Co-creating Corporate Brand Identity with Online Brand Communities: Stakeholder and Process-Oriented Perspectives

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Abstract

Contrary to the traditional conceptualisation of corporate brand identity as a static concept that is defined and articulated through an internally strategic driven process, the contemporary logic of branding characterises brand identity as dynamic and co-created through continuous interactions with multiple stakeholders in social contexts. Despite recent work on how brand communities and individuals contribute towards brand identity construction, our understanding of the iterative and reciprocal processes of stakeholder interaction involved in the co-creation of brand identity is still under-developed. Current research in brand management literature does not provide systematic insights into processes and activities involved in the formation of brand identity.

The aim of this thesis is to systematically study the co-creation of corporate brand identity from stakeholder- and process-oriented perspectives. It focuses on management-led processes as well as on brand identity co-creation activities of the brand community constituting part of the wider process of a socially constructed brand identity. Applying an interpretive case study approach involving in-depth interviews with senior executives of an iconic luxury automotive brand and a netnography of its online brand community, this thesis develops a process model of corporate brand identity co-creation, comprising three management-led processes (i.e., *nurturing brand passion*, *bridging* corporate brand identity meanings ,and *partnering)* and the unfolding activities through which management contributes to the wider process of corporate brand identity formation with community members and other stakeholders. By highlighting the interlinked and recursive nature of these processes and activities in the resulting model, the study offers a deeper understanding of the ways in which

managers are involved in co-creating corporate brand identity. The findings provide empirical evidence for the important role of managers acting as collaborators, listeners, and co-authors as well as the importance of corporate culture in the process of brand identity co-creation.

Given the notion in recent research that various stakeholders can contribute to the construction of brand identity, it is imperative to take a comprehensive look into how each stakeholder contributes to this process. On the basis of data from a netnographic study of the online brand community, the thesis identifies co-creation activities through which the brand community contributes to the co-creation of brand identity and shows how brand identity meanings are enacted and negotiated within the brand community and amplified to a broader audience. This also shows that brand identity is out of managers' control and helps understand how the brand identity, as a complex social phenomenon, develops among a multitude of enacted identities. Taken together, this thesis conceives of brand identity as a constellation of meanings and contributes to the radical shift in branding literature that highlights the dynamic, reciprocal and iterative nature of the brand identity concept. In this regard, the overall findings of this thesis contribute to brand identity theory, brand community theory, and co-creation theory.

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List of publications

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Traditionally, brand identity is defined in terms of concrete and tangible attributes (Kapferer, 2012), and as "a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create and maintain" (Aaker, 1996, p. 68). From this perspective, brand identity is created and maintained internally (e.g. Joachimsthaler and Aaker, 1997; Balmer, 2001; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Kapferer, 2012) and managed through conventional (corporate) brand alignment frameworks (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Urde, 1999; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Balmer, 2012; Kapferer, 2012). According to this thinking, managers control the meaning and image of the brand and communicate a consistent brand identity to internal and external stakeholders (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Balmer, 2001; Aaker, 2004; Kapferer, 2004, 2012). In this view brands serve as identifiers and differentiators of a firm's offerings (Levitt, 1980; King, 1991; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001) and signal competitive superiority (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). In this depiction, firms are predominantly the creator of value embedded in goods and this value is determined through value in exchange, whereby customers are perceived to passively use goods without contributing to the value creation process (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

As marketing moves from a firm-centric view into a new logic of brand management (Merz et al., 2009), scholars increasingly recognise that a customer is an operant resource, in that, he is an active player, with knowledge and competencies, who engages in dialogue and interacts with the firm and other stakeholders to co-create value (e.g., Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos and Voima, 2013). In this view, brand building is a social collaborative process where brands are co-created by multiple stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009; Ind et al., 2013;

Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2013; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2016). The widespread adoption of social media technologies by consumers underpins this structural shift in power from producers to consumers (Pitt et al., 2006). In this context, in the UK 77% of Internet users have a profile account on a social media platform and 91% of social media users acknowledged having a profile on Facebook (Ofcom, 2018). "This online connectivity has enabled users to build communities of interest beyond limits imposed by proximity and to customize products and share their ideas" (Ind et al., 2013, p.7).

Brand communities underpin the development of co-creation (Ind et al., 2013). The concept of co-creation reflects the increasingly blurred boundaries between managers and consumers (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). This shift can be seen in organisations involving stakeholders in co-creation and various collaborative marketing programmes (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Ind et al., 2013; Cova et al., 2015). Brand community members play a dynamic role in the co-creation process 'by acting as providers and beneficiaries, thereby co-creating value for themselves, for brand communities, and for organisations' (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011, p. 320).

Complex interactive market environments, in particular the emergence of powerful brand communities, have challenged the assumption of brand identity as a static managerial creation (Aaker, 1996). Instead, the contemporary stakeholder and process-oriented perspectives on brand management argue extensively for the brand identity as dynamic and socially constructed through complex networked interactions between the firm, the brand and a multitude of stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009; da Silveira et al., 2013; von Wallpach et al., 2017). These interactions unfold as a co-creation process of brand identity construction, whereby brand managers and other stakeholders, individually and collectively "use, talk about, and construct brand identity while enacting their own identities" (von Wallpach et al., 2017, p. 443). During this process, multiple meanings are simultaneously ascribed by

stakeholders to the brand identity, which resonate not only with them but potentially with a multitude of stakeholders. Yet, despite these contributions, recent process-oriented branding literature provides little insight into the role of brand managers in the co-creation of corporate brand identity as a dynamic social process. Understanding how managers and other stakeholders experience, interpret and influence corporate brands is imperative in brand management (Melewar et al., 2012). Research into co-creation also makes abundantly clear that the micro-processes that underlie co-creation are still underdeveloped (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011). So far, only a few studies within the stakeholder- and process-oriented branding literature have offered empirical insights into the reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities (von Wallpach et al., 2017; Black and Veloutsou 2017; Kornum et al., 2017; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013). Although, this stream of research establishes that brand identities are not dictated by managers only, and that consumers and other stakeholders co-create brand identity, nevertheless, explicit and formal articulation of the co-creation activities as related to the brand identity are generally lacking. Accordingly, "branding theory and practice have not fully embraced a dynamic way of thinking and operating which is deemed a necessity for developing and maintaining successful brands in today's dynamic environment" (von Wallpach et al., 2017, p. 395).

The core conclusion here is that the relevance of the co-creation process in brand building remains under-theorised (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016; Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006). We still know little about how the interactive processes of brand identity co-creation work and what roles stakeholders have in the co-creation of brand identity. Notably, the nature and implications of how managers interact with consumers and other stakeholders in this dynamic social process of nested meanings of brand identity remain unclear. Therefore, this study aims to explore how brand managers contribute to the process of corporate brand identity co-creation with members of brand communities. By the same token, this study also

explores how the brand community contributes to the construction of corporate brand identity. The overarching aim of the thesis is to further advance the dynamic branding thought by furthering the stakeholder and process-oriented perspectives on brand identity through empirical research highlighting the dynamic and fluid nature of brand identity as a continual process of adaptation and negotiation between various stakeholders.

Contrary to the classical managerial-inspired approach - that sees identity as static and enduring - and aligned with the process-based perspective of brand identity formation, this thesis defines brand identity as *a continually evolving constellation of meanings, constructed through a dialectical process among a multitude of stakeholders in relation to their individual and collective identities.* The concept of co-creation, which is viewed as the process by which firms and consumers collaborate and participate in value creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) thus becomes critical to this thesis theorisation of the brand identity as "meanings" (Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006; da Silveira et al., 2013; Lucarelli and Hallin, 2014; von Wallpach, 2017).

Key contributions of the thesis are: (1) the development of a process model, which demonstrates the dialectical relationship between managers and the brand community, by systemising processes and inherent activities managers engage in to contribute to the wider process of corporate brand identity formation; (2) demonstrating the dynamic co-creation activities undertaken by the brand community to co-create the brand identity; (3) illustrating how brand identity and stakeholders' identities are intertwined as nested identities.

1.2 Research questions and objectives

This thesis draws on extant research in brand management as well as work that relates to and informs corporate brand identity including social media and brand community literature, organisational identity, corporate identity, co-creation, and the service-dominant

logic. The most prominent of these is work that has emerged in recent years in which scholars have argued the need to recognise the dynamic and process nature of corporate brand identity where identity is situated as a hub of reciprocal co-creation activities between stakeholders involved in the process.

The aim of this thesis is to systematically study the co-creation of corporate brand identity in the context of an online brand community from stakeholder and process-oriented perspectives. Specifically, this thesis focuses on management-led processes as well as on brand identity co-creation activities of the brand community constituting part of the wider process of a socially constructed brand identity. This dynamic approach seeks to advance both theoretical and practical understanding of corporate brand identity development and to contribute new insights into the iterative processes of stakeholder interactions involved in its construction.

The main questions for this thesis are therefore:

1. How do brand managers contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity with online brand communities?
2. How does the brand community contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity?

Applying an interpretive case study approach involving in-depth interviews with senior executives at Aston Martin and a netnography of its online brand community, the first research question studies management-led processes and the unfolding co-creation activities through which management contributes to the wider process of corporate brand identity formation with community members and other stakeholders. By highlighting the interlinked and recursive nature of these processes and activities in the resulting process model, the study theorises how these processes would work and offers a deeper understanding of the ways in which management are involved in co-creating corporate brand identity. Moreover, in

considering managerial contributions to brand identity co-creation, this study provides empirical evidence for the important role of managers acting as collaborators, listeners, and co-authors as well as the importance of leadership and corporate culture in the process of brand identity co-creation.

Given the notion in recent research that various stakeholders can contribute to the construction of brand identity, it is imperative to take a dynamic and a comprehensive look into how each stakeholder contributes to this process. On the basis of data from a netnographic study and narrative interviews with members of the brand community, the second research question aims to identify the co-creation activities through which the brand community contributes to the co-creation of brand identity at the micro level and shows how brand identity is enacted and negotiated within the brand community and amplified to a broader audience. From this perspective, the current thesis takes the position that brand identity is a complex social phenomena that develops among a multitude of stakeholders who negotiate, enact, and develop the brand identity. Taken together, this thesis conceives of brand identity as a constellation of meanings and contributes to the radical shift in branding literature that highlights the dynamic, reciprocal and iterative nature of the brand identity concept. In this regard, the overall findings of this thesis contribute to brand identity theory, brand community theory, and co-creation theory.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised in 10 separate but interrelated chapters.

> **Chapter 1** is an introductory chapter that introduces the background of the research problem and presents the rationale behind this study. The research questions and objectives of the study are explicitly discussed.

Chapters 2 and **3** provide a theoretical background that informs this research. The concepts of corporate brand, product brand, luxury brand, the evolution of corporate brand management, corporate identity, corporate brand identity, and frameworks of corporate brand management are critically discussed in chapter 2. The phenomenon of social media including social networking sites and literature on brand communities are reviewed in chapter 3. This chapter also discusses the dynamics between brand managers and stakeholders in the co-creation of corporate brand identity, therefore building the conceptual foundations for the research questions. This is accomplished through gradually introducing and building on recent research that calls for stakeholder and process-oriented perspectives on brand identity, where identity is illustrated as explicitly subjective, dynamic and reciprocal. The implications of this trend on brand identity development is discussed in-depth.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed explanation and justification of the epistemological and ontological philosophical dispositions that underpin and guide this thesis.

Chapter 5 introduces and extensively discusses the research design and methods applied in this thesis. Here the inductive approach as well as data collection and data analysis methods adopted in this study are described.

Chapters 6 presents the empirical findings pertinent to the managerial perspective and answers the first research question: *How do brand managers contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity with online brand communities?*

Chapter 7 presents the findings related to studying the perspective of the online brand community and answers the second research question: *How does the brand community contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity?*

Chapter 8 provides a thorough discussion of the emergent findings in light of the extant literature. Three managerial-led co-creation processes and their underlying co-

creation activities are identified. Additionally, the chapter discusses the co-creation activities that emerged from the Aston Martin brand community.

Chapter 9 concludes with the theoretical and managerial contributions of this research including advocating for a more process-based view of brand identity. The chapter also introduces the research limitations and proposes avenues for future research.

Chapter 2 -Corporate Brand Management

2. 1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical review of the literature around corporate brand management. The chapter first starts by clarifying the concept of corporate brand in relation to product brand. Thereafter, a historical development of corporate branding is presented. Dominant brand management models are then discussed in great details followed by a discussion of the concept of corporate brand identity in light of recent theoretical development.

2.2 Corporate branding definitions

In the branding literature there are various definitions of a corporate brand. According to Balmer (2001, p.15), "a corporate brand involves the conscious decision by senior management to distil and make known, the attributes of the organisation's identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition. This proposition underpins organisational efforts to communicate, differentiate, and enhance the brand vis-à-vis stakeholder groups and networks". This view takes an identity based perspective and conceptualises the corporate brand as a distinct identity type, managed by senior managers and underpinned by an informal promise that the company makes to its stakeholders (Balmer, 2012). Knox and Bickerton (2003, p. 1013) take a managerial perspective and argue that "a corporate brand is the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organisation's unique business model". In this sense, the corporate brand is experienced in its entirety. It serves as a frame of reference for guiding and interpreting the organisation. Aaker (2004) views the corporate brand as a bundle of corporate associations and perceptions.

The objective of corporate branding has been considered "to establish a favorable disposition towards the organization by its various stakeholders and, as such, this is likely to lead to a propensity to buy the organization's products or services, to work or invest in the company, etc." (Balmer, 1995, p. 30). In this perspective, corporate branding is considered as "a systematically planned and implemented process of creating and maintaining a favourable image and consequently a favourable reputation for the company as a whole by sending signals to all stakeholders and by managing behaviour, communication, and symbolism (Einwiller and Will, 2002, p. 101). Linking corporate brand to brand identity, Harris and de Chernatony (2001, p. 442) further note that "corporate branding consists of a holistic approach to brand management, in which all members of an organization behave in accordance with the desired brand identity."

2.3. Product Branding

Brands have been around for centuries (Moore and Reid, 2008). Adopting the historical method through the investigation of the historical archaeology literature, Moore and Reid (2008) traced the history of branding back to the beginning of 2250 BCE in the Indus Valley through to 300 BCE Greece. According to the authors, merchants used seals of tigers and other animals in trade where "the markings on the seals were used for informational purposes in trade, for manufacturers, re-sellers and government authorities. The markings have been shown to indicate origin of manufacture and allow for the performance of various functions of marketing (for example: sorting, storage, transportation) both by re-sellers and government authorities" (Moore and Reid, 2008, p. 9). In the late 19th century, increasing numbers of American business owners pushed to develop branded consumer products since most products were unbranded commodities. According to Low and Fullerton (1994, p. 176), "manufacturer-branded products had clear and distinct identities. Their distinctive packaging

made them clearly identifiable on sight." Keller (2013, p. 30) explains that the word *brand* is derived from the Old Norse word *brandr,*- North Germanic language of the inhabitants of Scandinavia prior to 1350 AD- which means "to burn" since brands were the means by which owners of livestock mark and identify their animals.

The brand has been defined in many different ways. Kotler (2000, p. 396) defines a brand as "the name, associated with one or more items in the product line, that is used to identify the source of character of the item(s)". The American Marketing Association (1960) defines a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (p. 404). This definition is often criticised for being reductionist (de Chernatony and Dall' Olmo Riley, 1998), "deconstructionist" (Kapferer, 1992), and for being restricted to a trademark, whereas the focus should be on brands as complex entities and value systems (Keller, 2013). Similarly, Kapferer (2008, p. 171) asserts that "a brand is not the name of a product. It is the vision that drives the creation of products and services under that name. That vision, the key belief of the brands and its core values is called identity." de Chernatony and McDonald (2003) adopt a more encompassing definition of a brand as "an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that a buyer or user perceives relevant and unique added values which match their needs more closely. Furthermore its success results from being able to sustain these added values in the face of competition‟ (p. 25). This characterisation of a brand emphasises two key elements: 1) brand values are of prerequisite for the brand to be relevant and meet stakeholders' expectations; 2) brands are relational and comparable.

In sum, the concept of a brand originally emerged from the field of consumer products/services where the focus has been on the unique features associated with a particular product in a company's product portfolio. Academics as well as practitioners have re-

evaluated the traditional brand concept and extended its meaning and usage to include corporate brands (King, 1991; Balmer and Gray, 2003). Although corporate brands and product brands are distinct entities, both share the same objective in differentiation and stimulating preference (Knox and Bickerton, 2003). The quest for differentiation, visibility and credibility pressures organisations to focus more on the brand's abstract dimensions, mainly identity and values, as key sources of differentiation (Christensen and Askegaard, 2001).

2.4 Corporate branding

While product level branding with its tactical and functional focus has been the dominant perspective in marketing research for decades, more recently, the corporate brand approach has become more relevant due to a number of shortcomings of product oriented-brand research (Morsing and Kristensen, 2001, p. 24). Product and corporate brands play different roles in the company's strategic positioning in the market. Wining stakeholders' trust and building a solid reputation is restricted to the "brand behind the brand" (Kapferer, 1997, p. 222). Equally, in the current competitive business environment, corporate brands have become a viable source of competitive advantage and a significant constituent of corporate strategy (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Hatch and Schultz, 2003), particularly when launching new products or entering new markets. Empirical research also shows that corporate branding benefits firms in circumstances of mergers and acquisitions (Lambkin and Muzellec, 2010), affects consumer evaluations of corporate brand extension (Keller and Aaker, 1998), leads to consumer loyalty (Anisimova, 2007), positive word of mouth (Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008), and consumers' willingness to pay premium price (Del Rio et al., 2001). In addition, Balmer (2001) notes the important role of corporate branding in staff motivation, investor confidence, and customer attractiveness.

In contrast to product brands, corporate brands with their set of coherent values and beliefs meet the needs of a multitude of stakeholders (Ind, 1997; Olins, 2000). In addition, the audiences for a corporate brand are not limited to costumers, rather, they include a multiplicity of stakeholders external as well as internal to the organisation (King, 1991). Schultz (2005) suggests that corporate brands have a higher strategic focus than product brands. Consequently, the role of employees –including senior management- is seen as crucially important in transmitting brand values. In this sense, corporate branding is a "move towards conceiving more integrated relationships between internal and external stakeholders linking top management, employees, customers and other stakeholders" (Schultz, 2005, p. 24). Schultz (2005) proposes a comparison between product and corporate brands following six criteria as shown in the table 2.1 below.

	Product branding	***Corporate branding***
Foundation	Individual products	The company/organization
Conceptualization	Marketing, outside–in thinking	Cross-disciplinary, combines inside–out and outside–in thinking
Brand receivers	Consumers	All stakeholders
Core processes	Marketing and communication	Managerial and organizational processes
Difficulties	•Create and sustain differentiation • Involvement of employees and use of organizational cultural identity heritage • Limited involvement of stakeholders other than consumers	• Alignment of internal and external stakeholders • Create and communicate credible and authentic identity • Involvement of multiple subcultures internally, and multiple stakeholders externally
Brand equity comes from	Superior product attributes, good advertising and communication	The visual and behavioural identity of the corporation

Table 2.1 Product and corporate branding, Schultz (2005, p. 21)

The degree of synergy between the corporate brand and the product brand depends on the brand architecture (Keller, 1998) or the positioning strategy. Managers can decide whether to label an individual product by a separate brand name (stand-alone), by only the corporate brand name (monolithic), or by the two names together (endorsed) (Laforet and Saunders, 1994; Olins, 1989). The first attempt to distinguish corporate brands from product brands was made by Stephen King in 1991 (Balmer, 1998). King posits that since it is difficult to split the service from the product when making a purchase, "the company brand will become the main discriminator" in gaining customer's trust and influencing his perceptions of the brand. King (1991) argues that the brand needs to be established as a consistent entity with a great emphasis on communicating brand values through a common approach to marketing, communication strategy, and consumer research. Equally, he puts great emphasis on the vital role of senior managers, in particular the role of the CEO as the brand manager.

2.5 The concept of luxury brands

A key catalyst of the luxury market is its worldwide growth due the remarkable increase in luxury consumption. The global luxury market tracked by Bain & Company (2017) comprises nine segments, including personal luxury goods, luxury cars, luxury hospitality, luxury cruises, designer furniture, fine food, fine wines and spirits, private jets and yachts, and fine art. The overall luxury market grew by 5% in 2017, to an estimated €1.2 trillion globally. Sales of luxury cars continued to dominate the market, growing by 6% to reach €489 billion in total in 2017 (Bain & Company, 2017). This notable growth can be the consequence of globalisation, wealth-creation opportunities, digital communications, international travel, and cultural convergence (Okonkwo, 2009).

While the literature provides a paucity of definitions of what defines a luxury brand, researchers and luxury specialists are still cautious in providing a universal definition (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012) because the luxury concept is constantly evolving, elastic, and a

subjective concept (Kapferer, 1998) in that whether or not a brand is luxury eventually depends on inferences and perceptions of consumers. In economic terms, luxury brands are those which "have constantly been able to justify a high price, i.e. significantly higher than the price of products with comparable tangible functions" (Mckinsey, 1990). Yet, this economic based view deliberately ignores the cultural and socio-emotional dimensions in contemporary consumption and reduces "the intricacies of luxury brands to generic motivations; e.g. luxury status as a function of price/income" (Roper et al., 2013, p. 377). Kapferer and Bastien (2012) suggest that the pricing power of luxury rests on high intangibles such as culture, heritage, and craftsmanship. Phau and Prendergast (2000, p. 124) propose a more comprehensive definition centred on four factors characterising luxury brands through their ability to "evoke exclusivity, [have] a well-known brand identity, [increase] brand awareness and perceived quality, and retain sales levels and customer loyalty". Similarly, Kapferer and Bastien (2012) affirm that luxury brands can be defined around six criteria: i) hedonistic experience and product timelessness rather than functionality, (ii) offered at price that exceeds their functional value, (iii) culture, heritage, and exceptional know-how, (iv) controlled distribution channels, (v) commitment to personalised services, and (vi) represent a social marker for their owners. A luxury brand can thus be regarded as "the most selective in its distribution; the most image-driven; the most extreme in its product quality [...] and the most expensive" (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009, p. 313). Overall, the above definitions and dimensions of luxury inform our understanding of what defines or constitutes luxury and provide managers and consumers with a set of criteria, which they may generally use in interpreting luxury brands.

The above studies arguably indicate that the nature of the concept of a luxury brand is subjective and multi-dimensional due to the divergence in perceptions. At this point, it is important to emphasise that the current thesis views "high quality, expensive and nonessential

products and services that appear to be rare, exclusive, prestigious, and authentic and offer high levels of symbolic and emotional/hedonic values through customer experiences" (Tynan et al., 2010, p. 1158) as key identifiers of luxury brands articulated around various symbolic, functional, psychological, and experiential needs that luxury brands aim to satisfy.

Although a luxury product is, by definition, not affordable by everybody, the increased disposable incomes encouraged the middle classes to spend more money on luxury brands leading to the democratisation of the luxury market (Dubois and Laurent, 1995; Hudders et al., 2013). As a result, the luxury market is no longer the exclusive domain of an exclusive clientele (Dubois and Laurent, 1995). Due to this democratisation of luxury, the luxury market is evolving as a growing number of traditional luxury firms are widening the range of their offers with products that are more accessible to the mass market adopting masstige (mass-prestige) positioning strategies (Truong et al., 2009). Masstige brands are those which are perceived by consumers to be much closer to the level of prestige of traditional luxury brands than to that of middle-range brands, however, their prices are much closer to those of middle-range brands (Truong et al., 2009). Brun and Castelli (2013, p. 832) propose that, unlike luxury brands, masstige brands are "not necessarily rare or manufactured in low volume [yet] they acquire the luxury label due to design, additional services or the aura created by the brand". Kapferer and Bastien (2012) differentiate luxury from top of the range (the upper end of a brand's range) and upper-premium. Although upper-premium brands (e.g. Audi, Lexus, Volvo) borrow their prestige from luxury brands through imitation, they remain comparative, produced in high volume aiming at the market share, and are chosen rationally for their excellence and daily usage value, whereas luxury is superlative, remains timeless, exclusive, incorporates mystique and artisanship, dream and brand myth (e.g. Aston Martin, Ferrari, Porsche, Rolls-Royce, Bentley) .

From the customer's perspective, research in marketing acknowledges the symbolic role of possessions in consumers' lives (Belk, 1988). Consumers buy luxury products for different reasons. These include emulating the lifestyle of the rich (O'Cass and Frost, 2004; Amaldoss and Jain, 2005), the superior quality (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004) or motivated by hedonic rewards (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012), for example, customers signal social status using brand prominence (Han et al., 2010) and benefit from identity affirmation and group membership (Peng et al., 2011). Similarly, Kapferer and Bastien (2012) speak of a dual function of luxury consumption: luxury for self (self-rewards and pleasure) or luxury for others (brands being a marker of social stratification and signalling of exclusivity). Status as a major determinant of luxury consumption is defined as the "tendency to purchase goods and services for the status or social prestige value that they confer on their owners" (Eastman et al., 1999, p. 41).

A strong brand identity is a fundamental dimension in creating and managing a luxury brand (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012). Kapferer and Bastien (2012) go to argue that luxury brands are powerful identities in their own right because a luxury brand carves its uniqueness and defines itself by staying faithful to an identity that lasts through time, rather than constantly comparing itself to others. A brand identity is a central substance and a frame of reference for the development of a careful and well defined branding strategy (Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008; Okonkwo, 2007). The enactment of a successful corporate branding strategy that is oriented towards reinforcing the brand identity, allows luxury companies to create distinguishable brands in return for customers' loyalty and return on investment for shareholders (Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008).

A key facet of brand identity is brand personality (de Chernatony, 2001; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003; Kapferer, 2004), particularly relevant to luxury brands (Heine et al., 2018). The concept is understood as a set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker,

1997). Aaker's (1997) seminal work identified five distinct dimensions that subsume personality: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication and Ruggedness. However, Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) criticised Aaker's brand personality scale for including concepts beyond personality characteristics, such as intellectual abilities, gender and social class associations. They define the concept not as the whole but as a part stressing the distinctiveness of brand identity and therefore provide a stricter definition by which brand personality is "the unique set of human personality traits both applicable and relevant to brands" (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003, p. 153). Brand personality plays a role in the construction of brand identity (de Chernatony, 2001). More specifically, it communicates emotional attributes (de Chernatony, 2001) and gives the brand identity a meaning in the minds of consumers who perceive a congruence between their perceived selves and the personality traits attributed to the brand (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). Therefore, brands must be instilled with human characteristics and traits in order to articulate what the brand should stand for (Aaker 1996; Kapferer, 2004). "The brand inherits these or constructs them" (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012, p. 149). By assigning personality qualities to brands, consumers create an intimate relationship with brands and accept them as members of the relationship dyad (Fournier, 1998). Furthermore, the symbolic meanings associated with the brand personality allow consumers to construct and maintain their identity (Belk, 1988).

Luxury brands are often considered as being exclusive and rare, and thus their prestige and uniqueness can only be sustained through limited accessibility, "the greater the inaccessibility – whether actual or virtual – the greater the desire" (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012, p. 71). However, the emergent studies about co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Payne et al., 2009) accentuate the notion of a construction process, by which stakeholders come to mutually influence one another, and call to adopt a stakeholder perspective in luxury branding (Roper et al., 2013; Tynan et al., 2010) hence,

challenging the classical managerialist perspective in luxury marketing (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012). For example, Roper et al. (2013) conceptualise luxury brands as a socially constructed discourse, while Tynan et al. (2010) emphasise the importance of co-creation in luxury brands due to the experiential dimension of luxury goods, therefore relating to the service-dominant logic perspective (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2011), according to which a firm and a customer jointly integrate their resources into the co-creative process. Moreover, luxury brands are increasingly using social media to engage in two-way communications with consumers (Kim and Ko, 2012). Importantly however, is how can luxury brands optimally balance between growth and over-exposure on the one hand and maintaining brand prestige and exclusivity on the other hand. Achieving this balance presents brand managers with serious challenges in a complex and constantly challenging market environment. The provision of answers to this question must capture a more realistic and comprehensive account of managers', consumers' and other stakeholders' roles in contemporary brand identity management.

2.6 The emergence of corporate brand management

Research around the concept of corporate branding has been considered to be complex and multidisciplinary because it is intertwined with complex constructs such as corporate image, corporate reputation and in particular with corporate identity (Balmer, 1998; Knox and Bickerton, 2003). The next section provides a historical overview of the emergence of corporate branding and the contextual trends that influenced the emergence of the concept based upon the work of Abratt (1989), Kennedy (1977), and in particular, the historical analysis of Balmer (1998).

2.6.1 The early 1950s and beginning 1970s

This period was characterised by the focus of researchers and senior managers on corporate image management as a topic of concern. The growth of interest in the area has been attributed to Boulding's (1956) book "The Image" (Balmer, 1998) in which he emphasised the relationship between the perceived image and behaviour by stating that there is "an a priori link between an individual's image of an organisation and that person's behaviour towards the organisation" (Balmer, 1998, p. 986). Martineau's (1958) article "The Personality of the Retail Store" also contributed to the prominence of corporate image. The latter defined the "store personality or image-the way in which the store is defined in the shopper's mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes" (p. 47).

This period also saw the emergence of the term "corporate identity" which was coined by Lippincott and Margulies in 1957. The next notable theoretical contribution was made by Pilditch (1971) emphasising the difference between corporate identity and corporate image.

2.6.2 The late 1970s

Increasingly, less emphasis on the notion of image has given way to significant interest in organisational attributes that define the brand such as the internal environment, corporate personality and, in particular, corporate identity. Its seminal work is considered to be the journal article by Kennedy (1977) "Nurturing corporate images: Total communications or ego trip?" (Balmer, 1998). His empirical findings emphasised the importance of the company's behaviour, mainly the role of employees in forming the corporate brand values and influencing the brand image, findings that resulted in incorporating employees into the analysis of corporate brand management. Olins' (1978) book, "The Corporate Personality: An Inquiry into the Nature of Corporate Identity" was very influential in understanding the

strategic importance of corporate identity. In particular, he advocated the use of visual identification (corporate name, logo, tagline and house-style) to build brand identity.

2.6.3. The early 1980s and late 1990s

This period witnessed the heightened interest in corporate identity as the concept began to take over from corporate image (Balmer, 1998). The book "Corporate Identity" by Birkigt and Stadler (1980) is considered seminal in the development of the concept. The authors identified the elements of corporate identity mix: personality traits, acts of behaviour, communications and symbols. Recognising issues around the conceptualisation of corporate identity in this period, Balmer (1998) explains that on one hand, the concept was often used to refer to organisational symbolism such as logos and other visual identification symbols. On the other hand, corporate identity was increasingly viewed as the distinct attributes of an organisation. A notable characteristic of this period was the pioneering of the notion of "company brand" by Stephen King (1991), a concept known in the contemporary literature as the corporate brand. King spent most of his career with the advertising agency JWT (J Walter Thompson). After retirement, he served as non-executive director at WPP and was a Visiting Professor of Marketing at the Cranfield School of Management.

Balmer notes that the concept of the company brand came to prominence around 1995 under a more strategic label; "the corporate brand". Since then, the term began to appear in journal articles put forward by several academics paving the way to a more strategic approach to corporate brand management (e.g., Balmer, 1995; Keller, 1998; Keller and Aaker, 1998; de Chernatony, 1999; Mitchell, 1999). The "corporate brand" as a concept was increasingly used as an alternative to corporate identity. Balmer (1998) at the time noted that the concept of corporate brand was not confused with the visual identification as in the case of both corporate image and corporate identity.

It was also in this period that corporate identity management /corporate brand management took a broad approach and became a concern for academics and practitioners from different countries and different scientific background such as marketing, organisational behaviour, human resources, accountancy, economics, graphic design, psychology and strategy (Balmer, 1998) evidenced by the formation of the International Corporate Identity Group (ICIG) in 1994. The Group, headed by John M. T. Balmer, and includes academics from the University of Strathclyde, Erasmus University, and Harvard Business School, as well as leading consultants.

2.6.4 The 2000s-Present

By the early 2000s, the concept of corporate brand had advanced considerably and the prediction that the concept would emerge as a prominent area of interest has evidently come to fruition (Balmer, 1998). A significant amount of research has been dedicated to different themes within corporate branding literature. This evolution can be observed in a special issue in the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (AMS) (2006) and special issues on corporate identity and corporate marketing (2001), corporate and service brands (2003), corporate marketing (2006), identity perspectives on corporate and organisational marketing (2011), and product, place and corporate branding (2012) published in the European Journal of Marketing (EJM). Due to the burgeoning interest in brand identity co-creation, which reflects the evolution in marketing from a producer–consumer perspective to a co-creation perspective as captured by S-D logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), a consistent body of work has emerged suggesting that consumers and other stakeholders actively contribute to the co-creation of brand identities (e.g., Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013; Da Silveira et al., 2013). The most recent research about the subject was published in the journal of Business Research (2017) and explored the reciprocal co-creation of stakeholder and brand identities (e.g., von Wallpach et al., 2017; Black and Veloutsou, 2017).

2.7 Corporate identity

Thus far, the previous sections of this chapter have provided a theoretical overview and examined the concept of product branding, corporate branding and the emergence of corporate brand management. However, understanding a corporate brand can only be advanced by drawing on a variety of perspectives. Notably, identity - a construct that is core to corporate branding - has been influenced by extensive work in organisational theory (organisational identity) and marketing and corporate communications (corporate identity). In particular, organisational theory critically reflects on the view of identity as inherited and as emergent (Czarniawska, 2000) and largely recognises the dynamic nature of identity which affords a powerful lens through which to understand the paradigmatic shift towards corporate brand identity co-creation. This critical reflection on the use and nature of the concept of identity is rare among brand management theorists (Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006). This section starts with a discussion about how identity is conceptualised in research in corporate identity (which is underpinned by theories from organisational behaviour (Balmer, 2008)) and how the concept is informed by research on organisational identity respectively.

The corporate identity concept dates back to the early 1960s (Balmer and Greyser, 2003) and was first coined by Lippincott and Margulies (1957, in He and Balmer, 2007) who defined the construct as the visual image in relation to the company's symbols and logos that the company uses to identify and presents itself to its stakeholders (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). Despite the attention given to corporate identity in the literature, its meaning is highly ambiguous and the concept is still lacking a precise definition which has led to more confusion with the usage of the term (Melewar and Jenkins, 2002; Balmer and Greyser, 2003).

Originally the term identity was borrowed from psychological and sociological literature on individual identity where it is used to express the sense that a person has about his or her self (Hatch and Schultz, 2004). Applying the analogous features of individual identity to corporations as an actual organism suggests that each organisation has a sense of distinctive personality, autonomy and continuity provided by a combination of organisational traits relating to strategy, history, philosophy, culture and core business (Cornelissen et al., 2007; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006). The concept of corporate identity has strong roots in the practitioner literature and was initially defined in terms of graphic design i.e., the visual aspect of identity (e.g., Lippincott and Margulies,1957; Olins, 1978). Balmer (2001) has cautioned against understanding corporate identity in terms of graphic design, which Olins represents. Olins (1995) defines corporate identity as "the explicit management of all the ways in which the organization presents itself through experiences and perceptions to all its audiences " (p. 3).

Corporate identity has evolved and was extended from being seen as merely a projected image through visual design and other forms of communications and corporate advertising towards a construct that encompasses a set of distinctive, stable and coherent corporate characteristics that provides the company with stability and continuity (Balmer, 1998; Cornelissen et al., 2007). Balmer (2001) has argued that Albert and Whetten's (1985) characterisation of organisational identity as central, distinctive, and enduring should be adapted to corporate identity. This shift led Balmer et al. (2009) to view corporate identity as the organisation's defining fundamental attributes rather than visual identification. Visual identity is only one component of the myriad elements that form corporate identity (Melewar et al., 2001; van Riel and Balmer, 1997). Van Riel (1997) defines corporate identity as "the self-presentation of an organization, rooted in the behavior of individual organizational members, expressing the organization's "sameness over time" or continuity, "distinctiveness,"

and "centrality"' (p. 290). Van Riel and Balmer (1997, p. 355) add that corporate identity "articulates the corporate ethos, aims and values and presents a sense of individuality that can help to differentiate the organisation within its competitive environment".

Balmer (1998) traces the evolution of corporate identity and outlines a growing emerging consensus among academics and practitioners on three distinguishing features of corporate identity. First, corporate identity is fundamentally concerned with reality and what an organisation is, that is, its strategy, philosophy, history, business scope, the range and type of products and services offered, and its communication, both formal and informal. Second, corporate identity is multifaceted and draws on multiple disciplines. Third, corporate identity is anchored in corporate personality, that is values that exist within the organisation. Corporate identity is conceptualised as a function of top management because of its strong links with the company's vision and strategy (Hatch and Schultz, 1997) and is expressed to external audiences through, for example, products, communications, behaviour and environment (Hatch and Schultz, 1997).

Attempting to define the elements which constitute corporate identity, Balmer and Soenen (1999) propose a corporate identity mix composed of the *mind*, *soul*, and *voice*. The *mind* consists of managerial vision, corporate philosophy, strategy, product performance, brand architecture, nature of corporate ownership, and organisational history. The *soul* consists of the subjective elements including the distinct core values, mix of sub-cultures, employee affinities, and internal images. The *voice* which encompasses the total corporate communication and consists of its non-controlled communication, controlled communication, symbolism, employee and corporate behaviour, and indirect (external/ third party) communication. Extending Balmer and Soenen's analogy, Melewar and Jenkins (2002) emphasised the physical, tangible aspects of identity by including the 'body' in the corporate identity mix. All these elements of corporate identity "encompass all those overt as well as

non-overt expressions that might leave an image about the company and its products and services with stakeholders" (Cornelissen and Harris, 2001, p. 52).

Within branding literature, there is a growing consensus that corporate identities and corporate brands are interlinked in that corporate identity provides the foundation for corporate branding (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Harris and deChernatony, 2001). In this regard, when corporate identity is integrated into a branding strategy, communicated and perceived by stakeholders, we can speak of a corporate brand (Balmer, 2010) with an image and a reputation (Urde and Greyser, 2016).

Balmer (2010) recognises the enduring confusions that arise from the conceptualisations of corporate identity and corporate brand and concludes that although the two concepts are often used interchangeably, yet the wo concepts are not identical. The corporate identity refers to the distinct attributes of the organisation and addresses the questions "what are we?" and "who are we?" (Balmer and Gray, 2003). Corporate identity draws on a complex mix of organisational traits and has an overtly internal focus and resides within the organisation, while corporate brand identity, which is born out of a corporate identity, is a cognitive construct that sums up the values which are associated with the corporate brand and that rests in the mind of consumers and other stakeholders (Balmer, 2010). Balmer (2010, p. 186) explains that: " Corporate brand identity refers to a distillation of corporate identity attribution into clearly defined perceived attributes and associations that are linked to a corporate name and, secondary, to an institutional marque. Corporate brand identity is a *perceptual/cognitive* identity type. It is an identity type that has especial meaning to groups and to individuals" (Balmer, 2010, p. 186). This close relationship between corporate identity and corporate brand is further supported by Abratt and Kleyn (2012) who define the corporate brand as expressions and images of a company's identity.

2.7.1 Insights from organisational identity theory

Insights from organisational theory enable us to better understand the concept of identity. The field of organisational identity is fragmented with profound differences and fractious disagreements between identity scholars due to a multiplicity of philosophical perspectives namely between the two dominant perspectives: the social construction (identity as a process) and the social actor (identity as characteristic).

2.7.1.1 The social actor perspective

Organisational identity is widely defined as that which is most central, enduring, and distinctive about an organisation (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Albert and Whetten (1985) explain that the construct of enduringness points to "features that exhibit some degree of sameness or continuity over time" (p. 265). Gioia et al. (2013, p. 125) define central features as "key values, labels, products, services or practices etc." Organisational identity is about "self-referential meaning" highlighting an "entity's attempts to define itself" (Corley et al., 2006, p. 87) by answering the questions "Who are we as an organization?" or "Who do we want to be as an organization?" (Albert and Whetten, 1985) and "How are we different from others?" and "What is important to us?" (Kreiner et al., 2015, p. 983). The key underlying assumption of this perspective is the personification of the organisation, such that the organisation is attributed human-like personality and character (Cornelissen et al., 2016). This perspective recognises the self-referential character of organisational identity, but maintains the view of organisations as independent entities (Gioia et al., 2013) indicating "the organization's self-determined, self-defined, and self-proclaimed position in social space" (Gioia et al., 2016, p. 23). The notion that organisational identity is the property of the organisation and exists at the level of social actor rejects the idea that organisational identity is the individuals' or collective's beliefs about the organisation (Corley et al., 2006) and is therefore distinct from individual and collective levels of analysis (Albert and Whetten,

1985). In this sense, organisational identity is objectively held although it is subjectively constructed (Scott and Lane, 2000) through the cognitions of individuals and groups within the organisation (Cornelissen et al., 2007). From this perspective, "an organization is not a collective composed of individuals but is, in a metaphorical sense, a single organism or human being that can have an identity and ask the self-referential and phenomenological question 'Who am I (as an organization)?'" (Cornelissen et al., 2007, p. 6).

In the social actor view, "organizational identity is considered to be a property of an organization as a "social actor" to whom society has granted legal rights and powers similar to those enjoyed by individuals" (Gioia and Hamilton, 2016, p. 23). Identity claims that are central, enduring, and distinctive are essential for a collective social actor's self-definition, in that, these claims portray a dual role as a coherent guide for how members of an organisation should behave and how other organisations should relate to it based on the conveyed core attributes (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Thus, the functional roles of identity is to facilitate both internal direction as well as external interaction (Gioia et al., 2013).

In this perspective, organisational identities arise from claims made by leaders and can be known only through their collective entity-level commitments, obligations, and actions (Whetten and Mackey, 2002) often "expressed as institutionalized mission statements, policies, and routines (King et al., 2010, p. 295). Top managers shape how the organisation is defined and interpreted internally and externally through leader-driven cognitive lens (Corley and Gioia, 2004). Leaders select, specify, and establish the organisation's shared identity claims that should be institutionalised and adopted by members of the organisation (Whetten and Mackey, 2002). Leaders primarily establish identity claims by shaping others' interpretations of what an organisation stands for by providing them with official and consistent narratives and help members construct their collective self-concept (Whetten and Mackey, 2002, Ravasi and Schultz, 2006).

Organisational identity has been presumed to be relatively stable over longer time and resistant to change, identity alteration only occurs in serious identity threats such as when outsiders question the organisations' identity, consequently pressuring members to question their own understanding of their organisation (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991) and when pursuing the ideal organisational identity (Gioia et al., 2000), or when facilitating identity transition post-merger (Clark et al., 2010).

2.7.1.2 The social construction perspective

The social constructionist holds that organisational identity is self-referential, defined and articulated by members of the organisation for both internal and external audiences (Gioia et al., 2013). This view emphasises the notion that organisational members collectively create meanings and labels and various other features that they see as constituting the essence of organisational identity (Gioia et al., 2013). Scott and Lane (2000) note that managers and various stakeholders contribute and shape organisational identities. Hatch and Schultz (1997, p. 357) clarify that "organizational identity refers broadly to what members perceive, feel and think about their organizations. It is assumed to be a collective, commonly-shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics." In this view, the focus is on the meanings ascribed to claims made and used labels by members of the organisation (Gioia and Hamilton, 2016). From this perspective, organisational identities are constructed and maintained through ongoing intersubjective negotiations of claims that underpin organisational identity (Gioia et al., 2013). The shared understandings of the organisational reality affect organisational change and strategic decision making (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia and Thomas, 1996).

While the majority of empirical research builds on Albert and Whetten's definition (central, enduring, and distinctive) in their understanding of the organisational identity

construct, a number of scholars have taken issue with the notions of *enduringness*, especially those adopting a social construction view arguing that identity may change in particular situations (e.g., Corley and Gioia, 2004; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). In this regard, a notable contribution is made by Gioia et al. (2000) who argue that identity can change within relatively short spans of time even if identity claims remain the same over time. They recognise that organisational members tend to perceive identity as stable, even when it is continuously in flux, because members continue to use the same labels to describe their core beliefs and values even as the meanings associated with those labels subtly evolve and change. That is, " the labels are stable, but their meanings are in flux —thus leading to the appearance of stability even as identity evolves" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 126). The authors maintain that it is more appropriate to refer to identity as having continuity over time rather than labelling it as "enduring". "An identity with a sense of continuity, however, is one that shifts in its interpretation and meaning while retaining labels for "core" beliefs and values that extend over time and context" (Gioia et al., 2000). These authors conclude that different forms of organisational images may serve as referents for identity and therefore destabilise the current sense of organisational identity and activate an adaptive process of identity adjustment. This adaptive process is labelled "adaptive instability" (Gioia et al., 2000) to demonstrate the interwoven relationship between identity and image. This implies that members' perceptions of their organisational identity are reinterpreted in light of reactions and perceptions among external stakeholders of the organisation and its claimed identity. It is important to note that the concept of image is used inconsistently in organisation theory and marketing literature. Organisation theorists refer to image as the way members of the organisation believe people outside the organisation see it (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991). It describes "insiders' assessments of what outsiders think " (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991, p.

215), while in the marketing and branding literature the term refers to the external perceptions held by various stakeholders (e.g., Kapferer, 2008).

Schultz (2016) summarised three views on identity change: identity as enduring stability (identity is continuous and changes very slowly over time), identity as periodic or partial change (identity claims/labels and their meanings change completely or adapt to external images and shifts in strategies and environments), identity as ongoing change (identity as process and flows of expressions and interpretations continuously constructed in different moments in time). It is important therefore to recognise that these views reflect the difficulties in defining identity, its distinctiveness and endurance. Ravasi and Schultz (2006) conceive of organisational identity in much inclusive sense and argue that the social actor and social constructionist perspectives are complementary as to make their analytical separation unproductive.

In conclusion, insights from organisational identity can influence and meaningfully inform corporate brand identity (He and Balmer, 2007; Balmer, 2008). In particular, the social constructionist view appears to recognise the dynamic and adaptive nature of identity and that identity is a relational concept that develops through internal and external contributions. By inference, this notion extends to the concept of corporate brand identity and calls for a new perspective on the nature and development of brand identity which will be discussed in the next section.

2.8 Corporate brand identity

The concept of brand identity has conventionally been defined in the branding literature as a stable entity, which is internal to the firm and the source of influence on consumers' perceptions and interpretations of the brand meaning (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012). According to this perspective, the corporate brand identity lives in the minds of individuals and groups: "corporate brand identity is a perceptual/cognitive identity type" (Balmer, 2010, p. 186) and refers to "perceived attributes and associations that are linked to a corporate name and, secondary, to an institutional marque" (ibid). In this version of brand identity, a well-defined brand identity is critical for the long-term building, differentiation and management of the corporate brand (Aaker, 2004). Recently, however, the managerially-oriented assumption of brand identity as a static managerial creation that is unilaterally developed, maintained and strategically managed through conventional brand alignment frameworks (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Urde, 1999; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Balmer, 2012; Kapferer, 2012) has been challenged because it does not reflect brand management practices in today's complex market environments, in that, brand identity is not portrayed as stable and enduring (da Silveira et al., 2013).

It was not until the 2000s that the stakeholder-oriented perspective on brand management emerged, which considers brands as dynamic and social processes and recognises that they are socially constructed through complex networked interactions between the firm, the brand and a multitude of stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013). Thus, brand identity is viewed as dynamic and originates from multi-stakeholders (da Silveira et al., 2013). Since stakeholders are defined as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman 1984, p. 46), this means that internal and external stakeholders (e.g., employees, individual consumers, brand communities etc.) have a role to play in appropriating and co-

creating brand identity. Indeed, Kornum et al. (2017) note the existence of synergies and tensions between the intended brand identity, collective identity of the brand community, and individual consumer identities as articulated by brand community members. This process of ongoing social negotiations among stakeholders results in "a nested system of identities" (Kornum et al., 2017, p. 432), where different identities interact in complementary or contradictory ways.

Von Wallpach et al. (2017) posit that the construction of the brand identity and the construction of stakeholder identities are reciprocally intertwined through the many performances of stakeholders including brand managers. This suggests that brands "are social entities experienced, shaped, and changed in communities" (Brown et al., 2003, p.31). Although the process-oriented branding perspective has recently advanced our understanding of brand identity co-creation, only a few empirical studies shed light on the reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities (e.g., von Wallpach et al., 2017; Black and Veloutsou, 2017; Kornum et al., 2017). However, they have focused on the co-creation of brand identity among individual consumers and brand communities with the result that much less is known about how brand managers take part in this process.

From the perspective of performative theory, von Wallpach et al. (2017) view brand identity as a social object that is constantly ascribed multiple meanings. Drawing on Tierney et al. (2016, p. 914), brand meaning is defined as "an idiosyncratic and evolving emotional and cognitive understanding attributed to a brand as a result of a socially negotiated process". Thus the meaning attached to the corporate brand identity is the embodiment of phenomenological interpretation in a broader cultural context (Edvardsson et al., 2011). Given the powerful role of brand communities in brand identity co-creation (Kornum et al., 2017; von Wallpach et al. 2017), they are also appropriate context for examining company-led

processes intended to take part in the wider process of co-creating brand identity with other stakeholders.

2.9 Frameworks of corporate brand management in perspective

As a next stage of review, the following sections discuss and critique existing classic analytical models of corporate brand management. This review will further help uncover the dominant assumptions that guide the managerial approach to corporate brand identity.

2.9.1 The corporate image management process model

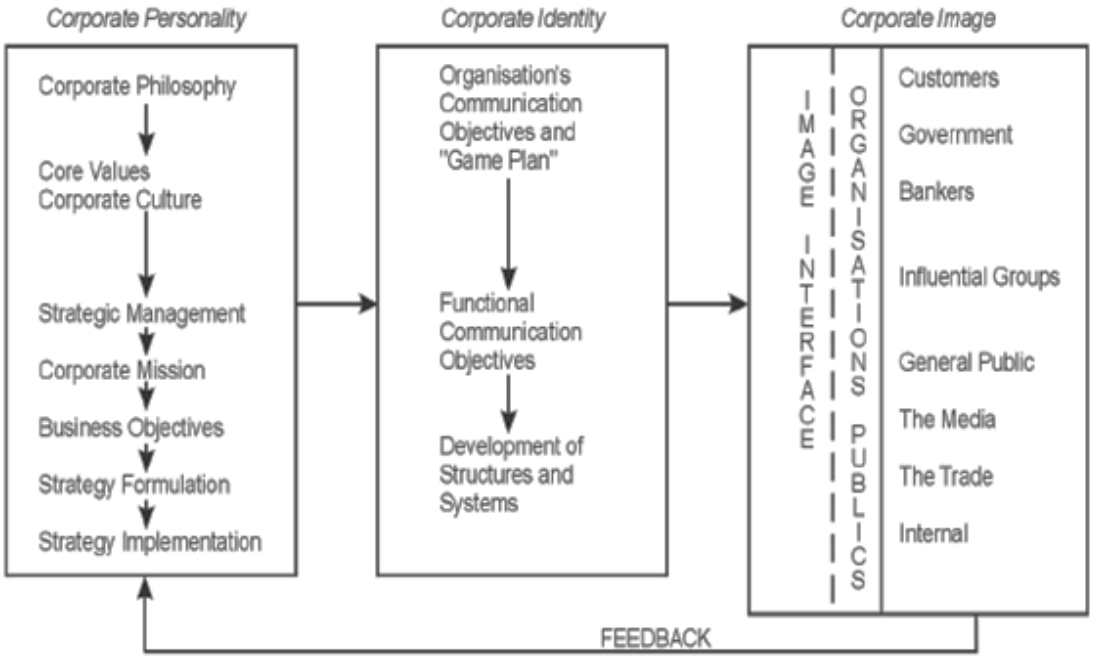


Figure 2.1 The corporate image management process; Abratt (1989, p. 71)

Abratt (1989) adopted the concept of brand personality after it was introduced by Olins (1978). Abratt's model has been highly influential since the dawn of the discipline and was the basis for other models such as Balmer and Soenen's (1999) ACID Test of Corporate

Identity Management. Abratt's (1989) model explains the corporate image management process and integrates the concepts of corporate personality, corporate identity and corporate image. At the heart of Abratt's model is the corporate philosophy which impacts upon the organisation's strategic direction, organisational core values and culture. In contrast to Hatch and Schultz (1997), Abratt views culture as a variable within corporate personality rather than an independent concept.

Abratt (1989), notes that various stakeholders of an organisation hold different perceptions of that organisation, demanding that the corporate image management process ought to focus on developing a "unique set of management system" to meet the needs of relevant stakeholders. However, it has been noted that the author trusts that communication is linear as the model does not include a feedback mechanism between corporate image and corporate identity. This denotes that the organisational communications activities are not subject to external influence and as such image has no reciprocal influence on identity. Yet, brand identity and image are increasingly considered to have a close reciprocal relationship (Schultz, 1997; Gioia et al., 2000).

Another limitation is the fact that Abratt did not attempt to describe the process of corporate image management as a sequence beyond a simple description of the models' concepts. The model also appears to assign too much importance to top down communication. Abratt posits that one of the key activities in the corporate image management process is the development of communication objectives, which are a subset of the overall business objectives. He argues that it is vital that the communication plan be both formulated and implemented at the highest level in the organisation whereas brand managers are charged with merely "the guardianship of the corporate image". In this sense the role of managers in developing and communicating the corporate identity is largely ignored. The author also fails to explain how employees interpret, enact and respond to the formation of a corporate identity

and how they construct their sense of identity in ways that lie outside top management power. Employees portray the corporate identity and should thereby constitute the focus of the model's attention.

2.9.2 Identifying gaps between brand identity and reputation model

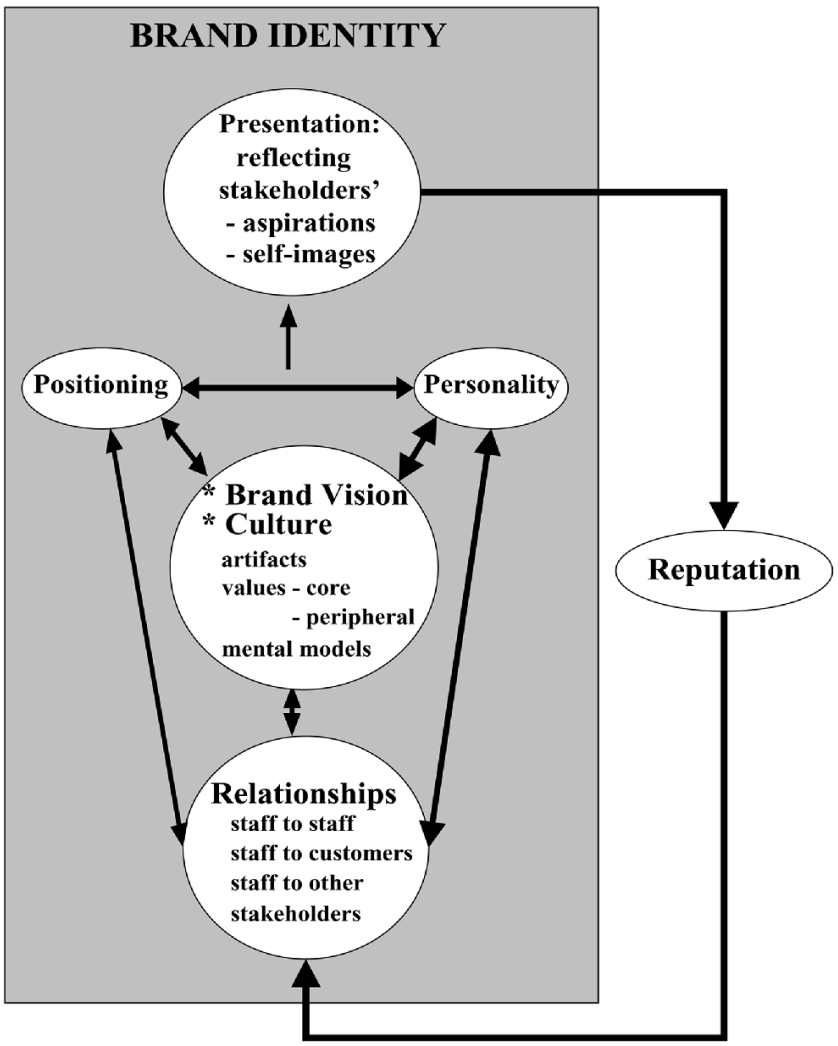


Figure 2.2 Gaps between brand identity and reputation; de Chernatony (1999, p. 166)

To address issues around the alignment of a corporate brand, de Chernatonay (1999) conceptualises corporate brand management as a process revolving around the identification of the gap between brand identity and reputation. The brand identity model includes six elements: *vision* and *culture*, which direct the brand's anticipated *positioning*, *personality* and

ensuing *relationships*, all of which are then presented (*presentation*) to enhance the organisation's attractiveness and reputation. At the centre of the model are brand vision and culture. This seems to reflect the view of Hatch and Schultz (2001) who posit that by effect "strategic vision and organizational culture are strongly linked and there is a need for perceived long term coherence between them" (p. 10). de Chernatonay (1999) makes valid contribution by highlighting the importance of internal brand building, mainly the crucial role of employees as brand ambassadors, as a foundation for building a successful corporate brand identity because their values, culture and behaviours become evident to other stakeholders. He further extends brand management from the responsibility of the CEO to a brand management team.

