged until 01/04/2014, then posted the following after more than 18 months of no posting due to being busy with her child who is having a long-term medical condition:

> "FT: Afternoon ladies. It's been long and I have been busy with hospitals this past year. Right now, it's been 20 days my son has been hospitalized. We need a suctioning unit for the doctor to agree to send us home. It has already been purchased but I will only have it by Saturday. The hospital is no longer providing. I asked the Social worker to lend me one […] Any ideas.☹" (01/11/2015).

Following this thread, she opted again for dormancy for more than 6 months, then posted the following urgent inquiry which is related to traveling with kids having disabilities, hence it shows that her situation did not get any better and that she is still busy with her sick child:

> "FT: It's been a long time since I have posted anything. lots Going on. I have a very urgent question. Which is the best airline to travel with disabilities - physical and otherwise?" (14/07/2016).

Having presented the normally occurring dormancy, and before moving to induced dormancy, it is important to highlight that it is a positive disposition to remain engaged that makes members opt for induced dormancy rather than disengagement, where they can still benefit from the community via lurking.

6.4.5.3. Connections

Temporal Connections

Induced dormancy is related to a member's temporal connections, where a member is too demotivated by past negative experiences (i.e. past connections) to remain actively engaged, and hence shifts to passive lurking. In this case, the demotivation is higher than in the state of reductive engagement, hence leading to further withdrawal from the community. However, there is still a perceived need to remain engaged (positive disposition to remain engaged), albeit passively, hence not getting disengaged yet.

Observations reveal that it is easier for newbies to become demotivated than for long-term members who previously were either fully engaged or functionally engaged, hence further highlighting that a member's reaction towards negative experiences is related to his/her past connections (see section 6.4.3.3.). Therefore, newbies were found to easily opt for dormancy, where they can still benefit from the community via lurking without being subjected to any more negative experiences. To illustrate, the next excerpt is from a long thread (82 posts in total) which was initiated by a newbie who is complaining about her negative experiences with the community. Her positive disposition to remain engaged is evident from her initial posts as she repeatedly expressed a positive perception regarding the value of the community. However, instead of having some focal members taking on the role of the moderator and help her in recovering engagement by *empathising* with her and by *governing* the offenders, she was bombarded with more negative responses (incongruent *empathising* and incongruent *governing*), hence further aggravating the incongruence.

> "PX: I have found EW very helpful since moving to Dubai and know that there are many lovely and helpful ladies on here, who truly give from their heart and care about helping others. However lately the bickering on every post is becoming unbearable […] for God's sake!!!! I have seen responses that are unbelievable and sometimes borders on bullying. EW is place to share and help not a place for bullies […]
>
> IZ: PX You are a hypocrite - pure and simple.
>
> DT: […] I've been here a number of years and newbies like yourself regularly come on to tell us off for not playing nice ... Well, I find that accusation unfair and simply not true...To be honest, I think a passive aggressive thread like this is no better than the comments you complain of!! […]

PP: In all honesty if you start a thread telling people how they should behave on a forum, I am sure you can imagine it will become a war of word. Because what you're doing is telling off a bunch of adult women for being naughty […]

DT: I think the whole thread is inappropriate...this happens so often - newbie asks innocent question, gets roasted then starts a thread to complain how mean everyone is on here which opens a free for all of name calling and random criticizing […]" (26/01/2015).

The profile of the OP from the above illustration (PX) was further analysed. She has been registered since 08/06/2014, had 26 posts prior to this thread where she was practicing both *learning* and *sharing*. However, the negative comments she received on this thread led her to stop replying and to stop posting until 05/02/2015 when she posted an inquiry *(learning* practice), followed by another period of dormancy until 26/06/2016 when she posted another inquiry. According to Nonnecke & Preece (2000), posting 3 or less times in 12 weeks should still be considered as lurking. Therefore, this period can be considered as opting for a state of dormancy.

As for long-term members (both core and functional), they were also found to experience induced dormancy, albeit they are not as easily demotivated as newbies due to their strong past connections, hence further highlighting the significance of a member's past connections in determining the progression of engagement. First, for long-term functional members, the following excerpt is illustrative. The OP (WK) is registered since 29/05/2007 with 3381 posts in total, and her preceding post was on 01/11/2013. She explains below that her dormancy was induced by negative experiences due to flaming (incongruent *sharing*), and that she is back hoping that things have improved, hence highlighting her disposition to remain engaged (for more illustrative posts from WK see Appendix 15):

"WK: What a long time since I last popped in here! Good to still see some of the old faces!!!

TB: Hello WK, Welcome back, hope you are well, nice to see you x

TW: was just wondering what make you drift away WK ...?

WK: Hi TB and TW  @TW - it just got a bit personal - there were a few trolls around who would take whatever you posted and twist it around, until eventually it just didn't seem worth it.... It's been a while though since then so hopefully it got ironed out! I have been on the odd once or twice to ask

something or when a friend has advised someone was asking about cakes, but other than that it's been quiet  How are you?" (28/11/2014).

Second, focusing on core members, in the following illustration member DT (core member registered since 29/08/2013 with total posts of 2680), who was previously very active was found to remain dormant for more than 2 months (from 10/09/2015 to 26/11/2015). Further analysis of her profile indicates that she has repeatedly expressed her demotivation. However, the fact that she resumed her activity once an interesting/controversial newbie appeared (TS), proves that she has been regularly lurking while hoping to find an interesting thread (i.e. a heated debate) to login in and participate by posting[81], hence switch back to active engagement as expressed in the following comment: "*Fair play to you TS - several weeks since I saw anything I could be bothered to log in for!!*" (posted by DT on 25/11/ 2015).

Relational Connections

Due to the passive nature of engagement in the state of dormancy, the only role adopted by members in this state is that of a lurker. According to Hartmann et al. (2015, p.3), lurkers represent "*passive social roles in contrast with more productive social roles*". The impact of the negative A2A interactions mode, due to its intensity and/or repetitiveness, has removed any moral obligations towards other members and led to disconnect from the community, and hence the member is content to benefit from the community without contributing to its reservoir of resources. Therefore, the member does no longer follow the norm of reciprocity, refrains from *sharing*, and is contend to free ride as a lurker (Smith & Kollock 1999), and hence benefits from the use of public goods (i.e. the community's reservoir of information) without contributing to its creation and development (Ostrom 2000).

Similar viewpoint was communicated to the researcher by some ladies during the EW meetups. They explained that while they "*love*" attending the coffee mornings, they are "*not very fond*" of the forum due to the aggressive attitude of some posters and that they prefer interacting with the ladies at the coffee mornings since they are "*much nicer*" (Researcher field notes:

[81] A member has to login in order to post on any of the EW forums, hence logging in is a prerequisite for active engagement.

27/01/2016). However, they still benefit from the site via lurking as expressed in the following quote by Anna: "*I am a practical person, I won't let some aggression stops me from benefiting, and EW website is the best source of information for everything and anything about Dubai. I check the site regularly, but I don't post anymore*" (Researcher field notes: 03/02/2016). Anna further explained that she tried posting before but did not "*like much*" the replies she received, and that she does not like the overall "*vibe*" of the forum and feels that it is "*full of negative energy*" as many posters get "*nasty*" replies, hence she thinks "*it is much safer to lurk than post*". The researcher also met another lady (Beth) who was personally offended on the forum and decided to never post again. However, she still regularly checks the website (i.e. lurking) as she considers it "*the #1 source of information in town*", and while her pervious negative experience is stopping her from posting (active engagement), she still benefits from the forum via lurking (passive engagement) (Researcher field notes: 10/03/2016).

6.4.5.4. Summary of the State

Table 6.6: Summary of the State of Dormancy

Dispositions	Temporal Connections	Relational Connections
• Naturally occurring dormancy takes place when a member who has been actively engaged becomes temporarily inactive due to personal reasons such as lack of time (e.g., being busy at work or during family vacations) or circumstances beyond the member's control (e.g., sick child). • It is a positive disposition to remain engaged that makes members opt for induced dormancy rather than disengagement, where they can still benefit from the community via lurking.	• Induced dormancy is related to a member's temporal connections, where a member is too demotivated by negative past connections to remain actively engaged, and hence shifts to passive lurking. • In this state, the demotivation is higher than in the reductive engagement state, hence leading to further withdrawal from the community • It is easier for newbies to become demotivated, and hence opt for dormancy, than for long-term members (previously fully or functionally engaged), hence further highlighting that a member's reaction towards negative experiences is related to the past connections.	• Due to the passive nature of engagement in the state of dormancy, the only role members adopt is that of a lurker. • The impact of prior negative experiences has removed any moral obligations towards other members and led to disconnection from the community, and hence the member is content to benefit from the community without contributing to its reservoir of resources (i.e. free ride as a lurker).

6.4.6. The State of Disengagement

6.4.6.1. An Overview

Disengagement refers to the termination/conclusion of a member's engagement process with the community. In contrast to the temporarily inactivity experienced in a state of dormancy, the state of disengagement is more permanent (Brodie et al. 2013). Observations reveal that, similar to dormancy, disengagement can be naturally occurring or induced. The former concerns the actors' dispositions, while the latter is related to their connections as discussed below in sections 6.4.6.2. and 6.4.6.3. respectively.

6.4.6.2. Dispositions

It is a member's lack of disposition to remain part of the community that drives naturally occurring disengagement. It refers to a normal conclusion of the process when the need for engagement ceases to exist, the connections and the overall community experience as such are still perceived as positive.

Observations reveal that members exhibiting a naturally occurring disengagement were primarily functionally engaged, with limited social connections with the community. Hence, they would disengage once they relocate to a different country, since the need for information would cease to exist. This bears similarity to Bowden et al.'s (2015) finding that customers within functional/utilitarian services have higher inclination towards disengagement. The following illustration is typical in this regard, where a functional member initiates a thread explaining that she is relocating soon, and asks questions regarding the move, then disengage thereafter. The following is the post where she first mentioned the relocation while seeking advice regarding the move:

> "HF: Hello ladies. We'll be moving to Doha in February from Dubai because of hubby's job. I don't know anyone in Doha. Which areas are family friendly? We are living in a great community in Dubai […] so we're looking for similar family friendly neighbourhood with good schools nearby. Suggestions from expats in Doha will be really helpful for us  " (31/10/2014).

She then mentioned in a later post that she will be moving in January 2015. Follow-up observations of her profile indicate that her last post on the forum was prior to the relocation date, hence suggesting disengagement thereafter (for more illustrations see Appendix 16). Admittedly, it was rather tricky to differentiate between dormancy and disengagement via observations, since both involve no posting. However, drawing on Brodie et al.'s (2013) differentiation between dormancy and disengagement, the former being more transitory than the latter, prolonged inactivity on the forum (indicated by no posting) was assumed to be an indication of disengagement as in the previous example. This is coupled with the fact that the need for engagement (information related to expat life in Dubai as the OP was a functionally engaged member) ceased to exist (due to relocation to different country).

The following is perhaps a more evident example where the OP explains that she has been away from Dubai for 5 years and that she had been using the forum prior to leaving. However, due to extended inactivity (disengagement when she left Dubai) her account was closed and she had to create a new one when she moved back to Dubai as expressed in this post: "*I am a British lady and I have recently moved back to Dubai (I have been away almost 5 years so I lost my old EW account)*" (posted by WD on 10/11/2015). More demonstration is provided by another functional member's post who also associates the community engagement with living in Dubai, hence got re-engaged only when she returned to Dubai: "*Hello again! I didn't post for 3 years as we left the country. It is lovely now we are back to see so many old names on here*" (posted by TR on 06/12/2014).

In contrast, core members maintain their engagement even after relocating, since the prime reason for engaging with the community is the social support and the companionship it creates (see section 6.4.1.2.) rather than the need for information. The following post is illustrative, where a core member still *welcomes* a newbie and answers her inquiries while she no longer lives in Dubai. Further analysis of LT's profile reveals that she has been registered since 05/02/2011, has left Dubai in 2015, yet is still engaged to date with total posts of 3321.

> "LT: Welcome to the UAE. I am no longer in Dubai, but I can recommend going to one of the Expatwoman Coffee Mornings to meet people […]" (06/09/2015).

More illustrations are provided in the following excerpt involving two core members (GE and LV) who have both relocated. Analysis of their respective profiles shows that the former is an EW member since 19/08/2012, has left Dubai in 2015, and is still actively engaged with a total of 4581 posts to date, whereas the latter is a member since 21/11/2006, has left Dubai in 2009, and has also remained actively engaged with a total of 7137 posts to date (for more illustrations see Appendix 16):

> "C3: Hi. Seriously contemplating retiring to Cyprus. Would be grateful for any tips […]
>
> GE: If LV is around she can help as I'm sure she lives in the South. Our place is in the North and it's not everyone's cup of tea
>
> LV: GE is right, the North and South are very different, though both lovely! […] We've been here for six years, and we love it and wouldn't live anywhere else! […]" (19/06/2015).

In the previous illustration, the two core members who have both relocated are answering inquiries of the OP (*sharing* practice), whereas in the following excerpt they are socialising (*chatting* practice):

> "GE: Happy New Year LV. What's the weather like in your part of Cyprus? […]
>
> LV: It snowed with us in Anogyra in Jan 1st but it didn't lie, the people across the lane had their solar panels freeze and burst (we had kept a tap dripping so were OK) […] And a very Happy New Year to you, GE!" (03/01/2016).

Maintaining the engagement after relocation parallels Schau et al.'s (2009) observation regarding long-term community members remaining in a brand community after disposing of the focal brand due to the developed friendships with other members. However, the EW findings further specify the type of long-term members who would remain part of the community because of the companionship, namely the core members. Moreover, the observed difference between functional members and core members regarding disengagement after relocation further demonstrates Bowden et al.'s (2015) view that prior engagement modes affect a member's propensity to disengage. It is also in agreement with prior research concerning commitment in online communities being driven by social connections (Mathwick

et al. 2008) and the socio-emotional support[82] among members (Chan & Li 2010). Having reviewed the naturally occurring disengagement by focusing on members' dispositions, induced disengagement is discussed next by considering the members' connections.

6.4.6.3. Connections

Temporal Connections

In contrast to the naturally occurring disengagement, disengagement can be induced via extensive negative connections (past and present) that rendered the possibility of establishing future connections, and hence the continuity of engagement with this community, impossible. Therefore, induced disengagement is the case when a member terminates the engagement with a community even though it is still deemed needed and valuable by that member (i.e. positive disposition to remain engaged). It is a consequence of negative engagement iterations, either due to intensity or frequency. The former causes an abrupt termination, whereas the latter results in a more gradual withdrawal from the community were members with time, subject to repeated no interaction or negative A2A interactions modes, move from the state of reductive engagement and/or dormancy to disengagement. Such gradual withdrawal parallels Åkerlund' s (2005) "altitude drop" type of fading service relationship where the decline in the relationship is rather smooth.

Observations further suggest that whether the termination is abrupt or gradual depends in turn on a member's past connections. An abrupt termination is typically experienced by newbies who are highly vulnerable and have no reservoir of past connections that can allow them to disregard negative incidents, and hence tend to magnify the impact of negative responses. To illustrate, the following excerpt is from a thread initiated by a newbie who is complaining about the negative responses she received (negative A2A interactions), and instead of helping her to recover her engagement, members ganged up on her and bombarded her with more sarcastic and aggressive comments (incongruent *governing*) (for more illustrations see Appendix 16). It is evident from the OP initial posts that she had positive disposition to remain engaged since she still perceived the community as beneficial and "*very helpful*". However, by the end of the

[82] Chan & Li (2010) use the term socio-emotional support. Instead, the term social support is used in this thesis to refer to both types of support, since drawing on Rosenbaum (2006), (2008), Rosenbaum & Massiah (2007), and Yao et al. (2015), the emotional support is considered part of the social support.

excerpt, the present connections became too negative that she found herself forced to disengage. To follow up on this case, the profile of the OP (K8) was reviewed. She joined the forum on 02/07/2014, had in total 46 posts (including the posts on this thread), and her last post to date is in fact the last post in this excerpt (dated 20/08/2014):

> "K8: Does anyone agree with me that this forum is supposed to be used for friendly advice? I'd say 80% of my posts on here have had negative/rather insulting comments back when all I have asked friendly casual questions! I believe if people don't have nice things to say /write then not to reply!
> GU: Sorry if you got your feelers hurt but can we please stop trying to make people write only light and happiness? People write what they think - that's what makes a forum interesting.
> K8: Sorry I thought it was for advice etc on living in Dubai as an expat. Didn't realise it was an opinion forum for people to attack others as entertainment.
> LC: Attacking others? Really what utter nonsense […]
> K8: LC I'm pretty speechless […] Goodness me! I'm not upset just think it could be a bit more positive thats all, have a nice week everyone
> IZ: Back to OP, the only reason 99% of old time users pop in for the hope of something juicy […] No one pops in to give you love and kisses […]
> K8: Oh, dear!! I will stick to the rea life human friends!! May you all find peace and love!!!!" (20/08/2014).

In contrast, disengagement of long-term members was found to follow a more gradual path (following a state of reductive engagement and/or dormancy), being mostly unaffected by the intensity of negative interactions. Instead, they are demotivated through the repetitiveness of negative experiences, the causes of which vary depending on whether the long-term member was previously fully engaged (core members) or functionally engaged (functional members). The disengagement of both groups is further elaborated below.

