



MARIA ANTIKAINEN

The Attraction of Company Online Communities

A Multiple Case Study



ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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University of Tampere
Department of Management Studies
Finland

Distribution
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P.O. Box 617
33014 University of Tampere
Finland

Tel. +358 3 3551 6055
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“Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it. “

Andre Gide (1869 - 1951)

At the beginning of this research process, I hardly had enough courage to dream of this day, writing this chapter. Today is the day. This process has got so many turns that I assume that no one has got a very strict idea about the final outcome, at least I have not. Above all, I consider myself lucky and grateful for having had the opportunity to go through this process.

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Seeking for the truth...

Tampere, January 31st 2007

Maria Antikainen

Abstract

This study considers the attraction of company online communities, taking the perspective of relationship marketing. The purpose of the study is to identify and analyse the attraction of different company online communities. To achieve this purpose three questions are answered. The first question considers the classification of company online communities. The second question explores the types of relationships in company online communities while the third one identifies attraction factors in those relationships.

The exploratory and qualitative case study approach enabled to use an abductive logic in which different processes are intertwined with each other. The empirical data was gathered in four case company online communities with multiple methods including both traditional methods such as interviews and online research methods such as posing questions in discussion forums. To be able to find a wide variety of attraction factors, the cases represent different types of online communities aimed for women and families, teenagers, banks' customers and software developers.

The study suggests that company online community members may establish different kind and levels of relationships. These relationships may be formed between members, between a member and a maintainer, between a member and a service as well as between a member and a brand. Altogether 16 attraction factors were found in these relationships. As a supplement to the attraction relationships and the attraction factors, attraction was divided into two types: self-related or social related. To obtain a deeper insight into this phenomenon, the differences between the maintainers' and the members' views on the attraction factors were compared, and finally two models of attraction offerings were constructed based on the type of attraction and the origin of attraction.

The present study contributes to marketing theories by modeling the attraction of company online communities. The study also offers valuable knowledge for companies in building, maintaining and utilising their own online communities. As studies on relationship marketing with company online communities are still rather non-existing, this study opens several future research avenues.

KEY WORDS: ATTRACTION, CASE STUDY, COMPANY ONLINE COMMUNITIES, RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The background of the study

Nowadays the Internet becomes a more and more essential part of people's everyday life. The mobile Internet has increased the accessibility by bringing the Web into people's hand devices. People use the Internet for multiple purposes: to search for information on the interlinked Web pages and other documents of the World Wide Web, to use interactive services, such as electronic mail, online chat and file transfer to communicate, to share files as well as to bind relationships with others. The Internet also acts as a market, where businesses as well as consumers exchange, buy and sell products.

With the second generation services available on the World Wide Web, often referred to as Web 2.0 or Community 2.0, the Internet lets users collaborate and share information online even more efficiently. In fact, user-generated content, collaboration and communities are the buzzwords of the Internet today. Online communities respond to people's natural need for belonging to groups, which explains why they have become very popular.

Online communities have also become central arenas for customers seeking and exchanging information and experiences of products. Along with the Internet and online communities, comparing products as well as the availability of different products has become easier for customers who themselves have also become more active information seekers. Customer to customer (c-to-c) interaction has enhanced dramatically as people with similar interests and lifestyles may interact around the globe. Instead of using the term word-of-mouth, the term word-of-mouse depicts the conversation in Internet environment where customers instead of speaking communicate by using the mouse (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2006). Because of the Internet, word-of-mouse has a new scale while customers exchange views on goods, services and suppliers around the globe and the clock. Therefore, the customers' power has increased with the popularity of online communities.

Companies can actually impact the company-customer relationships by helping their customers to build productive relationships among themselves in online communities. Therefore, enhancing knowledge-exchange through c-to-c interaction is an additional source for creating value for companies that is separate from the value created in the marketer-customer exchange. This source of additional value can have an impact on customer loyalty (Gruen, Osmonbekov and Czaplewski 2005). Furthermore, additional value for customers may be created in other ways in online communities. As a supplement to c-to-c interaction, also customers and maintainers may have a dialogue. Maintainers have also possibilities to enhance relationships with members directly or through their brand. Thus, one of the main aspects in creating value for both members

and maintainers is learning by either actively participating or following conversations in online communities.

For all these reasons addressed, having online communities of their own may give a remarkable competitive advantage for companies. Therefore, from the company perspective, online communities are challenging but also interesting tools that can not be ignored as a part of the companies' marketing strategy. Based on the earlier literature (e.g. Cothrel 2000; Szmigin and Reppel 2004; Szmigin, Canning and Reppel 2005), one of the common objectives for building company online communities is to enhance relationships with customers. Creating long-term customer relationships has become an even more central issue in companies as technology has opened new possibilities but also because of the new challenges caused by the changed customer behaviour as well as the ever tightening competition (Parvatiyar and Seth 2001; Sisodia and Wolfe 2000).

Although online communities have been studied in many disciplines, little attention has been paid to approaching them from the relationship marketing perspective. Because of the characteristics of relationships in online communities, especially because of their voluntariness and easiness to end, it is suggested that attraction is an important element in relationships, not only as a first stage in relationships, but in all stages in relationship life cycles. Therefore, this study concentrates on studying the attraction of company online communities and emphasises the role of ongoing attraction in the relationships between members and online communities.

It is also suggested that other elements in a relationship; for example loyalty, trust and commitment, have a smaller role in relationships with online communities than in traditional relationships between suppliers and customers. However, this does not mean that customer loyalty cannot be developed, but rather suggests that instead of exploring bonding (Szmigin and Reppel 2004; Szmigin et al. 2005), for example, it is important to start by exploring attraction to understand the factors that attract members. After identifying the attraction factors, it is easier to start considering how commitment or loyalty may be built in online communities.

When considering attraction in relationship marketing studies, attraction has been considered as a part in a three-bond model as Figure 1 illustrates (Halinen 1994b, pp. 3-4). The three-bond model consists of attraction, trust and commitment, which are dependent on each other. According to Halinen (1994b) there is a link between attraction and trust as attraction creates trust and vice versa. Similarly, attraction and commitment are linked as well.

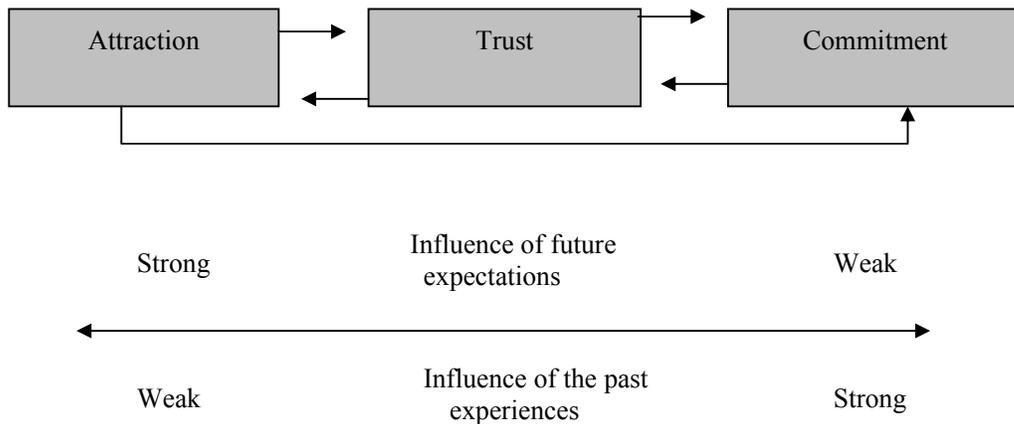


Figure 1. The three-bond model (Halinen 1994b, p. 4)

Attraction has also been seen as an engine in stimulating investment initiatives, and increasing investments in a relationship also being a very future-oriented concept. Alternatively, the lack of attraction and effort can lead to the low commitment and relationship dissolution. (Halinen 1994b, p. 3-4)

In conclusion, given the suggested role of attraction in initiating, developing and maintaining exchange relationships, the lack of studies within relationship marketing is surprising. Furthermore, earlier studies and literature are mainly focused on studying attraction in b-to-b relationships while this study also concerns b-to-c relationships. Since online communities are a good example of how technology has enabled to use relationship marketing also in b-to-c context, three of the four cases in this study are b-to-c communities.

The focus of the study is illustrated in Figure 2. The empirical environment of this case study is formed of such company online communities that are used in enhancing relationship marketing. Since relationships are the object of interest in relationship marketing as well as a key concept in forming online communities, the study focuses on exploring relationships in company online communities.

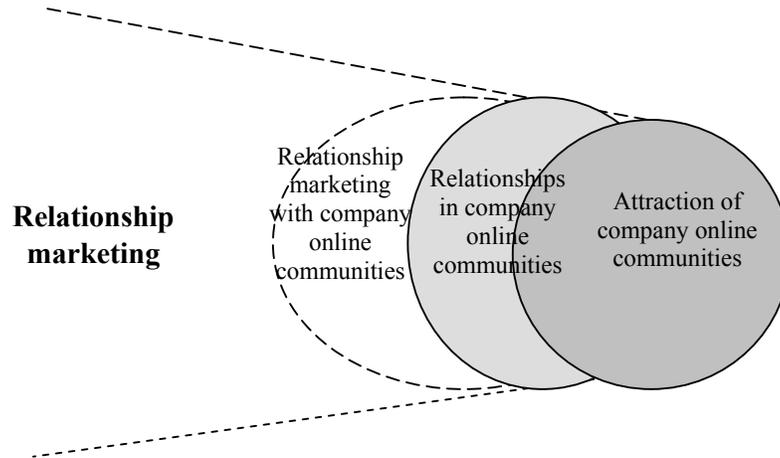


Figure 2. The focus of the study

The study suggests that the concept of attraction is in a central role understanding why these relationships are established and maintained, and therefore, attraction of company online communities is chosen as a focus of the present study.

1.2 The purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to identify and analyse attraction of different company online communities from a relationship marketing perspective.

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following questions are answered:

- 1 How can company online communities be classified?
- 2 What kind of relationships can be identified in company online communities?
- 3 What kind of company online communities' attraction factors can be identified?

Two participants in company online communities, namely maintainers and members, are studied to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Since there is a lack of coherent classification of company online communities in the relationship marketing area, the first research question explores what kind of

company online communities there are and how they can be classified. To be able to answer the research question a multidisciplinary literature review is needed.

Then, to be able to understand attraction in relationships, it is considered important to identify what kind of relationships there are in company online communities, which is also the second research question. To answer this question the relationship model is constructed.

Finally, the third research question explores the attraction factors of company online communities. As a result, the main contribution of this study, the attraction model is constructed. Because of the abductive nature of the study, the model is built on the basis of the empirical evidence as well as using the earlier studies. Each attraction factor is discussed and exemplified by using citations from the collected data. In addition, to obtain a deeper insight into this phenomenon, the differences and similarities in the case online communities maintainers' and members' views on the attraction factors are compared to find out if there are remarkable differences between them. In addition to comparing maintainers' and members' views, the multiple cases of the study enable comparing differences and similarities of attraction factors between the cases. These comparisons increase knowledge about how the factors vary in different company online communities. As a result of this study two models of company online communities' attraction offerings are presented as well. The aim of these models is to shed light on what kind of attraction offerings there can be by utilising examples of different kind of existing online communities.

1.3 Limitations

There are some limitations, in other words topics or areas that are left out from this study. Although online communities are a multidisciplinary phenomenon and the definitions used in this study derive from various disciplines, this study is made from the relationship marketing perspective. For example approaching the phenomenon from the motivation theory (e.g. Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo 2004; Hars and Ou 2002; McKenna and Bargh 1999; McKenna and Green 2002) is not the perspective of this study, however, these studies are utilised in creating preunderstanding. This study explores the attraction derived from the online community, which is a rather unexisting area in literature.

Other related concepts – such as trust and commitment – are excluded from this study, however, it is admitted that the attraction model may include the same factors that can be found when studying those concepts in company online community environment.

Although the study identifies relationships in company online communities, it is limited to exploring between whom or what relationships are formed and attraction in those relationships. In other words, other issues considering the nature of relationships are excluded. Although it is not empirically explored whether the respondents themselves feel as being a member or a customer,

visitors of online communities are labelled as members in this study. In the eyes of other participants in online communities everyone is a member, and therefore, using the term member was considered as the best choice.

Moreover, since the context of the present study consists of company online communities, the concept member may refer to consumers or business customers of maintaining companies. For this reason also the term *customer* is used as a synonym for the term member, especially in contexts where the company perspective is stressed.

Further, with the term *company online community* this study refers to online communities that are maintained by companies. The present study concentrates only on company online communities that emerge on the Internet, not online communities in extranets or intranets.

The researcher takes the viewpoint of an outsider or a spectator of the focal phenomenon. The terms *maintainer* and *member* are used to refer to participants in the company online communities. In this study, the maintainers of the case companies are also the owners of the web sites where online communities are formed.

The empirical study comprises of three Finnish company online communities using Finnish as their language and one company online community that is global and uses English.

1.4 Key concepts of the study

Online communities, company online communities and *attraction* are the central concepts of the study, which are introduced next with the relevant literature streams of the study.

From a very early age, people move in groups: from the playgroup to the weekly drink with retired friends, social companionship is a key factor of human life. The communities have been studied by the fields of social psychology and anthropology for decades and their characteristics are rather well known (see e.g. Carrol and Rosson 1997; Napier and Gershenfeld 1993).

Indeed, when we look to sociology for a definition of community, we notice that sociologists have defined and redefined the concept for more than 50 years (Wellman 1982). Community was a prominent concern of the social theorists, scientists, and philosophers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the interest has been continued among contemporary scientists (In Muniz and O'Guinn 2001: e.g. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler and Tipton 1985; Boorstin 1973; Etzioni 1993; Lasch 1991; Wellman 1979). In fact, for a century and a half communities have been a subject of political, religious, scholarly and popular discussion. The main concerns have been the changing role of the community in people's everyday life, market capitalism and consumer culture. (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001)

Just as numerous definitions have been put forward for the term *community*, there many definitions for the concept of online community, too. Licklider and

Taylor (1968) were the first sociologists who began to explore whether communities could appear in the web environment as well. They described the phenomenon as follows:

In most fields they will consist of geographically separated members, sometimes grouped in small clusters and sometimes working individually. They will be communities not of common location but common interest.

One of the best-known definitions of online communities is probably made by Rheingold (1993, 2000) who argues that:

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.

In his definition, Rheingold, as many other authors, emphasises the importance of *meaningful relationships*. These meaningful relationships can emerge between members or also between members and representatives of the company. Figallo (1998, pp. 16-17) suggests that “the feeling of togetherness, familiarity, rituals and relationships act as bonds, which makes the social connectedness even stronger over time.” Furthermore, in earlier literature, online communities are conceived as groups of two or more individuals, each aware of his or her membership in the group, as well as to the positive interdependence as they strive to achieve *mutual goals* (Johnson and Johnson 1987).

Since defining such a multifaceted phenomenon as online communities has been challenging, Cothrel (1999) approached the problem by asking the members of 15 different online communities to tell what the community meant them. Cothrel (1999) summarised all the comments in a sentence as he said that an online community is “a group of people willing and able to help one another”.

In general, the definitions of online communities reflect a disciplinary perspective. In other words, some people view online communities as a social phenomenon, while others focus on the structure of the supporting software. (Andrews, 2001; Preece 2000, 2001) For example, from the technological perspective, some of the web developers argue that an online community is member-created content stored in a database and related to stories, segments of websites and general discussion areas (Nielsen 2000). Further, sociologists stress the social perspective when defining community as a set of social relationships and an online community as a network with a particular set of characteristics that uses computer support as the basis of communication among its members (Wellman 1997). Some of the e-commerce entrepreneurs, alternatively, take a very broad view of community as they see that any communications software that can be added to the website is regarded as an online community (Whitworth and de Moor 2003). Finally, business people approach an online community within the framework of alluring new customers, increasing sales and building and enhancing customer relationships (Hagel and Armstrong 1997; Werry 2000).

Some of the most known previous classifications and definitions of online communities are gathered in Table 1.

Table 1. *Earlier classifications and definitions of online communities*

In Table 1, the perspectives of Cothrel (1999; 2000), Warms, Cothrel and Underberg (2000), Hagel and Armstrong (1997) and Klang and Olsson (1999)

Author	Definition / Important elements of online communities	Classification of online communities	Main emphasis
Andrews (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Online communities consist of three elements: trust and the nature of computer-mediated communication, online community implementation, the impact of economics 	Traditional, audience-centric	Computer-mediated communication and the impact of economics
Cothrel (1999; 2000); Warms, Cothrel and Underberg (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Online communities are groups of businesses, customers, or employees with common interests interacting via the Internet 	Consumers, business customers or partners and employees	The active management and the community programmes
Hagel and Armstrong (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – People have four reasons to join: interest, relationship, fantasy and transactions – Distinctive focus as to membership, emphasis on member-generated content, choice among competing vendors, commercially motivated community organisers 	Consumer-focused and B-to-B-focused	The economical benefits of online communities
Kim (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Important elements: purpose, places, profiles, roles, leadership programme, etiquette, events, rituals, subgroups 	Geographic, demographic, topical, activity-based	Building process
Klang and Olsson (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Needs to have an effective infrastructure, active membership 	Non-profit and profit, non-company and company	The classification of online communities
Preece (2000, 2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – An online community consists of people, purpose, policies, computer systems – Any virtual space where people come together to get and give information or support, to learn or to find company 	No two communities are the same	Sociability and usability
Schubert and Ginsburg (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Online communities describe the union between individuals or organisations who share common values and interests using electronic media to communicate within a shared semantic space on a regular basis 	Community of interest and network community	The concept of online communities, communities of transaction
Rheingold (1993, 2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Online communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace 	Commercial, non-commercial	Human relationships

approach the phenomenon from the business perspective, which is the object of interest in this study.

To understand the phenomenon of online communities it is also essential to differentiate online communities from virtual groups or virtual teams. Online communities differ in three dimensions. Firstly, virtual teams are formed to solve specific problems or tasks, as online communities focus on relationship development in real life. Secondly, online communities are spontaneously shaped by people with similar interests, while virtual teams or groups are organised by specific organisations. Thirdly, online communities may exist a very long time, as long as people share similar interests, but virtual teams usually dissolve after the task is finished or the problem is solved. (Li 2004)

Nevertheless, all websites with online discourse are not considered as online communities (Erickson 1997). Some sites are just places for people to meet without any sense of community or permanence among the members. For example, such chat rooms where single people want to meet other single people and none returns on a regular basis can not be regarded as online communities (Jones 1997).

Even though the term *virtual community* is used popularly (Rheingold 1993, 2000), the term *virtual* might misleadingly imply that these communities are less *real* than physical communities (Jones 1997; Whitworth and de Moor 2003). Yet, as Kozinets (1998, p. 366) points out, “these social groups have a *real* existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behaviour, including consumer behaviour” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). To maintain the useful distinction of computer-mediated social gathering, the term *online communities* is used in this study to refer to these Internet-based forums.

In this study the interest lies in such online communities which are aimed for enhancing companies’ relationship marketing. These online communities are named as *company online communities*. The literature considering this research area is incoherent, lacking some central assumptions and fixed definitions. In this study the following definition is used. *A company online community is maintained by a company sharing a common interest and interacting via information and communications technologies* (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003). In this context, *a common interest* refers to all kind of interests, for example a hobby or similar life situation. Although the maintainers may participate in the activities in company online communities, their interests usually differ from the members’ interests. The maintainers of these communities seek direct or indirect profit for the company in either the short or long term. (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003)

The studies in this area have focused on customer bonding with online communities (Szmigin and Reppel 2004; Szmigin et al. 2005) as well as building and utilising brand communities in creating and enhancing relationships with consumers (Andersen 2005; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002; McWilliam 2000; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

As online communities in general are a multifaceted phenomenon, they have been studied from multiple perspectives and disciplines. To mention some of the

discussed topics, marketing scholars have stressed the consumer behaviour perspective and tribalism (e.g. Kozinets 1999), the use of online communities as a source of customer information and development of new products (e.g. Bickart and Schindler 2001; Füller and Mühlbacher 2004; Pitta and Fowler 2005a; Pitta and Fowler 2005b), building and management processes of online communities (e.g. Figallo 1998; Kim 2000; Kozinets 1999; Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003), economic leverage and new business possibilities of online communities (e.g. Balasubramanian and Mahajan 2001; Hagel and Armstrong 1997; Dyson 1997).

Information sciences have stressed the online community design and usability (e.g. Preece 2000, 2001), unique characteristics of the digital environment (e.g. Danet, Ruedenberg, and Rosenbaum-Tamari 1998; Walther 1996) and classifications of online communities (e.g. Schubert and Ginsburg 2000).

Sociology, social psychology, psychology as well as marketing have stressed the group dynamics (e.g. McKenna and Green 2002), motivations (e.g. Dholakia et al. 2004; Hars and Ou 2002; McKenna and Bargh 1999; Mc Kenna and Green 2002), relationship formation (e.g. McKenna, Green and Gleason 2002), social networks (e.g. Wellman 1997; Wellman and Gulia 1999; Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia and Haythornthwaite 1996) and virtual identity (e.g. Dholakia and Bagozzi 2004) in the context of online communities.

Furthermore, researchers from different disciplines have stressed learning (e.g. Constant, Sproull and Kiesler 1996; DeSanctis, Fayard, Roach and Jiang 2003; Kozinets 1998, 2002) as well as the use of new methods, such as ethnography, or in fact *netnography*, in research (e.g. Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel 2003; Kozinets 2002; Witmer, Colman and Katzman 1999) and getting marketing information (Maclaran and Catterall 2002).

Another central concept of this study, namely the concept of attraction has been studied in relationship marketing (e.g. Halinen 1994a; Halinen 1994b; Harris, O'Malley and Patterson 2003; Perry 1998) where it has been defined as a company's interest in exchange with another based on the economic and social rewards-cost outcomes expected from a relationship over time (Halinen 1994a, p. 76). Attraction offers important insights into how and why the nature of relationships changes over time (Harris et al. 2003). Even though, the importance of attraction is recognised by many authors (e.g. Halinen 1994a; Halinen 1994b; Perry 1998), there seems to be a lack of studies considering especially consumer relationship marketing.

Attraction has also been a topic within other fields of marketing as well as psychology and social psychology (e.g. Byrne 1971; Campbell, Graham, Jolibert and Meisner 1988; Eskola 1984; O'Shaughnessy 1971-1972), which have been an additional influence of the study.

Drawn from the literature review, attraction is seen in this study as *an online community's ability to draw members*. Moreover, since this study explores the attraction based on how members themselves perceive it, this study examines members' *perceived attraction*.

However, despite the fact that online communities have existed more than 25 years, little scholarly research has been focused on exploring relationships

between members and maintainers in company online communities. Yet in the field of psychology and consumer behaviour there are some studies considering the members' motivations to participate in online communities. (e.g. Dholakia et al. 2004; Hars and Ou 2002; McKenna and Bargh 1999; McKenna and Green 2002). However, in these studies the dyadic approach, including both the members' and the maintainers' perspectives, is more or less ignored. Since the earlier studies have approached the problem from the member's perspective, this study brings the dyadic perspective considering relationships where attraction occurs. Also as a difference between the studies made in psychology, this study focuses on the factors that are expressed by the members and does not aim at interpreting the motivations behind them. However, earlier studies produce valuable information and they have been taken into account in the present study in both phases, in preunderstanding and analysis.

The relevant streams of academic and practical discussion are presented in Figure 3. In the centre of the figure are the central conceptual streams of the study, namely attraction and online communities focusing especially on company online communities.

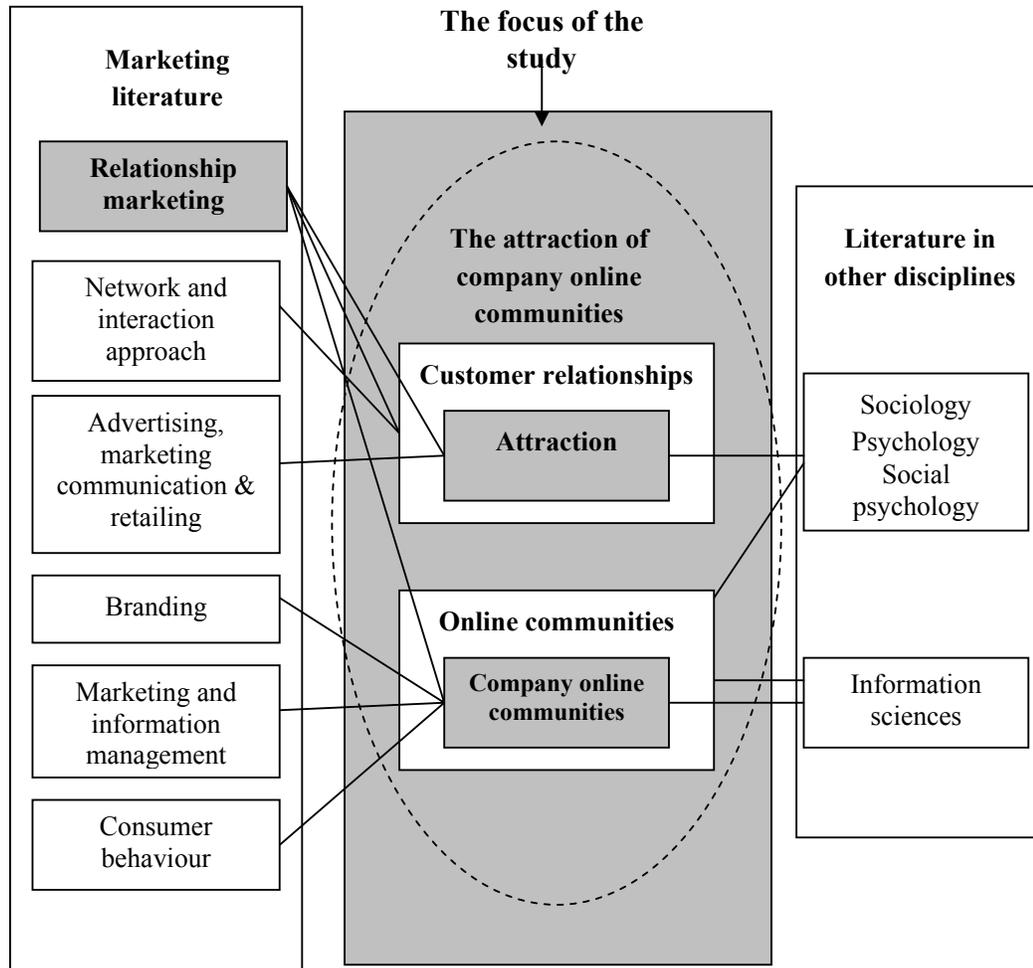


Figure 3. Central concepts and relevant literature streams influencing the study

Customer relationships, attraction, online communities and company online communities have been studied in different research traditions in marketing, which are depicted on the left side of the figure. Customer relationships have been object of interest in the interaction approach (IMP) as well as in relationship marketing, where also attraction has been studied in order to understand why customers create and maintain relationships with companies in the first place. In addition to these studies, attraction has been studied from different perspectives in advertising, marketing communication as well as in retailing. In these studies the focus has more or less been on attracting consumers to buy a product.

Online communities and especially company online communities have been object of interest in branding, marketing and information management as well as in consumer behaviour. Since the area is multidisciplinary, the right side of the figure presents other disciplines that have been interested in this research area.

Both attraction and online communities have been studied in sociology, psychology and social psychology. Furthermore, online communities and company online communities have been studied in information sciences.

The aimed contribution of this study is to describe and analyse company online communities' attraction and to contribute in marketing as well as in the multidisciplinary field. However, a special attention in creating contribution is in relationship marketing, which is also the lens through which this study is conducted.

The attraction is studied in company online community context in the present study; however, the results may be limitedly generalised to online communities maintained by non-profit organisations. The fact is that nature of the relationships does not depend on who maintains the community. However, the role and objectives of the maintainer may be stressed in this study because of the company online community context.

1.5 The structure of the report

This study is an embedded multiple case study with four cases. As the study utilises abductive logic consisting of the continuous dialogue between the empirical and the theoretical world, different phases are intertwined into each other. However, aiming at creating a logical presentation of the study, the report is structured in a more traditional way, beginning from discussion of the earlier literature and continuing with methodological considerations, the empirical findings and ending with contributions.

The report begins with the introduction chapter including the background of the research, the theoretical perspective of the research, the purpose of the study and the limitations of the study. Chapter one aims at presenting the starting points for the study.