Despite these positive contributions, de Chernatonay's (1999) model still has significant limitations. First, as the author acknowledges, the model is not based on empirical research. It is meant to offer a simple representation of gaps between brand identity and reputation, which may have direct appeal to practitioners. Secondly, as opposed to Urde's (1999) model which contains a mixture of tangible and intangible elements of the brand, de Chernatonay (1999) relies exclusively on the intangible elements of the brand as key constructs of the model and as the only internal brand resources that leads to a strong brand reputation overlooking other elements such as innovation, product and service quality etc. In addition, the model fails to display the external influence on brand building. This gives the impression that the process of building a brand is entirely under the direct control and influence of the brand management team.

Third, as Balmer (1998) noted, the objective of corporate identity management is to establish a positive reputation among the organisation's various stakeholders. As such, a favourable reputation is not only a result of the organisational internal effort. Media reports, financial analysts, NGO's, and competitors also contribute to stakeholders' image

construction and consequently shape an organisation's reputation to a great degree. Thus, it is needless to say that by focussing solely on the internal brand building, external feedback mechanism on the organisation's current and past actions, which may signal a need for possible future actions, is missing from the model.

The framework also presents internal branding as a closed system. Hatch and Schultz (1997) conclude that organisational sense giving and making of the brand is enormously influenced by everyday interactions between organisational members and external audiences. In addition boundaries between internal and external members of an organisation have become indistinct due to the fact that these members belong to numerous stakeholder groups (Hatch and Schultz, 1997).

2.9.3 Core value-based brand building model

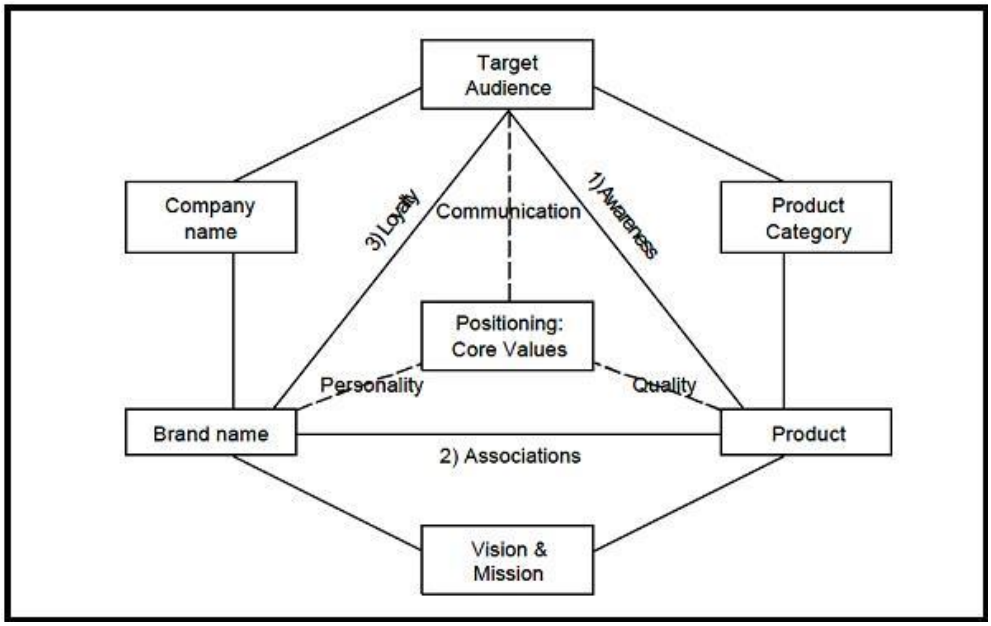


Figure 2.3 Urde's Brand Hexagon (1999, p. 125)

Urde's (1999) Brand Hexagon offers a framework that guides the process of core value-based brand building. The model integrates elements of brand equity and brand identity with a company's strategic direction. According to the author, the starting point for a brand oriented company is its mission and vision which relates to the brand identity, core values, personality, and the actual and future strategy of the brand. Then the brand meanings and associations are communicated through products, product category, corporate brand, brand positioning and core values.

Positioning is placed at the centre of the model as it is the platform through which the brand expresses its core values by means of the dimensions of *quality*, *personality* (i.e., human characteristics that are associated with the brand and serve to achieve brand differentiation), and finally the dimension of *communication* (e.g., the tone of voice -straightforward, cheeky, formal, etc.-, style and choice of media channels). Communicating the brand values consequently leads to brand awareness –an important dimension of brand equity- which is the first step in the brand building process. Through the creation of feelings and various associations the brand can reach loyalty and commitment from various stakeholders.

In this model Urde (1999) makes a distinction between the right side of the model (product category and product) which reflects the "reference function" when interpreting a brand whereas the left side (corporate name and brand) reflects the 'emotional function" in brand interpretation. As such a brand is experienced on the rational level as well as the emotional level (Urde, 1999). The lower part of the model (mission and vision) communicates the organisation's purpose for the brand, while the upper part reflects stakeholders' interpretations of the brand. At the centre of the model lie positioning and core values because they are in the hub of a constant meaning interpretation process caused by ongoing interactions between the brand and its stakeholders.

The key contribution of this model is its strong emphasis on core values as basic elements of a corporate brand identity. The author notes that core values must be relevant to stakeholders and aligned with the organisation's promises, attitudes and marketing communication programmes. Urde (1999) defines core values as "all-embracing terms that sum up the identity of the brand as well as being the guiding principles for all internal and external brand building processes. The main limitation of the model is its reliance on internal branding in creating core value-based brands, whereas the branding process takes place in parallel (i.e., inside and outside the organisation). Externally, the model subtly presents awareness of consumers as a reference point linking core values to added values and vice versa.

In addition, the model mixes two different levels of brands; corporate brand and product-level (category product brand, product brand). These types of brands are complex in structure and differ in terms of their theoretical conceptualisation, function and focus, and therefore differ in the way they are ought to be managed. Although these types of brands build on the concept of the organisational core values, Urde (1999) did not explain who is likely to lead the branding process within an organisation and how the management of this process is coordinated.

2.9.4 Identity management mix model

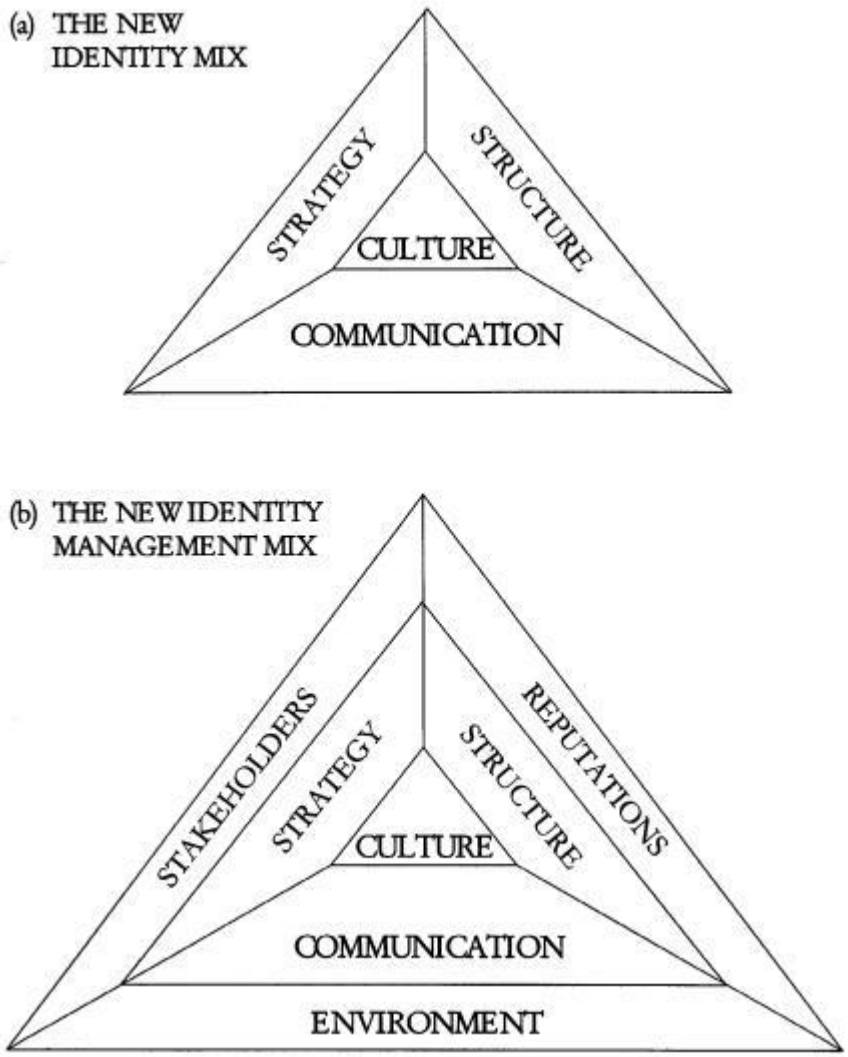


Figure 2.4 Identity management mix, Balmer (2001, p. 5)

Balmer's (2001) new identity mix was built around the business identity mix of Steidl and Emory (1997) - the mind (i.e., the vision, the philosophy and strategy through which the company acquire its legitimacy to do business) the spirit (or the values, attitudes and the overall behaviour of the company towards its various stakeholders) and the body (i.e., the company's physical infrastructure needed to run the business), which the author re-categorised as: 1) strategy (the mind) which refers to the attribute of corporate identity and

consists of leadership vision, corporate philosophy, corporate strategy, corporate brand promise, financial corporate performance and performance of the corporate offerings (products and services), 2) structure (the body) which represents the organisational structure and the way parent company, subsidiaries and business units interact, consequently affecting the corporate identity, 3) , communication (the spirit) which encompasses primary communication (refers to the communicated attributes of products and services, price and distribution channel), secondary communication (i.e., controlled forms of communications such as PR and advertising and brand symbols), and tertiary communications (word of mouth), and 4) culture which is at the core of corporate identity and is manifested in a mix of sub-cultures within an organisation (Balmer, 2002).

The model then was expanded to include a set of variables that managers need to address when managing an organisation's corporate identity. These elements are:
Environment – managers need to ensure that the corporate identity remains salient by scanning the external political, economic and technological factors.

Stakeholders – communication strategies must be prioritised and reflect different audiences' perceptions and aspirations.

Reputations - the predominant impression of an organisation developed by audiences including the reputation of the corporate company, its subsidiaries, business units and alliance partners, the country-of-origin, and the company's senior management.

The main contribution of this model is the consideration of external environment as an element of the management mix. The model echoes what Balmer and Soenen (1999) labelled a 'vision driven approach' to brand management, therefore shifting from approaching brand identity as a mere visual manifestation of a company to a strategic concept in brand management. However, the major limitation of this model is that it is not based on empirical

research. Furthermore, the model is not necessarily ideal as it is difficult to interpret due to the complexity of identifying the relationship between its components.

2.9.5 Vision, image and culture gap identification model

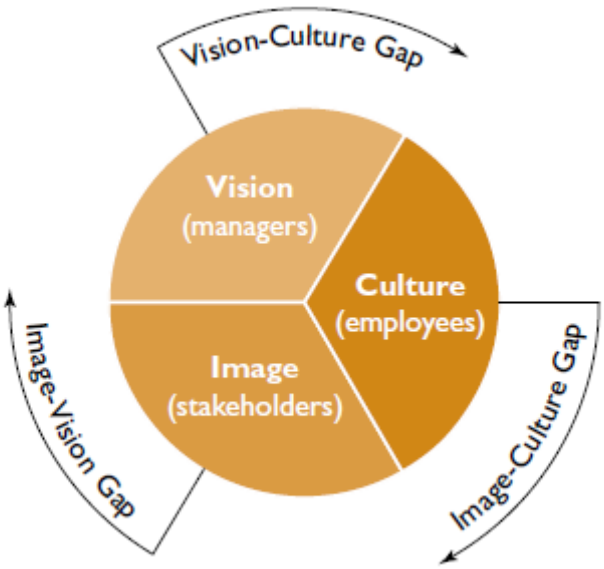


Figure 2.5 The corporate branding tool kit; Hatch and Schultz (2001, p. 10)

Hatch and Schultz (2001) developed the corporate brand toolkit based on research in more than 100 companies over more than 10 years. Schultz (2005) conceptualises corporate branding ”as alignments between the origin and everyday practices of the organization (organizational culture); where the organization aspires to go (strategic vision); how the organization is perceived by external stakeholders (image); all nested in perceptions of who the organization is (identity)” (p. 24).

Organisations can use these three variables (vision, culture, and image) to review the strengths and weaknesses of their corporate brand. Misalignment can be identified by a series of diagnostic questions to all stakeholders internally as well as externally, uncovering the

relationship between the three elements and potential gaps simultaneously. The image-vision gap occurs when the strategic vision of top management is in conflict with outsiders' image. If the problem is misalignment between the company's strategic direction and employees aspirations and sense making of this strategic direction, then there is a vision-culture gap. Misalignment between stakeholders' images of the company and the company's communicated values, attitudes and behaviours leads to image-culture gap. The gap analysis needs to be conducted concurrently. The authors further propose that when an identity gap is detected, it is essential that managers make an action plan to guide the re-alignment process.

This model has been highly influential in the organisational and branding literature. It offers a salient analytic tool to identify organisational gaps. The model also underscore the close relationship and reciprocal influence of vision, culture, and image, as well as their implications for brand management. "Culture, identity and image form three related parts of a system of meaning and sense-making that defines an organization to its various constituencies" (Hatch and Schultz, 1997, p. 357). However the main limitation is that the model does not offer managers guidance as to the process of brand re-alignment. This limitation is, in fact, recognised by the authors who describe the toolkit as useful for identifying issues areas, but state that "the hard work of developing specific solutions and implementing them belongs to you and your team" (Hatch and Schultz, 2001, p. 130). Knox and Bickerton (2003) suggest that this framework should be expanded by including a fourth parameter; the competitive environment of the organisation.

Another limitation of the model is the assumption that alignment between image, vision, and culture is a straightforward process. The model seems to neglect that, for example, changing the organisation's culture is a difficult task (Rosenfeld and Wilson, 1999) because changing the culture within an organisation requires an "unfreezing" of the status quo, and

later a “refreezing” to consolidate the new organisational status (Lewin, 1951 cited in Lind, 2015).

2.9.6 The ACID test model

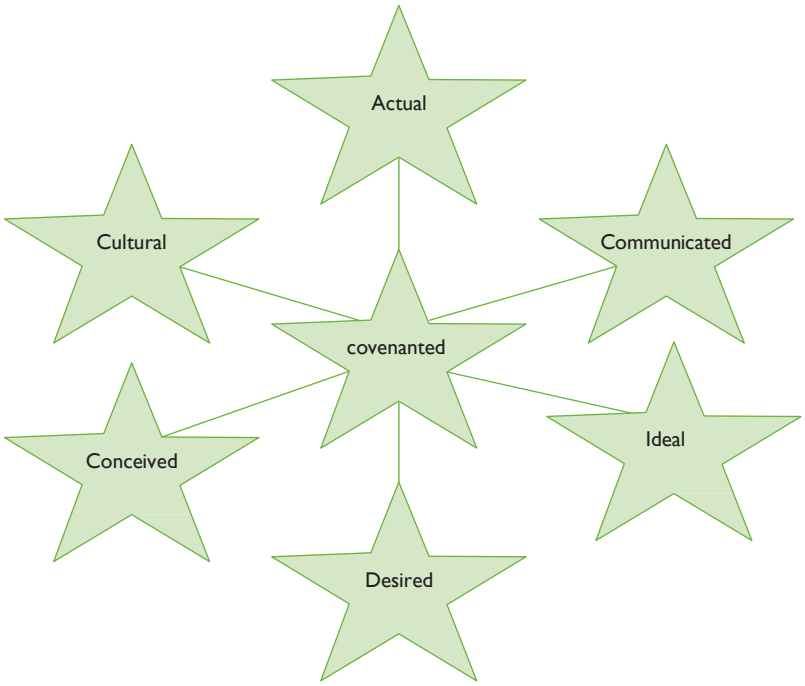


Figure 2.6 The Corporate brand bridging constellation (Balmer, 2012, p. 22)

Balmer’s ACID Tests are complex models of corporate identity; nevertheless they are useful frameworks for brand management. Since its initial conceptualisation in 1999 by Balmer and Soenen, the ACID Test has been altered and refined several times in light of feedback from its application in business. The current version, the acronym AC4ID Test, comprising seven identities goes back to 2005 and is mainly informed by multiple in-depth case study research dating back to the 1990s using qualitative data.

The identity types in AC4ID Test are as follows:

Identity Type	Description	Concept
Actual Identity	What the company's identity emphatically is	Corporate Identity
Communicated Corporate Brand Identity	What the company claims the corporate brand to be	Corporate Communications
Conceived Corporate Brand Identity	What the corporate brand is seen to be (by stakeholders)	Corporate Brand Image/reputation
Covenanted Corporate Brand Identity	What the company's brand promises to be	Corporate Brand (promise)
Cultural Corporate Brand Identity	What the (internal) corporate brand values are found to be	Corporate Brand Culture
Ideal Corporate Brand Identity	What the corporate brand needs to be	Corporate Brand Strategy
Desired Corporate Brand Identity	What the CEO/Senior Executives wishes the corporate brand to be	Leadership's Vision

Table 2.2 The AC4ID Test Identity types, adapted after Balmer (2012, p. 11)

Balmer based his ACID Test on Self-Discrepancy Theory adopting Higgins' (1987) work on "domains of the self". Higgins (1987) identified three forms of the self; the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self (normative). He explains that (a) the actual self, is our representation of the attributes that someone (we ourselves or another) believes we actually possess; (b) the ideal self, refers to our representation of the attributes that someone (we ourselves or another) would like us, to ideally have (i.e., hopes, aspirations); and (c) the ought self, which is our representation of the attributes that someone (ourselves or another) believes we ought to possess (i.e., a obligations, or responsibilities), Higgins (1987).

Balmer views the corporate brand as a distinct identity type. That is, the corporate brand is a covenanted identity which is derived from both the firm's corporate identity and the conceived identity and is referred to synonymously with "corporate promise". Balmer (2012) defines the corporate brand as "a distinct identity type pertaining to one or more entities. It has a quasi-legal character in that it is underpinned by an informal, albeit powerful, corporate contract between the firm and its stakeholders—a corporate brand "covenant"' (p. 6).

However the corporate brand is more difficult to model and define. For example, Kapferer (1997) contradicts Balmer's approach to corporate brand and argues that "identity" is an important dimension of a brand and thus, corporate identity is a component of the corporate brand rather than an identity in its own right.

Balmer argues that, the AC4ID Test is significant in terms of the corporate brand calibration imperative. Brand calibration is "a method—a modus operandi—by which credibility can be attained and maintained in the present (corporate brand being), in the future (corporate brand becoming) and in both the present and future (corporate brand bridging)" (Balmer, 2012, p. 13). According to him the AC4ID Test framework can be used as a tool to assist senior managers in their strategic task of detecting and aligning potential identity misalignments. In operationalising the AC4ID Test framework, Balmer offers the REDS2 Diagnosis Process as a method to guide the corporate brand management process. It is a five-stage process described as follows (Balmer, 2012):

1. R = Reveal the identity types
2. E = Examine the key identity interfaces between the covenanted identity and other identities
3. D = Diagnose the identity gaps and misalignments
4. S1 = Select the interfaces requiring alignment
5. S2 = Strategy; develop the most efficient strategy to re-align key identities

Despite Balmer's stature in the field, his model presents seven brand identities that are not always possible to discern; actual, conceived, communicated, covenanted, cultural, ideal, and desired. The model is based on the premise that the identification of gaps between identities facilitates the identification of potential issues and thereby actions needed. For all its insights, Cornelissen et al., (2012) criticise the model and argue that it lacks coherence,

logically unsound, and tends to use constructs that are not fully identified, lending themselves to multiple interpretations which render the model difficult to apply.

2.10 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an in-depth review of how the concepts of corporate brand, luxury brand, and corporate brand identity have evolved. Furthermore, the chapter concludes that the reviewed frameworks sustained the normative assumption that the corporate brand dimensions are created and managed by the firm. These framework do not appear to consider the concept of co-creation, nor do they recognise the dynamic and evolutionary nature of brands particularly in the context of social media. Notably, the role of the socio-cultural dimension in constructing the corporate brand identity is overlooked. While these models are clearly useful for laying out the systemic relationships between the core dimensions of corporate brands (identity, image, and culture), they do not go beyond the alignment of these dimensions to further explain how the brand identity is co-constructed in a dialectical process. They seem to underestimate the agency of consumers and to oversimplify the construction of multiple meanings (Cornelissen et al., 2012). In fact, social media, in particular brand communities, have brought about a counterculture offering a pivotal point of interaction between stakeholders and corporate brands where a shift in negotiation power takes place between consumers/non-consumer groups and the corporate brand (Pitt et al., 2006). Corporate branding is "a task of dynamic rather than static alignment" which "needs to engage stakeholders to co-construct brand meanings and influence corporate branding strategies, yet maintains some needed degree of coordination and consistency" (Melewar et al., 2012, p. 606).

Brand literature has evolved from a brand logic that considers brands as identifiers to a new brand logic that views brands as being complex social and cultural phenomena (Kozinets,

2002; Pitt et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2003; Merz et al., 2009). Therefore, brands are better understood as processes (Merz et al., 2009), hence, the focus should primarily be on the way in which brands are understood, enacted and constructed in a dialectical process by various stakeholders. This poses significant challenges for brand managers whereby their influence on brand identity is not as straightforward as proposed in earlier corporate branding models. The widespread use of digital communication by various stakeholders, particularly online brand communities, in brand identity co-creation has significant implications for managing the corporate brand identity. These online challenges are further discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 - Social Media and Brand Community

3.1 Introduction

The widespread use of social media has substantially affected brand management (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013), chiefly through the provision of emerging platforms for negotiations between customers, brand managers and other stakeholders. This chapter reviews literature on social media and brand communities as the context of co-creation. In addition, the concept of co-creation is conceptualised and discussed drawing on service-dominant logic and branding literature. Especially, the notion of brand community as a context where corporate brand identity is negotiated and enacted is explored. The chapter further discusses the profound implications for contemporary brand management in particular the dynamic nature of brand identity and the role of both stakeholders and managers in corporate brand identity co-creation.

3.2 Social media: classification and definitions

Based on Goffman's (1959) theories of identity and social performance, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) adopted the concept of self-presentation to offer a classification of social media (see Table 3.1). Goffman's proposition is that in social interactions people tend to project a desired impression of the self. Self-presentation is done through self-disclosure, i.e., "the conscious or unconscious revelation of personal information (e.g., thoughts, feelings, likes, dislikes) that is consistent with the image one would like to give" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 62). Yet, the classification of social media can be problematic since these platforms are evolving rapidly with the inclusion of more sophisticated features and technologies. Furthermore, the needs social media users fulfil may also shift as a result of the evolving functions of the internet (Flanagin and Metzger, 2001). Social media is identified as "a group

of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

	Social presence/media richness		
	Low	**Medium**	**High**
High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., second life)
Self-presentation/self-disclosure	Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g., YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)
Low			

Table 3.1 Classification of Social Media, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 62)

To better understand the concept of social media, it is fundamental to differentiate between two related concepts that are imprecisely referred to in concurrence with social media: Web 2.0 and User Generated Content. The term Web 2.0 was first coined in the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference of 2004, during which O'Reilly referred to a novel way in which applications developers and end-users could use the World Wide Web based on the principle that Web 2.0 is a platform where applications and content is co-created and published by all users (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), unlike Web 1.0 whereby end-users consumed content passively.

Flew (2005, p. 36) explains the shift from 1.0 to 2.0: ” [A] move from personal websites to blogs and blog site aggregation, from publishing to participation, from web content as the outcome of large up-front investment to an ongoing and interactive process, and from content management systems to links based on tagging (folksonomy)”. In this sense, Web 2.0 as a technological platform paved the way for the inception of social media, which is used as an umbrella term for different tools of computer-mediated communication including online social networks.

User Generated Content as a concept came to prominence in 2005 and commonly refers to any publicly available content – text, video and audio- produced by end-users (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). To be considered as User Generated Content, digital content must adhere to three criteria: “i) content made publicly available over the Internet, ii) which reflects a certain amount of creative effort, and iii) which is created outside of professional routines and practices” (OECD, 2007, p. 4). The evolution of social media added another layer of complexity to the concept with the popularisation of social networking sites (SNSs). This requires offering a definition to social networking sites. According to Ellison and Boyd (2013, p. 158) “a social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user generated content provided by their connections on the site.” This definition illustrates the importance of the three defining features of a social network site, i.e., the profile (biographical data, activities, relationships in a network), navigating (browsing the connections between users to view other content and profiles), and have connections lists.

3.3 The emergence and history of social network sites

The idea that everyone is connected to everyone else according to the popular six degree of separation theory (Milgram, 1967) finds corroboration in the contemporary digital society, namely in the field of social media. Milgram's (1967) Small-World Experiment argues that a very small number of people are linked to everyone else through only six degrees and the rest of us are connected to the world via those few. The ‘‘degrees’’ signify the number of persons who act as intermediaries along the contact chains. Social networks sites replicate Small-World Experiment since the inception of the first social networking site, Six Degree in 1997. The website’s core mission was to allow users to create profiles and connect with friends, however it failed as a business model and ceased to exist in 2000. Founders of Six Degree argue that the website was simply ahead of its time (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). However, it would not be a misconception to argue that the lack of innovation which was detrimental to user experience and the fact that the site was not based on advertising to generate cash flow contributed to its failure. Boyd and Ellison (2007) add that early adopters did not have extended networks of friends on the site and most users were not looking for new relationships with strangers.

Six Degrees marked the beginning of a new era as a new wave of SNSs began to emerge. In 2002 Friendster was launched indicating a shift in the typical dating profile by inviting its users to build a network of relationships labelled as “friends” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). The premise was to match friends-of-friends assuming that friends-of-friends- are more likely to trust each other and build successful romantic relationships than strangers would (Boyd and Heer, 2006). To effectively capture the importance of trust, Friendster restricted the access to other users within four degrees’ distance (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). The website continued to amass popularity until 2004 losing ground to MySpace. What followed was that many of its early adopters left because the site encountered technical and

social difficulties. The site was not able to handle rapid growth due to its poorly developed technology and users found themselves in contact with their bosses and classmates in possibly uncomfortable ways (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

MySpace was launched in 2003 in California. During its inception, MySpace targeted dissatisfied Friendster users and was able to grow rapidly. Alienated Friendster users, particularly indie-rock bands who were banished from Friendster because they breached profile rules, actively encouraged others to eschew the site and join MySpace (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). The symbiotic bond between these bands and their fans helped MySpace to build a sustainable user base beyond Friendster users. MySpace reflected rather eclectic user behaviour, ranging from networking and dating to the desire to express self-representation (social identity) and group affiliation.

As one of the largest OSNs to date, Facebook was initially invented to support niche demographics before expanding to a broader audience. Facebook was launched in early 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg and started as a Harvard-only OSN. From 2005 onwards, Facebook became open for students from other schools, shortly after membership was open to the general public. The mission of Facebook is "to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer" (Facebook, 2018). The company was valued at $479.4 billion (Mintel, 2018). Facebook also acquired other social media platforms including Instagram in 2012 for $1 billion, and WhatsApp in 2014 for $19 billion (Mintel, 2018).

Facebook is the most common site on which users have a profile. In the UK 91% of social media users acknowledged having a profile on Facebook (Ofcom, 2018). With 2.20 billion active monthly users, Facebook has grown to be one of the world's largest user base with an increase of 13% year over-year (Facebook, 2018). Of those monthly active users, 1.45 billion are daily active users (Facebook, 2018). While Facebook's service is free of charge, its business model is built on targeted advertising which accounted for over 98% of total revenue

in 2017 (Mintel, 2018). The more time users spend on the platform, the more page impressions Facebook can sell to advertisers. Incomes are directly determined by the number of active users and the time they spend on the network. Henceforth, increasing user activity and as such generating ad impressions and clicks is one of Facebook's major goals (Claussen et al., 2013). Ofcom (2017) found that social media users engage in three key activities: posting comments or sharing videos or photos (78%), liking, sharing or commenting on shared content (76%) or lurking (looking at posts without commenting, liking or sharing) (71%). Social media users are more likely to post comments in public groups (24%), create groups and plan events (24%) and complain to companies (19%) (Ofcom, 2017).

In February 2005, YouTube was launched to become the world's largest video sharing website with over a billion active monthly users globally (Alphabet, 2017). The economic value of the site was revealed when Google acquired YouTube in 2006 for the extraordinary price of $1.65 billion. YouTube is the second most visited website online after Google surpassing Facebook (Mintel, 2018). The success of the site has been built on the desire for users to express themselves within a public medium - to engage in 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2010). Beyond personal entertainment, the site is also used by musicians, a variety of business entities, non-profit organisations and politicians in order to reach wider audiences.

Another widely used social network site is Twitter. Twitter was launched in 2006 by Jack Dorsey as a micro-blogging website, based on the premise of users sharing short nuggets of information referred to as "tweets". In 2017, the platform had 330 million monthly active users globally with a total revenue of $2.44 billion (Mintel, 2018). Twitter expanded its strict character limit from 140 to 280. Tweets are publicly accessible and following others does not require permission as the relationship is not necessarily reciprocal. Tweets are categorised by hashtags to make them easily traceable in twitter search.

3.4 Brand communities

Nowadays the aforementioned traditional branding practices have been challenged by the advent of new technology which has brought about changes in consumer power dynamics with the result that these practices may not resonate with dynamically changing digital markets (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Henning-Thurau et al., 2013). "Along with other forms of computer mediated communication, they [social networking sites] have transformed consumers from silent, isolated and invisible individuals, into a noisy, public, and even more unmanageable than usual, collective" (Patterson, 2012, p. 527). Most consumers were restricted to content consumption roles during the era of Web 1.0, however the rise of social networking sites has removed the barriers of Web 1.0 and elevated consumer empowerment (Labrecque et al., 2013). The term empowerment refers to the "dynamic process of gaining power through action by changing the status quo in current power balances" (Labrecque et al., 2013, p. 258). Consumers are no longer limited to a passive role in their relationship with a brand. Customers can easily express and share their opinions with other customers and influence each other's attitudes and behaviours. They have gained the ability to not only praise brands but also to take revenge against them through electronic word-of-mouth eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), gather unbiased information about products and brands (Eisingerich et al., 2014), and present themselves using digital referents (Schau and Gilly, 2003).

Unlike traditional word of mouth (WOM), social media word-of-mouth (sWOM) has the advantage of enabling consumers to share timely information (Eisingerich et al., 2015). On a more profound level, sWOM is written and remains accessible to users over time (Leonardi et al., 2013). It has been shown that WOM has significant impact on consumer choice and purchase decision making (e.g., Buttle, 1998), as consumers perceive it to be more

reliable and trustworthy source of information unlike information provided by marketers (Allsop et al., 2007; Eisingerich et al., 2014).

Broadening the concept of empowerment, consumers can build online brand communities in the complete absence of the firm (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). A distinct facet of consumer power associated with brand communities is the notion of a "brand hijack" (Wipperfürth, 2005). This occurs when consumers take control of the brand and variables that are inherently pre-determined by marketers (Cova and Pace, 2006). Similarly Cova and White (2010) talk about counter-brand and alter-brand. Recognising the power of the consumer community, Hatch and Shultz (2010) propose a model for a more equal balance between brand communities and companies managing the underlying brands that is based on co-creation.

Brand communities have been around as a marketing concept since the 1990s (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001) and have since evolved to offer unique brand experiences. The brand community literature has regarded the creation of brand communities as a desirable objective for brands in that community-integrated customers are, among other added value for companies, emotionally invested in the welfare of companies and hence more loyal to them (McAlexander et al., 2002). Brand communities as a form of social structure, add to our understanding of consumer behaviour and decision making. Therefore, understanding the phenomena is worthwhile, especially for brands with a strong online presence such as identity brands and luxury brands. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) define a brand community as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand." McAlexander et al. (2002, p. 38) argue that the most important thing being shared in a brand community is the "creation and negotiation of meaning." Other benefits of brand communities are facilitating information sharing, cementing the history and the culture of a brand, providing assistance to consumers, and

positively influencing brand loyalty (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Although the findings of Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) and McAlexander el. (2002) were based on research around offline communities, many of their characteristics and practices can be situated in online brand communities.

Brand communities are the place where brand meanings are openly debated, and where corporate communications become the source of the brand lexicon, and indeed the ethos of the community (Muñiz and Schau, 2007). In this sense, Hatch and Schultz (2010) suggest that brands should relinquish their power when building communities. By overly controlling the discussion, brands may push members of the brand community to lose interest and commitment to the brand community. Members can also resist firms' control by subverting the online content delivered by marketers and explicitly counter the intended brand meanings (Quinton, 2013).

Undertaking an ethnographic study Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) explored the social process within brand communities and found three common markers of communities: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). The fundamental community marker is consciousness of kind which refers to the participant intrinsic connection with other members and reflects the shared sense of separation from non-members (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). As such, members develop a strong sense of belonging from their affiliation with the brand community (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Second, communities are marked by both shared rituals and traditions. Through these social notions, community members set their ideology, values and meanings and transmit these principles within and out of the brand community (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). The third community marker is a sense of moral responsibility. This reflects the felt sense of duty and commitment to the community and its members (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). This moral responsibility manifests itself in (1) integration and retention of community members through

active participation in order to guarantee the community survival, and (2) supporting community members with the correct use of the brand (Casalo et al., 2008).

Because of the Internet, consumers are able to explicitly interact with companies and engage in creating value for the brand. In a qualitative study, Schau et al. (2009) examined 9 brand communities through ethnographic methods and conducted a meta-analysis of 52 articles. The authors identified 12 value-creating practices common to most of brand communities. These practices were modelled into four thematic groups: social networking, impressions management, community engagement, and brand use. Social networking activities "focus on creating, enhancing, and sustaining ties among brand community members" (Schau et al., 2009, p.34). Such practices include welcoming, empathising, and governing. The main objective is to appreciate and sustain the homogeneity of the community through reinforcing the social norms and providing emotional support across brand community members.

Impressions management is concerned with creating a favourable brand image beyond the boundaries of the brand community. Brand devotees are engaged in two main activities; evangelizing and justifying their commitment to the brand. Community engagement includes "(1) staking, [which occurs when community members set to distinguish their domain of participation within a subset of the community that is most in line with their interests] (2) milestoning, [refers to reviving the most salient brand experience] (3) Badging, [occurs when signs and symbols of the brand that relate to milestoning are created] and (4) documenting [refers to constructing a narrative of the brand experience based on community engagement first tripartite practices]" (Schau et al., 2009, p. 34). These activities bring about beneficial outcomes to members of the community in a form of social capital which refers to resources gained from group membership, relationships and networks, and in a form of cultural capital, that is, a set of socially rare and distinctive knowledge, skills and practices (Bourdieu, 1984).

For example, sharing information and knowledge are central in brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Consumers also gain hedonic and utilitarian values by participating in brand community events (McAlexander et al., 2002). Lastly, brand use practices are specifically related to ideal use of the brand and include grooming, customizing, and commoditizing (Schau et al., 2009).

The above-mentioned practices illuminate our theoretical and managerial understanding of consumer-brand relationship. Brands can derive added value by fostering brand communities through relinquishing control to consumers, engaging members of the community and inspiring co-creation. Echoing this logic, Grönroos (2000, pp. 24–25) states that "the focus of marketing is value creation rather than value distribution, and facilitation and support of a value-creating process rather than simply distributing ready-made value to customers." Furthermore, brand communities offer marketers two significant cues; information on customer desires and information as to how to best satisfy them (Thomke and von Hippel, 2002).

3.5 The context of co-creation

The concept of co-creation has emerged as one of the most important aspect of the stakeholder-focus brand era ensuing a shift to a new logic of brand management that requires the successful inclusion of various stakeholders in the creation of brands (Merz et al., 2009). Co-creation is now embedded within the stakeholder perspective to branding with the result that a brand has become a "collaborative, value co-creation activity of firms and all of their stakeholders" (Merz et al., 2009, p. 329). The concept of co-creation is largely based on value co-creation (e.g., Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) and service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). As Ramaswamy (2011, p. 195) observes in an analysis of co-creation in management literature, "co-creation is the process by which mutual value is expanded

together". Similarly, "co-creation refers to the processes by which both consumers and producers collaborate, or otherwise participate, in creating value" (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011, p. 3). Ind et al. (2013, p. 9) define co-creation between a firm and a brand community as "an active, creative and social process based on collaboration between organizations and participants that generates benefits for all and creates value for stakeholders". Ind and Coates (2013) even argue for a broadened conception of co-creation including interpretation and meaning making. Marketing literature shows that interaction, dialogue, engagement and transparency between firms and consumers play important role in co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Hatch and Schultz, 2010).

Some scholars adopt a narrow approach to co-creation and argue that co-creation only takes place in direct interactions between customers and firms (e.g., Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos and Voima, 2013). From this perspective, firms and customers "merge into one integrated process of coordinated actions, where both parties are active, learn together and from each other, and may directly influence each other" (Grönroos, 2011, p. 290). The current thesis takes a broad understanding of co-creation and considers co-creation process to take place both in a joint sphere, where firms and customers interact directly, and in a customer sphere, without the participation of firms, where customers independently or with other actors co-create value (Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos and Voima, 2013 ;Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014). As such, this thesis refers to co-creation as *a process in which customers, brand communities, or firms interact directly or indirectly and engage in periodic or shared co-creative activities at the brand level to mutually co-create some form of tangible or intangible value for the parties involved in the process.*

Co-creation is often discussed in the context of online brand communities where members can play an active role, both as providers and beneficiaries, resulting in value for

individuals, brand communities, and for companies (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011). Firms are motivated to participate in online brand communities by the many benefits they can reap: apart from enhancing the brand's core value or stimulating creativity (Ind et al., 2013) and product innovation (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2013), they can co-create brand identity with community members (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013; Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2013). In contrast, individuals are motivated to participate in brand communities when they can express their self-identity (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011), have opportunities for fulfilment, learning and sharing (Ind el al., 2013) and can exchange brand experiences (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) argue that consumers engage with online communities to fill some needs. They proposed eight motive-based factors, which drive consumers to make contributions to online communities (i.e., eWOM communication), comprising (1) venting negative feelings, (2) concern for other consumers, (3) self-enhancement, (4) advice-seeking, (5) social benefits, (6) economic incentives, (7) platform assistance, and (8) helping the company. Schau et al. (2009) compiled a constellation of value-creation practices common to online brand communities and grouped them into four categorical themes: social networking, impressions management, brand use, and community engagement (these are discussed in the previous section).

Brand communities are social collectives marked by a shared culture where the brand identity is collectively enacted, negotiated and co-created through members' consumption meanings, rituals and practices (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Kozinets, 2001). Community members are admirers of the brand (i.e., they include owners and non-owners of the market offering), who are willing to express their perceptions of and stake in the brand to others (Merz et al., 2009). Sharing brand-related information and experiences contributes to the community's cultural capital of the brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). McAlexander et al.'s (2002) work on brandfests identified four crucial types of brand community relationships

emerging through interactive experiences at these events: either between the customer and the brand, between the customer and the firm, between the customer and the brand in use or among other customers. In this sense, managers should have an understanding of the socio-cultural influences of the brand community on the construction of brand identity (Leigh et al., 2006) and influence the co-creation activities of the brand community. Through brand communities, consumers present enormous challenge to marketers because they no longer want companies to 'market to' them, instead, 'market with' them (Cova and White, 2010). Managers need to bet involved in the construction of the community's cultural codes and meanings, understand societal processes involved in identity construction (Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006) and extend the role of consumers by jointly undertake collaborative marketing programmes (Cova et al., 2015).

Stakeholders' discourse and interactions in online brand communities are usually generated and narrated through text (Kozinets, 2002). According to Edvardsson et al. (2011), meaning is determined within the confines of language and social interactions, as well as within the roles and social positions of customers and marketers in a social context. In this regard, stakeholders engage in complementary or contradictory discursive strategies to communicate and negotiate their versions of the brand identity meaning depending on the resources and influence they have within the stakeholder network (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013). As a result, brand managers need to be aware of sources of brand meanings (Iglesias and Bonet, 2012), especially consumer-generated content and stories that may or may not promote the intended meaning (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012; Gensler et al., 2013). Iglesias and Bonet (2012) suggest that brand managers should utilise narratives and storytelling as persuasive rhetorical devices to co-create a favourable brand meaning.

3.6 Dynamics between brand managers and other stakeholders in the co-creation of corporate brand identity in brand communities

The stakeholder-focus brand era (Merz et al., 2009) implies that the brand is the sum of all relationships and encounters with multiple stakeholders. Therefore, it is fundamentally important that firms take the legitimate interest of stakeholders into account (Freeman, 1984) and build strong brand relationships with a multitude of stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009). Stakeholders become powerful when they combine their resources and skills and create social spaces to interact with one another and with the firm, and to represent themselves, participate in collaborative marketing programmes or challenge the firm's communication (Cova and Dalli, 2009; Cova et al., 2015). Merz et al. (2009, p. 328) note that "marketing managers might benefit from investing resources in building strong brand relationships with all of their stakeholders and a service-dominant firm philosophy built around brand value co-creation". This view suggests that firms can attract such stakeholders, particularly consumers and offer them resources and a collaborative and creative milieu to communicate, debate, critique, innovate and utilise their skills and knowledge for their own interests as well as that of a firm. From an experiential perspective where brand co-creation emerges from experience (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016), brand managers can co-create brand relationship experiences by designing and managing brand encounters to support co-creation processes which can develop further through organisational and customer learning (Payne et., 2009). Payne et al. (2009) bring to the fore the importance of relationship experience design for co-creation and conclude that firms need to design co-creation processes through 1) cognition-supporting encounters by, for example, sharing knowledge in order to assist customers in interpretation and sense-making; 2) emotion-supporting encounters through visual elements and stories; and 3) action-supporting encounters by supporting consumers to engage in activities. Hatch and Schultz (2010) introduced a stakeholder framework to brand

co-creation based on stakeholder/company engagement (dialogue, access) and organisational self-disclosure (transparency, risk).

Congruent with the stakeholder and process-oriented perspectives on brands (Merz et al., 2009), Iglesias et al. (2013) introduce an organic view of the brand and argue that a brand identity is built with multiple stakeholders and many aspects of this co-creation process lie outside the boundaries of the firm, notably in a 'conversational space'. This is where the firm and consumers interact through 'brand interfaces' such as products, visual identity and service encounters. Adopting a hermeneutics discursive perspective, Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) emphasise the active role of stakeholders in co-creating brand meanings in online social spaces replete with brand-related text, where "stakeholders continuously negotiate and re-define brand meanings through their discursive activities" (p. 1507). However, Gyrd-Jones and Kornum (2013) offer an alternative understanding of brand management from a value complementarity stakeholder perspective. The authors studied the management of brand co-creation processes in relation to multiple stakeholder ecosystems based on the cultural viewpoint of each stakeholder. They found that successful co-creation outcomes depend on the firm's ability to maintain cultural synergies between the brand and multiple stakeholders using core brand values as a mutual reference point. The implication of the stakeholder approach is that brand management is strongly performed through managers' actions and interactions with multiple social constituents such as consumers (da Silveira et al., 2013). Yet, literature focusing on the role of the firm in co-creating brand identity with other stakeholders is still limited.

In spite of the relevance of considering brands as dynamic and social processes arising from brand-based interactions between the firm and its stakeholder networks (Merz et al., 2009), the stakeholder and process-oriented perspectives on branding have remained significantly under-theorised (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016; Csaba and Bengttson, 2006).

This thesis contributes to the branding literature by unravelling the management-led processes as well as the brand identity co-creation activities of the brand community constituting part of the wider process of a socially constructed brand identity. This dynamic approach seeks to advance both theoretical and practical understanding of corporate brand identity development and to contribute new insights into the iterative processes of stakeholder interactions involved in the co-creation of corporate brand identity.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that in the age of social media brands are co-created by brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Brown et al., 2003, Schau et al., 2009) and other stakeholders, a phenomenon that has been conceptualised as a new brand logic (Merz et al., 2009). The power within the co-creation process has increasingly shifted away from firms towards brand stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Asmussen et al., 2013; Ind et al., 2013). This is due to unprecedented resources available to consumers and other stakeholders who interact and constitute operant resources (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Merz et al., 2009), and because boundaries between the inside and outside of a firm have become increasingly blurred (Ind et al., 2013). This shift in thinking about the nature of brands and branding is consistent with the recent theoretical development in the branding literature (cf. Merz et al., 2009) and the evolving S-D logic of marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) emphasising that brand value is co-created between the firm and its stakeholders. This inclusive view paves the way for stakeholder and process-oriented perspectives for developing a truly systematic understanding of brand identity co-creation.

While recent work acknowledges the dynamic and socially constructed nature of brand identity, the stakeholder and process-oriented perspectives on branding has just begun, as such, opportunities abound for more research to explore the contributions of managers and

stakeholders to the construction of corporate brand identity. In this tradition, this study adopts a mixed methods approach to gain an even deeper understanding of the complex processes of brand identity co-creation in dynamic cultural contexts.

The next chapter discusses the philosophical assumptions that define this study.

Chapter 4 - Philosophical Considerations

4.1 Introduction

Researchers generally reflect on their philosophy of science through the examination of their ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions in relation to research paradigms and apply research methods consistent with their assumptions (Guba, 1990). Kuhn's (1962) idea of paradigms as described by Gergen (2015, p. 25) is that they are "roughly a network of interrelated commitments to a particular theory, a conception of a subject matter, and methodological practices". Guba (1990) lays out the basic philosophical assumptions that define different research paradigms which can be summarised from the responses to three fundamental questions:

a. The ontological question: What is the nature of reality, and what can be known about it?
b. The epistemological question: What is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and what can be known?
c. The methodological question: How can the researcher gain knowledge about the world?

Within the social science paradigm debate, there are two dominant research traditions, explicitly referred to as two competing paradigms (e.g., Lincoln and Guba, 1985); positivism and interpretivism, each has particular assumptions about the nature of knowledge and what could be known. These assumptions, in turn, lead to different methodological traditions about the production and validation of knowledge. As Bourdieu (1993) notes, the "social world may be described and constructed in different ways in accordance with different principles of vision and division" (p.132). Familiarity with the differences between these two perspectives guides the researcher' choice of paradigm and justifies his assumptions regarding the nature of reality and truth. The sections that follow, address the above three questions from the broad

perspective of positivist and interpretivist research paradigms and their core concepts in terms of philosophy of knowledge.

4.2 Positivism

Hesse (1980) describes what are taken to be the fundamental assumptions of positivism. These are "*the assumption of naïve realism, of a universal scientific language, and of the correspondence theory of truth"* (p. vii, italic in origin). Hesse goes on to explain that in natural science, "there is an external world which can in principle be exhaustively described in scientific language. The scientist, as both observer and language-user, can capture the external facts of the world in propositions that are true if they correspond to the facts and false if they do not" Hesse (1980, p. vii). Thus, grounded in *erklären*, the positivism paradigm holds to the naïve realist position (essentialism) regarding reality and assumes that knowledge is value-free and that a single true reality exists out there independent of human consciousness or perceptions, waiting to be discovered. As such, researchers can objectively "picture" the external world (Hesse, 1980) and "thereby deductively test, or inductively generate, theory" (Johnson and Duberley, 2003, p. 1282). The goal is to explain and predict human behaviours derived from the researcher's conceptualised and operationalised *a priori* theory rather than the social actors' inter-subjective reality, and involves making time and context-free generalisations and cause-effect explanations (Duberley et al., 2012). Within the positivist paradigm, explanation is committed to "specifying causal links" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 151).

Epistemologically, positivism denies the subjective social nature of research and grants primacy to empirical evidence to dominate the research scene and provide the objective truth (Alvesson and Deetz, 2007). Essentially, "we scientists study you" (Gergen, 2015, p. 79). A scientist is regarded as detached from the world and capable of producing indisputable

and objective accounts of the world through experiments and theory (Hesse, 1980). Within positivism, the "context of justification" or testing of scientific theories takes precedence in the scientific inquiry, whereas the "context of discovery" – that is, the source of knowledge and theory- is excluded (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 25). Theory, regardless of its genesis, is permissible so long as it is coherent and testable through hypotheses and experimental design (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Ontologically, reality exists as the sum of the part, that is, "there is a single reality composed of discrete elements" (Hirschman, 1986, p. 239), and therefore when these elements are disconnected, independent and precise observations and measurements are attainable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Parts of reality are taken out of their natural setting (context) and placed in controlled environments for observation and measurement with the assumption that the subjects' responses attained in the laboratory experiment correspond to the subjects' behaviour in the real world (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Positivists claim that "the controlled experiment allows the researcher the most confidence in discovering causal relationships among variables" (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988, p. 513). For example, one may want to investigate how cues in the consumption environment such as a supermarket serve as stimuli and affect consumers' brand evaluation and choice. Different types of information cues such as product design, brand logo, product packaging are then presented to consumers in a laboratory setting in order to study the influence of such cues on consumers' purchase decisions. The inherent assumption is that the behaviour displayed in the laboratory is transferable to consumers' behaviour in natural settings such as supermarkets or retail stores. Within positivism, these findings and theories are considered a representation of reality and are then translated into guidelines as one single and universal truth. The positivist approach holds that human beings are passive agents, preconditioned and behave reactively to events, that is, external factors in the environment to which they are

exposed drive them to exhibit certain behaviours that are predictable and definite (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Morgan and Smircich, 1980). Against this stance, the nature of social beings is deterministic and inborn in the "view that every event has a cause…All things in the universe are 'governed' by, or operate in accordance with, causal laws" (Angeles, 1981, p. 60).

An axiological assumption of positivism is that adherence to the objective methodology guarantees that the findings of the scientific inquiry are free from the influence of any value system (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) or bias. Furthermore, adherence to the research design which is defined as "the fixed structure of the research… allows for accurate answers to research questions" (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988, p. 512). Values and the possibility of the inquirer bias are thereby excluded from influencing the scientific research outcome (Guba, 1990).

Given the lack of attention to the subjective nature of reality, positivism has been subjected to criticism. According to Schutz (1970), positivists rely on their own interpretations of the world to construct a fabricated social reality; instead direct experiences of social actors have to take primacy in order to overcome the deficiencies in generated knowledge. The author states that "the safeguarding of the subjective point of view is the only but sufficient guarantee that the world of social reality will not be replaced by a fictional non-existing world constructed by the scientific observer"(Schutz, 1970, p. 271). Habermas (1984) also takes issue with the assumptions of positivism and rejects the positivist theory of science on the basis that it fails to consider what he calls communicative action or "the discursive democratization of social practices" (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 141). He calls for undistorted communication that is free from "power, status, prestige, ideology, manipulation…or any other form of mischief that furnishes a base for the evolving ideas" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2007, p. 90).

4.3 Interpretivism

Tadajewski (2006) proposes the following ontological, epistemological, and methodological characteristics of interpretivism:

- The ontological assumption of the interpretive research is that reality is "socially constructed, multiple, holistic, contextual" (Tadajewski, 2006, p. 438).
- "For interpretive researchers, social reality is seen to be inter-subjectively composed, so that epistemologically, knowledge is not approached from the standpoint of an external, objective position, but from the lived experience of the research co-participant" (Tadajewski, 2006, p. 430).
- "A methodological strategy to 'understand' the lived experience of consumer interpretive researchers generally – although not exclusively – use qualitative methods" (Tadajewski, 2006, p. 430).

These assumptions summarise much of the thinking within interpretivism in approaching a scientific inquiry. In this approach, there is no single, tangible reality. Realities are multiple and holistic (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hirschman, 1986; Tadajewski, 2006). Reality is also socially constructed which means that "all human knowledge is developed, transmitted, and maintained in social situations" (Berger and Luckman, 1967, p. 3). As such, these realities are more than the sum of their parts; instead, reality is complex, sensitive to history and context, emergent and dependent on the mutual shaping and interpretations of human beings.

Theory has a distinctive role within interpretivism, "while theory may provide important sensitizing conceptions, it is not a device of classification nor tested in any simple and direct manner" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2007, p. 33). Meanings and interpretations as inquiry outcomes are negotiated with research participants as the principle of an interpretive inquiry is to consider the subjects' frame of reference and display a unified and consensual reality.

While positivism isolates reality from its natural context and strips the actions of humans from any sociocultural meaning, interpretivism stresses the contextuality of meanings and interpretations given to a phenomenon. As Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 39) observe, " realities are wholes that cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts, …contextual value structures are at least partly determinative of what will be found."

Ontologically, the interpretive research de-emphasises the objective, external concrete social world; instead, this approach seeks to study the social world at the level of the lived and subjective experience with social reality perceived as inter-subjectively constructed (Tadajewski, 2004). As such, epistemologically, knowledge is derived from the lived experience of the research participants (Tadajewski, 2004) rather than theory-neutral observation claims. Interpretivists oppose the tenets of positivism, in that their perspective in understanding a phenomenon offers a different approach to how empirical work is conducted as well as the role of the researcher. Actors are not considered passive objects but active individuals in sensemaking like the researcher (Alvesson and Deetz, 2007).

Charmaz (2006, p. 140) notes that social interactions between the researcher and researched "produces data and therefore the meanings that the researcher observes and defines". Essentially, interpretivism gives more voice to those under study (Gergen, 2015). Prasad (2005, p. 13) suggests that "all interpretive traditions emerge from a scholarly position that takes human interpretation as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world". These traditions (e.g., constructivism, phenomenology, hermeneutic) are particularly committed to Weber's *verstehen*, which involves explaining actors' behaviour by accessing and understanding meanings and interpretations actors subjectively ascribe to everyday realities (Duberley et al., 2012). As Carson et al. (2001, p. 64) state "the main purpose of interpretivist methodologies is to achieve substantive meaning and understanding of how and why questions in relation to the phenomena under investigation". However, the concept of

understanding is never complete, rather an on-going iterative process, that is, once constructed, current reality facilitates and influences the construction of the future reality (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Researchers doing interpretive work usually use ethnography, phenomenology, and hermeneutics in a rigorous manner by actively undertaking a prolonged period of observation and in-depth interviewing to show how particular realities are socially constructed (Alvesson and Deetz, 2007). In the same vein, the study at hand approaches the corporate brand as a socially constructed organism in which consumers play an active role in shaping the brand identity meaning. The two paradigms; positivism and interpretivism are contrasted in Table 4.1.

	Positivism	**Interpretivism**
Ontological assumptions (nature of reality)	Objective; tangible; ahistorical; fragmentable; divisible	Socially constructed; multiple; holistic; contextual
Nature of social being	Deterministic; reactive	Voluntaristic; proactive
Axiological assumptions (overriding goal)	'Explanation' via subsumption under general laws; prediction	'Understanding' via interpretation but not necessary to confirm hypotheses
Epistemological assumptions (knowledge generated)	Nomothetic; time-free; context-independent; value-free	Idiographic; time-bound; context-dependent; value-laden
View of causality	Real causes exist	Multiple; simultaneous; shaping
Research relationship metaphor	Dualism; separation; detached observer	Interactive; co-operative; translator

Table 4.1 Summary of positivism and interpretivism adapted from Tadajewski (2006, p. 438).