First, for long-term functional members, negative iterations are experienced as a result of aggressive responses from some members (i.e. incongruent *sharing* in the form of flaming). However, they tend to ignore such negative responses, and hence their disengagement is mostly naturally occurring. However, some cases of induced disengagement were also observed. In such cases, the negative experiences were too significant to ignore, and hence their impact outweighs the benefits gained from the community (information resources). To illustrate, the case of the demotivated functional member (WK) who previously opted for dormancy (see section 6.4.5.3.) was followed up. As previously presented, she attempted to re-engage after a period of induced dormancy (from 01/11/2013 to 28/11/2014) in the hope that the forum has become more 'tamed'. However, her subsequent posts indicate that her attempt has failed as

the last time she posted was on 29/11/2014. This example further illustrates the gradual nature of the disengagement of long-term members and the effect of past connections on decreasing the chance of experiencing an abrupt termination.

Second, to shed light on the disengagement of core members, the following excerpt is presented where some core members discuss the causes of demotivation and mention the disengagement of some fellow core members:

> "IN: What happened? Where did everyone go? Even three months ago it was more vibrant and dynamic. Where is all the drama, the debate or at least some useful info?
>
> BL: This post will self-destruct soon! I think most people have moved over to FB.
>
> B7: A lot of threads/posts get deleted (along with useful information). Also bans. That put many off.
>
> S2: Yup a lot of regulars have left (KI & DB) and even LC stopped posting. Posts got deleted. Too many spammers. I miss the good ol' days  (watch this thread/post get deleted)
>
> FD: Too many spammers, heavy handed moderating.
>
> AR: I have seen a number of informed women leave EW and the board is relatively stagnant. Instead of discussion around a variety of topics, the board is now heavily populated with the usual "Please help me/my husband find a job" postings. Sigh...." (05/11/2015).

Further analysis of the profiles of members involved in the previous excerpt suggests that core members would disengage only when extremely demotivated, as most of the posters who expressed demotivation still kept their engagement with the community to date. However, there is a noticeable reduction in the rate of posting of some, hence reflecting a state of reductive engagement or even dormancy in some cases, rather than disengagement. This further supports Chan & Li's (2010) view that the socio-emotional resources, which defines the experience of core members, increase commitment to the online community, and hence managers need to focus on fostering such socio-emotional support among members. As for the disengaged members who were mentioned in the excerpt, their profiles were also reviewed. First, KI joined EW on 24/06/2009 and has in total 3000 posts, the last of which was posted on 02/09/2014, and she has been repeatedly expressing her demotivation due to excessive censorship (*incongruent* governing) prior to becoming disengaged. Second, LC's registration date is 09/05/2011 and has total posts of 3353, the last of which was posted on 09/07/2015. Third, DB's profile was inaccessible, hence no information was available. However, searching the forum by her user name, it seems that she has been highly active until 2013. The following is

another excerpt where the causes of core members' demotivation are also discussed, and how it led some fellow members to disengage:

> "GB: So I'm back in town and the board is empty!! So what happened and where is everybody? 😭
> B7: I feel heavy handed mods have been the main factor that this forum has slowed down. Many I know no longer post due to deletion
> AR: Ditto on B7's comment – I'm friends with 3 ladies (who had all been on EW for over 3 years) who no longer use EW because of the number of posts / threads which were being deleted when any kind of debate got remotely controversial / lively. You find the 'old timers'[83] have so much knowledge / experience to share and hence their loss is a shame […]
> CP: No more fun, no banter, no arguments, no discussion […] EW has become that nightclub on the wrong end of town that plays bad music. It all went wrong when SP got banned! She was a veteran!" (22/01/2016).

Reviewing the profiles of the members participating in the above excerpt further suggests that when demotivated, core members would mostly opt for a state of reductive engagement or dormancy rather than disengagement, as they are all still active to date, however a noticeable reduction in the rate of posting (indicating a state of reductive engagement) and some periods of inactivity (i.e. dormancy) were also observed. As for the member who got banned as mentioned in the excerpt (SP); she has been registered since 15/02/2007 with a total of 21078 posts, which is the largest observed number of posts per one member. Reviewing some of her previous posts, it is rather evident that her engagement was highly beneficial for the community, this proves the admin misuse of the *governing* practice, and further highlights the negative impact of such incongruent *governing* not only on the engagement of core members but also on the community as a whole.

Relational Connections

Since members are no more engaged in this state, and the engagement process has come to an end, there are no roles involved. However, it is worth noting that some members (especially newbies whose disengaged is induced) may reach this state due to the failure of some focal members in their roles as moderators (see section 6.4.3.3.).

[83] The 'old timers' is another term that is used in the EW forum to refer core members

6.4.6.4. Summary of the State

Table 6.7: Summary of the State of Disengagement

Dispositions	Temporal Connections	Relational Connections
• Naturally occurring disengagement: driven by a member's lack of disposition to remain part of the community. • Naturally occurring disengagement is primarily exhibited by functional members, who have limited social connections with the community, hence the need for engagement ceases to exist after relocation (i.e. functional members tend to associate their engagement with living in Dubai). • In contrast, core members maintain their engagement even after relocating, since they engage with the community primarily the social support and the companionship it creates.	• Induced disengagement: when a member terminates her engagement with the community even though it is still deemed needed and valuable by that member. • Induced disengagement is caused by extensive negative iterations due to intensity (causing abrupt termination) or frequency (causing more gradual withdrawal). • whether the termination is abrupt or gradual depends on the member's past connections. • An abrupt termination is typically experienced by newbies who have no reservoir of past connections • disengagement of long-term members was found to follow a more gradual path.	• There are no roles involved, since the engagement process has come to an end.

6.5. Chapter Summary

This chapter examines the dynamics of the AE process in the EW community by identifying the various engagement states and any change in engagement state over time, depending on actors' connections and dispositions which need to be aligned for engagement to take place (Chandler & Lusch 2015).

The chapter starts by explaining how the A2A interactions modes are used as observable indicators that can reflect the alignment of connections and dispositions, where alignments are associated with positive A2A. All three possible A2A interactions modes were discussed: positive, negative, and no interaction. The latter refers to the case when a member's post does not get any reply. As for the positive and negative modes, the analysis draws on Echeverri & Skålén's (2011) conceptualisation of congruent (matches) and incongruent (mismatches) elements of practices to understand when each takes place. The findings suggest that when the

interacting members have congruent elements of practices, then positive A2A interactions take place. However, when such elements of practices are incongruent, negative interactions occur.

The chapter then proceeds with examining the dynamics of the AE process in the community under study. The empirical results and the theoretical orientation enabled the outlining of a practice-based framework that explains such process. The model shows that the initiation of the AE process is caused by a trigger, which is mostly the need for information or advice. The process is iterative in nature rather than following an orderly sequential progression over time and involves an interplay of relevant practices. The interplay can involve practices within the same thematic category (intra-thematic) where such practices work together towards their thematic function or goal. The interplay can also be between different categories (inter-thematic), where practices work together across the three themes, hence practices are integrated and engagement deepens (Schau et al. 2009). Therefore, practices were found to be combined in complex ways affecting engagement progression.

Six engagement states were then identified and explained in terms of the actors' dispositions and connections (temporal and relational). First, the state of **full engagement** is the result of repeated positive iterations (positive A2A interactions mode) and is characterised by the deepest (highest) engagement level. It involves an inter-thematic interplay of a range of practices from all three thematic categories (cognitive, emotional, and social). It is mostly adopted by core members, who are long-term fully engaged members that value the community beyond its informational resources and also see it as a source of social support, which involves emotional support and companionship.

Second, **functional engagement** is the most commonly adopted state where members engage with the community to obtain functional value (information resources). It involves mostly an intra-thematic interplay of cognitive practices (*learning* and *sharing*), and hence engagement in this state is rather utilitarian in nature. It is characterised by a fluctuating engagement level due the nature of engagement in this state being primarily functional/utilitarian, hence members tend to engage when they need information/advice (via *learning)* and reciprocate by *sharing* when they can. Interestingly, many members may remain in this state for the entirety of their engagement process (i.e. do not further opt for full engagement with time), those are referred to as functional members.

Third, the state of **engagement recovery** is an attempt to reconcile previous incongruence(s), driven by a member's positive disposition to remain engaged. It typically involves only cognitive engagement practices with an inclination towards *learning* rather than *sharing*. It is a critical state where members are vulnerable and are waiting for some sort of justice. Hence, moderating efforts are needed from focal members to help those recovering members regain their engagement via careful *governing*.

Fourth, the state of **reductive engagement** is a result of extreme demotivation caused by significant negative experiences. It is characterised by a decreasing engagement level, yet the member still being disposed to remain engaged with the community, albeit with less motivation to contribute and a regression in the adopted practices. It can be considered the start of a gradual withdrawal from the community.

Fifth, the state of **dormancy** is a temporary state of inactivity or passive engagement (i.e. lurking). It can be naturally occurring or induced. The former occurs when a member who has been actively engaged becomes temporarily inactive due to personal reasons such as lack of time. The latter takes place when a member is too demotivated by past negative experiences to remain actively engaged, and hence shifts to lurking. In this case, the demotivation is higher than in the state of reductive engagement, yet there is still a positive disposition to remain passively engaged rather than getting disengaged.

Sixth, the state of **disengagement** refers to the termination/conclusion of a member's engagement process, and it can also be naturally occurring or induced. The former is driven by a member's lack of disposition to remain part of the community and refers to a normal conclusion of the process when the need for engagement ceases to exist. In contrast, the latter is the case when a member terminates engagement despite positive disposition to remain engaged. It is caused by extensive negative experiences that rendered the continuity of engagement with this community impossible.

Chapter 7

Discussion and Conclusions

7. Discussion and Conclusions

7.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to draw the conclusions of this research based on the empirical findings. It starts by providing an overall summary of the thesis (section 7.2.), this is followed by presenting the theoretical contributions (section 7.3.), and the managerial implications (section 7.4.). Finally, the limitations of the study are highlighted along with suggestions for future research (section 7.5.).

7.2. Thesis Summary

This thesis aimed to achieve two objectives. First, **to advance the conceptualisation of AE by adopting a practice-based approach**. Second, **to demystify the dynamics of the AE process and the effects of A2A interactions on such a process**.

It starts with an overview of relevant literature. The evolution of engagement conceptualisations was reviewed, followed by presenting the AE construct adopted in this research to study many-to-many engagement from a network perspective. An overview of the S-D logic was also provided, being the foundational metatheory underlying the AE theorising, and then practice theory was proposed as a complementary lens that can further advance the AE research and its conceptualisation. Based on the literature review, the following research questions were formulated to attempt to fill the identified gaps in prior engagement research:

1. What are the AE practices in the online community under study?
2. What are the various engagement states identified in the online community under study? What are the effects of the A2A interactions on such states?

This was followed by discussing methodological considerations. First, social constructivism, which is the paradigm underpinning this thesis, was presented. Next, the research design and

the adopted approach for the execution of the empirical research were discussed in terms of; the selected methodology (netnography), the research setting (the online community of ExpatWoman.com/Dubai), the chosen methods for data collection (online ongoing non-participant and offline participant observations), and the methods used for data analysis (inductive thematic analysis). This was followed by a discussion of the adopted measures to ensure quality and rigour.

Focusing on the analysis, it was composed of two phases, each corresponding to one research question. Addressing the first research question, the analysis aimed at identifying a complete array of all possible engagement practices undergone by all members including the less active members, and not just those observed in the most active members, who are typically the minority of any online community (De Valck et al. 2009). Following several iterations of coding, nine engagement practices were identified, which were subsequently organised into three thematic categories: 1) cognitive engagement practices, 2) emotional engagement practices, and 3) social engagement practices. These map onto the engagement dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and social. As for the behavioural dimension of AE, this study draws on Kozinets (2002) who regards the mere act of posting in itself a social action, thus resembling a behavioural practice. Hence, all identified practices reflect, through the act of posting, the behavioural dimension of engagement.

Moving to the second research question, six specific engagement states were identified in terms of the actors' dispositions and connections. This was achieved by drawing on practices of individual actors and the response they receive from one or more members of the community (A2A interactions) as observable indicators that can reflect the alignment of connections and dispositions, where alignments are associated with positive A2A interactions, reflecting positive (service) relationships. To capture a more comprehensive picture of all possibilities of A2A interactions, three modes were considered: positive, no interaction, and negative. The positive and negative A2A interactions modes were found to be, in turn, dependent on the configuration of the elements of practices carried out by the interacting actors, where congruent element of practices leads to a positive mode, and incongruent element of practices results in a negative mode. Each state was discussed in terms of the actor's dispositions and connections, and any change in engagement state over time.

Having presented a summary of the previous chapters, this final chapter proceeds by discussing the theoretical contributions of this study based on the empirical findings.

7.3. Theoretical Contributions

7.3.1. Advancing the AE Construct

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes by enriching and advancing our understanding of the AE construct within the context of online communities and by focusing on two categories of actors, namely an online community's members and management (as presented by the admin) in four ways. First, it advances the AE conceptualisation by adopting a practice-based approach, hence supplementing its S-D logic-based foundational perspective with practice theory and demonstrates that the latter can provide a useful lens for empirically exploring AE by identifying nine specific engagement practices, hence bringing AE closer to managerial deployment. Second, it enhances the AE dimensionality by providing empirical support for the need to include a fourth (social) dimension. Third, by using longitudinal data this study is one of the first to empirically explore the dynamics of the AE process in an online community and indicates how iterations of those practices over time, result in six possible engagement states, subject to the A2A interactions modes, and depending on a member's connections and dispositions. Fourth, unlike most of engagement studies to date, this research considers not only positive relationships but also negative experiences resulting from no and/or negative A2A interactions modes, and further explores the under-researched concept of disengagement by differentiating between naturally occurring and induced disengagement. Having summarised the four points, each is further elaborated below.

7.3.1.1. Advancing the AE Conceptualisation by Adopting a Practice-based Approach

To date, it is Brodie et al.' s (2011a) engagement conceptualisation, which is based on an S-D logic perspective, that has been widely adopted in recent literature. There has been recommendations by several scholars (e.g., Calder et al. 2016; Hollebeek et al. 2016b; Leckie et al. 2016) to adopt complementary theoretical perspectives for the further development of AE

conceptualisation, especially practice theory (Brodie et al. 2011a; Hollebeek et al. 2016a). However, the application of the latter to the study of AE in the context of online communities is limited. Schau et al. (2009) identified only four engagement practices, which were further employed by Habibi et al. (2016) to explore brand communities in the context of social media (Facebook), and were recently refined by Hollebeek et al. (2017) in the context of a luxury online brand community.

However, despite the initial insights these studies provide regarding AE practices in online communities, they suffer from limitations in terms of not considering all of the AE dimensions and in focusing primarily on the most engaged members who are typically the minority of any online community (De Valck et al. 2009). In contrast, this research presents a more comprehensive investigation and identifies a full set of all possible AE practices undergone by different members including the less active ones. Furthermore, it identifies various engagement states and the corresponding engagement practices. Moreover, Warde (2005) explains that a practice-based approach aims not only at identifying the range of available practices and the prevalent ones, but also the typical combinations, and the corresponding groups of individuals who will engage with such combinations. Therefore, the adopted practice-based approach enabled this study to represent an initial attempt regarding members' profiling, as will be further discussed in section 7.4.4.

7.3.1.2. Using Longitudinal Data

Adoption of a longitudinal approach has been recommended by several scholars in order to better explore the AE dynamics (e.g., Bowden et al. 2015; Hollebeek et al. 2016a; Leckie & 2016; Maslowska et al. 2016), yet extant engagement research is mostly cross-sectional (Hollebeek et al. 2014; Li et al. 2017). Therefore, by using longitudinal data this thesis attempts to fill this gap, and hence serves as a starting point to demystify the dynamics of AE. Moreover, it suggests the A2A interactions modes as an observable indicator that can reflect the alignment of connections and dispositions, being a prerequisite for engagement, whereby a positive A2A interactions mode is associated with such an alignment.

Furthermore, the identified six engagement states highlight the effect of actors' connections and dispositions on the progression of AE. Hence, it provides the first empirical evidence within an online community context of the engagement conceptualisation proposed by Chandler & Lusch (2015) as comprising of two fundamental attributes: connections and dispositions. Specifically, the longitudinal data permitted the further exploration of the temporal aspect of connections, highlighting the progression of engagement over time. The study demonstrates that newbies, trigged by a need (which is typically information or advice), would start to form connections with fellow members as they undergo cognitive engagement practices to fulfil such needs. Subject to positive interactions, the engagement level increases, and a member's connections further develop, yet it is an actor's disposition that influences how to draw on such connections. Some members who have a more social disposition were found to further opt for a state of full engagement through progressive adoption of more practices from all themes, and hence become core members. This agrees with Mathwick et al.' s (2008) argument that newbies become core members over time by acquiring the needed knowledge, and hence move to full participation. However, the findings further show that not all newbies would become core members. Instead, some members who have a functional disposition (functional members) may limit their engagement to the functional state for the entirety of their engagement process, even with ongoing positive iterations.

Finally, the analysis of longitudinal data enabled this study to be one of the first to empirically investigate the fluctuating nature of AE as portrayed in literature (e.g., Brodie et al. 2011a; Hollebeek et al. 2014; 2016a). The findings show that the engagement level of some members can be subjected to reduction in some cases due to negative experiences. Nevertheless, an increase in the engagement level can still follow once previous demotivation, caused by past negative experiences, is restored via engagement recovery. This is especially relevant to newbies since they are the group of members which needs recovery efforts the most in order to make them regain their engagement and to move back to the state of functional engagement, where the engagement level would rise again.