Chapter two is devoted to the discussion of company online communities including definitions and earlier studies in this area. This discussion is necessary in order to gain profound understanding about different types of company online communities. At the end of the chapter as a synthesis of the earlier studies and the pilot study conducted, the classification of company online communities is presented. Therefore, the first research question considering the classification is answered.

In chapter three the theoretical domain of the study, relationship marketing, is presented. After that the concept of attraction is presented as well as the earlier studies concerning attraction. At the end of this chapter earlier studies of the reasons for why members visit online communities are discussed.

In chapter four the methodological considerations are done. The aim of this is to give the readers a wide picture about how the study has been done. The chapter consists of the methodology including philosophical considerations about the researcher's position and perspectives as well as the theoretical paradigms. After that, the research path and research strategy are depicted. Then,

the case study method as well as the collection and analysis of the empirical data are briefly presented. Also the cases are presented in this chapter.

Chapter five begins with presenting the main contributions of this study, the relationship model and the attraction model, and hence answers the second and the third research questions. The model is constructed as a synthesis of the empiria and earlier studies. Then each attraction factor in this model is discussed considering the findings on the earlier literature as well as the findings of the cases. The chapter ends with comparing attraction factors in and between the cases and presenting and discussing two models of attraction offerings.

Chapter six starts by presenting the attraction model, the main result of the study to help readers to follow the further discussion of the results. After that the factors in the model are discussed by using the cases as examples. Then the factors compared between the maintainers' and members' views as well as between the cases. Finally two models of attraction offerings are constructed and the findings are discussed. Due to the abductive nature of this study, the results are discussed and compared with the earlier studies.

In chapter seven, conclusions are drawn. After that, the contributions and the criteria for evaluating the quality of the study are discussed. Finally, possible future research paths are considered.

2 COMPANY ONLINE COMMUNITIES

This chapter begins with scrutinising the concept of company online communities starting with the concept of community, the sense of community and the concept online community. Then, the definitions, characteristics and classifications of company online communities are discussed. After that, the report considers the value and the management of company online communities. Finally, before presenting the relationship model of company online communities the cases of the study are presented.

2.1 The concept of company online communities

2.1.1 The concept and sense of community

The concept of community

In general, early sociologists have believed that modernity destroys community. In fact, society has often been defined in opposition to community and these two words have been used as antonyms to each other. Tonnies' 1887 classic *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (roughly, Community and Society) made the clear division between these two terms by depicting the community as customary, familiar, emotional and rural. On the contrary, he found the society as mechanical, individualistic, rational and urban. His discourse was aimed to point out that the natural community has been replaced by an urban and modern society, which causes disconnectedness, lack of norms and dislocation.

If we further look at the definitions of the term *community*, we will see that most definitions stress the same aspects: a social grouping with shared spatial relations, social conventions, a sense of membership and boundaries, and an ongoing rhythm of social interaction (Schlichter, Koch and Chengmao 1998).

The sense of community and social identity are closely related concepts to communities and online communities, and therefore they are discussed in this chapter. In studying communities it is essential to understand how individual people feel about their social environment, and if they consider it as a community that they are part of.

In essence, the general concept of communities is essential to gather people and make them communicate. Indeed, as Kelly (1998) stated that “Communication is the foundation of society, of our culture, of our humanity, of our own individual identity, and of all economic systems.” Communication between people, naturally enough, is an essential part of online communities, and it is this key element which can be said to distinguish the new interactive media from the traditional push media (Chaffey 2004). In online communities the power has moved to people who actively communicate in the web (Dye 2001; Searls and Weinberger 2000).

The sense of community and social identity

Sarason (1976) defined the psychological sense of community as a sense of mutual responsibility and purpose; a feeling of being a part of a group one can depend on and contribute to. According to him, the sense of community has to do with the affinity of community members; they feel that they belong together, are similar with each other and like one another.

Tajfel (1981) defined social identity as that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group, together with the value and the emotional significance of that membership. Therefore, the concept of social identity is closely related to the sense of community. In their social identity theory, Tajfel and Turner (1986) suggested that in seeking self-enhancement or positive self-identity, individuals characteristically categorise people so that they favour members of the group to which they themselves feel they belong. Social identity is based on the human capability of perceiving something that relates to us in symbols and language (Kaunismaa 1997). This capability is the same whether the individual is in a real social environment or in an online environment. People having a sense of community are also more likely to cooperate, feel a stronger need to agree with group opinions, perceive in-group messages to be of higher quality and conform more in both behaviour and attitude (Nass, Fogg and Moon 1995).

Social identity can be manipulated with minimal cues (e.g. group members wear similar badges), at least in real life and in small groups. It also is possible to induce a psychological group formation between a human and a computer (Nass et al. 1995), a fact that emphasises the ease and flexibility of group identity formation. Even though communities are larger formations than groups, it is still very likely that the sense of social identity can be identified in a community of people who interact via the Web. (Kyröläinen 2001)

However, it is hard to define if someone is a member of an online community. Visitors often become attached to their communities and visit them often (Hiltz and Wellman 1997). Sometimes, they become so dependent upon the community that they can be described as addicted (Hiltz 1984). According to Smith (1999), an online community is generally understood to consist of persistently interacting members. Likewise Figallo (1998) suggested that online communities are those where ”members feel being part of a larger social group, sense an interwoven web of relationships with other members, have ongoing

exchanges with other members of commonly valued things, and have lasting relationships with others.”

Nevertheless, according to recent literature also lurkers i.e. silent members have to be considered a part of the community (e.g. Katz 1998; Mason 1999; Nonnecke 2000; Nonnecke, Preece and Andrews 2004; Nonnecke, Preece, Andrews and Voutour 2004). Therefore, the sense of community can be seen as the most important measurement in assessing if someone is a member of the community.

2.1.2 The history of online communities

Online communities are dated as far back as to the early seventies when the first newsgroups emerged on the Internet. At first, these groups consisted of researchers with a common interest in research and also a need for cooperation. At approximately the same time the first multi-user dungeons (MUDs) appeared in Great Britain. A MUD is a virtual world where people play different types of role playing games in an imaginative environment. They can also associate with other people, exchange ideas etc. By 1980 email capabilities had developed significantly. Bulletin boards were regularly used and Finger and WHOIS programs were developed to help people find email addresses. These improvements of the initial communication tools were done due to demand of the users. Once they were sufficiently developed and enough structure existed users began to form a community. (Balasubramanian and Mahajan 2001; Klang and Olsson 1999; Preece 2000; Rheingold 2000)

More recently, the early static web sites that appeared in the mid 1990's have shifted to highly interactive web sites allowing the communication not only between the site and the visitors but also between visitors. As a result, online communities have swiftly appeared on the World Wide Web. As both the numbers of online community sites and visitors have grown quickly; both the popular press and researchers of different sciences have become interested in them as a subject of study. (Ridings and Gefen 2004)

Online community sites are said to be one of the fastest growing category of web sites (Wingfield and Hanrahan 1999). Already in 1999 Gross stated that there are over 25 million members of online communities. In 2001 the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that 90 million American have participated in an online group (Horrigan, Rainie and Fox 2001)

The rapid evolution of technology has influenced the development of online communities significantly. The first bulletin boards were based on the metaphor of physical bulleting boards. Nowadays people are able to send messages to the boards where they are displayed in various ways. Usually the messages are threaded so that the first message is in the beginning of the thread and later responses are stacked beneath the first one. During the last ten years, services have developed rapidly enabling visitors to use advanced search facilities, create own profiles with personal data and pictures, see other people's profiles, have private conversations and use avatars, for example. In addition to asynchronous

communication technologies such as discussion forums (bulleting boards), where messages can be read and responded to hours, weeks or months later, also synchronous services that require communication partners to be co-present online, have been added. These synchronous services include chat systems, instant messaging and texting systems. (Preece, Maloney-Krichman and Abras 2003).

To mention some of the first most popular online communities, Usenet was established in 1980, as a distributed Internet discussion system, and it became the initial online community where volunteer moderators and votetakers contributed. The WELL (www.well.com) was a pioneering online community established in 1985. Many users voluntarily contributed to community building and maintenance (e.g. as conference hosts). The Well gained popularity through Rheingold's books depicting it from the viewpoint of the member (Rheingold 1993; 2000). The Well is originally located in the San Francisco Bay area but nowadays members come from all over the world. AOL (www.aol.com) is the largest of the online service providers, with chat rooms voluntarily moderated by community leaders. Slashdot (<http://Slashdot.org>) is a popular technology-related forum, with articles and readers' comments. The Slashdot subculture has become well known in the Internet circles. Users accumulate a *karma score* and volunteer moderators are selected from those with high scores. Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) is now the largest encyclopedia in the world. Its editors, who voluntarily publish and revise articles, have formed an intricate and multi-faceted community.

Nowadays online communities appear in a variety of media, which were gradually integrated into single environments, for example graphical, three dimensional environments such as the Habbo Hotel (<http://www.habbohotel.com/>), a virtual hotel, where people can meet friends and furnish their own rooms. Also highly sophisticated gaming worlds, for example Battlefield (<http://www.ea.com/official/battlefield/1942/us>), Counter-Strike (www.counter-strike.net) and Unreal Tournament (www.unrealtournament.com) have attracted a big amount of enthusiastic users. In these games, users may conduct at least two kinds of actions almost simultaneously: play and chat with each other. Furthermore, one of the most popular community technologies is MP3, which makes it possible to facilitate distribution and sharing music. This technology has created online communities where visitors may effectively share and get the newest music, pc-games and console games free. However, the development has also increased the demands of the users' technology. Users need to have computers with fast processors, effective display controllers, large memories and high-bandwidth Internet connections.

The biggest Finnish online community is called IRC-Gallery (irc-galleria.net/) having over 365.000 registered users and reaching almost 25 % of the Finnish people. The IRC-gallery started as a photo gallery for Internet Relay Chat users in 2000, but nowadays it offers a wide variety of services offered including a discussion forums. IRC-gallery has 20 moderators and it is maintained by Dynamoid Oy. Another popular Finnish company online

community is Suomi24.fi (www.suomi24.fi), which is a company-owned online community offering a very wide variety of discussion forums on its sites. These forums get more than 10 000 messages daily, which include discussions about other companies' products as cars, computer games, movies etc. Actually these kinds of giant online communities consist of many subonline communities that are formed under the discussion topics.

2.1.3 *The history and definition of company online communities*

As online communities became very popular, companies discovered the possibilities they have to offer. In the beginning, the Internet was not aimed for commercial purposes, but soon after it reached popularity with masses of users, the commercialisation began. This first step for companies was to create an online presence (Klang and Olsson 1999). The main idea was to have a website so that customers would be able to find a company. As the information on the Internet increased, having a URL was not enough to attract customers and portals and malls were established offering several services. In the long term however, this was still not enough to tempt customers to enter. To solve this problem, many companies started to develop online communities (Holmström 2000).

In the mid 1990's, a new community-hype was generated as the economic aspects of online communities were discussed. One of the most famous books in this field was written by consultants Hagel and Armstrong and was called *Net Gain* (Hagel and Armstrong 1997). According to them, the implementation of community-platforms, where people could communicate products or services, provides valuable information about customers' attitudes and their preferences for companies. Therefore, online communities could be useful for market research and the creation of new and customised products or services which then would lead to increased customer loyalty and revenues for the companies (Hagel and Armstrong 1997).

If there were many terms that were used about online communities, various terms are also used when speaking about company online communities. The terms *b-web* (Tapscott, Ticoll and Lowy 2000), *business community* (e.g. Schubert and Ginsburg 2000), *business-oriented online community* (Cothrel 1999; 2000), and *commercially based online community* (Andrews 2001) are widely used. Yet, there is some confusion with the use of these terms, because with these terms some writers refer to online communities that are aimed for only direct commercial purposes as increasing sales in the companies' web stores. Controversially, this study suggests that the definition should include all kind of company-maintained online communities aimed for acquiring new customers, increasing efficiency, making new innovations, and building stronger relationships, for example. (Cothrel 2000)

In the first pilot study before this study, thirty company-maintained online communities were studied (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003). Based on this study it is suggested that in many cases the aim of the communities is not to generate

direct incomes, but to enhance customer relationships and attract potential customers. In turn, the business logic of the maintaining company can be further divided into at least three different business logics that affect the nature and purposes of an online community: a dot-com company, a traditional bricks and mortar company or a media company. (Klang and Olsson 1999; see also Chaffey 2004; Turban, King, Lee, Warkenting and Chung 2002). The term dot-com company refers to a company that only exists on the Internet. In contrast, a bricks and mortar company represents a traditional company, while media companies like the BBC or the Finnish MTV, are in a class of their own because of the importance of their online communities. In their online communities, members may discuss the news, television programmes, and also other topics.

Yet even though company online communities are quite a heterogeneous group because of the different backgrounds and purposes of the maintaining companies, they have homogenous elements such as discussion forums and the same kind of rules. Indeed, Mittilä's and Mäntymäki's (2003) study proposed that the services offered on a community's website are the dynamic synthesis of the supplier's business logic, the purpose of the community and the people participating in that community.

Finally, by defining company online communities, it should be taken into account that although companies often state that they *own* their online communities, this term is misleading because of the characteristics of online communities that are formed around members. For this reason online communities can not be owned but rather maintained. As stated earlier, the following definition is used in this study. *A company online community is maintained by a company sharing a common interest and interacting via information and communications technologies.* In this context, *a common interest* refers to all kind of interests, for example a hobby or similar life situation. Although the maintainers may participate in the activities in company online communities, their interests usually differ from the members' interests. The maintainers of these communities seek direct or indirect profit for the company in either the short or long term. (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003)

2.2 Earlier studies of company online communities

2.2.1 *The management of company online communities*

Management processes

In order to get a broader view on company online communities and understand the challenges of hosting online communities, the management of online communities is discussed briefly in this chapter. According to Forrester Research, 40 % of companies that have created online communities say that the most difficult challenge is not front-end design and implementation, but ongoing administration (Warms et al. 2000). According to Kozinets (1999), to be able to gain benefits through communities, companies have to develop strategic implications of the existence of different types of both online community and community participation. Contrasted with database-driven marketing, marketers should consider that customers are (1) more active and discerning, (2) are less accessible to one-to-one processes, and (3) provide a wealth of valuable cultural information.

Further, marketers should consciously develop strategies that effectively help them to target more desirable types of online communities and community members. One of the possible suggested strategies include: interaction-based segmentation, fragmentation-based segmentation, co-opting communities, and paying-for-attention marketing. According to Kozinets (1999) interaction-based segmentation is based on differentiating the types of interactions prevalent in a given community in order to recognise the differential opportunities and needs of devotees, insiders, minglers and tourists. Then, fragmentation-based segmentation divides the consumer groups to minor divisions who have something in common. Furthermore, online marketers do not speak to individuals, but to a group. Sharing important information with the most important members is called co-opting communities. Moreover, paying-for-attention marketing bridges one-to-one and communal online marketing by approaching members to one-to-one proposition but also offering some incentive by allowing a company to tell the message. (Kozinets 1999)

Warms et al. (2000, p. 1) suggest that an in-depth understanding of potential members, community programmes that engage members and technologies that support those programmes should be combined in aim to develop a successful online community. In addition to this, an online community needs ongoing administration. Furthermore, Szmigin et al. (2005, pp. 486-488) stress the importance of thinking about what kind of relationships should be formed. As well, Kim (2000, p. 3) pointed out that successful online communities should evolve to keep pace with the changing needs of members and maintainers. She has also created nine different practical strategies in aiming to develop successful,

sustainable communities. These strategies represent an architectural, system-oriented approach to community building that she calls as *social scaffolding*. The strategies are named as *purpose, places, profiles, roles, leadership, etiquette, events, rituals, and subgroups*.

Preece (2000) also sees that usability and sociality are in the central role in building online communities. Preece has also introduced a community-centred development model (CCD) that involves the members into design process and takes into account both usability and sociality. Furthermore, Warms et al. (2000) uses the term *active management* to describe a continuous process of managing, analysing and optimising community programmes over time. According to Mäntymäki and Mittilä (2004), active listening is an ongoing process for capturing information: member opinions, preferences, experiences, intentions, and needs. *Development* is the process of designing the specific community programmes that members will engage in. A single community often has many programmes that have their own objectives, tasks, tools, and technologies. Development includes both planning and implementation phases. According to Szmigin et al. (2005, p. 492), development can be monitored by tracking potential for delivering solutions, fostering of interaction, speed and reliability, accessibility, responsibility for interaction and personalisation.

Furthermore, *maintenance* consists of the daily processes that are conducted in a community to maintain the created programmes. Instead of speaking about control, Mäntymäki and Mittilä (2004, p. 100) used the term *evaluation* to depict measurement, reporting, analysis and other evaluation actions in an online community. Evaluation is an activity or a series of activities that comprise the formal and informal perceptions by the parties involved, and the assessment of the impact of the perceived objects(s) on the focal issue (Mittilä 2000). Further, measurement consists of the use of standardised metrics to gauge a community's progress and overall performance. Reporting ensures that data and insights are delivered in a manner that enables management action. Analysis includes combining the distillation of insights of the lessons learnt in hours of *in-community* time to key recommendations. In evaluation, insights gathered by active listening are combined with system data and other information to formulate the recommended actions. (see also Warms et al. 2000)

The membership management

As it was discussed earlier it is hard to define when someone is a member or not, Kim's (2000) strategy concerning membership management is briefly discussed next. She divided the membership life cycle into five successive stages: visitors, novices, regulars, leaders, and elders. While transforming from visitors into novices members pass some kind of membership ritual, for example registration. Similarly, between being a regular or a leader Kim (2000, p. 118) sees that there is some kind of ritual.

This kind of behaviour is familiar from traditional communities. Firstly, when a person comes to a new neighbourhood, for example, he or she does not know who to trust and how to behave. The visitor will either step in or step back.

Then, novices are eager to fit in and make friends, but they are not yet sure how things work. Some of the novices will stay alone whereas others will be drawn into community life and they will become regulars. Regulars who have time and energy to become officials will take leaders' places. While time passes some of these leaders become elders, who act as teachers, storytellers giving the place a sense of history, body and soul. As a conclusion, by supporting members in different life cycle stages, it is possible to encourage members to develop in a community life cycle. Such activities are, for example, creating a visitors centre including all the information newcomers need, rewarding regulars, empowering leaders, and honouring elders. (Kim 2000, p. 118)

2.2.2 The value of company online communities

The main objective for building company online communities is that both the members as well as the company gain some value through it. Therefore, it is important to consider values that company online communities may offer. The value is approached from the company's perspective in this chapter. As we speak of communities owned by companies there are always some kind of business objectives involved, which derive from companies' backgrounds.

One of the objectives of companies is to *increase revenues* (Cothrel 2000). However, despite the popularity of online communities and the strongly increasing number of community-members, many providers of online communities have faced problems in generating revenues through online communities (Zerdick, Picot and Schrape 2001, p. 171). Also measuring monetary benefits is difficult, because in many cases, benefits do not materialise in direct incomes but in some other way like long-term relationships with members.

The revenues may be gained for example through monthly fees of using the community as the Well does (Rheingold 1993, 2000; Wingfield and Hanrahan 1999). However, usually people are reluctant to pay for the access to an online community since the main part of them is free. Conversely, the fees from advertisements are increasingly expanding as the communities come more and more popular and the traffic on the websites increases (Bughin and Hagel 2000).

In addition, some online communities are integrated in the online store, which may increase the amount of sales with the help of the community (Brown, Tilton and Woodside 2002). If the online store is integrated with the online community, the community can enhance the product support, service delivery and enable more effective market segmentation (Armstrong and Hagel 1995; Walden 2000). Online communities integrated in the web store may increase the transaction fee revenue. Furthermore, companies may also get new revenues by selling advertisements to their websites. (Rothaermel and Sugiyama 2001; Schubert and Ginsburg 2000).

On the other hand, online communities are built to *enhance relationship marketing for companies*. In such online communities the aim is to create value for both the company and its customers. The value for the company is gained through creating additional value for customers. By additional value Gruen et al. (2005) refer to the value that is “value over and above the value that the customer receives directly through exchanges with the organisation.”

According to Gruen et al. (2005) additional value in online communities is created for customers through c-to-c knowledge exchange; from the sharing of physical, intellectual, emotional, or monetary resources as well as sharing experiences (see also Arnould and Price 1993; McAlexander et al. 2002)

Brand communities are examples of communities aimed at creating additional value for customers.

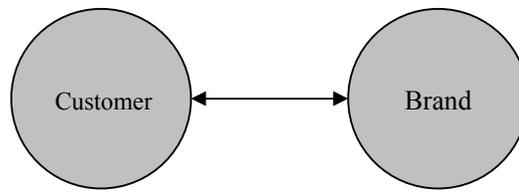
According to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), they are:

Legitimate forms of community, but communities of a particular stripe, and of their time. These communities may form around any brands with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition.

Some examples of these kind of communities are the Harley Davidson riders’ online communities (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), the Saab owners’ communities, and the MacIntosh members’ communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

McAlexander et al. (2002) extend Muniz and O’Guinn’s model of brand community triad to a more complex web of relationships and created a member-centric model of brand community. With this model they emphasise the role of member experience more than the brand as well as the dynamic nature of brand community. Figure 4 compares the traditional, Muniz and O’Quinn’s model with McAlexander et al.’s model.

Traditional model of customer-brand relationship



McAlexander et al.'s (2002) customer-centric model of brand community

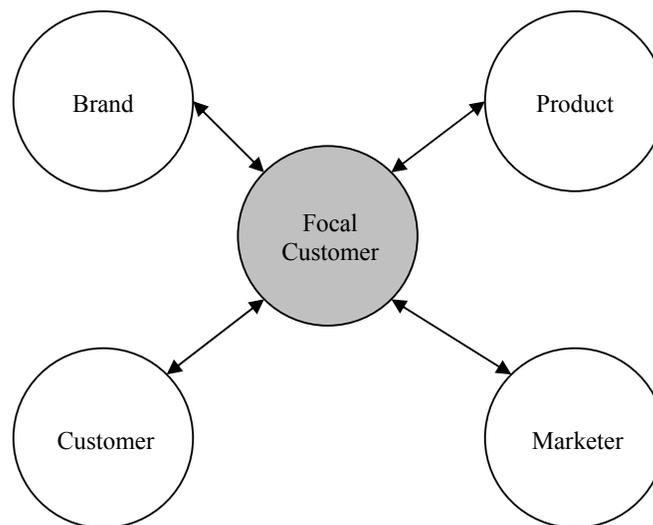


Figure 4. Key relationships in a brand community (McAlexander et al. 2002, p. 39)

Because brand communities widen the relationship with the brand to include other customers (Cross and Smith 1995), developing a strong brand community could help to actualise the concept of relationship marketing. Therefore, a successful brand community may lead to socially embedded and entrenched loyalty (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), brand commitment (Jacoby and Chestnut 1978; Keller 1993), and even to hyper-loyalty (McAlexander and Schouten 1998).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) stress that consumers are connected to other consumers through the benefit of the community. The community consists of social relationships, which clearly are the objectives of relationship marketing. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) brand community creates basically two types of relationships: between the company or brand and the consumers, and between the consumers. It is not always efficient or even possible for the company to maintain a one-to-one relationship with customers (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). The time spent developing a relationship may be taken away from the actual customer service (Gruen and Ferguson 1994; Iacobucci 1994).

Hence, company online communities carry out this kind of functions effectively, sharing information, encouraging members to serve each other, and providing a social structure between the company and the member.

Because members serve each other by exchanging knowledge, company online communities may also help companies to *reduce costs*, as the costs for customer service for example by telephone decrease (Cothrel 2000). In addition to, creating the value in c-to-c interaction, company online communities act as arenas, where value may be also created by enhancing the dialogue between the customers and maintainers. In an online community, where maintainers actively involve in discussions and answer the members' questions, also other members can see the answers, so an online community website also acts as a database for questions and answers. By increasing communication, online communities may help companies to forge closer ties with their most important constituencies, whether they are consumers, suppliers, distributors, resellers or other partners. (Gruen et al. 2005; see also Arnould and Price 1993; Cothrel 2000; McAlexander et al. 2002)

Another benefit that is hard to measure but is regarded as highly-effective can be positive *word-of-mouth* (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Herr Kardes and Kim 1991) or *word-of-mouth* (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2006) that can be spread by satisfied customers in online communities. On the other hand, online communities maintained by companies may also act negatively, for example when discussions attack against the company or when there are no discussions at all. Yet, though companies can moderate discussions in their own online communities, discussions in the other online communities on the Internet are totally out of companies' control.

To continue the list of company online communities' value, one benefit is that through online communities companies can gather *feedback* from customers. According to Sampson (1998) feedback can be active, passive or spontaneous. Feedback is called active if a customer is asked to give it. Passive feedback is collected for example through a permanent web form. If a customer writes a letter to a company, he gives spontaneous feedback.

All in all, information gathered through an online community is an invaluable *source of insight*, by virtue of their power to reveal needs, expectations, and opinions otherwise difficult to uncover. (Chaffey 2004, p. 402; Kozinets 1999; 2002; Warms et al. 2000, p. 2) To utilise these conversations, and all information that is gathered about customers' behaviour in an online community, companies create different types of databases and use software tools to personalise service for individual customers. As well as personalising their services, companies can use information gathered in service and product development.

Kozinets (2002) uses the term *netnography* to describe a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through electronic networks. Netnography uses the information publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant customer groups. Furthermore, by following the discussions companies may gain new innovations (Cothrel 2000; Fuller, and Mühlbacher 2004). *Community based innovation* is a

method that can utilise the existing innovative potential of online communities by integrating its members virtually into new product development.

Another side of the coin is that *customers learn* in online communities as they get and exchange information. Therefore, a management process of online communities includes maintaining and developing services and content to give members better possibilities to learn. Since the customers' learning process happens through discussions, learning is strongly dependant on the amount and the level of the discussions. Learning in online communities differs from many other situations as members may not share a common work task or goal. In many cases they are strangers that come together to discuss topics or have some actions, which are of mutual interest. (DeSanctis et al. 2003) To summarise this chapter, the value of company online communities is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. *The value of company online communities in literature*

The value of company online communities	Author(s)
Additional value through c-to-c knowledge exchange; from the sharing of physical, intellectual, emotional, or monetary resources as well as sharing experiences	Gruen et al. 2005; see also Arnould and Price 1993; McAlexander et al. 2002
Better product support and service delivery	Armstrong and Hagel 1995; Walden 2000
Company learning and getting customer information	Kozinets 1999; 2002, Warms et al. 2000; Hagel and Armstrong 1997
Customer bonding	Szmigin and Reppel 2004; Szmigin et al. 2005
Customer learning	DeSanctis et al. 2003
Higher advertising and transaction fee revenue	Rothaermel and Sugiyama 2001; Schubert and Ginsburg 2000
Increased website traffic	Bughin and Hagel 2000
Increased efficiency	Cothrel 2000
Innovations	Cothrel 2000; Fuller and Mühlbacher 2004
More effective market segmentation	Armstrong and Hagel 1995
New customers and increased sales	Brown et al. 2002; Cothrel 2000
Positive word-of-mouth	Bickart and Schindler 2001
Stronger brands	McAlexander, et al. 2002; McWilliam 2000; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001
Stronger relationships with customers	Cothrel 2000

Since company online communities may enhance creating and developing relationships with customers in many ways it may be suggested that company online communities can be used in enhancing companies’ relationship marketing. Online communities may be also used in *customer bonding* by enhancing relationships (Szmigin et al. 2005). Alternatively, company online communities act as a source of customer information, and therefore, they can also be considered as a tool of database marketing.

2.3 Classifying company online communities

2.3.1 Classifications of online communities and company online communities

The concepts of community and online community are closely related. In terms of social dynamics, there are many similarities in traditional and online communities: both involve developing a web of relationships among people who have something meaningful in common e.g. a hobby, a profession or a political cause (Kim 2000). On the other hand, online communities have some specific features.

Firstly, while in earlier times communities were bound to the limitations of time and space, these restrictions have been resolved by the global communication possibilities offered by the Internet. Secondly, people may never meet each other face to face contact. Thirdly, in the context of an online community people probably manifest themselves differently than in the context of meeting people physically due to the computer-mediated nature of online interactions. In addition, cues used in the traditional face to face interaction, such as nonverbal expressions, are filtered out, which elevates the importance of communication content (e.g. Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002; Kiesler and Sproull 1992; Postmes, Spears and Lea 1998; Walther 1996).