4.4 Adopting the interpretive stance

The current study is positioned within the interpretive paradigm because this approach emphasises "thick description" (Geerts, 1973) of the phenomenon under study and enables access to participants' constructed experiences and artifacts. Since interpretivism is rooted in *verstehen,* it enables the researcher to grasp "the shared meanings within a culture of language, contexts, roles, rituals, gestures, arts, and so on" (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988, p. 510). Furthermore, interpretivism looks at the social world not as a set of facts, but as mental representations of lived experiences. From that perspective, the interactive relationship between consumers and their brands "includes not only feedback but also *feedforward*" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 54, italic in origin) in that, brands identities and meanings assigned to them –as social realities- change, evolve, and redefine themselves because they are time and context specific. Following the interpretive disposition, this study acknowledges that a brand identity is "value and meaning laden" because consumers and other stakeholders designate different meanings to it. "These meanings are developed through individuals' interpretations of social interaction with each other" (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988, p. 518). With this assumption being held, this study adheres to the collective meaning instead of individuals' meanings. This orientation is appealing because this study adopts the perspective of social constructionism (see next section; 5.5), especially as it is laid out by Gergen (1991, 1994, 1999).

Furthermore, since the naturalistic ontology assumes that realities are wholes that cannot be detached from their natural context, this study strives to elicit the meanings of research participants in their natural contexts, that is, meanings held by managers will be elicited in their workplace as a site of managerial activities. Similarly, the brand community on Facebook serves as the field of observation to adequately produce accounts of the on-going conversations and interactions between the community's stakeholders as they relate to the co-

creation of corporate brand identity, thereby resulting in a truly systematic understanding of the phenomenon. Also the assumption of "a subject-object dualism" is precluded in favour of a reciprocal interaction between the researcher and researched i.e., "subject-subject relationship" (Guba, 1990, p. 175), thereby reinforcing the sentiment that meanings of the findings come into being only through the interpretations of the researcher and research participants, and in so doing recognising that realities are co-constructed in a dialectical process.

4.5 Social constructionism and corporate brand identity

This thesis draws heavily on the social constructionism epistemological perspective that leaves little room for Kant's transcendental idealism (i.e., through reason and senses humans can create an accurate representation of the world) or Plato's recollection theory (i.e., knowledge is inborn and deeply buried in humans' souls). Constructionism accepts the view that social actors together construct their reality through interactions with the physical world and with each other (Gergen, 2015).

Constructionism is often equated with Constructivism. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2013) the constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology, a subjectivist epistemology, and a naturalistic set of methodological procedures. Constructivism developed from psychology to challenge the behaviourist approach that postulates determinism, in that, human behaviour is controlled by the external environment (Gergen, 2015). For a deeper appreciation, Gergen provides a sharp description of the two perspectives. "*Where constructivism places the origin of knowledge in the head of the individual, social construction places the origin in social process.* Constructivism is fiercely individualist; constructionism champions relationship" (Gergen, 2015, p. 30, italic in origin). Although both terms can be used synonymously since constructivism holds the same fundamental ideals as

social constructionism, in that, they are both concerned with "the question of how we construct what we take to be 'the real'" (Gergen, 1999, p .237), the emphasis in this study is on the constructionist orientation. Herein, constructionism as an approach to studying the corporate brand opens the possibility to illuminate the nature of the corporate brand identity co-creation and to understand the interactions and social relations between various stakeholders at the intersubjective level. Social constructionism assumes that knowledge is originated and sustained in social situations (Gergen, 2015) and in so doing the research aim is to rely on the research participants' views and their construction of reality as they engage with the world in specific contexts (Creswell, 2014). In addition, the researcher is aware of his position within the research process and reflects upon the values and predispositions he carries with him and how they may affect the interpretive process (Creswell, 2007).

Constructionsits recognise the "multiple constructed realities" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 295) and the multiplicity of values and the probability that what is treasured by some may be seen as imposing and unjust by others (Gergen, 2015). The important point to raise here is that relativism is an issue associated with the subjectivist ontological and epistemological beliefs inherited in social constructionism. However, relativism in constructionism does not mean that "anything goes". Relativism invites the view that nature of reality and knowledge is "subject to community acceptance… and not, individualistic convention" (Tadajewski, 2004, p. 314). In other words, "the objectivity of the meaning or sense of the world is defined by the consent or agreement of the structuring subjectivities" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164). Such shared understandings constitute social reality and "make up the prescriptive and proscriptive rules for social conduct and meaning ascription" (Deighton and Grayson, 1995, p. 661). To counter the issue of relativism and call for a reflexive examination of social actors' own understandings, Guba and Lincoln (1989) emphasised the "authenticity" of the constructionist inquiry, which stresses the necessity to show how

different members' ontological beliefs are represented in any account (fairness), and to show how research participants' own constructions are enhanced as well as their "understanding and appreciation for the constructions of others outside their stakeholding group" (p. 248) (ontological and educative authenticity), while facilitating emancipatory action (catalytic authenticity) through members' training and empowerment (tactical authenticity). The authors' concept of "authenticity" parallels Habermas' (1984) *consensus theory*, which refers to the notion of the "ideal-speech situation, where discursively produced consensus is induced when that consensus derives from argument and analysis without the resort to coercion, distortion or duplicity" (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 142).

Since marketing was mainly dominated by the positivism paradigm (Tadajewski, 2004; Penaloza and Venkatesh, 2006), the outcome was an ontological and epistemological duality and separation of marketers and consumers. Positivists grew comfortable with helping consumers - within the economic exchange framework - in their quest for the objective truth and subsequently imposed limitations upon consumers' endeavours by assuming a single interpretation of the brand informed by the marketers' branding activities. Likewise, - from this perspective- consumers' behaviours and responses to the information provided by the firm were predicted and as such the relationship between the brand and consumers was controlled. In contrast, marketing from the postmodern perspective "could not be distanced or detached from the consumer – it is no longer a somewhat occult art accessible only to marketing professionals to satisfy consumer needs. It becomes a process available to consumers in order to empower and enable them to construct the realities they intend to experience" (Firat an Dholakia, 2006, p. 137). As such, marketing is explicitly moving towards the more active depiction of consumers as "operant resource(s)" (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 7) who continuously co-create brands with marketers. In the wake of this paradigmatic shift in marketing, the social constructionist extrapolates that multiple brand

meanings, that are equally legitimate, exist because brands do not represent a single unified meaning (Berthon, 2009), rather, they embed interpretations of different individuals and social groups. Therefore, brands are neither ahistorical with intrinsic value nor governed by laws of cause and effect; instead, brands may be studied from the perspectives of consumers in their contexts rather than from the etic perspective because "understanding is a hermeneutical event, interpretation cannot be detached completely from the social context" (Murray et al., 1994, p. 460).

By considering the active interactions and exchanges between a company and its stakeholders, and among stakeholders, the constructionist approach enables the researcher to reconnect social actors and help them reflect on and evaluate the legitimacy of their ideas about reality. In that sense, the researcher can capture the social and cultural nature of corporate brand identity and explain how activities of managers and members of the online brand community are prone to reciprocal influence, and how this influence is reproduced in consumers' evaluations and co-creation of brand identity.

4.6 Qualitative vs Quantitative methods

Qualitative research is defined as "an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4), whereas quantitative research is "an approach for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). The usage of a qualitative methodology does not exclude the use of quantitative methods. The same principle applies for quantitative methodologies as in positivism. Yet, combining qualitative and quantitative methods have sparked fragmentary debates about whether the fusion is conceivable, let alone desirable.

Rossman and Wilson (1985) identify and draw analogies between three schools of thought in the paradigm debate. They differentiate between methodological "purists" who

believe that quantitative and qualitative methods are rooted in different paradigms and therefore should not be mixed. Another perspective is offered by the "situationalists" who argue that methods have value and that a certain method may be more appropriate in specific situations, whereas the "pragmatists" believe that regardless of circumstances, both methods may be used in a single study thereby integrating the objective and subjective perspectives.

Kuhn defines paradigms as the "entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on, shared by the members of a given community" (Kuhn, 1962, p. 162). Building from this perspective, Guba and Lincoln (1985) stress that qualitative methods are linked to the interpretivism paradigm, however the authors stress that interpretivism or "naturalistic paradigm" is not anti-positivism and caution from equating qualitative and quantitative research with interpretivism and positivism respectively. They further explain that in some situations the interpretivist may employ quantitative data. Nevertheless, Lincoln (2010, p. 7) overtly voices deep concerns about mixing paradigms and says that what worries her is "mixing paradigms, or metaphysical models, or, worse yet, simply declaring that one's philosophical belief system associated with research and inquiry are meaningless or irrelevant". The author goes to clarify that this distinction matters and relates straightforwardly to the trilogy of ontology, epistemology and axiology because they form the researcher's stance regarding the nature of reality, nature of knowledge and the inquirer's relationship with the research participants, and the intention to reach consensus and cope with conflicting values. In the same vein, Crotty (1998, p. 41) suggests that "it is a matter of positivism vs non-positivism, not a matter of qualitative vs quantitative".

Constructionism/Interpretivism inquiry is inherently qualitative in nature. The fundamental purpose of qualitative research is often described as understanding lived experiences within their socio-historical context (Elliott et al., 1999). The view of qualitative inquiry on the nature of understanding allows the researcher to pose very different questions

than can be pursued within quantitative, positivist paradigm (Blaikie, 1993; Elliott et al., 1999). Van Mannen (1983) provides a description of the qualitative method that resonates clearly with the objectives of constructionism. “It is at best an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (Van Mannen, 1983, p. 9). To respond to critics in terms of rigour in naturalistic inquiry and in an attempt to prevent interpretive work from being judged by the same criteria subsumed in the conventional positivist enquiry, Guba and Lincoln (1985) propose a set of distinct criteria by which the “trustworthiness” of the naturalistic studies might be judged. These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. As the authors explain, the criteria were implemented for the single purpose of making clear "the inappropriateness of the conventional terms when applied to naturalistism and to provide a more logical and derivative relation to the naturalistic axioms" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 301). Techniques for establishing trustworthiness of the current study are discussed in section 6.9.

Furthermore, the interpretivist has to deal with different views of multiple realities and understand research participants from their own perspective and in their own social and cultural contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As realities are not fixed and are dependent on the humans’ ability to change and adapt, the best approach to understand these realities and “de-emphasize a power relationship’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 40) is the human being as the main research instrument, an understanding that is only attainable through qualitative methods. The study at hand tends to use this belief system and is positioned within the interpretivist qualitative inquiry. Additionally, as the researcher, consciously or not, brings to the table his or her own beliefs and preconceptions, qualitative methods enable the researcher to be critically reflexive during the research process. Accordingly, the qualitative research design is

adaptable and allows the researcher to engage his subjects in mutual dialogue and achieve an understanding of how corporate brand identity is socially constructed and maintained through the on-going interactions between social actors. Besides, the use of qualitative research is more appropriate when the aim is to develop theories where partial knowledge exists (Creswell, 2007) as in the case of co-creating brand identity in online brand communities. Furthermore, numerical measures and statistical analysis simply do not fit the research problem (Creswell, 2007), where the remit of the research is to understand meanings and lived experiences by taking an emic approach (insider's view) rather than seeking distance between the inquirer and those studied.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the philosophical considerations of this study. Guided by the research questions and the aims of this study, the interpretivist paradigm is adopted instead of positivism in order to conduct a rich, naturalistic research. Interpretivism privileges the meanings of those living the experience and is driven by the view that reality is multiple and socially constructed. Constructionism accepts the view that reality is co-constructed and subject to consensus, in that social actors together construct their reality through interactions with the physical world and with each other (Gergen, 2015). As such, the basic assumption of constructionism is that corporate brand identity is a consensual construction, influenced by the broader socio-cultural context, and subject to interpretation and change. An interpretive, qualitative case study is used to acquire knowledge about the nature and co-creation process of corporate brand identity. This brings the necessity of discussing the specific research design adopted in this study and its implication. This is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 5 - Methods and Research Design

5.1 Introduction

The philosophical dispositions discussed in the preceding chapter shape decisions about research methods and procedures adopted in this thesis. Hence, this chapter introduces the sampling approach adopted and provides a chronological discussion of the data-collection process as well as the adopted strategy for coding, analysing and interpreting the raw data. This is followed by a discussion of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria for judging interpretive research. The chapter ends with a discussion of reflexivity in the context of this research.

5.2 Research design

Emphasising the relevance of rich data and access to participants' own perspectives and meanings (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to the research topic, the researcher has adopted an interpretive case study design (Stake, 1995). Yin (2009, p. 18) defines a case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" which echoes Eisenhardt's (1989) portrayal of a case study as "a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings" (p. 534). The case study "provides the "thick description" so necessary for judgments of transferability" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 359), because providing rich account of the case and its context permits other researchers to decide whether the findings are transferable to other similar contexts. Theorists using cases in theory-building typically address the "how" research questions in less studied areas (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Case studies are often associated with bias and subjectivism, yet "well-done theory building from cases is

surprisingly “objective,” because its close adherence to the data keeps researchers “honest” (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p. 25). In the same direction, Walton (1992, p. 129) has observed that “case studies are likely to produce the best theory”. Furthermore, subjectivism applies to all other forms of qualitative and quantitative methods. Nevertheless, there will always be a gap in the quality of the emergent theory and that may not need to be a matter of considerable debate. In this respect, Thorngate (1976) explains that although it is preferable to produce theories that are *general*, *simple*, and *accurate*, yet there is no satisfying answer to help produce theories that satisfy all three properties and that it is likely to achieve any two yet at the expense of the third property.

In-depth interviews with managers and netnographic methods (including active observation and interviews with members of the brand community) were employed in this thesis. The combination of different data collection methods complements each other and is a fruitful procedure to develop a comprehensive view of corporate brand identity co-creation (Meijer et al., 2002). Figure 5.1 illustrates the research design of this thesis.

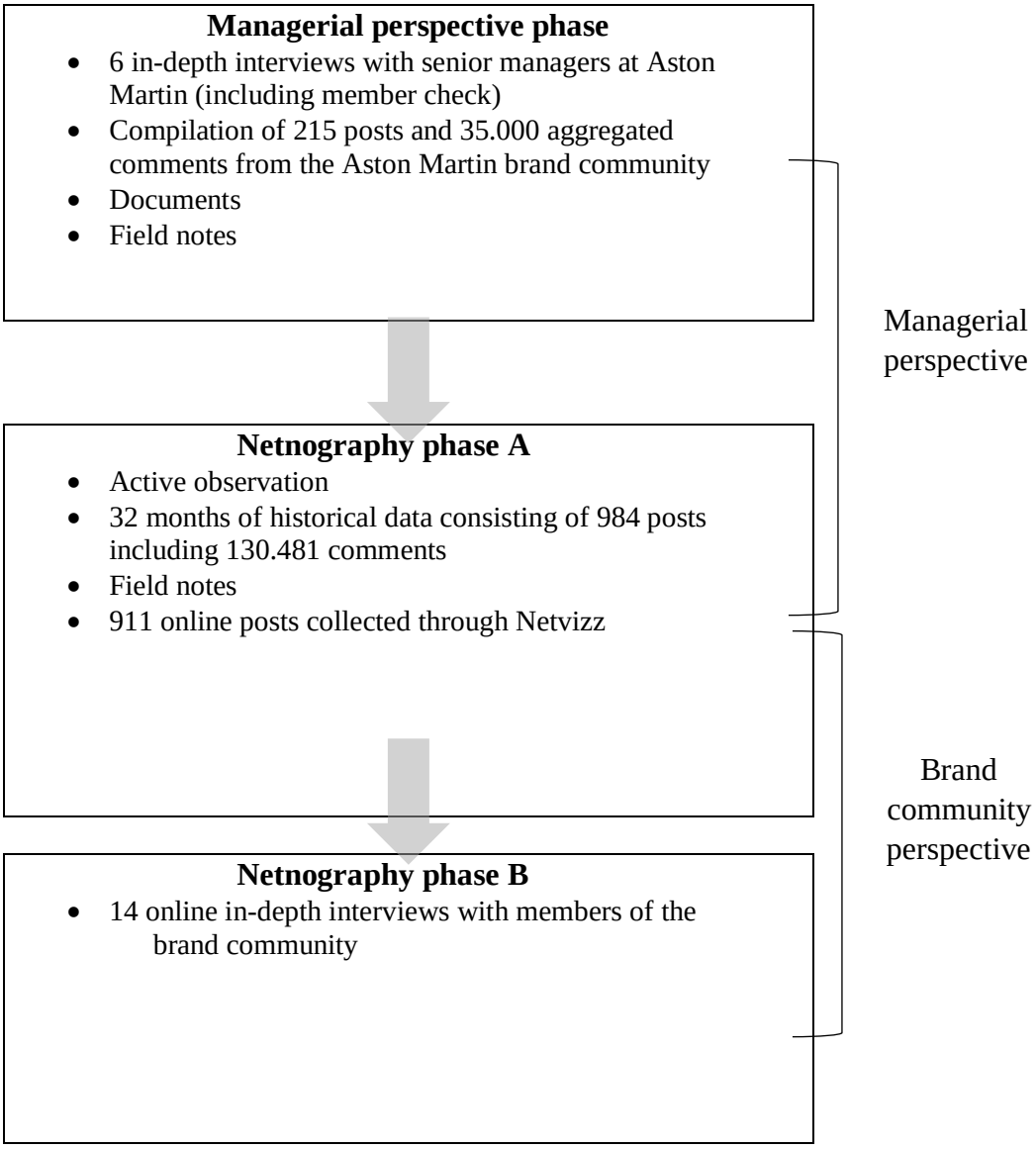


Figure 5.1 Research design

5.3 Research site

Having established that a case study design is appropriate to study the co-creation of corporate brand identity in online brand communities, Aston Martin was selected as a research site for its revelatory potentials (Yin, 2009) and richness of data, and informed by the research topic as well as the research questions posed.

The researcher negotiated access to the firm on the assumption that a consultancy report will be produced at the end the research. In this capacity, the researcher had unique access to the

case company which have not been studied previously in the context of co-creating corporate brand identity.

5.3.1 Aston Martin

The empirical work was based on a single case study (Yin, 2009), which allowed the researcher to develop a deep understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991), i.e., co-creating corporate brand identity as viewed from the perspectives of managers and the brand community. Purposeful sampling was applied (Patton, 1990) to select a suitable case study. The researcher selected Aston Martin (AM) as a case study because it is (1) a well-known brand, (2) has ambitious plans for the future, which stimulate discussions about brand identity, and (3) has a large and active brand community. This provides a suitable setting for studying how brand managers co-create corporate identity with existing or aspirational owners of their cars.

The Aston Martin on-line brand community was established in 2009 and is hosted by the firm. The brand has now a fan base of more than 6.8 million followers as at 27 June 2018. The community was chosen because it meets the requirements set out by Kozinets (2015): it is relevant, has a regular flow of communication and frequent postings, is highly interactive among heterogeneous community members and has the potential to yield detailed or descriptively rich data. Furthermore, studying brand communities of corporate automotive brands (like Ford, Jeep or Saab) has shown social influence on identity construction at the individual level (Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), thus allowing us to capture the nested nature of corporate, community and individual identity construction.

Aston Martin, was founded in 1913 by Robert Bamford and Lionel Martin as 'Bamford & Martin Ltd'. 1914 saw the birth of the name 'Aston Martin' following one of Lionel

Martin's successful runs at the Aston Hill Climb in Buckinghamshire, England. The company made its international motor racing debut at the 1922 French Grand Prix. Since then, the company has developed into an iconic corporate brand of British heritage which is synonymous with luxury and elegance. The brand identity of Aston Martin is built on its three core values or identity claims: power, beauty, and soul. The firm's headquarters and manufacturing facility are based in Gaydon, Warwickshire where 1,800 employees work to produce the company's range of luxury sports cars.

The organisational structure of Aston Martin (see Figure 5.2) comprises the executive management team, led by President and Chief Executive Officer, Dr. Andrew Palmer, formerly held the position of Co-Chief Operating Officer & Chief Planning Officer at Nissan. The executive management team is charged with the efficient running of the day-to-day operations and governance of Aston Martin. They meet on a weekly basis and each director and senior manager within the firm has responsibility for a number of strategies and tactics that link directly to the key KPIs of the Second Century Plan such as stabilising the business and strengthening its core GT and sports product range. The Second Century Plan was announced at the Geneva Motor Show in 2015 and focuses on building a sustainable luxury business for Aston Martin.

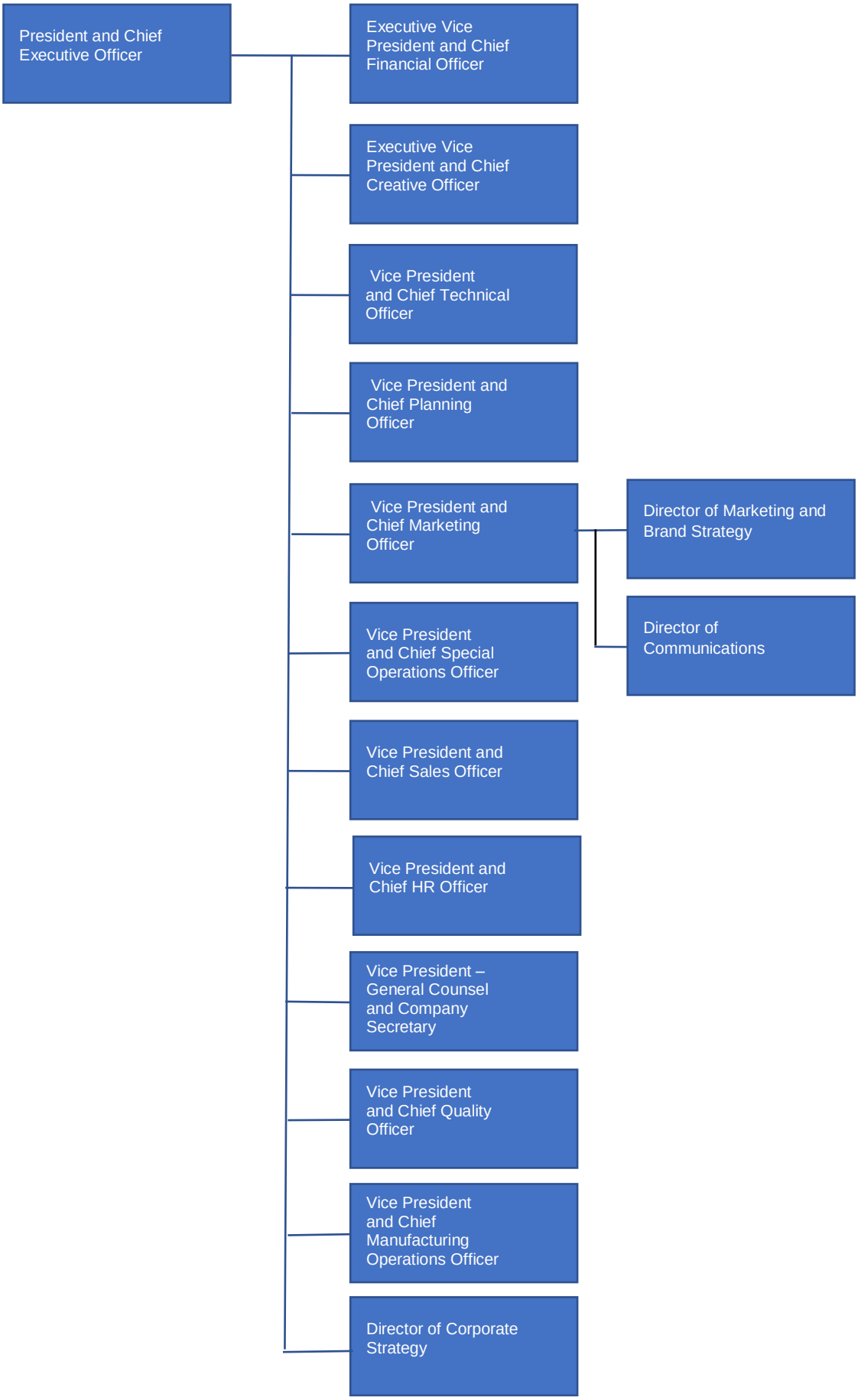


Figure 5.2 Aston Martin Organisational Structure as at 25 February 2019

Aston Martin's cars are positioned within the high luxury sports (HLS) car market. The firm's vision is to be the Great British car company that creates the most beautiful and accomplished automotive art in the world. Aston Martin's brand value grew with 268% to US$3.6 billion and is the fastest-growing brand in the automobile sector (Brand Finance, 2018). Aston Martin's current core model line-up comprises three core models, one grand tourer (GT) (DB11), one sports car (Vantage) and one super GT (DBS Superleggera). As part of Aston Martin's seven-year Second Century Plan, the firm intends to introduce one new core model each year to 2022 with each model having a seven-year lifecycle.

In addition, Aston Martin also offers limited special edition models, such as the Vantage GT12, Aston Martin Vulcan, Valkyrie, Vanquish Zagato which are priced at significant premiums. The company uses these models to provide a 'halo' effect for its product range alongside introducing new technologies which are then applied to the broader product range. As an exclusive luxury brand, Aston Martin generally pursues a low volume production strategy to maintain a reputation of exclusivity, rarity and to promote premium pricing. Managers at Aston Martin determine the optimal number of cars to produce each year based on creating a balance between the volume of cars Aston Martin produces against the principal requirement to maintain brand exclusivity. They maintain that the optimal balance is up to around 7,000 sports cars per year, with additional sales from SUVs and sedans, driving target volumes of around 14,000 cars per year in the medium term.

The firm is almost entirely dependent upon third-party dealers for the sale and promotion of its products. It sells its cars through a global dealer network, comprising 162 dealers spread over 53 countries as at December 2018 (Aston Martin, 2018). Aston Martin has a strong presence in three markets: the U.S. (72%), the U.K. (75%), and Europe (70%) in terms of its unit sales for the years 2016 and 2017. Aston Martin's growth strategy also considers expanding its market share in Asia Pacific and the Middle East.

Aston Martin faces strong competition within the high luxury sports (HLS) car market. Key competitors include Ferrari, McLaren, Rolls-Royce, Lamborghini and Bentley. In addition to these main players, certain premium car brands also offer a limited number of higher priced cars that compete with cars in the lower price bracket of Aston Martin's range in terms of price and performance (e.g., the Porsche 911 Turbo).

In 2015, Aston Martin embarked on an ambitious mid-term strategy – the 'Second Century Plan' which revolves around three phases: (1) business stabilisation which centres around establishing a clear growth plan and the securing of financing, (2) core strengthening which is expected to deliver an entirely new sports car range and continued deployment of the special editions strategy, and (3) expansion of the product portfolio with the relaunch of the Lagonda brand and planned introduction of the high luxury automotive segment such as the brand's first SUV (DBX) (targeting a female customer base) and performance sedans to address the fastest growing consumer base of the HLS car market. The three phases are aimed at delivering a successful and sustainable luxury business by 2020. The plan targets a substantial raise in profitability and cash generation ensuring long-term product development to safeguard the firm's growth strategy and sustainability bearing in mind that the business was subject to bankruptcy seven times. However, the success of the brand's growth strategy of expanding its portfolio to also include SUVs and sedans depends largely on customers' and fans' acceptance of this brand extension.

Under the Second Century Plan, Aston Martin has been committed to better communicate and engage with customers and fans at various touch-points. For example, in 2015 the firm adopted a new customer relationship management platform called Sales Cloud in order to provide a single view of a customer and improve dealer management. The new corporate website was launched in 2017 and has been designed to reinforce the luxury brand experience of visitors, available in multiple languages. Furthermore, the firm has introduced a

single Brand Hub to ensure global consistency in all dealer marketing materials. In 2018, a new merchandising platform was introduced to provide a single online platform for customers and wholesalers to order the brand's cars and partner merchandise.

Aston Martin's marketing budget is mainly dedicated to F1™ sponsorship, frequent new product launches, key motoring events such as Le Mans 24 hour Race, Goodwood Festival of Speed and Goodwood Revival, Pebble Beach and the Geneva, Shanghai and Beijing Motor Shows. It also actively uses product placements (e.g., James Bond films), one-on-one regional and dealer marketing events, factory tours and sponsorship arrangements. In addition to core automotive activities, the brand has also engaged in attracting customers, prospects and fans through its "Art of Living" experiential offerings which give access to personalised lifestyle experiences that do not involve driving.

In leveraging its iconic image and in order to extend its business into other luxury goods, Aston Martin licenses its brand to various commercial partners (e.g., its exclusive apparel range in collaboration with Hackett). In addition, Aston Martin engages several successful sporting professionals as its brand ambassadors (e.g., Tom Brady, Max Verstappen and Daniel Ricciardo). Aston Martin has also been marketed by and associated with the fictional character James Bond for over 50 years. The franchise featured a DB5 model in the 1964 film Goldfinger, with the DB10 exclusively designed, engineered and hand crafted for the latest Bond film, Spectre (2015).

Furthermore, since 2016, Aston Martin has sponsored the Red Bull Formula 1 racing team F1™ in order to gain international exposure. The brand has also engaged in an innovation partnership with Red Bull Advanced Technologies to create the Aston Martin hypercars (Valkyrie and Valkyrie Pro). Since 2018, the F1team competes as 'Aston Martin Red Bull Racing'. Aston Martin also promotes its brand through the Aston Martin Racing Programme. The brand participates in endurance GT racing events such as Le Mans and

Nürburgring 24 hour races. In 2016 Aston Martin Racing team won two world championship titles and in 2017 seized victory in the GTE Pro Class at the Le Mans 24 hour race.

Additionally, the brand has invested in enhancing its digital presence via digital marketing (web, client relationship management through Sales Cloud, social content, configurators, etc.) which has led to organic growth of social media audience that exceeds 11 million people (aggregates of various social media channels) as at 30 June 2018, along with helping convert prospects into sales in a marketing environment where, according to managers, even top customers, i.e., high net worth individuals (HNWI) engage with the brand online. HNWIs are defined as individuals with investable assets - not including primary residence, collectables, consumables and consumer durables - in excess of $1 million (Capgemini, 2018).

As a luxury brand, the key challenges facing Aston Martin are targeting younger luxury consumers and in particular broadening the brand's appeal to female drivers, raising the brand's awareness in the UE, the United States and creating strong positioning in attractive key growth markets such as Asia Pacific, driving technological innovation through new designs and partnerships, and repositioning itself as a luxury brand and a leader in the HLS car market. All of these developments put the Aston Martin corporate brand identity under close scrutiny from both the firm's management and its external stakeholders. Of particular interest to the present study is how members of the firm-hosted online brand community respond to these changes and how the management of Aston Martin interacts with the on-line community and other stakeholder groups in co-creating corporate brand identity.

5.4 Sampling

The ontological and epistemological assumptions of interpretivism assume that the researcher develops an in-depth emic understanding and description of the phenomenon under

study. As such, Hackley (2003, p. 75) recommends that "data gathering for interpretive research need not be random, but it does need to be systematic and/or theoretically informed", because "in interpretative research the researcher seeks to arrive at insights for which he or she will offer as much evidence and reasoning as possible". From this perspective, this study adopted the purposive sampling approach based on informational and theoretical rather than statistical consideration whereby information was maximised (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The sampling process was terminated when new concepts and themes ceased to emerge (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

5.4.1 Sampling of key company informants

The key informant method is a technique for collecting data on organisations and social groups (Bagozzi et al., 1991). Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines for purposeful sampling, research questions of the current study suggested that sampling should start with managers with profound knowledge or formal position within the firm (Bagozzi et al., 1991; Kumar et al., 1993), that is, managers who play an important role in the strategic direction of the brand online/offline. As active participants in the development of the brand, these managers represented key informants who provided important insights into brand management as well as the social media strategy. In addition, these key informants were knowledgeable about organisational structures and policies that inform internal perception of what the brand stands for. Moreover, because of their position and influence within the firm, they had the authority to nominate and grant access to other members of the firm to whom the researcher could not have direct access. The researcher conducted a set of face-to-face interviews at the company's headquarters with top managers at Aston Martin between April and June 2016. Each interview lasted 60 minutes on average. A member check interview was conducted in December 2017 and lasted 83 minutes. Interviewees and their responsibilities within the firm are detailed as follows:

- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer
- General Manager – Global Marketing
- Global Digital Marketing and Content Manager
- Global Digital Marketing Executive (2 interviews)
- General Manager – Client Services

Although small, interviews were conducted with key experts on branding, brand identity, social media and brand communities. Furthermore, the interviewees provided in-depth and rich data. Data saturation was reached when new and relevant information ceased to emerge, and themes seemed to be well developed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

5.4.2 Sampling of the brand community

The Facebook based brand community was chosen for this study because it represented a "joint sphere" (Grönroos and Voima, 2013) where direct interactions between the brand and consumers took place. Detailed information about the importance of Facebook as a social networking site and a host of large brand communities was provided in the literature review chapter (Ch. 3, section 3.3). Choosing the brand community for netnography was determined using purposive sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Kozinets (2010) notes that generally online communities suitable for marketing research need to meet a set of criteria. These include having: (1) a focused topic that is relevant to the research question; (2) a regular flow of communication and high posting; (3) a high level of interactivity between community members; (4) detailed or descriptively rich data; and (5) a heterogeneous character in terms of the number of different participants. All these criteria were sufficiently explicit in Aston Martin's online brand community and can be gleaned from Figures 5.3 and 5.4. Figure 5.3 represents the Facebook page of the brand community with an increasing number of followers indicating the community's strong social and cultural capital.

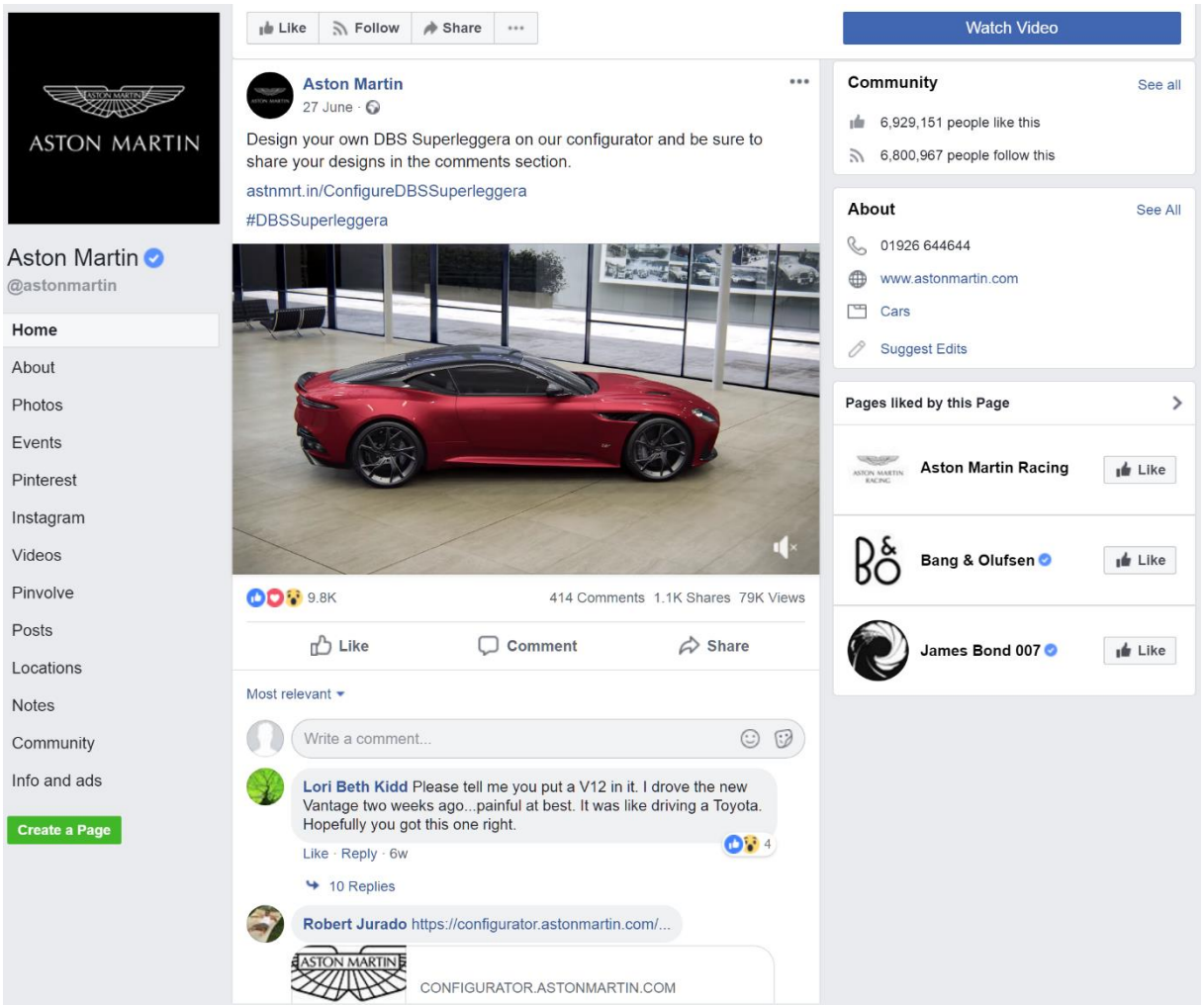


Figure 5.3 A screen shot of Aston Martin brand community page on Facebook as at 27 June 2018



Figure 5.4 Visualisation of Aston Martin brand community network using Force Atlas 2 algorithm in Gephi (zoom-out of the overall network). The visualisation represents data collected between 15 March 2015 and 30 November 2017

Figure 5.4 provides a zoomed-out view of the brand community as a social network and makes the analysis of the brand community more tangible. It illustrates the large number of followers (Kozinets, 2010) and dense connections between the nodes within the network. This network consists of a set of nodes (or points) that represents actors within the network, i.e., managers and members of the brand community. These nodes are connected through a set of

edges (i.e., ties/connections) represented by lines with different colours. Nodes tend to cluster together because of their high similarities and closeness to each other, thereby, forming subcommunities within the Aston Martin social network. A different colour has been set for each subcommunity identifier as depicted in the graph. The brand community has a heterogeneous character with a wide array of members who are geographically dispersed (see Appendix F for fans per country generated through Netvizz application).

In addition, the initial screening of the brand community on Facebook demonstrated the presence of diverse experiences and ongoing debates on brand identity, which are intrinsic to the research question (Kozinets, 2010), i.e., studying the co-creation of the corporate brand identity of Aston Martin, with devotees and insiders (Kozinets, 2002) actively debating the brand identity and sharing insights with community members. This high level of engagement is evidenced in Figure 5.5 and 5.6. These examples are illustrations of an active brand community with knowledgeable and enthusiastic members who can provide rich and descriptive information about the topic (Kozinets, 2010).



Figure 5.5 A zoomed-in view of a brand-related post by managers: example 1. The Figure represents data collected between 15 March 2015 and 30 November 2017

The centre of Figure 5.5 is a post by managers characterised by the larger grey node in the graph and is titled "*Introducing the new Vantage. The true successor to a true sporting dynasty...the Vantage nameplate has been worn by some true icons"*. As the visualisation shows, the impact and popularity of this post is represented by the heightened activity around the topic. When users engage with a node they generate edges (edges are depicted in the graph by the colourful lines). What emerges, as the graph indicates, is a depiction of an intense conversational setting (Kozinets, 2010) with active members that comment, share, and like evidenced by the fact that the post has a direct connection/interaction to 23,824 members of the brand community (in social network analysis, this refers to in-degree measure, i.e., the

number of ties directed to the node illustrated by lines) and generated 18,615 likes, 2,624 comments, 2,571 shares, showing the popularity of this particular post.

Another example is a brand-related post by managers *"The V8-powered Aston Martin DB11 in divine red"* (see Figure 5.6), this is another successful post in terms of engagement, which generated 25,938 likes, 816 comments, 1,973 shares, and has a direct connection to 30,546 brand community members.

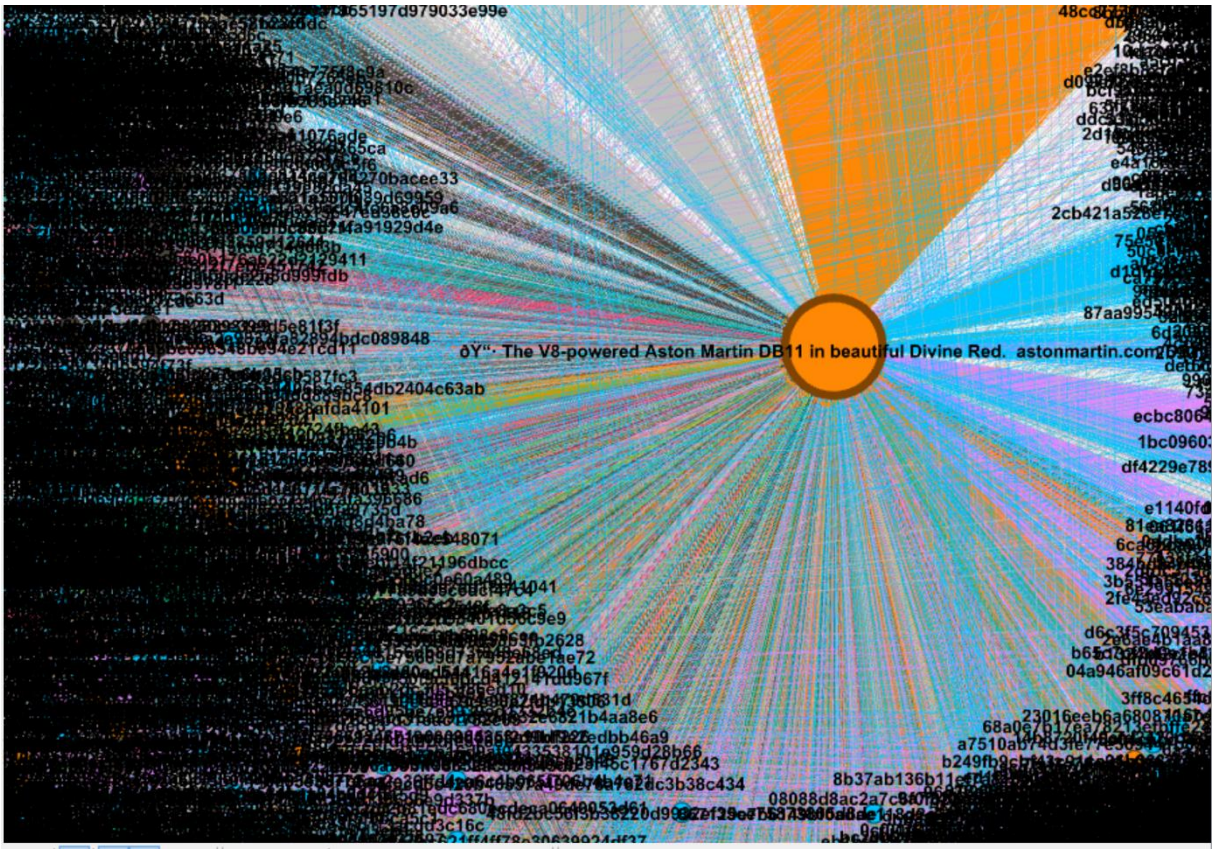


Figure 5.6 A zoomed-in view of a brand-related post by managers: example 2. The Figure represents data collected between 15 March 2015 and 30 November 2017

5.5 Data collection process

Consistent with the constructionist view and in order to consider the phenomenon under study from different perspectives, the researcher concluded that triangulation is a worthwhile procedure to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study and

enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. As Mathison (1988, p. 13) notes, "good research practice obligates the researcher to triangulate, that is, to use multiple methods, data sources,…to enhance the validity of research findings". Miles and Huberman (1994) distinguished five kinds of triangulation in qualitative research:

- Triangulation by data source (data collected from different persons, or at different times, or from different places);
- Triangulation by method (observation, interviews, documents, etc.);
- Triangulation by researcher (the use of multiple investigators);
- Triangulation by theory (using different theories, for example, to explain findings. This mode is at odd with the naturalist paradigm (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 307);
- Triangulation by data type (e.g., combining quantitative and qualitative data).

The current thesis used triangulation by data source as well as methodological triangulation because "each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality" (Denzin, 1978, p. 28). Data collection took place in five rounds using (1) semi-structured interviews with key informants (managers), (2) documents and artifacts (annual reports, news articles, etc.), (3) participant observation of the brand community, (4) downloading and scraping online data from the brand community, and (5) semi-structured interviews with specific members of the online brand community.

Throughout the next two sub-sections, the methods of data collection utilised for exploring managerial perspective are discussed in detail. The methods of data collection pertinent to brand community perspective are discussed under section 6.7.

5.5.1 Semi-structured interviews with managers

Within the overall research strategy of the case study, the interview mode was deemed suitable to achieve the research aims as it allows for a profound conceptualisation of the

subjects' experiences and enables theory generation. As Patton (1990) explains, the interview method requires "carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have *directly* experienced the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 1990, p. 104, italic in origin).

Nevertheless, there are some weaknesses associated with interviews. Alvesson and Deetz (2007, p. 195) explain that "one cannot get around the context-dependency of the interview statements- one cannot neglect that they are produced in a specific social situation and that language games are important". Another general issue related to interviews is associated with the interviewees' multiple identities and subjectivities that can occur during the conduction of an interview (Alvesson and Deetz, 2007). In this sense, it is important to be reflexive and aware that there are always sources of influence in an interview context that cannot be overlooked.

Consistent with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the interpretive approach, this thesis employed semi-structured interviews with key informants. These interviews involved the top management team of Aston Martin (details of interviewees were provided in section 6.4.1) responsible for the strategic aspects of marketing and branding, which amassed to five in-depth semi-structured interviews and one member check interview. Key informants were identified through discussions with the researcher's contacts within the firm.

Interviews were conducted between April and June 2016 using open-ended questions and followed a topical interview guide (see Appendix A for interview guide). Five interviews lasted at least 60 minutes. One member check interview was conducted in December 2017 and lasted 83 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded with informants' permission and then

transcribed verbatim producing an average of 11,000 words per transcript, which yielded a dataset of 123 single-spaced transcript pages (see Appendix B for a sample of interview transcript) . Interviews were conducted at the office of the interviewees at the firm's headquarters in Gaydon. One pilot interview -not included in dataset- was conducted through Skype to test the interview questions. Additional field notes were taken after each interview in which the researcher registered his reflection about the interview. Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985), fully informed consent (see Appendix C) was obtained formally attested by the respondents' and the researcher's signatures on a form prepared in advance and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Nottingham. Meanwhile, in order to triangulate and capture managerial interactions with members of the brand community and how these members reacted to some managerial activities, a netnographic historical data was collected from the firm-hosted community on Facebook between March and August 2016 which resulted in a data-set consisting of 215 posts and 35,000 aggregated comments including replies.

5.5.2 Organisational documents

In addition to interviews, the researcher collected documents as a secondary source of rich information and unobtrusive data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These documents included PowerPoint presentations, the firm's marketing communication plan, financial reports, annual report (2018), press releases, trade news and analysts' reports. These documents also served as a means of triangulating data and provided a secondary source of rich data about the organisational structure and philosophy, culture, identity, and brand positioning, but they also helped improving the quality of interviews and interview questions (Forster, 1994). Furthermore, a desk research of Aston Martin's marketing materials (available on the brand's corporate website) was conducted to further understand the brand's history, product lineage, and the overall business strategy.

5.6 Data analysis: Managerial perspective

The method of data analysis adopted was thematic analysis which is defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). A theme is "a category identified by the analyst through his/her data… that builds on codes identified in transcripts…and that provides the researcher with the basis for a theoretical understanding of his or her data." Despite being widely used in qualitative research, there is a lack of clear conceptualisation and explanation of thematic analysis processes in much of the literature (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Suddaby, 2006). Yet, thematic analysis increases the ability to reflect participants' perspectives, provide thick description and rich account of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which then contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Boyatzis, 1998). The analytic process progresses from being descriptive to being interpretive of what is articulated in the data in order to problematise the significance of themes and their patterns and broader meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In order to validate the identification and development of categories and themes, data was inductively analysed, i.e., although findings were influenced by a *priori* (theoretical support and research questions), themes were allowed to emerge directly from the raw data, which creates opportunities for generating new theories, a process similar to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) notion of open coding and axial coding.

Furthermore, the iterative process of constant comparison (Eisenhardt, 1989) was used in order to refine and develop new concepts and categories and reduce the mass of largely textual data. These analytic techniques provided a rigorous strategy for analysing qualitative data through: finding initial concepts within the data and grouping them into categories (open coding); connecting and comparing and looking for relationships among these categories that

have emerged form open coding, a process that can lead to developing higher-order themes (axial coding); and further reducing the identified themes into several "aggregate dimensions" (Gioia and Thomas, 1996). These inductive coding techniques follow a "recursive, process-oriented, analytic procedure" (Locke, 1996, p. 240) that is explained in in the next section. The analysis comprised three main stages.

The first step in the analysis involved becoming closely familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the raw data (text segments). Following this process of close readings and with the research questions in mind, initial in-vivo codes (i.e., exact language used by participants; Strauss and Corbin, (1998)) were assigned to the text line-by- line whenever possible or a simple descriptive phrase when no in-vivo code was available. The researcher then compared and scrutinised each sentence to the sentences before it to decide whether or not it reflects the same concept, or a different concept. If the sentence reflects the same concept, it was then labelled with the same code, if it reflects a different concept, it was assigned a new code. During this process of conceptual coding, the researcher also clustered similar codes into broader categories of similar concepts.

Throughout this process of open coding, the process of axial coding began by problematising, interpreting and reinterpreting the data, connecting and looking for relationships among the codes, specifying how they relate to one another (e.g., associations, links, and implications) and writing memos (writing elaborated theoretical ideas about codes), which facilitated organising them under higher level and wider thematic categories, i.e., 2nd-order themes (Gioia et al., 2012). Once no additional conceptual categories could be developed, 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was achieved and this process ended.

Finally, after the researcher identified a workable set of themes within the data, he proceeded with selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) in order to search for theoretical

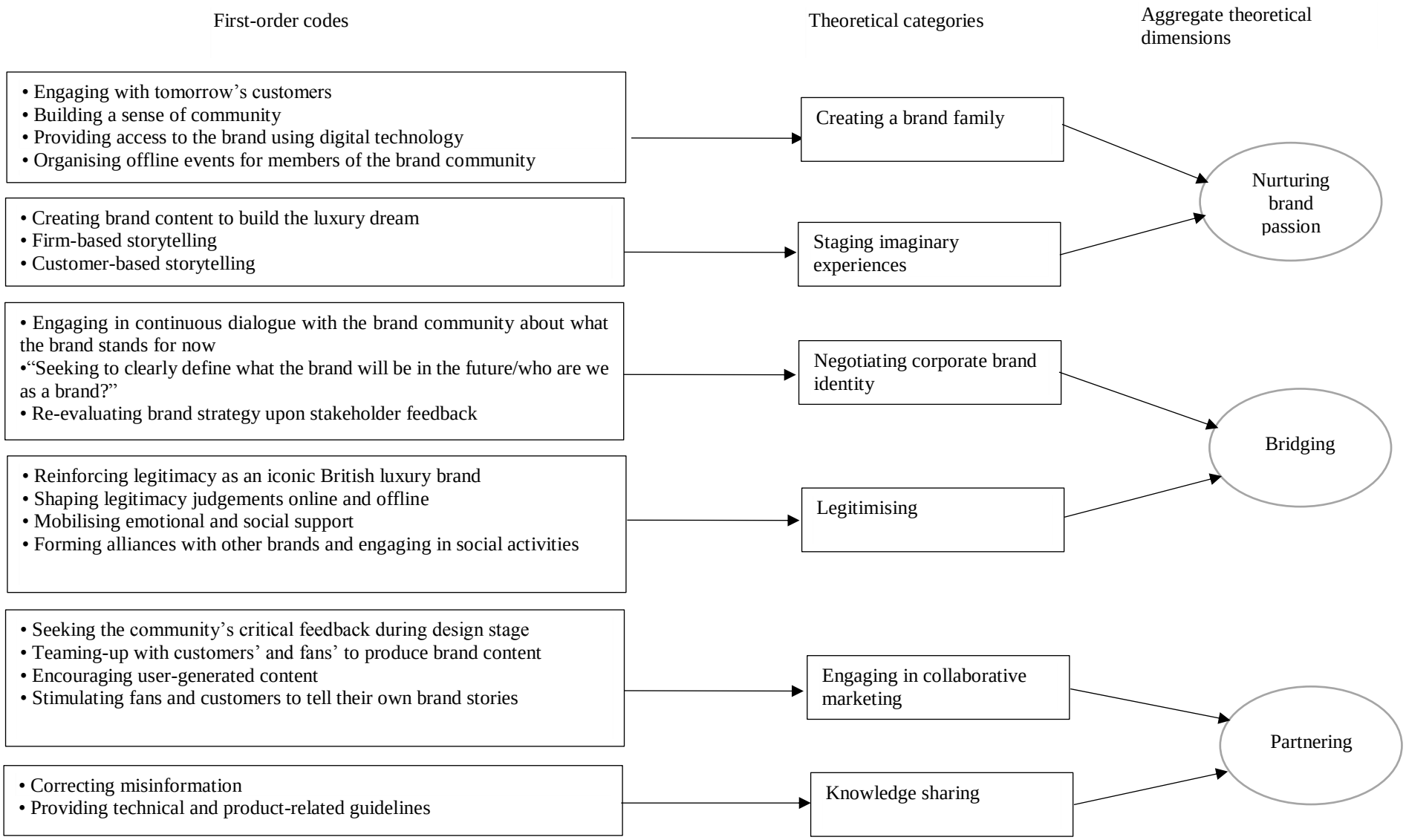
links between these themes and draw together a theoretical narrative and cluster them together into coherent aggregate dimensions (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2012). For instance the interrelated themes "negotiating corporate brand identity", "legitimising" were collapsed into the overarching theoretical category "bridging" (see Figure 5.7).

Netnographic analysis for this particular phase was undertaken at two levels. First, posts were inductively categorised to identify key concepts which indicated the existence of distinct managerial co-creation activities (e.g., the theme of negotiating brand identity). Next, the researcher manually pattern matched categories arising from managers' key narratives (views, actions and reactions) in the interview data to categories arising from the brand community members' actions and reactions identified from the online data. In this interpretive reading, the analysis involved iteration from part to whole, both within and across the interviews, and within and across netnographic data (Thompson, 1997). This iterative process allowed the researcher to explore the synergies and conflicts between multiple interpretations of the corporate brand identity and enabled a holistic understanding of the corporate brand identity co-creation process leading to the development of the process model.

5.6.1 First-order vs. Second-order Data

Van Maanen, (1979) distinguishes between two types of data; First-order data and second-order data. First-order data are "facts" of a study and represent interpretations used by respondents. Second order data are the theoretical categories the researcher use to interpret and explain facts and patterns of the first order data. This systematic approach enables the reporting of both emic and etic perspectives in a clear manner and allows for gradual or progressive abstractions and a rigorous demonstration of the links between the data and the abstractions of new concepts.

Thus, building on the coding techniques described in the previous section and following Van Maanen's (1979) first-order/second-order distinction, Gioia and Thomas' (1996) aggregate dimension concept, and Corley and Gioia's (2004) hierarchical data structure, the analysis is based on a systematic framework because the data analysis continued iteratively, moving between empirical data and the existing literature resulting in the development of first-order concepts, second-order themes. In this way the analysis process gradually moved to a form of abductive reasoning (i.e., the interplay of existing theory and method, Van Maanen et al. (2007); Gioia et al. (2012)), since data and relevant literature were considered at the same time in the 2nd-order analysis. Once the development process of categories and themes was completed, the researcher developed the emergent themes even further into second-order aggregate dimensions and constructed a data structure. Figure 5.7 represents the data structure which consists of 1st-order concepts, 2nd-order themes, and aggregate dimensions.