On the other hand, long term members (both functional and core) were found to be more immune to such fluctuations which are caused by negative experiences, since their significant reservoir of past connections permits them to ignore such negative instance. Nevertheless, their engagement level can still fluctuate as a result of naturally occurring dormancy, where they become inactive due to external factors (being busy at work or during family vacations), hence

further highlighting the significance of time as valuable resource and that members with more free time are more likely to become more engaged (Etgar 2008). Another noted source of fluctuation is related to the members' dispositions, since functional members were found to exhibit a lack of regularity in terms of posting, reflecting a fluctuating engagement. This can be attributed to the functional disposition of those members who typically tend to engage when information or advice is needed via *learning*, and then reciprocate by *sharing* when possible.

7.3.1.3. Exploring Negative Experiences and Disengagement

The prime focus of extant engagement research is positive service relationships. Despite the recently provided initial insights (e.g. Bowden et al. 2017, Juric et al. 2016; Maslowska et al. 2016), negative experiences and its impact on AE remain under-explored (Li et al. 2017). To contribute in this regard, this thesis aims at capturing a comprehensive view of all possible A2A interactions modes and the resulting AE with all its nuances in the community under study. Furthermore, negative experiences were found to result not only from a negative A2A interactions mode but also from no interaction, due to the disappointment experienced when one' post does not get any reply.

Moreover, the findings highlight the significance of connections, both temporal and relational, in understanding the progression of a member's engagement following negative experiences. The temporal connections help explaining the different reactions to such negative iterations; where the negative impact is much stronger for newbies compared to long-term members due to the limited past connections of the former, and it is such connections that a member draws on facing negative experiences. In contrast, long-term members are generally more tolerant to negative interactions, and hence their engagement levels remain relatively intact, and would only decrease in cases of extreme demotivation. However, the causes of such demotivation would depend in turn on the member's disposition; whether the long-term member is a core member (social disposition) or a functional member (functional disposition). The latter is demotivated due to flaming (i.e. aggressive/hostile attitudes) (incongruent *sharing*). Whereas the former is demotivated by the violation of the norm of trust via spamming (another form of incongruent *sharing*), and by extreme censorship (incongruent *governing*) due to its negative impact on the entertainment aspect of the forum, since it restrains the development of heated

debates. As for the relational connections, it concerns conflict management where some focal actors need to adopt the role of the moderator as will further discussed in section 7.4.5.

Finally, this thesis is the first to differentiate between a naturally occurring and induced disengagement. The former refers to a normal conclusion of the process when the need for engagement ceases to exist, whereas the latter is the case of induced termination (whether abrupt or gradual) resulting from extensive negative experiences and extreme demotivation that rendered the continuity of engagement with this community impossible.

7.3.1.4. Advancing the AE Dimensionality

This study advances the AE dimensionality by providing empirical support for the need to include a fourth (social) dimension in the context of online communities. Such social dimension has significant managerial implications (see section 7.4.). As Dessart et al. (2016) explain, a problem in the dimensionality of the AE construct affects negatively not only its conceptualisation but also its operationalisation. Therefore, without the social dimension, the understanding, and hence the empirical treatment of AE in online communities remains partial.

7.3.2. More Theoretical Contributions to AE Research

In addition to the previously mentioned theoretical implications, by investigating a non-brand related community, this thesis further contributes to AE literature by responding to recent research calls for exploring AE outside the more established B2C setting (Hollebeek et al. 2016a). Moreover, by focusing on a community of interest, the study shed light on a substantial proportion of online communities that has not been explored in engagement research to date, despite their increasing popularity and significance (Hartmann et al. 2015; Weijo et al. 2014).

Therefore, this thesis advances initial attempts to explore the AE practices in online brand communities (e.g., Hollebeek et al. 2017) by further exploring a non-brand community. Moreover, it identifies the activities that members perform in relation to each of those practices. In addition, six specific engagement states are identified and the combinations of practices carried out in each of the these states. An understanding of such combinations is highly useful for community managers as highlighted by Hollebeek et al. (2017).

7.3.3. Contributing to the Online Community Literature

In addition to advancing AE within the context of online communities, this thesis contributes to the wider online community research where a significant body of literature has been developed over the years, yet major gaps still exist (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015). In an attempt to further advance this field of research, the *Journal of Psychology & Marketing* dedicated in 2015 a special issue to encourage investigation of less explored aspects of online communities. They received 49 submissions (of which 8 papers were published), hence indicating that "*many research questions remain to be answered in relation to online consumption communities*"(Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015, p. 239). Two of the three research priorities[85] identified in this special issue are further explored in this thesis: 1) governance and conflict management (see section 7.4.5.) and 2) the drivers of community success (see section 7.4.1.).

Furthermore, research to date mostly focuses on what motivates members to participate/engage in online communities, and on the antecedents and consequences of such participation/engagement (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015) (see Appendix 17 for an overview). Less attention has been directed to explore the interactions among members and the activities they carry out (De Valck et al. 2009). Initial attempts have been made in this regard (e.g., Brodie et al. 2013; Hollebeek et al. 2017; Schau et al. 2009), yet those studies focus on the most active members who are typically the minority of any online community(De Valck et al. 2009). Therefore, this thesis contributes in this regard by considering activities and practices of all members including the less active members. Most importantly, the insights gained from this research can help practitioners make better use of the online AE platforms and to develop more successful communities, hence responding to the second research priority of the special issue as indicated above and further discussed next.

[85] The third key research priority is: "*implications of community membership for individual and societal well-being*" (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015, p.235).

7.4. Managerial Implications

In addition to the above theoretical contributions, this thesis also provides several managerial implications that are relevant for the survival and growth of online communities as well as for starting one. Having a successful online community is highly challenging and many communities are facing failure (Hollebeek et al. 2017; Worthen 2008). Such common failure led the *Journal of Marketing & Psychology* to place the issue of "*drivers of community success under different ownership*" on top of the research priorities of their special issue in 2015 dedicated to advancing the understanding of online communities (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015, p.236). Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz (2015) further highlight the importance to consider different ownerships and not to be limited to firm-hosted communities (i.e. brand communities) due to the rising interest in other types of communities (e.g., communities of interest) that can be organised by consumers or by a third party (Hartmann et al. 2015).

Therefore, this research aims at suggesting some tactics to better manage the engagement platforms and the AE process in an online community context. Furthermore, by advancing the construct conceptualisation to include a social dimension (see section 7.3.1.4.), online community managers are provided with a more comprehensive understanding of AE that can better guide the development of organisational strategies and tactics to fully capitalise on this highly promising concept. The managerial implications of this thesis are further elaborated below.

7.4.1. A Practice-Based Success Recipe

Before discussing specific managerial implications arising from this research, it is worth highlighting that most of identified key practical contributions were achieved by adopting a practice-based approach, which focuses on activities and processes (Vargo & Lusch 2016), making the AE construct more observable, hence more designable and manageable. Vargo & Lusch (2016, p.19) further elaborate that the "*institutional orientation*" of practice theory makes it highly useful in fulfilling the needs of managers and policy makers, as it enhances their decision making by allowing them to understand the shared norms and values of the resource-integrating actors.

The benefits of adopting a practice-based approach in marketing has been repeatedly highlighted as reflected by the special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Theory* in 2008, and the special issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Management* in 2011, both aiming at promoting the adoption of such an approach to marketing studies. The performance aspect of practices (Schatzki 1996) makes it highly useful to bridge the gap between theory and practice, hence can greatly increase the practical value and relevance of marketing theories to marketing practitioners (Araujo et al. 2008; Mason et al. 2015). In addition, a practice perspective makes actions repeatable and reproducible by offering some sort of know-how (Warde 2005), thus an identified set of successful engagement practices can be transferred to other contexts. Therefore, this study aims at providing managers of online communities with a recipe for success by combining the practice-based approach with an advanced and more comprehensive understanding of AE and its dimensionality, as explained below.

7.4.1.1. Fostering a Wide Array of Various Practices

First, the findings suggest that online community management needs to foster a wide array of practices. As Vargo & Akaka (2012) explain, service systems do not pre-exist, they are dynamic and are constantly "*being formed and reformed through the enactment of practices*" (p.211), hence by focusing on practices managers should be able to develop and sustain a successful online community, or in fact any service system. As Schau et al. (2009, p.41) note, "*more practices lead to a stronger brand community, marketers should strive to encourage greater diversity in practices*". The study further demonstrates that a strong online community should promote a wide range of engagement practices from all thematic categories to allow for the progression and deepening of AE over time. It specifically highlights the importance for information communities to also foster social engagement practices which permit the formation of social bonds/ties between members that were proven to create more lasting engagement than that driven by cognitive needs.

Therefore, practices from all thematic categories should be considered while designing an engagement platform, with special emphasis on the social practices even if the community is informational in nature (hence cognitive engagement being more relevant), hence offering members the opportunity to undergo practices from the various thematic aggregates. This would also ensure that members with different dispositions are motivated to get engaged,

especially that the community's most valuable source of information (core members) were found to have a more social disposition and are driven primarily by the social aspects of engagement. Hence, by overlooking the social engagement practices managers of informational communities would fail to keep a dedicated core that would have greatly added to the community information resources. The importance of core members has been previously suggested in literature (e.g., De Valck et al. 2009; Leigh et al. 2006; Mathwick et al. 2008), and it is further emphasised in terms of the significant roles they adopt, such as the role of mentor and adviser for newbies and less experienced members, and the role of moderator during conflicts (see section 7.4.5. below). The survival and prosperity of an online community depends on those core members (Balasubramanian & Mahajan 2001; Hollebeek et al. 2017).

7.4.4.2. Practices as an Indicator

Second, attention to practices should not be limited to the platform design stage, managers should continuously monitor members' practices as an indicator of the community strength and vitality. Hartmann et al. (2015, p.21) refer to the community vitality as: "*an assessment of the community's liveliness as a whole. An energetic and vital community is likely to be more attractive to its members*". A healthy community should to be able to always sustain a comprehensive array of practices (Schau et al. 2009) covering all thematic categories, and weakness[86] in any area should be immediately spotted. Since practices are emergent and self-perpetuating (Warde 2005), any identified deficiency can be rectified through the seeding of practices that refers to managers' efforts to stimulate and promote practices (Schau et al. 2009).

For instance, the social engagement practices were becoming less adopted in the forum under study; core members were less motivated to engage via *chatting*, and this in turn had significant negative impact on their engagement. Therefore, the community managers should identify this as a warning and set immediate strategies to encourage members to further engage in non-functional interactions and online socialisation, and to identify the causes for such regression in social engagement practices in order to fix the problem from its roots. In the forum under study, the causes were excessive censorship (incongruent *governing*) and the disabling of

86 A weak area refers to a category of engagement practices were few or no practices are being adopted by members. Therefore, if members are found to use the forum solely for information with no socialisation (even though it is primarily an information forum), it should be an indication that the community is facing trouble in terms of its health and vitality, which in turn makes it more vulnerable.

private messaging (PM), both can easily be solved, yet the community managers need to realise that there is a problem in the first place and to identify its causes before being able to solve it.

7.4.4.3. Accommodating Members in Terms of Practices

Third, managers need to accommodate their members' needs in terms of practices, whether by allowing for modifications in existing practices (its constituting activities and/or the relevant norms and procedures) or by establishing new ones. While the goal of all managers is the success of their online community, such success depends in turn on the engagement of members (Hollebeek et al. 2017; Worthen 2008). Furthermore, Seraj (2012) demonstrates that for members to engage with an online community, they need to consider such community as valuable and preferably irreplaceable.

However, the social value of the EW community has been declining, and hence a decrease in the engagement of many core members was also noticed. This can be mostly attributed to the rigidity of the EW management who failed to accommodate the persistent request of core members to enable the feature of PM, claiming that it is due to security concerns. However, some members are convinced that is merely a tactic from the community management, driven by economic benefits, to ensure high attendance at the weekly meetups. Many members considered the disabling of PM as a major drawback that negatively affect their online experience, hence hindering the progression of their engagement. It has even led some members to bypass the forum rules and to take even higher security risks by publicly posting their personal email addresses. Whereas some members found other forums and Facebook groups more accommodating for one-to-one interactions, and hence got disengaged from the EW community altogether, providing empirical evidence for Chandler & Lusch's (2015) argument regarding an actor's search for other value propositions once engagement is no longer possible or feasible, based on that actor's specific dispositions and connections.

Moreover, the findings indicate that the management worries regarding the possible negative impact of PM on the attendance of the meetups are unjustified for two reasons. First, most of the members who attend such meetups prefer face-to-face socialisation over online interactions. Second, those members prefer the EW organised meetups over smaller

independent gatherings to be able to meet a larger number of new members on ongoing basis[89]. Therefore, responding to the members' request by enabling PM would have greatly improved the online engagement via the strengthening of connections between members, while the meetups' attendance would have not been affected due the attendees' dispositions (preference for face-to-face socialisation).

7.4.2. Optimising the Online/Offline Mix

In addition to the practice-based managerial tactics recommended above, this research shed light on the substantial engagement opportunities that can be harvested once members are provided with the chance to interact, hence engage, not only online but also in real life (if possible). Today's consumers live "*multi-platform lives*" (Arthur 2013, March 12) with one foot online and the other offline (Kozinets 2010; 2015; Weijo et al. 2014). Therefore, engagement strategies should optimise this online/offline mix as suggested in business practice literature (e.g., Greenberg 2015; LaMothe 2011); where successful management of AE depends on the efficient use of both environments and the ability to see opportunities where they can complement each other (Sashi 2012).

The community under study did not limit its realm of engagement to the online forum and went offline by organising regular meetups to allow members to further undergo and develop their social engagement practices, and to provide them with the possibility of having face-to-face interactions. This proved to be a very successful strategy; while cognitive engagement practices prevail in the online forum, it is the social engagement practices that are far more evident in such gatherings, especially the *chatting* practice, as many of the attendees explained that they prefer face-to-face socialisation. Furthermore, *demarcating*, which was less practiced online, was also highly manifested in such gatherings, leading to the formation of smaller more homogenous groups of like-minded members that allows for more intimacy, and hence the development of stronger connections leading to higher engagement. The organisation of various meetups provide members with the opportunity to undergo the practice of *demarcating* on several bases. For instance, members with similar circumstances, and hence interests, were grouped together. Moreover, *demarcating* was further practiced within the same group based on nationality and age. Furthermore, meetups are held at different locations, causing

[89] Meeting new people is considered highly beneficial in Dubai due to the high expatriate turnover.

demarcating based on geographical proximity, as members usually prefer attending meetups at a location closest to their houses where they meet others ladies from the same neighbourhood.

In addition to enhancing the engagement of existing members, the findings demonstrate that efficient use of both environments also helps expanding the members' base by engaging members with both dispositions; those who prefer online interactions and those who favour face-to-face contacts. Discussions with regular members of various meetup groups revealed that many of them do not even use the online forum, and that they only joined the EW community for such gatherings. This provides empirical support for the suggestion in business practice literature that supplementing online with offline strategies can tap into a whole new demographic (Halek 2014). It also shows that members with different dispositions can opt for different engagement platforms (online vs. offline). This exhibits a level of similarity to Li et al.'s (2017) argument that changes in the disposition of an actor can possibly lead to the use of different engagement platforms.

7.4.3. Monitoring the Members' Engagement Patterns

According to Storbacka et al. (2016, p.3014), a fundamental managerial task is the identification of effective patterns, which should guide the design of effective AE processes. The findings suggest that observing members' A2A interactions modes and the resulting engagement states can greatly help in this regard. An effective pattern in the context of online communities is associated with having most members (functionally or fully engaged depending on their dispositions) following an overall positive (increasing) engagement trend. This means that members are motivated to undergo further iterations, and hence over time AE is reinforced.

Furthermore, having members choosing a state of engagement recovery following negative experiences is also an indication of an overall positive engagement trend as it reflects successful attempts from focal actors to reconcile the incongruence. Hence, those offended members can be re-directed back to a positive engagement state (functional engagement state), once the effect of previous demotivation is mitigated, rather than opting for more undesirable states (reductive engagement, induced dormancy, and induced disengagement).

On the other hand, such monitoring can also help identifying negative patterns. For instance, an increasing number of members adopting such undesirable states is an alarming indication which calls for further investigation to take the needed actions. This can be related to problems concerning the platform itself and its design (i.e. technical issues) or it can be related the A2A interactions and negative experiences, hence better management is needed.
Currently, the EW management (represented by the admin) is continuously observing all posts, and interferes via *governing* only when the rules of the forum are violated, with less attention being directed to the relational norms. Instead, the admin is advised to use such observations to identify possible development of negative patterns as early as possible and to interfere accordingly. This can be achieved by focusing more on the A2A interactions mode in order to take needed actions in negative instances; no interaction or negative A2A interactions. In case of the former, the admin needs to step in and responds to threads that have no replies. Whereas in case of the latter, the admin needs to moderate the conflicts (rather than leaving it entirely to core members who repeatedly failed, and even caused more incongruence in several cases) to ensure more successful engagement recovery.