Fourthly, an online community differs from any other group that uses the same computer network by offering members the possibility to have many-to-many communication. Members can interact with one another not only on a one-on-one basis but also on a many-to-many basis. This means that by posting to a newsgroup, or sending a message to a discussion forum every member can speak to all other members. In addition to a discussion forum, where members can post their messages and others can read and reply, there are several kind of services used in communication.

Because of the multitude of different elements of online communities, the variety of different kind of online communities is wide as well. To be able to understand the variety of online communities, it is necessary to classify them at some level. Researchers have made classifications based on many different criteria, but still no typology has been considered beyond others. After reviewing several proposed typologies, Li (2004) concluded that none of the classifications or definitions of online community covers every aspect, or fit under every circumstance. However, establishing a common ground classification scheme would support the goal of facilitating interdisciplinary research agendas.

A well known online community classification was made by Schubert and Ginsburg (2000). They divided communities into two categories: based on the aspect of the underlying medium or from the perspective of the purpose they serve. From the view of the underlying medium, an Internet community is a network community, which evolves on the Internet. Furthermore, from the perspective of the purpose they speak of communities of interest and divide them further into leisure time communities, research communities and business

communities. Business communities may appear in the form of communities of commerce, communities of transaction and electronic malls. Leisure time communities may be oriented on gaming, binding relationships or fantasies. However, communities do not necessarily belong in only one category but they can be hybrids including elements from many categories as the cases in this study. Since company maintained online communities are the objective of the interest in this study, it has to be noted that these kind of communities may emerge in every category of the Schubert and Ginsburg's classification scheme.

Furthermore, Porter (2004) suggests a typology for online communities by first dividing them into two first-level categories: member-initiated and organisation-sponsored. According to Porter (2004) member-initiated communities are established and managed by members while organisation-sponsored communities are communities that are sponsored either by commercial or non-commercial (e.g. government, non-profit) organisations (see Laudon and Traver 2003). Porter (2004) stresses that these sponsoring organisations have key stakeholders and/or beneficiaries (e.g. customers) that are an inherent part of the sponsoring organisation's mission and goals. According to Porter (2004) at the second level of the typology, online communities are categorised based on the general relationship orientation of the community. Relationship orientation refers to the type of relationship fostered among members of the community. She suggested that member-initiated communities foster either social or professional relationships among members. Organisation-sponsored communities foster relationships both among members (e.g. customers, employees) and between individual members and the sponsoring organisation. However, it should be added to Porter's model that these relationships can either be social or professional as well.

As Szmigin et al. (2005) argued, companies have to develop appropriate relationships to meet the objectives set for their online communities. They present four possibilities for the organisation of an online community and the form of relationships based on different kind of communication, dialogue or information and whether the profit maximisation is a key objective. According to them, relationships may be content, customer, hobby or vendor focused.

Chaffey (2002, pp. 402-403) approached categorisation slightly differently as he suggests that depending on a market sector, an organisation has a choice of developing different types of communities for business-to-customers, communities of purpose, position, interest and communities of profession for business-to-business. Cothrel (2000) added to this list employee-to-employee communities, which can be a useful tool in companies' internal marketing.

Moreover, Dholakia and Bagozzi (2004) conceptualised online communities based on the distinction between network-based and small-group-based online communities. Furthermore, Porter (2004) divided the organisation-sponsored online communities into three categories: commercial, non-profit and government. Although Porter uses a term *commercial* online community, she includes all company-owned communities in the category.

One of the most known classification concerning company online communities is made by Hagel and Armstrong (1997, pp. 118-123) who

categorised company online communities to consumer-focused and business-to-business focused ones. In consumer-focused communities there are geographic, demographic and topical communities. Geographic communities consist of people sharing the same geographical location like the same city or suburb. Again, demographic communities gather people having the same demographical background as the same sex or life situation. Topical communities are constructed around people's common interests. Kim (2000, p. 5) added one more in this list: activity-based, defined by a shared activity, like shopping, investing, playing games, or making music. Furthermore, according to Hagel and Armstrong (1997, pp. 118-123), in the business-to-business area there are vertical industry, functional, geographic and business category communities.

Furthermore, Szmigin et al. (2005, p. 486) suggested that companies have to develop appropriate relationships to meet the objectives set for their online communities. They present four possibilities for the organisation of an online community and the form of relationships based on different kind of communication, dialogue or information and whether the profit maximisation is a key objective. According to them, relationships may be content, customer, hobby or vendor focused.

Preece (2000) listed the elements of which online communities are constructed, namely people who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles, such as leading or moderating; a shared purpose, such as interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community; policies, in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules, and laws that guide people's interactions and finally, there are computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness. Figure 5 illustrates the elements of an online community which are based on Preece's elements.

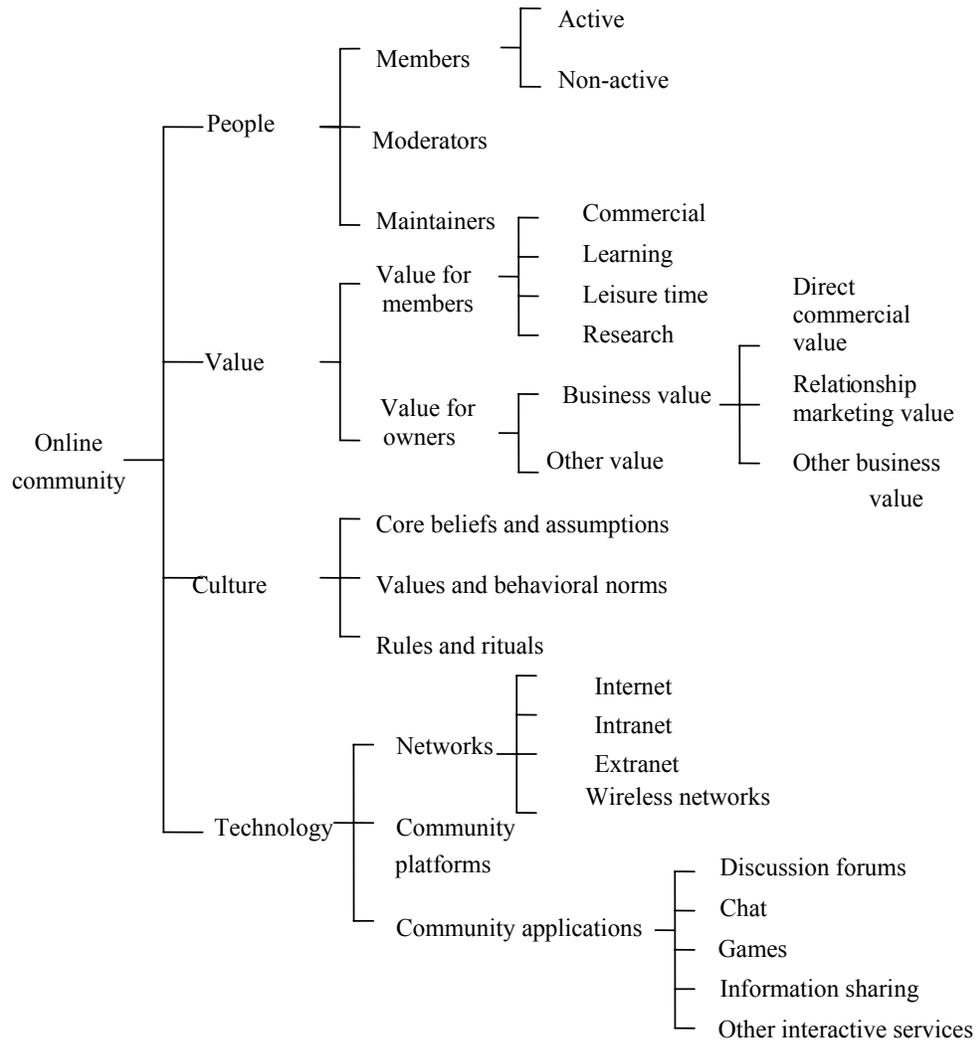


Figure 5. The elements of an online community (see also Preece 2000)

This study is based on Preece’s classification, and therefore, the elements are described more profoundly in the following.

People

By calling the first element as *people*, Preece refers to two parties in an online community: members and maintainers; there may, however, also be a third group of people, moderators, who are the supervisors of the discussions and usually work in the maintaining organisation, or may also be volunteers getting some compensation for their job. Moderators may also sometimes participate in discussions, but mainly an online community contains maintainer-published and member-generated content (Hagel and Armstrong 1997; Werry 2000). Thus

member-centred communication and member-to-member interaction can be considered central features in an online community.

Online communities can become true communities only if their members are supportive with each other and interact to meet their needs, not merely the needs of maintainers. (Andrews 2001) This means that the members, not the maintainers, generate the content of the site, email list or bulletin board (Chaffey 2004, p. 402). This also extends the members' roles from readers to publishers (Eisenhardt 1996). As a result, the members obtain increased power since they are able to create new relationships between the community maintainers and other members of the community (Andrews 2001). Yet, sometimes it is the maintainer who dictates the operation of the community. For this reason too, different kind of conflicts may arise between the maintainers and the members over community purpose, policies, and practices (Hagel and Armstrong 1997; Werry 2000). Due to member-generated content, the maintainer may also confront many kind of problems that make the management of the community very challenging.

While the main idea of online communities is based on content created by the members, the activity of members varies a lot. According to several studies (Katz 1998; Mason 1999; Nonnecke 2000; Nonnecke et al. 2004a; Nonnecke et al. 2004b; Schlosser 2005), there are a remarkable amount of members, *lurkers*, in online communities, who do not contribute. According to respondents of Nonnecke et al's (2004b) study, the most popular reason for lurking is "just reading/browsing is enough", "still learning about the group", and "shy about posting". Nonnecke et al. points out (2004b) that although the term lurker has been mostly used in the negative meaning, lurkers should rather be seen positively and as possible contributors of the community in future. In fact, Katz (1998) found that lurkers are less hostile than those who post, more tolerant to open discussion, and technically sophisticated.

Furthermore, the profiles of the members may be shown in various ways. The most constricted way is to limit the information of the member to include only a nickname. Thus, in many online communities, members' profiles include lots of information: nicknames, location, hobbies, motto, pictures, activity as a participant of the current community and much more. Earlier studies have shown that being able to see the activity status encourages members to contribute (e.g. Kollock 1999; Wasko and Faraj 2000). In some online communities members are named according to their status, for example as *beginners*, *active participants* and *experts*. However, in many cases the names are more imaginative and have derived from the purpose of the community.

Value

The second element in Preece's (2000) list, a shared purpose, can be approached from either the maintainer's or the member's perspective. However, instead of using the term purpose, the term *value* is stressed in this study to make an even clearer distinction between the maintainers' and the members' value gained from an online community. For example, in the case of a company-owned online

community, the company gains direct or indirect business value for having the community. Alternatively, the customers gain their value through interesting topics, the possibility to create relationships, play games or exchange files, among other things (Hagel and Armstrong 1997, p. 18). These kind of activities are offered by different online communities that can be divided into leisure time, learning, research or commercial based on their value offering (e.g. Schubert and Ginsburg 2000).

Culture

Thirdly, Preece (2000) stated that there are always some kind of policies in online communities. These rules or norms can be written or unwritten, but most communities have some written rules on the websites to guide the communication. As well as written rules, also unwritten rules guide the communication giving some information for example on how a member should communicate and what kind of behaviour is appropriate. Behind the rules there lie core beliefs and assumptions as well as values and behavioural norms (Postmes et. al 1998; Schein 1985). Because the structure of online communities share some dimensions with the structure of organisations (e.g. Hatch 1997), this element is adopted from the organisation theory and called *culture*. As a term it can also be considered as a wider concept than politics.

Technology

The fourth element in Preece's (2000) list considers technology in online communities, including all services that allow interaction or communication on the web. In daily life, we rarely convene large groups of friends or relatives and exchange our opinions. In comparing physical communities and online communities, it can be noted that physical communities lack the many-to-many element whereas online communities lack the physical community's defining place. (Cothrel 1999; Maclaran and Catterall 2002)

This software used in online communities is also called as groupware, collaborative software, social software or interactive software. Ellis, Gibbs and Rein (1991) defined groupware as "computer-based systems that support groups of people engaged in a common task (or goal) and that provide an interface to a shared environment".

The tools used in social software applications can be divided into communication tools and interaction tools. Communication tools typically handle the capturing, storing, and presentation of communication, usually written but increasingly also including audio and video. Interaction tools handle mediated interactions between a pair or group of users. They differ from communication tools in their focus on establishing and maintaining a connection among users, facilitating the mechanics of conversation and talk. Furthermore, communication tools are generally asynchronous, interaction tools synchronous like a phone, a Net phone, a video chat or near-synchronous like a text chat. (www.wikipedia.org)

In general, communication involves the content of talk or writing while interaction involves the interest users establish in one another as individuals. In other words, a communication tool should make creating and searching texts both simple and powerful. An interaction tool is designed to present as much of a user's expression, performance, and presence as possible. (www.wikipedia.org) Some of the most often used software in online communities are briefly presented in the following.

Instant messaging. An instant messaging application or client allows one to communicate with another person over a network in relative privacy. Popular clients include Gtalk, Skype, Meetro, ICQ, Yahoo! Messenger, MSN Messenger and AOL Instant Messenger. One can add friends to a contact list or buddy list by entering their email address or messenger ID. If they are online, their name will be listed as available for chat. Clicking on their name will activate a chat window with space to write to the other person, as well as read their reply. (www.wikipedia.org)

Internet Relay Chat (IRC). Clients allow users to join chat rooms and communicate with many people at once, publicly. Users may join a pre-existing chat room or create a chat room about any topic. Once inside, users may type messages that everyone else in the room can read, as well as respond to messages from others. Often there is a steady stream of people entering and leaving. Whether you are in another person's chat room or one you have created yourself, you are generally free to invite others online to join you. When others accept the invitation, they are taken to the room containing the other members, similar to the way conference calling works with phones. This facilitates both one-to-one and many-to-many interaction. (www.wikipedia.org)

Discussion forums. Also names like *Internet forums*, *online forums* and *bulletin boards* are used. Originally modelled after the real-world paradigm of electronic bulletin boards of the world before the Internet was born, Internet forums allow users to post *a topic* for others to review. Other users can view the topic and post their own comments in a linear fashion, one after the other. Most forums are public, allowing anybody to sign up at any time. A few are private, gated communities where new members must pay a small fee to join.

Forums can contain many different categories in a hierarchy according to topics and subtopics. Other features include the ability to post images or files or the ability to quote another user's post with special formatting in one's post. Forums often grow in popularity until they can boast several thousand members posting replies to tens of thousands of topics continuously.

There are various standards and claimants for the market leaders of each software category. Various add-ons, including translation and spelling correction software, may sometimes be available, depending on the expertise of the operators of the bulletin board. (www.wikipedia.org)

Blogs or weblogs. Blogs, short for web logs, are like online journals for a particular person. The owners will post a message periodically allowing others to comment. Topics often include the owners' daily life or views on politics or a particular subject important to them. Blogs mean many things to different people, ranging from *an online journal* to *an easily updated personal website*. While these definitions are technically correct, they fail to capture the power of blogs as social software. Beyond being a simple homepage or an online diary, some blogs allow comments on the entries, thereby creating a discussion forum. They also have blogrolls (i.e. links to other blogs which the owners read or admire), and indicate their social relationship to other bloggers using the XFN social relationship standard. Pingback and trackback allow one blog to notify another blog, creating an inter-blog conversation. In summary, blogs engage readers and build a virtual community around a particular person or interest. Examples include Slashdot, LiveJournal (www.livejournal.com) and Blogger (www.blogger.com). (www.wikipedia.org)

Wikis. A wiki is a webpage that is easily editable using the relatively easy to use wiki syntax. This means that everyone can edit, change or delete text. Examples include the original Portland Pattern Repository wiki (<http://c2.com/ppr/>), CommunityWiki (www.communitywiki.org), Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) and Wiktionary (www.wiktionary.org). (www.wikipedia.org)

Social network services. Social network services allow people to come together online around shared interests or causes. For example, some sites provide dating services where users will post their personal profiles, location, age, gender, etc, and are able to search for a partner. Other shared goals or interests include business networking, for example Ryze (www.ryze.com) and LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), emotionally supportive phone counselling like Phone Buddies (www.phone-buddies.com), social event meetups, for instance Meetup (www.meetup.com), or recreational hobbies. (www.wikipedia.org)

Social network search engines. Social network search engines are a class of search engines that use social networks to organise, prioritise, or filter search results. There are two subclasses of social network search engines: those that use explicit social networks, and those that use implicit social networks.

Explicit social network search engines allow people to find each other according to explicitly stated social relationships such as XFN social relationships. For example, XHTML Friends Network (<http://gmpg.org/xfn>) allows people to share their relationships on their own sites, thus forming a decentralised or distributed online social network, in contrast to centralised social network services listed in the previous section.

Implicit social network search engines allow people to filter search results based upon classes of social networks they trust, such as a shared political viewpoint. This type of social network search engine mines the web to infer the topology of online social networks. For example, the NewsTrove (<http://newstrove.com>) search engine infers social networks from content like

sites, blogs, pods and feeds, by examining (among other things) subject matter, link relationships, and grammatical features to infer social networks. Users may then employ the social networks as filters to their search results. (www.wikipedia.org)

Social shopping applications. These applications extend the ideas of social bookmarking, including images, in order to provide product recommendations or reviews. The concept was pioneered by Wists (www.wists.com) in early 2005. Other, more recent, examples include Stylehive (www.stylehive.com) and the revamped Yahoo! Shoposphere (<http://shopping.yahoo.com/shoposphere/>). (www.wikipedia.org)

Peer-to-peer social networks. A hybrid of web-based social networks, instant messaging technologies and peer-to-peer connectivity and filesharing, peer-to-peer social networks generally allow users to share blogs, files (especially photographs) and instant messages. Some examples are imeem (<http://www.imeem.com>) and Grouper (<http://grouper.com>). Also, Groove (www.groove.net/home/index.cfm) and WiredReach (www.wiredreach.org) have a similar functionality, but with more of a work-based, collaboration bias. (www.wikipedia.org)

Virtual presence. Virtual presence means being present at virtual locations. In particular, the term virtual presence denotes presence on the World Wide Web locations pages and web sites which are identified by URLs. People who are browsing a web site are considered to be virtually present at web locations. Virtual presence is social software in the sense that people meet on the web by chance or intentionally. The ubiquitous (in the web space) communication transfers behavior patterns from the real world and virtual worlds to the web. (www.wikipedia.org)

Virtual worlds and massively-multiplayer online games (MMOGs). Virtual Worlds and Massively-Multiplayer Online Games are places where it is possible to meet and interact with other people in a virtual world – which looks somewhat like reality. Some popular commercial worlds are Second Life (<http://secondlife.com>) and The Sims Online (<http://thesims.ea.com>). Some commercial MMOGs (or, more accurately, MMORPGs) include Everquest II (<http://everquest2.station.sony.com>) and World of Warcraft (www.worldofwarcraft.com). Non-commercial open-source and experimental examples include Planeshift (<http://www.planeshift.it>) and Croquet project (www.opencroquet.org). (www.wikipedia.org)

The technology sector can be further divided into networks, containing the Internet, intranet, extranet and wireless networks, as well as into online community platforms, in other words, the base of the online community software and community applications, including interactive services.

When looking at online communities as a whole the services in online communities can be divided into four categories that can also be seen as different community programmes (Warms, Cothrel and Underberg 2000, pp. 2-3). These are member-generated content, online events, member-to-member interaction and outreach, which are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. *Community services (Modified from Warms et al. 2000, p. 3)*

Services	Means
Member-generated content	Member-created profiles, home pages, product reviews, journals, etc.
Online events	Seminars, expert sessions, virtual meetings, virtual trade shows, etc.
Member-to-member interaction	Discussion forums, chat sessions, Q&A boards, email discussion lists, etc.
Outreach	Newsletters, volunteer programmes, recognition programmes, etc.

According to Warms et al. (2000, p. 3), each community deploys its own combination of means based on its business objectives and the role of the community management is to bring these elements together into a coherent whole to foster interaction and drive results. Furthermore, online communities may be categorised on the basis of the objectives they have been set. The decision as to the type of community the maintainer wishes to build is crucial, as it will shape the result in terms of the nature of the community and the type of members and their motives for joining. For example, the profit maximisation organisation may try to dominate an online community in order to fulfil their short-term goals. Szmigin and Reppel (2004, p. 628) mention Lastminute.com as an example of a site which is highly controlled and the price is a key feature for controlling managing custom on its site. However, these type of tightly controlled vendor focused sites only rarely succeed in creating online communities where members are having conversations and binding relationships.

Alternatively, Nextweekend.com represents quite the opposite, which de Chernatony (2001) calls a loosely controlled brand. By asking members what they wanted to do during the forthcoming weekend, and gleaning ideas from others who have shared their thoughts on the site, Nextweekend.com was able to provide alternative offerings. These kind of member-focused online communities have real opportunities for long-term profit maximisation. By allowing other service providers to participate and to serve the needs of the community members, the main organiser of the community increases his own potential of aggregating new members and bonding with existing ones. Therefore, member-focused online communities enable all participants to exchange value. (Szmigin and Reppel 2004)

2.3.2 The first pilot study: Classifying company online communities

In the pilot study Mittilä and Mäntymäki (2003) studied thirty online communities on the Internet to be able to understand the classification of company online communities. Drawn from the literature review, Mittilä and Mäntymäki's (2003) study started from Preece's (2000) classification of commercial online communities' elements. The framework is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *The classification of company online communities (Modified from Mittilä and Mäntymäki, 2003, p. 323)*

Dimensions	Description
Business logic of the company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bricks and mortar, dot-com company or media company
People	<i>For whom is the community built?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members with the same geographic location, demographic situation, topic or profession
Value of the company online community for members	<i>Why does the community exist? What is the value of the community for its members?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interest, relationship, games, transaction (Hagel and Armstrong 1997)
Value of the company online community for the company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct revenues, increased efficiency, acquiring new members, making new innovations, getting an insight and building stronger relationships (Cothrel 2000)
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there hosts and how active are they? Are there written rules or protocols? Does the member have to register? Can the member act anonymously?
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interactive software: Discussion forums, chat, contests, Q&A's etc.

Additionally, a dimension, called *the business logic of the company*, according to Cothrel (2000) (see also Chaffey 2004), was chosen for the framework. As a supplement to the dimensions, it contains the operationalisation of them.

Empirical results of the study

The business logic of the company. First of the studied dimensions was the business logic of the maintaining company. There were 17 traditional bricks and mortar companies with limited online presence among the cases. However, due to their big investments on the web some of them could be called *click and mortar companies* (Chaffey 2004, p. 55), businesses combining an online and offline presence. The remaining 13 companies were interpreted as being dot-com companies. They were trading over the Internet with their customers. In the observation it was not possible to identify any company gathering member information and selling it as suggested by Klang and Olsson (1999).

From the six communities targeted for professional members only one was maintained by a dot-com company (16, 7%) while the communities targeted for consumers were divided evenly between the traditional and the dot-com companies. Dot-com companies maintained mainly communities for demographic groups. The division of the companies' business logic and their members is depicted in Table 5.

Table 5. *The business logic and member groups of the community maintaining companies*

	Member groups	Demographic	Geographic	Topic	Professional	Total
Business logic	Bricks and mortar	Count 3	2	7	5	17
		% within Target 30,0%	100,0%	58,3%	83,3%	56,7%
	Dot-com	Count 7		5	1	13
		% within Target 70,0%		41,7%	16,7%	43,3%
Total	Count	10	2	12	6	30
	% within Target	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

In Table 5, the different member groups are divided with four criteria into members who share similarities in their demographic or geographic backgrounds, members who are interested in the same topic, or members who are professionals or non-professionals.

People. The majority of community maintainers did not explicitly express their target members or desired participants. Therefore, they were interpreted based on the purpose of the community and the scope of the communication. In some cases multiple target members were found. For example, in communities with

many subcommunities, each of them could have their own target members. However, only one member group from each community was noticed to be dominant or mentioned by the company for the classification. The group was deduced on the basis of the scope of the community, in some cases it was directly written down on the site. Sometimes the community's members could have been classified into two or more categories at the same time. For example, because of the fact that Finnish language is used in the community's communication, it is natural that the community has some geographical or linguistic limitations. Table 6 presents frequencies of different member groups divided with four criteria.

Table 6. *Target member groups of the communities*

Member groups	Frequency	Percent
Demographic	10	33,3
Geographic	2	6,7
Topic	12	40,0
Professional	6	20,0
Total	30	100,0

The majority of the studied communities, 24, was targeted for the consumers, while the rest were professional-oriented. Half of the consumer-oriented communities focused on people with a common topic. In demographic target groups there were communities targeted for women (three cases), for young people (two cases), for parents (two cases), for people with the same nationality (two cases) and for intelligent people (one case).

Value of the company online community for members. The findings concerned to the value for the participating members were related by using the classification introduced by Hagel and Armstrong (1997), i.e., interest, relationship, fun and transactions. However, the dimension *fantas games* was relabelled into *entertainment* to be able to combine all similar types of value under this dimension.

The value of the community for members was concluded by the material that was written on the websites. If there was no written text about the value offered for members, the answer was left empty. Table 7 presents the frequencies of different kind of offered values classified into four classes. Some of the communities offered multiple types of value for the members to engage in the community.

Table 7. *The value of the community for members*

Value for members	Frequency	Percent
Entertainment	3	10,0
Interest	9	56,2
Relationship	7	43,8
Transactions	13	76,4

For example, on Duuni.net's websites (<http://www.duuni.net>) the value offered for members was written as follows:

In Duuni.net people can discuss business, computer science or leisure time activities or just read other's opinions. There people can meet their old friends and also get new contacts and get new ideas.

On their sites, 16 communities expressed their value for members while 14 did not mention anything about their value on their websites. Eight of 13 dot-com companies had their value written down, and in the traditional companies the same ratio was nine of 17 communities. Half of the professional targeted communities had the value for members written down on their websites.

The value of the company online community for the company. The value of the community for company was interpreted by activities aiming at immediate or prolonged profit from the community. The commercial nature of the studied communities materialised in the way depicted in Table 8.

Table 8. *Commercial activities in the communities*

Objectives	Frequency	Percent
Selling advertisements	18	60,0
Fees	4	13,3
Having partnerships	6	20,0
Shop	11	36,7
Other	1	3,3

All of the objectives were found connected to augmenting incomes or cutting costs. These aspects are closely related to one of Cothrel's (1999) objectives, increasing efficiency. 18 of 30 communities sold advertisements on their sites,

four had membership fees and eleven had some incomes from the shop. Furthermore, sixteen communities mentioned that they have sponsorship or partnerships.

No-one of the maintainers mentioned directly on their site that the community was for acquiring new customers, increasing efficiency, making new innovations, getting an insight or building stronger relationships. However, there were at least ten communities that did not seem to have any other clear objectives than to use the community in some of these purposes. For example, none of the professional communities seemed to have any other reason to maintain the community. Dot-com companies, in general, seemed to utilise more the above mentioned ways to obtain incomes than traditional companies. For example, eleven of thirteen dot-com companies sold advertisements while among traditional companies the amount was seven of 17. Interestingly, none of the communities targeted to professionals had advertisements on the sites.

Culture. When studying community culture the study focused on such issues as anonymity, hosts, registration and rules, which were observed or reviewed on the websites of the communities. These dimensions were chosen to best illustrate the policies, protocols and rules mentioned in the theoretical literature. Preece (1999) and Kim (2000) stressed the importance of rituals in the community, but this dimension was too complicated to study without a longer observation period. Therefore, they were beyond our reach. The findings of the culture are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. *Online community culture*

Dimension	Frequency	Percent
Anonymity	29	96,7
Hosts	14	46,7
Registration	21	70,0
Rules	22	73,3
Other	3	10,0

With the exception of one community, people could act anonymously on the sites without having to reveal their real identity to anyone else than the maintaining company. Actually, that was the recommended way due to the privacy and security matters.

On their websites, fourteen communities mentioned that they have hosts or moderators. However, there was a big difference in the activity level of the moderators meaning that in some communities the moderators were actively involved in discussions while in some of the communities their role was not

particularly visible. One community also had their values written on their website.

Some kind of rules, netiquette or guidelines were found on 22 communities' websites. In 22 communities people were asked to register if they wanted to join a discussion. In most of the registration forms people were asked to give at least their names and their email addresses. However, in most communities, discussions could be followed without registration.