First-order codes
Theoretical categories
Aggregate theoretical dimensions
• Engaging with tomorrow's customers
• Building a sense of community
• Providing access to the brand using digital technology
• Organising offline events for members of the brand community
Creating a brand family
• Creating brand content to build the luxury dream
• Firm-based storytelling
• Customer-based storytelling
Staging imaginary experiences
Nurturing brand passion
• Engaging in continuous dialogue with the brand community about what the brand stands for now
•"Seeking to clearly define what the brand will be in the future/who are we as a brand?"
• Re-evaluating brand strategy upon stakeholder feedback
Negotiating corporate brand identity
• Reinforcing legitimacy as an iconic British luxury brand
• Shaping legitimacy judgements online and offline
• Mobilising emotional and social support
• Forming alliances with other brands and engaging in social activities
Legitimising
Bridging
• Seeking the community's critical feedback during design stage
• Teaming-up with customers' and fans' to produce brand content
• Encouraging user-generated content
• Stimulating fans and customers to tell their own brand stories
Engaging in collaborative marketing
• Correcting misinformation
• Providing technical and product-related guidelines
Knowledge sharing
Partnering

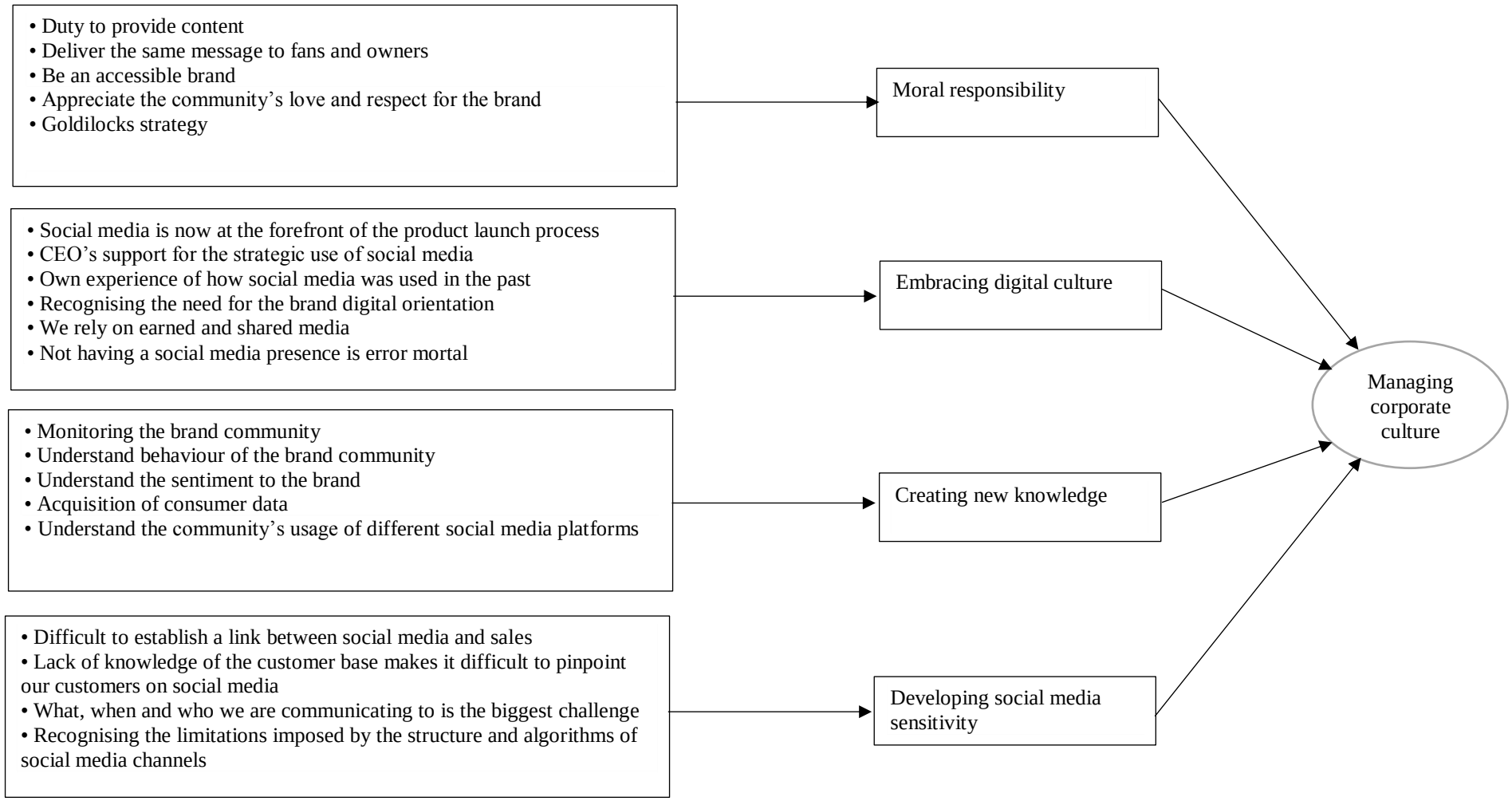


Figure 5.7 Data structure overview

5.7 The netnographic approach: Brand community perspective

In 2017, 86% of adults (aged 16 and over) in the UK acknowledged using the Internet and 76% of all Internet users said to have a social media profile (Ofcom, 2017). As more people use the Internet, social media have become significant in the daily life of Internet users and a natural environment for human interactions. Hallet and Barber (2014) make the point that "studying a group in their "natural habitat" now includes their "online habitat" (p. 306). One way of studying this "online habitat" is through netnography (Kozinets, 1997, 1998), which applies the principles of traditional ethnography to an online context. Reeves et al. (2008, p. 512) trace ethnography back to anthropology and define it as "the study of social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organisations, and communities". In the same tradition, netnography as an interpretive method designed to study and understand consumption issues and popular culture in online spheres is concerned with "obtaining cultural understandings of human experiences from online social interaction and/or content, and presenting them as a form of research"(Kozinets, 2015, p. 54) .

Netnography is a "participant-observational research based in online hanging out, download, reflection and connection" (kozinets, 2015, p. 67). While ethnography is recognised as a valid method of research, there is also growing recognition and awareness that netnography is as important as the traditional form of ethnography. In marketing and consumer behaviour, netnography is increasingly being used in seeking knowledge about consumers' online social interactions and word of mouth, rituals, attitudes, practices, value co-creation, consumer education, and the virtual community influence on the consumer decision process (e.g., Kozinets and Handelman, 1998; Sandlin, 2007; Schau et al., 2009; de Valck et al., 2009). Furthermore, netnography is considered to be "faster, simpler, and less

expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interview" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 61).

As an interpretive inquiry, netnography requires thick and rich description as a process of *verstehen.* Netnography, as in ethnography, relies on the researcher as instrument, that is, "the participation and observation in particular cultural arenas as well as acknowledgement and employment of researcher reflexivity" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 63). Thus, participant observation is the true nature of netnography. Accordingly, the observation of the brand community is a distinctive feature of any netnographic research method concerned with studying online communities. Without "an understanding of the symbolic world of the subjects of study, seeing the world through their eyes and using their shared meanings, the empathetic process of *verstehen*" (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003, p. 216), the researcher is unable to build a systematic understanding of the social behaviour. Boellstorff (2012) warns from the threat to rigour and legitimacy of netnography. The author notes that ethnography is not best served when online data collection is limited to interviews in combination with the analysis of forums and blogs leaving out participant observation. The latter provides ethnographers with "insight into practices and meanings as they unfold. It also allows for obtaining nonelicited data-conversations as they occur, but also activities, embodiments, [etc.])" (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 55). The point that the author highlights here is that ethnography does not hypothesise or make predictions about the social world of the subjects. Rather, it explores this social world on the premise that it is underpinned by dynamic and evolving meaning systems and cultural practices (Boellstorff, 2012). Gold (1958) identified a classificatory framework of the degree of the researcher's participation in the research setting. The author distinguishes between four degrees of participation: complete participation (the role of the observer is undisclosed to research participants), participant as observer (the researcher openly adopts and balances both participant and observer roles), observer as

participant (there is a brief/limited engagement in the research setting, where the role of the researcher is known but he may not have sufficient exposure to develop a full understanding of the meaning and culture of the setting), and complete observer (the researcher plays no active role in the social situation, merely observing events as they unfold).

Central to the process of ethnography is the pursuit of "thick description" which informs the interpretive consumer research. Geertz (1973) promotes "thick description" as a means to reveal the depth of meaning that human actors inscribe in their discourse and practices and how they make sense of reality and the world. According to Denzin (1989, p. 33), thick description has four characteristics: (1) It gives the context of an act; (2) it states the intentions and meanings that organise the action; (3) it traces the evolution and development of the act; (4) it presents the action as a text that can then be interpreted. Thus, thick description is intertwined with netnography and provides context for understanding meanings. It can be achieved by using multiple methods in the data-collection process (Goulding, 2003). As such, by opting for a multi-method research design in this study, involving active participation in the brand community as well as unobtrusive data-collection methods, and interviews with members of the online brand community, the researcher is provided with in-depth insights and meanings of what is being observed.

Netnography is, therefore, methodologically sound, reliable and in line with the epistemological and ontological foundations of this study because the second research question: *How does the brand community contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity?* is amenable to netnographic inquiry. That is, the research question relates to the social interactions of consumers engaging in computer-mediated communication. This methodology has two major benefits: it privileges the subject and meanings they attach to their world, and because of its `thickness' it adds enough layers of understanding to help the researcher fully describe, interpret and analyse what he observes in a circular way. Thus, it is

through observation, interaction and participation in the online brand community that the researcher can grasp the social and cultural codes through which participants make sense of their world. As Whitehead (2005, p. 6) states, "It is through repeated observations, conversations, and more structured interviewing that the ethnographer gets an emically valid understanding of the sociocultural contexts, processes, and meaning systems that are of significance to the study participants." The word 'emic' refers to understanding participants through their own sociocultural contexts, belief systems and worldviews. The opposite word is "etic" which means the outsider's perspective (Creswell, 1999). Etic understanding is attainable through interpretation, theoretical and analytical explanations, and it is necessary in understanding what is truly emic and as such conducting an emically valid research (Whitehead, 2005). Hence, interpretive research such as netnography "relies upon understanding informants' points of view [emic] to portray broader cultural meanings [etic views]" (Spiggle, 1994, p. 492).

Like other research methods, netnography has its benefits and drawbacks. A number of researchers have addressed some of the key strengths and weaknesses of the method (Langer and Beckmann, 2005; Sandlin, 2007; Rokka, 2010; Kozinets, 2002; 2015). According to Kozinets (2002), the method can be considered faster, simpler and much less expensive than other offline methods. In addition, compared with other commonly used research methods, such as interviews, focus groups or surveys, netnography is considered more naturalistic and less obtrusive as it "provides a window into the rich communicative and symbolic world of people and groups as they use the Internet" (Kozinets, 2015, p. 80). Kozinets (2002) opens up for critical discussion the trustworthiness of netnographic data because of the issue of informant identity. Similarly, Zwick and Dholakia (2004) state that issues of informant identity are potentially problematic in online research. That is, in online contexts, participants may present a self-image that is significantly different from their 'real'

selves, which could possibly undermine the trustworthiness of the data collected. To address this issue, Kozinets (2002) suggests that netnographers should suspend judgement about the individual to instead focus on the behaviour or the communicative act as the ultimate unit of analysis. To ensure the most trustworthy data possible, Kozinets (2002) urges researchers to immerse themselves in the culture of the online community through long-term engagement.

Adopting traditional ethnographic methods, Kozinets (2010, p. 61) recommends the following procedures for conducting a netnographic study:

1. Entrée: formulation of a netnographic research question and identification of appropriate online sites. The researcher then needs to learn as much as possible about the relevant brand community and its participants and appreciate the nuances of online interactions.
2. Data collection: guided by the research question, the researcher is engaged in 1) direct copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and 2) observing the community and its members, interactions and meanings, and taking notes about the observations.
3. Analysis and interpretation: classification, coding, content analysis and contextualisation of the online data. Interpretation of data is assessed trough the concept of "trustworthiness" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

5.7.1 Netnographic data collection

Netnographic data involved different sources of data in order to address the research question: online posts and comments by members of the brand community supported by observations and notes taken during these observations, and semi-structured interviews with members of the brand community.

5.7.1.1 Phase 1- Planning and Entrée

Entrée is the first step in conducting a netnographic study (Kozinets, 2010). It suggests that researchers explore and familiarise themselves with the online communities they consider to study. This phase is similar to conducting a pilot study in which the researcher learns as much as possible about the brand community in terms of topics discussed, level of engagement, and members' behaviours. Following Kozinets' (2010) suggestions, this phase took place between March 2015 and May 2015 and was used to (1) confirm the brand community is appropriate for the research purpose, (2) become familiar with the brand community, (3) identify ways to enter and approach the community, and (4) consider data collection strategies. Before gaining entrée into the brand community, the researcher also gathered information about Aston Martin cars through secondary sources including documents available on the official website of the brand, trade news and TV programmes (e.g., *Mega Factories* on BBC, and a series of *How It is Made* available on YouTube).

5.7.1.2 Phase 2- Active participation/observation

Observation "maximizes the inquirer's ability to grasp motives, beliefs, concerns, interests, unconscious behaviors, customs and the like; observation…allows the inquirer to see the world as his subjects see it, to live in their time frames… and to grasp the culture in its own natural, ongoing environment" (Guba and Lincoln, 1981, p. 193).

The first stage of this phase constituted of an unobtrusive observation period in which the researcher's main focus was to understand and deepen his cultural understanding of the community (Kozinets, 2010). In the second stage, as the observation became more focused and the researcher's understanding of the community further enhanced, the mode of overt participant observation was employed. In this stage the researcher acted as a committed and active member of the community. The researcher's participation involved following discussions, reading messages regularly, liking, posting and replying to other members, and

offering comments. Fieldnotes were taken during the observations about community activities, conversations, types of posts that generate in-depth and engaging discussions, profiles of active members to be targeted for online interviews. The researcher also took screenshots of the ensuing online conversations (see Appendix D) as part of the netnographic data collection process (Kozinets, 2010).

Aston Martin's brand community page on Facebook was visited twice a week. Every time the community's page was visited, all new posts and comments were observed and downloaded (see Appendix E). Non-English posts and spams were ignored during the analysis. The collected netnographic data provided a "window into naturally occurring behaviours" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Understanding the brand community and its culture can only happen trough prolonged engagement and participation in the culture over a lengthy period of time (Kozinets et al., 2016). A 32 months data timeframe, with no time gaps, from 15 March 2015 to 30 November 2017 provided a rich dataset. Posts and comments were downloaded into pdf files and inputted into NVivo. In total online data comprised of 984 posts including 130,481 aggregated comments and formed the basis for the netnography analysis in addition to the 14 online interviews with members of the brand community.

The researcher also scraped the Aston Martin brand community page on Facebook using the Netvizz application, which was developed by the Amsterdam Based Digital Methods scholar, Bernhard Rieder in 2009. In total Netvizz retrieved a dataset of 911 posts between March 2015 and November 2017. This procedure produced useful metadata that supported data analysis by helping the researcher to gain important insights into the brand community through social network analysis. Netvizz also confirmed the high level of popularity and engagement of this brand community in accordance with Kozinets' (2010) guidelines in choosing a suitable online brand community (see Figures 5.4; 5.5; 5.6 and subsequent explanations). The most relevant metadata that Netvizz returned are:

- A tabular file containing posts made by managers and user activities around posts including user comments and likes.
- A tabular file containing the distribution of fans per country (see Appendix F).
- A graph file which allows the reconstruction of the networks of interactions among users, and among users and content (posts and comments).

Although this thesis is not concerned with online social network analysis, it was deemed that the visualisation of the Aston Martin brand community network using Gephi software would provide rich data in terms of level of engagement, traffic, and flow of communication and the identification of the posts that generated the highest amount of engagement (see section 5.4.2, Figures 5.4; 5.5; 5.6). To visualise the network, dataset obtained through Netvizz was inputted in the Gephi network analysis and visualisation software as demonstrated in section 5.4.2.

5.7.1.3 Phase 3- Interviewing brand community members

As this study triangulates various methods of data collection, this phase comprised semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of the brand community. Online interviews, whether asynchronous (e.g., email) or synchronous (e.g., Facebook Messenger) are established methods for netnography (O'Connor et al., 2008; Kozinets, 2010). In selecting these members, purposeful sampling was used. It is evident that the sample was not meant to be representative of the large number of the brand community members. Ultimately, participants were chosen for their knowledge and ability to provide rich insight into the phenomenon under study. Stake (1994, p. 243) reminds us to "take that case from which we feel we can learn the most. . . Potential for learning is a different and sometimes superior criterion to representativeness". In this sense, Kozinets (2002) recommends interviewing two member types of online communities when studying marketing related topics; devotees and

insiders. Kozinets (2002) argues that "devotees" are knowledgeable and have a strong interest in the community's focal topic and consumption activities, but have weak social ties with the group, whereas "insiders" are those who share enthusiasm and strong interest in the community's themes of concern, as well as deep social ties with other community members. Active and knowledgeable participants who frequently comments and engage in meaningful conversations were identified during the observations and subsequently approached through Facebook Messenger. Participants perceived the researcher as a culture member (Kozinets, 2002) because he actively liked and commented on posts and replies, and formed direct relationships with members of the brand community. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher provided participants with his profile and affiliation, research background and objectives, a set of initial interview questions, and sought their consent (Appendix G).

A total of 182 request messages were sent to members of the brand community to invite them for an interview (22 female; 160 male). 42 members replied and agreed to participate in the study, yet 24 withdrew after receiving more information or did not follow up. In total 18 interviews were conducted, however 4 interviews were excluded because they did not provide in-depth or insightful information. Thus, the final data set for this phase consisted of 14 interviews (see Appendix H for a sample). Two pilot interviews were conducted -one face-to-face (not included in dataset), and one through Facebook Messenger (included in final dataset). Table 5.1 provides a detailed overview of sample characteristics.

Name	**Gender**	**Age**	**Occupation**	**Country**	**Owner/Fan**	**Freq. of OBC visitation/week**
Gareth -#1	M	30-35	Business Owner	UK	Vantage	Daily
David -#2	M	35-44	Area Manager for a UK based facilities provider	UK	Fan	Daily

Edward -#3	M	45-54	Retired Entrepreneur	UK	DB7	Daily
Julia -#4	F	45-54	Housewife	UK	Fan	Weekly
Steve -#5	M	Over 55	Customer Advocacy Director in IT Industry	UK	Vantage (the only car to replace his 911)	Daily
Torben -#6	M	35-44	Business Owner	Norway	DB9	Daily
Martin -#7	M	25-34	Boat Yard Operator	UK	Fan	Daily
Michael -#8	M	45-54	Designer	Germany	Lagonda 1987	Daily
Eric -#9	M	45-54	Business Owner	UK	DBS	Daily
Bryn -#10	M	45-54	Self-employed	New Zealand	Vantage S	Daily
Nicolas -#11	M	30-35	Consultant	Canada	Fan	Daily
Matteo -#12	M	35-44	Advertising Studio Owner	Italy	Fan	Daily
Paul -#13	M	45-55	Site Director	UK	Vantage 2013	Varies
Prasad -#14	M	25-34	Student	Ukraine	Fan	Daily

Table 5.1 Profile of interview participants

Interviews were conducted in two stages: the initial in-depth interviews and then follow-up questions as a form of more focused interviews. Facebook Messenger was used to conduct the interviews and ask follow up questions because of members' geographical

dispersion. In two instances, interviews were conducted by email following interviewees' request (Kozinets et al., 2014). Employing Facebook Messenger and emails allowed for automatic transcription of the interviews. One may argue that online interviews are contaminated by the medium used and therefore, are of limited value in comparison to face-to-face interviews, yet, "in anthropology there is no such a thing as pure human immediacy; interacting face-to-face is just as culturally inflected as digitally mediated communication" (Horst and miller, 2012, p. 12).

Interviews focused on gaining a deep understanding of the community's culture, how members perceived the Aston Martin brand, what the brand stands for, core values they associated with the brand, the extent to which they identify with the brand, their brand experiences, the nature of their interaction with the brand, their contributions to the brand community, and their opinions regarding the new direction the brand is taking (see Appendix I for interview guide). Requests for interviews were stopped when no new themes and categories emerged and data saturation was achieved (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

5.7.2 Netnography data analysis: Brand community perspective

Throughout the observation and online data collection, the researcher systematically reviewed the complete downloaded archive of posts and comments. This allowed the researcher to organise and make sense of the conversations and enabled gaining insight in the depth of the online data. The researcher started the analysis of the netnographic data with the purpose to organise the collected posts, comments, and the 14 online interview transcripts into a rigorous and meaningful data. The 14 online interviews are considered by the researcher as socially embedded in the cultural context of the ongoing conversation within the Aston Martin brand community. The data was first copied into a computer aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software NVivo 11 in order to generate word cloud for the entire data (see Figure 5.8) and glean insights for the analysis (Kozinets et al., 2014).



Figure 5.8 Aston Martin word cloud generated through NVivo

However, the word cloud is descriptive only because it does not enable the researcher to develop theoretical codes and draw conclusions. Based on this systematic review, the researcher then shortlisted the most relevant and informational posts for an initial analysis guided by the research question and objectives. 250 posts spread across different time periods were shortlisted for an initial analysis. These posts were chosen for their significance, relevance, descriptively rich content, and involved discursive engagement by various community members (Kozinets, 2002). In netnography, using carefully-chosen posts is similar to “purposive sampling” (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Kozinets, 2002; Brown et al., 2003).

Throughout the initial analysis and interpretation (Spiggle, 1994) the researcher focused on understanding how members of the brand community shared information, opinions, positive and negative sentiments, interacted and argued with each other. The focus was also on how they perceived and reacted to official postings by the brand. Preliminary coding of the selected 250 posts provided the initial codebook using open coding (Strauss and

Corbin, 1998). The initial codebook informed the subsequent line by line analysis of the remaining 734 posts totalling a data set of 984 posts. Codes were built up inductively and were tested as more data was analysed. Codes were reused when further instances were found later in the new collected data. Some codes were modified entirely as the researcher gained important insight from text interpreted later in the analysis process. New codes were added when text did not fit the existing codes. At a later stage codes were arranged into six 2nd-order themes following axial coding and constant comparison (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) (comparing data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, data with themes etc.). This process followed the same steps as discussed in section 5.6. As the analysis of the entire data set was completed, the final set of codes comprised 122 unique codes and six 2nd order themes including authenticating the brand identity, co-creating brand fiction, benchmarking, classifying, customising, coping with identity discrepancies. Codes and 2nd order themes are summarised in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Netnography codes and themes

Open codes	Description	2nd-order themes
Keep the classic look	Design	Authenticating
Expected familiarity	Design	Authenticating/iconic
Should not loose corporate identity features/design	Design	Authenticating
Therapeutic	Feel much better when I sit in my Aston	Customising
Occasion	Only use the car in special occasions	Customising
Disappointment	Really disappointing to look at. Reminds me of a Japanese super car knock off with a Halfords boy racer spoiler on the back. It lacks any of the taste and subtlety of design that one normally associates with Aston. Worst looking car since the even more hideous Lagonda/ reference to the Vulcan	Authenticating
Soccer twat	How to ruin a great brand – a soccer twat!	Classifying

Japanese	Reference to the aggressive look of the car's bonnet	Benchmarking
Get somebody with class	Members disapprove of Tom Brady	Classifying
Disapprove of Tom Brady	Prefer Chris Hemsworth	Classifying
Doubt	Not sure about the look of the new Aston's. Prefer the old line more	Authenticating
Real Aston Martin	The soul of Aston Martin made real	Authenticating
James Bond car	That's a genuine Bond car	Co-creating brand fiction
DB11 is Bond	The exterior of the DB11 is unmistakably Bond's	Co-creating brand fiction
Become James Bond	I feel like I really need to be James Bond	Coping with identity discrepancy
V8 engine	V8 is underperforming	Authenticating
AMG V8	AMG engines don't feel authentic	Authenticating
V12 engine	V12 is powerful	Authenticating
Overengineered	The Aston Martin Valkyrie	Authenticating
Abomination	Associating Aston and Tom Brady association is an abomination	Classifying
Avoidance	Don't want an Aston anymore because of unwanted association	Classifying
Prats	What are Aston doing with prats like that!	Classifying
Awful guys	Great cars blocky by awful guys what's that all about	Classifying
Baseball caps	Are the baseball caps really necessary? Not the sort of thing an owner of an Aston Martin would probably wear	Classifying
Yearning	Fans wish they could afford Aston Martin	Coping with identity discrepancy
Design positive	Positive comments about Aston Martin design	Authenticating
Design negative	Negative comments about Aston Martin design	Authenticating
History	You buy history, pedigree and the name	Authenticating
Steeped in history	Aston Martin is a manufacturer steeped in history	Authenticating
British	General discussions about the Britishness of Aston Martin	Authenticating
Brand dilution	Tom Hardy's association with Aston Martin will dilute the brand	Classifying
Don't buy	Powered by German engines. Don't Buy	Authenticating
DB10	Aston martin!!!!! The DB10 will not work. It doesn't have the classic Aston look that we all love. It's not carrying the legendary DB series.	Authenticating
Elite brand	You'd think he could afford a decent pair of trousers..... beautiful, stylish, elite brand being promoted by a man in shorts..... A.M. Don't let your standards down. Stunning car btw.	Classifying

Koenigsegg	AM-RB 001 hyper car says Koenigsegg everywhere	Benchmarking
Aston Martin essence	The essence of the Aston Martin is in its style its design its gorgeous sound	Authenticating
Design DNA	It's called design DNA and is the reason our cars are amongst the most beautiful and desirable cars in the world both from visual & sound aspects	Authenticating
Overdesigned new Vantage	Just looks like any overdesigned sportscar now	Authenticating
Understated	What attracted me to AM was that the cars were tasteful & just understated enough	Authenticating
Design evolution	Definitely looks like an AM to me and clear evolution of vantage	Authenticating
Cool	Aston Martin cars are cool	Authenticating
Un-cool	Tom Brady makes Aston Martin un-cool	Authenticating
Lost its soul	This car has a Japanese manga design, an AMG Mercedes engine ... this Aston Martin Vantage has lost his soul	Authenticating
James Bond toolbox	The car is part of his "toolbox" refined, beautiful/handsome, powerful and above all sexy	Co-creating brand fiction
Triumph	When bond drives an Aston (even one that ends up destroyed ultimately) he is going to triumph, ultimately you are in safe hands	Co-creating brand fiction
You could be Bond	Driving an Aston, you could be Bond, you could be the uncompromising hero women will succumb to, and others will respect	Co-creating brand fiction
Ferrari	I do not agree with the headlights (front and back): too much "Ferrari" touch. It's not ASTON style	Authenticating
Slob	Why has Aston picked a grubby looking slob to represent them?	Classifying
Mazda	I think I'll stick with my 2014 vantage, it's a proper Aston, unique and a beautiful heart melting design, rather than this new Mazda MX5 lookalike from the front	Benchmarking
Mercedes	Comments about Mercedes making Aston Martin engines	Authenticating
Craig Daniels	Craig Daniels is Aston Martin	Co-creating brand fiction
Lottery	I need to win the lottery	Coping with identity discrepancy

Covet	have coveted one of these since a small child, when bought the gold corgi DB5 for Christmas in the late 60's. a shame I'll probably never own one but I'm working on it with my fourth jaguar	Coping with identity discrepancy
Unfair	WTF ! Why, oh why is the universe so unfair! How can I not be a multi millionaire with my own race track at this time	Coping with identity discrepancy
Unique work of art	Aston Martin had to be the most beautiful and prestige car manufacturers in the world, you can't compare anything else to them, they are so unique and different to all the other brands, true works of art!	Benchmarking
Iconic	Please don't ruin an icon. Astons are elegant. Stick to it	Authenticating
Timeless look	Judging by the front aspect of the new Vantage, it is nice but, to me, it does not have the iconic timeless look of it's predecessor	Authenticating
Never in lifetime	I will never in this lifetime be able to afford it	Coping with identity discrepancy
The great thing of the UK	This car resumes all of the great things of UK, it's like Shakespeare, a Supermarine Spitfire or the 5 o'clock tea	Authenticating
Joe public	What about inviting "joe public". We may only dream but it would be nice to see your cars in the flesh!	Coping with identity discrepancy
Feel like James Bond	Just bought one a few months ago before Spectre was released - still feel like James Bond when driving it - Lovin the experience - you guys should buy one of these cars in your lifetime	Co-creating brand fiction
New trends	I wonder why the need for the gentlemanly brands like Aston, Jaguar & Bentley are going in this direction. I sure don’t associate these brands with these designs and don’t think its changing anytime soon	Authenticating
Sensory overload	Could look at the car for hours	Customising
Good times	when I've had a good day and the weather is nice. I will get the car out and go for a drive, I won't drive the car if I've had a bad day	Customising
Junction	People let you out in junctions	Customising
Smile	The car makes me smile	Customising

Build quality	Build quality, when you sit in an Aston Martin you know you are in something rather special	Authenticating
Rich enough	The One-77 is my dream car. Hopefully by the time I'm rich enough, it wouldn't be out of production. Please God!	Coping with identity discrepancy
Hope	I cannot hope to afford now but can aspire to afford later!	Coping with identity discrepancy
No music	Never ever have radio or music on in my DBS just love the soundtrack of the car	Customising
Audi style	The Audi style might make sense to air the big 6 litre V 12, but it does not go with the discrete elegance of the body	Benchmarking
Craftsmanship	Apotheosis of British motoring and craftsmanship!/ True Craftsmanship to the very last detail..	Authenticating
Nissan	Actually that does not say power beauty and soul....that says hot wheels.... sorry, call me old fashioned but they're now looking like cheap Nissan's driven by boy's with underrated body parts...	Benchmarking
Jaguar	You can sit in a modern Jaguar and it feels like any other car but you get behind the wheel of an Aston and you know it’s in a different league	Benchmarking
Stay in Britain	They should never take Aston Martin away from Britain it should always stay British we are the only ones who can make them the way they are	Authenticating
Futuristic	Marek Reichman and his philosophies. He did an awesome job with the DB11 which clearly is futuristic without shedding the DB design philosophy down	Authenticating
DB7	It saved AM from bankruptcy, it's DNA travels through the entire range	Authenticating
DB11	General comments about DB11/positive and negative	Authenticating
Tiptronic	It was sad to see that Aston removed the gear stick and went Tiptronic on all models back around 2012. One of the most pleasurable driving moments in my V12 Vantage is to move the stick and feel the power. Somehow or other "connects" you more to the	Authenticating

	car. Great to hear that it has returned	
Old vs New	The new Aston Martin cars are beautiful, but I still think the old Astons are better looking. But maybe that's because of the nostalgia seeing them starring over the years in movies	Authenticating
Lost their way	DB5 is a holy grail !! I always loved the straight six DB7 and the DB9s beyond that I think they have lost their way. A 1970s V8 would be a dream	Authenticating
Class	Aston stands for class	Authenticating
Iconincally linked	Unlike other car makers who have been used in Bond films (except perhaps for Lotus) The two are iconically linked	Co-creating brand fiction
Stalwarts	Both (Aston Martin and James Bond) are seen as stalwarts	Co-creating brand fiction
Joey and Porsche	Rather sadly thinking Joey & Porsche from friends thing	Classifying
Hand built	Hand built British engine	Authenticating
Too expensive	Cars to dream but too expensive for most of us. I like to see them in bond movies with all the gadgets. For me the only way to get one, is to win in a lottery or to buy a copy in small scale. I have bought many Bentley, Rolls-Royce, Aston Martin and Jaguar in small scale	Coping with identity discrepancy
Classic grill	Where's the classic Aston Grill?	Authenticating
On steroid	Mazda MX5 on steroids – will keep my Vantage	Benchmarking
Car stunts	I think the Aston sequences in these movies were some of the most brilliant car stunts ever seen on the silver screen	Co-creating brand fiction
Focus on cars	They should concentrate on building wonderful cars and not dilute the brand into areas that are not to do with mechanical engineering/What's next restaurants !! Hotels !! Jeeeez	Authenticating
Build quality	Build quality is second to none	Authenticating
Handcrafted	Astons are handcrafted	Authenticating
Attention to details	I've been inside this building. I've witnessed these cars being hand built. The attention to detail is absolutely astounding..	Authenticating
Worth the money	The fact that each one is beautifully hand built makes them worth every penny of their price. Wish I could afford one though!	Authenticating

See one in the flesh	I hope one day I will see it in real	Coping with identity discrepancy
Not premium enough	The interior of the DB11 is better than previous efforts but still doesn't look premium enough for an Aston Martin	Authenticating
Fantasy	Finally, a fine and impeccable luxury vehicle that greet you sweetly without words. Honestly, I stopped at the light behind one vehicle positioned in the center lane of three; the second I turned slowly to my left the brand-new "Aston Martin Rapide S" captured, grabbed, and froze my full attention, saying, "Hello, Linda, I know you are ready to purchase your first Aston Martin..." Honestly, I forgot I was sitting at the light until I heard the horn blowing at me. Italy is beautiful and majestic.	Coping with identity discrepancy
New money	That's where the money is	Classifying
Footballer image	Aston Martin should not have the footballer image	Classifying
Porsche	I'm not convinced by the styling. As others had said, there's a Porsche flavour to the back end - not very pretty.	Benchmarking
Ambassador	There is only one brand ambassador and his name is Bond, James Bond	Co-creating brand fiction
Manual gearbox	a big hurrah to Aston Martin for bringing back the humble clutch and manual gearbox and injecting real 'theatre' back into driving a supercar!	Authenticating
Mercedes engine	It will be a shame when the engines are Mercedes. End of an era	Authenticating
Fast and Furious	Looks like a Fast and the Furious Boy Rice	Authenticating
Design language	The more I look at it the more I like it and admire how Aston have moved their design language on whilst still respecting the past	Authenticating
Comparison of car parts	For those that think a Merc or a BMW compete, please understand an Aston is an emotional purchase so stop trying to restrict comparisons to the objective practicalities	Benchmarking
Becoming an Aston owner	Rapide S is my Dream Car! And I made a plan to get it through doing my business and hard work! I'm	Coping with identity discrepancy

	looking forward to becoming an Aston Owner	
Competing brands	Since I've known myself as a person, I've always been in love with Aston Martin... My friends were passionate about Porsche, Ferrari, Lamborghini, etc... Those were brands that never caught my eye... Nothing has the class and style of an Aston Martin	Benchmarking
One 77	DB11 is One 77's brother	Authenticating
Love/hate relationship	I have a love/hate relationship with you, Aston Martin. You make some of the most beautiful cars in the world- that I will never be able to afford lol	Coping with identity discrepancy
Luxury, performance, beauty	The combination of Luxury, Performance and Beauty is what always attracted me since seeing the Silver DB5 in Goldfinger	Authenticating
Red Bull	Just a shame you had to involve Red Bull	Authenticating
Legacy	At least a brand focusing on legacy...sports. Not looking a mass producing diesel SUV or 4 cyl cars	Authenticating
Mass production	Aston Martin are not mass produced like German cars	Authenticating
American	That's looks like American car	Authenticating
British heritage	Aston is the best British heritage	Authenticating
Brand heritage	Truly love Aston for its heritage	Authenticating
Racing heritage	These are big, powerful cars with racing heritage	Authenticating
DB lineage	DB badge moving forward in its own classic way	Authenticating
Toyota Supra	Looks a bit like the Toyota Supra concept car that was everywhere a few years ago/reference to Vantage GTE	Benchmarking
Aston Martin appeal	I've never understood the appeal of Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati, Zonda et al. Aston Martin combines class, prestige, comfort, looks and power all in one.	Benchmarking

Because the researcher gathered extensive amounts of data, the use of NVivo allowed for easy access to data, data display, data linking and looking for convergence and divergence among coded data. Comprehensive reading of data was complemented through the use of lexical searching which facilitated looking for passages similar to those already coded. The

interpretation of the data was constructed through a hermeneutical process that involved a continuous movement between individual postings within a thread, chunks of postings, entire discussion threads, and the emergent understanding of the complete set of data (cf., Thompson 1997).

Upon completion of data analysis, netnography in its entirety was sent through Facebook Messenger to three members of the brand community for member check (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Members were invited to read the netnography and give feedback about the interpretation and the extent to which the analysis gives an accurate representation of the brand community. Feedback was positive and confirmed the trustworthiness of data interpretation and analysis. "*Very well put together piece, extremely interesting and well paced. Great to read the views of the other participants too. Glad I could be a part of it"* (Member check 1). "*I'm amazed by the quality of it. Deep research. Truthful and enlightening… Great quotes from the people too! Very interesting and strong opinions. I'm truly honored you used some of my own, however I didn't know you would transcribe as is in your text haha! I would have checked my spelling and been a little more concise if so! 😅 to keep up with the quality of the rest of the work I mean. But yeah. Other than that you dressed a fine portrait of the fans... I can see myself in that a lot, and reminded me a lot about myself too, and a lot of reasons why I love the brand. Very introspective read. I must say, after reading your work that I now consider that experience as a milestone in my journey to reaching my dream"* (Member check 2).

5.8 Trustworthiness

Perhaps the most applied evaluative criteria for judging interpretive research are those of "trustworthiness" put forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to parallel the rigor criteria

commonly used within positivism. Trustworthiness can be operationalised through four separate criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Credibility aims to ensure the production of reliable findings and interpretations.

Transferability: Within the constructionist paradigm, one is not concerned with generalisability, but rather with the transferability of the findings of a specific context to another context depending on the similarities between "sending and receiving contexts"(Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 241; Hirschman, 1986). Yet, transferability is relative and depends upon careful understanding and interpretation of the second context (Hirschman, 1986). Furthermore, the researcher may not apply the constructed interpretations and findings to even a similar social setting since salient conditions (e.g., time, culture) could yield different results (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and therefore correspondence between interpretations may not occur.

Dependability: A third criterion central to interpretivism is dependability, which requires that another researcher (auditor) authenticates the accuracy of the research process and establishes that findings, interpretations, and conclusions are drawn in a transparent manner from data and are internally coherent (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Confirmability: The typical technique for confirming the data and interpretations is the confirmability audit which parallels the process of establishing dependability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The techniques of triangulation and keeping records of a reflexive journal can be used to determine confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Table 5.3 illustrates the techniques adopted in this study in order to ensure rigor and trustworthiness of the findings.

Traditional Rigor Criteria (in positivist paradigms)	**Trustworthiness Criteria (in naturalistic inquiry)**	**Techniques for establishing trustworthiness in this study:**
Internal Validity	Credibility	1) Prolonged engagement in the field 2) Persistent observation of the brand community 3) Triangulation of data collection methods and sources 4) Member checks- interviewees were invited to provide feedback after the analysis
External Validity	Transferability	5) Thick and rigorous description of research context and the research process 6) Followed clear procedures for data analysis
Reliability	Dependability	7) Purposive sampling 8) Participant's informed consent was sought 9) Data collection, analysis process and emerging themes were verified by supervisors
Objectivity	Confirmability	10) The emerged findings were clearly separated using 1st order (emic) and 2nd order (etic) data structure. 11) Systematic data management: • Verbatim transcription of interviews • Clear description of theoretical and methodological decisions • Accurate accounts of contacts and interviews 12) Reflexivity: • Careful reflection upon methods through which data was collected • Critical self-examination of the researcher as a research instrument 13) Findings were presented in a conference 14) A research paper was published in the Journal of Business Research

Table 5.3 Techniques of trustworthiness adopted in the current study (based on Lincoln and Guba, 1985)

5.9 Reflexivity

The topic of reflexivity is central to various strands of the interpretive traditions like constructivism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and the critical theory of Habermas

(1984). Reflexivity involves "metatheoretical reflection that is a form of inquiry in its own right … [and is] an applied practice that, while drawing on general metatheoretical categories, is involved integrally …in the overall process through which research is produced' (Morrow, 1994, p. 228). This definition is adopted in this thesis because of its emphasis on larger levels of reflexivity including the research, the researcher as well as the constructed theory. Thus reflexivity is grounded in acknowledging the role of the social structure and human agency in constructing knowledge and truth as well as "careful interpretation" of data (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009, p. 9). In a sense, the plasticity of reflexivity extends beyond introspection, that is, "any knowledge of the world, in common sense thinking and in science, involves mental constructs, syntheses, generalizations, formulations, idealizations, specific to the respective level of thought organization"(Schutz, 1977, pp. 265-266).

Against this backdrop of the increased recognition of the role reflexivity plays in research, Johnson and Duberley (2000) initially introduced two forms of reflexivity; methodological reflexivity and epistemic reflexivity. Drawing on these different perspectives on reflexivity, this thesis adopts the epistemic reflexivity.

Methodological approach to reflexivity adopts the positivist epistemological and ontological commitments and is limited to the critical evaluation of the methodology adopted in research instead of assessing the researcher's position and assumptions in the research (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Furthermore; 1) it rejects inter-subjectivity as a scientific principle in any explanation of the complex human behaviour, and 2) it deliberately excludes the approach of *verstehen* to research in social science under the criticism that it lacked objectivity (Alvesson and Deetz, 2007). These assumptions contradict the constructionist view adopted in the current thesis. Constructionism questions and rejects the approaches to knowledge in *erklären* and the claims to objectively and empirically articulate verifiable truth accounts about human nature and social reality. By taking a constructionist stand as a way of

understanding the co-creation of brand identity, it is evident that this study is committed to the ontological and epistemological subjectivism and is aligned with epistemic reflexivity. Epistemic reflexivity goes beyond the methodological approach and relates to how a researcher's own social position affects the forms and outcomes of research, questioning the taken-for-granted beliefs that inform our knowledge, as well as involving the acceptance of multiple valid accounts of any research (Johnson and Duberley, 2000).

In social constructionism, reflexivity thus, constitutes being aware of, and responsive to the surrounding social reality. As Hacking (1999) notes, social construction projects are critical of the status quo. The author holds that 1) "X is quite bad as it is" and 2) "we would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed" (p. 6). In the context of this thesis, the researcher draws parallels with Hacking's two benchmarks and argues that marketing with its roots in modernism, has largely treated brand identity as a fixed entity. Consequently, this firm-focused account is increasingly out of touch with current realities of the digital marketing era where social interactions and consumer engagement are potential source of influence. Furthermore, the technological revolution and access to vast amounts of information and shared knowledge have empowered consumers and other stakeholders to attain legitimacy as active agents in the co-creation and consumption of brands, and to be able to make their own choices based upon their social interpretation and inter-subjectivity. Thus reflexivity encourages us to embarrass less controllable view of the marketplace and to rethink our understanding of the very nature of brand identity, consumer and consumption. In doing so, sophistication and rigour in empirical research can be achieved.

Owing to the direct link of qualitative research to *verstehen* which entails capturing, describing, and explaining the real meanings and interpretations that actors subjectively ascribe to a phenomenon, management researchers need to thoroughly and evidently assess

their qualitative work fairly by using the appropriate appraisal criteria in a reflexive way (Johnson et al., 2006).

On the basis of this background, the challenge of qualitative data is best mitigated by the assessment criteria that limit bias. For example, criterion of "trustworthiness" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) in the context of this thesis was demonstrated by supporting thematic findings through self-evident quotes from participants. This is parallel with "fairness", one of Guba and Lincoln's (1989) criteria of "authenticity", where research findings represent multiple voices (managers and brand community) and claims about what is considered to be truth or reality. Another criterion of trustworthiness was to have participants and interviewees evaluate the researchers' interpretation, i.e., "member checks" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) in order to reach a valid and accurate interpretation of the text, also referred to as hermeneutical interpretation. Trustworthiness can also be achieved by triangulation (Denzin, 1989). Although objective reality can never be captured, triangulation –which, in the context of this study, refers to the process of combining several qualitative methods and sources (Flick, 2009) - is a method to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and add rigour and richness to scientific inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

5.10 Conclusion

In line with interpretive philosophical position, this chapter has presented and justified the methodological considerations and research design employed in this study. In so doing, it has illustrated and discussed in concrete steps how the data was collected and analysed for the two research questions of this thesis:

How do brand managers contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity and meaning with online brand communities?

How does the brand community contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity?

The first research question took a managerial perspective and relied primarily on semi-structured interviews with managers at Aston Martin. This study also utilised online data collected from the firm-hosted community on Facebook between March and August 2016 which resulted in a data-set consisting of 215 posts and 35,000 aggregated comments including replies. The aim of the online data was to capture meaningful managerial interactions with members of the brand community and how these members reacted to some managerial branding activities and negotiated the brand identity of Aston Martin.

Second, the chapter also provided detailed background about the netnographic method, online data collection and analysis adopted in the second research question. The netnography is based on a dataset of 984 posts collected over a 32 month period. The prolonged observation period helped the researcher gain emic understanding of the brand community and the underlying culture. Netnography also included online in-depth interviews with members of the brand community to uncover members' unique brand experiences. In total 14 interviews were conducted using Facebook Messenger and emails. These interviews provided depth and substance for an immersive approach to online data collection.

The next chapters (Ch.6; Ch.7) present the research findings of this thesis and answers the first research question and second research question respectively.

Chapter 6 – Analysis and Findings: Managerial Perspective

6.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to answer the first research question of this thesis: *how do brand managers contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity and meaning with online brand communities?* Adopting a process perspective, the chapter explores the ways in which marketing managers contribute to corporate brand identity co-creation with other stakeholders (i.e., brand community members). The results and analysis are based on extensive in-depth interviews with senior managers and netnographic data collected from the firm-hosted online brand community. The focus is on the revised role of managers and how they engage and collaborate with on-line communities in brand identity co-creation processes. The analysis identified six such activities: creating a brand family, staging imaginary experiences, negotiating brand identity, legitimising, engaging in collaborative marketing, and knowledge sharing. Further axial coding identified that these activities support three types of co-creation processes through which marketers collaborate with on-line communities: 'Nurturing brand passion', 'Bridging' and 'Partnering'.

6.2 Co-creation processes

6.2.1 Nurturing brand passion

One of the three processes centres on nurturing the passion towards the Aston Martin brand across all stakeholders. Two key activities are instrumental to this process: creating a brand family and staging imaginary experiences.

6.2.1.1 Creating a brand family

Creating a brand family is defined here as *nurturing a lifetime of love and passion for the brand and creating an environment for social interactions amongst brand enthusiasts.* As an iconic luxury car brand, the on-line brand community is comprised of predominantly fans of the brand and few customers (see methodology section). The company views the fans as valuable members of the AM family (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer), be it as potential future customers or as part of the large brand community that helps elevate the brand to its iconic luxury status.

> *So, I think there's a rather nice sort of lifetime factor to Aston Martin that people will fall in love with the brand at a very earlier age. And they may not be able to buy a car for 20 years or 30 years, but it's really important that we nurture those people.* (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer)

Creating a brand family is a future-oriented activity that unfolds over time:

> *You're talking to aspirants, you know, these are the customers of the future… people that don't own the products but share a passion for Aston Martin.* (#4 - General Manager Client Services)

The opportunity is clearly to build up tomorrow's customers. The world out there is full of entrepreneurial new money, wealth and those clients who are building up their wealth to be able to afford an Aston Martin are engaging on social media. (#2 - Marketing Director)

Nurturing brand passion is especially important as the firm targets new markets where there is little, if any, brand awareness as part of its Second Century Plan. By using the term 'family', Aston Martin emphasises the close bond the brand has with the brand community as well as appreciating the love, trust and loyalty the brand community has towards the brand, as exemplified by the following quotes of members of the on-line brand community:

Proud to be part of the amazing Aston Martin family (Dan);

Aston Martin is the best car brand of all time and always deserves all the support and love! (Bob)

To foster the perception of being part of the Aston Martin family, managers share off-line events with the on-line community. This includes detailed information, ways to explore the cars in great detail, as well as allowing them to be 'present' at key events by streaming live events on Facebook (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer). For example, Aston Martin launched its DB11 during the Geneva Motor Show 2016, which was streamed live, generating half a million views (Aston Martin, 2016). AM also introduced a microsite featuring a configurator which enabled visitors to spec, try and customise a virtual car. This initiative drove traffic to the official website, generated buzz around DB11 and offered passionate members an immersive brand experience.

The perception of being part of this family is also strengthened through offline social events for fans and customers, which include an annual event where members of Pistonheads

(an online news and reviews website devoted to cars) are invited to the firm's headquarters to view some AM classic cars (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer).

6.2.1.2 Staging imaginary experiences

The process of nurturing brand passion is further facilitated by managers staging imaginary experiences by, for instance, posting video stories, or launching a microsite which allows fans to design their dream car (see earlier). These tools allow customers to fantasise and thus co-create their own brand experiences and results in individual as well as collective brand identity meanings formation. However, storytelling is seen as a more powerful means of conveying emotional and cognitive brand experiences that stimulate brand identity meaning generation, compared to merely posting content, such as a video of a car, as illustrated in the following quote:

> *Storytelling is more important, because if we wanted to create content and we wanted to create content that got lots of clicks, we would do car videos, you know, we would do silly stuff.... For me, powerful content is content that is storytelling.* (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer)

Based on the netnographic data, Aston Martin emphasises three types of stories to allow fans to immerse themselves in the brand, fantasise and consequently stimulate the creation of individual as well as collective brand identity meanings. These stories centre on the legacy of the brand and its associated brand myth; behind-the-scenes stories; and stories about the living up to the brand's lifestyle (see "Art of Living" portfolio mentioned earlier). Stories about the brand legacy give fans an insight into Aston Martin's 104-year journey. Frequently, iconic cars from the very first Aston Martin 'Coal Scuttle' through to DB5 and One-77, as well as the people who have helped shape the brand, are depicted in both narrative and visual forms, documenting the brand's distinctiveness and heritage. Fans get the chance to

see the face of the company and experience the work that takes place in and around making a car. They get to know how certain elements of the cars are developed, and get a glimpse of the stories told by employees who take pride and pleasure in making these cars. Online content includes car production videos and pictures taken in the factory in Gaydon, as well as designers' sketches. These behind-the-scenes stories portray transparency and feed the fans' interest in interacting with this exclusive brand beyond showing features and specs of the cars and produce atmospheric experiences just as proposed by the following statement:

> *These cars are personal, this is the soul element of the brand, there is a personal works of craft that these guys have crafted together, and they have a story to tell. So, what is their story? How do they come to be stitching a seat or a steering wheel? Or a piece of interior trim on an Aston Martin. Uhm so these are the stories which are product related, but they are behind the soul of the brand. They are not necessarily about how fast it goes or our car doing a donut on the street or so. Uhm, so there is an opportunity there for us as well.* (#2- Marketing Director)

The myth associated with the brand via its association with the James Bond movie franchise (a key element of Aston Martin's brand identity) provides the brand with cultural meanings and connects the brand with the community members at an emotional level. To elaborate, Aston Martin created ten DB10 cars specifically for the latest Bond film *Spectre*. The company posted a video clip on YouTube and Facebook which shows how the car was created and includes a dramatic drive by the stunt driver (Aston Martin, 2015b).
The company uses the James Bond character as a context-specific reference point in formulating an interpretation of the hero brand which comes bundled with identity meanings, which have found substantial cultural resonance with the brand community:

Love Aston Martin. "The combination of Luxury, Performance and Beauty is what always attracted me since seeing the Silver DB5 in Goldfinger (Erik);

For as long as I can remember I have been a fan of Aston Martin. From my James Bond Corgi DB5 replica which I saw in real life to my true love a 1970's Aston Martin V8 Vantage and Volante. (Mark)

The third type of stories concerns the art of living. Through these stories, marketers aim to reinforce particular attributes of the brand identity such as elegance and individuality to consumers through the avenues of experiential lifestyle and culture, inviting fans and customers to explore events and experiences including travel, haute cuisine, sport, fashion and culture.

The following statements were typical reactions of the brand community to a video clip featuring Aston Martin's Vanquish Zagato, driven by a female:

Awesome car, awesome woman, awesome landscapes, awesome marketing people who chose to present this beauty driven by a lady for a change. Aston Martin, bespoke cars for advanced connoisseurs. Congratulations for this new masterpiece! (Charlotte)

I absolutely enjoy the places Aston Martin takes us to, beautiful scenery and a stunning car with excellent performance... WOW!! (Tony)

In this case, the car is not the essence of the play, rather it is a tool for a dramatic brand performance through which marketers facilitate brand identity construction (von Wallpach et al., 2017). This brand narrative strategy is an obvious means to help fans and other stakeholders co-construct brand identity as well as draw on these brand narratives in the construction of their own identities.

6.2.2 Bridging

The second process managers engage in co-creating brand identity with its on-line community is 'bridging'. Bridging is defined here as continuous collaboration with other stakeholders to co-create a shared understanding of the brand identity. Two activities facilitate this process: negotiating brand identity, plus legitimising the brand.

6.2.2.1 Negotiating brand identity

On-line communities offer platforms for negotiations, interpretation and meaning making (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013). Negotiating brand identity is the continuous exchange with the brand community about brand related activities perceived by either party as diverging from their associated meaning of the brand. Therefore, this activity can be regarded as a base for confirmation/refutation or further development of new brand identity meanings across stakeholders and represents an essential part of the continuous 'bridging' process marketers have to engage in and facilitate. As this section will demonstrate, negotiating brand identity influences strategic decision making within the firm, as well as tactical marketing activities. Aston Martin is investing £700 million in new technologies and new products (a complete renewal of all sports cars and the addition of new models) (Car Magazine, 2016) aimed at targeting new markets and customer segments. The company recognises that this move could be viewed by existing fans and customers as incongruent with their personal and collective brand meaning of Aston Martin. The following quote illustrates the challenges faced by AM.

> *I think the challenge comes in evolving the brand image…And it's a good image - people value that image. I think the challenge comes in how we move away from that, such that people see us from as more than just a sports car brand to actually become a luxury brand*. (#1-Global Digital Marketing Executive).

Initial reaction to repositioning the brand as a lifestyle brand illustrate the resistance within the brand community towards such initiatives. In their effort to curate "Art of Living" experiences, Aston Martin collaborated with a Brooklyn graffiti street artist in order to turn an Aston Martin Vanquish into a canvas (Aston Martin, 2015a), something the firm claimed an important marker of the brand identity. However, this branding activity aimed at presenting the car as a piece of modern art prompted a discursive debate about the brand identity. The brand community was largely critical and challenged the company to hold to its brand values and heritage:

> *The essence of the Aston Martin is in its style its design its gorgeous sound everything's like an Italian supercar but it's made by the British paid in pounds made in Britannia under the reign of a monarch...isn't it*. (Ken)
>
> *It's art already, without the ugly graphics. It can't be improved upon. You've ruined it. Hope you're happy with yourself.* (Mark)
>
> *How very 'American' looks shite!* (Glenn)
>
> *Even Americans wouldn't hurt a car like this give us a break.* (Di)
>
> *No! Why did you do that? Aston Martin should be an icon of timeless elegance instead of flashy claptrap*. (Arkadiusz)

In essence, these statements show that 'tattooing' the Vanquish resonated poorly with the dominant brand association held by the AM brand community. The community associated this act as 'American', 'flashy' and 'ugly', demonstrating a lack of synergy with the core values and identity meanings they associate with the AM brand. The prevalent view within the brand community was that Aston Martin had strayed from its origin identity as an elegant, iconic British brand. In a statement on Facebook, AM justified embellishing the car on the ground that:

We've not decided to wrap the car, we've decided to do this as an art car - as a piece of work, as a piece of modern, cultural art.

In the midst of claims and counterclaims, marketers reassessed what they conceived as an artistic character of the brand and decided to discontinue the promotion:

So, we didn't do the second bit of promotion; we thought there was no point, nobody likes it. And we probably won't do that with the brand again. (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive)

In the above example brand identity is actively negotiated amongst brand community members and with managers. Such feedback is welcomed by the firm which constantly assesses and re-examines its branding strategy, what it stands for, and how it is being perceived externally. The metaphor of *'the proverbial canary in the coal mine'* captures the importance of the brand community as a signalling source. Fans are thought of as an avenue for checking on brand health:

I think it's a health-check … it's a way of us gathering information or getting a sense of what we're doing is right. Uhm you could argue that the fan community on Facebook for example, uhm, is the proverbial canary in the coal mine; you know, they are the early warning. So if they start to get angry at us, we need to listen to that. (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer)

As illustrated in these quotations, managers are not the sole guardians of brand identity (Wallpach et al., 2017). Instead, as in the case of this iconic brand, managers will have to recede and allow customers to take on the role of protecting their interpretation of the brand identity, which is highly interwoven with their self- identity (Belk, 1988). The role of the manager is to carefully balance the future growth strategy of the business with maintaining the strongly embedded identity and collective meaning associated with this iconic brand. Any

marketing activity could trigger a need to renegotiate brand identity for individual fans as they might see it incongruent with their idiosyncratic meanings of what the brand stands for.

Negotiating brand identity enables managers to experiment with the brand. Experimenting here is clearly a property of identity negotiation. In part, the brand community provides a platform for the company to educate stakeholders about the brand's new direction, but more importantly experiment with the brand and collectively negotiate the core values and identity claims moving forward as explained by this statement: *"If there's a big element of the community that have said negative stuff about it [refers to DBX car]; we, we can use that to understand, either whether we continue to do it or whether we need to make changes, to what our plans are"* (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive).

In particular, experimenting with the brand is about engaging in a learning process; a process of trial and error as the following quote clarifies: *"Social is about you know trying to be open with everyone. So it's...it's very much again test and learn really"* (#3- Global Digital Manager). As such, this logic of experimenting, testing and learning helps managers to be aware of potential discrepancies between the internal and external perceptions of the brand. This dialectic relationship is what drives the cocreation process because it keeps the brand identity evolving over time through a common consent.