The merit of adopting a practice-based approach is that such negative instances are easily spotted since they involve cases of incongruence in terms of practices. Hence, the researcher was able to undergo this simple exercise as part of the analysis efforts in this thesis, where threads with no interaction (no response) and those with negative A2A interactions (i.e. cases of incongruence) were easily identified. Therefore, community managers can do the same manual monitoring and interfere when needed in order to direct members to a positive engagement path (i.e. successful engagement recovery). Another option, which merits further investigation from forum managers is to assess the possibility and feasibility to build algorithm that learns to identify problematic patterns and helps foster positive ones. The identified congruent and incongruent practices and associated engagement states could serve as a starting point.

7.4.4. Establishing Engagement Profiles for Members

The importance of establishing engagement profiles for members and its positive impact on improving engagement strategies has been noted in the literature (e.g., De Valck et al. 2009; Baldus et al. 2015; Dessart et al. 2016), yet remains unaddressed in engagement research to

date. While investigating the social capital production in a peer-to-peer problem solving community, Mathwick et al. (2008) used membership length to distinguish between newbies and core members, and considered the members' experiences solely from the perspectives of these two profiles (i.e. newbies and core members). However, this thesis empirically demonstrates that using time as the only base for differentiation between members can lead to inaccurate results.

Time is naturally an important factor, and the significance of the temporal aspect of engagement (temporal connections) has been repeatedly highlighted by the findings, which supports Nahapiet & Ghoshal's (1998) argument that time is important for the continuity and stability of social structures. Yet, this study further clarifies that such stability results from the strengthening of connections which occur over time between members, subject to positive A2A interactions, and from acquiring the community norms through progressive adoption of relevant practices. Moreover, while agreeing with Bagozzi & Dholakia (2006) that time influences members' perceptions of the community experience, the findings further indicate that such perceptions are also highly affected by the members' dispositions, which in turn influence the adopted engagement states, and hence affect the progression of engagement.

All active long-term members would come to develop strong connections through ongoing positive engagement iterations. However, they may have different dispositions, which will affect their adopted practices and engagement states, and hence their engagement profiles. On the one hand, over time some members would come to consider the community as a source of social support and not just a source of information, hence opt for the state of full engagement and become core members by undergoing practices from all various categories.

On the other hand, others might still limit their perception of the community and its value to its information resources, hence remain limited to the cognitive engagement practices and the functional state. This suggests that attention to members' dispositions can justify Bowden et al.'s (2015, p.800) observation regarding the existence of some customer segments "*that simply do not wish to engage fully with their service providers*". Moreover, it highlights for managers the importance of accepting that some members may choose to remain functionally engaged for the entirety of their engagement process based on their dispositions, hence attempts to convert them to core members would just be wasted efforts. However, functional members who

are typically the majority in an information forum, still form a highly valuable group that greatly adds to the community information resources through reciprocity.

To sum up, this thesis represents an initial attempt in regard to profiling online community members by proposing a practice-based basic profiles that considers the effect of not only the membership length (reflecting a member's temporal connections) but also the members' dispositions on the adapted engagement practices, and hence on the progression of engagement, as a simple and practical classification approach. Members are divided first based on the membership length as newbies and long-term members, and as a next step long-term members are further divided based on their dispositions into functional and core members, this leads to three basic distinct profiles: (1) newbies, (2) functional members, and (3) core members. Therefore, to successfully manage engagement, careful attention needs to be directed to the respective needs of members from the three profiles in order to incentivise them accordingly, and to ensure that the engagement platform(s) can accommodate their respective dispositions, hence can effectively motivate members from the three groups to become and remain engaged.

To illustrate, newbies require encouraging (via *welcoming*), mentoring (via *sharing*), and prompt conflict management (via *governing*) from focal members. However, lately newbies were not always *welcomed* due to the negative impact of spamming (incongruent *sharing* by some fake newbies), which led to aggression and suspicious attitudes towards many newbies who are in real need for help and are not spammers (i.e. incongruent *welcoming*), hence creating a vicious circle of negative interactions. This is an alarming situation that requires immediate handling from the community management by employing effective tactics to stop the initial cause, which is spamming.

As for functional members, they mostly focus on the cognitive aspect of the platform, hence managers need to focus on encouraging and optimising information exchange in the forum. This was achieved in the EW community by introducing a new ranking system for members, where each is given a rank based on two factors: (1) the number of posts, reflecting how active a member is and (2) the perception of other members to such posts, reflecting the overall perceived usefulness of a member's posts.

Finally, core members are primarily concerned with the social value of the community. To accommodate for such social disposition, EW went beyond the online forum by arranging

physical meetups. While this move proved to be beneficial, the social aspects of the forum still need to be enhanced to allow for more online socialisation to cater for members who prefer such mode of interaction. A starting point would be to enable the PM feature to facilitate member-to-member (A2A) interactions in the forum rather than depending primarily on the offline meetups for socialisation. Also, adding more social features to the forum can be highly beneficial in this regard, and is in line with Gummerus et al.'s (2012) findings that providing entertainment and social benefits should be prime objectives to the providers of online communities[91]. This can be achieved by offering members the opportunity to recommend suggestions for improvement to ensure that any introduced features would be valued by members. It would also highlight the cocreative nature of such communities that should not be limited to content generation but should also include the continuous development and enhancement of the forum and its features to meet its members' evolving needs.

7.4.5. Conflict Management

Another important managerial implication arising from this thesis relates to conflict management which has been identified as a major research priority for the advancement of online communities' research (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015). Conflict management represents a major problem in the context of online communities; it is highly challenging since it takes place in the public domain, hence involving not only the conflicting members but a network of various actors (Gebauer et al. 2013). While there are initial attempts to explore this issue (e.g., Campbell et al. 2009; De Valck 2007; Husemann et al. 2015), further efforts are still required (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015).

This thesis suggests that conflicts may arise when members do not follow the norms of practices while interacting (i.e. incongruence), leading to a negative A2A interactions mode, the impact of which is found to depend in turn on a member's past connections; the stronger the connections with the community and fellow members, the less the impact of negative interactions. In contrast, members with limited past connections are more influenced by such negative interactions (i.e. by cases of incongruence), and hence require timely conflict management.

[91] Gummerus et al. (2012) focused solely on brand communities.

Conflict management requires some focal actors (core members or the admin) to take on the role of the moderator, focus on the emotional discontent of the offended member via *empathising*, and attempt to alleviate the frustration (or even anger) via timely *governing* by standing against the offensive member(s), and hence helping the offended member regain justice and recover engagement. Such actions are considered by the offended member as positive A2A interactions that may be capable of mitigating the impact of the previously experienced negative A2A interactions. This highlights the significance of the relational connections, reflected in the moderator' role, in order to ensure that members facing negative experiences are directed to a state of engagement recovery rather than opting for more negative states (i.e. reductive engagement, dormancy, or even disengagement).

In addition, careful attention to the engagement profiles of the conflicting members is needed for more efficient conflict management efforts as members with different profiles require different handling. For instance, newbies form the most vulnerable group, hence requiring more efforts to ensure that those members become re-engaged rather than drop out. Whereas core members are the least affected due to a strong feeling of belonging to the community and to the emotional attachment involved. They were even found to mostly perceive such conflicts as entertaining. In contrast, long-term functionally engaged members negatively perceive the conflicts between members. However, they also have strong past connections, which allows them to overcome such negative interactions that are considered as "part of the package" of using online forums. Hence, they tend to ignore the negative and just benefit from the positive.

7.5. Limitations and Future Research

Finally, this thesis has several limitations which offer opportunities for undergoing future research. Furthermore, this study presented limited initial insights in regard to certain points that merits further exploration. Hence, below a research agenda is suggested based on: 1) the limitations of this study; 2) some initial insights that require more investigation.

7.5.1. Limitations Leading to Future Research

First, a main limitation of this study is the fact that it is conducted in one context, namely the EW online community, hence strongly affecting the generalisability of the findings. Therefore,

a significant future endeavour would be to extend the study beyond a single online community and to investigate the engagement practices across a wide array of communities, and hence move towards more generalisation by identifying a common set of practices across such communities. The meta-analytic review carried out in this thesis represents an initial effort in this regard; where 67 articles in top journals of marketing, management, and information systems were reviewed, to find evidence of the identified practices (mostly instances of corresponding behaviour rather than explicit practices). However, it would be interesting to adopt a meta-analytic approach in data collection (Farley et al. 1995; Schau et al. 2009) and empirically investigate multiple online communities to reconcile a general set of engagement practices that is applicable to various online communities.

Second, the gendered nature of the community under study is another limitation. Therefore, an interesting avenue for future research is to consider communities with more gender diversity and perhaps compare the findings.

Third, Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz (2015) identify three different types of communities based on ownership structure: 1) firm-hosted (i.e. brand communities), 2) consumers-hosted, and 3) communities organised by third party. EW is a for-profit community from the third group; it connects several firms/brands with consumers through advertising and sponsorship. It would be interesting to undergo a comparative study between the three types of communities in terms of the AE practices, and to identify which of the identified nine AE practices are context-specific, and which are more general. While some of the activities and/or practices might turn to be rather specific to the community under study (or its type), the suggested thematic categories of AE practices, and the engagement states are sufficiently general, hence are expected to be transferrable across contexts.

Fourth, this thesis investigated an established and rather mature online community. Future research can consider instead a newly established community to investigate the development in the members' engagement practices over time as the community matures and perhaps compare the dynamics of the AE process in both cases. This endeavour can be very useful to understand how online communities develop, and to shed light on "*the dynamic processes of establishing and nurturing*" one that remain unclear to date (Stokburger-Sauer & Wiertz 2015, p.12), and hence can provide more guidance to those who want to start-up an online community.

Finally, while this thesis considers many-to-many engagement in a network (i.e. the online community), only two groups of actors were involved in the context under study, namely the community members and the community management (as presented by the admin). Future studies need to consider other service systems where a more complex network of actors is involved, especially in a B2B context where various suppliers, customers, and competitors are involved with more complex institutions and institutional arrangements.

7.5.2. Initial Insights Needing Further Exploration

First, the findings shed initial light on the issue of members' profiling, which can greatly improve the management of AE by allowing for the development of more efficient and targeted engagement strategies. While the three suggested profiles can serve as a useful starting point, further research can aim to develop a more thorough classification scheme with more detailed profiles. Also, it would be interesting for future research to overlay the results of this thesis with those obtained through network analysis, which can be highly useful in identifying the core members in an online community, to see how AE practices and engagement states map onto specific members or segments of the community.

Second, the AE dimensionality represents another significant future research direction. While this study has proven the centrality of the social dimension of AE in an online community context, future research needs to examine its applicability, expression, and significance in other settings. Also, this research suggests that the relative importance of the AE dimensions is dependent on the actors' dispositions, and hence their engagement profiles; where the cognitive AE dimension was found to be the most significant for functional members as opposed to the social dimension for core members. However, future research needs to investigate the relative importance of the AE dimensions in other settings, and the impact of the actors' dispositions/profiles on the expressions of the relevant dimensions in such contexts. Moreover, the AE measurement merits revisiting in light of the advanced dimensionality resulting from this thesis in order to account for the social dimension, since excluding a dimension makes any measuring attempts inaccurate (Dessart et al. 2016). Despite the recent efforts to develop engagement measures (e.g., Baldus et al. 2015; Dessart et al. 2016; Schivinski et al. 2016), none of the existing scales includes all four dimensions of the AE construct, hence causing validity concerns.

Third, another issue warranting further exploration is the negatively valenced AE. This research aimed at providing a comprehensive view of A2A interactions that considers both the positive and negative sides of service relationships; it investigated the under-explored concept of disengagement and identified two types (naturally occurring and induced disengagement), and further explored the negatively valenced engagement, yet the latter merits more exploration. Negative engagement refers to the negative manifestations of the AE construct, where an actor becomes actively engaged in exhibiting unfavourable feelings, thoughts, and/or behaviour related to the object of engagement (Hollebeek et al. 2014), which is the online community in the case of this study. However, the observed negative engagement in the EW community was limited to the expression of negative feelings and thoughts towards other members and/or the community itself. Therefore, a need still exists to further explore the various outcomes of negative AE (Bowden et al. 2017; Hollebeek et al. 2016; Li et al. 2017). For instance, more research is needed to investigate cases with more active negative behavioural manifestations (e.g., initiating campaign to boycott the community). In such cases, the will of individual members who were negatively impacted by the community can be integrated and mobilised. Hence, deploying their social capital at a communal level (Mathwick et al. 2008), and the voice of those individual members increases, such that they have a wider and far reaching impact on the future of community and its survival.

Fourth, successful management of AE relies on optimising the use of both online and offline environments. While this thesis highlights how beneficial the integration of the two can be, understanding of the online/offline mix remains partial as the prime focus of this study was the online context. Therefore, demystifying the dynamics of AE not only in an online setting but also offline is another key area that warrants more consideration, in order to better understand A2A interactions, and the actors' connections and dispositions in both contexts, and their effects on the progression of engagement. Perhaps a comparative research that considers simultaneously the dynamics of both the offline and online contexts can be useful in this regard. Comparing online and offline AE is also recommended by Hollebeek et al. (2017) and Leckie et al. (2016).

Finally, while this study examined the various roles adopted by both the admin and the members of an online community, understanding the roles of focal actors in different service systems and their effects on engagement remains a research priority that merits further attention (Hollebeek et al. 2016a).

To sum up, the limitations of this study and the initial insights provided by this thesis all lend themselves to the research agenda suggested in Table 7.1; which can be divided into two categories: 1) future research of AE in the context of online communities, and 2) future research of AE in other contexts.

Table 7.1: Proposed Research Agenda for AE

I-	**Future Research of AE in the Context of Online Communities**
1-	To extend the study beyond a single online community and to investigate the AE practices across a wide array of communities, in order to reconcile a general set of engagement practices that is applicable to various online communities.
2-	To consider communities with more gender diversity and compare the findings.
3-	To undergo a comparative study between the three types of communities based on ownership structure (firm-hosted, consumers-hosted, and communities organised by third party) in terms of the AE practices, and to identify which of the identified nine AE practices are context-specific, and which are more general.
4-	To consider a newly established community (rather than a mature one such as EW) in order to investigate the development in the members' engagement practices over time as the community matures, and to compare the dynamics of the AE process in both cases.
5-	To develop a detailed classification scheme of members profiles.
6-	To undergo a network analysis and to see how AE practices and engagement states map onto specific members or segments of the community.
7-	To demystify the dynamics of AE not only in an online setting but also offline via a comparative research that considers simultaneously the dynamics of both contexts; to better understand A2A interactions, and the actors' connections and dispositions, and their effects on the progression of engagement in both contexts.
8-	To investigate cases with more active negative behavioural manifestations (e.g., initiating campaign to boycott the community); where the will of individual members who were negatively impacted by the community can be integrated and mobilised, hence deploying their social capital at a communal level, and the voice of those individual members increases such that they have a wider and far reaching impact on the future of community and its survival.
II-	**Future Research of AE in Other Contexts**
1-	To investigate AE in other service systems with complex network of actors, institutions and institutional arrangements (e.g., B2B context).
2-	To examine the applicability, expression, and significance of the social dimension of AE in other settings.
3-	To investigate the relative importance of the different AE dimensions in other settings, and the impact of the actors' dispositions/profiles on the expressions of the relevant dimensions in such contexts.
4-	To develop a more comprehensive scale of AE that accounts for the social dimension.
5-	To investigate cases with more active negative behavioural manifestations in various contexts.
6-	To examine the roles of focal actors in different service systems and their effects on the engagement of the various actors involved.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Engagement-Related Concepts in Marketing and Management Literature

Authors	Engagement-Related Concept	Paper Type
Algesheimer et al. (2005)	Community Engagement	Quantitative
Wang (2006)	Advertising Engagement	Quantitative
Bowden (2009)	Customer Engagement	Conceptual
Calder et al. (2009) *	Engagement	Quantitative
Higgins & Scholer (2009)	Engagement	Conceptual
Sprott el al. (2009)	Brand Engagement	Quantitative
Kumar et al. (2010)	Customer Engagement	Qualitative
Mollen & Wilson (2010) *	Engagement	Conceptual
Phillips & McQuarrie (2010)	Advertising Engagement	Qualitative
Scott & Craig-Lees (2010)	Audience Engagement	Quantitative
Van Doorn et al. (2010)	Customer Engagement Behaviours	Conceptual
Verhoef et al. (2010)	Customer Engagement	Conceptual
Abdul-Ghani et al. (2011) *	Engagement	Qualitative
Brodie et al. (2011)	Customer Engagement	Conceptual
Hollebeek (2011a)	Customer Brand Engagement	Conceptual
Hollebeek (2011b)	Customer Brand Engagement	Qualitative
Gambetti et al. (2012)	Consumer-Brand Engagement	Qualitative
Gummerus et al. (2012) *	Customer Engagement	Quantitative
Sashi (2012) *	Customer Engagement	Conceptual
Vivek et al. (2012)	Customer Engagement	Quantitative
Brodie et al. (2013) *	Consumer Engagement	Qualitative
Kuo & Feng (2013) *	Brand Community Engagement	Quantitative
Wirtz el al. (2013) *	Online Brand Community Engagement	Conceptual
Habibi et al. (2014) *	Brand Community Engagement	Qualitative
Franzak et al. (2014)	Brand Engagement	Conceptual
Kaltcheva et al. (2014)	Customer Engagement	Conceptual
Hollebeek and Chen (2014)	Brand Engagement	Qualitative
Hollebeek et al. (2014) *	Consumer Brand Engagement	Quantitative
Jaakkola & Alexander (2014)	Consumer Engagement Behaviour	Qualitative
Sarkar & Sreejesh (2014)	Active Customer Engagement	Quantitative
Verleye et al. (2014)	Customer Engagement Behaviour	Quantitative
Vivek et al. (2014)	Customer Engagement	Quantitative
Wallace et al. (2014) *	Brand Engagement	Quantitative

Appendix 1: Continued

Authors	Engagement-Related Concept	Paper Type
Chandler & Lusch (2015)	**Actor Engagement**	Conceptual
Dessart et al. (2015)	Consumer Engagement	Qualitative
Isaac et al. (2015)	Engagement	Quantitative
Calder et al. (2016)	Engagement	Conceptual
Dessart et al. (2016)	Consumer Engagement	Quantitative
Brodie et al. (2016a)	**Actor Engagement**	Conceptual
Hollebeek et al. (2016b)	Customer Engagement	Conceptual
Kumar & Pansari (2016)	Engagement	Quantitative
Leckie et al. (2016)	Consumer Brand Engagement	Quantitative
Marbach et al. (2016) *	Customer Engagement	Qualitative
Maslowska et al. (2016)	Customer Engagement Ecosystem	Conceptual
Malthouse et al. (2016)	Engagement	Quantitative
Schivinski et al. (2016) *	Consumer Engagement	Quantitative
Solem & Pedersen (2016) *	Customer Brand Engagement	Quantitative
Storbacka et al. (2016)	**Actor Engagement**	Conceptual
Yang et al. (2016) *	Brand Engagement	Quantitative
Breidbach & Brodie (2017) *	**Actor Engagement**	Conceptual
Hollebeek (2017) *	Business Customer Engagement	Conceptual
Hollebeek et al. (2017) *	Virtual Brand Community Engagement	Qualitative
Li et al. (2017) *	Multi-**Actor Engagement**	Qualitative
Mathwick & Mosteller (2017) *	Online Reviewer Engagement	Mixed
Pansari & Kumar (2017)	Customer Engagement	Conceptual
Alexander et al. (2018)	Actor Engagement	Conceptual
Azer & Alexander (2018) *	Customer Engagement Behaviour	Qualitative
Fehrer et al. (2018)	Customer Engagement	Quantitative
Li et al. (2018)	Actor Engagement	Conceptual
Hollebeek et al. (2018)	Actor Engagement	Conceptual
Islam et al. (2018) *	Consumer Engagement	Quantitative
Viswanathan et al. (2018) *	Customer Engagement	Quantitative

*Note: *Indicates engagement studies in an online/social media context*

Compiled by author; Sources: Brodie et al. (2011a), (2016b), Hollebeek et al. (2014), Dessart et al. (2016), and Maslowska et al. (2016).