Technology. Technology here refers to the interactive software that was identified in the case communities. As depicted in Table 10, the most common service was the discussion forum; 29 communities of 30 had it. The next most popular services were the chat and the shop. When looking at the Q&A's (questions and answers) software, only interactive services were taken into account and the FAQ (frequently asked question) services were excluded. In *the other category* services like events, dating service and the possibility to give recommendations were identified. For example iVillage (www.ivillage.com) offers chat, discussion forum, quizzes, games and shop to its members.

Table 10. *Online community technology*

Element	Frequency	Percent
Auctions	2	6,7
Chat	13	43,3
Contests, quizzes	7	23,3
Discussion forum	29	96,7
Flea market	3	10,0
Games	3	10,0
Q&A's	9	30,0
Membership reward programme	2	6,7
Shop	13	43,3
Other	13	43,3

The results also showed that two professional communities offered a membership reward programme. In one case this meant that after gathering some number of points by answering other members' questions, a member could get something free from the community's shop. In the other case, active members were rewarded by placing their names on the list of the top members on the site. All of the professional communities had a discussion forum, and one of them had a question and answer site. Furthermore, one of them also had a shop. The maintainers in the professional communities also offered other services like an email box (one case) and events for their members (two cases).

The difference between the dot-com and traditional maintainers materialised in the software enabling the online auctions. The communities offering this opportunity were both dot-com companies. In other services, there were no big differences between traditional and dot-com companies.

Conclusions of the pilot study

In this pilot study the idea was to develop the classification of company-maintained online communities by selecting dimensions, which can be used to classify online communities and this way to answer the first research question. The dimensions were selected from earlier theories of online communities, and adapted for the company-maintained online communities. The rationality of these dimensions was tested empirically among 30 online communities.

Due to the limited sample of communities and the nature of the method used, there are some limitations, which need to be noted before generalising the results. It is possible that the sample could have some bias. Also the research method, which did not include interviews, may have caused some loss of finding due to interpretations. Yet, the nature of this study was exploratory to identify characteristics and creating an early proposition for a new conceptual framework for the classification of commercial online communities. All in all, the study contributed to the marketing theory by identifying maintainers' and members' different motives for engaging in the online community.

The dimension capturing the business logic of the maintaining company was found to be a useful dimension for comparing two types of communities. The studied thirty communities maintained by traditional or dot-com companies did not have many differences. However, dot-coms more often aimed at direct incomes than traditional companies. A deeper research by another method may reveal more interesting facts of similarities and differences of these two kinds of communities.

The study found out that in the dimension called people, the possible members, can be divided into four groups, distinguished by the geography, demography, topic or profession. The division between professional and consumer targeted communities gives a particularly clear distinction between the b-to-c and b-to-b communities. In some cases there are many target groups in communities as subgroups. Thus, selecting the dominant one is a more challenging task.

In some dimensions there were some problems to gain proper data by the selected method. The dimensions considering the value of the community from members' perspective and also the value of the maintainer's perspective were not written on the websites in many cases. In that dimension, a different method than online document review and observation would be preferred in order to reveal the objectives. However, all kind of transactions from information to shopping were the most common value offered for the members and selling advertisements the most common way to have more incomes among these 30 communities. It appears that the objective of many communities is also related to relationship marketing more than direct incomes. All of the researched dot-com companies

had advertisements on their sites and also the marketplaces were quite common. It is notable that studied communities for professionals did not have any advertisements on their sites.

Culture, the dimension including different policies, protocols and rules, was quite a homogenous group. It seems that most of the communities have their rules written on the websites and they encourage people to stay anonymous, because of privacy matters. Referring to the study, communities did not usually have their values on their websites.

The dimension labelled technology included all kind of interactive software in communities. This dimension was not such an effective tool to classify different communities but gave information about the variety of software in online communities. Discussion forums seem to be the most common software in creating interaction. Only one of the researched communities did not offer a discussion forum. Actually, in many cases discussion forums were the only service and enough to create a community. The communities focused on professional people offered a membership reward programme, but generally less other services than other communities.

Finally, company online communities are quite a heterogeneous group because of the maintaining companies' different backgrounds and purposes, but in many dimensions, they have also homogenous elements as having discussion forums and the same kind of rules. Actually, it is proposed that services offered on a community's website are a dynamic synthesis of a maintainer's business logic, the value of a community and people participating in a community.

The pilot study shows that to understand the value that a community offers more deeply, it is necessary to conduct a survey or interviews because of the limited information available from their websites. However, as a preliminary study of classification, this study found out that based on these dimensions, communities can be understood better as a strategic marketing tool of companies.

3 CONCEPTUALISING ATTRACTION OF COMPANY ONLINE COMMUNITIES

In this chapter, the theoretical domain of the study is discussed first. Then the concept of attraction is presented and considered from the different perspectives. Finally, the earlier studies concerning the reasons to visit company online communities are discussed.

3.1 The theoretical domain of the study

3.1.1 The roots of relationship marketing

Although relationship marketing as a term is fairly new, marketing relationships have existed as long as there have been trade relationships. It is suggested that the roots of the relationship marketing derive from *business marketing*, *services marketing*, *marketing channels* as well as *database and direct marketing* (Möller and Halinen 2000, pp. 31-32; see also Brodie et al. 1997; Coviello, Brodie and Mundro 1997; Gummesson 1996; Halinen 1994; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Mattsson 1997; Möller 1992, 1994).

All these traditions have something common as they all stress the external relationships of a company, particularly customer relationships. Möller and Halinen 2000 (pp. 31-32) suggested that these four traditions have influenced the shift of the marketing from transactional marketing into ongoing relationships as well as given theoretical and practical content to the relationship-marketing concept.

In the late 1970s, researchers in the industrial marketing field got interested in dyadic relationships between business buyers and sellers (e.g. Bonoma and Johnston 1978; Frazier 1983). Related studies concerning the political-economy framework (Stern and Reve 1980), channel relationships (Heide and John 1990) social-exchange theory (Anderson and Narus 1984, 1990) as well as studies by IMP (Industrial Marketing Purchasing Group) are a point of reference in terms of conceptualisation of relationship marketing in the industrial markets. The results of IMP's studies followed the development of the interaction approach

(Håkansson 1982; Turnbull and Valla 1986) and the latest network approach to the industrial relationships (Håkansson 1992; Ferrero 1992).

These approaches soon led to a theory of *the relationship approach* that focused on creating value through successful relationship exchanges. However, relationship marketing as a concept clearly managed to capture the imagination of scholars in the 1990s. Editors of a number of journals across continents were impressed enough to devote special issues to the topic. Back then, a paradigm shift in marketing at the expense of four Ps was predicted (Grönroos 1994); and new schools of thought, the Nordic School, the Anglo-Australian School and the Emory School, emerged (Möller and Halinen 2000).

Morgan and Hunt (1994) stated that “mutual cooperation, as opposed to competition and conflict, leads to higher value creation”. The core focus in relationship marketing is to build and enhance long term relationships with existing customers. The value concept is considered to be an important aspect of relationship marketing. The idea in relationship marketing and customer relationship marketing is simple; to create customer loyalty and then build profitable and long term relationships. To achieve success in this, a key element is to provide superior value to customers, which is regarded as one of the most successful competitive strategies. (Ravald and Grönroos 1996)

Theories of relationship marketing suggest that through satisfaction, commitment and trust it is possible to forecast and nurture a buyer-seller relationship in the long term. Customer satisfaction through service represents the main aspect to consider in order leading to trust and commitment of both parties as well as increased perceived value (Busacca 1994; Gruen 1995; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Jüttner and Wehrli (1994) agreed, pointing out that relationships turn into value-generating systems, usually among organisations, creating a network of business relationships. Collaborating with customers and other partners will lead to the following positive outcomes: a higher percentage of satisfied customers; greater customer loyalty; a perception on the part of a firm’s customers that information technology is offering better quality products; increased profits on the part of the seller (Evans and Laskin 1994).

Many authors (e.g. Payne 1995; Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne 1991; Alfaro 1994), moreover, have stressed the importance of the information technology revolution. They have suggested that by making intensive use of information and production technologies leading to mass customisation (Pine II 1993), it is possible to acquire detailed consumer knowledge and satisfy the needs of a customer base better than the competitors (Shani and Chalasani 1992). Although, relationship marketing emerged in the business-to-business area, the development of technology has also opened new possibilities in business-to-consumer context. One of the most known examples of such areas is CRM (customer relationship marketing) that is sometimes even used as a synonym to relationship marketing.

The debate on the way how relationship marketing can be applied on consumer markets has begun (e.g. Bagozzi 1995; Bennett 1996; O’Malley and Tynan 2000; Pels 1999; Pressey and Mathews 2000). To mention some of the topics, Wilson has opened the discussion considering if consumer and

organisational buyer behaviour should even be divided (e.g. Wilson 1998), Christy, Oliver and Penn (1996) discussed on the relationship-friendliness of different product markets, while O'Malley, Patterson and Evans (1997) considered the intimacy aspects of relationship marketing in consumer markets.

Online communities are a good example of how technology has enabled to use relationship marketing also in b-to-c context. Therefore, relationship marketing is chosen as a perspective of this study and for the same reason three of the four cases in this study are b-to-c communities.

3.1.2 Interaction, relationships and networks

The relationship marketing perspective is based on the idea that an ongoing relationship between two parties creates additional value for the customer, the supplier or service provider (Grönroos 2000b; see also Ravald and Grönroos 1996). Gummesson (2002a) has defined relationship marketing as marketing based on interaction within networks of relationships. Hence, as Gummesson's definition implies, the relationship process includes interactions that form relationships which may be developing in networks of suppliers, distributors and consumers or end users. The focal relationship is the one between a supplier or provider of goods or services and buyers and users of these goods or services. (Grönroos 2004)

Most of the definitions see relationship marketing foremost as a process. Grönroos (2004) has suggested that the process moves from identifying potential customers to establishing a relationship with them, and then to maintaining the relationship and enhancing it so that more business as well as good references and favourable word-of-mouth are generated. According to Grönroos (2004) relationship marketing consists of three processes: (1) an interaction process as the core of relationship marketing, (2) a planned communication process supporting the development and enhancement of relationships, (3) a value process as the output of relationship marketing. After a relationship has been established, the interaction process with the customer begins. It consists of various types of contacts between the supplier and the customer over time. These contacts have been studied in terms of acts, episodes and relationship. (Grönroos 2004; see also Halinen 1997; Håkansson 1982; Liljander and Strandvik 1995)

In fact, the term relationship is difficult to define, but one way to define it is to use time as a defining feature in relationship. Ford, Gadde, Håkansson and Snehota (2003) used the term to describe the pattern of interactions and mutual conditioning of behaviours over time, between a company and a customer. Both the past and future affect current behaviour in a relationship and experiences, expectations and promises underlie the interaction within it. Relationships exist in the whole array of forms that interaction can take and each of them is different. (Ford et al. 2003)

Furthermore, because there are multiple kind and levels of relationships, it is necessary to also consider differences between relations and relationships. According to Mittilä (2000), in relations, actors pursue self-interest and have

only individual goals while in relationships, the parties have a mutual interest and they want to develop the relationship by setting common goals.

To understand relationships deeper Håkansson and Johanson (1992; see also Ford et al. 2003) divided them into three aspects on the basis of their substance. These aspects are actor bonds, activity links and resource ties. Interpersonal communication as a key thing enabling actor bonds, based on mutual learning, trust and commitment, emerge. Activity links are the links where the activities, such as interaction, are happened. Resource ties are investments for the relationship such as adaptations. The fact is that communication plays a key role in relationships and relationship marketing. In the context of relationship marketing, a two-way communication process or sometimes a multi-way communication process are aimed at leading to some of response. (Grönroos 2004)

The dialogue process with the customer may start at the same time as the interaction process begins or before it. A dialogue can be seen as an interactive process of reasoning together (Ballantyne 2000). This process aims at building shared meanings, get insights in what the two parties can do together and avail existing knowledge but also create new knowledge (Bohm 1996; Gummesson 2002a; Schein 1994). Important in this process is to give the customers a feeling that the company is genuinely interested in learning about their needs and value systems.

Activities on both the interaction process and the planned communication process send messages to customers about the company and its way of serving its customers. The possible sources of messages can be further divided into four groups, which are planned marketing communication, product and service messages and unplanned messages. From a company's point of view the most problematic source are unplanned messages that are difficult or impossible to manage. These unplanned messages include news stories, employee gossip and word-of-mouth communication. (Grönroos 2004)

3.1.3 Relationship marketing with company online communities

Since online communities may enhance relationships with customers, companies are interested in the possibilities online communities can offer in their customer relationship marketing. Companies can utilise online communities basically in two ways; either build and maintain own online communities or just follow online communities maintained by other companies or organisations. Of course, building an online community of their own may give much wider benefits, but with multiple efforts and risks. Actually, building an online community is a bit of a confusing term, because they can not be built by the companies. Conversely, they are rather formed by members with the help of the company. In fact, forming an online community differs from many other development projects in companies as online communities can not be launched when they are ready, but they are rather formed on the Internet where everyone can visit them from the

beginning. Since online communities enable members to discuss with each other via the Internet, the amount of unplanned, not controllable messages (Grönroos 2004) has increased, and therefore, companies face new risks.

Basically, relationship marketing with online communities differs in two ways from the traditional relationship marketing. The medium and the relationships differ from the traditional ones. Online communities are a new model of interactivity and exchange enabled by information technology. Since online communities enable a dialogue between the member and the maintainer as well as between members, online communities may offer possibilities for companies to enhance their customer relationships. Learning about members and maintainers, which has been stressed in both IMP approach (e.g. Ford et al. 2003) and relationship marketing (e.g. Grönroos 2004) is one of the central benefits of company online communities.

Although, maintainers and customers discuss and learn in online communities, the most dramatic change has been done in the area of c-to-c interaction. People with similar interests and lifestyles may interact around the clock and the globe. The power of word-of-mouth has increased since customers are able to exchange views on goods, services and companies on the Internet. As Herr et al. (1991) stressed, word-of-mouth promotion is the best-known loyalty behaviour, and thus it is an important phenomenon to take into account when aiming at long-term relationships. (Dye 2001, p. 30; Gummesson 2002a; Searls and Weinberger 2000)

One of the characteristics of online communities is the lack of possibilities to control the communication between members. In their own online communities, firms may control the communication by removing inappropriate messages; however, this can reduce the members' will to discuss, which can, in the worst case, lead to a silent community.

Since online communities enable members to interact with one another not only on a one-to-one basis but also on a many-to-many basis, they add a new element to the dialogue framework in relationship marketing, namely, *many-to-many communication*. This means that by posting to a newsgroup, or sending a message to a discussion forum, every member can speak to all other members. Because both the member and the maintainer may learn in this process, these conversations can be seen as a part of the dialogue process even if the supplier does not involve in discussions. Therefore, companies may aim for creating many-to-many as well as one-to-many interaction with some members instead of a one-to-one dialogue that needs much more resources.

Then, as we consider relationships in the online community context, there are some differences between them and traditional relationships. Gummesson (2002a) spoke about the *e-relationship* to embrace relationships, networks and interaction based on IT. However, surprisingly, it seems that e-relationships have not decreased the need for meeting in real life, but conversely increased this need (Gummesson 2002a). For this reason, Gummesson (2002a) suggested that in e-relationships high-tech should rather be used to add human dimensions, not to decrease them. In addition to e-relationships, Gummesson (2002a) used the term *parasocial relationships* to depict relationships to brands, objects, symbols and

other less tangible phenomena. These kind of relationships are manifested in the connotations of company names, brands, trade marks and well known business leaders or other people who symbolise a business. In parasocial relationships just like a person, a product or a company has a soul, a personality and a body language.

Moreover, one of the characteristics of the relation between a member and an online community is *voluntariness* (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). Since relationships may only exist in the virtual world, members are often *anonymous* and behind their nicknames. Therefore, ending a relationship is even easier than in many other types of relationships. Technically visiting online communities needs just one click of the mouse. Alternatively, if a member is not satisfied with an online community, ending the relationship is extremely easy by being passive, in other words the member stops visiting an online community. The Internet also offers plenty of choices in online communities where members can discuss, so the competition is fierce.

Therefore, members have to feel that they gain some value in every visit, in other words, there has to be an ongoing attraction towards an online community. On the basis of these points of view, it is suggested that understanding the attraction of online communities is important.

In addition to relationships between members and online communities, there are also members that have only relations with online communities as mentioned before. These *lurkers* (e.g. Katz 1998; Nonnecke and Preece 2000a; Nonnecke and Preece 2000b; Nonnecke et al. 2004b; Schlosser 2005) use a community to gain benefit without feeling a sense of togetherness. Thus, an online community can not be formed if there are only lurkers and no members who have relationships.

To scrutinise deeper to the relationships in online communities, their elements, namely *people, value, technology and culture* (cf. Preece 2000), should be considered. Because some of the relationships exist between members and the brand of an online community, they may be considered as parasocial relationships. Also interactive technology as well as the culture and the value of an online community affect on how people manifest with others and how they perceive each other. Therefore, relationships can be seen to form between members and the online community including all its aspects. An interesting aspect is that when a member has a relationship with an online community, he or she can be considered as a part of the community as well. In a company online community, the company is in a relationship with a member directly in a maintainer's role or through an online community.

3.2 The concept of attraction

Traditionally, attraction is seen as an interpersonal phenomenon, which has been studied in social psychology and in marketing. It has received the greatest attention within *the social exchange theory* where Homans (1961) and Thibaut

and Kelley (1959) depicted the interaction between people as an exchange, in which feelings like devotion or love are exchangeable. Because of that, the determinants of the attraction have been viewed as primarily social in nature. In social psychology attraction is defined to mean devotion or love towards another person or group. Attraction is seen as an important element in group formation, because attraction power increases cohesion in groups and also defines their limits. Furthermore, attraction has been studied as a tool of sociometric research. (Eskola 1984, p. 129)

Within *the network theory*, the concept of competency is used to describe the factor that explains for example a company's ability to attract new customers and retain old customers. Again, competency may refer to a website's ability to attract people to visit the current site, for example. Competency can be based on, for example, the products of the company or the website's content. In the network theory, the knots may be given a competency rate that describes the knot's ability to compete on the links. (Barabasi 2002) All in all, the concept of competency approaches the same phenomenon, attraction, from the perspective of the network theory.

The concept of attraction in marketing is often related to the acquisition of new customers as well distinguishing from competitors. This study approaches attraction from the relationship marketing perspective, emphasising the importance of attraction in maintaining and enhancing relationships with customers.

The dynamic nature of marketing relations recognises that they evolve and change over time as a result of interaction between the parties. As to the development process of relations, the factors that lead to a strong long-term relationship have been the area of interest for many researchers. In addition to trust and commitment, adaptation, cooperation, interaction, interdependence, mutual goals, social and structural bonds, promises and shared goals have all been considered as key factors to successful relationships. (Anderson and Narus 1990; Grönroos 1990; Håkansson 1982; Morgan and Hunt 1994) Thus, it has been suggested that the concept of attraction has an even more fundamental role in the continuity of a relationship between partners than commitment and trust (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987; Grönroos 2000a).

Derived from the social exchange theory, attraction explains why relationships are initiated and developed (Kelley and Thibaut 1978). Some degree of attraction is a necessary precondition for the commencement of interaction, while ongoing attraction determines whether parties are motivated to maintain a relationship (Dwyer et al. 1987; Halinen 1997). Already the first definition of relationship marketing by Berry (1983, p. 25) stresses the importance of attraction:

Relationship marketing is attracting, maintaining and – in multi-service organisations – enhancing customer relationships. Servicing and selling existing customers is viewed to be just as important to long-term marketing success as acquiring new customers.

Despite the above, attraction has been studied less than the other relational bonds. According to Harris et al. (2003) one explanation could be that because attraction is so essential to the formation and maintenance of relationships it is considered as basic practice of marketing that is taken for granted. Harris et al. (2003) point out that further explication of the concept of attraction may provide a much-needed explanatory framework for a relationship development.

In marketing, attraction has been studied in the context of personal selling and negotiations, when the main focus is in the attraction between two people. Then, attraction can be seen as an inter-firm phenomenon as well. (Mittilä 2000, pp. 55-56) Referring to Mittilä (2000, p. 56), when considering relations, attraction is always based on expectations and references and presumed satisfaction. Consequently, attraction can be considered as a very strongly future-oriented concept. In older relationships, the experiences and the involvement as other factors outside the relationship also affect it.

In business relations it is recommendable to consider both collective and individual attraction. At the collective level attraction can be seen as a company's interest in cooperation with another actor. At the individual level attraction is an individual's interest in personal intercommunication. When considering businesses, attraction can also be directed towards the product (goods/service) itself. (Mittilä 2000, p. 56)

According to Halinen (1994a, p. 76), attraction may be viewed as a company's interest in exchange with another based on the economic and social reward-cost outcomes expected from a relationship over time.

In this study, the concept of attraction is studied in company online community context, which has its own characteristics. In the context of this study, members of an online community form various types and levels of relations and relationships. Online environment allows the company's websites to represent the company as a personalised entity in a relationship. Therefore, members may communicate with the maintainer using the sites as a media or they may interact with the websites. Online context also allows the members to communicate with each other, which enables to study attraction in c-to-c context too.

Drawn from the literature review, attraction is seen as *an online community's ability to draw member* in this study. Since this study explores the attraction *based on how members themselves perceive it, this study examines members' perceived attraction*. Based on the earlier studies, attraction is seen as an important element attraction explaining why relationships are initiated and developed (Kelley and Thibaut 1978) and some degree of attraction is a necessary precondition for the commencement of interaction, while ongoing attraction determines whether parties are motivated to maintain a relationship (Dwyer et al. 1987; Halinen 1997).

3.3 Earlier studies of attraction

3.3.1 *Attraction factors*

Earlier studies have shown that *modest price* (Halinen 1994a, p. 272) and both *functional* and *imaginary factors* (Dwyer et al. 1987, p. 16) have an influence on creating attraction. Price and functional factors are very concrete and easy to compare with others, but imaginary factors are dependant on the ideologies and attitudes of a member and a maintainer company.

Social exchange literature suggests that attraction is based on *individuals' physical attributes* (Byrne, London and Reeves 1968; Dion, Berscheid, Walster 1972), *their abilities* (Senn 1971) and *their personality* (Boyden, Carrol and Maier 1984; Carli, Ganley and Pierce-Otay 1994; Caspi and Harbener 1990; Evans 1963). As we think about the importance of these elements in an online community context, physical attributes can not be seen. Yet, other members' abilities as well as their personality are relevant in the online environment as well.

Eskola (1984) mentioned three factors that influence attraction. These are *geographical proximity*, *similarity*, and *complementarity*. However, in online environment geographical proximity is not an issue on online communities. Yet, also the geographical proximity may be important indirectly as it may increase similarity between members. Then, the similarities between two individuals may occur if they share *similarities in their backgrounds* (Powell 1990), *demographics* (Byrne et al. 1968; Gadel 1964), *education* (Evans 1963), *attitudes* (Byrne 1971; Byrne et al. 1968; Griffit, Nelson and Littlepage 1972), and *goals and values* (Gupta 1983). In addition, also the degrees to which they are exposed to one another (Moreland and Zajonc 1982), affect the level of attraction.

Furthermore, according to O'Shaughnessy (1971-1972, p. 33), *the ideology* between a member and a company is one of the attraction factors. The similarity in attitudes between partners has the same kind of effect, but not as strong as the similarity of ideology does. Also Campbell et al. (1988, p. 52) stated that the similarity in ideologies and attitudes between partners results in better output from the both partners' views. Nevertheless, the company's openness and kindness can replace the differences between attitudes and ideologies. In this case, attraction is more based on other things (social intercommunication) than having the same kind of values (O'Shaughnessy 1971-1972, p. 33). In an online community context the similarity may occur between members and the maintainer, between members, or between the value of the community and the member, for example.

Harris et al. (2003) studied attraction in b-to-b relationships by conducting 54 interviews among barristers and solicitors. Their research suggests that while legal professionals are motivated to seek relationships with those who can supply work and to gain access to lucrative clients (*economic attractiveness*), they also forge relationships to help overcome short-term difficulties (*resource*

attractiveness). According to their research, *social attractiveness* has an important role as legal professionals prefer working with colleagues who create a positive working environment, provide access to social networks, enhance self-esteem and/or adopt similar working styles (Harris and O'Malley 2000). They concluded that determinants of attraction may go beyond the simple characterisation of relationships in terms of economic, resource and social content. Further, they suggested that *familiarity* is a necessary condition for attraction to occur.

Furthermore, Harris et al.'s (2003) perceptions regarding which parties are attractive and which are not are influenced by (i) the socialization process, (ii) the similarity, (iii) the compatibility, and (iv) the knowledge of alternatives. Finally, based on their empirical study, attraction in the context of their study is comprised of four elements: (i) the complementarity of performance domain, (ii) legitimate and reward power, (iii) reputation, and (iv) socio-sexual attraction. As a conclusion of their study Harris et al presented a conceptual model of attraction, its determinants, and its consequences. Harris et al's study (2003) made a considerable contribution in conceptualising the concept of attraction. A summary of the factors that influence attraction based on the earlier studies is presented in Table 11.

Table 11. *A summary of the factors that influence attraction in earlier studies*

Attraction factor	Author
Complementarity (of performance domain)	Eskola 1984; Harris et al. 2003
Familiarity	Harris et al. 2003
Functional and imaginary factors	Dwyer et al. 1987, p. 16
Geographical proximity	Eskola 1984
Individuals' abilities	Senn 1971
Individuals' personality	Boyden, et al. 1984; Carli et al. 1994; Caspi and Harbener 1990; Evans 1963
Individuals' physical attributes	Byrne et al. 1968; Dion et al. 1972
Knowledge of alternatives	Harris et al. 2003
Legitimate and reward power	Harris et al. 2003
Modest price	Halinen 1994a, p. 272 ; Dwyer et al. 1987, p. 16)
Reputation	Harris et al. 2003
Similar goals, values and degrees they expose to one another	Gupta 1983; Moreland and Zajonc 1982
Similar ideology	O'Shaughnessy 1971-1972, p. 33, Campbell et al. 1988, p. 52; Dwyer et al. 1987, p. 16
Similarity in attitudes	Byrne 1971; Byrne et al. 1968; Griffit et al. 1972; Dwyer et al. 1987, p. 16; Campbell et al. 1988, p. 52
Similarity in backgrounds	Powell 1990
Similarity in demographics	Byrne et al. 1968
Similarity in education	Evans 1963
Socialisation process	Harris et al. 2003
Socio-sexuality	Harris et al. 2003

However, Harris et al.'s (2003) study and this study differ in their contexts and focus. Therefore, their framework is not used as a framework in this study. Nevertheless, it was utilised in creating preunderstanding as all the other studies presented in this chapter.

3.3.2 *Reasons to visit online communities*

Researchers in the online community research field have considered reasons why people join and visit online communities. Although these studies approach the phenomenon from different perspectives than attraction, some of them are close to the one of the present study. Therefore, these studies offer interesting insights into this study. Previous studies about members' reasons to visit to online communities are gathered in Table 12.

Table 12. *A summary of the earlier studies about reasons to visit online communities*

Author	Reasons/ motivations to visit or join in	Main emphasis in the study
Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002; Dholakia et al. 2004	Individual motives, social influences and social identity	Motivations to join, psychological perspective
Gruen et al. 2005	Factors that are divided into motivation, opportunity and ability	C-to-c knowledge exchange
Hagel and Armstrong 1997	Interest, relationship, fantasy games, transactions, many needs simultaneously	The economical benefits of online communities
Kollock 1999	Anticipated reciprocity, increased reputation, sense of efficacy	Motivations to contribute
McKenna and Bargh 1999; McKenna and Green 2002	Self-related: stigmatised and constrained identities Social related: social anxiety, loneliness, hectic lifestyle, safety issues	Motivations to join, psychological perspective
Ridings and Gefen 2004	Exchange information, social support, friendship, recreation, common interest, technical reasons	Reasons for why people visit online communities
Wasko and Faraj 2000	Tangible returns, intangible returns and community interest	Knowledge exchange

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) argue that while online communities aggregate information and other kind of resources, above all they are about aggregating people. According to them, people are drawn to online communities because of an engaging environment in which to connect with other people, but more often

in an ongoing series of interactions that create an atmosphere of trust and real insight.