6.2.2.2 Legitimising

Legitimacy is defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). A key challenge for managers at Aston Martin is to affirm and maintain the legitimacy of the brand ownership:

> *I've met so many customers in the past, working for other brands, who have told me: "you know I can afford your car, but I don't feel like I am allowed to buy the car."*

And you think: "really? you have got the money, so how does that work?" And you speak to them more about it. What they are talking about is the social permission to own. Does the man in the street give them permission to buy the car that they really, really want? They might really desire the car, but they may say to themselves: "what will my neighbours say? what will my friends say? what does the car in the street say about me as a person?" With Aston Martin there is a tremendous social permission to own. With other brands sometimes there is not. People fear how they are going to be seen when driving another brand. With Aston Martin there is never this fear of being seen driving the brand. So that's what I mean. It is a very kind of organic, approachable allowance to drive an Aston Martin from the public, which is a very strong place to be in for us. Our challenge if you like is making people aware of the brand and their consideration as well. (#2- Marketing Director)

Legitimacy of ownership is provided by the organic vast number of fans which signifies social acceptance of the brand. The company capitalises from the mass interest and emotional support stemming from 6.9 million brand community members to sell an average of 4,000 cars a year (#3-Global Digital Manager), because:

That mass fan following makes our owners feel good about their cars. (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer)

They're essential. The fans make the customers feel good. You know, when you're driving an Aston Martin and somebody gives you a thumbs-up, it's a great feeling. (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer)

Thus the expansive brand community act as an important referent for brand identity. The community co-creates and assigns legitimate meanings to the brand (Kates, 2004) and its

possession by drawing on shared social and cultural understanding of the brand. To ensure customers continue to legitimise the brand, managers at AM recognise:

> *You have to engage with the public at large with your brand otherwise your public at large will not give you permission for your customers to buy your car in the streets, because they are not engaging and understanding the brand in the way they should.* (#2- Marketing Director)

To do this, managers at AM build on its iconic brand status by reinforcing Aston Martin's cultural-cognitive legitimacy (congruence between the firm's activities and existing cognitive and cultural norms and beliefs (Scott, 2014)) emphasising its relevance in the personal and social life of customers and especially fans. The following quote illustrates how successful Aston Martin has been in this regard and what it means to be the owner of an iconic brand:

> *When you are a client of Aston Martin you are buying into a world that says a lot about how you are educated and how you view the world. You're not buying a car that's gonna be the loudest shoutiest car, at the same time you still have a statement when you get out of an Aston Martin, people are interested in who you are and what that car says about you as well… I get a lot of questions about who I am. They just have a lot of respect and credibility for you I guess, and that's just you driving a car. So it says a lot about the power of the brand.* (#2- Marketing Director)

Similarly, the firm's offline legitimising activities, in particular those activities related to moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) are also among the topics discussed in the brand community. The interplay between the firm's legitimising activities and online discussions show how the brand identity is being understood and evaluated in a socially constructed legitimation process (Suchman, 1995; Kates, 2004). For instance, a post implied that the member lacked the knowledge to make the necessary link between historical events and an

Aston Martin brand initiative. He interpreted the production of the limited edition of eight V12 Vantage S Spitfire 80 models to celebrate the 80th anniversary of Britain's most iconic warplane Spitfire World War 2 fighter, (Auto Express, 2016) as an:

> *Insult to the plane and the men and women who flew them. There is no relation to a Spitfire other than a cheap marketing ploy, very sad* (Jeremy).

In a response to Jeremy, Pete defended the moral legitimacy of the brand and defended the initiative as consistent with the brand heritage.

> *An insult you say? There are plenty of connections between Aston Martin and the Spitfire. AM Cambridge is just a few miles away from RAF Duxford, which is where they initially operated from. In addition, a donation of £5000 is being made to the RAF ... During the war, instead of making cars, AM used to build and supply parts to the aircraft industry in order to help with the war effort.* (Pete)

6.2.3 Partnering

The third core process contributing to brand identity co-creation, involves 'partnering' which refers to closely working with the brand community on a range of marketing activities and signifies the important role the brand community plays. This process is supported by two core activities: 'engaging in collaborative marketing' and 'knowledge sharing'.

6.2.3.1 Engaging in collaborative marketing

By engaging in collaborative marketing the brand community acts as "part-time marketers" (Gummesson, 1991), the firm views members of the brand community as peers in the marketing process with an active role in co-creating the brand identity through producing user-generated content, brand advocates, market researchers, as well as involvement in new product development (NPD).

Especially, the owners collaborate with Aston Martin to provide powerful marketing material in the form of driving videos choreographed as stories. Occasionally, managers collaborate with owners of Aston Martin cars to co-create stories around their driving experiences, which serve as promotional materials for the brand.

> *. … it's feeling confident and allowing other people to tell your story, that's co-creation as well. You know so in a sense you know, we know our story very well, so I can sit her and bore you to death about how we make our cars, and Le Mans, and racing and yada, yada, yada and I'm telling you a story. Uuh, for me co-creation is if you took all that and you loved Aston Martin and you told that story and you made a video about Aston Martin. That's, I think is co-creation because you're working, you're interpreting the brand through your eyes.* (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer)

These co-created stories are seen to play a powerful role in communicating identity content and how others come to see the brand, as expressed in the following quote:

> *The organic community out there and their word of mouth is actually critical to … getting the message that we have out there…[and] they got a possibility, the potential for them to actually shape other people's perceptions of the brand.* (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive)
>
> *Their job is to help us spread the message of Aston Martin, beyond what we can actually do ourselves.* (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive)

To accentuate the collaborative role of the brand community and the necessity for the brand to be accommodating of the community' resources, one informant referred to this role

as *"the new media in terms of how they influence other people to buy the cars"* (#2- Marketing Director).

A key element in engaging in collaborative marketing is to actively encourage and accept critical feedback both externally and internally. Feedback provides the firm with knowledge and resources. In particular, through the community's cognitive practices (i.e., sense making) as well as behavioural practices (i.e., word of mouth, artifacts etc.) fans and customers provide the firm with voluntary knowledge and services. Aston Martin is thoughtful about the points of views of the community and welcomes critical feedback because "a brand should be alive to that kind of feedback and dialogue" (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer). As such, feedback is seen as an essential process in assessing the brand identity and meaning as well as an important part in the design of new cars and advancing the brand's product line while maintaining the identity claims of power, beauty, soul. For example, when unveiling the DBX concept, Aston Martin CEO Andy Palmer invited feedback:

> *I am very much looking forward to seeing how this concept is received not only here today, but also by our legion of existing loyal customers and by those potential customers around the world.* (Aston Martin, 2015b)

> *The brand community gives you its overall view of what the car is, what they think of the car and that helps us define whether it's going to be a success or not*. (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive)

> *The marketing team communicated all feedback to the creative team, who put the feedback through a design process until a favourable design was created*. (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive)

The active role of customers in new product development has been widely recognised and acknowledged (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2013) and plays a crucial element in engaging with customers in collaborative activities.

6.2.3.2 Knowledge sharing

A common activity of the on-line forum is the discussion of technical aspects of the brand which represent a vital component of the brand identity. For the brand managers this means that facts and reliable information about the brand need to be regularly disseminated:

> *We have to make sure we meet the challenge of providing all the information they need.* (#2- Marketing Director)

Managers also need to share information with the community in order to correct misinformation about products posted by members, mainly caused by the complexity of automotive technology. Responses by Aston Martin clarifying the issue are necessary to ensure that such posts do not lead to damaging the brand identity:

> *There was a couple of posts recently where someone was confused about our new product … and then a string formed that was confusing the issue even more. If there is something like that we would probably respond because it's incorrect product information.* (#3-Global Digital Manager)

> *There's a danger for misinformation … automotive products are extremely complicated … and it's sometimes frustrating when you see advice on the internet from people that [and] not always the best advice to give.* (#4- General Manager Client Services)

Managers also share the education role with other members of the brand community who answer questions and intervene to correct members who have posted incorrect information associated with the brand.

Because of the size and the passion of our own community, they kind of do some of that role for us. So we will sometimes get 'Oh, they've answered it for us'. Someone else has come in and gone 'Oh no, that's wrong: its x, y and you can see the information – here is the URL'. So we are quite fortunate in that respect. (#3-Global Digital Manager)

The continuous process of enabling and leveraging the brand community to engage in collaborative marketing and knowledge sharing activities allows brand enthusiasts to play an active role within the brand community and offers them opportunities for fulfilment (Ind el al., 2013) as a valuable member of the Aston Martin family. This helps reinforce their understanding of the brand identity across and beyond the brand community.

6.3 Corporate culture as enabler of the co-creation process

Themes introduced next, were derived from interviews with senior managers and were incorporated in the aggregate category of 'managing corporate culture' as indicated in the data structure diagram (see Figure 5.7 in section 5.6.1). Corporate culture is intertwined with the unfolding managerial co-creation activities. The findings highlight the dynamic between an inclusive corporate culture and co-creation in that they are mutually constitutive, albeit culture may influence co-creation activities performed by managers in different ways as explicitly established in the next sections.

6.3.1 Moral responsibility

Moral responsibility here means a sense of duty or obligation (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001) which guides the way managers at Aston Martin perceive and interact with the brand community.

In the context of this study, moral responsibility is settled on two major dimensions; brand behaviour (e.g., access, content, dialogue) as well as brand attitude (respect, empathy). At Aston Martin, this sense of moral responsibility is expressed through accessibility (brand behaviour). For example, the CEO writes personally to every customer who buys an Aston Martin. This ethos and mentality of being accessible is also extended to dedicated fans and brand enthusiasts who aspire to own the brand. Fans can access and experience the brand through motor shows, racing events or direct visits to the factory in Gaydon. Accessibility is also achieved by providing online content which creates opportunities for active dialogue and interaction between the brand and the community. The imperative of content in facilitating access to the brand is evidenced through the accounts of the following senior managers:

> *I think we have a responsibility and I use that word responsibility because I think it means that it is our duty as Aston Martin to provide those fans with content. I mean, I,*

in very simple terms, I think if we don't we're letting them down, we are failing them. (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer)

I think as we look to our next generation of products, you can see on social media there is people that are really desperate for information about what those products are. (#4- General Manager Client Services)

We want to be the brand that if you can afford to buy the car one day or one of the cars or several of the cars even, that you remember the experience you had that we were that accessible brand, it wasn't the brand that oh hold on a minute, you know, you don't release content to me because I'm just a fan, we try to make it accessible to everyone, but we might give, you know, certain different levels of content, but still try and deliver the same message. (#3- Global Digital Manager)

Brand attitude as a second dimension of moral responsibility entails treating fans and customers with respect. Aston Martin is a stakeholder-oriented brand which capitalises on brand-consumer respect and empathy as tenets for a healthy relationship. The loss of respect may negatively affect the consumer-brand dyadic relationship as explained by the following statement.

I'm really super conscious that this respect and love is the most precious thing that we have as a brand. It's very fragile, we can lose it in an instant, so something that I worry about most of all is that I suddenly become arrogant, or people don't think that we're accessible, or they lose their respect for us. (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer)

This quote is an example of how through respect managers at Aston Martin humanise the brand. They recognise and enforce the idea that Aston Martin is under the duty to behave

in a sensible way that do not objectify fans and customers or take their brand love for granted. The brand lives by its values and it is at its worst when these values are lost and the brand turns arrogant, inaccessible, and loses significance. In this context, a senior manager pointed to a critical point in consumer-brand relationship, i.e., preserving the "right" level of access. He referred to the "Goldilocks Principle" as a code of behaviour to support maintaining a balanced relationship between the brand and its key stakeholders and carefully achieve the best balance of exclusivity and access. The senior manager commented that:

> *We have to be able to be accessible to that fan base, so we have to provide them, we have to not be snobby, or snooty, but we also have to maintain this balance of being a luxury brand and being slightly out of reach. I call it the Goldilocks strategy, after the fairy tale. In that, we have to get the porridge just right, you know, If it's too luxury and we are too remote, then maybe we lose some of that fan base, we lose some people that do the thumbs up, they think: "oh you know these guys are arrogant or snooty". If we go too popular with the fans, then it becomes cheap and the brand sort of loses that special sort of wow. So, you know, I think there's what I said this sort of balance all the time with giving people access to the brand, so making them feel relaxed and comfortable.* (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer)

6.3.2 Embracing digital culture: vision

Interviewees presented a large class of codes that led to the emergence of second-order theme *embracing digital culture*. There was a growing impression among participants that all of the changes taking place within the company underpinned by the firm's Second Century Plan and ranging from new investors and new leadership, to collaborating with Salesforce and experiencing new ways of connecting with customers and fans, were creating a supporting environment that triggers innovation and co-creation opportunities.

In the past, Aston Martin did not have the intention to exploit and support the utilisation of social media. There was continuing ambiguity as to the role of social media with complete absence of any systematic use of the medium. One participant reflects on his own experience about the company's usage of social media in the past and how the medium was marginalised: *"When I joined, I was a bit shocked in terms how little everybody knew about it. It was kind of, my boss, my old boss Pete, was the only person who did it and he used to do it day and night, and post and tweet and there was no reporting on it"* (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive). He further observed that *"When I joined, social media was just there, we needed to get it done, because everybody was doing it. But nobody really recognised it. And I was never involved in launch meetings or anything like that. It was kind of like: "oh don't forget to ask Neil to post something on social media on the morning""* (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive).

Recent shifts in the company's perspective due to its future growth plans eroded that approach. Current senior leadership recognised the incentives of strategically using social media and stepped outside the established organisational routines to create a culture that embraces digital and social media orientation. This vision is shared throughout the company and is explained in the following statement:

> *Again, it's a quick, it has been a quick evolution, because in the time that it has taken for me to go from joining to this point now, I mean, it's changed massively and it is still changing, so I think the culture from the new CEO… Andy Palmer, is very active on social media himself. So, he understands, you know, the purpose of it and…there's a lot of direction from him to make sure that we use it as best as possible and we're doing brilliant stuff and creative as we can with it, without spending too much money.* (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive)

The company is capitalising on and developing creative methods in using social media in less expensive ways while remaining globally competitive making the medium an indispensable part of the brand's DNA as one senior manager explains: *"I think that social media is part of everybody's future and is part of our brand's future as well."* (#4- General Manager Client Services). To build and nurture this digital culture within the organisation, the CEO is personally active on social media. Recently, the company joined "DriveTribe", an automotive social media website, where the CEO personally welcomes new members and directly communicates with fans, responds to their comments and shares information with them as well as inviting them to share and create their own brand-related content encouraging an environment of trust and active participation. On the operational level, social media has become an incremental part of the company's marketing communications planning. "*And now it's very much part of the planning process and understanding how we are gonna launch a car stems from ok; what is our first tweet about the car gonna be?"* (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive).

Although the organisation is relatively small and lacks significant resources such as budget and manpower, social media forms an integral part of Aston Martin's marketing practices as customers and other stakeholders are increasingly empowered by digital media and demand transparency and access. The company has partnered with external agencies such as Salesforce to assists Aston Martin with its social media and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) effort. Through this collaboration the company is making use of Radian 6 to listen and monitor the online conversations among consumers and between consumers and the brand throughout Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Furthermore, the company is not intimidated by drawbacks associated with social media and the potential risk of reduced control over the brand. Managers recognised the challenge and adapted a new brand governance philosophy. *"So I guess that's where I*

suppose the challenge is, is to understand we have to be an engaging brand to be in a conversation, but not necessarily be totally in control of that conversation". (#2- Marketing Director)

Embracing digital culture also required the company to adapt its visual corporate identity to suit the needs of social media platforms. As such, adjustment were made to the Aston Martin logo in order to fit the digital interface of the social media platforms used by the company (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) as evidenced by the following quote:

> *We've actually just recently changed the wings in the last four weeks, believe it or not... It's only a small change to it. One of the strong reasons is digital marketing: In a social media space, your real estate is very small. You're on a small screen, on a mobile screen and your real estate is very small, so your small logo becomes even smaller and the resolution of the word Aston Martin and the wings logo becomes even smaller still. So we've moved to a larger word mark, bigger than the wings to make the word Aston Martin clearer in a small screen digital communication format. So it's just the way that we are subtly changing the brand without revolutionising and then completely throwing it away. Sticking to what people know; the wings and the word, they understand that, but also subtly changing things, so it's adapting to social media and digital space that we now operate in, which is a key channel for us to communicate by.* (#2- Marketing Director)

Aston Martin also encourages fans and customers to connect with the brand's official website and make use of its digital services which are designed to deliberately augment engagement with the brand. For example, the company provides a car configurator on its homepage, a digitalised brand engagement tool that enables consumers to experiment with cars, review products' specs and create customised cars of the brand's existing models.

Potential buyers can submit their creations to Aston Martin dealers and start the buying process.

6.3.3 Creating new knowledge

Data shows the centrality of creating new knowledge that is most important to co-creation. The value of this knowledge goes beyond economic gains to the ongoing objective of the firm to understand certain aspects of consumer's life in order to build momentum for a strong socio-cultural capital for the brand in terms of promoting brand awareness, seeking support of the brand community, negotiating brand identity and associated claims. In this sense the firm is actively listening and monitoring the online conversations. Listening in the context of this theme refers to the process of following the online conversations related to the brand and its competitors by means of technical solutions. A key social media management system used by Aston Martin is Radian6, an application that allows managers to generate an abundance of online data - such as sentiments towards the brand and what it stands for, trends and demographics- which is instrumental in formulating the company's branding and business strategies as well as to influence the online conversation as the following account reflects:

> *What social media does for us is to allow us via monitoring to understand how certain customer demographics behave, understand the sentiment to the brand yes that is one thing, but also understand where else they are following, what else they are doing and talking about to see eh… Let say, we monitor Charlotte, the persona I mentioned and we go to her Twitter account or her Facebook account, on there we will see Charlotte is buying Prada, she is buying Gucci or Chanel or she is buying Michael Kors or Tiffany's or some more American brands, on there we will also find out how, what her friends are doing, how she is socialising, what she getting up to, so it's a really powerful tool to understand exactly what Charlotte is and what she's doing, then we*

can go and build a product that suits those needs that she's having and talk to her in a way that she is going to be listened to as well. (#2- Marketing Director)

This excerpt shows that Aston Martin adopts a directed and targeted approach to social media. An approach that facilitates the acquisition and exploitation of consumer data and knowledge such as user profile, activities, brands preferences, relationships as well as users' private networks and their interests and as such the company can become more responsive to consumers and adequately accommodates their needs and wants and collaborate with them in co-creation activities.

Induced by the exclusivity of the brand and forced to work with a limited marketing budget, managers at Aston Martin rely on earned and shared media, a strategy that brings the customer's voice to the core of the marketing strategy. Earned and shared media amplify the reach of brand messages through word of mouth, likes, shares, and retweets.

So, we don't do lot of paid, but we do uh, quite a lot of uh, earned, we have earned and of course we have shared. So, I think in that sense you can say that because we don't advertise a lot, that lot of our customers come from people who have heard about us or have been reading about us, and if you then make the assumption that everybody is on social media, then social media becomes really an important place for us to connect with them. (#5- Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer)

Adopting earned and shared media strategy has opened the way for Aston Martin to bypass the traditional media and count on social media as a source of engaging in generating new knowledge, disseminating information and sharing its commercial and branding materials with the public at large as well as forming collectives around its posts. A precondition to efficient use of social media in knowledge creation and generation is to first and foremost understand the technological structure of social media platforms and the extent to which each platform can achieve distinct objectives:

I think it's understanding the different channels as well. So we've got a better understanding now of the types of audiences as broad as they can be on the channel. So, Facebook for instance, people want…you know the best quality photos of our cars. And that will get the best reaction if you're being really simplistic about it, whereas Instagram and Pinterest, we can actually move more towards the luxury sector though, because there is a lot of that aspirational sort of felt way people use those channels. So, Pinterest for instance is very much about aspiration: "I want this car, I want that car" so, we can actually focus on the lifestyle of the brand there as well. So, yeah, we post stuff around Aston Martins' merchandise and the Aston Martin yacht that we've just built. That's very much focused towards that channel because we know people are interestingly aspiring to those elements of the brand. Uhm, Facebook, we focus on like I've said, just the best quality, the quintessential Aston Martin cars and our best quality photos,…and Twitter is almost like our announcements channel...So if we launch a car, you know, because it's real time, Twitter is the place where we go for that real time sort of, this is the announcement, this is now. (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive)

Understanding the channels enables managers at Aston Martin to reassess the way they approach and employ these channels. These channels are not merely tactical tools employed by the company to gain new knowledge, disseminate messages and reach different audiences globally, rather, they are structures where hosted virtual communities meet to share brand stories and engage in brand-related conversations that are usually emotionally charged. The utility of a given channel is evaluated in relation to marketing goals and a course of action chosen from a set of alternatives. Furthermore, the nature of the social media platform dictates which channel is more influential. To illustrate, Aston Martin launched its DB11during Geneva Motor Show 2016. Initially the audience was engaged via Facebook as

Aston Martin streamed the launch live from Geneva generating half million views. At the heart of the campaign Aston launched a microsite as well as a configurator featuring DB11, the site was fully interactive, enabling visitors to engage in a number of ways allowing them to spec and customise the car, and provide personal information. These activities contributed significantly to understanding consumers' needs and wants, and were all feeding into Aston Martin's Salesforce Customer Relationship Management system. Then, via Salesforce CRM system, a series of alerts were sent to dealers providing them with details about prospects which ultimately resulted in sales as confirmed by the marketing director. Not only was social media, Facebook in particular, part of *"a very joined-up sales journey"* (#2- Marketing Director), but the company was able to drive traffic to the official website, drove brand awareness, created buzz around DB11 and enabled fans and customers to engage in debating craftsmanship of DB11, the heritage, and the historical evolution of the model, thereby building a genuine brand experience that helps the firm to co-create and share, and sustain a strong brand identity.

6.3.4 Developing social media sensitivity

This theme emerged during the first interview and consistently continued to occur throughout the rest of the interviews as participants talked about key challenges presented by social media. Challenges were relational as well as structural as will be discussed below.

Whilst Aston Martin is tuning to social media for brand awareness, co-creation activities, and utilising social media as a source for gaining information related to consumers' engagement behaviours and their brand consumption experiences, challenges caused by social media was a concern emerged repeatedly during the interviews. Interviewees felt that due to privacy settings of users' profiles and the lack of knowledge about potential customers among the brand community especially in terms of occupation and income has important implication for segmentation. The homogeneous nature of online communities and the lack of social

media segmentation frameworks undermine the company's ability to categorise members of these communities into clearly identifiable segments of pure fans, potential customers, and owners -as managers refer to owners of Aston Martin cars- for targeted campaigns. The question for them was how to identify heterogeneity among members of the community in order to achieve individualised segmentation. Thus the main managerial uncertainty is how to translate engagement into revenue. The following statements explain the challenge:

> *You know we have 6.5 million Facebook fans, probably 95% of those aren't customers. Even if 10% additionally become customers, that would be amazing, but of those 6,5 million people we sell 4000 cars a year.* (#3- Global Digital Manager)

> *We know there's a huge community out there, but the challenge we've got is turning that community into actual sort of business value... and if you can't pinpoint your customer base on social media, which, the only channel I think, the closest we got to being able to do that is LinkedIn as far as a potential customer base, because it's got things like bracket bands of wages, salaries, and then job roles and C-suite and all that sort of stuff. So, we can use LinkedIn quite heavily... We did a recent campaign where we were doing test drive links. So, we directly posted that on LinkedIn to certain people, and then we could measure how many people actually completed the test drive form. If we extend that to other [platforms], that's eventually what we could do on other social media, but we kind of need that knowledge, we need the knowledge of the customer base.* (#1-Digital Marketing Executive)

Aston Martin is yet to identify sophisticated ways to gauge the effectiveness of social media and develop targeted engagement strategies that are fine-tuned for each individual or groups. "*You know maybe moving forward when data becomes more sophisticated and people are actually more open in terms of their social credentials. Then we start storing social*

profiles within our customer database, but until then it's still very difficult" (#3- Global Digital Manager). Currently, the company provides content to actual customers and fans equally (instead of targeted messages). *"I think it's really just you need to understand if you are engaging with real customers or if you are engaging with fans. I think the best way is ultimately treat everyone as a customer which is what we kind of try and do with our fans on Facebook"* (#3- Global Digital Manager). This democratised access to the brand is motivated by the following statement: *"So, potentially, these people can become customers, because, what we can't pinpoint ok you're a customer, you're a consumer, the idea is that obviously if you get the message out to as many people as possible, that can filter down and someone is gonna say: 'well actually, that looks like a good car, I wanna learn more about Aston Martin'".* (#1- Digital Marketing Executive)

Findings show that although managers are convinced that the initial objective of brand engagement is brand awareness, yet managers at Aston Martin feel the need to account for the economic value of social media. A resolution was offered by a senior manager who advocates addressing the pitfalls of conventional segmentation and the narrow focus on immediate revenues. He argues that the enduring value of social media rests in creating brand awareness and growing the brand, and eventually achieving sales objectives in the long term:

> *There is a link, but you're growing the brand, you're using social media to reach out around the world and to make people familiar, putting the brand into people's thinking and so, there is a direct link between social media and sales, but I think it's much more than that. Uhm, for us to have a long-term sustainable presence in all markets, we need to grow both our brand and our portfolio. So, uhm, you're talking to aspirants, you know, these are the customers of the future as well, the people that don't own the products but share a passion for Aston Martin.* (#4- General Manager Client Services)

Also measuring engagement seems to be a limitation for an effective use of social media because of the lack of sophisticated technology and advanced methods to analyse users engagement as explained here:

> *It's generally the numbers, you know, it's our community size more than anything else and also we do a monthly report and we look at what content has done well. .. I mean very simplistically really, we would look at how many people have viewed the content, shared the content and commented on the content. It's kind of that simple. I mean there are things like sentiment analysis as well, but unfortunately because of the way that you record sentiment in terms of algorithms and the like, it's a very hit and miss, you know, because of modern culture and certain terminology now used, an algorithm only sees a word as a negative or positive, he doesn't necessarily see it in the context of the sentence... So if someone calls one of our cars sick an algorithm might potentially see that as negative sentiment whereas actually it is a positive sentiment and yeah you can manually change that but it's still difficult to keep on top of.* (#3- Global Digital Manager)

This shows that liking, commenting, and sharing which are engagement features introduced by some social networking sites such as Facebook are commonly used metrics for measuring the level of users' engagement with posts because the data is made accessible to businesses. Managers at Aston Martin also consider sentiment analysis as a method to measure users' engagement with content provided by the brand, yet marketers recognise that due to the evolving popular culture and language, algorithms may for example, wrongly categorise a word as negative or positive because algorithm can neither grasp several layers of the meanings of a word nor put every single comment in the correct context by itself.

All in all, the above analysis indicates that a host of factors are likely to impact the effective use of social media in co-creation, nevertheless, developing social media sensitivity

can help create awareness of drawbacks and limitations represented by engagement platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). Consequently, this awareness can be leveraged to gain useful insights and build momentum for more systematic and successful use of these platforms in the co-creation process as well as to become more responsive to changes of online consumer behaviour.

6.4 Conclusion

The findings have detailed the data that emerged from the analysis and identified three key processes of corporate identity co-creation (nurturing brand passions, bridging, partnering) including six nested co-creation activities (creating a brand family, staging imaginary experiences, negotiating brand identity, legitimising, engaging in collaborative marketing, knowledge sharing). The findings also identified four themes (moral responsibility, embracing digital culture, creating new knowledge, developing social media sensitivity) which were distilled into a broader theoretical dimension "managing corporate culture". The emergent data provides empirical evidence that managers are active members of the brand community, yet their co-creation activities cannot be isolated from external influence. The brand identity construction process is conditioned by a broader socio-cultural context. That is stakeholders affect the process by altering activities, routines and boundaries that define managerial co-creation process. The data also shows that the co-creation process is largely shaped by the type of leadership and corporate culture that both enable and constrain co-creation.

Chapter 7 – Analysis and Findings: Brand Community Perspective

7.1 Introduction

The findings of this chapter answer research question 2: *How does the brand community contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity?*

The purpose of the chapter is to present the findings related to netnography which is based primarily on netnographic data and interviews conducted through email and Facebook messenger with members of the brand community. Verbatim quotations from netnography are presented to show the actual posts from the brand community members. No corrections were made to spelling errors, typos, and grammatical errors made by members of the brand community in their online conversations as the researcher wants to keep the language users use in social media.

This study extends the co-creation concept by providing insights into corporate brand identity formation within a social-media environment taking the perspective of members of the brand community.

7.2 Membership characteristics and the nature of exchange

The brand's official page on Facebook was created by Aston Martin in 2011 and counts over 6,8 million followers. Community members identify themselves as brand enthusiasts. The community consists of two groups; pure fans and brand owners. Before joining the brand community, members often already have a passion for the brand. When asked to reflect on how their passion for the brand began, interviewees gave the following answers:

I've been very interested in cars in general since my childhood. I guess british sports cars just stood out a little from the italian and german cars because of their history and tradition. I guess Astons are the ones I liked the designs on best. And when you combine the designs with James Bond and the beautiful sounding v8 and especially the v12 engines it really is the perfect combination for me. (6#-Torben)

I remember once seeing a 1997 Aston Martin vantage and was completely smitten. (14#-Prasad)

The source of my passion lies in my childhood. I loved cars since the begining. But I remember the first time I saw an Aston, it was a special moment. I was around 12, it was a black DB9 Volante, driving by in the darkness of the night. The bright xenon headlights first caught my attention. At the moment then, not every car had those. Only quality. Or BMW. Thats what I thought it was. Then I remember seeing the logo at the back and KNOWING it was something special, but not really knowing the brand at the same time. I knew the existence of Aston Martin, but nothing more. But despise that it just felt special. And then I heard that V12 engine growling, and I remember thinking, that it was one of the most apealing sound I've ever heard. And I'm a musician so sound is a very important thing to me. The sound is, actually one of the pillars of my passion for the brand. A few years later, when around 14yo, walking in the city (Quebec City, Canada) on a very sunny day of summer, I saw for the first time the 2005 V8 Vantage. Parked alone, in a beautiful metallic sand silver, shining like a thounsand lights under the sparkles of the sun. I was blinded by it's beauty. It was love at first sight. I remember being stunned. Everything else around me got blurred and I could only focus on one thing : that car. It made me feel something man. Really. It's

*that powerful. I stayed like 30mins, just around it. Enjoying everything, every curve, every detail, every line. The proportions of this thing, it's just... so perfect. So delicate. And then the owner came by and got in and started the engine. I remember the surprise I had, how MEAN and powerful that V8 engine sounded and I was amazed by the contrast. How something so beautiful and classy could sound so mean and agressive?. I liked that a lot. It was bold. A very pleasing combinaison. I always prefered the V12. But I think this car made me love the V8 for the first time. Anyway. I still consider the V8 Vantage to be one if the most beautiful car ever to be created. And this is, without a doubt the very moment where my passion for Aston Martin kicked in. (*11#-*Nicolas)*

*Having been a 911 owner for best part of 16 years I had always since a small boy had an interest in Aston Martin (fuelled by a neighbour who owned a DB5 and of course Bond!), also since the launch of the New Vantage back in 2004/5 I always said that it would be the only car to replace my 911, which my first one did in 2008! (*5#-*Steve)*

It was an article in german AMS magazine in 1976 the image has changed since the DB7 and its different on each car today meaning I am an enthusiast of the older models (8#-Michael.)

Was on my motorbike in the 80's and a new Aston came alongside while I was doing 70, waved, then floored it with a smile, and disappeared into the distance. The noise was so fantastic, I was hooked. (13#-Paul)

The community is underpinned by the shared interest in the brand and the social bond that is created with like-minded others. Members use their legal names and do not maintain

anonymity which allows marketers and researchers to easily trace content back to its contributor, learn more about individual members and assess their influence and the level of engagement with the brand and other consumers. Members are motivated to join the community with the aim to increase their brand knowledge, to share brand experiences, or, simply, to express their interest in the community's subject matters.

Brand related topics such as brand appreciation and brand love, authenticity, uniqueness, performance (engine), aesthetics, and innovation are among the most prevalent topics discussed among the brand community members. Members often discuss and react to offline brand-related activities such as racing at Le Mans. This highlights the embeddedness of the brand's offline life into the brand community's online conversations. Members engage in a spectrum of brand related-activities such as consuming the brand, and contributing to the brand and the brand community through engaging in conversations, looking at cars' pictures and watching branded videos, liking, and commenting. Fans strongly identify with the brand and openly express their emotions towards the brand. They engage in word of mouth, express their love and support for the brand, share their opinions about the brand innovation and the introduction of new models, and even show sophisticated marketing knowledge as they engage in complimenting or critiquing marketers for their branding campaigns. They also constantly compare Aston Martin cars to rival brands expressing their views on the brand values, heritage and other identity claims, and thereby, engage in cocreation activities. There is a high level of exposure to brand related information as members visit the brand page frequently and receive regular news feeds from the company. Engaged members show all three markers of brand community, including shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009).

The most important drivers for members to join the community are brand passion, entertainment and staying up-to-date with the brand and its development i.e., brand related

information. These findings support the notion that entertainment and information seeking are an intrinsically important motives for consumers to join the brand community, contribute and create content on Facebook (de Vries et al., 2012).

Connection with other like-minded enthusiast and owners….[and] sharing photos I think other members would appreciate.(1#-*Gareth)*

*Being an owner and I guess what you could call an Aston Martin enthusiast it is important for me to stay updated on the news regarding the cars, but also to see the videos and pictures on the page. I am very interested in the history of the brand and its great tradition in racing and beautiful cars. (*6#-*Torben)*

*As an owner and having a passion for the brand I like all things AM! (*5#-*Steve)*

*I joined the community on Facebook so I could enjoy the images and news Aston Martin provide. (*2#-*David)*

Entertainment refers to enjoyment and emotional release as a result of consuming and engaging with branded content. Connecting with other like-minded enthusiast and seeking help with technical issues related to the brand are also triggers to join the brand community as stated in the following statement:

[The brand community] has allowed me to make more like minded friends that have a common interest. There was a post a couple of days ago about an issue with the car cutting out when it had just been fuelled I commented on this and hopefully with collective thoughts

and views a fix will come to light, or possibly someone has had the same problem and can share their method of repair. (3#-Edward)

7.3 Authenticating brand identity

Although confusion surrounds the definition of authenticity from a marketing perspective (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Beverland, 2006; Napoli et al., 2014), the concept of authenticity has been used to refer to how things 'ought to be' (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), sincerity, innocence, and originality (Fine, 2003), or the genuineness, reality or truth (Kennick, 1985), and being natural, simple, unspun, and honest (Boyle, 2006). Brown et al., (2003, p. 21) go as far to suggest that "consumers' search for authenticity is one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing." Authenticity is a subjective construct and is defined and experienced differently by consumers and influenced by their interest and knowledge of a specific subject (Grazian, 2005).

Authenticity in this study is defined as the degree to which the car is in line with the uniqueness, quality and heritage of the brand, that is, what the brand stands for. Heritage, authenticity and luxury are salient in Aston Martin's brand management (Urde and Gryser, 2015). These identity claims i.e., brand heritage, history, and brand authenticity are significant in the brand community's quest to make a sense of the brand identity and develop a shared understanding of the brand identity. From the perspective of the postmodern branding paradigm, authentic culture is not a product of marketers, rather it is the product of the street (Holt, 2002). In this spirit, authenticating the brand helps managers to identify the gap between managerial understanding of the brand identity and the extent to which the brand community shares the same level of understanding.

The findings show that members of the brand community engage in authenticating the brand identity through two different forms of authenticity: authenticating through performance, and authenticating through aesthetics.

7.3.1 Authenticity through performance: Engine

Data revealed a divisive dispute over what engine should an Aston Martin car have as an element of its brand heritage. A discussion ensued among members of the brand community about the DB11. The DB11 is a successor to DB9 and was introduced in March 2016 and is initially powered by V12 engine. The car is also available in the new V8 engine option which is built by Mercedes. Many within the brand community perceive the V12-engined variant an icon that has shaped the perception of the brand, while they consider the V8 engine to have nothing to do with the brand's real history and cultural meanings.

> Matthew: *The V12 engine has zero to do with Aston Martin heritage. Only the Project Vantage that revealed the new Vanquish styling in the early 2000's had a V12.Production models prior to it never did. Someone thought that to compete with Ferrari and others they "needed" a V12 offering to appeal to buyers. I disagree. 500hp, 600hp, 700hp - no matter how it comes about, as long as it has that sound, buyers will be ok. If McLaren can sell a P1 without a V12, Aston does not need them in my view.…Good to see the V8 option for the DB11. The Aston Martin brand should have stayed with V6 and V8 power plants like back in the day IMHO. The forthcoming Vantage can be a V6 Bi-Turbo as it is 2017. Much more in keeping with the history of the brand. The DB7 was a supercharged 6 cylinder. Considering the power McLaren and others get from a V6 and V8 engines, there is no need for a big heavy + thirsty V12 in 2017. BTW Nobody is going to pass on a Aston because of the engine configuration (except FB posters) . Bi-turbo engines are here now and will*

stay, hybrid and BEV Astons will indeed come, sooner than you think. Adapt and enjoy. It will still be an Aston Martin, no matter what is under the hood.

As Matthew refuses to associate the V12 engine with the brand heritage, a debate ensues about the brand authenticity. Rejecting Matthew's claims, Brennan argues that:

Brennan: *I must protest that I vehemently disagree you, Matthew. The DB11 is perfect with the V12 engine. While it is popular and more emission efficient to cut down the engine size. I believe something unique is being lost following this trend. Aston Martin will have a lot to offer in both the V12 and V8 variables. However, I don't think they should stop producing the V12.*

He believes that the V12 is inherent in the brand identity uniqueness and argues that with the absence of the V12, the brand essence is lost. Brennan's statement shows the significant emotional value the engine has as an identity claim. Another member echoes Brennan's statement. Torben associates the V12 engine with the brand core values and history. He deduces that the V12 engine is the soul of the car, one of the brand core values that underpins the brand identity. For many members, the engine relates to and preserves the brand identity.

Astons are about "power, beauty, soul" and I think a lot of Aston lovers would agree with me that both the "power" feeling and the "soul" feeling would disappear if they stopped producing v12 engines…iconic cars including the db7 zagato, db9, dbs, 2x Vanquish, One-77, Vulcan and a couple more zagatos amongst others also has been produced with v12 engines. If you don't consider this a huge part of Aston Martins history we surely must agree to disagree. (#6-Torben)

Torben makes clear that the core values of the brand "power", "beauty", and "soul", as well as the brand heritage "iconic cars" are represented by the V12 engine. The engine is

consistently used throughout several Aston Martin's iconic cars and signals a degree of reliability and performance, hence indicates the legitimacy of the car to be indexed as iconic (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). While Torben concludes that the V12 engine is part of the brand history and is essential to the driving experience, another member echoes his argument and adds that the engine is part of the brand identity and represents the brand's value preposition: *"I know it's the way things are going, engine downsizing happens in all brands now, but in my opinion an Aston Martin is just all about a V12 and that growling sound. Not a performance thing, more a matter of brand identity."* (Lars). The sound produced by the engine is also part of the experience not only the pursuit of speed as Bryan argues: *"There is a lot more to the driving experience than just hp and other numbers. Sound is a big one and nothing else sounds like a naturally aspirated V12!"*

Members argue that the V12 has a competitive advantage over the V8 because the former is produced by Aston Martin, while the latter is manufactured by Mercedes Benz which raises the fundamental question of what criteria define the identity of Aston Martin.

> Manuel: *It's superb you re innovating and that a v8 is sold under such nice design, we love the db11, we like the Mercedes participation but my view is Mercedes rather buy the design from you than Aston their tiny parts.*
>
> Eric: *Why can't they build their own bloody V8? They always used to. Come on, Aston, keep the engine pure, at least.*
>
> Robert: *My V8 S was underpowered and unreliable, at least with AMG money, the car will be reliable and powerful from an owners perspective.*

Ingvar: *Certainly, the DB11 has a beautiful color but the V8 sound does not turn the sound of V12. Then V8 is German AMG and that's not good.*

Kevin: *As an existing Aston owner I haven't gelled with the new shapes yet or the Merc engines, still prefer the smoother lines of the previous generation of cars and the V12 engine…*

Nick: *Love it but a little disappointed that Mercedes have got involved! I'm a fan of Mercedes but some Aston lovers including myself will think that it isn't Aston anymore (isn't British anymore) with German parts!! Mercedes Benz has the money to put into the Aston brand and without that I think Aston would struggle with future developments!!*

Bond: *Non consistent design and a AMG Mercedes engine, C class interior bits...not really a British sports car anymore. I would go straight for the MERCEDES-BENZ AMG GT Speed shift DCT 630BHP and save 50K in the process.*

John: *Achtung, sounds way to German nothing but nothing sounds like a true Aston V8 at full chat. You're welcome to you opinions , but you are totally , undeniably, unmistakably 100% wrong ....rant over.*

Community members hint at the nuances between Aston Martin and Mercedes and debate the dichotomy between the identities of the two brand. They believe something is lost and emphasise the tied connection of the brand to the British heritage and reject adding a layer of "Europeanness" to the Britishness of the brand. In essence they want to preserve the

purity of the brand identity. According to them, there is an absence of a cultural link and social position between the two brands and therefore these brands are incompatible and do not exhibit similar associations. Using supplied parts from a foreign brand dilutes the brand heritage and can contribute to change in the brand identity's meanings, a change that members of the brand community see as a threat not only to the brand identity but also to their own identities. Members of the brand community challenge managers' decisions and reaffirm the community's ownership of the brand. In their view, business dealings with a big German brand (Mercedes Daimler owns 5% of Aston Martin) forms a threat to a small and the only independent British luxury car brand. As Leigh et al. (2006, p. 492) remind us, "when brand communities and subcultures are operative in a brand's 'meaning' ecology, managers no longer solely own the brand, its associations, or the right to position it for strictly commercial purposes".

7.3.2 Authenticating through aesthetics: Design

For the Aston Martin community, authenticity of the brand centres on the distinctiveness of its products design. Members are very aware of the fact that the brand needs to be innovative in technology and design in order to compete and stay relevant, yet they believe that the firm needs to slowly evolve the style and design and stay true to its heritage rather than following the changing consumers behaviours and market demands.

> *It would be wrong if there was no progress as for the new models I like the Vanquish and GT12.* (3#-Edward)

> *A brand with over a 100 years of history that designs and builds iMHO some of the most beautiful cars on the planet.* (5#-Steve)

Design is a salient cue that members of the brand community use as a reference point to an authentic brand identity. In the following extract, Paul is sceptic to associate the new hyper car (see Appendix J) with Aston Martin and argues that the design and the physical appearance does not convey the originality and authenticity of the brand. This shows the tight link between the identity of Aston Martin and its products. The car was revealed in July 2017 and is designed by Aston Martin in conjunction with Red Bull. It is named AM-RB 001 and boasts radical aerodynamics and is operational as a road car, but with the capability to perform like a race car in a race track. Paul argues that:

> Paul: *Absolutely stunning design, a very good looker.... My only problem with it is that it doesn't say Aston Martin to me.... It says ballistic hyper car with rocket thrusters!!! Words which are not bad by any means of the imagination, but not words we generally associate with Aston Martin.*

Similarly, another member echoes Paul's account and adds that:

> Fernando: *Even the first Valkyrie [revealed in July 2016] impressed me in a good way. An excellent example in my opinion of how design in Aston Martin took the quantum leap without losing taste and style would be the V8 which if I am not mistaken evolved from the DBS back in the late sixties. For me the basic identifiers (grille- bonnet - body curves and dimensions) were always there through the 70s, 80s, even in the current 2000s models. In nature, Good Evolution is constant yet subtle but whether a downright mutation is good or bad is yet to be seen, and that's my feeling about the Valkyrie, but this one. It just didn't click [referring to the advanced AM-RB 001].*

All these statements suggest that members of the brand community perceive a hyper car as inauthentic and is not an extension of past models. An Aston Martin car is recognisable by its elegant bodywork with a low-slung shape, gently curving lines, a short rear end and a

long bonnet. Maintaining a consistent style and aesthetics through uniformity of design elements, signals a degree of legitimacy and reinforces the brand identity.

In other threads, members also debate the design of DB11:

> Sam: *Hmm . . . I've always loved Aston Martin, I was born and raised near them after all, but this DB11, not so sure. It's nice, but pretty? I don't know - its pretty much a non-cross over version of the DBX which isn't a good looking car.*
>
> Ton: *It's certainly much nicer than the hideous DB10 from Spectre. Personally I think the current generation Vanquish is the more pleasing, but given a choice I'd choose the DBS any day.*
>
> Diva: *The interior of the DB11 is better than previous efforts but still doesn't look premium enough for an Aston Martin - the central screen still looks like its been plucked from Amstrad as an afterthought…Maybe its me and my love for Aston's of old but the design direction they are going on just doesn't do it for me.*
>
> Jack: *This DB11 model has none of the classic lines and aesthetic appeal of the DB9. Seems like Aston is now catering to a different clientele base, those who like more modern looking designs. It is a total turn-off to me. After the DB9 and DBS, I have lost interest in all subsequent Aston Martin models. I am so glad that I bought my DB9 brand new in 2011 and would never part with it.*

> Kim: *Apart from the crease it bares no resemblance to the Zagato it's derived of. Aston Martin has always stood singular it's design even though of late Jaguar has began to show similarities. But it was Jaguar taking design cues from Aston. But now what we know of the Aston look is disappearing which is fine as times change but they look so much like Jaguar they are looking less singular which [sic] each new model. Soon the only way to tell Jaguar and Aston apart will be the grill. Unless that changes too.*

These accounts reveal more about the abstract emotional qualities the consumer associate with the brand. These are not merely statements about the product design and aesthetics, but considerate personal reflections and feelings that are a representation of their individual and collective identities. These social interactions between the brand community and the brand have significant implications for brand management. Managers are challenged to be progressive, innovate and modernise the car lineage and their design to stay relevant especially when the brand is older than the consumer base it targets and serves, yet in the same time managers have to maintain the core values of the brand and uniformity of design throughout their products to keep the brand true to its heritage and aesthetic uniqueness as well as to the shared understanding of what the brand stands for. Managers are challenged to navigate the emotional complexities endowed in consumer's interpretations of the design element as an identity claim. These complexities remain unexplored in traditional models of brand management and largely understudied in extant literature.

All in all, members of the brand community use cues such as brand heritage and history, aesthetics, and technical superiority to assess the brand authenticity, make a sense of and give a sense to brand identity.

7.4 Co-creating brand fiction

While the physical characteristics of the Aston Martin cars contribute to the brand authenticity, a narrative spread through multiple discussion threads developed around creating brand fiction. The community sees the brand through the lens of James Bond as the brand core character, and engages in constructing social and cultural ties between Aston Martin and the fictional character of James Bond leading to the brand identity accumulating a set of meanings that do not exist separate from the emotional significance and meanings attached to James Bond.

> *I certainly believe Bond adds credence to the brand…Unlike other car makers who have been used in Bond films (except perhaps for Lotus). The two are iconically linked. Sean Connery standing next to the DB5 (still from Goldfinger production) and the Skyfall picture with Bond & M in the Scottish Highlands... both are images instantly recognisable around the world. No one remembers the BMWs used by Bond in Tomorrow Never Dies, (albeit the phone keypad control was a nice touch) or the World is Not Enough. Beyond that, as a standalone brand, the Aston Martin image incredibly strong (I would say).* (-#2-David)
>
> *The brand is a true British icon at least the early cars were, the connection with James Bond.* (3#-Edward)

Fiction in the context of this theme refers to the subjective interpretation and understanding of the brand identity and its meaning through mythic narratives concerned with a fictional character that is tied to the brand's heritage and its cultural meaning. A "myth is a traditional story about heroes or supernatural beings" (Woodside et al., 2008, p. 98). These stories provide a sophisticated rhetorical resource for brand identity construction and for

helping consumers experience archetypal myths. In the context of this study, data shows that the brand identity is interpreted through fiction as "the real thing" rather than consumer's interpretations of the object only. The James Bond character has become germane to Aston Martin's iconic identity and cultural status and acquired the label of "Bond Astons". For example a member of the brand community authenticates and interprets Aston Martin cars with the James Bond character in mind: "For some reason I despise Astons that are convertibles. I think (with me being a Bond fan), an Aston loses its sleek look if you don't have a roof." Another member recounts: "Classic model Aston Martin DB5, just like form the 007 Goldfinger, definitely I want one". A similar perspective is provided in the following statement:

> *Look at the old Lamborghini SUV/Crossover concept (Urus) which is coming 2018 ;). I've spent almost the whole day last week with the new F-Type and came to the conclusion, that it reminds me a lot of the old XKR. And, looking at the DB11, I still can see a DB9 or DBS, but not a Jag. This is just modern design and lines, which make a lot of cars look similar. But the exterior of the DB11 is unmistakably Bond's :).* (Guerra)

Interpreting the brand through fiction is motivated by the community's desire to achieve the key personality and trait dimensions associated with the James Bond character and with the brand identity. This imaginative interpretations of James Bond allow members to experience Bond's meanings of masculinity, sophistication, and adventure as real things in their own life. These traits are consistent with meanings attributed to the brand identity including success, sophistication, beauty and seduction. In this essence, the next quote provides a captivating demonstration of the brand as a heroic protagonist, a core association upon which the brand prospers. The quote also shows how the complex relationship between Aston Martin and James Bond is enacted and understood.

> *I would say…The character of Bond has sex appeal, men see him as a rogue, brave and a man of action… , and as a strong character, refusing to be compliant. Which in itself is a primary desire for women, he won't compromise. The car is part of his "toolbox" refined, beautiful/handsome, powerful and above all sexy. Bonds Astons are as iconic as the space shuttle, concord or the Empire State Building, instantly recognisable. When bond drives an Aston (even one that ends up destroyed ultimately) he is going to triumph, ultimately you are in safe hands. That filters through the subconscious I'm sure, reinforcing the image as an icon of male confidence. Driving an Aston, you could be Bond, you could be the uncompromising hero women will succumb to, and others will respect. It's a powerful brand image. Along with the social reinforcement that you must be successful as you can afford one. This in itself is an aphrodisiac.* (#2-David)

All in all, fiction is an important element in brand identity construction. The brand community members equate Aston Martin with James bond and construct powerful mythical narratives that accentuate the brand aura and contribute to the construction of a mythological brand identity.

7.5 Benchmarking: What the brand is, and is not

Consumer agency is supported by work which emphasises consumers' active negotiation and co-creation rather than passive acceptance of brand meaning (Fournier 1998; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Merz et al., 2009; Payne et al., 2009). In the context of this thesis, members of the brand community engage in online conversations to author and disseminate brand identity meanings. The uniqueness of product attributes, brand associations, brand identity and values are understood in the backdrop of competitors. Members of the brand

community frequently engage in contrasting Aston Martin with rival brands in particular Ferrari, Bentley, and Lamborghini. *"I've never understood the appeal of Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati, Zonda etc. Aston Martin combines class, prestige, comfort, looks and power all in one. Understated, beautiful, powerful, and practical. Amazing technological, organic masterpieces. A true super car"* (Andy). This sentiments are common in brand communities, for example, in Macintosh brand community, brand enthusiasts expressed their negative sentiments towards Microsoft, a competing brand, and used Microsoft to derive what Macintosh is not and who the brand community members are not (Muñiz and Schau, 2009). In the context of Aston Martin, consumers accentuate the inconspicuous character of the brand by rejecting other brands' explicit branding such as Ferrari, which is according to them is indicative of overtly and conspicuous consumption. Members also appreciate that AM brand cues such as brand name, logo, colour, design patterns are not too obvious as overtly expressed in other brands:

> *With those proportions, what's not to love?...To be honest, I've seen an Aston Martin in motion only once, and the way that silver DB9 was... as if it was floating. Somebody mentioned Ferrari, Pagani - don't let me wrong, I have a soft spot for the Prancing Horse myself, but let's be honest here. When you look at a Ferrari, you see... power. Style and power that's stating it's there and if you are to sit behind that steering wheel then pray to God you'll be able to handle it all. As for Aston Martin, it's more about... subtlety. If such a term could be applied to a high-end vehicle. And yet it's there. Aerodynamics, proportions, mechanical engineering, internal design - each compliments the others without making a screaming declaration about it. I believe the word I'm looking for is beauty in balance.* (Nikola)

Aston Martin - less common than a Porsche, classier than a Ferrari or Lambo! (Ian)

Evaluating competing brands, brand associations, product attributes and the perception of fit between the brand identity and self-identity are all important factors in brand passion, as well as the evaluation and purchase intention of the brand as the next statement exemplifies:

> *I had been dreaming of buying an Aston Martin for many years before I bought one. It was about the beauty, the history and the combination of luxury and power that made me buy it. But I didn't just buy one without testing other cars. I also tried Bentley and Ferrari and some other cars to compare it with. But the feeling when I started up the Aston was not comparable to the others in my opinion. The sound, the tight seats, the instruments and interior. It may sound stupid, but it actually felt like an extension of myself, like it suited me. It felt right.* (#6-Torben)

Further evidence of benchmarking is also found in the following accounts:

> *Since I've known myself as a person, I've always been in love with Aston Martin... My friends were passionate about Porsche, Ferrari, Lamborghini, etc... Those were brands that never caught my eye... Nothing has the class and style of an Aston Martin... My dream... This one is absolutely fabulous... Maybe one day.* (Daniel)

> *Dunno what car interior you are looking at, but it looks like a Mercedes bred with a Nissan and had some leather thrown at it. I'm struggling to find anything about this car I like, other than the badge.* (Matthew)

Thus members of the brand community use oppositional brands as a benchmark to determine what the brand is and what the brand is not. The essence is that direct comparison

of Aston Martin to rival brands provides distinct identity meanings. This suggests that when interpreting the brand identity, consumers do not only rely on marketing exposure and managerial pre-packaged identity meaning, product attributes, brand experience, rather, consumers are involved in a more complex process of brand identity evaluation that involves the critical assessment of the tangible and abstract attributes of other competing brands.

7.6 Classifying the brand in the social space

The findings reveal that members of the brand community tend to engage in the social orientation of the brand as they act as brokers of class. The narratives pertinent to this theme are focussed on the social status that the brand signals in the social interactions. Commercial materials posted by the firm and content generated by fans and brand owners provides the incentive for much of the conversation. Classifying is practiced through affirming by recognising those whose behaviour and appearance are deemed congruent with the brand identity and its symbolic meanings, and excluding those who don't fit the brand's ethos by denying them access to the social hierarchy associated with being a brand enthusiast .i.e., a fan or an owner, simultaneously promoting the social and cultural codes of the brand community. Those excluded from being a true Aston Martin enthusiasts are disparaged as nouveaux rich with tasteless conspicuous consumption. Members feel that the nouveaux rich do not assimilate the values associated with Aston Martin which makes their association with the brand illegitimate. Their lack of sensibility and demeanours do not correspond to identity claims of gentlemen, the most distinctive characteristic explicitly associated with James Bond. Those "unfit consumers", or opportunists are ridiculed and excluded from the Aston Martin family due to their consumption practices of exhibiting material wealth tantamount to consumers of other rival brands with opposing identities such as Ferrari, Lamborghini and Bentley, and because, despite their economic capital, they fail to confirm to a multiplicity of criteria synonyms with the brand such as sophistication, discernment, good taste, and brand

literacy. The dismissal of opportunistic consumers act as a way of affirming the brand community's dominant interpretation of the brand identity and the brand's social position as well as a way of confirming group identity when challenged by other non-conforming brand users. The following conversation highlights the ongoing debate between members of the brand community and adds breadth and depth to the brand identity.

> Mike: *What are Aston doing with prats like that!*
>
> Sweeny: *Great cars blocky by awful guys what's that all about*.
>
> Tony: *That's where the money is Whisk!* [new money]
>
> Martin: *Just goes to prove, the rich might drive nice cars, but absolutely no bloody style when it comes to dressing to impress.* [new money, lack of brand literacy]
>
> Lori: *I've got news for you for folks; you don't buy an Aston Martin based on a "face" or "name" endorsement. We purchase for the brand's heritage and all that comes along with it. No owner gives two shits who's standing in front of it until it's them.*
>
> Robert: *Bad move Aston! Next it will be ADIDAS or NIKE to appeal to all those obese Aston Martin Owners in their sweaty jogging pants* [low social class]
>
> David: *You'd think he could afford a decent pair of trousers..... beautiful, stylish, elite brand being promoted by a man in shorts..... A.M. Don't let your standards down* [tasteless, low social class]
>
> Joseph: *Aston Martin is a wonderful car and must be drive [sic] by normal people and dressed much better than those two nobody* [flashy, poseurs]

Reactions of the members of the brand community thrive upon their believe to hold the moral high ground. They vent and voice their frustration when they encounter a "brand

error" committed by marketers, fans and owners alike. Brand community members remain the moral protagonists and guardians of the brand's values. They contend that opportunistic forms of brand consumption by the status-chasing dupes are a threat to the brand identity, and to the norms and values typical to the brand and the brand community. They want for the brand to be loved, owned and driven by true Aston Martin lovers and for the right reasons (i.e., heritage, beauty, performance and technical superiority) and project the archetype of gentlemen who consume the brand with taste, a high level of care and emotional investment. Members of the brand community are also frustrated and ashamed that the emerging social groups (e.g., footballers, pop artists) would become associated with the brand and lower its status.