Appendix 2: Engagement Conceptualisations and Dimensionality in Business Practice Literature

Authors	Concept	Definition	Dimensionality
Appelbaum (2001)	Customer Engagement	It consists of both rational loyalty (including overall satisfaction, intent to repurchase, and intent to recommend) and emotional attachment.	Multidim.: C, E
McEwen (2004)	Customer Engagement	A measure of the overall strength of a company's customer relationships; it reflects the degree to which customers have formed emotional as well as rational bonds to the brands they buy and own.	Multidim.: C*, E
Peppers & Rogers (2005)	Engagement	Series of customised informational and financial transactions that occur over time and increase both the consumer value to the company and the value of company to the consumer.	Unidim.: B
Ghuneim (2006)	Consumer Engagement	A consumer-based measurement relating to interaction with an aspect of a brand or media property	Unidim.: B
Harris (2006)	Engagement	It is a way of thinking about today's marketing and media from the perspective of today's active consumer.	Multidim.
Passikoff (2006)	Brand Engagement	Psychologically based tendencies and expectations that determine marketplace behaviour.	Multidim: C*, E*, B*
Rieger & Kamins (2006)	Customer Engagement	It is an emotional connection between the company and its customers.	Unidim: E
EIU (2007a)	Customer Engagement	Building customer relationships that increase customer commitment to a company or brand.	Multidim. *
EIU (2007b)	Customer Engagement	Interactions with users of services, with the goal of improving user participation, compliance, and satisfaction	Multidim. *
Haven (2007)	Engagement	It is the level of involvement, interaction, intimacy, and influence an individual has with a brand over time	Multidim.: C, E*, B

Appendix 2: Continued

Authors	Concept	Definition	Dimensionality
Heath (2007)	Advertising Engagement	A subconscious emotional construct, where the level of engagement is defined as the amount of 'feeling' going on when an advertisement is being processed	Unidim.: E
ARF (2008)	Engagement	Turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context	Multidim. *
Forrester Consulting (2008)	Customer Engagement	Creating deep connections with customers that drive purchase decisions, interaction, and participation over time	Mulitdim. * C, E, B
Sedley (2010)	Customer Engagement	Repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a consumer has in a brand	Multidim.: E, B

*Notes: Engagement Dimensionality; Multidim. abbreviation for multidimensional and Unidim. for unidimensional. C is cognitive, E is emotional, B is behavioural. *Inferred from the research, rather than being explicitly stated. Sources: Adapted from Brodie et al. (2011a).*

Appendix 3: Practice-Based Studies in Marketing and Management Literature

Authors	Purpose of the Study
Holt (1995)	To examine consumption practices and develop a typology of such practices
Thompson & Hirschman (1995)	To examine the processes that shape consumers' sense of body image, the consumption behaviours motivated by those perceptions, and to analyse self-care practices
Brownlie & Saren (1997)	To discuss "relevance" in marketing research
Grewal & Dharwadkar (2002)	To develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that incorporates the institutional environment into current marketing channels
Skålén (2009)	To investigate the effect of service marketing practices on shaping the subjectivity of customer-oriented employee
Black & Cherrier (2010)	To examine anti-consumption practices, motivations and values within attempts to live a more sustainable lifestyle
Korkman et al. (2010)	To contribute to S-D logic in order to enrich the understanding of markets, resources integration, value formation, and cocreation.
Brownlie & Hewer (2011)	To advance the practice-based theorising by linking practices and structure in consumers' everyday living
Duguid (2005)	To challenge economists' attempts to reduce knowledge to information by adopting a community of practice perspective
Shove & Pantzar (2005)	To understand change in practices, and the consequences for the consumption involve
Warde (2005)	To revive the interest in theories of practice for the study of consumption, and provide abridged account of its principles
Kjellberg & Helgesson (2006)	To explore multiplicity and performativity in marketing practice
Cherrier (2007)	To consider ethical consumption practices and ethical directions within postmodern pluralism
Kjellberg & Helgesson (2007a)	To present a conceptual model of markets as constituted by practice

Appendix 3: Continued

Authors	Purpose of the Study
Kjellberg & Helgesson (2007b)	To investigate the links between the mode of exchange and the configuration of market actors and exchange objects
Sevensson (2007)	To consider the phenomenon of marketing work from a social-phenomenological lens
Andersson et al. (2008)	To address challenges concerning agency and the configuration of actors in relation to market practices
Watson & Shove (2008)	To investigate the recursive relation between products, projects and practices in craft consumption
Schau et al. (2009)	To explore the value creation process within brand communities
Echeverri & Skålén (2011)	To study interactive value formation at the provider–customer interface
Edvardsson et al. (2011)	To expand understanding of service exchange and value cocreation by adopting a social construction approach
Fellesson (2011)	To explore the organisational enactment of the customer
Jaakkola (2011)	To study the practices of "service productization" in professional service firms
Järventie-Thesleff et al. (2011)	To introduce a "marketing-as-practice-approach" to the domain of corporate brand management
Magaudda (2011)	To explore consequences of dematerialisation on the practices of digital music consumption
von Koskull & Fougère (2011)	To examine service development as practice through a rhetorical lens
Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2012)	To provide clearer understanding of the role of social and economic factors in resource integration
Breidbach et al. (2013)	To assess the impact of technology-enablement on service system's ability to cocreate value
Närvänen et al. (2013)	To identify and categorise discursive practices through which consumers negotiate lifestyle-related identities in online communities
Dinhopl et al. (2015)	To explore how consumers use "labelling" in online communities as a social practice

Appendix 3: Continued

Authors	Purpose of the Study
Finch et al. (2015)	To examine how a conduit shapes and connects the business and practices of sustainable waste management
Hartmann et al. (2015)	To conceptualise the consumptive moments of online community practices (direct vs. vicarious) and their different value outcomes
Lucarelli & Hallin (2015)	To advance understanding of the brand regeneration process by adopting a performative approach
Nilsson & Helgesson (2015)	To explore the indigenous epistemology of market research
Onyas & Ryan (2015)	To examine the brand as a market shaping device
Solér et al. (2015)	To study the performativity of 'muted sustainable' fashion brand and the construction of ecofashion consumption.
Venter et al. (2015)	To explore the market segmentation process from a performative perspective
Hollebeek et al. (2017)	To develop a refined typology of engagement practices in virtual brand communities
Breidbach & Brodie (2017)	To set the conceptual foundations and future directions for research on actor engagement and engagement platforms sharing economy context

Appendix 4: Social Constructivist Studies from Various Disciplines

Discipline	Authors
Sociology	Berger & Luckman (1966)
	Douglas (1970)
	Altheide (1976)
	Laws & Schwartz (1977)
	Spector & Kitsuse (1977)
	Tuchman (1978)
	Latour & Woolgar (1979)
	Knorr-Cetina (1981)
	Weinberg (1983)
	Lorber & Farrell (1991)
	Frankenberg (1993)
	Bogard (2003)
	Holstein & Gubrium (2003)
Political Sciences	Schneider & Ingram (1993; 2005)
	Edelman (1998)
Psychology	Gergen (1985; 1994; 2001; 2009)
	Gergen & Davis (1985)
	Cheung (1997)
Psychology (cont.)	Miller (1997)
	Nightingale & Cromby (1997)
	De Rivera & Sarbin (1998)
	Parker (1998)
	Burr (2003)
Learning and Education	Fosnot (1993; 2005)
	Schifter & Fosnot (1993)
	Von Glasersfeld (1995)
Organisation Studies	Shotter (1993)
	Watson (1994)
	Hosking et al. (1995)
	Weick (1995)
	Hatch (1997)

	Hosking (1999) Cunliffe (2003) Hosking & McNamee (2006)
Management	Cunliffe (2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2004; 2008)
Marketing	Richins (1994) Deighton & Grayson (1995) Holt (1995) O'Guinn & Shrum (1997) Hackley (2001; 2007) Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001) Grewal & Dharwadkar (2002) Palmer & Ponsonby (2002) Blois (2003) Peñaloza & Venkatesh (2006) Edvardsson et al. (2011) Dessart et al. (2016)

Compiled by author; Sources: Burr (2003), Edvardsson et al. (2011), and Holstein & Gubrium (2008).

Appendix 5: Netnographic Studies from Various Disciplines and the Adopted Observational Mode

Authors	Purpose of the Study	Observational Mode
Kozinets (1997)	To explore major fan movements in relation to a mass media culture.	Non-participant
Kozinets & Handelman (1998)	To understand the subjective meaning of boycott participation.	Non-participant
Kozinets (2001)	To examine the cultural construction of consumption meanings of mass media images.	Participant
Kozinets (2002)	To formally introduce the netnography methodology and to apply it in an example.	Non-participant
Brown et al. (2003)	To investigate the relation between producers and consumers in retro brand communities.	Non-participant
Schau & Gilly (2003)	To study personal web pages and the consumption meanings involved.	Non-participant
Kozinets & Handelman (2004)	To explore consumer movements that seek ideological and cultural changes.	Non-participant
Molesworth & Denegri-Knott (2004)	To understand failure of organisational communication in file-sharing community.	Non- participant
Langer & Beckman (2005)	To explore how netnography is used in sensitive research topics (cosmetic surgery).	Non-participant
Giesler (2006)	To understand consumer gift systems in Napster (peer-to-peer music file sharing.)	Non-participant
Hemetsberger (2006)	To explore the adversary innovation in free source and open-source related websites.	Non-participant
Hemetsberger & Reinhardt (2006)	To study learning process and knowledge-building in an open source community.	Non-participant
Jeppesen & Frederiksen (2006)	To understand value creation and users' innovation in firm-hosted user communities.	Non-participant
Kim & Jin (2006)	To explore online communities hosted by apparel retailers.	Non-participant
Alon & Brunel (2007)	To understand the relationship dynamics in online communities.	Non-participant
Füller et al. (2007)	To study innovation and joint-development activities within online communities.	Non-participant
O'Reilly et al. (2007)	To understand how they use of technology can enhance communications in mega classes.	Non-participant

Appendix 5: Continued

Authors	Purpose of the Study	Observational Mode
Woodeside et al. (2007)	To examine how tourists report certain Italian cities as brand icons.	Non-participant
Mathwick et al. (2008)	To examine the relational norms which determine social capital in online communities.	Non-participant
Dehuang & Woodside (2009)	To examine how tourists in China interpret their travel experiences.	Participant
De Valck et al. (2009)	To explore the participation patterns, discussion practices, and the decision processes.	Non-participant
Dwivedi (2009)	To explore the formation of online destination image of India.	Participant
Hamilton & Hewer (2009)	To explore the salsa dancing experience.	Participant
Schau et al. (2009)	To understand collective value creation within brand communities.	Non-participant
Adjei et al. (2010)	To develop and test a model of online C2C communications in developing desirable online brand community outcome.	Non-participant
Chan & Li (2010)	To investigate the effect of interactivity on reciprocity, commitment, and co-shopping.	Non-participant
Brodie et al. (2013)	To explore the nature and scope of CE in an online brand community.	Non-participant
Fisher & Smith (2011)	To investigate the consumers' experiences of cocreation within an online brand community.	Participant
Heinonen (2011)	To explore the process of consumers' relationship engagement in online communities.	Non-participant
Keinan & Kivetz (2011)	To explore why consumers desire novel and unusual and consumption experiences predicted to be less pleasurable.	Non-participant
Martin & Woodside (2011)	To examine how tourists in Japan interpret their travel experiences.	Non-participant
Mkono (2011)	To analyse tourists' self-interpretation of the "Other" as represented in food.	Non-participant
Janta et al. (2012)	To identify the strategies used by Polish workers to develop their English skills	Non-participant

Appendix 5: Continued

Authors	Purpose of the Study	Observational Mode
Scaraboto & Fischer (2012)	To study the mobilisation of marginalised consumers in order to seek inclusion in mainstream markets.	Participant
Seraj (2012)	To identify the main characteristics of an online community which deliver value to its consumers, and hence engage them.	Participant
Brodie et al. (2013)	To explore consumer engagement in a virtual brand community.	Non-participant
Mkono (2013)	To understand the marketing of the "authentic African" dining experiences.	Non-participant
Närvänen et al. (2013)	To examine the discursive practices that consumers use in order to negotiate lifestyle-related identity (low-carb/ high-fat dieters).	Non-participant
Rageh et al. (2013)	To identify the dimensions of the customer experience construct.	Non-participant
Rageh & Woodside (2013)	To examine the dimensions of the customer experience construct .	Non-participant
Thomas et al. (2013)	To understand the operation of the heterogeneous communities of consumption, and their interactions with the marketplace.	Non-participant
Zaglia (2013)	To investigate the existence of brand communities embedded in social networks.	Participant
Habibi et al. (2014)	To examine brand communities on social media.	Participant
Johns & English (2014)	To explore online mothers' groups and their impact on consumption.	Participant
Medberg & Heinonen (2014)	To explore value formation in the customer-bank relationship outside the line of visibility of service encounters.	Non-participant
Weijo et al. (2014)	To provide new insights into online communities of consumption and netnography.	Participant
Wu & Pearce (2014)	To explore emerging tourists' experiences (the Chinese recreation vehicle driving market).	Non-participant
García-Álvarez et al. (2015)	To study the subjective experience of social network gamers.	Participant

Appendix 5: Continued

Authors	Purpose of the Study	Observational Mode
Hartmann et al. (2015)	To conceptualise the consumptive moments of practices in an online community and explore their effect on value outcomes.	Non-participant
Keeling et al. (2015)	To explore the use of online communities to balance asymmetries between patients and healthcare professionals by supporting negotiation.	Non-participant
Logan (2015)	To explore the online self-presentation strategies of female fashion bloggers on social media platforms.	Participant
O'Sullivan (2015)	To investigate collaborative risk-aversion and the enhancement of context control in an illegal market.	Non-participant
Per Skålén et al. (2015)	To examine service systems transformation through actors' resource integration and value cocreation in contention.	Participant
Centeno & Wang (2017)	To examine the cocreation of human brands exemplified by celebrities in a stakeholder-actor approach.	Participant
Clemente-Ricolfe (2017)	To examine the consumer perceptions of online banking in Spain.	Non-participant
Dolan & Goodman (2017)	To Explore communication strategies for wine marketing.	Non-participant
Hollebeek et al. (2017)	To develop a refined typology and process model of virtual brand community engagement practices.	Non-participant
Wang et al. (2017)	To explore the special context and unique life experience of the online role-playing games.	Participant
Zhang & Hitchcock (2017)	To explore women travellers' experiences (from China to Macao) and the gendered views of female travellers.	Non-participant
Thanh & Kirova (2018)	To examine the wine tourism experience using the experience economy model.	Non-participant