According to Hagel and Armstrong (1997), the first reason to join communities is *interest*, because many of the first communities focused on connecting people who shared the same kind of interests. The second reason is *relationship*, because independence of time and place helps people to build significant and interactive relationships. However, it needs to be pointed out that there still remain cultural differences in people's behaviour and language barriers between them. Thirdly, *fantasy games*, which are offered by communities, help people forget their routines for a while. The fourth reason to join online communities, according to Hagel and Armstrong (1997), are *transactions*. Before the Internet, commercial actions between people mainly happened with the fellows or by writing an advertisement to newspapers. Since the Internet allows selling and buying globally and around the clock it has revolutionised the possibilities.

These transactions are not only commercial transactions but also for giving and receiving information. In addition to these four factors argued by Hagel and Armstrong (1997), the infrastructure of the community affects the attractiveness as well (Klang and Olsson 1999). Finally, to be able to really engage people and to make them come back it is important that the community is pleasant and attractive addressing several of the needs a person might have. For this reason, the most successful online communities meet more than one need simultaneously. (Holmström 2000; Hagel and Armstrong 1997)

Kollock (1999) researched motivations for contributing to online communities. He outlines three motivations (Kollock 1999, p. 227) that do not rely on altruistic behavior on the part of the contributor: *Anticipated reciprocity*, *increased reputation* and *sense of efficacy*. Kollock said that a person is motivated to contribute valuable information to the group in the expectation that one will receive useful help and information in return. Furthermore, according to him, there is evidence that active participants in online communities get more responses faster to questions than unknown participants (Kollock 1999, p. 178).

Reputation is important to online contributors because individuals want recognition for their contributions. Profiles and reputation are clearly evident in online communities today. Amazon.com is a case in point, as all contributors are allowed to create profiles about themselves and as their contributions are measured by the community, their reputation increases. In eBay (www.ebay.com) that is an online auction, or the Finnish version Huuto.net (www.huuto.net), members have the opportunity to rate their experience with someone they have traded with. This has an effect on the sellers or buyers reputation score.

Individuals may contribute valuable information because the act results in a sense of efficacy, that is, a sense that they have had some kind of effect on this environment. There is well-developed research literature that has shown how important a sense of efficacy is (e.g. Bandura 1995), and that making regular and high quality contributions to the group can help individuals believe that they have an impact on the group and support their own self-image as an efficacious

person. Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) is a prime example of an online community that gives contributors a sense of efficacy. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia which uses online software to enable anyone to create new articles and change any article in the encyclopedia. The changes the members make are immediate, obvious, and available to the world.

Approaching motivation from a psychological perspective, McKenna and Bargh (1999) built a conceptual framework about social interaction on the Internet. In their framework they have divided the type of motivation into *self-related* and *social related* types. As self-related motivators they mention stigmatised and constrained identities. According to them, the behaviour deriving from self-related motivators are disclosure of secret aspects of self and becoming the ideal self. As social motivators they mention social anxiety, loneliness, hectic lifestyle and safety issues. Moreover, the behaviour deriving from the social motivators are disclosure to gain intimacy, presenting the ideal self to gain approval and acceptance and forming relationships. (McKenna and Bargh 1999)

Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) and Dholakia et al. (2004) have as well been interested in the participants' motivations for visiting online communities. They have built a *social influence model* of consumer participation in online communities, which consists of three parts: *individual motives* for participation in the online community, *social influences* on member participation in the online community and *social identity* in the online community. Furthermore, individual motives are divided into purposive value, self-discovery, maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity, social enhancement and entertainment value.

Wasko and Faraj (2000) explored reasons for why people participate and help each other in online communities. They concentrated on *knowledge exchange* and therefore, they empirically explored three technical communities in their study. They asked participants an open-ended question by email, about why they participate and help others – they got 342 answers. In analysing data they utilised content analysis and divided the results into three general categories *tangible returns*, *intangible returns*, and *community interest*. Firstly, by tangible returns they meant access to useful information and expertise, answers to specific questions, and personal gain. Secondly, intangible returns refer to intrinsic satisfaction and self-actualisation. Thirdly, they said that the majority of comments received (41.9%) reflect a strong desire to have an access to a community of practice. According to them, these comments indicate that people are participating in order to exchange knowledge pertaining to practice, and they value the exchange of practice related knowledge within a community of like minded members. In addition, Wasko and Faraj (2000) stated that these comments indicate that people do not use the forum to socialise, nor to develop personal relationships. According to their study giving back to the community in return for help was by far the most cited reason for for people to participate.

Furthermore, Wasko and Faraj (2000) suggested that members are not simply interested in a forum for questions and answers, but appreciate the online dialogue, the debate and the discussion around topics of interest. Members help each other thanks to the possibility of *reciprocation* (Kollock 1999; Wasko and

Faraj 2000). In other words, they expect that interaction will be available in the future. People feel that the community provides access to knowledge rather than just information.

Finally, Wasko and Faraj (2000) argued that communities are especially critical of workers who do not have direct access to others in their practice. Therefore, they pointed out that online communities should use technologies that keep track of the structure of the interaction, archive discussions in a searchable format, and display the identities of group members.

Gruen et al. (2005) proposed a conceptual model to examine the key factors that drive c-to-c exchanges as well as the outcomes of the exchanges. They used the theory of motivation, opportunity and ability (MacInnis, Moormann, Jaworski 1991) to explain levels of c-to-c know-how exchange. They suggested that companies can impact the company-customer relationship by helping their customer to build productive relationships among themselves. In their model Gruen et al. (2005) also present the factors influencing three elements suggested in the MOA theory: *motivation, opportunity and ability*. However, as in the other earlier studies considering this area, Gruen et al.'s (2005) perspective is different from the one used in this study, since their model derives from the customer as the attraction concept derives from the online community.

Ridings and Gefen (2004) studied the importance of the reasons in assessing why people come to online communities. Hence, they directly asked the members why they joined. They asked an open-ended question "Why did you join?" in discussion forums of 27 online communities. They divided online communities into five categories (Preece and Ghozati 1998): health/wellness communities, personal interest communities, pet communities, professional communities and sport recreation communities. As a result, they got 569 different reasons from 399 people.

Ridings and Gefen (2004) categorised the results to four initial categories by two judges who worked independently of each other. These categories were selected based on earlier literature and labelled *exchange information, social support, friendship and recreation*. In addition, the judges were able to use another category if the result did not fit into the given ones. After the coding process, common interest and technical reasons were added to the given categories.

According to Ridings and Gefen's (2004) results, most people sought for *either friendship or exchange of information and a markedly lower percentage for social support or recreation*. They found that the results were significantly dependent on the different community types. Yet, in all types information exchange was the most important reason. Social support was the second most popular reason for members in communities with health/wellness and professional/occupational topics, but friendship was the second most popular reason among members in communities dealing with personal interests/hobbies, pets or recreation. Therefore, according to Ridings and Gefen (2004), online community managers should not only emphasise the content but also encourage the friendship and social support aspects if they wish to increase the success of their online community.

4 METHODOLOGY

Firstly, the role of the researcher, theoretical paradigms as well as the logic of the study is discussed. Then, the research process and research design are depicted. The chapter continues with presenting data collection and analysis and ends with the assessment of the methodology.

4.1 Theoretical paradigms and perspectives

According to Peter and Olson (1983), different approaches to science can be divided into two categories that are positivistic/empiricist and relativistic/constructionist. Hunt (1991) has added another category, modern empirism, in the middle of these two categories. Further, Guba and Lincoln (1994, 2003) have named competing paradigms as positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism. These paradigms are compared in Table 13, where the closest ones with this study are marked with the dark colour.

Table 13. *Basic beliefs (metaphysics) of alternative inquiry paradigms (Guba and Lincoln 1994, p. 109; 2003, p. 256)*

Item	Positivism	Postpositivism	Critical theory et al.	Constructivism
Ontology	Naive realism - <i>real reality</i> but apprehendable	Critical realism - <i>real reality</i> but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehendable	Historical realism – virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallised over time	Relativism – local and specific constructed realities
Epistemology	Dualist / objectivist; findings true	Modified dualist / objectivist; critical tradition / community; findings probably true	Transactional / subjectivist; value mediated findings	Transactional / subjectivist; created findings
Methodology	Experimental / manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods	Modified experimental / manipulative; critical multiplism; may include qualitative methods	Dialogic / dialectical	Hermeneutic/ dialectical

In Guba and Lincoln’s terms postpositivism is the closest paradigm to depict this study. Alternatively, using Hunt’s terms, the present study represents the values and views of modern empirism. Postpositivism represents the critical realism as it assumes that the reality is only imperfectly apprehendable. From the epistemological perspective, postpositivism assumes the research is seen objectivistically and findings are probably true. Further, postpositivism prefers using multiple methods, also including qualitative methods. Since the study is made in continuous interplay between theory and empiria, it can also be located within the research tradition that emphasises a dialogue between empirical material and theory (e.g. Pihlanto 1994).

The subjectivist and objectivist approaches are usually presented as being at opposite ends of a continuum where one end represents a very objective and the other one a very subjective world-view. However, the two approaches are just two extremes on the continuum, not the only possible alternatives. The present study aims to understand, interpret and explain the phenomenon under study rather than to find law-like generalisations. Therefore, this study is closer to an

ideographic research methodology, the opposite of nomothetic methodology, and can also be referred to as an action-oriented (hermeneutic) approach (see e.g. Pihlanto 1994).

Postpositivism or modern empirism is the preferred paradigm for case study, such as this study, for several reasons. Firstly, case study research areas are usually contemporary and pre-paradigmatic (Boing 1994). For this reason, the research areas usually require inductive theory building. Secondly, realism does not suffer from the limitations of relativism (Hunt 1991) that constructivism and critical theory do, for realism is characterised by some researcher objectivity. That is, it holds that there is an external reality (Tsoukas 1989), although the complexity of that reality and the limitations of the researcher's capabilities makes the triangulation of data essential to refine observations of that reality. (Perry 1998) Further, case study research efforts usually involve the collection of perceptions of *unobservable* external world phenomena such as perceptions (Hunt 1991). Marketing literature shows (Hunt 1991) that positivism requires that only observable phenomena can and should be researched, so realism rather than positivism is a more appropriate epistemological guide for case study research.

The perspective of this research admits that achieving the absolute truth of the real world is impossible. However, the main objective of science is to depict and explore the real world as well as possible while minimising interruptive factors affecting empirical study.

4.2 The logic of the study

Deductive and inductive logic are usually seen as the two major approaches in theory development. Deductive logic is used to test theory while inductive is used to build theory. (Bonoma 1985; Parkhe 1993; Romano 1989) Whereas deductive theory logic is usually associated with positivistic paradigm, inductive theory is often associated with constructivist paradigm (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Love 1991, p. 24).

However, it is unlikely that any researcher could genuinely separate the two processes of induction and deduction. According to Richards (1993, p. 40) both (prior theory and theory emerging data) are always involved, often simultaneously, and that it is impossible to go theory-free into any study. Furthermore, Gummesson (2002b) points out that:

We also use our senses and our common sense, intuition, tacit knowledge, and experience in conjunction with systematic, scholarly research and everyday observations from practice.

Furthermore, in reality the researcher has to constantly go back and forth between different research strategies as well as empirical observations and theory (Dubois and Gadde 2002, pp.555-556). Also Miles and Huberman (1994,

p. 17) stressed the importance of *prestructured research* for new qualitative researchers who work in the area where some understanding has already been achieved but where more theory building is required before theory testing can be done. Parkhe (1993, pp. 252, 256) argues that the process of ongoing theory advancement requires *continuous interplay* between the two. A prior theory can be seen as some additional evidence that can be used to triangulate on the external reality of the case study researcher's realism paradigm (Perry 1998).

This kind of reasoning logic which is situated in the middle of deductive and inductive logics is called *abductive logic*. Alvesson and Skölberg (1994) point out that compared to inductive and deductive logic, abductive logic stresses a dynamic interaction between theory and phenomenon, and it can be regarded as more productive in theory development as the other logics. Abductive logic allows *an intertwined research process*, which enables handling of the interrelated various elements, which is the major challenge in case studies (Dubois and Gadde 2002). In abductive logic, the idea is to start with taking empirical data to the theoretical level, in other words starting from the phenomenon as this study does (Alvesson and Sköldberg 1994). Figure 6 illustrates the differences between inductive, abductive and deductive logic.

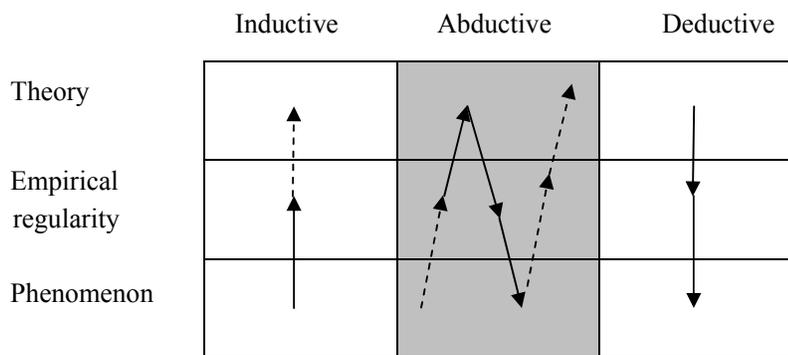


Figure 6. The distinction between inductive, abductive and deductive logic (modified from Alvesson and Sköldberg 1994)

Therefore, abductive logic is commonly used among qualitative researchers especially in case studies. Bonfantini and Proni (1983) suggested interpreting the abductive guessing instinct not only as a natural insight, a *lumen naturale*, but also as a *lumen culturale*, *an insight in our cultural background* (Bonfantini and Proni 1983, p. 134). Thus, as Eco said, *the abductive logic of interpretation* could also become a model for hermeneutic processes (Eco 1990, p. 59).

Also Gummesson (2000) stressed that interaction and communication play a crucial role in the research process. According to him, *interactive research* used in case studies enables to recognise complexity and ambiguity. Interaction

between practice and theory played a central role in the present study, and therefore, in addition to calling this study abductive, the approach of the present study can be also referred to as an interactive approach. Since the earlier studies of the phenomenon constituted a rather fragmented area instead of a coherent theory, there was a need to start from empiria, abductive logic enabled a constant interplay between the results of the empiria and the earlier studies. In general, the research process can also be described as dynamic and flexible.

4.3 The research process

The interest towards online communities emerged during the researcher's master's thesis considering personalised web services in Nokia's customer community, Club Nokia. After graduating, the researcher worked for eBusiness Research Center, where she involved in building an international online community aimed to bring together researchers, businesses and financiers. This job gave interesting insights into the phenomenon and also practical knowledge concentrating especially on the building of online communities but also planning the whole strategy and value proposition for the online community. One of the questions that aroused back then concerned the issue why members would create and maintain relationships with our online community.

During her dissertation process the researcher was involved in writing several conference papers related to online communities. These papers reflect the changes of the researcher's interests in this research area. Therefore, company online communities are approached from different viewpoints in these papers. First, she was interested in the role of online communities in the companies' strategy (Mäntymäki 2002), the classification of online communities (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003) and the management process of online communities (Mäntymäki and Mittilä 2004). After that, she got interested in relationship marketing with online communities (Mäntymäki and Mittilä 2003), the online research with online communities (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2004) as well as attraction (Mäntymäki and Mittilä 2005) and the opposite phenomenon, non-attraction (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2006). Also, the seniors' attraction factors were studied and the results were compared with the results of this study (Mittilä and Antikainen 2006)

Over all, writing and presenting conference and seminar papers helped the researcher to break the work into the smaller reasonable entities. Furthermore, by presenting the papers in various forums the researcher was able to get interesting insights and ideas in addition to new contacts and experiences. Again, the conference papers helped to make the decision of the perspective of the study. These studied are also used in the secondary material in this study.

During the preunderstanding phase, the first pilot study and the first interviews with the maintainers, it was possible to conclude that the companies were using their online communities as tools in their relationship marketing, which aroused the researcher's interest. While considering relationship

marketing in company online communities, it became clear that it is important to consider why customers establish relationships with online communities. This ended up with the conclusion that attraction is a central concept in the aim to understand that. The concept of attraction was already studied in the relationship marketing, which encouraged selecting the perspective of the study. Studying attraction, it seemed that understanding relations and relationships between members and the online community is essential in order to understand the phenomenon.

The abductive research path is roughly presented in Figure 7. The study started with the conceptual analysis of company online communities. After forming preunderstanding, a pilot study concerning the classification of company online communities was conducted (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003). The study was made by selecting 30 online communities owned by companies and visiting their websites. After that it was possible to define the fundamental terms of the study. These terms were an online community, a company online community and attraction.

Then, there was enough preunderstanding to start collecting empirical data by interviewing the maintainers of the selected cases. Firstly, three communities were selected into the study. However, as one company had two interesting communities, it was decided to take them both as cases of this study. The interviews were theme interviews. In case study, the theme interviews form one source of information (Yin 2003), but also additional sources are used. In this study, the primary sources were interviews and questions posed to the members of case online communities, and the secondary sources were unofficial discussions, emails and websites including online communities' discussion forums. The analysis of the data already started in the ongoing phase of the study. In the third phase of the study a new interview round was conducted to update the information.

Before conducting the study for members in the cases, it was necessary to test the method with the pilot study. The pilot study was conducted in six online communities that were other than case communities. The pilot study was considered successful, and therefore it justified carrying out the actual study by using the same methods. In addition, the results of the pilot study are used to validate and increase the ability to generalise the results of the study.

Then, in the second phase of the study the data was collected from members. Due to the characteristics of the cases, the methods differed between the cases. The number of the data collecting phases varied from one to three. As in the theme interviews, analysis and data collection were partly intertwined.

After that, the models of relationships were constructed and attraction based on the results and comparing them with the earlier literature. Then, the model was utilised in comparing the cases. In this phase it was noticed that since the first data collecting round was made about year ago, there was a need to update the data and conduct the second data collecting round among the maintainers and members. In this round new information was gained especially about the future plans of the case communities.

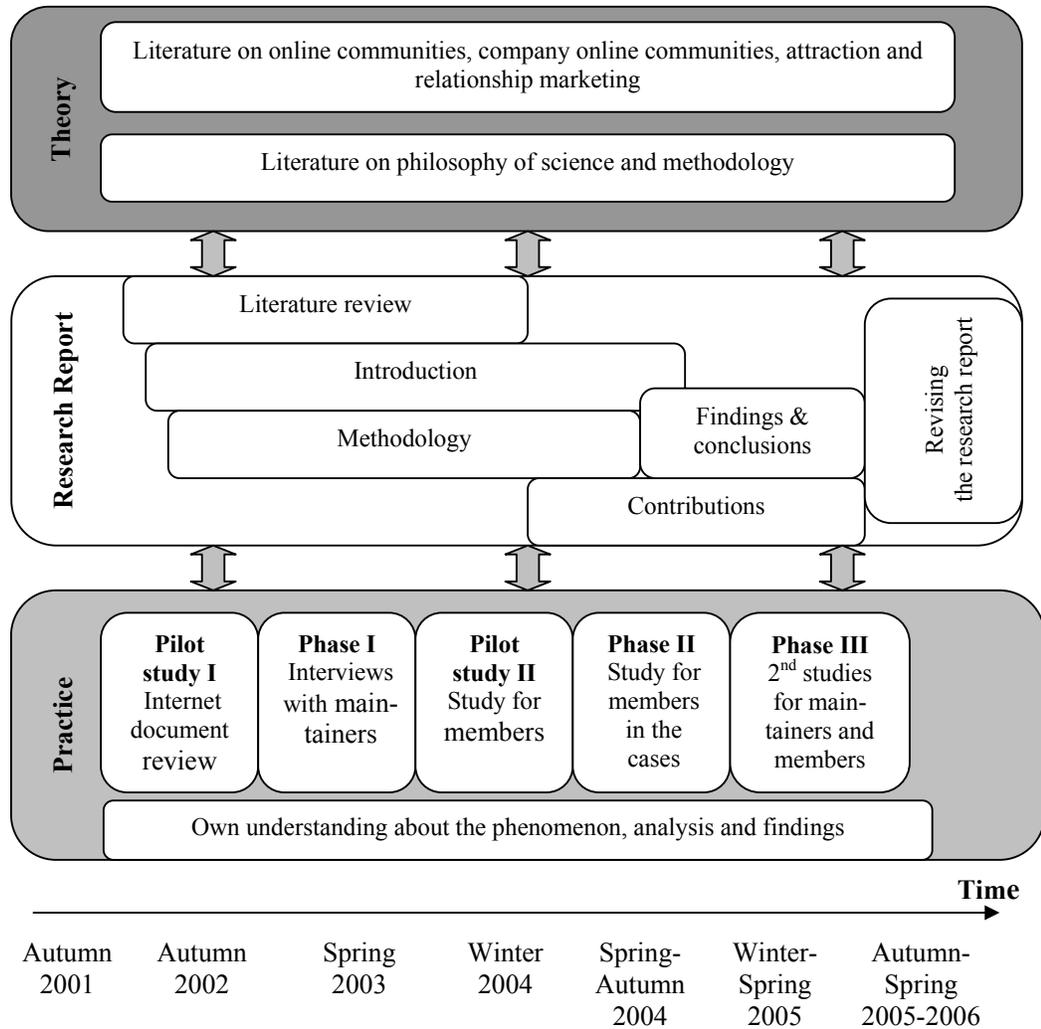


Figure 7. The abductive research path of the study

After that, the contributions of the studies and future research paths were written in the report. The report was written partly simultaneously and partly after the data collecting phases as Figure 7 illustrates. The final report was sent to the interviewees in the case companies and they were asked for comments.

4.4 The research design

4.4.1 Multiple case study approach

The case study approach is understood a bit differently in different research fields. According to Yin (1994, pp. 11-13), the case study research is a

comprehensive research strategy with the logic of design incorporating specific approaches to data collection and to data analysis. He has defined the case study as follows:

The case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident. The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situations in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

Furthermore, a case study is not a methodological choice but rather a choice of what is to be studied (Stake 2000). It is important to note that the case study strategy should not be confused with qualitative research; in fact, case studies may use both qualitative and quantitative data. One common misunderstanding has also been to confuse case studies with ethnographies or limit them to concern mainly participant observation, which is in fact only one possible source of evidence in case study strategy (Yin 2003, pp. 12-14).

As a research strategy, case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organisational, social, political, and related phenomena. Not surprisingly, case study has been broadly used in marketing among other sciences. (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2002; Yin 2003)

However, case study is only one strategy among several others of doing research. Others include experiments, surveys, histories and the analysis of archival information. Each strategy has specific advantages and disadvantages, depending on three factors: (a) the type of the research question, (b) the control of an investigator has over actual behavioral events and (c) the focus on contemporary as opposed to historical phenomena. In general, using case study is regarded as a relevant strategy when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin 2003).

The chosen research questions guide a path towards the suitable research strategy. Due to the explorative nature of the present study the questions considered in this study are mostly *what?*. In this study the *what* question was chosen because it is often needed in order to define a phenomenon and to study it further. Tötti (2000, pp 74-101) has discussed about different research questions suitable in qualitative and quantitative research. He suggested that when depicting a phenomenon, *what* is an essential question to start with. Although, the *how* question may in some cases refer into explanatory study (cf. Tötti 2000), in this study the first question concerning *how company online communities can be classified* is meant to be depictive as well.

In addition to the conditions mentioned above, case study research is especially well suited when the purpose of the research is a deep understanding of the nature and relevance (Lukka and Kasanen 1993). Furthermore, the case

study is preferred when examining contemporary events and when behaviour cannot be manipulated. (Yin 2003, p.7)

This study is a multiple case study including four cases, i.e. four online communities which were investigated empirically. Using many cases is common, because they allow *cross-case analysis* that is used in theory building (Perry 1998). A two-step theory building position is consistent with the realism paradigm's search for capabilities rather than regularities, for analytic generalisation (Tsoukas 1989) rather than statistical generalisation (Easton 1994; Ragin and Becker 1992; Yin 2003). In analytic generalisation *the investigator is striving to generalise a particular set of results to a broader theory* (Yin 2003, pp. 32-33). In fact, generalisation in qualitative research is not parallel to what the term means in quantitative research. According to Alasuutari (1995, p. 251) in qualitative studies authors always indicate how they assume or claim that their study increases knowledge broader than the specific case analysed.

However, there is a danger that empirical case studies using grand theorisation can become merely carriers of an identical prior understanding. This happens when distinctive new themes are missed, because of the dominating pre-existing theoretical framework. As Alvesson and Sköldböck (2000, p. 68) pointed out that "too far-reaching an emphasis on pre-understanding and given frames of reference amounts to the disappearance of the object and its absorption by the subject."

According to Yin (1994, p. 45) the evidence of a multiple case study is often considered more compelling and the study is altogether more robust than a single case study. An additional reason in favour of selecting multiple cases is that it also allows the use of replication logic. However, the obvious disadvantage is often the long time required to gather the information from multiple cases.

Case study is also known as *a triangulated research strategy*, which means using different types of materials, theories, methods and investigators in the same study (e.g. Brewer and Hunter 1989; Denzin 1978; Koskinen, Alasuutari and Peltonen 2005; Patton 1987). Stake (1995) used the term triangulation about the protocols that are used to ensure accuracy and alternative explanations. The need for triangulation derives from the ethical need to confirm the validity of the processes. In case studies, using multiple sources of data could do this.

The present study utilises the triangulation of data, methods and theories in order to understand the complex phenomenon and to increase the quality of this study. The data was collected during the study by theme interviews, posing a question in discussion forums as well as using other documents as secondary material. Both parties of an online community, maintainers and members were explored in order to gain two perspectives of the phenomenon.

To conclude, the multiple case study approach is in particular suitable for this research, as both concepts, online communities and attraction, have been studied only little and the purpose is a deep understanding of the selected cases. The multiple case study design allows replication logic to be used and the results are expected to be more reliable together. Therefore, also achieving a deep understanding is more likely with multiple cases than with a single case.

4.4.2 *The number of cases and the unit of analysis*

In case study research one or several cases are used for making specific or general conclusions about certain phenomena, recognising the multitude of variables, complex interrelations and ambiguities of social life (Gummesson 2001, p. 34). The selection of the number of cases is not done on statistical grounds in multiple case studies; instead the issue should be approached conceptually (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 30). Multiple cases are used to add confidence to the findings (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 29).

Yin (2003, pp. 46-50) advises that multiple cases should be regarded as multiple experiments and not multiple respondents in a survey. The number of cases is related to the number of replications sought for. The more replications designed the more certainty about the results there is (Yin 2003, pp. 47-51).

For these reasons addressed replication logic, not sampling logic should be used for multiple-case studies. Therefore, representativeness is not the criteria for case selection (Stake 1995), rather than the selected case predicts similar or contrary results (Yin 2003). Conversely, the sample is theoretical and purposeful; it can be anything from one case to several, depending on when the saturation is reached. This kind of study, when theory generation and theory testing are done concurrently, can be called an interactive research (Gummesson 2001, pp. 38-39). In this study, the cases were selected by judgemental sampling where *an expert uses judgement to identify representative samples* (Aaker and Day 1997).

Patton (1990) has listed 15 strategies for purposeful sampling. In some cases he even advises in some cases to use *maximum variation* that may include very extreme cases, but the most important is to use *information rich cases*. Naturally, the choice of the cases is also dependant on the conceptual framework developed from the theory. Thus, the companies selected in this study vary from each other many ways.

In this research, three companies with altogether four online communities were regarded as sufficient to allow for enough replication. This, however, required careful selection of sample cases to allow both literal and theoretical replication. In literal replication similar results are predicted and in theoretical replication contrasting results but for predictable reasons are predicted. An important step in replication logic is the development of a rich theoretical framework. The framework needs to state the conditions under which a particular phenomenon is likely to be found, that is called a literal replication. In addition also the conditions when it is not likely to be found, in other words when a theoretical replication is needed (Yin 2003, p. 47). The present study aims to build a rich theoretical framework about the attraction factors of company online communities. Therefore, different types of company online communities are chosen for this study.