> *To be honest, as there is more access to wealth (high paid footballers etc) I feel the brands value has been lowered. (I sound like a snob) I wear a suit if I go the theatre or dinner, I have been lucky enough to go on a business class flight, and have been disappointed to see others dressed poorly on these occasions. While I think it's great more people have access to Aston attaining monies, (one day it might include me). Aston Martin is part of the dreams I had as a boy, something to aspire to, something heroic. I am always a little sad when others who live those dreams don't show much respect for it....* (#2-David)

> *You can't prevent those who buy such cars from making such purchases, even if they care not for the brand beyond the status it holds (I'm sure there are plenty out there who in societies eyes don't deserve their wealth, (due to corruption, political leanings or even because we feel they are overpaid within their given field) but that free market trade. I have seen people on an Emirates flight in Business class who were poorly dressed, rude and (quite frankly) smelly*

(trainers, shorts and a t-shirt). As someone who sees the brand of Emirates in the same way I see AM, I respect the environment they are trying to provide for their customers, to see that being disrespected purely because someone can afford it, is, I feel, appalling. People have a choice, often they think that choice gives them a right to ignore the Standards their social position asks of them. (#2-David)

These moral distinctions are also prevalent in other brand communities (e.g., Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Luedicke et al., 2009). Evidence of classifying the brand is also visible in other threads where members of the brand community resist the company's use of an NFL player as a brand ambassador. Aston Martin uses this endorsement as part of its strategy to penetrate the United States market. Members of the brand community resist these promotional materials and what they signify. For example, American hip-hop artists, construed as representatives of the American culture, are rejected as brand endorsers or even true brand enthusiasts because they lack the brand knowledge and because of their vulgar consumption habits which stands in direct opposition to the notion of Britishness and the brand's integrity. These emerging groups lack the cultural capital which consists of a set of socially rare and distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices (Bourdieu, 1984). Their purchase of the brand is beneficial for the firm's bottom line, but harmful by association not only to the brand but to the true enthusiasts' status:

Carol: *I love the car! It's beautiful!! But Tom Brady [NFL player]? C'mon Aston Martin you could have put someone else there beside him. You should have put Daniel Craig there [plays the part of Bond] because he's Aston Martin!!!*

Fernando: *I must say that as a customer of Aston Martin, it seems low and degrading. I have seen what American hip-hop artists have done to Bentleys*

and wouldn't want that to happen to Aston Martin, precisely because it represents understated, low key, unpretentious yet tasteful and dignified, values i deeply respect about the British. Perhaps this is Brexit-induced... Selling out on its soul for some £££ by having an NFL player 'endorse' Aston Martin. Shame.

Aston Martin acts as an identity differentiator, a success symbol, and is therefore an identity brand (Holt, 2004). In identity brands, the brand value is derived from the symbolic meanings of the brand and how the brand enables consumers to construct their own identities, rather than from what the brand does (Holt, 2004). As such, members of the community have a strong self-awareness regarding their status. They fear that emerging groups may dilute extant brand identity meaning. They are concerned that unwanted associations will reflect negatively on the brand and by inference on fans and owners, therefore, brand community members enact "identity-enhancing distinctions" (Luedicke et al., 2009, p. 1017) to poseurs, and new money who use the brand for opportunistic ends.

The findings also reveal that the brand community is diverse in that age, gender, nationality, occupation has no role within the brand community. Brand enthusiasm and brand literacy are the core values that form the community's shared brand consciousness. Fans from diverse economic background emulate elite groups in their dominant interpretation of status. They distance themselves from the opportunistic and non-conforming emerging social groups who aspire to own the brand or own the brand already for the wrong reasons because they lack the relevant cultural capital to understand or use the brand. This distinction strengthens the tie between the identity of the brand community and the identity of the brand. The implication of this is that brand communities have become sites for social capital and cultural capital as consumers gain easy access to brand knowledge and skills necessary to consume the brand. The brand community has reduced access to luxury brands as consumers can acquire

insider knowledge and develop a cultural capital through the brand community membership. The brand community constructs and legitimises the cultural prominence of the brand by creating a sense of distinctiveness.

7.7 Customising

Brand use invites further consumer development and interpretation of the brand identity and its meanings and demonstrates the bi-directionality of co-creating stakeholder and brand identities. As brand community members integrate the brand into their lives, the brand occupies a substantial presence in their daily routines, thereby, the brand long-term survival is guaranteed. Interacting with the brand and enacting brand-related rituals help inject the brand identity with a vast array of symbolic meanings and unearth unique brand identity traits. The following accounts are elicited community members' brand use behaviours. Members recount their brand use when driving an Aston Martin or when they are exposed to the brand's pictures.

> *There are a lot of beautiful cars out there, but Astons have the whole package. I can have a really bad day, but if I go to sit behind the steering wheel and start up the engine the day gets really beautiful*🙂. (#6-Torben)

Torben's account offers a unique perspective through which he engages with the brand and makes a sense of the brand identity and the self. He describes the southing effect and the psychologically nurturing influence the car has on his emotional state, visible in his feelings of renaissance. In this sense, the brand is anthropomorphized (Aggarwal and McGill, 2012). He assigns distinctive personality qualities to it (Aaker, 1997) and associates the brand with a therapist as a way to humanise the brand, interact and have a social relationship with the brand, consequently elevating its status as a legitimate partner (Fournier, 1998).

Not all brand community members experience the brand in a similar way. Members of the brand community differ in how they use the brand and interpret its meaning in their lives. For example, David experiences a sensory overload from looking at pictures of Aston Martin's cars. David's passage is typical of the extremely emotional involvement with the brand:

> *When I see an Aston in a showroom, on Facebook or on the road, I am always pleased, impressed and enjoy looking at the car. It is possibly the only brand in the World that I view this way, beyond Spitfires or other iconic aircraft. The photo that would bring sensory overload for me? A DB5, a DBS and a DB10 in the foreground of an airfield with a Spitfire, a Bell222A helicopter and a Grumman Goose Seaplane.... I could look at that for hours....*😉 (2#David)

David gets emotional gratification from watching photos of the car. This act enables a mental stimulation and excitement. The only missing element in this interaction is the lack of brand proximity or a tactile experience which is denied by lack of economic resources. For Steve on the other hand, the car provides pleasure and a sense of occasion. The sense of occasion illustrates the time and efforts Steve invests to prepare himself and the car for the special occasion. The car is driven mindfully and the brand use is subject to intensive interpretation:

> *I feel honoured and proud to be an owner of an Aston Martin. It's a sense of occasion every time I drive it! … This comment sums us my feelings when driving the Aston. It's one of the best looking cars (in my opinion) on the road today and the AM brand is iconic. When I was a child I fell in love with the brand through James Bond and the fact that a neighbor had a DB5! Prior to ownership of an Aston I used to find myself following or passing an AM to*

observe and listen to it, that now happens to me. I feel proud to own a motoring icon! (5#-Steve)

Thus Steve uses the car as a marker of occasion (McCracken, 1986). Similar to Steve, and in contradistinction to Torben who has a therapeutic relationship with the car, for Edward driving an Aston Martin is a sacramental event. He has a unique ritualistic interaction with the car. The car is associated with good time only as his ritual is to abstain from using the car when not feeling good. Using possession rituals in this way, Edward moves cultural meaning out of his car and into his live (McCracken, 1986, p. 79) proving the elasticity of brand identity.

I enjoy the driving experience when I've had a good day and the weather is nice. I will get the car out and go for a drive, I won't drive the car if I've had a bad day at work as I want to associate the car with good times. (#3-Edward)

Gareth provides yet another perspective that illustrates how the car is used: that of a social facilitator. "Having an Aston is emotive. I rarely drive mine but when you do, it gives a different experience. People let you out at junctions" (1#-Gareth). Driving an Aston Martin gives him a sense of accomplishment and allows him to have priority in the road as the car commends respect among other drivers. This act of social facilitation denotes public recognition of the brand's social position. Similarly, every time this social facilitation occurs, the driver is validated in his understanding of the brand identity and in his own social position.

This array of brand experiences, interactions with the brand, and brand customisation show that fans and brand owners are the final decision makers in the process of brand identity creation. Through their rituals and customised use of the brand, they vividly make explicit what is implicit in the brand as powerful interpretive actors. These fragmented brand use and customisation reflects brand users' construction of unique brand identity traits such as the

brand as a therapist, a sensory overload stimulator, a marker of occasion, and a social facilitator, but also indicates that brand identity construction and interpretation is subject to stakeholders' emotional, cognitive, and behavioural accounts thus keeping brand identity construction flexible.

7.8 Coping with identity discrepancies

This theme underlines how fans who do not own the brand enact and co-create their own identities and brand identity.

Fans largely experience the brand through the entertainment dimension. The lack of owning an Aston Martin car culminates in lack of recognition, status and prestige as they aspire to belong to the lucky few who own the brand. These identity needs culminate in identity work encompassing a set of co-creation activities. In contrast, owners may engage in various activities of experiencing the brand ranging from driving, participating in brand owners meetings, visiting the factory in Gaydon, physically witnessing their car being produced in the factory, and receiving special gifts and goodies as valued Aston Martin customers which reflect back on their identities and the brand identity. These immersive activities are not available to fans and therefore fans engage in identity construction and simultaneously the construction of brand identity.

Owning an Aston Martin is more a myth than a reality for the vast majority of fans. This reality results in anxiety and negative emotions and can trigger identity work. Identity work involves "people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Fans experience a tension in their sense of identity as they aspire to own the brand. When felt that the self is challenged, a member of the brand community engages in questioning who he is and who he wants to become: *"It makes*

me sad knowing I will never get behind the wheel of one of these. I guess I need to come back as a rich bloke 😢 *I think it is made worse by knowing I will never afford one. Somehow makes you want it more* 😟 *"* (Andy). Similarly, another member recounts: *"I have always loved the AM. I'LL NEVER see the chance in my lifetime to even drive one, but just seeing them on the road is a treat."* (Alan).

Like many fans within the brand community, the self-concept (Tajfel, 1978) is a stimulus for luxury consumption. Andy expresses his inner struggle and strives for upward social mobility through deconstruction and construction of the self. He wishes to reconstruct his present identity and escape from his stringent economic condition. His aspired identity of an affluent individual may make ownership of an Aston Martin car far more possible. When the above identity narratives emerge, members refuse to withdraw from the brand, on the contrary, they pledge loyalty and the desire to own the brand becomes even more intensified despite the dissatisfaction and heartbreak.

Although fans experience the brand at the cognitive and affective level, they lack the tactile experience with the brand through ownership. Strategies used by fans to compensate for this void is through venting their frustration, yearning, passionate imagining, and optimism. These strategies allow them to deal with the harsh reality of not being able to own the brand or even see one in real life. It helps in filling the gap that exists between the actual identity and the desired one. Passion and yearning for the brand is activated by following the brand online, looking at brand images, watching brand-related videos and the James Bond franchise; *" I think part of the gap is filled by the presence of Aston Martins within film franchises like Bond"* (David #1). Netnography data also shows that online content provides an emotional relief and aesthetic enjoyment to fans:

Patrik: *This beats the all!. If one were ever to just see one with my own eyes and take a personal photo*😍 .

Brett: *I will hang a picture of this magnificent beauty next to a picture of my DB11 I dream of.*

Colin: *At the age of 14, (1959), I started going to the motor show in London every year. When I first saw the Aston Martin I fell in love with it, and said one day I will own one. I'm 71 now and still can't afford even a second hand one, but I still enjoy looking at photos of them.*

For some, yearning becomes less satisfying as one realises that yearning provides little real long term gratifications of hope. *"I'll never even see one of those in my lifetime. I love them, but, that only exists in my dreams"* (Alan); *"Alright, knock it off...I can't afford these cars yet and posts like this make me impatient"* (Adam); *"It's driving me crazy not having one*😬 *"* (Ann).

Community members also engage in passionate imagining through brand storytelling. Storytelling in the brand community is a means to interpret and add meanings to the brand identity as well as to advance the social bond within the community i.e., consciousness of kind (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). In the context of this study, data goes further than Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) account to suggest that brand stories also serve to construct the self by revealing the cognitively held beliefs about the self and the brand identity. The telling of these stories has an imaginative and a dramatic character about it as members of the brand community transcend brand barriers to find themselves in the presence of their beloved brand as the excerpt signifies:

Finally, a fine and impeccable luxury vehicle that greet you sweetly without words. Honestly, I stopped at the light behind one vehicle positioned in the center lane of three; the second I turned slowly to my left the brand-new "Aston

Martin Rapide S" captured, grabbed, and froze my full attention, saying, "Hello, Linda, I know you are ready to purchase your first Aston Martin..." Honestly, I forgot I was sitting at the light until I heard the horn blowing at me. (Linda)

The story told by Linda embodies the act of day-dreaming, yearning, and passionate imagining, an act that helps construct a coherent identity, albeit to a more limited period of time. Although the star of the story is Aston Martin, Linda is an actor participating in authoring the brand story, helping the advancement of the brand identity and contributing to its meaning of aspirational brand yet inaccessible.

Fans also engage in optimism as a coping strategy as the following statements demonstrate:

Adam: *I hope everyone here who dreams of getting an Aston also succeed in getting one someday.*

Oliver: *Hello Adam. I would love to have an Aston like you and I think that they are beautiful cars and totally amazing. When I get the numbers up on the lottery I will have one just for a short period of time to get it out of my system.*

I mean of course owning one, that the real deal, that's the dream, what all true fans long for. But, I would like to think that being fan is already to be part of the family. Not owning one shouldn't be considered as "incomplete". (#11-Nicolas)

Optimism is salient for those whose dream is not fulfilled and is apparent in fans' fantasies and other expressions of determination to work hard for the dream. *"Even I don't never see Aston martin cars in reality I loved and I still dream to get one of this super cars .thnx for hope"* (Marco). Optimism is defined as: 'a mood or attitude associated with an

expectation about the social or material future, one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his or her advantage, or for his or her pleasure' (Tiger, 1979, p. 18).

The above presented quotes show that identity struggle might drive co-creation. As the data suggest, consumers handle the unrealised dream by engaging in identity narratives through imagining, wishing, and go as far as to engage in self-discourse as a sign of fondness and yearning for the brand. Instead of withdrawing from the brand, fans become determined in their endeavours to experience the same degree of pleasure and brand involvement as the brand owners. This could be attributed to their pursuit of relentless self-perfection. By pursuing their ideal self-identity they construct the brand ideal identity. The lack of a full experience through ownership contributes to the ongoing yearning and passionate imagining, including the feelings of frustration and optimism in order to find out "who we are" as brand enthusiasts, which in turn contributes to further exploring and interpreting the brand identity as the desire to own the brand intensifies, consequently, the brand identity claims such as prestige, exclusivity, uniqueness, success and other aspirational identity traits are further maintained and reinforced.

7.9 Conclusion

The netnographic analysis and narrative interviews with members of the brand community generated valuable insights that advance our understanding of how stakeholders contribute to the brand identity co-creation, moving forward the advancement of stakeholder and process based brand paradigm. The brand community provides members with socio-cultural resources to vividly co-create corporate brand identity. The findings show that online brand communities are hub for a reciprocal identity construction including, brand identity, individual identity and collective identity. Therefore the emergent findings do not merely forward the abstract idea of brands as social processes (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013),

rather they provide empirical insights into the process of online stakeholder brand identity co-creation and demonstrate the importance of these stakeholder groups (fans and customers) as active brand identity co-creators and thus as operant resources (Merz et al., 2009).

Chapter 8 - Discussion

8.1 Introduction

Building on the emergent data, this chapter begins by providing an in-depth examination of how the emergent data and proposed model (see Figure 8.1) provide insight into the thesis first question, *"How do brand managers contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity with online brand communities?"* This examination begins with an in-depth discussion of the key concepts and relationships in the emergent model, with specific attention to managerial co-creation activities involved in brand identity construction. Next, the discussion extends to examine the co-creation activities of the brand community in the context of extant theories and in relation to the proposed process model, thereby, answering the second research question, *"How does the brand community contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity?"*

8.2 The emergent model

The emergent dialectical process model of corporate brand identity co-creation contributes to brand research by addressing the fundamental question that stems from the social dynamics underpinning the co-creation of the corporate brand identity: How do brand managers contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity with online brand communities? Based on a case study of Aston Martin (AM), drawing on the joint perspective of AM managers and the brand's online community, this study introduces a model of corporate brand identity co-creation (see Figure 8.1). The proposed model visualises the wider

context under which management participates in brand identity formation and details three key processes through which managers can contribute to this socially negotiated process of nested corporate brand identity co-creation with the brand community and other stakeholders. The processes are nurturing brand passion, bridging, and partnering and constitute continuously ongoing and inter-related processes, as indicated by the bidirectional arrows. For instance, nurturing brand passion will facilitate bridging and partnering processes but equally the partnering process has the potential to further stimulate nurturing brand passion and bridging processes. By systemising the processes and inherent activities managers engage in to contribute to the process of corporate brand identity co-creation, this model shows the dialectical nature of the relationships between managers, community members and other stakeholders. The interactions between these social constituents, depicted through arrows of varying thickness, lead to the nested nature of brand identity co-creation.

The dialectical process model of corporate brand identity co-creation builds on the premise that corporate brand identity co-creation follows an interactive and discursive socio-cultural process with various stakeholders (i.e., the brand community and general public) (Merz et al., 2009), acknowledging that fans and customers continuously reflect, negotiate, validate or object to discrepancies with their perception of corporate brand identity. Such a perspective rejects the idea of brand identity constituting a set of associations articulated and communicated by brand strategists (Aaker, 1996), that are stable and enduring (Kapferer, 2012). Instead, the model corroborates the view that brand identity is processual and co-created through actions and interactions of a multitude of stakeholders and thus dynamic and fluid (Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006).

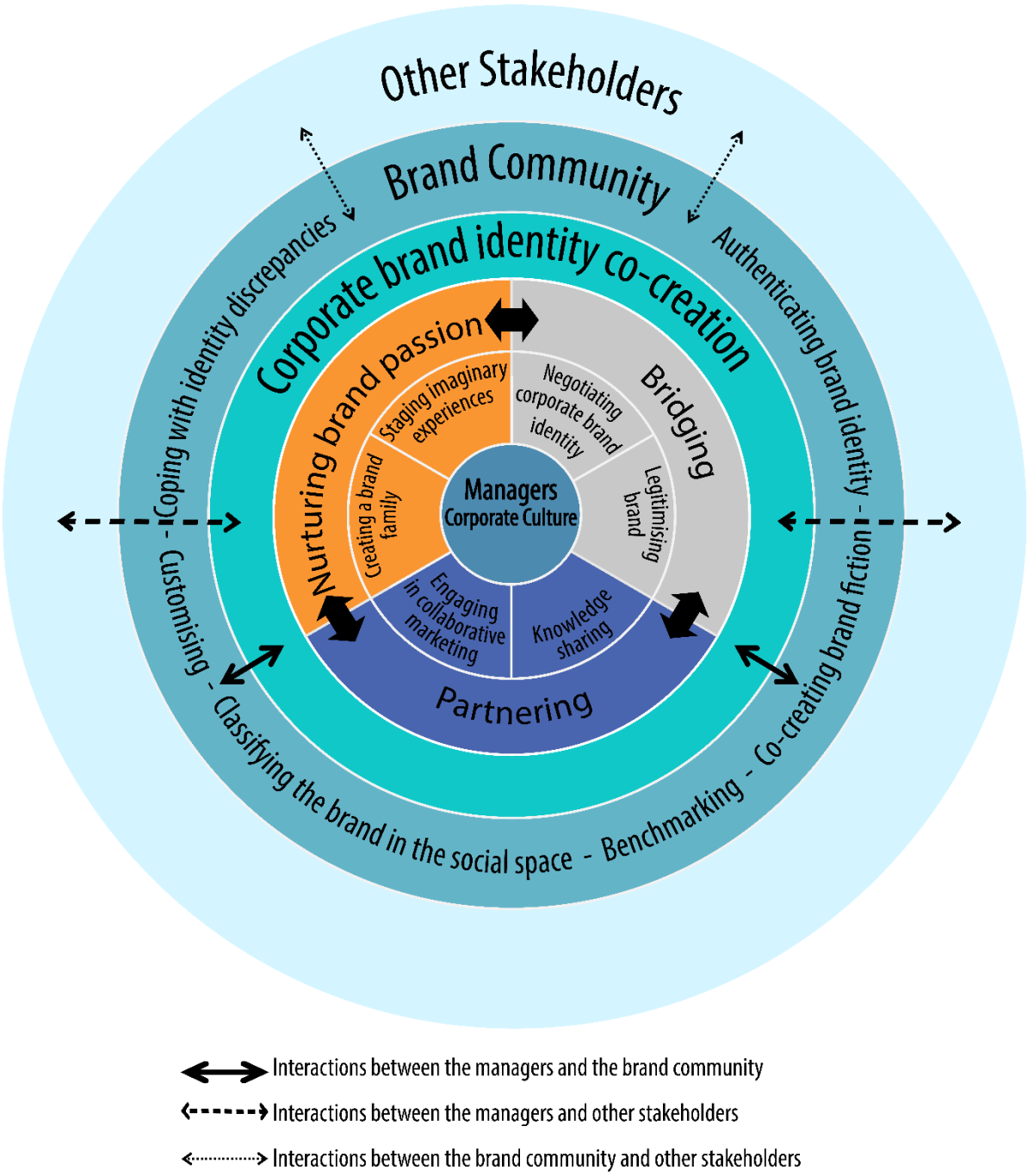


Figure 8.1 The dialectical process model of corporate brand identity co-creation

Note: Managerial co-creation activities are largely shaped by the firm's corporate culture

The three dialectic processes, nurturing brand passion, bridging and partnering, constitute currently under-theorised co-creation activities. Each process serves a specific function. The process of *nurturing brand passion* is typified by the desire to raise the desirability and aspirations of brand ownership and nurture a strong bond and identification with the brand across stakeholders (e.g., customers, fans and potential customers), thereby satisfying their identity needs and contributing to the corporate brand identity construction. Crucial to this process is the creation of a brand family, through which managers create a context for social interactions to take place (Berthon et al., 2009). The meaningfulness of the brand family is built around the brand as a focal point of interaction where managers actively contribute to brand identity co-creation via sharing, staging and narrating imaginary brand experiences. Identities are constructed and narrated through storytelling (Woodside et al., 2008), in which managers assume the role of partial brand authors (Allen et al., 2008). They communicate and assert meanings that they perceive constitute the corporate brand identity but are still pliable to assume relevancy to members of the brand community from which they may draw and claim as their own (Holt, 2002). The story-driven approach also helps forge enduring and deep consumer-brand bonds (Thompson et al., 2006; Iglesias and Bonet, 2012). In the context of Aston Martin, stories rich in sensational imaginary, with occasional reference to the superhero archetype James Bond (Cooper et al., 2010), make the brand accessible and act as powerful rhetorical interactions that help fans, customers and other stakeholders make sense of the corporate brand identity and inspire identification with the brand leading to a shared understanding of its identity.

The co-creation of corporate brand identity is further reinforced through the *bridging* process, which this study views as negotiating and balancing various internal and external brand identity meanings with the objective to maintain cultural synergy. The plasticity of the brand identity (Michel, 2017) and the phenomenological interpretations of its meaning

(Edvardsson et al., 2011) allow for the emergence of similar or loosely competing brand identity meanings. This requires managers to embrace tensions that are likely to emerge across the nested system of identities (intended brand identity, individual and collective identities) (Kornum et al., 2017). The objective of such a process is to resolve the incongruity of brand identity meanings and minimise tensions, hence cultivating a meaning of corporate brand identity that is acceptable and relevant across various stakeholders. Core activities of the bridging process are not only to respond but to stimulate a dialogue with customers and fans that facilitates negotiating brand identity. By looking beyond the immediate dyad of the firm and the customer/fan group, managers employ the brand community to assess whether brand initiatives are viewed as legitimate by the brand community and allow for adjustments, if necessary.

The iconic brand image of a highly aspirational brand constitutes the brand's legitimacy at the collective level which reaches beyond the online community (Hakala et al., 2017). Such an image of collective legitimacy acts as a major source of value for customers (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008). By encouraging customer-generated content, these value experiences (e.g., positive reactions by the general public) get reported back to the brand community and reinforce the collective legitimacy of the brand (Hakala et al., 2017). Brand managers can contribute to this cycle of reinforcing legitimacy by engaging in branding activities directed at the general public (e.g., James Bond hero story, contributing to social causes) as well as facilitating customer-generated content. This way, brand managers can stimulate and bridge brand identity formation across various stakeholders.

In the *partnering* process, firms and consumers "merge into one integrated process of coordinated actions, where both parties are active, learn together and from each other," (Grönroos, 2011, p. 290). Partnering is demonstrated in the findings as AM community members are actively invited to share brand-related knowledge and experiences, produce

user-generated content, as well as collaborate in marketing activities, which may include contributing to new product development, jointly producing marketing content, and providing critical feedback. As mentioned earlier for legitimising, taking a broader view of partnering looking beyond the immediate dyad of the firm and the customer/fans group enables a broader view of partnering to be taken, which considers how the brand community functions as a partner and in effect takes the role of a part-time marketer (Gummesson, 1991), thus contributing to corporate brand identity construction. Emphasising this broader view of partnering is in line with the understanding that brand identity is co-created and determined collectively through the agency of various actors in the ecosystem (Merz et al., 2009).

8.3 Brand community as a co-creator of corporate brand identity

In stark contrast to conventional branding literature that views brand identity as static and determined by the firm, this study reveals considerable evidence that the brand community contributes to the co-creation of brand identity. Although, Kapferer and Bastien (2012) argue that particularly for luxury brands, managers should increase obstacles to access the brand and that customers should not co-create brand identity, because the identity of the luxury brand is created internally and passed to consumers to carve their own social identities, the findings suggest that identity is not created in a top-down process and that it is necessary to reduce access obstacles (luxury or non-luxury), because in the postmodern consumer behaviour, brand identities are developed through complex social relations implying the reciprocal relationship among the brand identity and a multitude of enacted stakeholder identities. The findings extend beyond luxury brands to include iconic brands, political brands (e.g., Smith and French, 2009; Black and Veloutsou, 2017), and identity brands (Holt, 2004) that fulfil stakeholders' identity construction and signalling needs, thereby contributing to brand identity in numerous ways. The implication of this, is that firms need to open up to the brand ecosystem, that is, the wider socio-cultural system (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2011) in

co-constructing and appropriating an authentic brand identity reflecting the interactive conceptualisation of identity. Thus, the current thesis breaks in thinking away from the traditional view on the nature of brand identity and demands a more sophisticated understanding of how stakeholder agency coupled with the so-called democratisation of luxury (in the case of luxury brands), the connectivity and inter-activity between consumers and managers -facilitated by social media, raise important implication for brand management.

In addressing the role and activities of the brand community in the co-creation process of corporate brand identity, this study reveals the micro co-creation activities from the bottom-up, that is, from the perspective of the brand community (customers and owners) and provides deeper insights into the concept of brand identity co-creation. These activities would ideally allow for the amplification of the processes of co-creation identified in the first findings chapter (Ch. 6) capturing a more realistic and comprehensive account of brand identity co-creation.

The process of identity co-creation is rather cognitive, discursive and behavioural (Kreiner et al., 2015; Kreiner and Murphy, 2016). As the emergent model illustrates (see Figure 8.1), the findings reveal six co-creation activities performed by the brand community: authenticating, co-creating brand fiction, benchmarking, classifying, customising, and coping with identity discrepancies. These activities strongly indicate that the co-creation process of brand identity depends on the active participation of members of the brand community and their willingness to use their competencies and exchange their intangible resources such as brand knowledge, creativity, and emotional investment.

Through co-creating brand fiction, the netnography study shows a devoted brand community constructing a fictional consumption object or a mythic reality. In some sense, James Bond has become an identity marker and a cultural icon typically reflects achievement, elegance, taste, and Britishness. The co-creation of this mythic dimension of the brand

identity provides ideological legitimacy for the brand and help consumers construct and signal their desired identities.

Customising serves as expressions of brand passion and social display of the ways owners consume the brand (Holt, 1995) and forge intimate relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998), hence construct their self-identities. As per Belk (1988), brand community members see an overlap between the brand identity and their own identities. For example, brand ownership invokes a very specific set of routines and rituals that informs who they are and who they are not. As Belk (1988) posits, "knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves" (p. 139).

The theme of benchmarking aims at giving the brand a distinctive identity involving comparing Aston Martin to competing brands. This activity reveals that brand communities possess intangible competencies that help them articulate a particular conception of the brand identity. Members engage in debating what the brand is and is not on the basis of their deep knowledge of the brand heritage, its history and other identity elements as a process of confirmation.

The theme of classifying aims to enact identity enhancing distinctions. Brand community members promote themselves as the moral protagonists and guardians of the brand's values and identity by emphasising very specific identity claims as explained in section 7.6 of the analysis chapter (Ch. 7). Any opportunistic forms of brand consumption by the status-chasing dupes render the brand too commercial and threaten the brand identity as well as the identities of those associated with it (collective and individual identities).

8.4 Enabling nested identity meanings

In contrast to the notion that "brand identity is on the sender's side" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 151), the findings present evidence that meanings attached to the brand identity are not

under the control of a brand manager. Managers must engage in the processes discussed above, in particular the bridging activities including negotiating the brand identity and collectively achieve the goal of legitimising the brand identity. Brand identity meanings may be aligned with managerial meanings or loosely competing with each other, but they all have legitimacy. When brand identity meanings are incongruous, managers should engage in bridging in an effort to resolve incongruities and minimise tensions. They should cultivate socially acceptable and culturally relevant brand identity meanings further contributing to the "plasticity of brand identity" (Michel, 2017, p. 454).

Similar to Kornum et al.'s (2017) finding, an important contribution of this thesis is that it shows that tensions between the intended brand identity and the community's interpretation of the brand identity reflect the reciprocated influence of the two actors as tensions allow for the emergence of various brand identity meanings, thereby forming the base for negotiations and the creation of a collectively shared brand identity. As noted in the findings, Aston Martin accommodates the community's opposing interpretations of the brand identity and feedback these interpretations to its marketing and design teams to inform its cars' design and future branding activities, hence inviting the brand community to be a partner and in effect empower its members to perform as part-time marketers (Gummesson, 1991).

The unique set of brand identity co-creation processes extend beyond Aston Martin. The process model (Figure 8.1) is of particular relevance to other brands with large communities and extensive user-generated content (Muñiz and Schau, 2007), in particular iconic brands, luxury brands and identity brands, that is brands that affect the identity definition and identity construction of consumers (Holt, 2002), arguably less so in the context of non-consumer identity-signalling brands. Consumers now assume brand ownership, particularly in online brand communities (Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Muñiz and Schau, 2007), where the power relationship has shifted in their favour (e.g., interaction, access to

information), they make their own claims on brand core values, and they challenge and advance the brand identity as the findings of this study suggest in strong contrast to the functionalist perspective on brand identity (Kapferer, 2012) as a unique task of a brand manager who, from this perspective, strives for higher congruity among multiple identities (Balmer, 2012) and among identity, culture and image (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). Given the difficulty in managing and aligning the plurality of brand identity meanings, maintaining control over the brand conversation is unsustainable (Iglesias et al., 2013; Ind et al., 2013). It has previously been acknowledged that by ceding control to consumers and integrating customer resources, firms can build brand equity and derive added brand value (Schau et al., 2009).

Thus, the findings challenge how we understand brand management and imply that brand management is a reflexive process involving social interactions, open dialogue, co-ordination and facilitation of various brand identity meanings. It is desirable that firms adjust their marketing and branding programmes to reduce tensions (at the brand identity level), nevertheless, the multiplicity of brand identity meanings is also desirable as firms engage in brand extension or introduce new identity meanings.

8.5 The processual nature of corporate brand identity

Stakeholder marketing acknowledges that value co-creation occurs with a multitude of stakeholders and that value creation cannot be understood accurately by focusing on one stakeholder in isolation (Hillebrand et al., 2015). The stakeholder approach implies that identity is an outcome of actions and interactions, direct and indirect, and proposes a more reciprocal and dynamic nature of identity (Scott and Lane, 2000). In line with stakeholder marketing as “activities within a system of social institutions and processes for facilitating and maintaining value through exchange relationships with multiple stakeholders” (Hult et

al., 2011, p. 57), this study develops a processual perspective of identity, a position that "prioritizes activity over outcome, change over persistence, novelty over continuity, expression over determination, and becoming over being" (Schultz et al., 2012, p. 1). The findings chapters of this thesis outlined several examples of processes and activities related to corporate brand identity co-creation and demonstrated how these processes and activities, performed by managers and the brand community, profoundly facilitate and shape how the brand identity co-emerges, enacted and continuously negotiated to acquire new meanings and authenticity. The analysis also showed how managerial activities are intertwined with and intrinsically linked to consumers' activities including legitimising, knowledge sharing, and engaging in collaborative marketing. The analysis also shows that brand identity is not an objective fact, but is subject to the community's activities of authenticating, benchmarking, and customising. This challenges the common view that brand identity is inherent in the brand and that it is the task of managers to define its essence and manage it (Aaker, 1996; Balmer, 2001; Kapferer, 2008; Urde, 2013). Managerial definition of the brand identity is only one aspect of a much more complex phenomenon. This study recognises that the brand identity is co-created through unfolding processes, displaying the distributed agency between the firm and the brand community. Accordingly, the brand identity is typified by entanglement and temporal emergence as a social process involving various stakeholders. A positive implication of considering identity as a process is that it enables capturing the socio-cultural dimension of brand identity and how it is interpreted, developed and co-created in the context of brand communities, where members utilise their social and cultural capital and exert an important power in the development of the brand identity and its meanings.

Accordingly, the above arguments show that consumer culture is consequential for brand identity making emphasising the "heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 869), in that

brand identity is fluid, plural, formed, but also revised when it no longer serves consumers' ends or aligns with their interpretive schemas. This view does not lessen managers' agency, instead it considers both positions in the enactments and creation of the brand identity. Understood in this manner, the process of brand identity construction privileges neither the activities of managers nor those performed by the brand community (von Wallpach et al., 2017) recognising that brand identity has the ability to be something else other than the essential meanings pregiven to it. It is true that mangers instil brands with meanings (Gioia et al., 2000; da Silveira et al., 2013), yet the active interactions between consumers and brands enable and constrain the scope of meanings introduced by managers especially in the age of social media.

This process nature of the brand identity is in line with social constructionism, the epistemological assumptions that inform this study where objects and subjects interact and multiple realities are recognised and constructed in social contexts. This perspective understands brand identity not as an objective reality created by managers, but as a subjective emergent phenomenon imbedded in agents' discourse and sociomaterial activities (von Wallpach et al., 2017).

Understanding identity as a dialectical process suggests considering its construction within a context of struggle and tension over what the brand stands for. For example the activities of negotiating corporate brand identity, authenticating the brand identity, and benchmarking, all strongly demonstrate that managers and other stakeholders engage in competing claims regarding what the brand is. This implies that the co-creation process does not always come with seamless interactivity and collaboration between consumers and managers. Cova et al. (2011) and Echeverri and Skålén (2011) note that the value formation process that happens between the firm and consumers can also be unsuccessful and destructive, accordingly value is both co-created and co-destroyed in the process of

interaction. This tension is not surprising, in part due to the multiplicity of identities involved in the process, in that the co-creation of the brand identity is intertwined with the construction of individual and collective identities (von Wallpach et al., 2017; Kornum et al., 2017; Black and Veloutsou, 2017).

8.6 The socially constructed nature of an authentic brand identity

Netnography data shows support for the relationship between authenticity and brand identity. Authenticity is a cultural capital of the brand community because it is intrinsically inseparable from members' roles within these communities (Kozinets, 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Brown et al., 2003; Leigh et al., 2006), yet the contributions of stakeholders to the authenticity of brand identity has not been actively studied in the context of brand identity co-creation. In the context of this study, authenticating the brand is an activity through which the brand identity is legitimised and maintained. The authenticity of the brand identity is fundamental to Aston Martin as a brand that communicates a desired identity (Belk, 1988; Holt, 1995). Consumers and fans engage in defining a range of cues to construct an authentic brand identity and assign meanings to it beyond those provided by managers. Authenticity of the brand identity arises from the brand fit with the socio-cultural environment, the brand functional expectations as well as from the personal goals and values. Any inconsistencies related to these cues mark the new identity as drifting away from what it is, and what it is supposed to be, inspiring consumers and fans to resist the unauthentic brand identity.

Interestingly, the findings of this study show that the brand community is actively engaged in conscious negotiations and production of identity meanings through the judgments of the brand's products and the extent to which they are "the real thing", that is, congruent with the brand identity as the community sees it. The brand community refers to the brand

identity referents including power, beauty and soul to assess what constitutes an authentic brand identity. Therefore managers should make aspects of the brand identity claim as credible and relevant to how stakeholders view the brand identity.

Members of the brand community blend two types of authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004) in evaluating brand identity authenticity. Authenticity is indexical when an object has cues that have temporal and special connections to history, and iconic when an object has the essence of the original, that is, it resembles and is an accurate reproduction of the original (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Thus based on their experiences, consumers determine authenticity through physical attributes (indexical) and essence (iconic). Authenticity of the brand identity takes place in two ways: first, members of the brand community engage in assessing the authenticity of the engine, design and other original parts of Aston Martin cars and their spatiotemporal connection to history and brand heritage for which the brand is known to the audience (indexical authenticity) and, second, members evaluate the closeness of the brand's cars to the old models (i.e., iconic authenticity). Aston Martin wants to be known as an iconic brand and simultaneously demonstrates innovativeness and modernity as evidenced by its recent car models. Yet, the findings suggest that developing new car models must attend to the consumers' activity of authenticating the brand identity. Consumers want their brand to be known by its performance, design, heritage and fiction. Notably, Aston Martin's identity is largely inherent in its materiality and artifacts, in this sense engine and design and the extent to which they are anchored in history symbolise the community's centric view of an authentic Aston Martin.

Furthermore, through the prism of existing brand identity as well as their own identities, members of the brand community make a sense of the new models and construct their perception of an authentic identity. This is reflected in the brand community's use of reality and fiction to illustrate various aspects of authenticity. The findings show that reality

and fiction are intimate and co-exist to form inseparable elements of an authentic brand identity, thereby, procreating exceptional brand identity meanings. For example, the brand community perceives James Bond mythology as a real thing and an authentic character of the brand and engages in creating mythical narratives that enhance the brand cultural capital, invoke a collective identity and contribute to the construction of a mythological brand identity. This shows that the authenticity of the brand identity is (1) partly subjective rooted in ideas and beliefs of individuals; (2) partly objective anchored in the experiential context and the physical attribute of the brand.

8.7 Brand identity as assemblage of identities

The brand identity as a process implies that the actions of various stakeholders influence one another and lead to both expressions and borrowing of identities as each identity gives rise to other identity. Corroborating the findings of von Wallpach et al. (2017), Kornum et al. (2017), and Black and Veloutsou (2017), this study shows that brand identity emerges from the complex interactions between managers and other stakeholders. Understanding brand identity as an assemblage demonstrates the reciprocal identity co-creation and provides a missing link from the conceptualisation of brand identity by accounting for the agency of individual and social identities which are missing from the traditional brand management models as discussed in the literature review chapter (Ch.2). Assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2006) posits a parts-whole relationship that is relevant in the context of constructing identities. Brand identity should not be reduced to tangible and intangible attributes, rather, individual and collective actions, where multiple identities, including brand, individual and collective/social identities cohere and are exchanged, must be accounted for. In this study, individual identity is referred to as "a person's unique sense of self" (Postmes and Jetten, 2006, p. 260) while social or collective identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a

social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63).

The current study provides substantial evidence that brand identity is not merely a managerial implantation of internal interpretation of brand identity, rather, it is first and foremost an intricate interplay between assemblages of identities shaped through interactions between multiple stakeholders, whose own identities are at stake in the process. Crucial to this discussion is that identities are closely engaged (enabled and constrained), that is brands provide the raw material for shaping the individual and collective identities of various stakeholders, therefore, the luxury brand "offers a self-concept to its followers" (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012, p. 149), who in turn shape the identity of the brand to take on a different meaning.

The findings clearly illustrate this reciprocal process of stakeholder and brand identity co-creation further (von Wallpach et al., 2017). Through coping with identity discrepancies, members of the brand community, particularly those who lack brand ownership or brand proximity (some fans acknowledged not being able to see an actual AM car) engage in creating a desired reality in which the brand is enacted using fantasy. Participating "in this fantasy world offers a special opportunity for transformative play, while reinforcing a romanticized set of beliefs" (Belk and Costa, 1998, p. 218). Here members are found to engage in constructing identity narratives and gain a descriptive sense of who they are, simultaneously the brand identity and the set of values and beliefs associated with it are activated and kept alive, consequently co-creating brand and stakeholders' identities.

Another theme that illustrates the dynamic relationship between nested identities is classifying. Classifying is particularly a potent collective activity, through which members deliberately act as class brokers and identity custodians, whose understanding of the brand identity is rooted in the brand's history and heritage. Members fear that those who use the

brand inappropriately including footballers and pop artists may infuse the brand with ideologies associated with this demographic creating a counter brand identity that betrays the traditional values associated with elegance, sophistication, class and discernment. Those values are strongly believed to be referent for the identity of Aston Martin. When fleshed out, the act of classifying pinpoints identity motives, reflecting the desire of fans and owners to preserve a distinctive social position and satisfy their identity goals.

In sum, this study addresses the oversight in recent branding literature by adding further insights to the symbiotic brand–stakeholder identity co-creation perspective. To this end, the data reveals that stakeholders' identities and brand identity represent two complementary. This suggests that the companies response to the questions, who are we? And what are we? Is not directly attributed to marketing activities performed by managers only, rather, the brand identity is shaped and developed in complex social interactions and actions in the marketplace.

8.8 Conclusion

This study has advanced our knowledge about the process of corporate brand identity co-creation. Future research would greatly benefit from incorporating the insights from this thesis as it provides not merely a complementary theoretical lens, but also provides specific processes through which the corporate brand identity is co-created as demonstrated by the proposed process model, and the unique activities performed by the brand community. Specifically, this study shows the interplay between the internal and external of a firm - including managers and members of the brand community (fans and customers/brand owners) – in co-constructing a corporate brand identity. Recent work by branding scholars has been very promising, however, this work has not fully and systematically addressed this complex duality in the formation of brand identity. Furthermore, although recent scholarship accepts

the abstract notion that a brand is socially constructed, this work has not thoroughly documented the processes involved in brand identity formation, with notable exceptions (e.g., von Wallpach et al., 2017).

In closing, the discussion concludes that corporate brand identity, at its core, is processual because it is continuously emerging and evolving in a particular time and space. This chapter also argues that brand identity and identities of stakeholders are inherently interlinked and therefore form a pool of nested identities, and that these various identities are developed through interactive, ongoing co-creation activities. The chapter also highlights how the brand community draws on brand history, heritage, and other tangible and intangible brand cues to authenticate the brand. Fictional archetype such as James Bond has been found to be an important component of authentic brand identity, because brand fiction provides consumers with the raw material to construct idiosyncratic brand identity meanings.

Chapter 9 - Contributions and Conclusions

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter begins with the discussion of the theoretical contributions that this study has made to current knowledge on brand identity, brand communities, and co-creation. The chapter then provides details of the study's managerial contributions. It concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and offers avenues for future research.

9.2 Contribution to corporate brand identity

Although the concept of identity is typically adopted in the marketing literature, the concept suffers from shortcomings of its theoretical and managerial conceptualisation. Prior literature has not systematically analysed brand identity co-creation. Scholars have examined identity building as a simple one directional process such as the construction and negotiation of the identity of individual consumers through their possession and consumption of brands (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2002), individual's or multiple stakeholders', including brand communities, influence on the co-creation of brand meaning and brand culture (e.g., Arnould and Price, 1993; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Brown et al., 2003; Cova and Pace, 2006; Vallaster and Wallpach, 2013). Research does not provide empirical insights into the processes and activities involved in the co-creation of corporate brand identity. Von Wallpach et al. (2017) point out that traditional corporate activities performed by stakeholders are under-theorised in the current brand management literature (von Wallpach et al., 2017). Furthermore, the social interactions in brand co-creation is largely ignored (Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011). As Vallaster and Wallpach (2013, p. 1505) put it, "branding literature so far only forwards the abstract notion of brands as social processes involving multiple stakeholders but…does not provide a theoretical conceptualization that allows empirically studying brands as online social processes." More specifically, the role of internal and

external actors in co-creating the corporate brand identity is still underdeveloped. Michel (2017) underlines the importance of better understanding the ways through which multiple stakeholders contribute to the construction of brand identity. Similarly, Cornelissen et al. (2012) further propose that models of corporate brand building should take into consideration that brands are built through evolving interpretations between a multitude of stakeholders. Nonetheless, the micro-processes that comprise brand co-creation is still lacking (Pongsakornrunslip and Schroeder, 2011). Specifically, Vargo (2011, p. 127) posits that "to understand markets and value creation, one must constantly oscillate the focus among micro-,… and macro perspectives," thus tapping into MacInnis' (2011) "integrating" which involves "synthesis-that is, the creation of a whole from diverse parts," which this study realises by studying the co-creation of corporate brand identity in two interrelated questions taking managerial and the brand community's perspectives.

Only recently, a number of researchers have begun to address the mechanisms through which various stakeholders interact with each other and co-create the brand identity (e.g., von Wallpach et al., 2017; Black and Veloutsou, 2017; Kornum et al., 2017). While recent branding literature accepts the dynamic and process nature of brand identity, no study has extensively identified brand identity co-creation activities involving managers and the brand community and integrated these activities into a systematic and comprehensive framework. This thesis addressed this issue through the first research question and proposed a process model of corporate brand identity co-creation in which the researcher particularly illustrates how managers co-create brand identity through processes defined as nurturing brand passion, bridging, and partnering. In arguing the importance of stakeholders' contributions to co-creation, the study also identified six micro co-creation activities performed by the brand community as explored via the second research question. These were defined as

authenticating, co-creating brand fiction, benchmarking, classifying, customising, and coping with identity discrepancies.

This study has several implications for branding theory. First, it elucidates how both managers and consumers are active contributors to the creation of the corporate brand identity. The identified strands of co-creation activities are located between the firm and the brand community as a collaborative exchange, and also between members of the brand community through their collective actions reaching a broader audience offline. While the branding process is usually initiated by managers, it is through the direct and indirect co-creation processes that the brand identity is developed. Bringing managerial and the community's co-creation activities together, the thesis offers a holistic and a triangulated view of brand identity co-creation as an extension of a dynamic, stakeholder- and process-oriented perspective on brands (Merz et al., 2009; Hillebrand et al., 2015; von Wallpach et al., 2017).

In the context of creating a brand identity, no previous study has systematically provided the processes through which a brand identity is co-created. The first research question of this thesis, maps three processes of brand identity co-creation supported by a number of co-creation activities. These processes are: nurturing brand passion, bridging, and partnering. They provide direction for managers to address the issue of brand identity co-creation. They are iterative and recursive with each process potentially impacting the other processes. Nurturing brand passion inform not only creating a brand family and staging imaginary experiences, but is also implicit in other processes, i.e., bridging and partnering. Collectively with the brand community's based co-creation activities identified through netnography (second research question), they should provide a holistic, dual view and facilitate the process of brand identity co-creation. The co-creation model proposed in this study has been validated by senior managers at Aston Martin as part of an iterative research

process. Managers were asked to assess the usefulness of the model in the context of the brand. Their feedback was incorporated and the model was subject to some alterations.

The identified brand identity co-creation activities are not exhaustive and are not meant to account for all variations in the co-creation activities of brand identity, rather they represent the findings pertinent to the Aston Martin case study grounded in empirical data. In so doing, the findings also extend and provide additional insights into those identity co-creation activities identified by von Wallpach et al. (2017). Exploratory studies are still needed to identify additional processes, activities, and tactics and their efficacy at increasingly challenging dynamic online environment.

Second, the thesis clearly demonstrates the social nature of corporate brands. Conventional branding literature has locked itself in seeing brand identity as static and created internally by managers (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012). By way of contrast, this study fully acknowledges the dynamic and socially constructed nature of brand identity (Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006; da Silveira et al., 2013) and offers an empirical illustration of how the co-creation of corporate brand identity is intertwined with the construction of stakeholders identities culminating in a nested identity eco-system. The findings offer support for the stakeholder-and process-oriented perspectives that calls for the reconceptualisation of the concept of brand identity as dynamic and imbedded in interconnected networks of relationships (Merz et al., 2009; von Wallpach et al., 2017; Kornum et al., 2017).

Third, extant literature does not agree on a single definition of the concept of brand identity. Aaker (1996) defines brand identity as a set of unique associations that sums up the brand. Similarly, Kapferer (2012, p. 37) offers a different take on brand identity as "a long lasting stable reference". The ontological assumption shared between these definitions is the inherent and objective nature of identity neglecting the relational and adaptive dimensions of the concept. Seen from this point of view, this perspective considers brand identity as a

property of the firm, infused by a managerially defined set of claims that should guide the actions and perceptions of all stakeholders, rejecting the social construction and "collective understanding" view of identity (Gioia et al., 2000). In contrast, the current thesis aligns with the more recent line of inquiry (Merz et al., 2009) and defines brand identity as *a continually evolving constellation of meanings, constructed through a dialectical process among a multitude of stakeholders in relation to their individual and collective identities.* This depiction captures the fluid character of brand identity and entertains the idea that brand identity is a manifestation of multi-stakeholders' interactions and influence in a dynamic socio-cultural environment.

9.3 Contribution to co-creation theory

Although the new marketing paradigm that emerged against the goods logic emphasises intangibility and the interactive nature of co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2008), some have adopted a narrow conceptualisation of co-creation (e.g., Grönroos, 2011). According to this understanding, firms and consumers "merge into one integrated process of coordinated actions, where both parties are active, learn together and from each other, and may directly influence each other" (Grönroos, 2011, p. 290). Thus according to this perspective, co-creation can only occur through direct interaction between the firm and consumers (Grönroos, 2011). This thesis acknowledges the crucial role of interaction in the co-creation process, but adopts a distinctive approach and focuses on interactions which take place directly between the customer and the firm or indirectly between the customer and the firm and may also include the interaction between the customer and other stakeholders involving the brand. For example, the findings of this study show that the brand community can engage in co-creation activities without the necessity for these activities to be coordinated or integrated with managerial actions as

demonstrated in the second findings chapter (Ch. 7). Members of the brand community interact and use their resources beyond the influence and the participation of managers.

Interaction is defined as "mutual or reciprocal action where two or more parties have an effect upon one another" (Grönroos, 2011, p. 244). This definition does not imply that the action of one party runs in parallel with the action/response of the other party. As Fyrberg and Juriado (2009, p. 427) explain: "All actors are equally involved, however, not necessary simultaneously, in the co-creation process". More to the point, co-creation does not have to happen simultaneously. Secondly, if we consider co-creation as a dynamic process then the interaction between actors in the process conveys a sense of continuity and so do co-creation activities, and it would be hard to capture an "actual/direct" interaction in a single study. Thus implicit in the very conceptualisation of co-creation is the spacio-temporal dimension. Additionally, even though the findings have reported instances of direct interactions between managers and the brand community as in the theme of negotiating corporate brand identity, it is not the core intention to report instances of direct interactions only. Instead, the aim was to introduce managers' and the brand community's experiences and contributions to the process to co-creating corporate brand identity. The co-creation activities, both firm-based and consumer-based, which this study illustrate, have a sense of continuity where the role of a manager/consumer is only one of many other active co-creators.

Furthermore, the thesis extends the literature on co-creation by illustrating the type of corporate leadership needed for a successful co-creation. In the past decade, marketing has shifted from the traditional product-dominant view, considering the product as the basis of each strategy to a service-dominant logic based on the centrality of intangibility in terms of exchanges, relationships, and interactions (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, Merz et al., 2009). In this sense, this study supports the notion that brand identity is collaboratively co-created between managers and the brand community. Fostering co-creation between the brand community and

managers necessitates a participatory type of leadership. The findings highlight the importance of managers acting as collaborators, facilitators and co-authors of the brand.

Finally, the study contributes to co-creation literature by a providing a stakeholder and process based definition. Co-creation is defined in this thesis as *a process in which customers, brand communities, or firms interact directly or indirectly and engage in periodic or shared co-creative activities at the brand level to mutually co-create some form of tangible or intangible value for the parties involved in the process.* This definition speaks to the notion that co-creation can happen through direct or indirect interactions and that the output can be tangible or abstract, thereby, adopting a broader understanding of co-creation.

9.4 Contribution to brand community theory

This dissertation extends research on brand communities in the context of co-creation by taking an "outside-in" and "inside-out" approach to systematically studying the co-creation of corporate brand identity, thereby, providing a dialectic view of the process of identity co-creation. No previous study has systematically studied managers' and the brand community's roles (owners and non-owners) and contributions to brand identity construction. The starting point in studying brand communities is usually the customer (e.g., Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009), with less attention given to the importance of managers as valuable stakeholders in the brand community network. By systematically studying managerial contributions to the co-creation of brand identity, particularly the findings of the first research question of this thesis reaffirm that managers are important stakeholders within the brand community network. Their co-creation activities overlap in many ways with those performed by the brand community as evidenced by the findings. Strikingly, they all engage in inter-connected activities such as community building, learning together, interpreting, evaluating, negotiating, authenticating, and legitimising the brand identity. Data also shows that

managers, supported by a participative corporate culture can sustain and nurture a brand community that amounts to a brand family.

Apparent in this thesis is that fandom in brand communities is co-creative (Healy and McDonagh, 2013). Through its cultural capital, the brand community is perceived as a source of information and a source of brand identity meanings. Consistent with a number of other studies (e.g., Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009), a brand community performs important function on behalf the company as members engage in sharing information, giving feedback, but most importantly in contributing to the overall co-creation of the brand identity. Particularly noticeable in AM brand community is that the community has significant power over managers as members actively initiate branding activities that contribute to, regulate, or even constrain those activities performed by managers.

Previous research on co-creation in the context of brand communities emphasises the need for a fit in practices between the firm and brand communities for successful co-creation (e.g., Grönroos, 2011; Skålén et al., 2015). Schau et al. (2009) explain that practices "work closely together as a process of collective value creation, analogous to gears working together" (p. 35). Similarly, Echeverri and Skålén (2011) argue that mismatch between the practices of a firm and brand community leads to what they call "value co-destruction".

However, the results of this study show that tension and synergy co-exist and are complementary in brand community based co-creation. Particularly from a stakeholder perspective, synergetic or contested views are expected due to the dialectic and process nature of the interactions. Moreover, because a brand operates in a market with heterogenous actors who appropriate the brand in ways that are meaningful to them justifies tensions in any interaction. As Kozinets et al. (2010, p. 87) note, "broader social tensions are evoked when marketplace relationships mix with communal cultures". One way to solve tension or misaligned activities and actions is through the process of bridging as proposed in this study.

Nevertheless, the results of this study does not echo Echeverri and Skålén's (2010) notion of value co-destruction as a direct result of incongruity of actions and goals of parties involved in the co-creation process. While it is desirable to reduce potential tensions, this study recognises that co-creation, as an interactive ongoing process between different actors, is inherently characterised by disagreement and tension that set in motion various activities and articulates a multiplicity of brand identity meanings. The dialogic dimension of the brand identity co-creation allows for the emergence of fragmented narratives. Results show that tension triggers readjustment of marketing activities and relationship dynamics that guide them where marketing actions are modified and new ones are introduced leading to the emergence of new identity meanings, adjustment or reinforcement of current brand identity. As kornum et al. (2013) found in their comparative study of the interplay between brand identities and community identities, tension is a natural state and that "orthogonality strengthens both the brand and community identity independently by virtue of the fact that it allows for the expression of non-aligned identities." Thus, contrary to previous research (e.g., Schau et al., 2009; Grönroos, 2011; Skålén et al., 2015) this thesis relaxes the constraints of tension and suggests that tension can be managed in an integrative manner allowing co-creation to be successful.