Appendix 6: Summary of the Meta-Analytic Review

Authors	Enough Material to Code as AE Practices	AE Practices Explicitly Examined	Other Practices Explicitly Examined	Evidence of Corresponding Behaviour to 1 or more of the 9 Empirically Identified Practices
1- Adjei et al. (2010)	✓	×	×	✓
2- Alon & Brunel (2007)	✓	×	×	✓
3- Bagozzi & Dhalokia (2002)	×	×	×	×
4- Baldus et al. (2015)	✓	×	×	✓
5- Bowden et al. (2017)	✓	×	×	✓
6- Brodie et al. (2013)	✓	×	×	✓
7- Brown et al. (2003)	✓	×	×	✓
8- Brown et al. (2007)	×	×	×	×
9- Chan & Li (2010)	✓	×	×	✓
10- Cove & Pace 2006	✓	×	×	✓
11- Dessart et al. (2015)	✓	×	×	✓
12- Dessart et al. (2016)	×	×	×	×
13- De Valck et al. (2009)	✓	×	×	✓
14- Dhalokia et al. (2004)	×	×	×	×
15- Fisher & Smith (2011)	✓	×	×	✓
16- Fong & Burton (2006)	✓	×	×	✓
17- Füller et al. (2007)	✓	×	×	✓
18- Fisher & Smith (2011)	✓	×	×	✓
19- Giesler (2006)	✓	×	×	✓
20- Gummerus et al. (2012)	×	×	×	×
21- Habibi et al. (2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓
22- Hamilton & Hewer (2009)	✓	×	×	✓
23- Hartmann et al. (2015)	✓	×	✓	✓
24- Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004)	×	×	×	×
25- Hollebeek et al. (2017)	✓	✓	✓	✓
26- Healy & McDonagh (2012)	✓	×	×	✓
27- Hemetsberger (2006)	✓	×	×	×
28- Hemetsberger & Reinhardt (2006)	✓	×	×	✓
29- Jayanti and Singh (2010)	✓	×	×	✓
30- Jeppesen & Frederiksen (2006)	✓	×	×	✓
31- Johns & English (2014)	✓	×	×	✓
32- Keeling et al. (2015)	✓	×	×	✓
33- Kim & Jin (2006)	✓	×	×	✓
34- Kim et al. (2008)	×	×	×	×
35- Kozinets (1999)	✓	×	×	✓
36- Kozinets (2001)	×	×	×	×
37- Kozinets (2002)	✓	×	×	✓
38- Kozinets et al. (2008)	×	×	×	×
39- Kozinets et al. (2010)	✓	×	×	✓
40- Kozinets & Handelman (1998)	✓	×	×	×
41- Kuo & Feng (2013)	×	×	×	×

42- Langer & Beckman (2005)	✓	×	×	✓
43- Laroche et al. (2012)	×	×	×	×
44- Malthouse et al. (2016)	✓	×	×	✓
45- Marbach et al. (2016)	✓	×	×	✓
46- Mathwick & Mosteller (2017)	×	×	×	×
47- Mathwick et al. 2008	✓	×	×	✓
48- Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001)	✓	×	×	✓
49- Muñiz & Schau (2005)	✓	×	×	✓
50- Muñiz & Schau (2007)	✓	×	×	✓
51- Närvänen et al. (2013)	✓	×	✓	✓
52- Nelson & Otnes (2005)	✓	×	×	✓
53- Nimrod (2011)	✓	×	×	✓
54- O'Reilly et al. (2007)	✓	×	×	✓
55- O'Sullivan (2015)	✓	×	×	✓
56- Scaraboto & Fischer (2012)	✓	×	×	✓
57- Schau et al. (2009)	✓	✓	✓	✓
58- Seraj (2012)	✓	×	×	✓
59- Sibai et al. (2015)	×	×	×	×
60- Simon et al. (2016)	×	×	×	×
61- Steinmann et al. (2015)	×	×	×	×
62- Teichmann et al. (2015)	×	×	×	×
63- Thomas et al. (2013)	✓	×	×	✓
64- Wasko & Faraj (2005)	✓	×	×	✓
65- Weijo et al. (2014)	✓	×	×	✓
66- Wirtz et al. (2013)	×	×	×	×
67- Yang et al. (2016)	×	×	×	×

Appendix 7: Additional Illustrations Concerning the A2A Interactions Modes

A2A Mode	Observation	Additional Illustrative Posts
No Interaction	Members may refrain from answering due to the fear of being misjudged as a spammer	The fear of being misjudged as a spammer is illustrated by the following excerpt, where a long-term member (B7) was mistaken to be one due to similarity of user names with a spammer: "AB: […] All I read was the last three digits and thought it was B7 posting. I thought it was strange that she was spamming old posts but thought that maybe she'd opened a company! L1: I was completely lost with your post […] and yes the other 7 does appear to be running a business. B7: What?! I'm not running a business!!! I'm Not spamming old posts! Please explain S9: It was some new poster whose user name also ended in 7. AB only saw the last three digits and mistakenly thought it was you. The poster in question was resurrecting old posts in order to advertise for business. B7: Thank you! Was curious as it sounded nutty" (17/11/2015).
Positive A2A Interactions Mode	It is the predominant mode in the observed forum	"CR: […]. I only found this one [the EW forum] because the one I was browsing before was so completely rude and full of negativity I had to leave. People definitely disagree, but take it in stride and no need to be disrespectful. I haven't encountered any real harshness or mean spirit in this forum... Yet, even though I've read some 'hot topics' […] B4: […] Believe me, compared to some other forums, this is an Eden with polite and kind angels […] DZ: […] I find that there are very few actually nasty comments made on here. Plenty sarcasm yes, but not much out and out nastiness although tempers do sometimes flare! I appreciate though that what I find simply sarcastic (and to be honest, often amusing) another poster may well find downright rude […] MB: […] Many posters are actively participating in our EW community and are helpful, kind and thoughtful. They actually go out of their way to give sound advice, offer their opinions etc […] For the rest, I just ignore them

		NI: For me, this forum does have very good and adequate information, many posters have been very helpful to one another and I always recommend my friends to this forum especially when they plan to come here be it for holidays or for a job as an expat! […] I wish I knew about this forum much before than I did […]" (23/09/2014).
	Additional cases of congruence	1) "X1: Hi, has anyone got suggestions where my two young girls, 8 and 10, can do an indoor aerobic sport like indoor hockey or indoor football? Or any other sport suggestions? […] (*Learning:* seeking recommendation) TA: Hockey […] Netball: […] (*Sharing: recommending*) DR: Thank you for the information – I will look into these places (*Learning*: receiving the offered advice with thankfulness) […]" (08/11/2015). 2) "SS: Hi ladies. Please can someone help me? I am trying to get hold of some nice blue lights for my Christmas tree […] I have tried all over MOE. I think Carrefour had them as they have them on some of their decorated trees. But when I enquired they told me they had sold out (*Learning:* justifying) […] Please do any of you ladies know of anywhere? (*Learning: seeking information*) TIA. Xxx NN: Ace hardware? (*Sharing* information) SS: Yes they have some. Yay! Thank you so very much. You wonderful lady. x" (*Learning:* receiving the offered advice with thankfulness) (04/12/2015).
Negative A2A Interactions Mode	Additional cases of incongruence	"AX: Dear all! First of all, my best wishes to you. A question: we have a 17-month baby boy who goes to nursery downtown, we both work as parents. When our boy is sick (which happened already 4 times since he goes to nursery as of September), one of us has to take off from work to care for our boy. I know that there are home nursing agencies who can come to your house to provide best care to your child when parents go to work, it is quite expensive though, so I was wondering, whether an insurance exists that covers these costs (or part of the cost)? Many thanks for any tips/information. If this insurance does not exist, any recommendation on

		agencies that do provide this service? (*Learning*: seeking information and recommendations). LC: I really wondered if you were serious, but then I realized you are!!!! I'm sorry but sick kids and having to be there to look after them is just part of parenting!! If the kid is sick enough to be off school then they need to be with a family member/parent looking after them not a stranger!!!" (05/01/2015) (the norms of *sharing* are not followed: case of incongruence concerning the sharing practice). 2) "YL: This has been happening since this week, I am on cruise control and never exceed 120kmph. But I have got flashed 2 times (consecutive days) this week on Al Khail street. Am I missing something? Is there a reduced speed camera? Is there a patch where the speed limit has been reduced? Anyone else experience this? I'm speaking with regard to the section between Hessa to Oud metha exit (Dubai bound). (*Learning*: seeking information) ST: I am glad you got flashed, maybe this will help with the speeding lunatics on the roads, at least it seems like one will slow down." (25/01/2016) (the norms of *sharing* are not followed: case of incongruence concerning the *sharing* practice).

Appendix 8: Additional Illustrations Concerning the AE Process

Observation	Additional Illustrative Posts
Process initiated by a trigger	1) "TS: Hello all, I am new to all this but basically we are considering whether to move to Dubai. My husband has an excellent job on offer but it feels like we have a lot to give up - so those questions[…].....Too many other thoughts for one post so I'll await responses. Many thanks." (17/05/2015) 2) "JE: Hello, I'm relatively new to Dubai and wondering if anyone can recommend any online dating websites? I've tried Tinder and don't really think it is for me […] I'm 34 if that's relevant? Thanks so much in advance for your help" (19/12/2015).
Intra-thematic interplay of practices	1) "YA: Hi, I was wondering if anyone has any experience of homeopathy. I recently went to see a homeopath for my skin […] Has anyone done homeopathic treatments before and does this sound normal? (*Learning:* seeking information)" (20/03/2011). "YA: Thank you J1! you definitely know your stuff... I'm seeing dr. […], have you heard of her? (*Learning*: seeking feedback) […] It's very difficult to get poisoning from homeopathic meds as they are very diluted. I have called my homeopath and she said that with homeopathy, you generally feel worse before you feel better...its a normal process apparently […] (*Sharing:* informing)" (21/03/2011). 2) "A4: Hi All, can anyone recommend a good kennels for dogs. Anywhere in the Dubai area will suit. Thanks. (*Learning:* seeking recommendations)" (05/10/2015). "A4: Thanks for all the tips. It's for Christmas and some are already booked up (DKC) but have got them into Posh paws, highly recommend (*Sharing:* recommending)" (10/10/2015). 3) "B5: It has come to my attention that I don't have the faintest idea where should I go for an emergency […] We live in DSO, I have an infant too, so where would you guys suggest we go for proper competent emergency care if the need should arise? We have private insurance so are happy to go where needed. TIA! (*Learning:* seeking advice/recommendations)" (01/11/2015). "B5: went to [hospital name]—but the wait times are SO LONG and the doctors I saw there both times I went were just completely incompetent […] ABSURD. Not only that I saw some very disturbing behavior from the nurses there who were taking care of patient registration […] the condition I witnessed there yesterday was horrendous and the medical care even worse. (*Sharing:* reviewing)" (07/12/2015).

Inter-thematic interplay	"TS: I really can't imagine Christmas in Dubai is the same as Christmas here. We start with the village nativity play which begins with the vicar in the pub - and a real sheep with Christmas lights on […] (*chatting*)" (27/11/2015). "TS: JBR looks lovely with direct access to the beach and the beach clubs. We only found The Walk on our last evening when we were in Dubai in August but the Indian restaurant we were in was very nice (*Learning*: updating) How long would it take to drive or get a taxi to say, the Mall of the Emirates? […] Do we have to get a big 4x4 realistically - will a little VW Golf not do? (*learning*: seeking advice)" (02/12/2015). "TS: Thanks B7, you must be very adventurous […] ! I must sound very staid and boring but yes, we do have a nice life here, we are very lucky […] (*Appreciating*)" (18/11/2015). "TS: I always vowed never to let my children have toy guns or other weapons. It failed miserably with the boys. They used rulers, sticks from the garden, Lego, anything and made loud bang your dead sort of noises […] (*sharing*: advising) (25/11/2015) "TS: […] I am quite good at tea and a sympathetic ear […]" (14/12/2015).

Appendix 9: Additional Illustrations for the State of Full Engagement

Property	Observation	Additional Illustrative Posts
Dispositions	Core members sharing a sense of companionship and camaraderie	1) "DT: […] I'm sure some people here genuinely do feel that EW means more to them than that [an anonymous online information board] !!!! It's entirely up to the individual what they put into or expect from posting so I don't think it's up to any one person to come along and tell them what they should or shouldn't think...just saying..." (24/02/2015) 2) "TB: "[…] For most of us [core members] though I believe it's [the forum] a place to pop regularly to catch up with news and old faces (some spending longer on here than others ) […]" (18/08/2014).
	Core members are rather immune to criticism	"SX: There have been times when people have had a go at something I've said - most times I've been able to say to myself "fair point - I didn't think about it like that". Other times, I know I just have a genuine difference of opinion with another poster - that's life. BB: Agree. It helps if one doesn't have a chip on one's shoulder, and is not defensive, you can take away a lot from posters who have the cajones to say what they really think. There are posts here and there where I feel the comments are uncalled for, but I also see a lot of people overreacting and taking things personally. Everyone can't have the forum the way they want. You might not like another poster's tone, but you may also find that very same poster will share information that can be very helpful and useful to you." (26/01/2015).
	Core members considers intense debating as a main source of entertainment	1) "IV: […] EW keeps me in the know and entertained even when I get replies I don't always agree with :-) ...it makes a great read on dull days. TB: Dragons...hehe. It's no' like the days of yore though, is it. When there were posses. And reaaaal cat fights. Oh, and Pudding!!! It is quite tame nowadays!" (05/09/2013). 2) "DT: Almost without exception, if you mention this forum to people, the first thing they say is how nasty some of the posters are but that it is also useful for finding information !! lol Although nowadays, so many regulars have left it's not really anything anymore... I know other forums where there is no nastiness or drama and they can be dull a lot of the time […]" (22/09/2014).

		3) "TB: I do wish admin would let us have a glimpse back in time to the old threads, just for a day. Those were entertaining ... L1: They were the days! Good old Thursday Night Threads "TNT" some days I would never get any work done they were that good! And a few years ago it was incredibly nasty on here, there were some really vicious threads and posters banned was a daily occurrence. There were quite a few trolls on here back then though and they just stirred up the pot.: […] Much as the mods have to appear to not approve of this there's no doubt that it's this sort of thing that keeps the place alive – none of us would admit it but the threads that keep us wanting to check in are those with differences of opinion ... Some days I look down the front page at the titles and there's literally nothing worth opening […] I know of another forum where there is no unpleasantness and no interference from moderators but it's dull […] BB: […] Plenty of comments on here are condescending, rude, self-aggrandizing, but **many** are also supportive, downright sweet, and helpful. Just don't take it so seriously. Also, when/if others disagree or challenge something you've said, this can be stimulating and enlightening! […]" (20/08/2014).
	Core members rejoiced at the controversy and heated debates that started to develop around an unusual and untypical new member (TS)	1) "BL: […]TS is my new favorite. CP: TS I think you have saved EW. […] TS, you're an EW tonic! If you are genuine, please come with your wellington boots, your Aga, and your Sloe Gin (haven't heard anyone talk about sloe gin for years!) and we'll show you our real Dubai, away from the malls and all you read about in the papers I think you'll fit in just fine.  " (25/11/2015). 2) "IN: Haha, remember my complaint about the forum being too boring  Looks like that problem is being fixed. CP: TS please come, and please post about all of your adventures during the first year.  (substitute for popcorn!) CY: […] Ps loving this thread, oh haven't we all got a 500k housing allowance??!!! I certainly do (don't!)

		GE: This thread is keeping me and my colleagues amused for hours […] HC: […] got to love this thread!!" (10/11/2015).
Temporal Connections	The future progression of core members' engagement is negatively affected by some of the admin actions (past and present); the interference to promote EW coffee mornings and the unjustified disabling of the private messaging feature, and incongruent *governing* (excessive censorship)	1) "Z1: Hi there, I was wondering if there are any existing play groups in and around Mirdif/Warqa area. My son is 10 months old and I would love to be part of regular mums meet ups with kids. If anyone knows of any group, please let me know the details. Thanks in advance Admin: Hi Z1, please arrange to meet up at one of our previous arranged coffee mornings" (04/11/2015). 2) "CP: As my post did not contravene any EW rules, I shall repost the gist of it […]". (30/01/2016). 3) "GE: If admin weren't happy, would any of us be here today, using these names  IZ: Dont give them ideas or you will have splinters in your bum before you can say naughty chair" (17/04/2014) 4) "BL: Last week there was a whole load of spam posts … I posted to admin and asked why they hadn't been removed. Guess what? My post was removed! […] 5) NM: Yep and when the sun comes up this one will be deleted too". (04/11/2015).
Relational Connections	Core members adopting the role of the mentor of newbies	1) "OD: […] it is just as difficult to get involved in a forum discussion as it is to socialize in real life. So you just wait a little and get involved slowly, especially in the personal discussions […]" (17/01/2012). 2) "VA: Ladies, I know this sounds silly, but I cannot find my own threads and therefore cannot find the replies! The search does not bring them up? Why? DT: click on your name, in red next to your posts or in the list of members at the bottom, then you will see the date you joined and your post count. Click on the number of posts and they will all be listed" (16/11/2013). 3) "MR: Hi who has the right to delete a post & if a post deleted should I receive a notice??? S3: Admin delete posts and no, you won't get a notice" (08/07/2015).

4) “C9: TNT? 

CP: a TNT is a Thursday Night Thread. In days of yore, a Thursday night usually had a TNT where there was a cat-fight/disagreement between EWers about something or the other, or somebody's maid had done something dreadful, etc. It was all very exciting and people used to stay in instead of going out just to watch the drama unfold. There are even tales of families going without dinner as EWers couldn't bear to leave their screens […]

C9: thanks for the explanation. I have been scratching my head for days, trying up all possible combinations. lol” (03/09/2015).