In Figure 8 the design of the present study is illustrated by using one of the cases as an example. The case research may be designed as embedded or holistic. When the same case study involves more than one unit of analysis it is referred

to as embedded. Alternatively, when a single unit of analysis is selected it is called a holistic design. (Yin 2003, pp. 39-40)

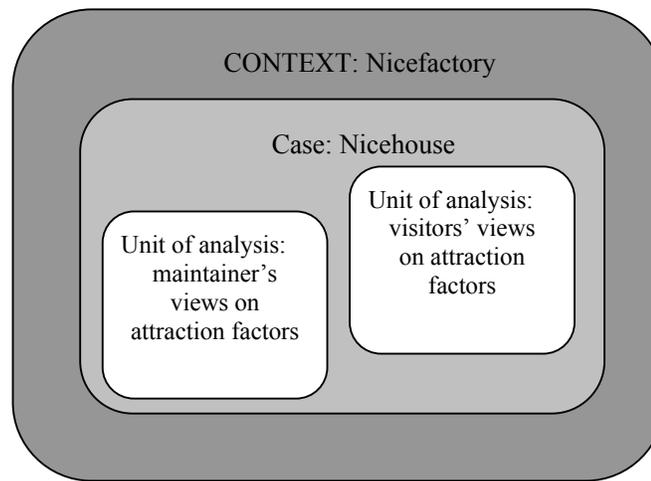


Figure 8. The design of the study, Nicehouse as an example (modified from Yin 2003, p. 40)

This study represents an embedded model where online communities are the cases. However, two of the cases are maintained by the same company, and therefore they partly share the same context. In each case, there are two units of analysis, namely the attraction factors from the members and maintainer's viewpoints.

4.4.3 *Selecting the cases*

The selection of the cases was made by following the guidelines discussed before. Since there is no universal list of such online communities, and therefore random sampling from the list of all company online communities is impossible, the criteria for choosing the cases were based on theory and rational reasons. This kind of selection is used widely among other researchers of the same field (e.g. Parks and Floyd 1996; Preece and Ghazati 1998; Ridings, Gefen and Arinze 2002; Ridings and Gefen 2004)

The cases were selected so that they meet the following criteria:

1. The case is the online community maintained by a company and used in some way to enhance the company's relationship marketing. The researcher decided if the online community was used in enhancing the relationship marketing basis of the information gained from the web site and the interviews.

2. The concept of online communities was operationalised as follows: the following elements should be found in case online communities: purpose, people, politics and interactive software, for example a discussion forum or a flea market. However, in one case (Mainio), the discussion forum was closed during the research process.
3. To be able to get an adequate amount of answers from members, the case online communities have to gain over 10.000 members per month.
4. The researcher has to get the access to the case.

In order to build a generic model of attraction, different types of company online communities were selected for the study. Therefore, the cases were compared by using the classification model (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003, p. 323). However, some of the features of the cases were verified only after the first interviews, and the cases were selected based on some preliminary information gathered beforehand on their websites and from the contact persons.

Based on these criteria, the following online communities were selected as cases for this study:

1. Nicehouse
2. Sooda
3. Mainio
4. *Code* (The name of this company and its online community are fictional because of the request of the company.)

Table 14 presents the selected case companies together with some key criteria for selection. The amount of the members was based on the information received from the maintainers.

Table 14. *The case online communities and selection criteria*

Online community	Maintainer	Customer segment	Interactive software
Nicehouse	Nicefactory	Women, families	Discussion forum
Sooda	Nicefactory ¹	Teenagers	Discussion forum, competitions, flea market, mobile services, question and answer sections, virtual pets and many other interactive services
Mainio	OP Bank Group	Bank's customers and potential customers	Discussion forum (was in the starting phase)
Code	<i>Company X</i>	Software developers	Discussion forum

Nicehouse is one of the first Finnish online communities focused on women. It is still a very popular online community focusing on the members' discussions with a strong sense of community. The second one, Sooda, is for teenagers, and is concentrating very much on innovative services. Therefore, it is assumed that the attraction factors between those online communities are different. Furthermore, Mainio, which is for the bank's customers, focuses strongly on the high quality editorial content, and again, differs from the others. The last online community, Code, represents a community for professionals, being very international and information-oriented. As stated earlier, a common factor in these communities is that one of the maintainers' purpose concentrates on enhancing customer relationships.

The main empirical data was collected by using theme interviews for maintainers and posing investigating members in case online communities. Next the data collecting is described step by step.

4.5 Data collecting and processing

The next chapter discusses the collection of data as well as the analysis of data. The main empirical data was collected by using theme interviews for maintainers and investigating members in case online communities. In addition, two pilot studies were conducted: one as an Internet search and another by posing an open

¹ Since 2004 Zento

question for members of different online communities. The first pilot study, theme interviews for company representatives, the second pilot study and actual study for members of case online communities are discussed next in chronological order. Because methods varied between the cases, each case is discussed in its own subchapter.

4.5.1 The first pilot study: the classification of company online communities

In order to understand the classification of company online communities the first pilot study was started by focusing on the state-of-the-art of the research field. Since the literature considering classification was fragmented and lacking a coherent framework, it was decided to explore this issue empirically.

The research process consisted of three intertwined phases: the literature review, the Internet search and the analysis. The first phase in this research was to scrutinise the literature concerning the research problem area. The framework for analysis was constructed based on this review.

The second phase was to make observations from practice by visiting different commercial online communities' websites to gather information about the relationships of online communities introduced in the literature and to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The approach to the problem was actually a combination of two methods, namely, document review and observation. According to Stake (1995, 68) these both methods follow the same line of thinking and they back up each other. In these methods, research questions should be carefully developed in advance and a system set up to keep things on track.

Due to the intertwined phases of literature review and Internet search, the studied communities' sites were visited more than once during the process. In the third phase, findings were coded and analysed on the six relationships chosen on the basis of the literature. In the analysis of the cases the focus was to note similarities and differences between the communities.

The search for potential cases was based on the researchers' knowledge of the existing online communities, search engines and the references of authors who had researched online communities. By using different sources, it was made more certain that different kind of online communities were included in our research. The number of selected communities was thirty, ten representing communities maintained by a Finnish company, sixteen from the United States, two from Great Britain, one from Germany and one from the Netherlands.

The community had to fulfil some criteria to be selected into this research. Firstly, due to the focus of the study, communities selected had to be maintained by a company. Secondly, there had to be some evidence of the community, which meant that clear interaction between members or between members and representatives of the company was observable. Thirdly, a clear purpose why the community exists was required to be identifiable.

4.5.2 *Collecting data from maintainers*

Nicehouse and Sooda

The empirical data of the study was collected by interviewing three key informants in each case company. In each case there was a contact person who organised the access into the company and in some cases also recommended the persons to be interviewed.

During the interviews Nicefactory was the maintainer of both online communities, Nicehouse and Sooda, so both of them were considered in the same interviews. The idea was to interview people who had different responsibilities in the case companies in order to get information from different perspectives. Hence, the informants in Nicefactory were a content manager, a marketing assistant, a concept designer, and a person responsible for the daily management of online communities.

The main objective of the interviews was to find an answer to the research question, in other words to explore what kind of attraction factors the maintainers suppose there are. In addition, the discussion themes also included other topics such as the maintainer's business logic and objectives for the online community as well as the building process, history and management of the online community. Furthermore, the maintainers were asked to give their definition of the online community, tell about the closest competitors, and forecast the future of the online community. These topics were seen as important in order to construct a comprehensive view about the case.

The interviewer had an interview guide with her in the discussions. The guide included the themes, which are presented in Appendix 1. However, the themes were not given to the maintainers beforehand in order to remain spontaneity in discussions. Naturally, some of the maintainers spoke more than others, so the nature of the discussions varied from a more structured interview to a discussion or even almost a monologue of the maintainer. Depending on the maintainer, the length of the discussions varied from one hour to two hours. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

As the interviews went on and knowledge increased, some of the questions turned irrelevant in the context, and the interviews became more qualitative theme interviews. In some cases it was not relevant to ask about the same information from many informants and as a consequence the discussion themes varied at the same time as the amount of information increased. Also the background of the maintainer influenced the themes. Different themes were chosen on the basis of the maintainers' positions and responsibilities in the company. For example, in an interview with the marketing manager, more marketing related themes were included.

Finally, during conclusion drawing, the need for new data occurred. The first interviews were conducted over one and half years ago, and therefore the key informants were contacted again and new interviews were made to get information about the latest developments. The second interview guide is included in Appendix 2. In general, the strategy was to choose the most valuable

informants who could answer all the relevant questions. In Nicefactory, the content manager and a person responsible for daily management were interviewed personally in the second round. These two informants were also asked to fill in a short questionnaire (Appendix 2) in the second phase. The aim of this questionnaire was to validate the suggested model of attraction. The questionnaire included a question about how important they regarded the different attraction factors in the framework. The maintainers were asked to mark values from one to five to test if they found the factors relevant. They were also asked about comments on the factors and possible proposals for additional factors to increase the reliability of the results. In Nicefactory, the maintainers filled in the questionnaire at the end of the interview. Hence, they had a possibility to ask specifying questions about the questionnaire. However, the maintainers did not make any suggestions about new factors.

Especially in Nicehouse this method revealed that although some of the factors in the questionnaire were not mentioned in the first interview round, they were regarded as important based on the values filled in the questionnaire. If the members had also filled the same kind of form, it is suggested that the results may have been similar. The reason is that by using an open-ended question only a part of the factors come up, while some important or less important factors are not mentioned. Since the main issue in this study is to explore the attraction factors without giving any restricting choices for respondents, this questionnaire for the maintainers is used only as secondary data.

Mainio

In Mainio the interviewed persons were the executive director, the managing editor and the marketing manager. The objectives were similar to Nicefactory's case, and therefore, the interviews followed the same guide as in Nicefactory (Appendix 1).

In the second phase, the managing director was interviewed by phone and with a similar interview guide as in Nicehouse and Sooda (Appendix 2). He was also asked to fill in the short questionnaire (Appendix 2) by email. Despite the encouragement of asking questions or suggesting new factors, he had no additional factors or questions considering the questionnaire.

Code

In Code, the informants were a developer marketing manager, a former expert in the community, a product manager, a person responsible for the Code's community programme, and a person who is responsible for technical documentation and discussion forums. In Code's case two of the interviews were made by email because of schedule and location problems. This kind of procedure was also possible, because there already was lots of information on the case from the earlier informants.

In the second phase, a person who was responsible for the technical documentation and the discussion forums was interviewed by email upon his

request. After the interview, he was also asked to fill in the short questionnaire by email. However, he did not answer to this request, and therefore, the developer marketing manager, was contacted and asked to fill in the questionnaire. Similar to the other cases, no comments or questions about the factors were received. Table 15 summarises the data sources of the case communities.

Table 15. *Collected data from maintainers of the case online communities*

The maintainer company	Case online community	Method	Number of interviews
Nicefactory and Zento	Nicehouse and Sooda	1 st round: Face-to-face interviews	3
		2 nd round: Face-to-face interviews	2
OP Bank Group	Mainio	1 st round: Face-to-face interviews	3
		2 nd round: Phone interviews	1
Company X	Code	1 st round: Face-to-face interviews	2
		1 st round: Interviews by email	3
		2 nd round: Interviews by email	1
Altogether			15

Some additional questions were posed by email during the research processes that are not included in Table 15.

4.5.3 Collecting data from members

The pilot study

To test the method before conducting the actual study a pilot study was conducted. To ensure the response rate in the actual study, the case online communities were not used in the pilot. Instead, six other company online communities were chosen. The selection was based on the popularity and customer profile of the online communities. From two online communities two discussion forums in which chosen, so there were altogether eight discussion forums where the pilot study was conducted. However, one of the forums was extracted from the study because the message was removed from the forum by the maintainer. There was no selection of the respondents, so all kind of members, actively involved and not actively involved (i.e. lurkers) were able to

answer. According to the researchers (e.g. Nonnecke and Preece 2000a) lurkers have to be considered as silent, but still important participants of online communities.

Since the term attraction is an abstract term with many meanings, it was necessary to operationalise it. Instead of asking “What attracts you here?” it was thought that asking “Why do you visit this forum?” is easier to answer and will guide the informant in telling about the attraction factors.

The messages that were sent to the discussion forums consisted of a single question and a short description of the background of the study. The topic of the message was similar to the question. The members of the community were invited to respond either directly on the discussion list, or privately by email to the researcher. However, responding directly to the board was recommended because of the possibility in generating discussion about the question. All the messages were not sent at the same time but in a week’s period. This procedure enabled to observe the usability of the chosen method. After two days sending the first message, a new message was sent to the forums where the discussions were not active. These messages included compliments and also encouragement to discuss further.

The study was concluded with altogether 68 answers to the questions with different lengths, which constructed about 25 pages text. The main amount of the responses came during the first days, but in some forums the last answers were written after sixteen days of sending the question. Respondents used an alias, but some included their age, and in some cases their gender was deduced based on their nicknames. However, people may use a nickname that refers to the opposite gender, and therefore, no sure conclusions can be made based on this information. Two of the chosen forums were clearly aimed for teenagers. These were popular forums and there was a lot of discussion. However, these forums produced only three answers. Therefore, based on the pilot study it seemed that young people were not very willing to answer the question.

Four of the chosen forums were mainly aimed for women; yet there were some amount of men and based on their alias some of the respondents seem to be men. Then, two of the forums were for both genders, but in the other case, due to the discussion topic that was cars and traffic, it seemed that the main part of the members were men. In fact, all the respondents in the pilot study from that forum were presumably men.

The quality of the answers seemed to be appropriate since there were only a few inappropriate messages. In general, there were also very in-depth answers considering for example social fears. The highest amount of the answers (33) came from the forum that is focused mainly for women. However, on the basis of the nicknames or other information, there were at least three answers from men.

The analysis of the data was started already during the study. The answers were fed to the analysis software called QSR NVivo. The analysis consisted of searching and identifying different themes from the answers that were then combined to the categories. These results gave the initial knowledge of the attraction factors and the usability of the method.

Since the pilot study was successful, it justified to collect data from case communities' members by following the same guidelines. Yet, due to the characteristics of the case communities, the data collection had to be carried out differently in each case. Next, the collection of data is discussed in each online community.

Nicehouse

After the pilot study, the data collection in the cases began. Nicehouse was chosen as the first case. Nicehouse includes 24 forums around different themes, which attract approximately 9000 visitors every day. The research question "Why do you visit Nicehouse?" was first posted to two forums (Appendix 3). After noticing that the saturation point was not yet reached, data was collected in five other discussion forums.

In the first two forums the same discussion threads were continued after four days. A new message was written in the forums that included a request to send more answers. However, this did not generate new answers and, consequently, this method was also discarded in other forums because the saturation point for the purpose of the study seemed to be reached with 44 answers. In this context, the saturation point refers that when analysing data there were no new categories found anymore.

However, before finishing the study, after almost a year from conducting the first study, the study was repeated to ensure the quality of the collected data. The question posed in the forum was formed a bit differently; it actually included three questions to give more information. These questions are included in Appendix 3. The main question was formed as follows: "What draws you here?" The reason for modifying the main question was the idea that this kind of formulation may even better encourage respondents to tell about attraction factors. Yet, there were not remarkable differences between the answers for the first and the modified question.

The second question considered whether the respondent visits other communities as well and if yes, why? The aim of this question was to be able to find also attraction factors that other online communities may offer. The final question asked if the respondent has stopped visiting some online community and if yes, why? The aim was to get information about the reasons why someone stops visiting by using a negative anonym to attraction factors. This kind of procedure is often used in grounded theory method. These questions were first posed in two forums, and then with small changes in two other forums with small changes. The second round produced ten new answers. These questions were posed first in two forums, and after that in two other forums with small changes. The second round produced ten new answers. At this point the saturation point was reached, in other words the point where new answers did not bring any new data, was gained.

Sooda

In Sooda, there are around 3500 visitors every day. The data collection was made using the same method as in Nicehouse with the exception that the question was posted only to one forum, which was clearly the most active one. As the results of the pilot study predicted, teenagers were not very eager to answer. In the first phase, there were eleven answers to the message. To increase the amount of the answers, the question in the forum was repeated after five days. Discussions were so active in Sooda that the question was already moved to the second site in the discussion thread, and therefore, the question was repeated. This produced nine more answers, and the saturation point seemed to be reached with these answers.

Then, similar to Nicehouse, the same kind of question was posed in Sooda in the second phase of the study (Appendix 3). This study resulted with four new answers which was enough.

Mainio

In Mainio's case there was no possibility to use the same method because the discussion forum was closed during the study. Therefore, it was decided to make a very short questionnaire with only one question "Why do you visit Mainio?" and some questions about the background of the respondents. (Appendix 4)

The professionals in Mainio coded the questionnaire into an electronic format. Then, the questionnaire was linked to Mainio's newsletter that has around 18 000 subscribers. In the first round, the study generated 23 answers. To be sure that the satisfactory amount of data was gathered, Mainio's following newsletter included a reminder, which led to 20 new answers. Conversely to other cases, the second round data collection was not conducted in Mainio because of the lack of the discussion forum and also because of using the questionnaire again was considered too difficult and time-consuming.

Code

In Code, the maintainer recommended that data gathering should be conducted by contacting some members directly by email. The contact information of Code's six members was received from the maintainer, and the question was mailed them by email. However, despite two reminders, this method produced only one answer.

After that, access to the discussion forums was received. Code includes eight main themes and each of them has a different amount of discussion boards. Altogether, the amount of discussion boards or forums is 39. Some of the forums are clearly more popular than others. The most popular forums were selected to the study. The question was first posted to two discussion boards. (Appendix 5)

After three days the question was posted to two other forums. Then, again, after three days it was posted to two other forums. Finally, the question was

repeated in two most popular forums after 20 days, which however, did not generate any new answers.

The data collection technique in this case was not very successful as only two answers by email and one answer to the discussion forum were received. For this reason, other data sources were also searched. Then, the discussion thread considering the user study was found on Code’s websites. The original message was sent by the maintainer to inform that some of the members will be contacted by email to ask for some feedback. The members had started a discussion around the topic and expressed their opinions about what kind of services they are interested in. In addition to development ideas, the discussion included a critique towards the services. In their answers, the members also considered things why they visit or would visit Code, and therefore this material was seen as sufficient for the study. The researcher has not influenced this material in the collecting phase, hence, it can be regarded as a naturally occurring data, which increases its reliability.

However, despite the problems of the first data collection round in the forums, the question was posted again to the two most popular forums. In Code’s case the first round was made later than in Nicehouse and Sooda, and therefore, the second round was made only a little over three months after the first one. The result was same as the last time producing only one answer.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Table 16 summarises different data collecting techniques that were used and the number of answers.

Table 16. *A summary of the data collected from members*

Case online community	Number of data collection rounds	Data collecting technique	Number of answers in the cases
Nicehouse	2	An open-ended question posed in the discussion forums	54
Sooda	3	An open-ended question posed in the discussion forum	24
Mainio	1	An online questionnaire	43
Code	1	An email questionnaire	1
	2	An open-ended question posed in the discussion forums	4
	1	Responses to the user study	41
	Number of answers altogether in Code		

The number of data collecting rounds refers to the times that a request for participation was posed. The data collection rounds as well as the techniques

varied between the cases in order to achieve the best possible results in terms of quality and quantity of the data.

4.5.4 Processing data

Maintainers' data

It is useful to start the analysis of the data already at an early stage (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 50). Hence, data collecting and analysis are intertwined with each other in this study. The advantage of this kind of action is that it ensures that a researcher collects an adequate amount of data as well as focuses on essential things.

After the interviews were transcribed, the data was coded. The analysis was conducted with the QSR NVivo software for qualitative analysis. First, the data was feed into the program. Then, all the data related to the research questions was coded. After that, the codes were organised under more abstract themes; this technique is also named as *pattern matching* (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 69) or in grounded theory as *open coding* (Järvinen and Järvinen 2000; Strauss and Corbin 1990). The themes were related to the questions of the interviews, but also the additional issues that had evolved during discussions were handled in the same way. This was done in order to avoid loosing any relevant information that was needed to get a complete picture about the particular case. Thus, all the relevant information that emerged in the interviews was coded and used in further analysis. Theme interviews were also used as a background material when depicting the case community.

Then, the data coded under the theme called attraction factors was further organised under subthemes. The analysis was inductive, in other words the themes of analysis emerged out of the data instead of being pre-defined. Furthermore, based on the attraction factors, it was possible to identify different relationships in company online communities. The classification of the factors was derived from reading and rereading the answers of the respondents until the themes started to emerge from the data. This part of the process where themes are sorted and reconstituted leading to the emergence of subthemes, linkages and relationships can also be called *axial coding* (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

The research process was *iterative*, so that if there was the need to get more data about some case, the interviewed persons were contacted again and additional questions were made. Then, the findings were tested against the database to verify the consistency and accuracy.

Members' data

The data from the members came in a written format, so it was directly fed to NVivo. The data was analysed using open and axial coding (Kruegar 1994; Strauss and Corbin 1990). After and partly intertwined with the analysis of interviews, the responses from the discussion forums were analysed and divided into themes and subthemes, or in this case into attraction factors. Similarly to the analysis of the maintainers' interviews, the aim was to find different themes that depicted online communities' attraction factors from the respondents' texts. No prior coding scheme was used, but the coding was based on the data.

4.5.5 Combining data

In the next phase, the themes and the subthemes from the maintainers' and the members' data were combined and reorganised again combining the overlapping themes. Finally, 16 subthemes were organised under five main themes. Table 17 illustrates the coding and interpretation of data to the attraction factors (subthemes).

Table 17. *An example of data analysis*

Example	Description	Attraction factor
"I think that in discussion forums you can find answers to your own practical questions more easily than from books or columns that offer only information. In discussions you can hear nicely different opinions."	Obtain and give professional or non-professional advice, experiences and information	Knowledge exchange with members (act/pass)
"It is also nice to see what others have created here.. Which I marvel often."	Content created by other members of the online community	Members' content

During the research process, some of the factors turned irrelevant for the purposes of the research and were dropped. Some of the subthemes and themes were overlapping each other and had to be combined and reorganised. The level of abstraction increased in the themes and subthemes during the analysis. Altogether, there were three complete rounds of analysis with the NVivo software.

Even though it is inevitable that a researcher has some kind of preliminary framework at least in his mind, the data was handled as openmindedly as possible. Yet, in the first round of the analysis, the themes as well as the factors reflected earlier literature. The themes, excluding one, were named the same as Preece's (2000) elements of online communities. However, as the understanding increased, the themes and factors differed from the earlier literature.

Due to the multiple cases, the analysis utilises *cross-case synthesis logic*. The technique is especially relevant if a case study consists of at least two cases. With multiple cases the analysis is easier and more robust than if there is only a single case. The technique treats each case study as a separate one (Yin 2003, p. 133). In this study the use of cross-case synthesis was conducted by searching and comparing similarities and differences between each case.

The cross-case synthesis was made by using both methods; *case-oriented analysis* as well as *variable-oriented analysis*. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) this method can be called *mixed strategies*. In mixed strategies, the cases are firstly analysed in-depth and the cross-cutting or key variables are evolved. Then the cases are systematically compared by using these variables.

Tables comparing the cases were used as tools for analysis as well as in presenting the results for readers. All in all, it is important to notice that writing and analysing processes happen partly simultaneously.

4.6 Case online communities

Next, before presenting the main results of the study, the four case online communities are briefly introduced. To provide a broad perspective for readers the backgrounds, the value for maintainers and members as well as the management of case online communities are presented.

4.6.1 Case descriptions

Nicehouse. The first case, Nicehouse, is aimed for women and families. Comfort, neutrality and safety depict the image of Nicehouse. Nicehouse is owned by a company called Nicefactory, which specialises in content production for digital media producing web services and creating online communities, learning environments, online shops and other innovative content production concepts for selected customer segments. Nicehouse is Nicefactory's first online community, launched in 1998. According to the interviewees, the original idea was to create an entertaining web service that is aimed for women, but lately the focus group has been broadened to families. Since the establishment, the amount of the members has increased constantly. According to the maintenance of Nicehouse, the counters showed that the daily average amount of visits was 16 905 in November 2005.

According to the user study, the members are mainly women (93 %). Furthermore, the biggest part of the members is at work (70 %) while twenty per cent are students and less than ten per cent are at home. (Taloustutkimus 9/2002)

The user interface is built *around the house metaphor*, which is shown in Figure 9. The house has theme rooms with different discussions and articles related to the theme. The idea behind the user interface is that it is easy to use also for those people who are beginners in web usage. The user interface has not changed much during the years but lately, registration has been added in some sections. However, most of the discussions do not require registration yet.

Although the focus is mainly on discussion forums, Nicehouse also offers a flea market, a shop, the possibility to order the recipe or the aphorism of the day by email, send a card and attend different competitions for its members. Furthermore, they offer also some mobile services: members can order ringing tones, picture messages and logos to cellular phones.



Figure 9. Nicehouse's screenshot (www.nicehouse.fi)

Nicehouse is maintained by Nicefactory which was established in February 1997. The company produces formats for multiple platforms, such as digital television and mobile media, mainly for the national market but also duplicable for the international market. Apart from creating content production concepts, Nicefactory develops its functions as a b-to-b service organisation that acts as a media operator, managing the client's web brand as a whole or partially and in

accordance with the client's needs, ranging from the implementation of the technical platform and maintenance to content production and management. Nicefactory also provides training in the field of digital media.

From the very beginning Nicefactory's objective was to create such online communities where the maintainers concentrate on writing articles and offer interactive services like discussion forums for members who then create the content by having discussions. Nicehouse's idea is to offer an entertaining web service for women and families where they can feel a sense of community, have in-depth discussions as well as get advice to various questions.

The business idea was to gain the main part of the earnings from advertisement selling. Yet, soon after Nicefactory launched Nicehouse, they saw that a web service is not economically profitable enough and that they would have to generate revenues through other channels, too. In the year 2003, Nicehouse launched their first own calendar that was sold in bookstores. The idea came from Nicefactory's (nowadays Zento's) another community Sooda that has its own successful calendar as well. Like Sooda's calendar, Nicehouse's calendar has sold very well and strengthened Nicehouse's brand as well.

Lately Nicefactory has started to collect customer information. Their aim is possibly to sell the gained information in future. Consequently, one of the options is to create Nicehouse into a strong web brand and a brand community, grow it big and then to sell it to a company that can gain also economic benefit from it.

An interesting point in Nicehouse's case is that Nicehouse is not aimed for Nicefactory's actual customers which are businesses, but for consumers. To conclude, Nicehouse mainly serves three different functions at the moment. Firstly, Nicefactory sells advertisements for companies to Nicehouse. Secondly, Nicehouse increases Nicefactory's knowledge of their core business, creating web and mobile services for companies. By building and maintaining Nicehouse they get valuable practical knowledge about these processes. Thirdly, one of the objectives is to strengthen Nicehouse's brand and create a cross-media as Sooda already is. The Nicehouse calendar was the first step towards this direction. The management of Nicefactory believes that if they find a strong partner, creating profit with cross-media concept will be possible already in the near future. According to the maintainers Nicefactory has filled the objective in a number of members, which has grown substantially every year.

Referring to the earlier discussion, the development of Nicehouse has been quite moderate; the user interface has changed only once after it was launched. However, in autumn 2003, Nicehouse launched a new product, a calendar for women. The calendar is sold in local bookstores and additional parts can be downloaded through Nicehouse's website. By this action, Nicehouse brand has extended from virtual media to the real world as well.

Only recently Nicefactory has started to systematically collect information about community members. By using this information the maintainer is able to offer personalised services for its members in the future. At the moment, members are required to register in some parts of the web service. Through registration, Nicefactory gains information about its members, which

information can later be sold to marketers. A part of the maintainers believe that members benefit from this kind of action as well because they get personalised advertisements on the products that interest them. Another benefit for members is that they get a possibility to register their nicknames and prevent anybody else from using it with this operation.

However, according to the maintainer, there is some level of resistance towards the registration, and therefore, the maintainer has to educate members to understand that this kind of service can not be maintained for free, but members have to give something in return. Even all the interviewed maintainers did not see personalised advertising and registration in a positive way. One of the maintainers pointed out that Nicefactory has been successful because it has not demanded anything or given too many choices for the members. According to the maintainer, there is the danger that a remarkable amount of the members would reject the online community as a consequence of the compulsory registration. In any case the objective in the future is to slowly change the registration to mandatory in several but not in all discussion forums.

According to the maintainers, the discussions do not need much moderation. Only some messages are inappropriate, and most of them are written by the same people in the same forum. Most discussions are appropriate considering also very profound topics. Nicehouse is also responsible for writing and acquiring articles for the community and checking of the messages on a daily basis. Generally, Nicefactory is not actively involved in discussions and stays anonymous to the members. Its role is mainly to delete inappropriate discussions. The following statement describes this:

Our relationship is clearly to be a maintainer. We are like a help desk.