Finally, the findings of this study highlight the importance of managers acting as supporters of the brand community's activities and interpretations of the brand identity. In this sense, Aston Martin is open to the brand community's expressiveness of different activities and meanings and enables the brand community to be a strong partner in the development of the brand identity. The current study did not observe anti-brand activities or antagonistic brand identities within the brand community. Yet, this study suggests that the relationship between tension and co-creation needs to be studied further in future research.

9.5 Managerial contributions

The dialectical process model of corporate brand identity co-creation proposed in this study (see Figure 8.1) provides valuable managerial contributions. Building on the findings of extant research (e.g., Schau et al., 2009; von Wallpach et al., 2017), the proposed process model highlights the complexity and extent of the co-creation activities and processes between brand managers and the brand community. This resonates with the notion that firms are better viewed as 'co-creational enterprises' (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016, 2018). The democratisation of power sharing between the firm and its stakeholders facilitated by the Internet gives easy access to brand manifestations and enables participation in brand-related content (Asmussen et al., 2013). While previous work urged marketers to fundamentally adopt a new way of thinking by embracing the stakeholder marketing approach and develop necessary co-creation capabilities (Hillebrand et al., 2015), the proposed process model gives an overview of the specific processes and activities that need to be addressed to make such a transition. The model offers managers a useful tool to guide them through the processes of co-creating corporate brand identity, and bridge underlying contradictions of brand identity meanings that may exist between the firm and its stakeholders. By considering the three processes of co-creation: nurturing brand passion, bridging, and partnering, managers can design collaborative marketing programmes, make the dialectic interaction possible, marshal joint resources, and coalesce around a shared objective. Firms may provide necessary resources and platforms (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016) for brand community members to interact, co-create, negotiate and exchange resources (e.g., stories, staging imaginary experiences) such that they feel part of a larger family, as well as instil the inspirational nature of owning such a brand, hence accentuate the corporate brand identity. Particularly in online contexts, engagement platforms play key role in facilitating the interaction between managers and consumers and allow for interactional co-creation to occur (Ramaswamy and Ozcan,

2018). In the context of iconic brands, luxury and identity brands, the nested nature of brand identities also requires brand managers to carefully consider the marketing programme directed to audiences outside the immediate brand community.

In contrast to the notion that "brand identity is on the sender's side" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 151), the findings present evidence that the brand identity is not under the control of managers. Managers need to acknowledge that the brand identity is relatively unmanageable and should accept the marketplace reality, that is, stakeholders determine its success and failure. This is because within a stakeholder network there is generally a diffusion of control over resources. Previous studies have already established that maintaining control over the brand conversation is unsustainable (Iglesias et al., 2013; Ind et al., 2013). By ceding control to consumers without abdicating responsibility (Fournier and Lee, 2009), organisational self-disclosure (Hatch and Schultz, 2010), and the integration of customers' tangible and intangible resources, firms can build brand equity and derive added brand value (Schau et al., 2009). This means that interactions among the company and the brand community must be orchestrated carefully. Rather than seeking control, a manager should assume the roles of a co-author of the brand identity (Allen et al., 2008) and a facilitator of the dialectic interactions between multiple stakeholders so that incongruities and synergies can live together.

In online brand communities where the power relationship has shifted in favour of customers (e.g., interaction, access to information, content creation), members of the brand community make their own claims on brand core values, and challenge and advance brand identity (Muñiz and Schau, 2007). Consistent with this reasoning, the proposed model advocates processes through which brand managers can co-author and bridge corporate brand identity meanings with the brand community and as such influence and be influenced through the nested nature of brand identity formation. The findings show that managers recognise the power loss and reconcile a position that sees ownership of the brand as not exclusively that of

the firm (Round and Roper, 2012), managers at Aston Martin infer that customers and fans are the brand. Similar to Ind et al.'s (2013) study, the findings of this thesis draw managerial attention to the importance of managers adopting a participative leadership style due to the dialogical and collective process of co-creation as the process model illustrates. Managers could do so by encouraging an inclusive and participatory culture that promotes role sharing, creativity and acceptance of various interpretations and re-definitions attributed to brand identity. That is because co-creation occurs in a socio-cultural environment where "the maintenance of mutual respect of strong and independent cultural identities of the parties involved" (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2013, p. 1492) contributes to successful co-creation activities and processes.

In particular, the crucial aggregate dimension of managing corporate culture stresses that firms adapt their organisational structure and management actions when integrating stakeholders in their marketing processes (Driesson et al., 2013). Leaders have been already identified as critical in brand building (Lindgreen et al., 2012; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006). In the case of Aston Martin, managers and CEO recognise that the brand community has a particularly strong influence on the brand direction and positioning to the extent that the brand community is accepted as part of the brand family and owner of the brand. This inclusive culture reflects managers' wide commitment to nurture a mutually beneficial co-creation environment.

Corporate culture in this study is defined as "as a set of shared mental assumptions that guide interpretation and action in organizations by defining appropriate behavior for various situations… These largely tacit assumptions and beliefs are expressed and manifested in a web of formal and informal practices and of visual, verbal, and material artifacts, which represent the most visible, tangible, and audible elements of the culture of an organization" (Ravazi and Schultz, 2006, p. 437).

The findings identified four inextricably linked themes that are collapsed into the aggregate category "managing corporate culture". These themes are moral responsibility, embracing digital culture, creating new knowledge, and developing social media sensitivity. They are likely to shape the co-creation process and are important in providing a source of competitive advantage for the firm. Specifically, these four themes are expected to shape the processes and underlying co-creation activities underlined in the dialectical process model of corporate brand identity co-creation.

1) **Moral responsibility** in this study refers to the obligation of a firm to emphasise openness towards the brand community through interaction, dialogue, content sharing and giving physical access to the brand. As discussed in the analysis chapter, this moral responsibility is grounded in brand behaviour and attitude. Firstly, a firm has a moral obligation to give access to the brand and enable enriching co-creational brand experiences through physical and virtual touchpoints without losing the exclusivity of the brand. AM managers refer to this position as Goldilocks Principle which means balancing exclusivity and access. Secondly, a firm needs to be committed to showing respect and empathy towards the brand community, that is, the brand should behave in a sensible way that goes beyond transactional relationship to focus more on becoming inclusive and presenting the brand as a responsible human entity.

2) **Embracing digital culture** and having a co-creational vision. Firms need to build innovative co-creation capabilities, create a supporting co-creation environment and "virtualize the co-creational capacities" of the firm (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016, p. 102) via online platforms including brand community platforms and company websites. This conceptualisation is consistent with recent call by Payne el. (2009) who recognise that companies need to support co-creative processes through emotion supporting encounters, cognition-supporting encounters, and action-supporting encounters. The corporate culture of

AM has changed over time accommodating the market challenges as confirmed by the interviewees: *"The culture from the new CEO…Andy Palmer, is very active on social media himself. So, he understands the purpose of it and there is a lot of direction from him to make sure that we use it as best as possible"* (#1-Global Digital Marketing Executive).

3) **Creating new knowledge** that facilitates the co-creation process. This knowledge comes from interconnectivity and interactions with the brand community. Managers need to have a clear understanding of how engagement platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram function and keep pace with advanced social media analytics (including systems for tracking engagement and online consumer behaviour) in order to amplify knowledge creation from which managers can construct co-creation strategies. Encouraging consumer-generated content can generate new insights about the experiences and behaviour of consumers, which in turn, can lead to collaboration with the brand community. Creating new knowledge is an integral part of organisational learning which is defined as "the development of new knowledge or insights that have the potential to influence behaviour" (Slater and Narver, 1994, p. 63) and contribute to diagnosing and designing the brand relationship experience (Payne et al., 2009).

4) **Developing social media sensitivity** as managers must recognise the relational and structural implications of using social media in the co-creational context and be more comfortable with antagonistic behaviour towards the brand. Mangers need to be aware that engaging in successful co-creation opportunities requires transparency, dialogue and access. They must also recognise that losing control over the brand building process is unavoidable (Iglesias et al., 2013) because it is difficult to control online conversations due to the nature of online platforms as enablers and constrainers.

In accordance with the stakeholders and process-oriented perspectives of this study, for managers to be able to carry out the above mentioned co-creation activities, they should

assume certain roles. The manager's role is not a custodian, rather, a co-author of the brand identity meanings (Allen et al., 2008) and a facilitator of the dialectic interactions between multiple stakeholders. Thus considering the potentials of brand communities to contribute to firms' marketing functions, firms are expected to invest considerably in developing their online engagement platforms. Hiring a full time brand community manager is a first step to enhance customer-brand experience and facilitate a long-term relationship with the firm beyond economic transactions.

Corporate culture is thus seen as being particularly important in enabling a successful co-creation environment. In the case of AM, this is clearly illustrated by the management strong awareness of participative culture. This participative culture reveals possible roles that managers should assume in the context of co-creation as explained in the next section.

9.6 Managerial recommendations

The findings have some possible suggestions for firms to become active co-creators of corporate brand identity. The findings show how the stakeholder and process- oriented perspectives, supported by a challenging digital marketing environment have profound implications for brand management emerging from the ongoing interactions between the firm and the brand community. Such a turn in brand identity co-creation and change in the marketing environment, create pressure for firms to reconsider the role of managers in brand management, advocating the need for more dynamic roles that fulfil different tasks, i.e., managers as collaborators, listeners, and co-authors. This plurality holds the most promise for operationalising the firm's vision of co-creation.

Managers as collaborators: Managers can become collaborative co-creators of brand identity by adopting a brand community philosophy including changing key organisational aspects such as culture and brand governance (Fournier and Lee, 2009). This role assumes

building relationship and networks (Gummesson, 2008) grounded in value creating dialogue (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006) and the consolidation of diverse viewpoints. It supports the view that dialogue involves open communication and knowledge sharing between managers and stakeholders which are critical in the process of co-creation. Managers should also engage in facilitating the learning process, particularly among consumers and new brand enthusiasts with less knowledge about the brand. The success of a manager acting as a facilitator is predicated on the firm's ability to embrace trust, dialogue, and interaction. In order to sustain and nurture further co-creation activities, an understanding of fair reciprocity between the involved parties is required (Schau et al., 2009; Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2013).

Managers as listeners: Listening goes beyond gathering and analysing conversational data through listening tools such as Radian6. In the context of Aston Martin, the brand community is considered an active brand partner and a source of critical feedback. The findings suggest that to build a co-creative community, managers need to foster co-creation opportunities and give the brand community the freedom to provide organic and critical feedback which may act as a buffer against brand identity threats. Managers need to have an understanding of how members of the brand community interact, appreciate the cultural capital they bring to the community, and understand how they can co-create value for the brand. Members of the brand community of Aston Martin are encouraged to be active and utilise their resources. They are stimulated to share their thoughts on brand identity and provide tips that are used as valuable input in developing concept cars. Managers continuously reflect on and use key insights gained from the community's feedback. This feedback is documented and then communicated to relevant departments within the company. Members are also expected to engage in brand-related information and brand knowledge sharing, word of mouth, and to use their influence beyond the boundaries of the brand

community. Thus, through listening members of the brand community and managers understand each other and learn together (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006).

Managers as co-authors: The co-creation of brands is largely considered a discursive practice (Roper et al., 2013; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013) in which the brand identity is narrated through storytelling (Woodside et al., 2008). Findings show that managers and members of the brand community all engage in storytelling, thereby co-authoring brand culture and consequently the brand identity. For example, the findings demonstrated how staging imaginary experiences, co-creating brand fiction, and coping with identity discrepancies, often culminate in creative and imaginary narratives that contribute to the brand identity formation. Particularly important in the case of Aston Martin, customers and fans pursue their understanding of the brand identity through creating and sharing brand stories. These findings highlight the importance of managers acting as co-authors. Managers could do so by authoring multiple brand narratives (Berthon et al., 2009) that speak to fans' and customers' identity development and identity signalling. They should also encourage customer-generated brand stories (earned media) and enable the brand community to create brand cultural capital which managers can then foster (Schau et al., 2009).

9.7 Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with all research, this study is subject to several limitations which point out to future research opportunities. This study focuses on the co-creation of the corporate brand identity in the company's hosted Facebook brand community. Although the identified co-creation activities might not reflect all managerial and brand community co-creation activities, the researcher is optimistic that the underlying activities and processes are generic enough to be replicated elsewhere, especially in the context of iconic brands, luxury brand, political brands, and identity brands, since it is likely that managers of such brands perform

similar activities across social networking platforms. Nevertheless, differences could emerge due to the technological designs and structures of other platforms, as well as the organisational branding objectives and socio-cultural space. While this study was designed for theory building, not for theory testing, comparative research investigating different social media platforms and other brands would highlight the robustness of the findings and improve the generalisability of the proposed process model and the identified brand identity co-creation activities. The dialectical process model of corporate brand identity co-creation proposed in this study has been validated by senior managers at Aston Martin as part of an iterative research process. Managers were asked to assess the usefulness of the model in the context of the brand and their feedback was incorporated into the model.

Moreover, this thesis draws on a qualitative single case study of an iconic luxury brand. Future research needs to adopt a multiple case study approach. This does not imply using quantitative data, because micro activities performed by managers as well as the brand community might be hard to uncover through quantitative methods.

A primary challenge for marketing scholars remains a definitional one. For example, da Silveira et al. (2013), and von Wallpach et al. (2017) advance the notion of brand identity as a dynamic process, involving a multitude of stakeholders, yet, as insightful as these studies are, the authors did not provide a process oriented definition for brand identity. The present thesis provides such a definition to brand identity which is significant to concept development. Nevertheless, as the literature suggests, there is disparity of conceptualisations and a lack of clarity and consistence as to what brand identity is. Therefore, future research may want to build on the brand identity definition proposed in this thesis to further study the nature of brand identity.

Despite the recognised implications of co-creation management and the governance of brand communities (Fournier and Lee, 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Ind et al., 2013),

noticeably absent in the literature are attempts to conceptualise leadership and corporate culture from a co-creation perspective. Therefore, it would be enriching that more research is dedicated to capture the relationship between corporate culture and its effect on co-creation performance, thereby taking the co-creation of brand identity towards a new brand logic. The current study identified four themes that give important insights into corporate culture as an overarching theoretical category, namely moral responsibility, embracing digital culture, creating new knowledge, and developing social media sensitivity. These distinct themes represent the interactive aspect of corporate culture and the mutually constitutive dynamics between corporate culture and co-creation. Therefore, researchers may wish to focus on the type of leadership and corporate culture needed, under which a brand identity can be successfully co-created with online brand communities.

In addition, while the two research questions of this thesis have focused on the perspectives of managers and the brand community (fans and customers) and emphasised the interactive nature of brand identity, future research needs to have a broader scope and consider the influence of other stakeholders involved in the co-creation process of brand identity including suppliers and other business partners, media, and the general public, which will add complexity to the co-creation process. As Hatch and Schultz (2010, p. 591) note, "the work of describing how brands are co-created with their stakeholders has barely began".

Although the intersection between the co-creation of brand identity and consumers' identities was demonstrated in this study, the phenomenon clearly demands further consideration. Currently, there is little case-based research aimed at systematically understanding processes for developing brand identity alongside stakeholders' identities.

9.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the co-creation of corporate brand identity in the context of online brand communities. This thesis adopted the constructionist philosophical assumptions (Berger and Luckman, 1967) with the intent to illustrate how the brand identity is co-created through the market shaping activities performed by managers and the brand community. The findings of this study were analysed and discussed drawing on branding literature, service-dominant logic, corporate identity, organisational identity, brand communities, and co-creation. Accordingly, this study contributes to the existing knowledge by proposing a process model for corporate brand identity co-creation and identifying a range of macro and micro co-creation activities. The study also highlights the importance of corporate culture in the co-creation process. As such, the study is a step forward in advancing the dynamic, stakeholder and process-oriented perspectives on brand identity which view identity as "emerging from the complex interactions among managers, organizational members, and other stakeholders" (Scott and Lane, 2000, p. 44). The traditional management-oriented literature views identity as long lasting and static. In contrast, the findings show that brand identity is vividly constructed and driven forward by multiple stakeholders, and that managers are but one contributor to its creation. Brand identity is intertwined with identities of stakeholders as nested identities, and the degree to which these identities are knotted generates reciprocal influence and actions.

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11. Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide for managers

Could you first tell me a little bit about yourself, your responsibility, and how long have you been working here?

What are the company's branding objectives?

How do employees (the organisation in general) perceive the Aston Martin brand? (i.e., who are we as an organisation?).

What kind of impression about the company you want to give to your customers/Fans?

How do you think consumers perceive/think of the Aston Martin brand?

What have been, if any, the biggest challenges related to the building of the company's image?

What is the brand identity of Aston Martin? How did you build this identity?

Have this identity changed over the years? How? Why? (Maybe before and after social media)

From your point of view, have the company's consumer relationship contributed to or played any role in developing the brand identity?

Can you tell me a bit about your customer base?

With social media in mind, what are the biggest challenges/opportunities in managing the brand?

To what extent do you feel that marketers can control the company's image?

How would you describe the corporate culture at Aston Martin?

What are the key attributes (strong points, characteristics) of Aston Martin as a global brand?

How well-defined would you say are these attributes? – Inside and outside the company, i.e., positioning of the brand identity.

What are the core values of the company; the set of values that unite the company around its mission, vision and that summarise the brand?

How does the brand deliver value to its customers?

In your opinion, how important is the consumer in building the brand? And how?

How would you compare your approach to social media as opposed to traditional media?

What motivated you to host a brand community on Facebook?

How often do you post branding related activities on the brand community page?

What types of activities do you tend to get involved in within the community?

How do you see your role within the brand community?

How do you deal with comments of the brand community? Examples?

To what extent do you interact with members of the community outside of the virtual community?

How would you define engagement?

How would you define cocreation?

What are the key strong points of a good digital content?

What is the art of storytelling and how do you build compelling content?

How, if at all, would you say the brand community has informed your social media strategy in any way? If yes, how?

How, if at all, would you say the community has helped you reflect on the way you look at the brand; in terms of core values, vision, culture, brand identity, etc.?

What differences internally, if any, have you noticed in terms of how managers and other employees view the brand as a result of your social media activities? Any examples?

How does your organisation measure the impact of your social media activities?

Have you seen any impact of your social media activities in terms of ROI?

How does your organisation assess the economic value of social media- brand community?

Looking back at the process of engaging with consumers online, what have been the key learning points? First for the organisation, and second on a personal level?

From your point of view, how does social media affect marketing performance?

Appendix B: Sample of interview transcript with managers

Interview conducted with the Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer at Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd.

Interviewee #5: OK.

Interviewer: OK. This one and some paperwork. Yeah, so this is uuh.., gives you some information about the research...

Interviewee #5: Ehum

Interviewer:... and is also a consent form.

Interviewee #5: Yep

Interviewer:...so if you don't mind, you can just have a look at it and you can sign it here if you...

Interviewee #5: Yeah sure

Interviewer: Here you go.

Interviewee #5: OK. Yeah. OK, just sign here?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewer: Thank you very much. So I have some questions. The first part will cover the brand in general and the main focus and the strategy aspects of it, of course. And the second part is about social media and the brand community of Aston Martin on Facebook. So the first question will be: uuhm, what does the brand stand for and by the brand I mean, you know, the corporate brand?

Interviewee #5: Uuuh, yeah, sure, sure. Uhm, well, I think the, the, easiest place to start off is probably, uuuh, power, beauty and soul uuuhm, which are the three descriptors that we've been using for the Aston Martin brand now for probably about ten years. Uhm, I joined about 18 months ago and I, I, I've not uuuhm, you know, we have debated changing them and we may in the future, but for now I think they, they, still pretty much uhm, uuh, provide a good summary of what the brand stands for. Uhm, yeah, you know how you interpret that, how you communicate it, that's one, another thing, but if you want to, to, very quickly describe; OK, what is Aston Martin? Power, beauty, and soul. So if you break them down, power uhm, is about the performance of the, of the, product, so, we make large engined powerful sports cars, uhm, and power also I think comes from uuh, the design. Beauty is about design and soul is about design, but also power is about design, because the cars are quite muscular, you know, they're quite... When you look at an Aston Martin, in fact, you know, the three cars we have here, they all have, they all have some power in the design. So it's a powerful car and that signals what's under the bonnet of the car. So the first thing is, is, that they are powerful cars. Uhm, the second thing is, is that they have to be beautiful. Now, as they always say; beauty is always in the, in the eye of the beholder. So, many people will think that this era of Aston Martin, uhm, which was the 1980s, uhm in fact, this, this era of cars, really from the seventies through the eighties, uh, the so called Oscar India cars, were not beautiful. Uhm, I think they

were, they were, uuuh, uhm, they were Aston Martins' of the era. Uuh and they had a style and an elegance uh, that I think uh, is, is today become quite timeless. So, beauty is, is how you reflect beauty, uhm, I think it can be interpreted, I mean, a DB5 like this is, is classically beautiful. Uh, you know, a Vanquish...a series one Vanquish or DB9 is classically beautiful. Uh, our cars of the seventies and eighties are not classically beautiful, but they're elegant and they are, they were of their era absolutely right and they were, they were an expression of the Aston Martin brand during the seventies and eighties, when that kind of design formed language, but if you look at even, even today, they have very long hoods, the proportion of the cars is, uuh, is very strong. So, [#Interviewee's phone rings] [#Inaudible] turn off. [#Interviewee turns phone off] Uhm. So, the cars always have to look good. You know, that's always, uh, I think the heart of the Aston Martin brand. Uh, and then you talk about soul, and soul is one of those, uhm, perhaps difficult things to define, because it speaks to a sort of human quality uh that in a machine is perhaps hard to, to, to define. Uhm, but we don't make transportation. Yeah, you know we make something that's desirable, Uhm, you know nobody needs an Aston Martin; you, you can buy a very good Ford Focus and that will take care of all your needs. Uhm, so an Aston Martin is very much a discretionary purchase, uhm, like all luxury, products. So, it's something that you buy with a lot of emotion, you fall in love with it, you see it and ahh I want it, it creates desire and so forth. And so you translate that the car does have a personality, you know, whether that's from the look of the car on the outside, whether that's the feeling of the car inside, whether that's how it's made. You know, all cars, handcrafted and made here in our factory, uhm, you know, by real people and not robots. So, the soul comes, I think from the fact that the car is not.. an Aston Martin is not a machine. It's something perhaps a little bit different. So, that's the very, hopefully very simple way of describing Aston Martin,it's a beautiful, powerful, handcrafted object. Uuh, that has the real touch of, of human beings, uh, from the design through to the,to, to, to, the manufacturing. So, that in essence is Aston Martin.

Interviewer: And you mentioned the word, uh, luxury. How would you define luxury?

Interviewee #5: Well, I mean I, I, I, look at luxury as a very simply, uhm, freedom, time, space, choice. Uhm. So, if you look at luxury in, in all its different forms, uhm, to something that's, uuh, in order to, uhm, uh, be in a position to have a luxury lifestyle, to afford luxury products, uhm, you've also got the, in most cases, the ability to, uhm, fly first class, of fly with a private jet or have a boat, or have a big house, or two big houses, of three big houses, or whatever it is. So, luxury is, uh, I think for, for, for consumers who've got, uhm, you know, a high, high net worth, uh, high, high levels of disposable income. Uhm, they've achieved that position in life and they're enjoying it, they're enjoying the freedom that it gives them and the time and the space and the ability to, to, to buy beautiful objects, or objects that satisfy them emotionally. Uhm, there's functional and then there's an... So, luxury is very much about emotional discretionary purchases. Uhm, luxury is also rare. So, not everybody can have it and the danger that we, the, the danger, the luxury business faces is that it becomes too generic and too accessible. Uhm, and then it's not luxury and I think the word luxury actually in the world is overused, because you can go into Tescos and buy, yeah luxury, luxury cakes or something, you know and you see the world luxury everywhere. Real, true luxury is something that is, is not available to many people. Uh, it's expensive, it's difficult to obtain, it's something that has qualities that only very few people can truly enjoy. In the car market you know we have basically four categorisations, roughly; you have entry, which is very basic cars, uhm, Dacias and, and, and, and very, you know, just very basic transportation. You have

mass, which is the bulk of the market. Mass produced cars; anything from Toyota to Ford, to an Opel, or whatever it might be. Great cars, all of them. Uhm, no one really makes a bad car these days. And a mass market car is absolutely, uhm, you know, has everything that you need for basically all of your, your, your transportation needs. Uh then there's premium, which is more expensive, more exclusive, uh, with higher content, with richer materials, with more technology and, and premium in our business is BMWs, Mercedes, to an extent Porsche, Maserati, Jaguar, Land Rover etcetera. Then you have luxury. And luxury really only is about six companies, right? I mean, it's Ferrari, it's Lamborghini, it's Bugatti, it's Bentley, it's Rolls-Royce and it's Aston Martin. And that's luxury. So, uhm, you know, and if you look at the sales, of the volumes, than clearly, you know the bulk of the market is, is mass, entry is growing as the global entry market grows, premium is growing as well, because each of the German big three sells over a million car a year, you know. So you wouldn't say that's very exclusive actually. Uhm, but relative to the total car market, it is actually quite exclusive. So, not everybody can afford a brand new BMW. Uhm, and then luxury is right up there and luxury is very rare, and luxury is very [#inaudible, due to loud mechanical humming sound]. So, we would look at luxury as something that is, uhm, not for everybody, not accessible to everybody. Uhm, primarily through price, but also through availability as well. So, we don't produce many cars and we restrict the number of cars we produce, uh, and we price those cars, uhm, based on the luxury market and, uhm, that, that creates, you know, demand and, and, and value.

Interviewer: OK. Uhm, what kind of impression, so when you talk about brand image, what kind of impression you want to give to consumers?

Interviewee #5: For Aston Martin?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee #5: So, herein lies, this is why I guess this topic is quite interesting to study Aston Martin, compared to maybe Rolls Royce or Bentley. So an Aston Martin has, has, this duality to the brand. Uhm, and the duality is, uhm, that we are a luxury company; we produce cars that can only be afforded by 1% of the world's population. So we're rare. Uuh, we are difficult to buy, I say difficult, because you need to have earned a lot of money, or whatever to do it, so, so, it's not something for everybody. Uhm, and so we, we need to communicate the values of our product to the customers that can afford. But the other part of the Aston Martin brand is one that's really popular. So, we are in a sense a, uuh, a lovemark, or as they call it; we have a sort of fan base and, you know, we're gonna talk about this, I guess in a minute about the Facebook... phenomenon. So, we've 6.5 million Facebook fans. So, how is that possible? You know, how is that possible for a brand that is not available to many people? Uh, is luxury and yet 6.5 million people love us. Uuh and I think that's one of the really unique qualities of Aston Martin, is that the car is, the car and the brand is loved by many people. And it's appreciated by many people. Uh, and so when you drive an Aston Martin down the street people give you the thumbs up. Uh when you are filling it up with gas, they come over to you and say: "Wow, lovely car". Uh, and it happens, happens to me all time, you know, I mean, I was getting my car cleaned the other day and the guys cleaning the car said: "wow, beautiful car". I said, "yeah, it is you know". So, you've got this appreciation, this sort of respect and affection, uuh, which is really, really, interesting in terms of our brand. I mean, how many luxury brands can you think of that have the love and the affection and the respect of the mass

market? You know, if you think about a very expensive handbag, uhm, or a very expensive watch or something like that, people may desire it, but, but, desire it, you know people may see an expensive watch and say: "Wow, I wish I could have that watch, yeah when I get rich I'll buy that watch", but, uh, there is a sort of affection and respect for it, mmm, I don't know. Uhm, but definitely with Aston Martin there seems to be this, this sort of affection and respect, so we, uh, as a brand, also have to respect that, that fan base. Uh, and so we have to be able to be accessible to that fan base, so we have to provide them, we have to not be snobby, or snooty, or, but we also have to maintain this balance of being a luxury brand and being slightly out of reach. I, I call it 'the Goldilocks strategy', after the fairy tale. In that, we have to get the porridge just right, you know if it's too luxury and we are too remote, then maybe we lose some of that fan base. We lose some of that people that do the thumbs up, they think: "oh you know these guys are arrogant or snooty". If we go too popular with the fans, then it becomes cheap and, and the brand sort of loses that special sort of wow. So, you know, I think there's what I said this sort of balance all the time, with giving people access to the brand, so making them feel relaxed and comfortable. The small boy that comes to the motor show, can go away with a poster and that's actually what we're gonna do. We're doing some posters for the Goodwood Festival of Speed. You know so we could do downloads, but actually what we are doing is giving poster for analogue. You know so, they can put them up on their bedroom wall.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee #5: Yeah, which is... So, you know. Um, um [# Interviewee holds up a model car] the car I'm holding here, you know, is the, is the model of the DB5 from James Bond. This is the original one, yeah.

Interviewer: 1967?

Interviewee #5: Uhm 1966, or 65. And this is the one with all the gadgets and the, and the roof that pops up and the man that flies out. The number of people, particularly in the UK, particularly men, that come to buy their first Aston Martin and they're in their forties of fifties, they come and say "When I was a kid and I had one of these and I fell in love with Aston Martin. And I always promised myself one day, that I would have an Aston Martin, when I have enough money and today is the day". That's pretty cool. So, we have, you know, I was talking about this recently at the Salesforce conference about the customer journey. You know, everybody in marketing is very interested in the customer journey, you know how do you get someone interested in the brand? How do you get them to understand the brand? How do you get them to buy the brand? Well, our, our journey can be fouryears. You know, we, we... And people remember those childhood memories. So, if we are, if we're friendly, if we give access to our brand to young people uhm, they will remember that for the future. You know, in a sense, I'm, as a marketer, I've got to sell cars today, so I'm gonna track people who could buy the cars today. But as part of my responsibility is, I'm building goodwill and affection for my successor in four years' time. Long after I'm gone, somebody will say, "Wow, when I was a kid, I came to Gaydon and I saw theVulcan and I had a model of the Vulcan and I always remember, bla bla bla bla bla" and in 4 years' time they buy a car. So, I think there's a, there's a rather nice uhm..a sort of lifetime, uh, factor to Aston Martin, that people will fall in love with the brand at a very earlier age. And they may not be able to buy a car for 20 years or 30 years, but it's really important that we nurture those people.

Interviewer: OK. And in terms of the brand identity, how do employees, so, internally, how do employees see the brand of Aston Martin?

Interviewee #5: I, I, think there's a, there's a, you know, I've worked in a few companies and what is incredibly strong in Aston Martin is the pride, that, that, the, the, the employees feel about working here. You know, they really feel proud to wear the wings. They feel proud to go home and tell their friends and their families: "I work in Aston Martin". Yeah, there's only 1800 people here. So, a small company, and, you know, when you tell people outside of work and you know people say what do you do for a job: "Well, I work Aston Martin": "Wow, really?!" So, you know, the brand, again, the brand commands this respect and affection, uhm, and employees feel that. I think they feel a real sense of pride that they are part of, of Aston Martin. That they are building these wonderful cars, that they are working for this incredible brand. Uhm, and they want, obviously, they want to see the company do well, because it's their life, you know it's their job, but they also want to see the company do well, because they love the company. You can get paid much more money and have much bigger jobs, working for other car companies. Aston Martin is, is, is small. Uhm we don't have the resources or the staff of big companies. So people, a lot of them come here because they love, they love Aston Martin. They want to work for this company.

Interviewer: And that's the case with you, I think, as well?

Interviewee #5: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer: Because you worked for some big companies as well

Interviewee #5: Yeah, yeah, totally, yeah, totally.

Interviewer: What are the core values of the brand. What could you tell me about that?

Interviewee #5: I think it's back to power, beauty and soul. I mean, the core value. One is design, so design absolutely is .. I think design is, probably more than anything is the most important attribute of our brand, because people love the cars, they love the way they look. So, I think uuuh, design. I think the fact that they're hand crafted, hand crafted in England. Hand crafted in the UK, because we're gonna build a factory in Wales. So, hand crafted, uhm, excellence, so, design hand crafted and uhm, yeah, we, we talk a little bit about technology...

Interviewer: Yeah

Interviewee #5:...the reality is that Aston isn't particularly far ahead in technology. We're competitive. I wouldn't say technology is a brand attribute. Uhm, although, the way we make the cars, with the bonded riveted, you know, tubs and the care and attention that we have in the manufacturing process… uhm. So you can argue that there is technology in, in, in the cars, but I wouldn't say people necessarily think about, uuh, they think probably, maybe more about , performance. You know, how the car is, the cars are fast. Yeah, they handle really well. So, it's probably styling, the hand-craftedness, uh, hand crafted, the hand built sort of nature of the car. And the performance as well.

Interviewer: OK. What's the brand mission?

Interviewee #5: Uh, it's. Good question, we were debating this, uh, very recently, uhm and we haven't got an agreed set of words yet.

Interviewer: OK

Interviewee #5: Uhm, but it, where we are moving towards is that we make the world a more beautiful place, uhm, and the mission of the company is to, is to create beautiful objects that people fall in love with. I think that's our mission in life, you know. We're not uuh, we're not saving the world, we're not curing cancer, we're not doing anything like that. We're, we're enriching... sounds like a very grand mission, but I, yeah. The product is discretionary, people don't need an Aston Martin, they want an Aton Martin and I think our job is to provide the world with, with beautiful objects.

Interviewer: OK. How important is the, the customer, not only in terms of money, you know, but how important is the customer to the brand in general?

Interviewee #5: Well, I, I, I think there are uuh. So the company is a 103 years old. Uh, in 103 years we've only built 80,000 cars. So, that that takes two to three days. So, we're tiny and so uh, the customers, it's almost I don't use the word customer, you know. I sometimes use the word client, or often what we do, we talk to people as they're sort of part of the family, because, you know there aren't many of them. There aren't many people around that own an Aston Martin, uhm, and the interesting, again another interesting part of being, as being CMO of Aston Martin is that I need to embrace customers that have a car that's 20, 30, 40 years old. You know they're not giving me any revenue if I look at it from a business point of view, but they are driving an Aston Martin and they feel part of the family. So, whether they've, you know, got a $300,000 Vanquish they've just bought you know and they come here to the factory to pick up or whether they've got a, you know, a 20 year old DB7 and they paid 20 thousands pound for, or whatever. Uhm, they're all part of the family, they all wear the wings. So, the, the customers are... in this business really feels like they're family. You know they've all bought... most people buy an Aston Martin for the same reason. They buy it because the, they love the way it looks, they love the way it feels, they love the fact that they're driving something that has, the, that commands respect. They're very, very secure people. We don't, uh, I've really noticed our owners are very confident, not arrogant, they are not flashy. They're very, very self-assured. Uhm, they don't feel they have to prove anything in life. So, for them an Aston Martin is, is a tasteful, beautiful way to enjoy their motoring and uuh, so, in that sense you got people that psychographically are quite similar. They think in the same way and so uuh again, just calling them customers is, is, is missing the point. It's a bit like just calling an Aston Martin a car. An Aston Martin is more than just a car, it's a beautiful object that does many things, and in a sense the customer just implies that, you know, uuuh, a person that gives you money for goods or services. They're not, they're more than that. They're, they're sort of family. You know, they love talking about the, they love talking about their cars, they're brand ambassadors, every single one of them is a brand ambassador. You know, when you, when you buy a bottle of uh, or a can of Coke or whatever, then you say a can of Coke is nice and I feel refreshed, but you don't necessarily go around and tell your friends: Wow. You may respect Coke as a company, you may like their product, but an Aston Martin, you're sort of proud to wear it and you use it.. I'm driving an Aston Martin.

Interviewer: It's self-identity.

Interviewee #5: Self-identity, yeah.

Interviewer: In terms of social media, how important is social media to Aston Martin as a corporate brand?

Interviewee #5: Well, there are, you know social media for me serves two distinct groups of people and they have two, they have different needs. Uhm, so the first is, is customers, who, or let's call them prospective customers and then they become family. So uhm, social media is one of many ways in which we can reach a, a, a prospective client. Uhm, and they can engage with us, they can follow us, they can uhm tweet about us, and then they can engage with the brand, they can enjoy our content. Uhm, and that helps them understand about how the company ticks. That helps them understand the company. Uhm, and then there is a social media play which is back to the fans, we're just giving the fans cool stuff, you know they want stories. I mean, what unites both groups, the family, the customers and the fans, is they all want to know more. They want... How do you build the cars? Why do you do that? Why do you make your badges this way? Where does your leather come from? What we're doing racing? What is the Red Bull connection with Formula 1? What is this new hypercar you're doing? They, they want, they, they're sort of hungry for those stories and I think that's, that's where social media is really powerful, because uhm, it's just such an effective channel for us to share and engage in, in, in those conversations.

Interviewer: Uhm, do you think, so uhm, customers and fans, do you think they are important in building the brand?

Interviewee #5: They are the brand in many, many ways. You know they're, they're essential. Uhm, the fans make the customers feel good. You know, when you're driving an Aston Martin and somebody gives you a thumbs up, it's a great feeling. We're all human, we all like that sort of, you know, it's a very basic sort of you know..

Interviewer: Appreciation

Interviewee #5: Yeah, appreciation, need to be, need for approval. You know, our customers are confident and, yeah, self-assured and they are not looking for, they're not looking for validation, but it's a lot, it feels a lot better to get a thumbs up, than a, than a, than a thumbs down. And I think that's, you know, again, that's the unique nature of the Aston Martin brand and so, in that sense, you know that, that, mass fan following makes our owners feel really good about their cars. And, what's really interesting is, that many of our owners have many different cars. You know they are affluent individuals, so they may be collectors. So they have Ferraris and Lamborghinis and Rolls-Royces and Bentleys and other stuff. And so they can tell, when they are driving in London in their Rolls-Royce, or their Lamborghini, or their Ferrari, or Aston Martin and they tell us this all the time: they get a different reaction. And what they tell us is, mostly positive reaction on the Aston Martin in almost 100%. But they get mixed reactions on some of the other brands. You know, so, we're a very, I think we are in a very lucky position. So, it's sort of this very precious thing that Aston Martin has, that we, uh, if we lose it, it's really a big, a really big problem for the company.

Interviewer: So what motivated you, to host the brand community on Facebook?

Interviewee #5: Aaah, I think it's, aaaah, I mean it's almost like error mortal, in that sense you have to. uhm, I think it's, I mean, the power of the platform, the reach of the platform. A billion users, I think they passed recently. Uhm, so in that sense, because it's..you know it's a platform to share. Uh, for us to share with them and them to share with their, their friends,

uuh, and to build communities. It's the most obvious place for us to be, because it's, it's, it's, you bring together like-minded people. And you know, it's a great way for us to share what's going on in the company and to share the brand and to, you know, to invite people into our world. Even if they may never buy a car. You know, if the nearest they come is the toy car that's OK. You know, we want them to feel proud... I suppose, it's little bit like a football team, right!? Yeah, you, you, you, can support, you'll never play for Manchester United, but you support them for your whole life. You sit and watch, you never gonna play, but you are a fan and you feel proud and you wear Manchester United on, you know whatever is, you know or whatever it is. So, in a sense, maybe you could look at, uh, Aston Martin as a bit like a football team. And that we have supporters and, and the most obvious place for those supporters to gather and for us to give them content and for them to appreciate us and to learn about us, is on social media and, and Facebook of course is the biggest of, biggest of all the platforms.

Interviewer: Uh, how do you see your role within the brand community on Facebook?

Interviewee #5: As Aston Martin?

Interviewer: As Aston Martin, yeah.

Interviewee #5: I think we, I think we have a responsibility and I use that word responsibility, because I think it means that we.. it is our duty as Aston Martin to provide those fans with content. I mean, I, in very simple terms, I think it's, it's.. if we don't we're letting them down, we are failing them. Yeah, we want, you know, fans may be sitting in Bangalore in India, or Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, or Osaka in Japan. They may never even visit, you know, uh, the factory. They may never have even seen an Aston Martin on the street, but they love, they fell in love with the brand. And so we have to respect that and we have to give, we have to sort of bring them and open the doors to the factory and we have to, to invite them in and to put them behind the driver seat and to get them to, to, to understand what it's like to, to, to drive an Aston Martin and to be part of the family. It's, you know, it's, again it's, I've never thought about this before today, but it's exactly like a football team. You know, there are thousands of fans, millions of fans of European soccer teams particular European soccer teams and they've never even seen their team play live.

Interviewer: Yeah true

Interviewee #5: Actually as a kid, I supported Liverpool. I've never seen Liverpool play.

Interviewer: I support Manchester, I've never seen Manchester.

Interviewee #5: ... you've never seen it, you watch it on TV, or you read about them but you've never seen them. So in a sense, Aston Martin is exactly like that. So our fans, we have to, ah you know, I, I, ah, I... not everyone agrees with me, I mean somebody would think that in luxury we should be more aloof and we should be more, you know, I, I disagree. I think, we're, we're, we're a little bit like a, like a football team. We have supporters and we owe those supporters respect and that respect comes through content and stories and the access.

Interviewer: So content is key in digital, what's a good content? What makes good content from your point of view?

Interviewee #5: Well I, you know, I've always thought it not. I mean content just describes stuff. So, uh uh, for me and I'll tell you the reason why I made a difference, why the, why I think content is not the, the... content is not the, the most important thing. Storytelling is more important, because if we wanted to create content and we wanted to create content that got lots of clicks, we would do car videos. You know, we would do silly stuff. So content is, is uhm, could be anything that is effectively on, on, all the other channels. For me, powerful content is content that is storytelling. So you start off with what's the story, so you started this discussion with asking me to describe the brand and I'm telling you, trying to tell you a story uh, and I think that's what we have to do. So, and then the content is what we, how we tell our story. You know so it's the videos of a car driving around the race track or it's the factory or whatever that might be. So this storytelling, the narrative which then you create content of the back of it.

Interviewer: So what makes a good storytelling, I mean, what are you doing..?

Interviewee #5: Oh, I think uh, well you go back to basics then. You go back to twelve, the twelve story archetypes, the twelve, rather they call them the twelve character archetypes and the 5 different type of stories? You know, the returning hero and bla bla bla bla bla, which is what every movie and TV show, and fiction and book, is written based on what five different narrative types? And we, we, we have to, in a sense we fit within some of those. So an obvious one for Aston Martin in terms of stories is that we are small and independent. And we could have gone out of business, in fact we did go out of business many, you know, or went nearly out of business, quite few times in the past. Uhm, and so that's, we're you know we're a sort of underdog. We're not Mercedes-Benz or BMW or Porsche or Audi. We are small and independent and we're this little company in the middle of the countryside in Warwickshire. Uhm, so we sort of fit the underdog hero narrative. So people are keen to see what we, what we're making and they sort of, I get a sense it's a bit like Leicester City, isn't it?

Interviewer: Yeah

Interviewee #5: They are sort of cheering for us, so they want to see Aston Martin take on the world. You know how does this a, you know, Ferrari is big brand and Bentley, Rolls Royce are big owners. Aston Martin is small and independent and people often naturally go for the underdog.

Interviewer: Yeah it's the only independent one, I think, in the industry.

Interviewee #5: Yeah, if you just exclude Morgan and TVR, we're basically the only independent one, yeah.

Interviewer: So...

Interviewee #5: Excuse me [# blows nose]

Interviewer: Uh, in terms of, uhm, consumer engagement..

Interviewee #5: Yeah.

Interviewer: How would you define engagement in this context?

Interviewee #5: In the context of our fans or the customers

Interviewer: Yeah so engaging consumers online, mainly the brand community on Facebook? So how do you..?

Interviewee #5: Well, you know, people... Ah, it's a really interesting topic this, I guess uh, people talk about conversation and you, you must have done a lot of research into this and read a lot about this. Uhm, marketers like me love to talk about conversations. It's very important to have conversations with consumers. How many marketing people do you really think have a conversation with their consumers? To me a conversation is, is doing something that we're doing right now.

Interviewer: Yeah

Interviewee #5: We're talking about a subject, there's interactivity. Uhm, for me a true conversation is where we Aston Martin are talking to an individual and that's difficult to scale, we got 6.5 million people. So, I, I think the conversation element to our communications uhm, is uhm, the, the, there's, there's, there's two, there's the fans. So there's the, the, the, the, the fan community and with 6.5 million it's difficult practically to have a conversation individually with all of them. But I would hope and that's my aspiration, and Neil and the team, are working on this... That, that, we, we can engage and we can listen and we can, we can give people what they want and if it's different stories or whatever it might be, or if they got problems or concerns, that we can engage in those conversations. If you are talking about customers, the family, it's super important that we can engage with them one on one. You know, I mean, Andy Palmer writes, uuh, personally to every customer who buys a car and has his email address on itand people contact him. You know, I mean, the CEO is accessible to everybody uhm, and that's for a company these days that's quite rare. You know, you think about I don't know uuh when you last been on a flight. Did you feel like you could talk to the CEO and you will get a response? You may go to a call-center or you may go through Twitter or whatever. That's OK, as long as there, as long as there's a dialogue. But to be able to talk directly to the boss of the company. But we're dealing here with a, a different market. So, if you've just spent half a million pounds, a million pounds, our new hyper car is gonna be two and a half million pounds. We're only gonna build about a hundred of them. So, Andy is gonna know all of them. And he should. And they should feel; I just spent two and a half million on one car, they should be able to pick up the phone and talk to the CEO. So, I think conversation is super important.

Interviewer: Uhm, do you see any, uhm, financial... or how do you measure the effectiveness of social media?

Interviewee #5: How do you monetise social media?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee #5: Oh, well I monetise it, because I can monetise it, I believe. Uh, although I need to research, I need to measure it. But I believe that uhm, because we are loved and respected by many millions of people, that makes our customers feel good about buying our cars.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee #5: Again, they are self-assured people, they're confident, they are independent thinking, but human nature says you would rather have that than that when you drive a car.

So, uhm, and I think a lot of people are attracted to the brand, because they fall in love with it. Again, it's back to the example of: when I was a boy, I had a toy Aston Martin and I fell in love with it and because it's, it's a, it's a, it's a brand that everybody respects and loves. When I got enough money, I then bought an Aston Martin. So, I think the monetisation of that engagement with the fan community, with social media is measured in sales of cars because people are buying an Aston Martin uh, knowing in the back of their mind that their buying an object that's, that's really respected by everybody.

Interviewer: But there's no way, I mean so far, that we can know from the brand community, so from 6.5 million followers of Aston Martin uuh, who is really a potential customer, can we?

Interviewee #5: We can potentially, because if we, so we've just integrated our CRM system, as you probably heard, with Salesforce...

Interviewer: Yeah

Interviewee #5:... So we have now an up to date, modern, uuuh, CRM platform, which allows us, and they have listening tools; Radian 6 and so and so forth. Uhm, and we now have the ability to more accurately track consumer journeys through our brand, because we should be - if it's working- we should be tracking all their uuh, uuh, touch points with the brand. So, if they come here to Gaydon, they sign in, name and address, email: bang they are on the system. And let's supposing we've never talked to them before and they come in and they register and then after all they love the factory so that they request a brochure or they then go and post something on social media and we can, we can, we can watch them on their journey, we can watch them on their journey when they visit a dealer, request a test drive, spec a car, buy the car. So, you know, if we put something out on Facebook and it leads to more sales, then yeah, sure I can measure that. We haven't tried that yet. We haven't tried that sort of controlled experiment where we put something out and we see the result. What we do know, is that uuh, many of our customers are really enthusiasts, they love cars and how they get their information is often on social media platforms, whether it's things like Pistonheads or whether it's Facebook. So, I think uh, you know, we don't advertise a lot. We, we, we tend to uhm, we tend to rely on earned media, so you know the PESO? You probably have studied the PESO haven't you?! Paid, earned, owned and shared ...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewee #5: So, we don't do lot of paid, but we do uh, quite a lot of uh, earned, but we have owned and of course we have shared. So, I think, I think in that sense you can say that, that, uhm, because we don't advertise a lot that lot of our custom comes from people who have heard about us or have been reading about us, and if you then make the assumption that everybody is on social media, then social media becomes really an important place for us to connect with them.

Interviewer: What could be the core value or the core added value of the brand community to Aston Martin?

Interviewee #5: Ah, I think it's feedback. I think it's a health check on the brand. I think it's a way of us gathering information or getting a sense of what we're doing is right. Uhm you could argue that the fan community on Facebook for example uhm, is the proverbial 'canary

in a coal mine'? You know they are the early warning. So if they start to get angry at us, or say all your cars are crap, or they don't look very good or whatever else, uhm we need to listen to that. So, I think, I think, they are a uh.. Oh they're very honest, they love Aston Martin, but they are very tough with their criticism of us and that's how it should be. You know, they feel, it's a bit, again, it's a bit like , you know, following your favourite soccer team. You know, you'll sit there watching them on TV and you shout and swear at them if they are losing, right? And you'll blame the manager, you'll... but you still love them, you want them to win, but you don't hold back in your criticism if you think they are not doing very well. So I think, again, Aston Martin has a little bit of that quality to it. People, if they see something they don't like, they tell us. And that's good feedback, a brand should be .. uh..alive to that kind of feedback and dialogue.

Interviewer: Uhm, do you have, or do you meet members of the brand community offline as well?

Interviewee #5: Yeah, I mean, to, to an extent. So if I'm at the motor race, if I'm at Goodwood Festival of Speed, if I'm at, if I'm with, if I'm filling up my car at the petrol station, I meet people all the time… and many people who don't own a car but they come up and say: "I love the car!" Or "I really like Aston Martin", or "I don't like what you are doing right now" or "you know I saw this on TV. Is it true or (not)?" So, absolutely! I mean every... when you drive an, I'm lucky enough to drive an Aston Martin, when you drive it, it's a rare experience. You know, you end up, I mean I, I went to uhm, recently I went down to Cardiff in Wales for a business trip. And the car was filthy, and so I found eh..I went to one of those hand wash places. There was a bunch of guys, you know and afterwards they said: "Can we take pictures?" "Yeah I mean yeah please". So, I mean, do they do that with any other car? Probably not. Probably with Ferrari they will do that, but it's.. I was.., they wanted to, to take selfies and looking inside, and that's cool! You know, and who knows out of five guys washing my car, one of them (laughs) could be the guy, that you know, has a chain of car washes and sells them for, you know, ten million and he, he remembers that Aston Martin as a beautiful car and the guy that drove the Aston Martin was a nice guy and let him you know bla bla.. whatever it might be. So, I think it's really, really cool and I think it's a good, I, I, I welcome that level of interaction and I, look, I'm a head of marketing so I need to be uh, I think open to conversations all the times with our fans and with our customers. But it's something I really encourage. I'm really lucky to work for this company, to have this position.

Interviewer: Do you have any activities offline for the brand community?

Interviewee #5: Yeah we engage for example with Pistonheads, you know, which is a big fan enthusiasts' website uhm, and they do their thing called Sunday Service and we, we, we do it every year here. So we invite them to come here and they have all their cars and most of them aren't Aston Martins. Some are. But there's just a celebration. They wanna come here and they wanna see Aston Martin, experience the brand, and, and, they're enthusiasts. So, absolutely yeah, yeah. Goodwood Festival of Speed, Monterey Car Week, motor racing, Formula 1 now, you know Le Mans. You know you'd be surprised, again, back to football...

Interviewer: Yeah

Interviewee #5: ...When people go to Le Mans, they're often cheering for the driver, nationality, you know we see this now with your country with Max Verstappen in the F1. You know I was in Monaco last weekend and all the Dutch flags, you know with 33, you know so they are cheering for their guy. But they are also in motor racing, they're cheering for a brand. It's a bit like Harley-Davidson you know people getting Harley Davidson tattoos. I haven't yet seen an Aston Martin tattoo, but you know, uh, I'm sure there's, I'm sure there's one out there.

Interviewer: The logo is really nice.

Interviewee #5: Ah, it's beautiful logo, it's really cool logo. And, and, so, uhm, you know people come and they all wear the Aston Martin clothes. You know, like this. They all come dressed like this. They wanna feel part of the team. It's exactly like a football team, they wear the strip, you know.

Interviewer: Where can you get a jumper like this?

Interviewee #5: You buy it uuuh, from, well in fact, all the noise down there is our shop...

Interviewer: Ok

Interviewee #5:... we're building a shop. So you'd be able to buy it there, you'd be able to get it online, you go to Hackett and so forth. So people from, yeah, I mean Hackett is a big partner of ours and they sell a lot of Aston Martin racing stuff. People buy it like crazy, they love it! Yeah, it's cool.. So, it's good business!

Interviewer: Yeah. So, we use the term co-creation a lot.

Interviewee #5: Yeah.

Interviewer:... as a practitioner? Uhm, how would you define co-creation, from your point of view?

Interviewee #5: Well, I mean I think, it's, it's, one or more, two or more entities getting together to, to create content. Uhm, so typically, if you take a brand scenario, co-creation can be us and our customers, uuh, the Aston Martin family or our fans co-creating content, storytelling. Uhm, so you know we might engage with a group of uhm, owners that are doing a rally. You know they are doing a drive around Scotland in Aston Martins and we will co-create ehh you know some content there about their experiences. Uhm, we can work with other brands, we can work with other creative people to, to, to co-create content, so for me it's about storytelling, it's back to storytelling, but it's about storytelling with uhm, at least two or three people or more involved in creating that, that, that content. And it also, in a sense it's allowing uuh... it's feeling confident and allowing other people to tell your story. That's co-creation as well. You know so in a sense your, you know, we know our story very well, so I can sit her and bore you to death about how we make our cars and Le Mans and racing and yada yada yada and I'm telling you a story. Uuh, for me co-creation is if you took all that and you loved Aston Martin and you told that story and you made a video about Aston Martin. That's, I think is co-creation because you're working, you're interpreting the brand through your eyes.

Interviewer: Yeah. And in terms of the social media strategy, from your point of view, do you think the brand community affects the way you design the social media strategy?

Interviewee #5: Yeah, I do, I do, I do, because I, again, it's back too. Uhm, you know, what the Internet has given us is, is, 24/7 instant feedback, right?! Uhm and rightly or wrongly you are judged immediately online uuh in terms of how you behave. So when we announce a car, when we release a car and it goes onto AutoExpress, or Pistonheads, or whoever it is and then you read the comments… and then you see people say: "Oh, I love it!"..."Oh that looks terrible what are they doing?!" So you you've got instant feedback. So, uh, I think the, every brand lives now with its critics and with its fans and you know that's a 24/7 never ending process. Uhm, you know, we've just seen the new Top Gear show, previewed on, on, on TV this week and boy was it tough ah?! You know, I think, ultimately, it will be fine. Uhm, but people were really tough about it. Yeah they didn't like it at all. So you know as a brand we have the same relationship with our fan base and customers, they will judge us very quickly.

Interviewer: Ok. In terms of the brand identity, do you think the brand has changed over the years?

Interviewee #5: uh, yeah I think, I think it has, and it's going to change even more.. and I say that, I think what won't change is the core of the brand which is back to beautiful cars, powerful cars, handcrafted, bespoke special brand, that doesn't change. Well it won't change while the current management team are in place because we are not gonna, we are gonna grow the company, but we are not gonna grow that big, so we're always gonna remain luxury. So the centre of the brand remains the same, ok? How does it change? How does it evolve? Well it evolves because we have to translate those values to new consumers, so to China for example, where people didn't grow up with this (shows a DB5 model).. where our customers are ten years younger on average than our customers in Europe or in America, so different cultural reference points. Yeah we had ehh.. it's quite interesting, we had recently ..eh…Duran Duran … the pop group they visited the factory..

Interviewer: From the nineties.

Interviewee #5: Yeah, the eighties, eighties! I mean Marek (Reichman) and I were…the Head of Design..we were crazy about them, we were so happy to meet with them, you know? So they appeal very much to customers in their early 50s and through their 40s yeah? Uhm but to the previous generation of Aston Martin there is absolutely no relevance at all. So what I mean is that.. you know what Aston Martin stands for doesn't change. How we communicate and how we explain that, that will change, and also the company is gonna do different products, you know we are gonna do a crossover, we are gonna do an electric car, we are gonna do different things with the brand, so we will change we will attract new people into the family.

Interviewer: How did you come up with the tagline? is it through research or...?