5) “DM: what on earth is a TNT????

B7: Thursday Night Thread Like the TNT bomb the topics were explosive and entertaining” (23/10/2015).

6) “CP: As there are lots of incoming newbies I thought it would be helpful for us to impart our EW advice […] speak in abbreviated terms […] You must however know that some things must not be abbreviated […] and your roads will be Um Suqeim St and Al Khail not USS or AKR

BB: I would say, don't sound too optimistic about moving here, or that you're optimistic about finding a job here! That is the worst way to introduce yourself and you will not make any allies. Certainly so if you post that your DH has been offered what is a great salary and package. The bitter ones seem to hate that the most in a newbie […]
I think I have mentioned this before, be careful what you say here and this relates to the above. You can be identified as there are much more creepers than actual posters, and it could come back to bite you if you overshare […] So please take the advice here with a grain of salt as everyone's situation will be different here for work and packages, and overall lifestyle […] note: this is not to say this forum is not extremely useful […] It's certainly been a huge help to me as well as entertainment...yes in the good old days. So sue me, I'm in that camp”

ST: To new comers don't feel intimidated […] things weren't better before; as much as some posters are like; the old days it was so good, believe me they moaned about how much better life was before expatwoman.com excited at the old days that supposedly was so much more amazing and interesting than now” (13/08/2015).

		7) "M7: I am really curious about these 'sliced mango' and 'cucumber' threads which so many of the old posters rave about. Seems some of us missed some really great/entertaining threads. have Tried to search but with no luck :-(AN: The sliced mango thread is an urban legend, got started about 5 years ago […] the cucumber thread did happen, but that seemed to be a wind-up. EW deletes their old threads after a few years, which is why you will never find them... IZ: Someone mentioned that her maid was sick and that she had her bringing her sliced mango to her room... basically a complete role reversal; and a very cunning maid completely taking the p!ss" (20/08/2014).
	Core members adopting the role of the moderator to stand against spamming which is a major source of their demotivation	1) "S2: For those who are lost, what happened was a recent new joiner Mona1 kept posting new threads asking very survey/research questions like: […] Some smart people caught on that she was just reposting the same questions that she or someone else had posted in other forums on other websites. Then a thread was started by other EW regulars asking her to explain herself, which has now been deleted.DZ: […] Just because this happened on a forum does not detract from their right to express their feelings of being misled […] I think those who have objected are well within their rights to express their feelings" (25/02/2015). 2) "DT: […] Also not keen on the new idea of quoting posts across the site as a sort of click bait - look what our ladies are saying about such and such ... feels a bit tacky..." (22/01/2016). 3) "SH: Admin… Forget the maids and foodies, what you really need is a special forum for advertisers! Seems like there are more of those these days than anything else!  CP: Have admin gone on holiday??? […]" (01/07/2015). 4) "P3: Why do people do this? Just do it on one thread – enough!! more Than that is just annoying and makes people NOT call you!!!! G1: I was just thinking the same thing! […] D3: It is really annoying!! Every thread I open is from years ago! That's me switching off for the night!!!" (16/03/2014).

	Core members are being sceptical towards newbies due to repeated spamming taking place on the forum	“FF: Personally, I think this is a wind up too! [… S3: (Sorry but) I'm seeing French & Saunders expat skit OD: I didn't at first. By now however I do too.” (10/11/2015).

Appendix 10: Additional Illustrations for Core Members Longing for a TNT

Member	Illustrative Posts
CP	"Hmmm. There are a few threads with TNT potential. Bubbling and simmering under the surface." (07/12/2015) "Will there be a TNT? It's been some time since we had a TNT Since we sat on the sofa and rubbed our hands with glee as one bun fight turned into another online and to go to make dinner there was simply no time […] All I see on the curtain thread is prices and fabric Such topics on EW is making it tragic Except talk of dog groomers, schools and hair EW is officially, totally, bare.  " (23/10/2015).
CM	"Well here's an idea, perhaps HQ will hear what's needed is a Forum for FUN. Those who prefer the mundane can stay with the boring and plain and have no cause for distress Then the seekers of thrills will suffer no ills if they ever so slightly digress […]" (23/10/2015).
IZ	wonder what the odds are on a TNT today ... Or even this year ... It is very quiet […](07/12/2015).
L1	"its sooo boring on EW that I had to go back and see the other posts […] Oh what I would do for a TNT!" (17/11/2015).
RT	"[…] I also miss TNTs but that's like a volcano that's gone completely dormant now." (2014/09/23)
M5	"S5 has started the TNT with her public school talk awwww shucks...we really needed some zest in here. going to bed then  " (25/10/2012).
GE	We could of course turn this into a TNT  … To be honest I have more going on LinkedIn than here now." (19/11/2015).
KD	"Ok … Ok what did I miss?!?! Had to go out all afternoon for work, but am now in position behind my computer, vino one side, popcorn the other and handbag at the ready! Let the practice match for Thursday begin!!!  " (17/01/2012/01/17).

TB	"Oooh a TNT. We haven't had a good one for a while. Maybe tonight's the night!" (27/03/2014). "The categories for this week's Thursday Night Entertainment Thread are: […] Start compiling your stories in your head people! title should read this week's TNET" (29/10/2014).
OD	"The most important abbreviation is TNT. Newbies, please start lots of 'TNT's" (13/08/2015).

Appendix 11: Additional Illustrations for Exchanging Email Addresses

The Non-Compliant Member	Illustrative Posts
GI	GI: T1 could you email me? […] at hotmail dot com. I'd like to talk to you more about this" (19/10/2015)
D5	B4: Give me your email or telephone number and I will contact you: Amazing, you can email me at […] at gmail dot com. Thanks a million!" (24/10/2015)
B8	(B8 posted her email address then removed it once the recipient confirmed receiving it, hence the original post was edited as indicated) B8: Thanks for all that! Are we allowed to put email addresses in here? Thanks in advance for your help! *edited by B8 on 20/06/2011* BT: You have got mail! Please feel free to remove your email Id from public forum if you wish...." (20/06/2011)
CG	CG: […] My email is CG underscore […] dot com if you would like to chat." (23/07/2014)
HM	SS: Hi Ladies! […] Any ideas, contacts, will be great! Thanks! HM: I know a few people... send me on HM at gmail dot com" (17/12/2015)
M9	(the posted address got deleted) B2: […] just not sure how we can message off this forum. M9: Well I am gonna post my email address and if you guys get to it before the admin does then that would be a miracle  lol" (2016/02/07)
AB	(the post with the email address got noticed by the admin and deleted but the recipient has already got it: CP: Hi AB, May I please contact you off the board if you would not mind posting your email ad for a minute. CP:  Got it" (2015/12/16)

Appendix 12: Additional Illustrations for the State of Functional Engagement

Property	Observation	Additional Illustrative Posts
Dispositions	Having the majority of members with a functional disposition represents a threat to the continuity and prosperity of the EW community, since an expat's needs for information is not as strong as before	"L4: It's far too slow. Only threads about maid issues or generally dealing with someone's misery get replies. Every other post gets a few replies and it's dead. Not much information sharing any more. GE: Totally agree, but there are only so many different questions you can ask and advice that can be given. And yes some is way out of date, but it's easy to bring that back up to date" (24/12/2014).
Temporal Connections	There is a lack of regularity in terms of posting, and high fluctuation in the engagement level of most functional members to the nature of engagement is this state being primarily functional/ utilitarian	"N2: […] When I share information I do it because I can, not for a reward or a pat on the back […] My gran used to say always roll a stone out of another's path if you can. One day someone will do the same for you. M8: When I first moved here EW didn't exist, and when it started up it was brilliant. I had all the time in the world to post, answers and questions […] 8 years on and my life has changed with the children etc. Some days I literally hop on here, ask a quick question, and refer to it later for an answer (by which time I am logged out) […] Other days, like yesterday, I had 2 hours to myself where I could sit and browse and I answered as many posts as I possible could […]" (18/01/2012).
Relational Connections	Guided by the norm of reciprocity members further adopt the role of the adviser rather than being limited to the role of the learner	"I2: So nearly 3 years ago my then fiancé and I had just moved to Dubai with only our suitcases, fingers crossed and lots of praying for a new life here (we had no jobs or home). 3 years down the line we are now married, living a lovely villa, 2 adopted desert dogs and fantastic jobs. However, during the time we were first here it was so tough and we were literally down to our last dirhams and had secured a temporary apartment. I came on to Expat Woman A LOT asking advice and to see if people were selling super cheap items for our living. Not only were we given some fantastic advice but there was one lady who messaged me and gave us cutlery, glasses, a carpet and a bottle of champagne, saying "welcome to Dubai"!! This generosity has stayed with me in the whole time we have been here. I have tried to contact her to offer her a huge thank you gift but I feel she may have left. Anyway, my point is I would love to pay it forward. If anyone on here is struggling, be it with finding work, needing home items or just advice then I would love to help Really this woman was so thoughtful, generous and extremely selfless it has been a huge inspiration that she would do something so kind!  " (15/09/2015).

Appendix 13: Additional Illustrations for the State of Engagement Recovery

Property	Observation	Additional Illustrative Posts
Dispositions	core members do not need recovery when having conflicts with other members since they are capable of defending themselves	"YL:ST, there is no reason to be calling out names. There are different ways an information is perceived by different individuals. Many may not agree with your opinion or mine, and everyone has a right to their own opinion. Driving under the 'expected' speed limit does not make someone a bad or an unsafe driver. But yes, there are many unsafe drivers on the road who slow down only at the radars and do not get flashed." (25/01/2016). "YA: Hi W1, not quite sure why you felt it necessary to post a negative comment here ... Sorry but I did find your comments rather rude and dismissive of people's intellect. I hardly think people are gonna look for medical advice on EW! we are merely sharing experiences... X2: […] As to other negative comments on here from certain posters, I always think of a saying "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all". I think some users of EW could benefit from logging off, getting out a little more and learning how to socialize nicely.... YA: I totally agree X2. I sometimes why people post such un-constructive comments that frankly don't benefit anyone. Thank you for your positive response […]" (21/03/2011).
	Long-term functional members do not need recovery efforts due to their practical disposition which allows them to mostly ignore such negative instances	"X3: What annoys me the most is the "personalized" attacks. Especially the ones that think they are more informed and knowledgeable than the rest. It can be hard for some to accept that not everyone agrees, and that others have different views that are just as valid as theirs. You need to ignore them and move on […]" (22/09/2014).
Temporal Connections	Newbies are more likely to be attacked than long-term members	"CM: I recall one particular incident a few years ago where a newbie was really verbally ripped to shreds for her opinion on a totally insignificant issue by a certain poster […] DT: yes, I had one of those experiences – one of my first posts saw me get torn to shreds for daring to challenge the "establishment" (not knowing any better) 5 years ago... […]" (26/12/2014). "CP: It actually seems like it's getting busier on EW, lots of newbies with lots of questions. Hopefully they all stick around for TNTs and popcorn[94]  " (05/09/2015).

[94] The poster here is hoping that some of the newbies' inquiries will create a heated debate (a TNT)

Relational Connections	To help newbies recovering from no A2A interactions mode, some focal members need to step in and respond to the unanswered posts by adopting the role of the adviser or mentor	Illustration 1: 1st post with no reply: "L9: My daughter (British/Irish) is relocating to Abu Dhabi. Shk. Khalifa City B (I think) I'm trying to compile some information for her and would be grateful for any help from the E.W. ladies […] Really appreciate your help Regards, L." (30/07/2015). 2nd post with no reply: "L9:  " (03/08/2015). 3rd post finally gets replies: "L9: Did I do something wrong?? I don't appear to have received any responses!! I thought the ladies of Abu Dhabi would have some of the information below. Perhaps everyone is still on vacation?? Would be grateful for any help and advice. Thank you and regards, LT: I am sorry that no one responded to your query. The thing is most of us live in Dubai and unfortunately the Abu Dhabi board is very quiet and the fact that a lot of ladies are away for the summer also doesn't help. Unfortunately, I am useless with regards to the questions you asked. I will try to answer some […] I don't have any information on the rest. I can't claim my advice will help a lot, but I hope it helps at least a bit. J2: Hi L9 -Depending on where you live, there are many good Supermarkets […] You also asked about curtains – […] There's nothing else on the list I can help you with so good luck." (06/08/2015). Illustration 2: The OP was posting her inquiry on several threads, yet was not getting and replies. However, another member helped out by explaining the reasons for not getting responses. The OP then followed the offered advice in the following post and did get several answers. "P8: Can u tell me plzz what medicines dr gave u during ivf or something u were taking like ROYAL JELLY, SELENIUM, COQ10 ETC and diet also. that helped in conceiving" (27/09/2015) (no reply). "P8: ladies Can u tell me plzz what medicines dr gave u during ivf or something u were taking like ROYAL JELLY […] that helped in conceiving. WHICH DR IS GOOD FOR IVF IN ABU DHABI" (27/09/2015) (no reply).

		"P8: U WROTE IN ONE OF UR POST ALSOO PLZZ TELL WHAT DOSE N MEDICINES U WERE TAKING THAT HELPED IN CONCEIVING DURING IVF" (28/09/2015) (no reply). "P8: Can u tell me plzz what medicines dr gave u during ivf or something u were taking like […] WHICH DR IS GOOD FOR IVF IN ABU DHABI? u are pregnant with ivf treatment from bourn hall. plzz reply." (28/09/2015) (no reply). "X5: Dear P8, I've seen quite a few of your posts and have noticed that you are not getting many replies. I think it might be because you write in abbreviations and caps lock a lot. It is very difficult to read and caps lock means the same as shouting. English may not be your first language so the short version of writing may be easier for you but you should notice that we all write in full sentences and very rarely use caps lock. If you try this way, you'll surely get more responses. Princess8: Ooopss i was not aware of the Caps lock thing ookk i will keep in mind now ...Thanks dear for correction.I did not mean shouting etc […]" (01/10/2015).
	The newbie's engagement was not recovered in cases when no one stepped in by answering the needed inquiries. Therefore, the newbie stopped posting thereafter (hence shifted to dormancy or even disengagement)	The OP did 3 attempts of posting on the forum and still did not get any response: "X6: Hello - Been wanting to try eyelash extension but I want to make sure I go to the right place […] has anyone tried Zen asian spa in JLT? […]. Thanks." (08/11/2015) (no reply). "X6: Bump" (09/11/2015) (no reply). "X6: no recommendations at all? really?  " (10/11/2015) (no reply).
	Offended members require some focal members to step in and adopt the role of the moderator to stand against the offenders, hence the offended members gain justice and recover engagement	Illustration 1: "B3: Two weeks ago, I was attacked for peeling off my shellac! Not a nice environment for newbies in Dubai I'd say ☹ MB: We have all been "attacked" at some point on this forum – it's best to just ignore it and rise above it. I have been the recipient of very nasty, negative comments one day and the next day have been praised for a comment  Take it all with a grain of salt. Living in the UAE makes you very independent. This is a predominately transient population so don't get attached. FD: Perhaps 'attacked' is not the correct term to use. BUT cyber bullying IS! you'll always get positive and negative - take the positive and ignore the negative, because the bullies feed off people getting upset and what they don't realize, is that their harsh words can actually be quite upsetting sometimes. Sarky comments are just that. Take it with a pinch of salt. SL: Keyboard warriors, the internet is full of them. Best just to ignore :-)

		CP: The best thing to do Bella is just ignore them and hope they move away soon. UL: Ignoring them is not the correct way. This can turn into bullying and that has caused a lot of harm to the recipient of the comments. Internet bullying in no way can be simply ignored. You have to remember that you are talking to a person - that there is a person with feelings at the other end. You're not talking to an object of your computer. People tend to forget this. Furthermore, you don't know what sort of life they are living. Some people are already worn thin by their circumstances and go to online forums as an escape from their daily lives. The last thing these sort need is to be picked on. B3: Thanks ladies for your positive feedback take it with a pinch of salt is the way to go then wouldn't want to leave such a useful forum full of lovely ladies like you because of some bullies." (23/09/2015). Illustration 2: "X7: A message from a frustrated newbie: Who agrees that we should keep this forum a friendly, positive place… toooo much aggression… toooo many attacks on newbies […] DT: Don't be upset …we all got bullied at one point (many points in my case) […] JO: Sometimes the written word can be completely misconstrued as something written in jest doesn't have the advantage of expression or tone of voice. I couldn't fathom out why my sister didn't contact me or respond to my texts for a week until I asked her what was wrong. "You don't know??? Try reading your FB message to me last (whatever the day was!)" I looked and to my horror, I had responded to something she said about how she was feeling and I missed 1 word out which changed the whole meaning of the sentence!! She had been pretty fed up with work and annoying niggly health worries and stated that she felt a right moaning Minnie at times. I replied by saying a few things then ended with " as for being a moanie Minnie, well of course you are!!" (I meant to write aren't!!!) We're the best of friends now LT: Dubai has changed in so many ways and the forum members are perhaps less homogenous in culture, so humour which was accepted as such (most of the time!) can now go straight to the wicket keeper for some posters […] DT: So, to the OP, stick around for a while and learn to read the tone of the forum, take what you need from it and ignore the rest, it is rarely ill intended, more often just banter. Or learn not to take it personally, after all no one knows who you are and vice versa.