Anyway, when a new discussion is started, the first message is usually written by the maintainer to activate the discussion. In addition, articles sometimes contain questions that draw people into discussions. The next statement depicts the role of the maintenance:

If we do not speak about checking messages but activating discussions or offering topics that increase conversations, I see that the maintenance, especially in the starting space, matters a lot. Everyone has some moderator to build the community, but in some phase the role changes. Of course, if the community's development slows down, stops or starts to degenerate, then the moderator is needed again, but mainly I think that these communities act on their own.

In addition to receiving actual feedback and answering it, Nicefactory's personnel read discussions as they do the daily cleaning operation of the sites. The personnel also follow discussions and for example a new discussion list may be added to a popular theme, which is illustrated with the following statement.

Maybe a list for single parents could be one example. It comes from the community; they needed to resolve their problems among their own group.

According to the maintainers, they receive quite a lot of feedback from the members in Nicefactory. The main part of the feedback comes via email to the maintainers and they answer it as soon as possible, in most cases during the same day. Members give feedback for example in problem situations or if they have some development ideas.

To collect systematic feedback from members, a survey is occasionally made among members by Taloustutkimus. In addition, Nicefactory collects and analyses the log data about the activities in the community as well, so that they know where their members come from to their site and what kind of software they use. All in all, the maintainers pointed out the customer orientation in their whole operation as follows:

Well, yes they (the ideas) come from users, we stress the user orientation mostly, so the community remains vital.

Sooda. The second case community is called Sooda. Sooda's original idea was to offer a high quality service for teenagers, which also familiarises them with the world of computers as well as the Internet. Sooda has also extended its brand to different products which are sold in stores. Sooda is owned by a company called Zento that shares the same owners with Nicefactory and works in the same business area as Nicefactory. Sooda was built two years after Nicehouse, in 2000. According to the maintainance, similar to Nicehouse, the number of members has grown every year. In November 2005, the average amount of the daily visits was 5511.

Sooda's member profile shows that 75 per cent of Sooda's members are girls. The biggest age group is 10-15 which constitutes 40 per cent of members. The second group is the olders aged 15-20 who constitute altogether 25 per cent of members (Taloustutkimus 9/2002).

Sooda is a trend service for young people and teenagers. Sooda differs from Nicehouse in many ways; it is impulsive, the sites are colourful and dynamically changing. Sooda offers a wide variety of services as discussions, competitions, a flea market, mobile services, a question and answer sections, virtual pets and many other interactive services. Sooda's layout is illustrated in Figure 10.

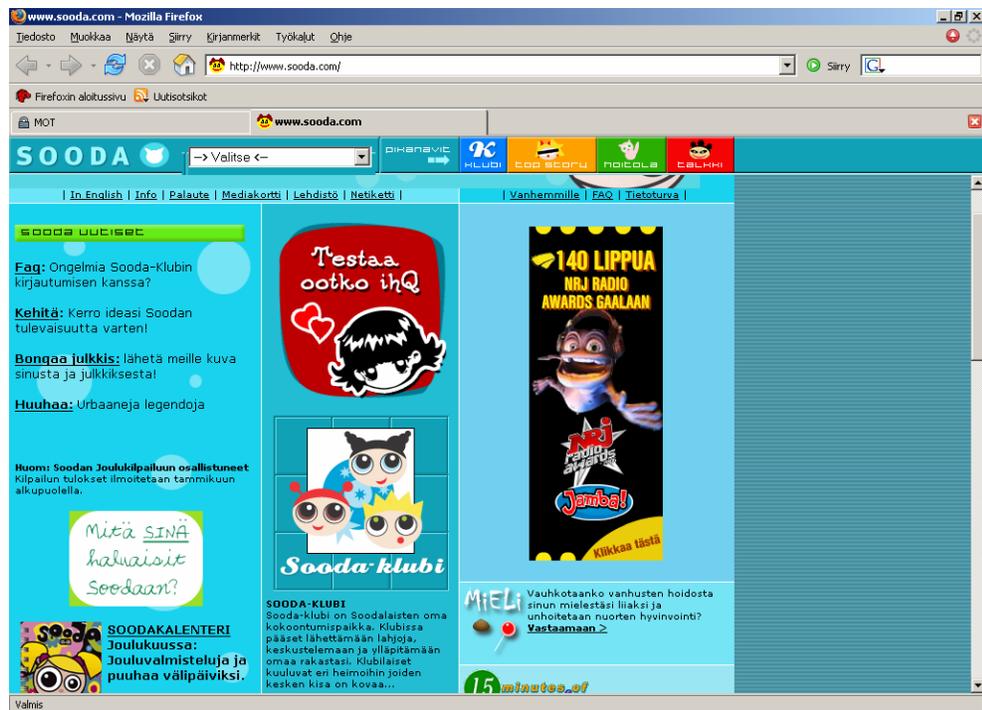


Figure 10. Sooda's screenshot (www.sooda.com)

Originally both Nicehouse and Sooda were maintained by Nicefactory Ltd. The situation changed in 2003 as Sooda got a new maintainer, a company called Zento Ltd. However, Zento and Nicefactory have the same maintainers and the reason for separating Zento from Nicefactory was to totally concentrate on the Sooda brand and to increase the possibilities to apply financing. Zento do not have employees, and therefore, for example, Sooda' daily maintenance is bought from Nicefactory.

Zento sells licences to products under the Sooda brand and offers help in planning, designing and marketing the products. The focus group of their products is 12-16 year old girls and boys. As a supplement to Sooda products, Zento specialises in building wide, innovative, multimedia web services and online communities.

Similar to Nicehouse, also Sooda's objective is to offer a service where members participate in content creation. Compared with Nicehouse, Sooda offers a much wider variety of interactive services by which members can participate in content creation. By using these interactive services, Sooda offers its members possibilities to communicate, play and learn with each other as well as to bind relationships.

Then, when considering the business value of Sooda, the strong Sooda brand created in the online community, enables Zento to generate revenues by selling calendars and widening the brand to clothes, games and other products in the future. The aim is to create an even stronger brand that is based on and supported by the online community.

Alternatively, Sooda also serves as a playground for the maintainers. One of the maintainers pointed out that every company should have such a project that gives the possibility to be creative and innovative. Because Zento's core business is to build and sell online communities for businesses, Sooda increases their knowledge and competency in their core business. Since Sooda has constantly increased the amount of the members and sold the calendar so well, it has well reached its objectives in the eyes of the maintainers. However, the cross-media concept considering other products has not yet reached all the objectives since there has been a lack of cooperating companies.

Unlike Nicehouse, Sooda has changed a lot during the years. Due to its young customer segment, its layout has changed dramatically during the years and is constantly changing as new services are planned and implemented. Earlier the idea of the user interface was to give members a feeling that they end up accidentally on sites and there was no logical navigation system. However, according to the feedback, the user interface was changed to more logical and traditional.

Sooda can also be considered as broadening cross media community. In addition to the web service, Sooda's calendar is sold in bookstores. The variety of products sold in stores is going to expand according to the owner's plans. As one of the maintainers pointed out:

I think that it should be considered what kind of additional value the online community brings to some other product...The first version of the calendar that was sold in a moment, I think that the reason was in combining these things as a thought, we made services that you can use in improving the calendar, services, that you can take in your calendar, for example things affiliated to the (virtual) pets. You have some pets and you keep their information in your calendar. In other words, we made the connection...We have created this kind of own world in Sooda, own visual language and creatures, everything that makes it easier to build something more concrete than only a name.

Similar to Nicehouse, Sooda encourages members to register to its different clubs as well. In the clubs, members can do various things, such as discuss with each other, send private posts, and send cards and virtual presents. However, the register information of the members is not utilised since the Finnish law prohibits the use of member information if the members are less than 18 years old.

Zento as well as Nicefactory maintains a low profile in the online community. Many of the services offered in Sooda operate automatically, in other words they do not need to be maintained daily. All in all, the maintainers are satisfied with the amount of discussion and other interaction among members.

As one of the maintainers pointed out:

We get a lot of discussion in every place, so following them is a bigger problem than being worried about the amount of discussion.

However, according to the maintainer, the maintenance of Sooda needs more resources than Nicehouse. The amount of inappropriate messages is bigger, and members send more feedback including questions as well as development ideas. Sooda's members have also shown activity in moderating discussions and therefore, it is planned to utilise them in moderating in the future. Some of them will be called *sheriffs* and given the authenticity to moderate discussions. In addition, because of *faking* and *flooding* in Sooda's discussion forums, the registration will be added as obligatory.

Members' new ideas are evaluated and if possible, implemented by the maintainer. Due to Sooda's young member profile, sometimes there occur some inappropriate messages or messages including information such as addresses or names. Because of that the maintainers stated that they need to read messages regularly and carefully.

As in Nicehouse's case, the feedback given by Sooda's members is read carefully and answered to as soon as possible. According to the maintainer, most of the feedback concerns some usage problems or some technical problems. However, according to the maintainers Sooda's members are quite active in suggesting new services and developments. Similarly to Nicehouse, a user survey is made occasionally and the amount of the members are monitored by own tracking systems.

Mainio. The third case community is Mainio, which is focused on OP Bank Group's customers, but open for all customers and potential customers as well. Rather than enabling customer-to-customer interaction, it concentrates on its own published materials.

Mainio was established in May 2001. Currently, around 74 per cent of the Mainio's members are OP Bank Group's customers. Mainio has over 110 000 monthly visitors of which 37 per cent are men (Mainio user survey, November 2004).

According to the interviewees, Mainio focuses on three themes that are housing, cars, and financial and legal matters of a household. Mainio also offers a weekly newsletter that has about 18 500 subscribers, a cooking book, different kind of guides and calculators, the possibility to ask experts in fields of housing, financing and legal matters, competitions and crossword puzzles. Mainio's user interface is illustrated in Figure 11.

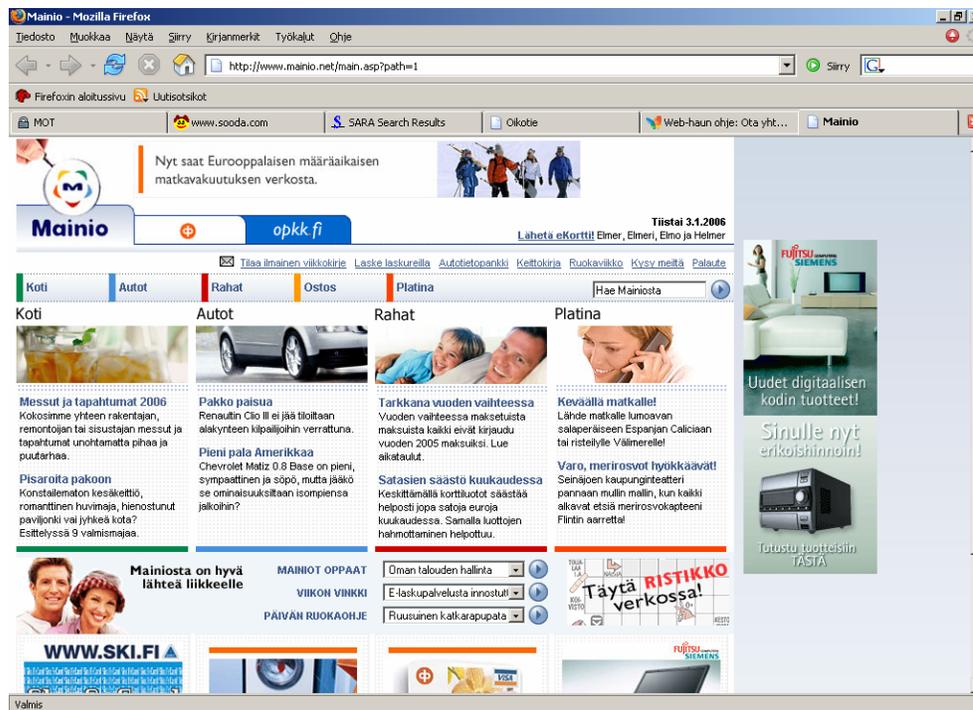


Figure 11. Mainio's screenshot (www.mainio.net)

Mainio's owner, the OP Bank Group (in Finnish OP-ryhmä), was founded in 1902. The OP Bank Group comprises 236 independent member cooperative banks and the Group's statutory central institution, the OP Bank Group Central Cooperative. The OKO Bank is the largest subsidiary of the Central Cooperative (www.op.fi).

Among the cases in this study, Mainio's objectives are most clearly connected to relationship marketing. According to the maintainers, Mainio's objective is to gain benefits during a longer period by making stronger relationships with existing customers and also alluring new customers to OP Bank Group. Mainio's aim is to attract members by offering additional value, which is created by offering them useful information and some entertainment. For company customers Mainio offers a possibility to advertise on their websites and the possibility to gain new customers from OP Bank Group's customers. As one of the maintainers described Mainio's main purpose:

Well, it (Mainio) is meant to facilitate everyday life.

In the communal perspective Mainio has not reached all the objectives. Discussion forums were closed because of the lack of resources and the lack of the members' interest to participate in discussions. However, according to the maintainer there is some sense of community between Mainio's members because they share a similar interest and also a relationship with the same bank.

The maintainers of Mainio, however, are interested in increasing the sense of community among their members.

During the last two years there have been some changes in Mainio. One of the biggest was that multiple themes were reduced to the current three themes. In December 2003, Mainio decided to close their discussion forums to spare their resources. Recently, after closing the discussion forums Mainio has concentrated even more on offering relevant articles and information for members. Since one of Mainio's objectives is to allure new customers to the OP Bank Group, Mainio does not require registration. However, ordering Mainio's newsletter requires giving personal data.

Mainio has a strong focus on the content creation. It has a managing editor who is responsible for planning and making the content together with the team and other partners. Mainio cooperates, for example, a lot with the OP Bank Group's customer journal Kultaraha.

Earlier, there were discussion forums around each theme on the website with moderators to activate and supervise discussions. Thereafter, the only community programme that Mainio offers is a weekly newsletter. According to the interviewees, the newsletter has quite a big amount of subscribers, around 18 500. It consists of links to the recently published articles in Mainio.

Earlier, when Mainio had several discussion forums, the discussions there were supervised and inappropriate messages deleted by moderators. Also new articles were ordered around popular themes in discussions. Currently, the only channel for active listening is to read the data gathered of the action of the online community (log data) and to get information through this channel.

One of the channels that Mainio uses to gather member information is competitions. In addition, Mainio also does some amount of benchmarking on web services that have similar themes. According to the maintainers, feedback from the members is read carefully. To collect more feedback and information from members, Mainio does a bigger survey among members once a year. In addition, there are various other measurement instruments in the company such as the amount of members per month, members' visiting frequency and time spent in the service, members' perceived benefit of the service etc.

Code. The fourth case community is Code, which is created to bring together professional developers working with the latest technologies and platforms supported by mobile devices. Its aim is to offer tools for developers to help them create their services compatible with the company's products. In many cases the services for the newest models are developed before there are any products on the market. Code is very global, while around one million developers all around the world visit it and share their knowledge.

In each technology section there are discussion areas, blogs, technical documents, FAQs and download sections for software development kits, toolkits and emulators. For business-minded members, there is information available on attractive business opportunities provided through Code's application sales channels. In Code the registered members are able to customise various features, allowing each member's version of the site to suit their specific requirements.

Code has recently also launched a recognition programme, where the most active and talented members will be rewarded. The idea is that a member tells about his/her noteworthy activities and achievements.

The owner of Code is an established company currently focusing on telecommunication. Code's purpose is to help developers in developing mobile services and at the same time to assure that there are certain services available when a company's products are launched to the market. The objective is to demonstrate developers the features that new products offer and to give information about the possibilities that can be done with them. In addition, Code also aims to help developers to get contacts with operators and to sell their services. Since the maintaining company as well as Code are global using English as a language, members come from all over the world.

The strategic objective of the community is to promote the sales of the company's products by building a total product offering that gives more value for end customers. The bigger picture is that Code also supports the development of technology and the whole industry as well. By letting members help each other in forums, Code can also cut the costs of answering members' questions.

According to the maintainer, Code aims to be the best or one of the best developer communities in the world. Code tries to distinguish itself from its competitors by offering better services for developers and to give reasons why they should join. One of the concrete benefits that Code offers is that it gives new sales channels for developers. In the short term, Code aspires to increase the amount of customers by 10 per cent from the earlier half-year. Although Code's aims are mainly indirect revenues, Code gets revenues through its business-to-business trade point as commissions. In addition, they get revenues by offering tool documents, which are supposed to increase their popularity in the future. Code also has a service for professionals that offers them active support via the Internet. This service is chargeable.

According to the maintainer, Code has reached its objectives quite well. The maintainers have been very satisfied with the constant growth of the amount of the members. Yet, the amount of the multimedia service sales has not been as high as they first expected. The reason for that was the defective availability of the multimedia devices on the market. Now it seems that this problem is already solved out and the new objectives are already set as the importance of services increases constantly. As the maintainer describes the situation:

We are starting to concretely have a marketing packet that we can promote for developers, so they can see that they could create business possibilities through Code.

Code has grown strongly during the last years and its services have broadened as the maintainer has also noticed the importance of Code. One example of the newest services is a chargeable service for professional customers. Among other dimensions it offers a possibility for a customer to ask questions and get answers from the personnel via the Internet. This pro service develops rapidly and new services, for example an own discussion forum is

already being planned. Another change is that the discussion forums will be updated by clarifying the categories and opening new areas, for example to serve Japanese developers better.

There are around 160 people from the maintaining company working with Code and the amount of them has been growing a lot during the last years. As a supplement to the interactive services on the web, Code organises a variety of events for developers. They also offer other services such as courses, testing and support services.

According to the maintainer, discussions in the forums are supervised. The aim is that the personnel would participate in the discussions and answer the members' questions, however, at the moment resources are limited. Because Code also offers a chargeable service to advice members, maintainers do not participate in discussion forums very actively. More specifically, there are only a couple of people who are responsible for supervising the discussion forums, but in some cases some of the personnel discuss voluntarily if they find the current topic interesting. According to the maintainer, good instructions play a central role in keeping the discussions accurate. In general, the nature of the discussions is informative and the discussion mainly concentrates on the development issues. For this reason, the discussions are very informative including very little nonsense that has to be deleted by moderators.

When members register into the service they give their basic information. However, according to the maintainer, Code does not systematically utilise this information yet. The maintainers mentioned that they value the feedback from members, and to be able to receive it enough, they offer many channels to give the feedback on the websites. However, according to the maintainer there are not yet specific processes developed to handle the feedback. The reason for this is that the forums have had a minor role, but some changes in the future have already been planned. According to the maintainer some small surveys have been made among the members.

4.6.2 Comparing the cases

The backgrounds of the online communities have many differences. However, Nicehouse and Sooda share many features, probably for the reason that they are both originally owned by Nicefactory. Nicehouse is the oldest community and Mainio the youngest. As Nicehouse, Sooda and Mainio live very strongly on the Internet; Code also acts actively offline. Then, Code differs from others as the online community consists only one part of the whole service that it offers for its customers.

Based on the data collected in this study, Table 18 summarises six dimensions (cf. Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003, p. 323) of the case online communities. The maintainers of the cases represent quite different types of companies, which also explains the differences between the online communities. Nicehouse's and Sooda's maintainers are technology-oriented companies that operate in the business-to-business area offering web services for other

companies. The companies are both young, Nicehouse was established in 1997 and Zento in 2003. In contrast, Mainio's and Code's owners are over a hundred years old; however, Code's owner has changed its line of business. Similar to Nicehouse and Sooda, also Code's owner is a technology-oriented company, as conversely, Mainio's maintainer, the OP Bank Group, represents a bank sector. However, also in banking technology-orientation, for example electronic paying, has become more and more important.

If the cases are approached from the perspective of their size and internationality, the biggest and the most international is certainly Code with its about two million registered members. In general, all of the communities are quite big in the number of members, yet others than Code are only for Finnish people.

Customer segments vary quite a lot between the cases, while Nicehouse concentrates on women and families, Sooda on teenagers and Mainio for customers and potential customers. Yet, in contrast to these three communities, Code represents the only online community aimed for professionals, more precisely for software developers.

The value of the studied communities differs as well. Nicehouse and Sooda offer entertaining value for its members. In contrast, Mainio and Code are concentrated on offering beneficial information. When considering the value from the maintainers' perspective, the cases differ as well. At the moment, Nicefactory uses Nicehouse to get insights and to learn about the building and management process of online communities in order to enhance its products for business customers. However, Nicefactory's aim is to build Nicehouse's brand and grow it to cross-media as Sooda already is. Sooda's owner Zento has focused on direct revenues by strengthening the brand and selling licences to it. In addition, Sooda has expanded its brand to calendars and will probably enlarge the brand to other products that are sold in stores. In the case of Sooda, the online community supports the brand and vice versa.

Yet, the value of the communities has something common as they all are connected to development of customer relationships. In addition, Mainio also concentrates on finding new customers and Nicehouse and Sooda are interested in possibilities to learn about members and to develop their services based on that information. Nicehouse's value for the maintainers is related to possible new business logics through selling the information about registered members. Code differs from others by being developed for helping professional customers in their job. However, Code offers similar services as other cases, yet the variety of the services offered on the web is broader. Code's objectives are connected to enhancing long-term customer relationships with professionals.

Table 18. *A summary of the dimensions of the case online communities (cf. Mäntymäki and Mittilä 2003, p. 323)*

Dimensions	Nicehouse	Sooda	Mainio	Code
Business logic of the maintaining company	Bricks and mortar company, b-to-b area	Bricks and mortar company, b-to-b area	Bricks and mortar company: a bank (b-to-b and b-to-c area)	Bricks and mortar company, b-to-b and b-to-c area
Customer segments	Women and families	Teenagers	Customers and potential customers	Software developers
Value of the company online community for members	Entertaining community for women and families	Interesting and innovative place where teenagers can play, learn, bind relationships	Useful information in everyday life	Helping developers to create new services and to find business partners
Value of the company online community for the company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building brand - Building cross-media - Getting customer information - Acquiring new b-to-b customers - Selling the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building brand - Building cross-media - Educating personnel in building and maintaining a community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Customer retention - Acquiring new customers - Increasing sales 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making sure that appropriate mobile services exist when launching new products - Cutting costs by letting members help each other - Increasing revenues
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Passive moderators - Netiquette written - Registration only partly - Anonymous place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Passive moderators - Netiquette written - Registration only partly - Anonymous place 	Before closing discussion forums: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moderators - Written rules - No registration - Anonymous place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increasing sales by assuring the availability services - Creating new innovations
Interactive technology	- Traditional	- Innovative	- No possibility to interact with others	- Innovative

By using Porter's (2004) typology, the cases of this study represent a customer relationship community (Mainio), lifestyle communities (Nicehouse and Sooda) and knowledge-based/collaborative learning communities (Code). However, Nicehouse, Sooda and Code have some features of customer relationship communities, and therefore this division is not exclusionary. All case online communities are customer-orientated and the importance of fulfilling the members' needs has been understood. Nevertheless, the management differs

between the studied cases. Nicehouse and Sooda are focused on many-to-many communication and content creation by members. Instead of focusing on many-to-many communication, Mainio focuses on content creation by maintainers. Mainio is a bank-maintained service and that fact may affect the decisions about controlling the content more carefully. For this reason, Nicefactory's communities have more community features and tools for active listening than Mainio's community has.

The culture of the case online communities differed between the cases as well. Registration is mandatory only in Code which also differs from the other cases since its online community is only one part of the whole service. Its online community's central elements are the discussion forums focused on asking and replying the questions. Also the personnel are involved in discussions more actively than in Sooda and Nicehouse. Since Mainio closed its forums during the study it does not offer possibilities for member-to-member interaction.

Even though customer feedback was seen as important in the case communities, the cases do not seem to have very systematic processes in tracking and utilising information gathered through discussions because of limited resources. However, different kind of surveys are used in all cases to gather customer information and insights. All in all, it seems that the case companies have not yet totally understood the possibilities that Kozinets' netnographic approach (e.g. 1999) may offer to the management of both communities and the customer base as well as the management of product development.

The community services of the cases are gathered in Table 19.

Table 19. *Services in case communities (Modified from Warms et al. 2000, p. 3)*

Services	Nicehouse	Sooda	Mainio	Code
Member-generated content	Cookbook, tips, poems	Virtual pets, book and film reviews, stories, Sooda club etc.	-	-
Online events	-	-	-	-
Member-to-member interaction	Discussion forums, flea market	Forums, possibility to look for email-pals	(Earlier a discussion forum)	Discussion forums, blogs
Outreach	Newsletter	Letters from virtual lovers	Weekly newsletter	Recognition programme, events in real life, newsletter

When considering the technology and offered services in online communities, Sooda represents an online community that offers many possibilities for its members to interact and create content on websites. Alternatively, Mainio does not offer any such possibilities for its members, but rather concentrates on offering quality content for its members. For this reason, it can be called into a question if Mainio really is an online community or a web service.

5 MODELLING THE ATTRACTION OF COMPANY ONLINE COMMUNITIES

In this chapter the findings of the study and the earlier literature are intertwined with each other. The chapter begins with briefly discussing about the online relationships and after that introducing the company online relationship model. Then, the attraction model is presented and each of the factors are discussed including the citations from the empiria. Next, the cases are compared utilising the attraction model. Finally, the chapter ends with introducing two types of attraction offerings.

5.1 The company online community relationship model

5.1.1 *Online relationships*

As discussed earlier, online relationships somewhat differ from traditional relationships. One of the major differences is that people often manifest themselves anonymously without seeing others. Relationships are based on voluntariness and are technically easy to end by just being passive. Instead of having face-to-face contact, there is also always some kind of technology between the participants of the relationship that enables the interaction.

In this study, since the exploration of relationships is limited to exploring between whom or what relationships are formed as well as attraction in those relationships, many perspectives considering relationship characteristics are excluded from this study. *In the present study a relationship is seen to be established when a member visits a company online community.*

Besides relationships between people, online relationships may exist with brands, objects, symbols and other less tangible phenomena. These kind of relationships, which are called parasocial or e-relationships according to Gummesson (2002a), are manifested in the connotations of company names, brands, trade marks and well known business leaders or other people who symbolise a business.

5.1.2 Company online community relationships

The analysis of the data revealed that there are four types of relationships in online communities. These relationships are formed between a member and another member, a member and a maintainer, a member and service and finally, a member and a brand.

The brand refers to the e-relationship with the online community's, company's or products' brand, which Gummesson (2002a) has embraced as well as to the studies of brand communities (Andersen 2005; McAlexander et al. 2002; McWilliam 2000; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) that have suggested that there is a relationship between a member and a brand.

In this context *the service* refers to the technology which is used in an online community. In addition, the service also refers to the whole content of the web service where an online community is formed. As a supplement to the four relationship dyads, also the culture and purpose of an online community affect the relationship between the member and the community (Preece 2000; 2001).

Considering company online communities, members may be consumers, business customers or employers. In a company online community, a company is in a relation with a member in a maintainer's role. The relationship model of company online communities is illustrated in Figure 12. The model is approached from the members' viewpoint.

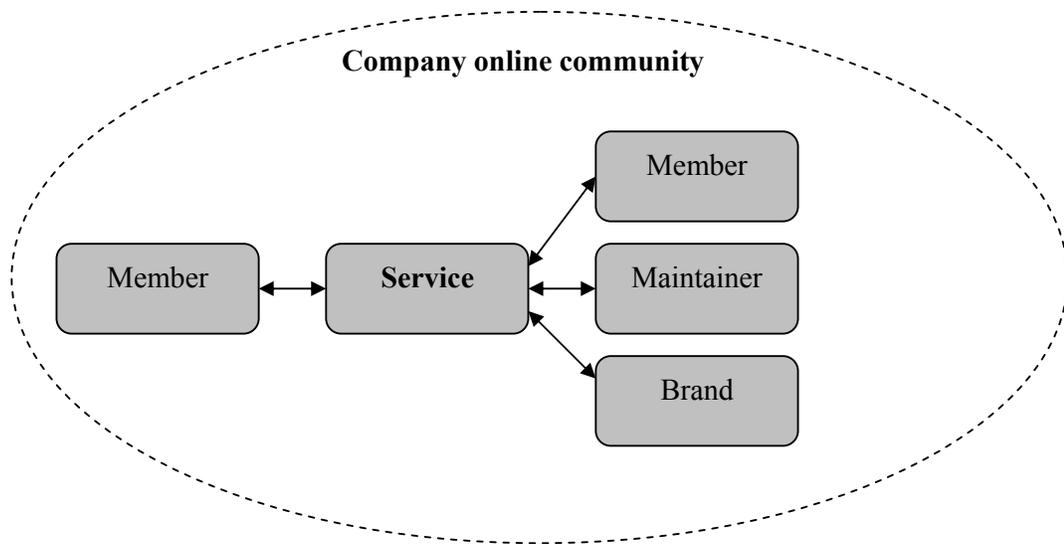


Figure 12. The relationship model of company online communities

Based on the earlier discussion about different levels of relationships, instead of calling a connection between a member and an online community a relationship, it may be called a relation in some cases. The creation of the

relationship requires that there are mutual interests and common goals (Mittilä 2000).