Interviewee #5: I don't know, I mean it's power, beauty and soul, which is conceived 10 years ago. You know, is it a tagline? Is it a mission statement? Is it.. I don't know what it is. We don't really have a tagline, we have three words that we use: power, beauty, and soul. Uhm… we might change in the future. Maybe we need a tagline? Maybe, we don't? I don't know, but uhm .. I think for now we are not so obsessed. I mean, you know, many luxury brands do? Does Louis Vuitton has a tagline? Does Gucci have a tagline? I don't think they do, they just have a brand and they have a visual identity and their products and so forth. So taglines tend to be, uhh you know the car industry loves taglines. You know every car brand changes its

tagline every 5 or 10 years. Uhm for Aston Martin we are not obsessed about taglines. Power beauty and soul is a way of describing the brand, and the cars and the company, but we are not obsessive about power, beauty and soul being a tagline.

Interviewer: What brings the company together, I mean people working inside and...?

Interviewee #5: The business plan, the business, the objectives of the business. As of right now, today, it's the turn-around of the business. It's the launch of the new cars, it's the, it's the five or six year business plan. Uhm, it's the turn-around, it's the new factory in Wales, it's the hyper car we do with Red Bull. It's all the products. So, what unifies the employee base is around the future potential of the company. You know the vision laid out by the CEO.

Interviewer: Have you started with the new business plan 2020 I think?

Interviewee #5: Yeah, it's about 2020. It's called the second century

Interviewer: Yeah second century

Siomon: and it runs through to 2020, six year plan yeah.

Interviewer: From now to..

Interviewee #5: From last year,15,16,17,18,19,20 …six year plan

Interviewer: And again, uhm do you think the brand community on Facebook has helped you reflect on the brand?

Interviewee #5: Oh, yeah, I, I, I believe so, yeah, and I believe it will do more so in the future. And uuuhm, I think that, again, it's back to football teams again, isn't it? We have a core of supporters and we want to keep them. We want to grow them.

Interviewer: Can you give some examples? Like, aah, you know, where do you see this reflection, so where do you see it and say: "Oh this..?"

Interviewee #5: Uuuhm, I think I see, I see, I see the fan community reflected again back in, in, into our customers uuh and how the product and the brand is treated in the market. Uh, I think their love, the affection and the respect that we have, is.. means that the cars are, uhm, you know, it is, it's the fan base, it's the engagement, it's buying a t-shirt or a baseball cap. Uhm, I think it's the messages of support that we get, it's the positive dialogue that we get, some are negative, it's the conversations that we have. Yeah, we have hopefully 6.5 million people on Facebook that are interested in what we do. You know, they've signed up to follow us for a reason, and the reason is that they love our cars, they love our brand and are interested in what we do. So, we need to give them content that helps them celebrate that love.

Interviewer: Do you think social media has changed the marketing, or the way marketing works, or is it just another channel?

Interviewee #5: Huh, well I, I, I, I made myself unpopular when I called it another channel. So there is two ways of answering the question: the, the,the, yes it's another channel, I've got newspapers, I've got TV, I've got lots of channels. Social media is just another channel, but it behaves in a different way. So, it's interactive and it's, it's, it's immediate and 24/7 etcetera, etcetera. So, uhm, yes, social media is just another channel, that's true, uuh, but it has radically changed the way in which we as a company or any brand can interact with, with,

with a, with our fans and with our customers. You know, it's very immediate, it's very direct, it's unfiltered, it's a direct relationship.

Interviewer: One last question.

Interviewee #5: Yeah, sure.

Interviewer: Uhm, how do you manage to relate to the past, you know, uhm, Aston Martin is also about heritage...

Interviewee #5: Yes, it is.

Interviewer: So, how do you manage to relate to the past..you know Aston Martin is also about heritage? How do you manage to relate to the past and stay relevant till now?

Interviewee #5: Well, I think, I think our heritage is part of the brand, I mean, I think, you know. It's this, isn't it? [# Interviewee, holds up a DB5 model car, he keeps in his office] You know, I mean it's, it's the DB5, it's, it's the beautiful cars of the past, it's the fact that we look back on our, on our previous cars and we celebrate them, and it's the fact that you know our historical that.., you know the older cars also still to this day help us sell new cars, so we celebrate that heritage, we embrace it. I mean, we, we, it's a part of how we talk about the company. So, you know, we don't get any revenue from selling a DB5, well we don't sell DB5 anymore and every time one gets sold at auction for a million pounds we don't get the money.

Interviewer: So you cannot order it even...

Interviewee #5: No. And we're not getting any money from this, but it's the value of the brand, it's the love of the brand, it's the fact that people are prepared to pay a million pounds for a DB5 which says, they love…. It says that, that, it's an asset, that's interesting and collectible, but it also says that there is something special about Aston Martin. As a brand, people wanna collect it.

Interviewer: Anything else you want to add to the conversation?

Interviewee #5: Uuuuhm... No, I want more fans actually! And I am still everyday looking for that Goldilocks, that balance, but I'm really super conscious that I, I think this respect and love is the most precious thing that we have as a brand. It's very fragile. We can lose in an instant, so it's something that probably I worry about most of all is that I suddenly become aah arrogant, or people don't think that we're accessible, or they lose their respect for us. So we have to keep them.

Interviewer: You don't have an annual report, you don't?

Interviewee #5: Not yet, we will do. We will have an annual report, yeah, let's see it.

Interviewer: OK. Thank you so much.

Interviewee #5: Very good, thank you very much. I hope that's was helpful.. Very good.

Interviewer: Do you think I can get a hold of some uhm, documentations, like maybe a report, a marketing report?

Interviewee #5: Yeah, sure, yeah, yeah, I mean let's talk with (name) afterwards... and let's see what we can... I mean actually the best thing I can give you is presentations of speeches I have given externally.

Appendix C: Consent form for interviews with managers



Information for Research Participants

Consent Form for Employees Interviews

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research project. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you may change your mind about being involved in the research at any time, and without giving a reason.

This information sheet is designed to give you full details of the research project, its goals, the research team, the research funder, and what you will be asked to do as part of the research. If you have any questions that are not answered by this information sheet, please ask.

What is the research project called?

Co-creating corporate brand identity with online brand communities

Who is carrying out the research?

Interviewer Essamri, PhD candidate.

What is the research about?

The purpose of this research is to explore how corporate brand identity is co-created in the online brand community by exploring the perspectives of both managers and the brand community.

What will research participants be asked to do?

Participating in this study will involve a voluntary interview. The interview will be conducted in person and will take a maximum of one hour at time and place of your convenience. Questions will be open-ended and relate to your current role and experience in the management of the brand on social media within your current organisation. With

your permission, I may follow-up with additional clarifying questions. Interviews will be audio taped unless you object. This research does not present any foreseeable harm or discomforts to you, nor does it intend to access trade secrets or breach your intellectual properties' rights; however any concerns should be openly expressed before or during the interview. You may withdraw from participating in this research at any time for any reason. No monetary compensation will be provided in exchange for your time.

What will happen to the information I provide?

Once the interviews have been completed, they will be transcribed and analysed by means of qualitative analysis software NVivo. Your personal and professional Information on such as gender, name and job title will not be identifiable in any published findings unless consent is given prior to publication. Interviews will be anonymously presented in my thesis or any resulting publications. If direct quotes are used in any research report or paper, pseudonym will be used (upon your approval) unless you consent to be identified using your legal name. Collected data will be encrypted and password protected and only accessed by myself; the primary researcher.

What will be the outputs of the research?

The output of this research is a thesis for the degree of Ph.D. in Marketing, conference papers, and possibly academic journal articles.

If you have any question, please contact the lead researcher, Interviewer Essamri, on the contact details provided below.

Interviewer Essamri

Nottingham University Business School

E: lixae14@nottingham.ac.uk

Complaint procedure

If you wish to complain about the way in which the research is being conducted or have any concerns about the research then in the first instance please contact the lead researcher.

Or contact the School's Research Ethics Officer:

Adam Golberg

Nottingham University Business School

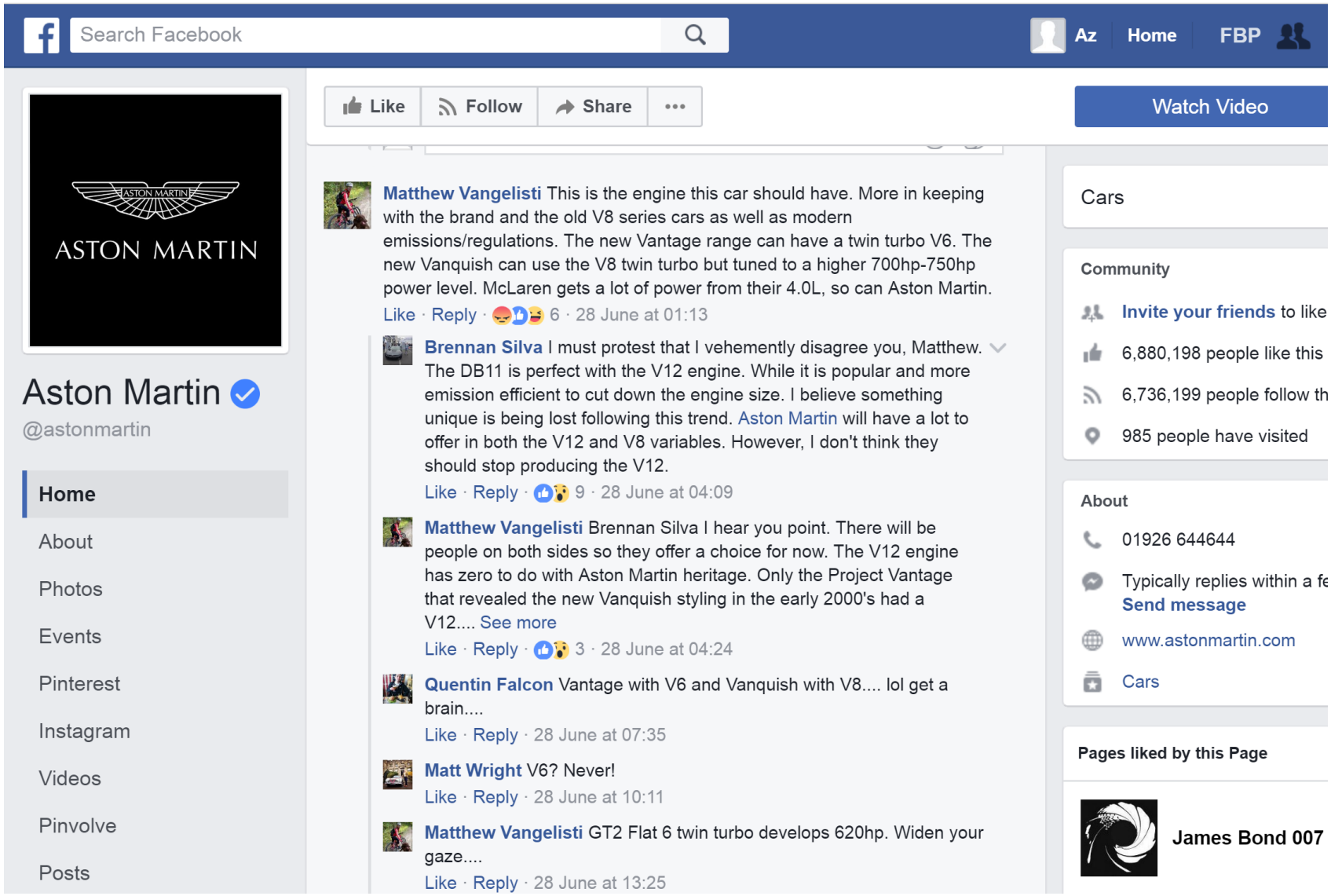
Jubilee Campus

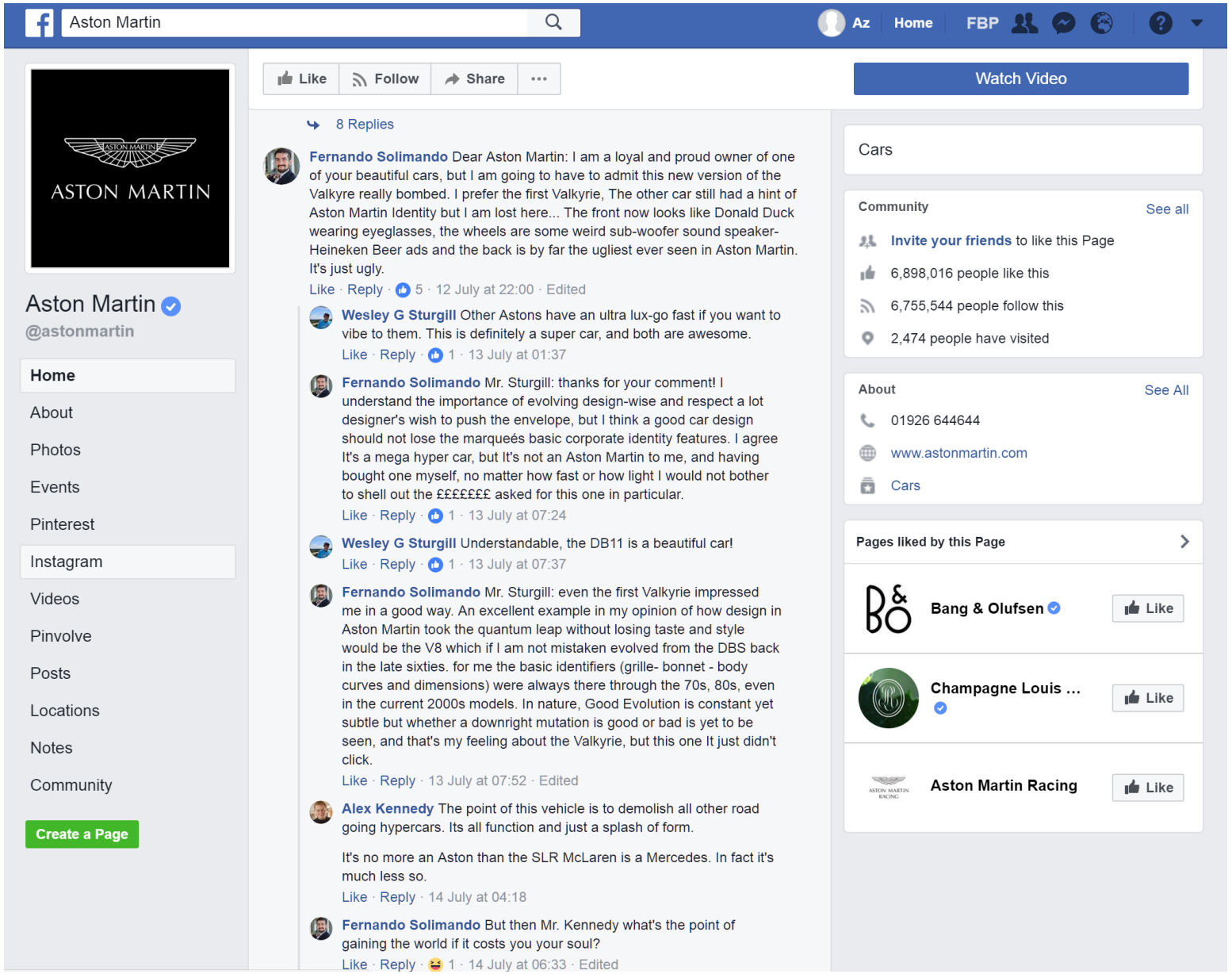
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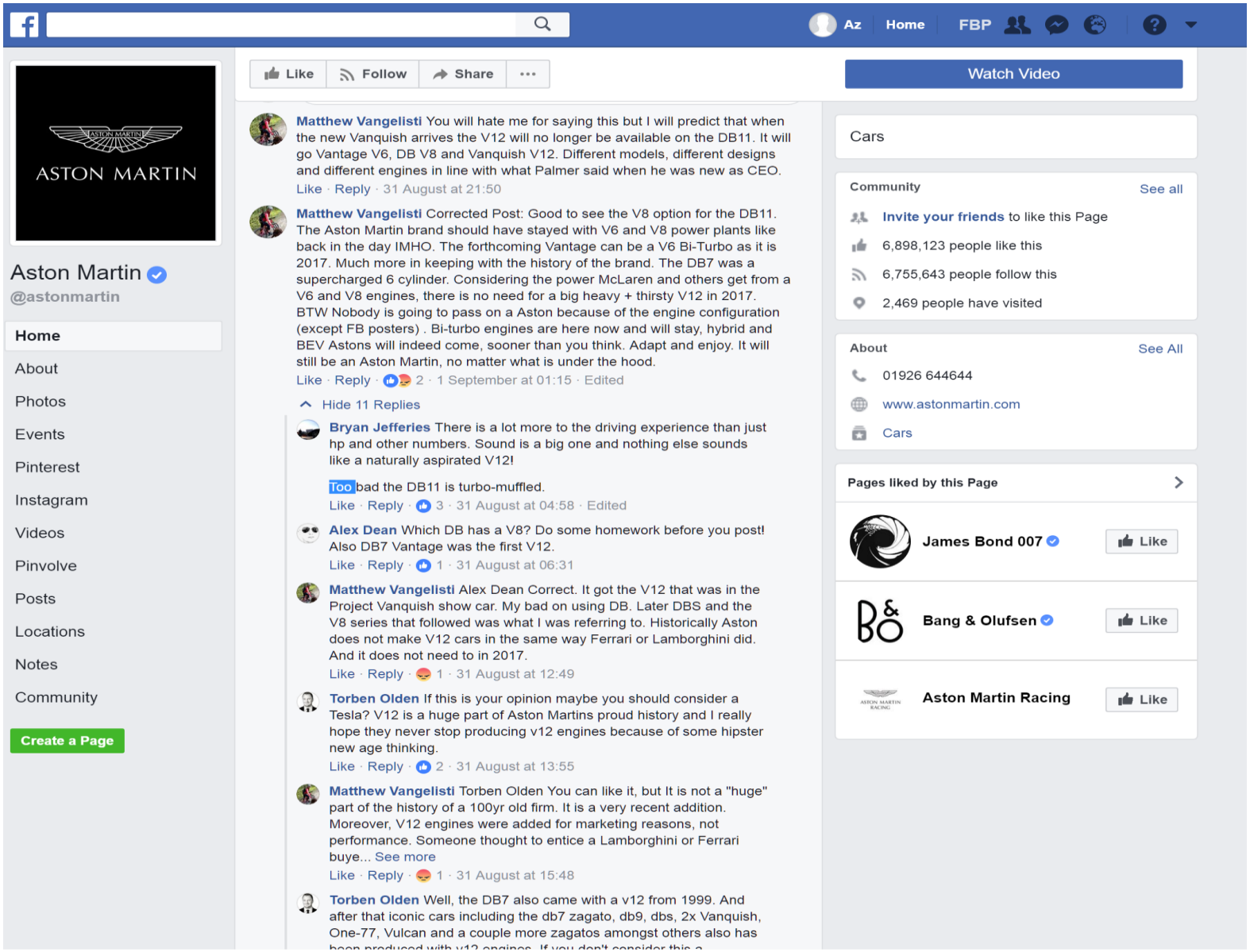
Phone: 0115 846 6604

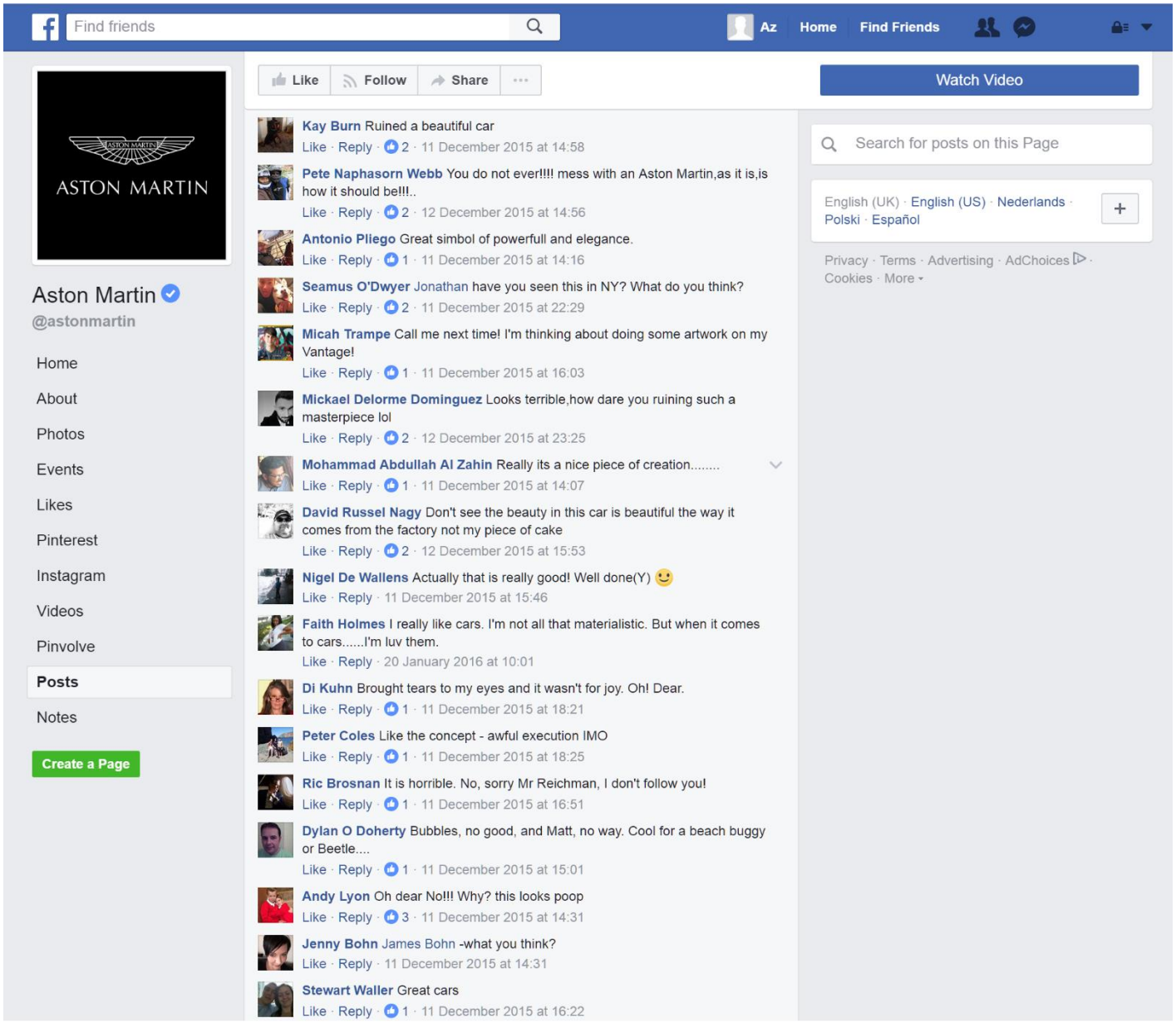
Email: adam.golberg@nottingham.ac.uk

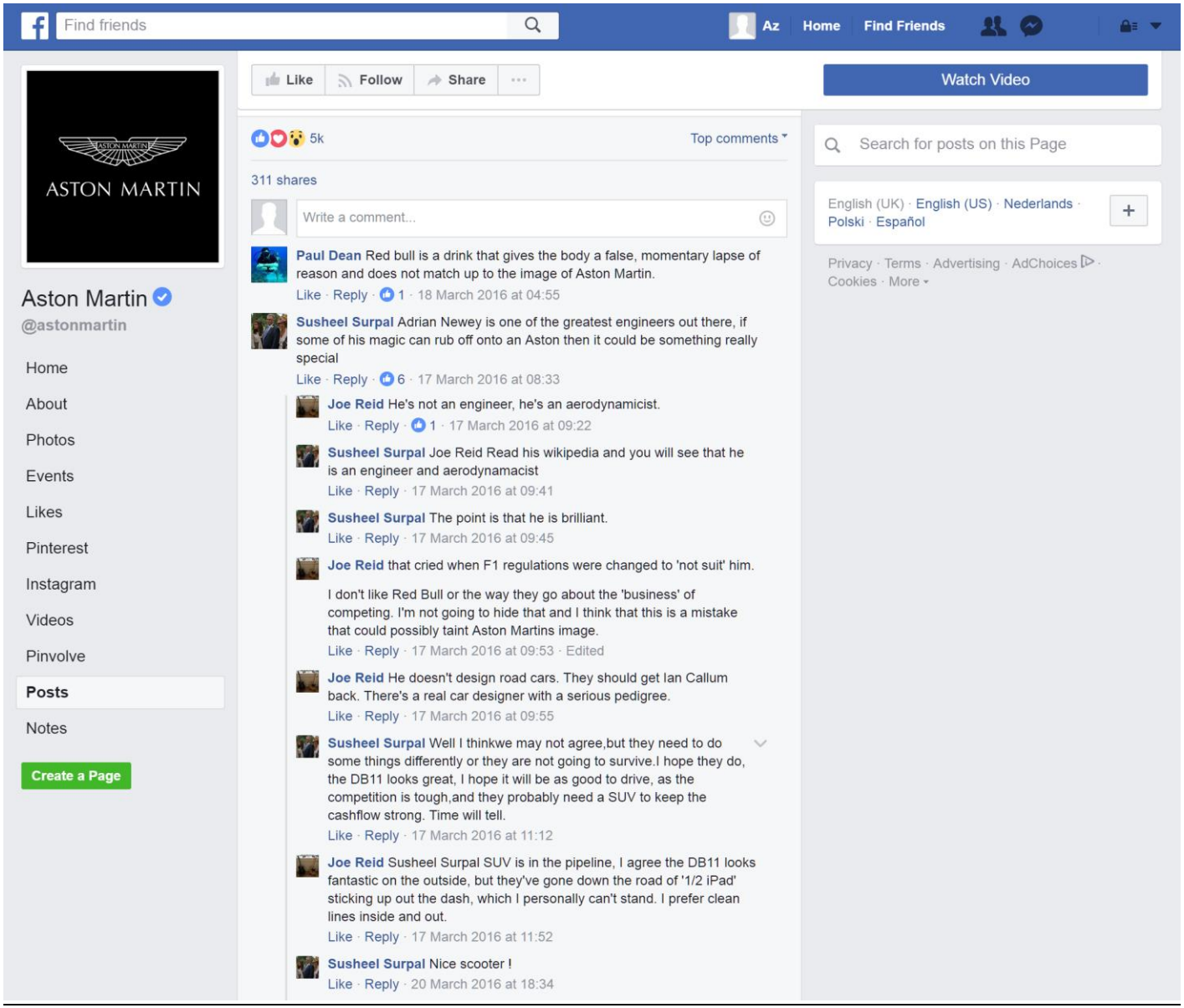
Appendix D: Screenshots of ongoing online conversations




Aston Martin
Az
Home
FBP
Like
Follow
Share
Watch Video
ASTON MARTIN
Aston Martin
@astonmartin
Home
About
Photos
Events
Pinterest
Instagram
Videos
Pinvolve
Posts
Locations
Notes
Community
Create a Page
8 Replies
Fernando Solimando Dear Aston Martin: I am a loyal and proud owner of one of your beautiful cars, but I am going to have to admit this new version of the Valkyre really bombed. I prefer the first Valkyrie, The other car still had a hint of Aston Martin Identity but I am lost here... The front now looks like Donald Duck wearing eyeglasses, the wheels are some weird sub-woofer sound speaker- Heineken Beer ads and the back is by far the ugliest ever seen in Aston Martin. It's just ugly.
Like · Reply · 5 · 12 July at 22:00 · Edited
Wesley G Sturgill Other Astons have an ultra lux-go fast if you want to vibe to them. This is definitely a super car, and both are awesome.
Like · Reply · 1 · 13 July at 01:37
Fernando Solimando Mr. Sturgill: thanks for your comment! I understand the importance of evolving design-wise and respect a lot designer's wish to push the envelope, but I think a good car design should not lose the marqueés basic corporate identity features. I agree It's a mega hyper car, but It's not an Aston Martin to me, and having bought one myself, no matter how fast or how light I would not bother to shell out the £££££££ asked for this one in particular.
Like · Reply · 1 · 13 July at 07:24
Wesley G Sturgill Understandable, the DB11 is a beautiful car!
Like · Reply · 1 · 13 July at 07:37
Fernando Solimando Mr. Sturgill: even the first Valkyrie impressed me in a good way. An excellent example in my opinion of how design in Aston Martin took the quantum leap without losing taste and style would be the V8 which if I am not mistaken evolved from the DBS back in the late sixties. for me the basic identifiers (grille- bonnet - body curves and dimensions) were always there through the 70s, 80s, even in the current 2000s models. In nature, Good Evolution is constant yet subtle but whether a downright mutation is good or bad is yet to be seen, and that's my feeling about the Valkyrie, but this one It just didn't click.
Like · Reply · 13 July at 07:52 · Edited
Alex Kennedy The point of this vehicle is to demolish all other road going hypercars. Its all function and just a splash of form.
It's no more an Aston than the SLR McLaren is a Mercedes. In fact it's much less so.
Like · Reply · 14 July at 04:18
Fernando Solimando But then Mr. Kennedy what's the point of gaining the world if it costs you your soul?
Like · Reply · 1 · 14 July at 06:33 · Edited
Cars
Community
See all
Invite your friends to like this Page
6,898,016 people like this
6,755,544 people follow this
2,474 people have visited
About
See All
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www.astonmartin.com
Cars
Pages liked by this Page
Bang & Olufsen
Like
Champagne Louis ...
Like
Aston Martin Racing
Like


Az
Home
FBP
Like
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Matthew Vangelisti You will hate me for saying this but I will predict that when the new Vanquish arrives the V12 will no longer be available on the DB11. It will go Vantage V6, DB V8 and Vanquish V12. Different models, different designs and different engines in line with what Palmer said when he was new as CEO.
Like · Reply · 31 August at 21:50
Matthew Vangelisti Corrected Post: Good to see the V8 option for the DB11. The Aston Martin brand should have stayed with V6 and V8 power plants like back in the day IMHO. The forthcoming Vantage can be a V6 Bi-Turbo as it is 2017. Much more in keeping with the history of the brand. The DB7 was a supercharged 6 cylinder. Considering the power McLaren and others get from a V6 and V8 engines, there is no need for a big heavy + thirsty V12 in 2017. BTW Nobody is going to pass on a Aston because of the engine configuration (except FB posters) . Bi-turbo engines are here now and will stay, hybrid and BEV Astons will indeed come, sooner than you think. Adapt and enjoy. It will still be an Aston Martin, no matter what is under the hood.
Like · Reply · 2 · 1 September at 01:15 · Edited
Hide 11 Replies
Bryan Jefferies There is a lot more to the driving experience than just hp and other numbers. Sound is a big one and nothing else sounds like a naturally aspirated V12!
Too bad the DB11 is turbo-muffled.
Like · Reply · 3 · 31 August at 04:58 · Edited
Alex Dean Which DB has a V8? Do some homework before you post! Also DB7 Vantage was the first V12.
Like · Reply · 1 · 31 August at 06:31
Matthew Vangelisti Alex Dean Correct. It got the V12 that was in the Project Vanquish show car. My bad on using DB. Later DBS and the V8 series that followed was what I was referring to. Historically Aston does not make V12 cars in the same way Ferrari or Lamborghini did. And it does not need to in 2017.
Like · Reply · 1 · 31 August at 12:49
Torben Olden If this is your opinion maybe you should consider a Tesla? V12 is a huge part of Aston Martins proud history and I really hope they never stop producing v12 engines because of some hipster new age thinking.
Like · Reply · 2 · 31 August at 13:55
Matthew Vangelisti Torben Olden You can like it, but It is not a "huge" part of the history of a 100yr old firm. It is a very recent addition. Moreover, V12 engines were added for marketing reasons, not performance. Someone thought to entice a Lamborghini or Ferrari buye... See more
Like · Reply · 1 · 31 August at 15:48
Torben Olden Well, the DB7 also came with a v12 from 1999. And after that iconic cars including the db7 zagato, db9, dbs, 2x Vanquish, One-77, Vulcan and a couple more zagatos amongst others also has
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Kay Burn Ruined a beautiful car
Like · Reply · 2 · 11 December 2015 at 14:58
Pete Naphasorn Webb You do not ever!!!! mess with an Aston Martin,as it is,is how it should be!!!..
Like · Reply · 2 · 12 December 2015 at 14:56
Antonio Pliego Great simbol of powerfull and elegance.
Like · Reply · 1 · 11 December 2015 at 14:16
Seamus O'Dwyer Jonathan have you seen this in NY? What do you think?
Like · Reply · 2 · 11 December 2015 at 22:29
Micah Trampe Call me next time! I'm thinking about doing some artwork on my Vantage!
Like · Reply · 1 · 11 December 2015 at 16:03
Mickael Delorme Dominguez Looks terrible,how dare you ruining such a masterpiece lol
Like · Reply · 2 · 12 December 2015 at 23:25
Mohammad Abdullah Al Zahin Really its a nice piece of creation.....
Like · Reply · 1 · 11 December 2015 at 14:07
David Russel Nagy Don't see the beauty in this car is beautiful the way it comes from the factory not my piece of cake
Like · Reply · 2 · 12 December 2015 at 15:53
Nigel De Wallens Actually that is really good! Well done(Y)
Like · Reply · 11 December 2015 at 15:46
Faith Holmes I really like cars. I'm not all that materialistic. But when it comes to cars.....I'm luv them.
Like · Reply · 20 January 2016 at 10:01
Di Kuhn Brought tears to my eyes and it wasn't for joy. Oh! Dear.
Like · Reply · 1 · 11 December 2015 at 18:21
Peter Coles Like the concept - awful execution IMO
Like · Reply · 1 · 11 December 2015 at 18:25
Ric Brosnan It is horrible. No, sorry Mr Reichman, I don't follow you!
Like · Reply · 1 · 11 December 2015 at 16:51
Dylan O Doherty Bubbles, no good, and Matt, no way. Cool for a beach buggy or Beetle....
Like · Reply · 1 · 11 December 2015 at 15:01
Andy Lyon Oh dear No!!! Why? this looks poop
Like · Reply · 3 · 11 December 2015 at 14:31
Jenny Bohn James Bohn -what you think?
Like · Reply · 11 December 2015 at 14:31
Stewart Waller Great cars
Like · Reply · 1 · 11 December 2015 at 16:22
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Photos
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Create a Page
5k
Top comments
311 shares
Write a comment...
Paul Dean Red bull is a drink that gives the body a false, momentary lapse of reason and does not match up to the image of Aston Martin.
Like · Reply · 1 · 18 March 2016 at 04:55
Susheel Surpal Adrian Newey is one of the greatest engineers out there, if some of his magic can rub off onto an Aston then it could be something really special
Like · Reply · 6 · 17 March 2016 at 08:33
Joe Reid He's not an engineer, he's an aerodynamicist.
Like · Reply · 1 · 17 March 2016 at 09:22
Susheel Surpal Joe Reid Read his wikipedia and you will see that he is an engineer and aerodynamacist
Like · Reply · 17 March 2016 at 09:41
Susheel Surpal The point is that he is brilliant.
Like · Reply · 17 March 2016 at 09:45
Joe Reid that cried when F1 regulations were changed to 'not suit' him.
I don't like Red Bull or the way they go about the 'business' of competing. I'm not going to hide that and I think that this is a mistake that could possibly taint Aston Martins image.
Like · Reply · 17 March 2016 at 09:53 · Edited
Joe Reid He doesn't design road cars. They should get Ian Callum back. There's a real car designer with a serious pedigree.
Like · Reply · 17 March 2016 at 09:55
Susheel Surpal Well I thinkwe may not agree,but they need to do some things differently or they are not going to survive.I hope they do, the DB11 looks great, I hope it will be as good to drive, as the competition is tough,and they probably need a SUV to keep the cashflow strong. Time will tell.
Like · Reply · 17 March 2016 at 11:12
Joe Reid Susheel Surpal SUV is in the pipeline, I agree the DB11 looks fantastic on the outside, but they've gone down the road of '1/2 iPad' sticking up out the dash, which I personally can't stand. I prefer clean lines inside and out.
Like · Reply · 17 March 2016 at 11:52
Susheel Surpal Nice scooter !
Like · Reply · 20 March 2016 at 18:34
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Appendix E: Sample extract of online conversations/data

Scott Bradburn I think I'll stick with my 2014 vantage, it's a proper Aston, unique and a beautiful heart melting design, rather than this new Mazda MX5 lookalike from the front! Bring back Ian Calum!!!! Like · Reply

Aston Martin @astonmartin

Stuart Fisher The more I look at that new front end Scott Bradburn the more I agree with you, MX5 ish. I drove a DB9 last year which a friend generously leant me and this new car is not a patch on it. What do think Nick Carter. Like · Reply

Nick Carter Ive been incredibly fortunate to own a few DB9's which all have been an incredible experience. However, after test driving the new DB11 and the Vantage V12S. The only Aston for me is the V12S!! Like · Reply

Stuart Fisher Nick Carter I was only referring to the look of that front, I'm sure the drive will be everything that we expect from an Aston, the sound of your V12 on full throttle was a symphony that will haunt me. Like · Reply

Scott Bradburn Hi Stuart, I agree with you, I'm sure the actual drive is incredible. I was lucky enough to finally buy my dream car (V8 Vantage 4.7 2014 plate) last year for my 50th and LOVED it. It went back to the dealer with a minor issue and they leant me a new D... See more Like · Reply

Scott Bradburn Oh and Nick, I drove a Vantage V12 on an Aston track day and a friend of mine has one too, I agree with you, an awesome car that just takes your breath away! I couldn't quite afford the V12 so settled for the V8, which is perfect for me! But that 600bhp was insane! Like · Reply

Nick Carter A true breath taking experience Scott. Cannot beat the shirt wheel base Aston. What a car!!!!! Like · Reply

Trixie Hackley Nick Carter jaguar all the way xx Like · Reply

Stuart Fisher Trixie Hackley I love Jaguars, I have had 12. The sound of the F type are on full chat is awesome, but having been behind the wheel of a V12 Aston Wow. And the shape is sculpture, if I could afford either it would be a difficult choices to make Like · Reply

Nick Carter Your F is nice, but it's not an Aston xx Like · Reply

Trixie Hackley Stuart Fisher I had an Aston 4.7 v8 but didn't like driving it .. but now I have a f type 5 litre 550bhp v12 and I love it drive it everywhere... Like · Reply

Scott Bradburn the F-type is an amazing car and more of an every day car.... but still not an Aston, nor does it look as beautiful as an Aston...but people should buy the car they love regardless of opinions as its such a personal thing. Like. Reply.

Appendix F: Fans per country until December 2017

AE	45752
AR	61924
AU	74336
BD	79086
BE	56059
BG	40606
BR	240327
CA	80401
CH	28273
CL	44905
CO	66298
CZ	32628
DE	197007
DZ	104857
EG	153387
ES	82278
FR	312294
GB	343402
GR	36471
HU	27934
ID	69086
IN	1377276
IQ	46900
IR	74283
IT	185531
JP	30725
LK	36468
MA	74471
MX	333107

MY	118035
NL	31941
PE	45044
PH	101851
PK	151897
PL	80388
PT	87974
RO	61156
SA	43051
TH	87687
TN	51613
TR	162287
TW	69483
US	513967
VN	56127
ZA	98290
SUM	6096863

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Appendix G: Consent Form for Brand Community Interviews

Information for Research Participants

Consent Form for Brand Community Interviews

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research project. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you may change your mind about being involved in the research at any time, and without giving a reason.

This information sheet is designed to give you full details of the research project, its goals, the research team, the research funder, and what you will be asked to do as part of the research. If you have any questions that are not answered by this information sheet, please ask.

What is the research project called?

Co-creating corporate brand identity with online brand communities.

Who is carrying out the research?

Interviewer Essamri, PhD candidate.

What is the research about?

The purpose of this research is to explore how corporate brand identity is co-created in the online brand community by exploring the perspectives of both managers and the brand community.

What will research participants be asked to do?

Participating in this study will involve a voluntary interview. Interviews will be conducted online via text- or audio- and video-based chat. Questions will be open-ended and relate to your overall experience with the brand and your interactions with the brand on Facebook. Questions may focus on reasons as to why you interact with the brand, why you use Facebook to interact with the brand, relevance and your impression of the brands' postings etc. With your permission, I may follow-up with additional clarifying questions. This research does not present any foreseeable harm or discomforts to you, nor does it intend to invade your right to privacy or access any of your personal information (e.g. gender, IP address, browser type). The researcher is mainly interested in your interactions with the brand and with other peers online on the brand's hosted Facebook community; however, if you have any concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, these should be openly expressed before or during the interview. You may withdraw from participating in this research at any time for any reason. No monetary compensation will be provided in exchange for your time.

What will happen to the information I provide?

Once the interviews have been completed, they will be transcribed and analysed by means of qualitative analysis software NVivo. Interviews will be anonymously presented to illustrate points in my thesis or any resulting publications. If direct quotes are used in any

research report or paper, pseudonym will be used (upon your approval) unless you consent to be identified using your legal name. Collected data will be encrypted and password protected and only accessed by myself; the primary researcher.

What will be the outputs of the research?

The output of this research is a thesis for the degree of Ph.D. in Marketing, conference papers, and possibly academic journal articles.

If you have any question, please feel free to contact me on Facebook or through my email provided below.

Interviewer Essamri

Nottingham University Business School

E: lixae14@nottingham.ac.uk

Complaint procedure

If you wish to complain about the way in which the research is being conducted or have any concerns about the research then in the first instance please contact the lead researcher.

Or contact the School's Research Ethics Officer:

Adam Golberg

Nottingham University Business School

Jubilee Campus

Nottingham NG8 1BB

Phone: 0115 846 6604

Email: adam.golberg@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix H: Facebook Messenger interview sample with a member of the brand community

Hi Nicolas, my name is Interviewer I'm a PhD candidate at the University of Nottingham UK. I'm doing a study on the Aston Martin brand and came across your posts about the brand on Facebook page and was wondering if you could participate in my research. My questions are related to the brand and are not concerned with any personal information. So far I have conducted some interviews some fans as well as owners and would very much like to know

your views on the brand. If you are interested, I'll be happy to provide you with my University's personal email address to confirm my credentials. Also as a participant you have the right to use your legal name or chose to be quoted anonymously in the final report, which I will be happy to share with you if you would like to. Please let me know your decision, Please let me know whether you accept my request. Regards

Hi Az. I would be absolutely interested yes.

You can use my legal name and I would indeed like to see the final report.

What do you want to know?

Thank you so much for your help. I have attached the consent form for you and some more information about the research.

Here are the questions

1-In your opinion what does the brand stand for?

I think it stands for Power, Beauty and Soul. I really do. The slogan is particularly well chosen. Quality and refinement and elegance and dynamism. To resume, I think it stands for something truely exceptionnal. That being an object, a car, and ideology, or simply an objective, a goal.

2- Can you please say why you are passionate about the brand?

I'm passionate about it (please note that refering to "it", I'm talking more about the cars than the brand in itself. But it's just a little nuance). So yeah, I'm passionate about them because, in my own eyes, as I see them, they ultimately embody the image I want myself to project as a human being. A blend of refinement, elegance, prestige, but also quality and power, power not in terms of performance, but in terms of influence, and the feeling of uniqueness and exception it evoques in some others. Most of all, I think Aston Martins speaks of balance and harmony. Balance between raw and civilised. That's were the true power lies in my opinion. It's powerful, and yet docile, impressive, and yet humble. A true gentleman's car.

3- What is the source of your passion for the brand?

The source of my passion lies in my childhood. I loved cars since the begining. But I remember the first time I saw an Aston, it was a special moment. I was around 12, it was a black DB9 Volante, driving by in the darkness of the night. The bright xenon headlights first caught my attention. At the moment then, not every car had those. Only quality. Or BMW. Thats what I thought it was. Then I remember seeing the logo at the back and KNOWING it was something special, but not really knowing the brand at the same time. I knew the existence of Aston Martin, but nothing more. But despise that it just felt special. And then I heard that V12 engine growling, and I remember thinking, that it was one of the most apealing sound I've ever heard. And I'm a musician so sound is a very important thing to me. The sound is, actually one of the pillars of my passion for the brand. A few years later, when around 14yo, walking in the city (Quebec City, Canada) on a very sunny day of summer, I saw for the first time the 2005 V8 Vantage. Parked alone, in a beautiful metallic sand silver, shining like a thounsand lights under the sparkles of the sun. I was blinded by it's beauty. It was love at first sight. I remember being stunned. Everything else around me got blurred and I could only focus on one thing : that car. It made me feel something man. Really. It's that powerful. I stayed like 30mins, just around it. Enjoying everything, every curve, every detail, every line. The proportions of this thing, it's just... so perfect. So delicate. And then the owner came by and got in and started the engine. I remember the surprise I had, how MEAN and powerful that V8 engine sounded and I was amazed by the contrast. How something so beautiful and classy could sound so mean and agressive?. I liked that a lot. It was bold. A very pleasing combinaison. I always prefered the V12. But I think this car made me love the V8 for the first time. Anyway. I still consider the V8 Vantage to be one if the most beautiful car ever to be created. And this is, without a doubt the very moment where my passion for Aston Martin kicked in.

4- Has the Facebook brand community shaped your perception of the brand in anyway?

Hmm no I don't think the community has shaped or modified my perception of the brand in any way.

5- What content do you enjoy the most?

The content I enjoy the most is pictures, announcements, and videos about AMR.

6- If you are following the Aston Martin official brand page on Facebook, to what extent has the content provided by Aston Martin on Facebook contributed to your passion for the brand? What content would you say is lacking?

The pictures are wonderful. But I would LOVE to see more in-depth videos, like POV or 360 video of the cars driving on the road, or getting unleashed on the track. WITH GOOD SOUND.

7- How long have you been member of the brand community?

Hmmm for maybe 2 or 3 years I think? I'm not sure.

8- What is the frequency of your visit to the brand community (daily, or the average number of visits per week)?

Daily.

9- What was your motivation for joining the brand community?

It just felt natural joining considering my love for the brand

10- How would you describe your brand experience in terms of feelings, sensation, thought etc.?

It always been very important, always held a dear place in my heart and my life. But If I would have to describe it into words, it would say : hope, extacy, and nostalgia.

11- Do you own an Aston Martin?

No. But I will.

12. As a brand enthusiast who aspires to own the brand, how would you describe your brand experience at this stage where you don't own an Aston Martin? Is the experience somewhat incomplete, perhaps there is a brand experience "void or emptiness" in the sense that the ultimate or desired brand experience is not fulfilled yet? So, it would be very much helpful in elaborating on this point. Thanks

It's a good point you make. I would like to say that it is indeed somewhat incomplete, yes, but, in another way, It's not a point of view that I like to entertain. I'm not filthy rich, and let's be realistic, these machines are pretty expensive. Unless you are BORN rich, you just don't buy an Aston, you have to acheieve other things in your life, personally or professionnally, in order to be sucessful enough to be able to buy one. There is process to it, a challenge. And that's what will makes it even more desirable, and that's what will make me appreciate every bit of worth there is to it when I'll get mine. So yes, until then, we could somewhat say that the experience is incomplete, but I dont like seeing things like this. Short story. 2015 I've been to Sydney and I had the exquisite opportunity to sit behind the wheel of the latest Vanquish. Alone. In a dealership. It was a memorable moment too. One step closer to my dream. For me it's a process, evolving slowly. The passion I entertain for the brand has brought me closer to it, a little bit more, each year. In time it will lead me to my goal I think. But I dont like thinking that my experience is "incomplete" until then. Because, what's the experience, exactly? If it's based on a goal, is it not different for everybody? And does it change over time too? Is that "ultimate experience" going to shift to something else, when I'll have the car? Like visiting the factory or driving the Vulcan or Valkyrie or a DB5? And to be honest, even if I don't own one yet, I still had plenty of feelings and experiences already. Juste wanting one in itself is part of the experience I think. I mean of course owning one, that the real deal, that's the dream. What all true fans long for. But, I would like to think that being fan is already to be part of the family. Not owning one shouldn't be considered as "incomplete".

To be striken by the beauty, the perfection, to be conquered by it like a piece of art, and deciding in that very moment that this is your favorite car, and something you want in life bad enough to really work for it, that is the true ultimate experience. The rest are just the ripples of that moment, whatever fun and special these experiences are. It all start with that moment. The spark that ignite the passion. Thats how you build a faithfull fanbase, and a rocksolid clientele.

You asked me to decribe my brand experience into feelings. I gave you three, and I just realised something about it ; Hope, extacy and nostalgia. Future, present and past. That's a life comitement. Right there. That's my experience. And it's evolving, and growing with and within me. Their product is good enough to create such kind of desire, and comitement. It worked on me. So I think Aston has to capitalise on that, (and I think they already are) but yet even more, to entertain the passion, to share it and to welcome every newcomer like a family member, and to treat everyone of them like a future owner.

Hi Nicolas, thank you so much for the insightful and elaborate answers. Very much appreciated. Have you got time for some final questions? Cheers

My pleasure! Of course go ahead.

13. To what extent do you feel that your personal identity (or self-image) matches the identity of the brand?

Hmm well I can't pretend to know the identity of the brand, but the way I see it, how it feels to me, is that some of their cars are tailored for me, not the other way around. But yeah. I think these machines represent the extent of my personality.

14. What do you think of the fact that many people buy the brand for the wrong reasons? For example, rappers, footballers as opposed to discreet gentlemen?

You can't buy an Aston for the wrong reasons. I mean, if it's your choice, it's your choice and in the end I'd say that it tells more about your good tastes than what you do. Unless if it's for trashing the car, or not taking care. That's a wrong reason. Of course I think it's more fitting to a gentleman than a rapper let's say. But the true merit (if such thing exists) is in the personality, not in the style. You can be a rapper AND a gentleman. I'll never feel bad to see a rapper driving that if the guy's got a cool attitude. What bother me more is if the owner is an asshole. In a suit or in a hoodie, that's where it clashes you know? Cause what that car leaves in term of experience is happiness, euphoria, well-being. It's nice to see the owner leaving people with similar feelings. I mean. Just be fucking nice isn't so hard. Is it?

15. What do you think of Aston Martin getting involved in making yachts, building hotels and residencies?

I don't mind Aston getting in the diversity market. Car industry is changing a lot. What matters is TOO much diversity. I would like them to stay at least in the VEHICULE BUISNESS. Boats, motorcycles, aircrafts. But not buildings. That's just odd. It looks like they just want to make money off the brand's name. What I'm trying to say is that, may they invest in other projects, by all means. But maybe with another facing. For instance "Wingride Flats"

and in small writings below "an Aston Martin company". Keep it subtle, that's what the brand inspires and they need to be consistent with that. Or they'll lose credibility to their passionate purists. And they seem to be concerned less and less of that over the recent years. That's my impression. Like their association with Red bull Racing F1 Team. Don't get me wrong I'm a massive F1 fan, but it seemed a little odd to see that partnership in the first place. Ok Red bull slogan with Aston wings is a cute match, and it's opening the brand up for new and fresh and younger and more dynamic perspectives, I agree. But I think that's a bold and limit borderline. I like the partnership. But it would have been a better fit with another team IMO. Like Force India Racing Point. Anyway. I can't wait for them to show up as an independant team. If that's still on the stove.

16. What do you think of the direction the brand is moving towards in terms of the new line of cars such as the Hyper car, DBX? Do you think the brand is still true to what it stands for?

Yes I absolutely have nothing to say about opening new lines of vehicles. As long as it stays luxury and exclusive. Like, not too much Cygnet stuff in the future. I know it was a good political trick but yeah. Have fun sometimes but do behave gentlemen.

17. Do you think James Bond adds any value to Aston Martin? What do you think if Aston wants to distance itself from James Bond?

I think it's a symbiosis relation. Aston Martin gives value to Bond first and foremost, but Bond gives them a nice action context in which they can be seen in detail and extravaganza. Both are nice, but together they are great. (And I'm also a big Bond fan). But like every symbiosis relation, it is fragile and needs to be balanced. Unfortunately I don't mind at ALL if they distances just a little bit, because they were too much involved recently. I mean, creating a car JUST for the film (Specter) ? Maybe a bit too much. And between you and me, I'd bet my left nut that the DB10 was just the New Vantage's early prototype, that they rebranded for the film. $$$$$. Yes of course. Good financial move, but at the expense of subtleness again. And example of the perfect balance I would expect of Aston Martin in a modern Bond film is in CASINO ROYAL and QUANTUM OF SOLACE. Now a THAT, was some juicy stuff of EPIC proportion. I think the Aston sequences in these movies were some of the most brilliant car stunts ever seen on the silver screen, and I know my cinema. Simple, beautiful Aston with no

gadjets, getting TRASHED, out of necessity, showing the beast inside, in all of their glory and magnificent sobriety. That was a 100% awesome.

18. How would you describe an AM driver in relation to competing brands?

First of all someone who is passionate about his car, foremost, but other cars in general also. Someone open-minded, who's got wit, cleverness but who's also kind, polite and behaved. A gentlemen who's got class and and character and who does not inspire arrogance, vanity, or domination. Just a cool sociable person, who wears a nice aura, for a lack of a better word I'd say.

(More) That's the identity of the AM driver you were asking about. He's got charm, confidence, but he's got noting menacing in his personality. He's just a friendly neighbor. He may be impressive or indimidating but only by inspiring admiration. Put good-looking in top of that and we've got a perfect match. A golden car, for a golden boy. I also feel like I need to add that this statement stands for whatever the ethnic race, sexual orientation and age of the person. Because that's just being reasonably open-minded. Anything else is not respectful of other's freedom, and freedom seems to be also something found in Aston Martin, because nothing lacks. It's an exquisite blend of everything you need, power, beauty, style, luxury, and yeah soul, it's true. In abundance for your needs. No contraints. So yeah freedom. Plus its in the logo's wings so yeah. Freedom comes over with being open minded and that's how the company should behave and feel like. That's why I also accept change, in reasonable amount like the partnership with RBR F1 Team. It's good to try new things and let ourselves evolve, but we still must be careful to stay true to ourselves!

I must say that these are good questions you're asking.

19. What is your age? (please delete irrelevant age bracket)

25-34 years old

35-44 years old

45-54 years old

Over 55

I'm 25-34 9. I'm studying Industrial and Labor Relations at University Laval and I'm a also a graduate in Cinematography of the same school. I work part-time at Home Depot, I'm an associate and health and safety officer.

Hi Nicolas, thank you so much for all the insights. It was really helpful.

Would you be interested in reading my interpretations and analysis of the brand community including of the stories provided by other fans and activities within the brand community? The purpose will be to see the extent to which you recognise and confirm the claims of my analysis and interpretations. Thank you

It would be my pleasure

Thanks Nicolas. Cheers

Cheers bud

Appendix I: Interview guide for online interviews with members of the brand community

1- In your opinion what does the brand stand for?
2- What is the image you have about Aston Martin?
3- Can you please say why you are passionate about the brand?
4- What is the source of your passion for the brand?
5- Has the Facebook brand community shaped your perception of the brand in anyway?
6- To what extent has the content provided by Aston Martin on Facebook contributed to your passion for the brand? Please give some examples.
7- What kind of content or posts provided by Aston Martin do you enjoy the most? Please give some examples and why?
8- To what extent are you satisfied with the level of engagement or the quality of the conversation Aston Martin has with the brand community?
9- What was your motivation for joining the Aston Martin Facebook official brand page?
10- You have posted some comments on the Facebook page, what motivates you to share your comments with the brand community?
11- To what extent do you think Aston Martin is accommodating and welcoming to your ideas and contributions as a member of the brand community on Facebook?
12- What do you think of the direction the brand is moving towards in terms of the new line of cars such as the Hyper car, DBX? Do you think the brand is still true to what it stands for?

Follow up questions

1- Can you please elaborate on what does the term “Britishness" mean to you?
2- Can you name the most relevant core values of Aston Martin to you?
3- To what extent do you feel that your personal identity (or self-image) matches the identity of the brand?
4- How would you describe your brand experience in terms of feelings, sensation, thought etc.?
5- 11- Do you own an Aston Martin?
6- Can you name some of the benefits to Aston Martin by having a brand community?
7- To what extent do you think the brand community (fans and owners) add value to the brand and contribute to improve the brand (For example its brand image, etc.)?
8- In your opinion, what do you think is the role of the brand community on Facebook?

9- In your opinion, how can Aston Martin be more welcoming and inclusive of its fans on Facebook?
10- Do you think the brand community can influence the brand and its products?
11- To what extent do you think the community makes it easy for you to express your true beliefs about the brand?
12- How long have you been member of the brand community on Facebook?
13- What is the frequency of your visit to the brand community on Facebook (daily, or the average number of visits per week)?
14- What is your occupation?
15- What is your age? (please delete irrelevant age bracket)

25-34 years old

35-44 years old

45-54 years old

Over 55

Appendix J: Aston Martin hypercar and other models



Aston Martin Valkyrie





Aston Martin DB11



Aston Martin DB5



Aston Martin Vantage



Aston Martin Vanquish Zagato Volante