		It's only as real as you want to make it. So go out and buy a pair of brave knickers and think of it as a cross between the Yellow Pages and Space Invaders  …and remember we've got your back  X7: Thank you all, maybe you are right and I still need to get the feel of it, will take your word for it and give it another chance since you have my back  " (06/10/2013). Illustration 3: "LZ: Why do people like stepping on others?? I feel some people are just here to attack others or monitor their ideas in a negative way […] BN: Because they're bored, have very little else going on in their lives to fulfil themselves and resort to online bullying - it's cowardly. Just ignore it and don't take any of it personally LL: Because it's easy to be a big hard bully when you are hiding behind a screen. Some people just have nothing better to do. NM:[…] Yes there are some who really do stir things up you have the choice of ignoring the post and move on or reply without stooping to their level. X8: I think there are a few posters who enjoy coming on to take their daily frustrations out on others! It can be hard not to take in personally but then u just have to realize it's their issue not urs & try to rise above it, it's quite sad really 😢 L3: A lot of people just enjoy being "the forum police". This one isn't too bad but it does happen everywhere. When I was younger this kind of thing would have bothered me a lot more but I think, like most women, i've got a lot more confident with age and now I just laugh. I read the forum for a lot longer than i chose to post, just as soon as we knew we were moving over. There is a lot that's useful here, and a lot from people who might need to get out more. TB: At the end of the day, it's just a reflection of real life, from the annoying/obnoxious end of the scale to the tremendously nice end, and everything in between - that's life. EW is good as a forum as it let's you see other sides to discussions that you may not otherwise think of, but if there is a post you don't agree with or a poster you don't like, ignore and move on! We wouldn't all be friends in real life and sometimes you just need to be a bit thick skinned if someone disagrees with you.

		Z3: I found some interesting points from an article on cyberbullying.... […] ***Many serial bullies are also serial attention-seekers.*** […] ***The objectives of bullies are Power, Control, Domination, Subjugation*** […] ***The Number One rule*** *for dealing with this type of behaviour is: don't respond, don't interact and don't engage.* [….] *However,* ***never argue with a serial bully*** […] http://www.bullyonline.org/related/cyber.htm X9: Talking about it probably just gives these ppl the attention they seek - as Z3 wrote. I say, move forward, don't look back, stay positive, keep head hi and focused on real life. In the end they will be judged for their comments, not you. LZ: Thank you so much for all the replies and thank you Z3 for the link…has great info…will definitely try to ignore the bullies […] Thanks a million😊" (22/09/2014)/

Appendix 14: Additional Illustrations for the State of Reductive Engagement

Property	Observation	Additional Illustrative Posts
Dispositions	Core members reach reductive engagement due to excessive demotivation caused by extensive negative experiences related to spamming and censorship	"CP: TNT…Is there ever going to be one?" AN: Never again. You need to get on Facebook. CP: are there TNTs on there? Is that where all the TNTs are occurring AN: I wouldn't say there are TNTs, but definitely more movement than here. OD: Any specific pages? Before the mods come on and delete...soooo boring over here CP: FB… so that's where you ve been lately  … but I don't want to go get on FB! I hate FB!! What we really need is FB to shut down lol ! hate to admit it but it has become so boring over here… don't know how much longer I can take it  DT: sorry to say it CP but you are in the minority with your dislike of Facebook...and contrary to your belief, it isn't full of people talking behind others' backs" (04/06/2015). "FI: Where is everybody? What has happened to this board? It is soooooo slow these days. Hardly a few threads get bumped up...where is the gossip and scandals? SJ: it used to be fast and furious.... always had loads of people signed in, no matter what time of day.... Thursday afternoons were best, get the popcorn and vino ready. lol HA: I agree… It's so boring … But I am still hopeful… Every day I say to myself maybe today is the day and we will finally have a TNT!!1 CP: now it is quite dull […] but there is always hope … lots of newbies with lots of questions … Hopefully one would turn into TNT… RT: Not too optimistic, but who knows…. Maybe tomorrow is a better day…." (28/08/2015).

Appendix 15: Additional Illustrations for the State of Dormancy

Property	Observation	Additional Illustrative Posts
Dispositions	Naturally occurring dormancy takes place when a member who has been actively engaged becomes temporarily inactive due to personal reasons such as lack of time (e.g., being busy at work or during a family vacation) or circumstances beyond the member's control (e.g., sick child)	1) "DZ: So pleased you are back on the forum BB! BB: thanks, DZ, nice to see you're still around as well!" (19/08/2014). 2) "D4: Hello Ladies, I've been on this forum for long, but been away for over a year […]" (19/08/2015). 3) "RT: GI another big, HUGE fan of your recipe, so is my family! Thank you a million. Miss seeing your posts on EW. GI: Thank you darlings – I've been very busy lately with work and finishing my dissertation, which I hope to hand in completed by the end of august […]" (15/07/2015).
Temporal Connections	Induced dormancy is related to a member's temporal connections, where a member is too demotivated by past negative experiences (past connections) to remain actively engaged, and hence shifts to passive lurking	1) "WK: Hi aAR - am still kinda around (thanks to a lovely friend who sent me a heads up for your post) so thought I'd quickly drop in on the chat. Yep, I'm in Dubai during the week and Muscat Thurs, Fri and Sats. More than happy to answer your questions (if I can!!! No kids but friends in Muscat are teachers). Drop me an email on […] at gmail dot com […]" (21/08/2011). 2) "WK: Oooh, I m an old poster but haven't been on the site for quite a long time, but just a couple of days ago I put 2 posts up, one asking for help in the form of donations, another in the form of info […]" (17/01/2012).

Appendix 16: Additional Illustrations for Disengagement

Property	Observation	Additional illustrative posts
Dispositions	Naturally occurring disengagement: functionally engaged members associate the community engagement with living in Dubai, hence disengage once they relocate and re-engage if they return again	"S4: Hello dear ladies. I'm an old timer at EW who got relocated and now planning to be back in Dubai. Please advise on the new areas for living these days […] I love Expat Woman and so glad to be here again!" (14/01/2016).
	In contrast, core members maintain their engagement after relocation, since the prime reason for engaging with the community is the social support	1) The following is an excerpt from another core member who has joined EW in 13/06/2009, left Dubai in 2013, and is still actively engaged with total of 8568 posts to date: "SJ: Spent 5 years in Dubai, we left 2 years ago and now in Qatar, I hate it, always have... we are heading back to Dubai in June, to do another few years ... then what!!!!! Haven't got a clue where we want to be." (12/03/2015). 2) The following two excerpts involve a core member (AR) who joined EW on 03/06/2009, has left Dubai in 2012, yet remained engaged with total of 6350 posts to date: "AR: […] That said, I moved country 6 months ago and I loved Dubai too, but am now so in love with my new country that Dxb seems like a weird entity, not a place I lived in and loved for 5 plus years […]" (16/07/2012). "CP: Hey AR! Are you coming back to Dubai? AR: No CP, just coming over for a night to do some Christmas shopping (ugh) and thought I might squeeze a chiro in as well" (12/11/2015).
Temporal Connections	Induced disengagement can be in the form of an abrupt termination. This is typically experienced by newbies who are highly vulnerable and have no reservoir of past connections, and hence tend to magnify the impact of negative responses (cases of incongruent sharing).	The OP was asking for specific information and instead got judged and criticized. However, she did not comment on the negative responses she received and just disappeared from the thread. Moreover, her profile was reviewed and it further suggests that she did get disengaged after the negative responses she received in this thread. Her registration date is 26/02/2015 with a total of 2 posts. The first was posted on 2015/10/10 and did not receive any reply, whereas the second is her inquiry below, hence further highlighting the vulnerability of newbies due to the lack of previous connections. "Z4: Hi ladies. I'm planning to look at some 2bed apartments in Sadaf that I'm told have a storage room. Is that room suitable to be used as a maid's room? TIA

		B6: Have not seen the rooms you speak of but would say – HELL NOOOOO! […] AB: […] I remember a thread fight over it a few years ago […] SR: Yes... If she sleeps standing up! SB: Well, perhaps ask yourself if you would sleep in a room that is advertised as a storage room, not a bedroom, and then you might find your answer! Seriously? Z5: Seriously???? Does it have AC? A Bathroom? Space to breath???? AB: Yikes! I have a room beneath like in the link under my stairs. I would never put a human being in there! I couldn't put a person who is taking care of my home in a windowless room without a bathroom or toilet, where they couldn't even fit a bedside table. I would rather use the storage room as a storage room and clean my obviously small apartment myself. S2: Those are more closets than anything else, please get an apartment with a maids room, JBR definitely has those, else… DON'T GET A MAID CB: It's a very valid point! The room with the boiler looks like a scary bedroom. I wouldn't put a dog in that room!!! […] MJ: This post makes me sick, are you seriously for real? I wouldn't even put my dog in a storage room. Shame on you and anyone else who treats their nannies/maids etc like lesser people." (10/10/2015).

Appendix 17: Review of Studies on Motivations or Antecedents and Consequences of Participating in Online Communities

Authors	Purpose of the Study
Wasko & Faraj (2000)	To explore why people participate in knowledge exchange in online communities of practice
Hars & Ou (2002)	To identify the motivations for participating in open-source projects
Lakhani & von Hippel (2003)	To explore the motivations to participate in providing the mundane task of filed support in an open-source project
Wasko & Faraj (2005)	To examine how individual motivations and social capital influence knowledge contribution in online communities of practice
Dhalokia et al. (2004)	To investigate two group-level determinants of online community participation (group norms and social identity), and their motivational antecedents and mediators.
Ridings & Gefen (2004)	To explore why people join online communities
Gruen et al. (2005)	To examine the key factors that drivers and outcomes of C2C exchanges in online communities
Ridings et al. (2006)	To differentiate between motivations of lurkers, infrequent posters, and posters in order to understand the differences in their behaviours.
Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder (2008)	To explore the possibility of meaningfully segmenting the members based on their motivations to join the community.
Woisetschläger et al. (2008)	To conceptualise and empirically test drivers and consequences of consumer brand community participation.
Ross el al. (2009)	To examine the influence of personality on Facebook use and the associated motivations.
Casaloˊ et al. (2010)	To explore the antecedents and consequences of consumer participation in online communities.
Kim et al. (2011)	To examine the effect of cultural difference in motivations for using social network sites
Muntinga et al. (2011)	To explore motivations for brand-related social media use.
Seidman (2013)	To explore the effect of personality on social media use and motivations.

Appendix 17: Continued

Authors	Purpose of the study
Tsai & Men (2013)	To understand the motivations and antecedents of consumer engagement with brand pages on social networking sites.
Luarn et al. (2015)	To investigate social work-of-mouth motivations and to understand motivations to engage in check-in behaviour in social network sites.
Shao et al. (2015)	To develop a motivation-based segmentation typology of Facebook users.
Teichmann et al. (2015)	To investigate the effect of the community type (company-hosted vs. consumer-hosted) on motivational drivers of content contribution
Kim & Drumwright (2016)	To explore the effect of social relatedness on consumer motivation (intrinsic vs. extrinsic) to engage with brands on social media.
Martínez-López et al. (2016)	To identify consumers' motivations to participate in online brand communities.
Tseng et al. (2017)	To examine how members' initial motives to participate affect the development of their commitment.

Commentary addressing the required corrections for the thesis

1. Substantive Issues

- *Clarification of the role of practice theory as both a meta-theoretical perspective as well as middle-range theory about Actor Engagement (AE):*

This point has been addressed by explaining how practice theory has been embraced as both a metatheoretical perspective and a midrange theory, and how it can inform the AE theorising from these two levels via two routes (see section 2.8.1, p.42). The candidate made use of the suggested reference (Schau et al. 2009) in addition to other references (e.g., Vargo & Lusch 2016; 2017; Brodie et al. 2011b; Hollebeek et al. 2017). Moreover, Figure 2.1 (p.31) has been amended accordingly to reflect this dual role.

- *Clarifying why you adopted an SDL perspective rather than an SL. This will only require 1 or 2 paragraphs.*

To address this point, the candidate added a new elaborate section of three pages (section 2.5. Service Logic (SL) vs. S-D Logic, pp.27-30) where an overview of the SL is presented and a comparison between SDL and SL is provided, while clarifying why the candidate adopted the SDL rather than the SL as the foundational perspective for the study of AE. This was achieved by making use of all the recommended references and some additional references (e.g., Grönroos & Gummerus 2014; Gummesson 2006).

- *More attention should be paid to the transition from CE to AE*

The relevant section has been amended and extended to address this point (see section 2.7. Advancing Engagement Research: From CE to AE, pp.32-34. The candidate also made use of a new reference (Alexander et al. 2018) to better explain the "zooming out" from CE to AE and the specific level examined in this thesis (i.e. the meso-level). The transition from CE to AE was also highlighted in the introduction (see pp.3-4).

- *The candidate should more explicitly clarify the research problem that leads to the aims and research questions.*

This point has been addressed by amending two sections in the introduction (section 1.1. Research Background and section 1.2. Research Objectives and Questions, pp. 1-6). Accordingly, amendments have been made in the summary of chapter 2 (section 2.9.) to better reflect the research problem in terms of literature gaps (pp. 48-49).

In the introduction, the candidate started by explaining the significance of online communities for marketers and how its existence and success depend on the engagement of some members (AE). She then highlighted the need to understand the dynamics of the members' engagement (AE) process from a network context (multiple interactions among many members, reflected by the A2A interactions) for the prosperity and sustainability of online communities, especially the larger ones which resemble big data environment. She also clarified how a better understanding of the dynamics of member engagement (AE) is necessary to anticipate and/or influence changes in an online community and to identify patterns or practices, being prerequisite for meaningful user/member management system for such big data environment. Having established the need **to demystify the dynamics of the AE process in an online community and the effects of A2A interactions on such process** (the A2A interactions reflect the network perspective with many-to-many interactions among multiple actors/members), the candidate then explained that practice theory (i.e. practice-based approach) will be used to explore such dynamics. She highlighted the merits of **adopting a practice-based approach to advance the AE conceptualisation**; such approach focuses on activities and processes making the AE construct more observable, hence more designable and manageable. Therefore, adopting such an approach can advance the conceptualisation of AE by bringing AE closer to managerial deployment.

In order to empirically explore the dynamics of the AE from such a practice perspective, the first step is to identify a complete array of all possible engagement practices undergone by all members including the less active members, and not just those observed in the most active members (as the case with extant literature), who are typically the minority of any online community. This leads to the first question:

1.What are the AE practices in the online community under study?

And since the AE process is comprised of varying states (discussed in the literature review), in order to understand the dynamics of the AE process, various engagement states need to be identified and the effects of the A2A interactions explored. This leads to the second research question:

2.What are the various engagement states identified in the online community under study? What are the effects of the A2A interactions on such states?

- *The candidate should clarify her philosophical stance.*

The candidate ensured to clarify that social constructivism is her own philosophical stance (rather than being the paradigm that suits best this research). This has been mentioned in the Abstract, Chapter 1. Introduction (see section 1.3. Research Methodology, p.6), and further highlighted in Chapter 3. Research Methodology (see section 3.2. The Researcher's Paradigmatic Position, p.52)

- *More criticality in the presentation of the Cognitive/Emotional Practices (more explicitly showing a nuanced understanding of their complex nature) would be welcome.*

As explained by the internal examiner during the viva, this comment was directed to the illustrations of "seeking advice regarding serious issues" (specifically the illustration where the OP was having a divorce and that where the OP discovered her child needs special care). Therefore, this point has been addressed in the relevant section (see section 5.2.1.1. Seeking Advice, p.119), by adding a paragraph that explains the complex nature of practices and that for the purpose of analysis each post is used to uniquely illustrate a specific type of practice, while the reality is far more complex and a single post can (and often do) involve more than one engagement practice.

- *Rework is needed in Figure 6.2 and 6.3*

Please see the amended Figure 6.2 (p.158), and the added explanation (p.159). However, as explained by the examiners during the viva, it is figure 6.4 and not 6.3 that needed rework (A Spectrum of the Six Engagement States), hence please see the amended Figure 6.4 (p.164).

- *The candidate should pay attention to the generalizability of the study, both at a theoretical and empirical levels*

Based on the discussion with the examiners during the viva, the candidate became aware of her tendency to overgeneralise the theoretical and empirical contributions of the study. Therefore, to address this point, the candidate amended the following: 1) Abstract, 2) section 7.3. Theoretical Contributions (pp. 224-229), 3) section 7.4. Managerial Implications (pp.230-240). This is in addition to further highlighting this issue as part of the limitations of the study (see section 7.5 Limitations and Future Research, pp.240-244)

- *More criticality is needed on the presentation of the limitations and research agenda (which could also be expanded and presented in a Table).*

To address this point, section 7.5. Limitations and Future Research (pp. 240-244) has been amended and expanded, and a new table was produced (Table 7.1: Proposed Research Agenda for AE, p.244)

2. Stylistic issues

- Tables are long lists, which can be helpful for future researchers but are not analytical enough to link to the text. Consider moving some of these to Appendices (especially Table 1.1, currently in the introduction)

  All the tables have been reviewed and the following tables (as per the previous version of the thesis) were moved to the Appendices: Table 1.1 (currently Appendix 1, p.304), Table 2.1 (currently Appendix 2, p. 306), Table 2.6 (currently Appendix 3, p.308), Table 3.2 (currently Appendix 4, p.310), and Table 3.3 (currently Appendix 5, p.313).

- *There are few typographic errors throughout the text.*

The whole thesis was reviewed and proofread and errors were rectified.