Relations or relationships between a member and an online community evolve during time. One point that should be noticed is that these relationships in an online community are not exclusionary but they can exist at the same time. Furthermore, members may have relationships with companies' online communities also without having relationships with companies in the physical world. Although, in order to exist, an online community needs a certain amount of people having relationships, but there are also members that rather have relations than relationships. In online community literature, members who do not contribute but only read the content of an online community are called as lurkers. (e. g. Katz 1998; Nonnecke and Preece 2000a; Nonnecke and Preece 2000b; Nonnecke et al. 2004a; Nonnecke et al. 2004b). Lurkers are such members that rather have a relation than a relationship with an online community.

5.1.3 The second pilot study

Collecting data in discussion forums

To test the method before conducting the actual study in the cases, the second pilot study was conducted in company online communities that were chosen on the basis of their popularity. Since the cases of this study are Finnish company online communities, all these cases in the pilot study are also Finnish. The online communities of the pilot study are presented in Table 20.

Table 20. Selected online communities for the pilot study

Online community	Web address	Owner	Discussion forum/ forums	Number of answers
Suomi 24.fi	http://www.suomi24.fi/	Eniro Finland	Fashion and beauty	3
			Cars & traffic	4
Ellit	http://www.soneraplaza.fi/ellit/	Sonera	Women perspective	10
			Pets	6
Vahtokylpy	http://www.vahtokylpy.net/	Elisa Corporation	Work and study	27
Helmi	http://keskustelu.mtv3.fi/	MTV 3	Human relationships	16
Sisters Club	http://www.sisters-club.net/sisters/	Sisters Club / Sanoma Magazines Finland	Chatter box	1
Demi	http://www.demi.fi/	Demi / A-Lehdet	Freetime	1
Verkkoklinikka	http://www.verkkoklinikka.fi/	Coronaria Plc	Exercise	-

In the pilot study, there were seven online communities with nine discussion forums in the study. In Verkkoklinikka, the question was removed by the maintainer, which explains the lack of answers.

The following message was sent to the discussion forums of the chosen online communities. “I conduct a study about attraction factors of online communities. I would like to ask you why do you visit X?” The study produced 68 answers altogether.

Findings of the pilot study

Firstly, many of the members mentioned *getting and giving advice*, so it seems to be an important factor for them. For instance, one of the respondents stated as follows:

Here I can get information and tips about skin care, make up etc. I get to know new brands and their functionality and sometimes their prices too. And it is also nice to be able to give advice to someone. :)

Then, respondents indicated that *having and reading* discussions was important to them. Saying own opinions and hearing others was mentioned many times in answers. One of the respondents pointed out as follows:

I think that this could be regarded as a form of therapy as people can visit and clear their mind.

In addition, one of the reasons was *interest* in the topics of the community. People come to forums where they find an interesting topic to discuss and get information. As two of the respondents stated:

The subject matter of these forums is interesting.

As a dog owner I get information to my problems.

Again, many respondents seem to find the possibility of asking questions and having *discussions anonymously* important. As one of the respondents wrote:

I am a man and here I can anonymously ask about a sensitive topic, men's skin care!!!! I would not ask it from anybody 'face-to-face'.

Furthermore, people feel that they can have different *roles* on the Internet because of the lack of face-to-face contact. For example, one of the respondents has a panic disorder, and it is sometimes difficult for him to meet people face-to-face. Therefore, he enjoys writing on the Internet. Another respondent depicted her/his feelings as follows:

I present a rare group on the Internet. Namely, a living person. Because I am lonely, foul and ugly, I can be here without the prejudices caused by the outward appearance. In the present world only beautiful and faultless manage. Is this real? I do not think so, but entertainment yes. Amusement and untruthful boosting of self-respect when I can feel myself equal with others with my cleverness.

According to the respondents, they enjoy discussing with people who are *similar* to them. They also like to share their experiences and support from others. *Meeting new people and getting new friends* was considered as an attraction factor as well. According one of the respondents, discussing in forums is nice way to meet new people and exchange ideas.

People like the possibility to be able to meet different kind of other people than they normally meet as the following statement indicates:

I think that this type of discussion list may be a good way to meet different kind of people. The age perspective brings different ways of thinking that might be

useful in every day life. Because here you meet people from my mother's age to twenty-year olds, young people can get tips from the people with more life experience. I might also give new perspectives to people who I find bit stiffed => In real life, usually these kind of meetings do not exist, because life situations are so different.

Furthermore, some of the respondents wrote that these types of forums act them as *substitutes for social life* and also alleviate loneliness. As some of the respondents pointed out:

I lack social life almost totally; I work alone as a practitioner, live in a place where I do not have any friends. Earlier I was unemployed, and then I had no other life. I have some hobbies, but not such people with whom I could talk freely.

For people who live abroad, *the Internet is a useful way to be in contact*. One of the respondents said that as she/he lives abroad and has two jobs, this is her/his way to relax in the evenings when she/he feels too tired to go out. All in all, the lack of time- and geographical boundaries were mentioned in many answers.

Moreover, one of the respondents compared *the usability* of different forums. According to her/him, difficulties of seeing messages (each message needs to be opened separately) and the order of the messages influence the amount of the discussion.

Spending time, relaxing, having a coffee break, waiting on the phone, having fun and other things related to *entertainment* were mentioned as reasons to visit online communities. In addition, one of the respondents stated that visiting the online community has clearly become a *habit* for her/him.

5.2 The development of the attraction model

The attraction model was built on the basis of the analysis of the data gathered in this study as well as earlier literature. The attraction model includes three elements: *different community relations, i.e. attraction relationships; the type of attraction, i.e. whether the attraction is related to a member as an individual or as a social entity; and the attraction factors*. Self-related attraction refers to the type of attraction that does necessarily not require another people. On the contrary, social related attraction forms in interaction between at least two members (Mc Kenna and Bargh 1999). The attraction model is illustrated in Table 21.

Attraction relationships were chosen on the basis of the relationship model of online communities. The four relationships are *member-to-member, member-to-maintainer, member-to-service and member-to-brand*. The attraction factors are classified according to members' *self-related* and *social related* types of attraction.

Attraction factors were chosen on the basis of the results from empiria. Also constant interaction with the earlier literature brought valuable insights which guided the process.

All in all, most of Dholakia et al.'s (2004) individual motives can be found in the results. In Nicehouse and Sooda purposive value, maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity and entertainment value can be found. In Mainio, the purposive value is stressed but also entertainment value can be found. In Code, purposive value as well as interpersonal interconnectivity can be found. Also Ridings and Gefen (2004) included social support and recreation (entertainment) in their framework.

Nevertheless, since entertainment and benefit form as a sum of many factors, they are not considered as a separate attraction factors in the present study. Some online communities are more beneficial and some more entertaining, which depends on many factors included in the attraction model presented in this study. Furthermore, members' opinions depend on what services they use. Members also stress the benefit or entertainment features of the community depending on the current situation or the current needs. Yet, it is admitted that these factors inevitably have to be taken into account as we consider attraction, but still in the present study they are rather seen as a sum of many factors than constituting of individual factors.

Table 21. *The attraction model of company online communities*

RELATIONSHIP	TYPE OF ATTRACTION	ATTRACTION FACTOR
Member-to-member	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with members
	<i>Social related</i>	Discussions
	<i>Social related</i>	Commercial activities
	<i>Social related</i>	Dating
	<i>Social related</i>	The diversity of people
	<i>Social related</i>	Friendships
	<i>Social related</i>	Playing
	<i>Social related</i>	Roles
	<i>Social related</i>	Similarity
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with maintainers
Member-to-service	<i>Self-related</i>	Maintainers' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Members' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Awareness
	<i>Self-related</i>	Service variety
	<i>Self-related</i>	Usability
Member-to-brand	<i>Self-related</i>	Reputation

Moreover, it should be noticed that *the knowledge exchange with members* and *the knowledge exchange with maintainers* attraction factors include both

active and passive roles and it can be further divided into professional or non-professional knowledge exchange as the cases show. Attraction factors may be further divided into subfactors as well. For example, the Service variety factor includes many kind of services from newsletter to different types of competitions, while the Members' content factor includes things from creating home sites or writing poems.

Furthermore, since this study is a descriptive qualitative study aiming to explore attraction factors, importance and relationships between different factors are not measured. Since interaction between members as well as the content created by members plays an essential role in online communities, it is suggested that factors under member-to-service or member-to-brand relationships have a smaller influence on attraction than others. Nevertheless, it is impossible to prove the importance of different attraction factors without further studies. To give a more operationalised view as well as to summarise different attraction factors, Table 22 illustrates attraction factors, their descriptions and examples from the empirical data.

Table 22. *Attraction factors, descriptions and example comments*

ATTRACTION FACTOR	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE COMMENTS
Knowledge exchange with members (act/pass)	Obtain and give professional or non-professional advice and share experiences with other members	“In discussion forums you can find answers more easily to your own practical questions than from books or columns that offer only information.”
Discussions (act/pass)	Have interesting discussions	“What could be nicer than discussing interesting themes with bright people.”
Commercial activities	Buy, sell or barter products	“People visit the flea market a lot. So I believe that a lot of bargains are done there.”
Dating	Looking for a dating company	“There are ‘girls looking for company- boys looking for company’ forums, which are popular.”
The diversity of people	Meeting people with different backgrounds	“I like to ‘meet’ different kind of people and learn how they think.”
Friendships	Create and maintain friendships	“I have also made long-term friendships here.”
Playing	Play games with others	“The first time I came to Sooda with my friend was because of the virtual pets.”
Roles	Be able to act anonymously or have a different role than in a real life	“Here you can act as anonym, so it is easy to visit.”
Similarity	Share similar backgrounds or feel accustomed to each other	“I visit this to share things that are related to pregnancy, feeling some sense of community.”
Knowledge exchange with maintainers (act/pass)	Obtain advice and information from maintainers	“My #1 request would be for company X to more actively participate in this forum, so that questions actually get answers.”
Maintainers’ content	Maintainers’ created content	“Mainio is a real time information forum.”
Members’ content	Members’ created content	“It is also nice to see what others have created here.”
Awareness	Be able to find and visit the online community	“You can visit it whenever you want.”
Service variety	Different services of the online community	“I visit Sooda’s club to participate in the quiz and sometimes to write or to send presents.”
Usability	Technical features in the online community	“I got a newsletter to my email and there is a very clear list about the current topics of Mainio.”
Reputation	The reputation of the the company and its online community	“Mainio is the OP Bank Group’s service and I trust this bank.”

Next, each factor is firstly discussed in relation to the earlier findings of the researchers. Then, the findings of the empirical study are discussed including the cases where the factor was found.

5.3 Attraction factors in the case online communities

5.3.1 Attraction factors in member-to-member relationships

Member-to-member related attraction factors exist between the members of the online community. Table 23 highlights the member-to-member relationships in the attraction model.

Table 23. *Member-to-member relationships in the attraction model*

RELATIONSHIP	TYPE OF ATTRACTION	ATTRACTION FACTOR
Member-to-member	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with members
	<i>Social related</i>	Discussions
	<i>Social related</i>	Commercial activities
	<i>Social related</i>	Dating
	<i>Social related</i>	Friendships
	<i>Social related</i>	Playing
	<i>Social related</i>	Roles
	<i>Social related</i>	Similarity
	<i>Social related</i>	Variety of people
Member-to-maintainers	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with maintainer
Member-to-service	<i>Self-related</i>	Maintainers' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Members' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Awareness
	<i>Self-related</i>	Service variety
Member-to-brand	<i>Self-related</i>	Usability
	<i>Self-related</i>	Reputation

Next, each factor is discussed more profoundly including both the findings of the data as well as related earlier literature.

Knowledge exchange with members

The first factor in this relationship is based on both self- and social related factors and labelled *knowledge exchange with members*. The factor refers to the members' will to obtain and give professional or non-professional advice, experiences and information. Besides taking an active role, members may also

take a passive role, in other words read advice that others have asked. Hence, the attraction factors consist of both the active and the passive role of members.

Earlier literature has recognised almost similar factor as Wasko and Faraj (2000) pointed out the importance of giving and getting advice. In their study they argued that the generalised reciprocity is more important than creating friendships. Furthermore, Ridings and Gefen (2004) mentioned exchange information or knowledge exchange (e.g. Gruen et al. 2005; Wasko and Faraj 2000) as an attraction factor. They define this factor as to “obtain and transfer information about a topic, educate”. Also the attraction factor called compatibility (Eskola 1884; Harris et al. 2003) is related to this factor as the member with a compatible knowledge may give valuable advice and experiences to other members.

Nicehouse. In Nicehouse, the maintainers mentioned a possibility to get advice from other members and to hear their experiences as an attraction factor. The maintainers pointed out that people seek for information and advice for their daily routines such as cooking and cleaning. One of Nicehouse’s ideas is particularly to make people’s daily life easier. Even though there are also articles where information is provided, their role is mainly to support and create an impression that the content is regularly updated.

Nowadays the Internet offers an enormous amount of information, yet the answers in Nicehouse showed that people’s experiences are a very valuable source of information and also a reason to come to the forums.

I am a 46-year old mother from the metropolitan area, who has made a decision about getting a dog. A puppy comes after Easter and before that I want to find information about a puppy’s care, breeding, health, feeding...everything necessary to be able to care a little one very well. I think that in discussion forums you can find answers to your own practical question more easily than from books or columns that offer only information. In discussions you can hear nicely different opinions. (Member)

Sooda. Even though entertainment has an important role in Sooda, the maintainers stated that members also look for feedback and answers to their questions in different areas of life from others. The members stated that asking advice from others is one of their reasons to visit Sooda.

Sometimes I come to ask something. If there is something that you would like to discuss, just come to Sooda. (Member)

However, conversely, one member argued that she actually gets better advice in another online community which she uses to visit.

I can tell/ask ‘better’ there (another online community) about my own things (boyfriends etc.) There people answer more.. ‘maturely’☺ (Member)

Mainio. There is a service where members can pose questions to the experts of financial matters, legal matters or housing on their websites. Therefore, the maintainers mentioned that members learn from questions posed by other members. Since there is no discussion forum in Mainio anymore, this is also the only way of knowledge exchange with members in Mainio at the moment.

Code. Code's members work in the same business area. According to the maintainers, they might even be more professional in this area than the maintainer is. In Code, the members can share their opinions and information with each other. Therefore, learning from others is a central idea of Code.

The members affirmed the maintainers' perceptions expressing that giving and getting advice from other members is an important attraction factor.

Discussion groups are really the only free source of information and help.
(Member)

Sharing knowledge and helping newcomers is also very important. One of the members mentioned that he had received recognition from the maintainers because of his activity in discussions. In addition, the maintainer had rewarded him by additional help and encouraged to get involved even more in discussions.

Discussions

The next factor, based on social attraction, is called *discussions* that refers to the importance of having valuable discussions with other members. The factor differs from the previous factor, knowledge exchange with members, as the discussions factor refers to high-quality dialogues, which are not aimed for knowledge exchange but instead they have a value of their own.

Already Ridings and Gefen (2004) suggested in their study that the role of social support is important. Also Wasko and Faraj (2000) concluded that participants are interested in having dialogues and discussions. Furthermore, Figallo (1998) considered *café interactivity* as a key element in online communities. With *café interactivity* he refers that in some online communities a flow of conversation is more important for the members than the messages themselves.

Although discussions are placed in the member-to-member relationship, the maintainers can affect them in a moderator's role. According to Mittilä and Mäntymäki (2005) the moderators' role is important in enhancing the quality of discussions. In fact, the lack of moderators may cause a poor quality of discussions, which was considered one of the main reasons to stop visiting online communities.

Nicehouse. According to the maintainers, members are looking for similar people with whom they can have interesting discussions about various themes. One of the innovative services of Nicehouse is called the *ask mother - answer*

mother discussion forum that is joined with Sooda. This forum enables teenagers to have discussions and to present questions to adults and vice versa.

One of the members said that she participates in the most interesting discussions, because she feels that it is nice to exchange ideas in discussions. She also thinks that the level of discussions is fairly good.

Usually I follow discussions that are nice to follow and I participate in the most interesting topics. Curiosity probably? It is nice to share ideas with others in discussions ☺ Sometimes it is also nice to begin some funny (?) theme that I wonder about and get diverse answers. In most of the discussion lists the discussion is quite appropriate. In the discussion lists that include inappropriate discussions I only follow others writings. (Member)

In the members' opinion, there are only a few people in Nicehouse who send inappropriate messages. In fact, most of them visit one and the same discussion forum. All in all, the members mentioned Nicehouse generally as a place of rational and bright people.

Sometimes there are very captivating discussions. What can be nicer than discussing about interesting themes with bright people. (Member)

Sooda. The maintainer pointed out that having discussions is an attraction factor. Thus, the maintainer mentioned that in contrast to Nicehouse, Sooda's members do usually not have very in-depth discussions.

Also the members mentioned discussions. They expressed that it is easy to come to Sooda and have discussions about the topic they are interested in at the moment. Furthermore, the level of the discussions was appreciated.

I have strong long-term bounds with Sooda. Here I can have excellent discussions with many kind of people. And even in Finnish. (Member)

The place is good, and I can not stop visiting. I can chat about everything. (Member)

Commercial activities

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) suggested transactions as one of the attraction factors of online communities. Flea markets in online communities as well as online communities whose main purpose is around commercial actions are very popular on the Internet. Also bartering and sharing data files has been popular. Actually, sharing music, which in some cases is an illegal action and has caused many problems, is very popular. As a supplement to buying and selling, also bartering is included in this factor labelled *commercial activities*.

Nicehouse. Nicehouse offers a flea market called *Attic*, which is quite popular according to the maintainer. However, the flea market is quite small including

only two discussions: sell and buy. Yet, the flea market is the only additional service in Nicehouse, and thus according to the maintainer, not the main reason why people visit Nicehouse.

Dating

An attraction factor called *dating* reflects sexual attraction among men and women. In the literature, Harris et al. (2003) mentioned socio-sexuality as an attraction factor and also theme interviews indicated that dating should be chosen as one attraction factor.

Also in the most popular online communities in Finland, dating is a common attraction factor. Almost all the biggest company online communities offer at least some type of dating service and many online communities are formed around this factor.

Nicehouse. In the maintainers' opinion, dating may be one of Nicehouse's attraction factors. However, dating is not considered essential in Nicehouse, and therefore there are no forums aimed for this.

Sooda. The maintainers pointed out that dating is one of Sooda's attraction factors. The same service, which was mentioned earlier in the context of forming relationships, is also aimed for finding email pals. Yet, in contrast to the online communities that are aimed for dating, Sooda and Nicehouse are far away from those.

The diversity of people

Harris et al. (2003) pointed out that familiarity is a necessary condition for attraction to occur. Yet, the present study revealed quite the opposite. According to the data, many members in the case online communities are more attracted to the possibility to meet people from different backgrounds, who they otherwise would not meet in real life.

Nicehouse. In some Nicehouse's discussion forums having the same kind of background is important. However, the maintainers stated that the members form a heterogenous group. According to the member, they like to read different opinions from different people.

Sooda. In Sooda one attraction factor was curiosity towards other members from different backgrounds. The members expressed their aspiration to meet new people and read their opinions and stories as well as to discuss with others.

The following statement indicates the fact that many of the answers from Sooda's members include some humour, too.

I like to 'meet' different kind of people and learn how they think. I visit Sooda to irritate others. (Member)

Friendships

Then, another social factor under this relationship is the members' willingness to create friendships. Friendships seemed to be an important attraction factor for some members in the study. Members are searching for a companion for conversations and making new friendships in the online community because they are either lonely or socially active persons. Furthermore, other researchers have as well pointed out the importance of creating friendships in online communities. (e.g. Hagel and Armstrong 1997; McKenna and Bargh 1999; Ridings and Gefen 2004) This is not a surprise as we think of the nature of communities in general and the role that friendships play in there.

Nicehouse. In Nicehouse, members have formed small communities. The members of these communities have become friends, and therefore, one of the attraction factors is the possibility to looking for new friends and binding new relationships. However, a part of the maintainers did not consider this such an important factor compared to Sooda, where they regarded this factor as much more important.

However, forming new friendships seem to be important for Nicehouse's members. For example, one of the members wrote that since he has moved three years ago to the countryside, and does not have much social life outside the family, Nicehouse's forums one way to get to know people. According to other members, they have also bound long time friendships in Nicehouse.

I have also made long-term friendships here. The discussion is generally decent here, too. (Member)

Sooda. The maintainers manifested that members are looking for new friends in Sooda. To make this possible the maintainer offers a service where members can look for pen pals by sending own advertisement or replying to someone else's advertisement.

In Sooda, there are 'girls looking for company and boys looking for company' - forums, which are popular and they are especially used to find pals for the exchange of emails. So as earlier people looked for pen pals, nowadays email pals are looked for, who are changed quickly. (Maintainer)

Playing

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) have mentioned games as one of the reasons to visit online communities. The fact is that online communities dedicated for online games have been very popular and their popularity is increasing. One good

example of such an online community is Habbo Hotel (<http://www.habbohotel.com>), where members communicate in the virtual world by virtual characters. In fact Habbo Hotel represents a game, which is based on role playing. Yet, *the playing* factor had a minor role in the case online communities, which of course limits the insights got from the cases.

Sooda. Sooda offers virtual pets for members. These virtual pets need to be taken care of for example by feeding and stroking. Another Sooda's service for playing is the Sooda club. In the club, members are inhabitants of the country they have selected from five alternatives. The countries have leaders who are chosen on the basis of the amount of virtual presents that the inhabitants have sent them. Inhabitants may also discuss in the forums, create own profiles, send email to other inhabitants and collect scores for their country by participating in a quiz. Both the Sooda club and the virtual pets were mentioned as attraction factors by the maintainers and visitors.

Roles

Anonymity was stressed among members. In online communities members can act anonymously, which normally is not possible, and members felt this possibility relieving. They felt that anonymity makes communication easier and they are able to discuss without commitment. This finding is in line with Bagozzi and Dholakia's (2002) and Dholakia et al.'s (2004) notion of the social identity in an online community. Also McKenna and Green (2002) emphasised the effect of anonymity.

However, instead of anonymity, *roles* was chosen as a name for the factor. The factor includes members' roles in the online community (Kim 2000), different identities that people have in online communities as well as anonymity that allows people to take different roles than usual. For example, in this study, although some of the members used a nickname that could reveal the member's gender; this can not be considered as a fact. People may lie about the gender on purpose, or they can just use a nickname that is associated to the opposite gender. Therefore, exploring gender issues or gathering reliable background information is sometimes even impossible on the Internet.

Furthermore, the members' roles and reputation are important in online communities. Someone may have the label of an expert because he has advised others, and therefore, others trust him. Profiles and reputation are clearly evident in online communities today.

Nicehouse. While getting information was stressed as an attraction factor; also entertainment is one of Nicehouse's attraction factors. Besides getting advice, members come to Nicehouse to have fun and spend leisure time. Further, role playing and anonymity in online communities were also mentioned as a reason to visit.

Even elder people can play, as some person can have an alias, whose opinions are much stronger as in the real life and who does not have the courage to be that kind of person outside the web. It is the same thing that a person can activate things than he/she has done already as a child, it is only a good thing. (Maintainer)

At the moment, reading and writing to discussion forums requires registration only in some sections. However, a registration system would bring useful information about the members, help the maintenance and increase the quality of discussions. Yet, Nicehouse has not added mandatory registration because members seem to like acting anonymously.

The members' opinion was that anonymity helps they tell their feelings more freely than in normal life and without any commitments. The members also feel that it is easy to ask questions anonymously.

Behind the nickname, it is easy to be scary, dumb or silly – there is no pressure to be clever or rational. Sometimes also bad feelings can be expressed, sometimes we share happy things. I get so much without committing into anything. (Member)

Yet, the members did not admit that they are attracted because of the possibility to have different roles – the reason suggested by the maintainer. One of the members stated that she feels it is easy to write without any registration system. However, she admitted that the quality of the discussion may be better in those online communities that demand registering.

Sooda. In the maintainers' opinion some of Sooda's members like to play different types of roles than in real life. Some Sooda's members also control messages of others acting as supervisors of the community. Also Sooda's members, who send messages without any relevant content again and again (called *flooding*) and members who use others' nicknames (called *faking*) make some of the other members angry. In fact, because of these problems, the maintainer has planned to add an obligatory registration on the sites. In addition, some of Sooda's members will be invited to act as moderators or more specifically *sheriffs*. The maintainer believes that this will be a useful way to moderate discussions as well as to activate members.

As the maintainer earlier said, the members also mentioned that they enjoy the possibility to act anonymously. For example, one of the members said that she changes her nickname almost every time.

...and here you can act as anonymously, so it is easy to visit. (Member)

The members affirmed the maintainers' statements about the problems in Sooda. They said that there are members, who act provocatively or *fake*, which annoys other members. Also because of some people, who use their nicknames, they have even planned to stop visiting Sooda.

I considered ending visits to Sooda, because I got fed up with fakes & provos.
(Member)

Code. In Code, there was a discussion about how members get the status to their profiles and how they should get them. Two participants did not know why someone gets *the senior member* status. The maintainer explained that after 50 posts it will be given. Another member disagreed to the logic of the current system and suggested that a senior member should fill the following criteria.

When I look at a senior member 1) I expect, that he must be putting light on something. 2) I expect, he must be questioning about some thing which is not mentioned anywhere neither in this forum nor in the SDK document. and must be having some sense. 3) I expect, he has not best but at least good knowledge of C/C++. 4) and most of the time I expect that person must be helping others by answering to their questions. I think a senior member who does not have any of the above quality, must not be a Senior member. (Member)

Similarity

Again, the factor labelled as *similarity* refers to the extent to which potentially relational partners perceive or feel psychologically, socially, morally or emotionally close or accustomed each other. Similarities also may exist between people sharing the same experiences or backgrounds.

In the earlier literature, similarity has also been considered as an important attraction factor (e.g. O'Shaughnessy 1971-1972; Eskola 1984; Harris et al. 2003). Even though in the present study members stressed that they like to meet different kind of people, they prefer meeting similar people as well.

Nicehouse. Similarity and a sense of community seem to be the most important attraction factors in Nicehouse. Members are looking for similar people with whom they can have appropriate discussions about interesting themes.

Especially in the forum that is focused on pregnancy, the importance of backup and advice from people who are or have been in the same situation is important. The members felt that they can ask even *foolish* questions here and have discussions with people who share similar interests. Again, they felt that they can also be helpful and give advice to others based on their own experiences. All in all, the sense of community was strongly indicated in this forum.

I visit this forum to share things that are related to pregnancy, feeling some “sense of community”, getting some backup and trust in pregnancy and giving birth, as some kind of peer backup... Sometimes I have been able to help others as they have asked something that I may have knowledge of. It is that kind of interactive thing. I do not have fellows who are pregnant, or even in the same phase, so it is nice to talk about the thing that interests all the others as well. I think that my own friends would be bored to dwell on so detailed pregnancy things...It is wonderful that there are different kind and different aged women here, from grandmothers to young people (and old people!), primigravidas, people who wish for pregnancy. Our common world of experiences is very large and on a wide basis. And then we are connected with this one thing. (Member)

Sooda. Furthermore, according to the maintainers, Sooda’s members are a more homogenous group than Nicehouse’s members as they are mainly girls around the same age. They like to consider them as one of the Sooda people. Therefore, similarity is one of the attraction factors. In fact, one of the maintainers argued that Sooda is more like *a real* community than Nicehouse. The strong sense of community reflects in a way how they control the community and express their devotion between each other more. Another sign of the strong community is that Sooda’s members have also met in the physical world.

The members indicated that it is nice to come to Sooda because they know the people there and like to read their messages. On the other hand, they also expressed that the possibility to meet different types of people draws them to Sooda.

Mainio. In the maintainer’s opinion offering only web services is not enough, but the members have to feel that the community is familiar in order to participate in it. Thus, after closing the discussion forum, members can only feel the sense of community at the mental level without really communicating with others. In the interviews the question whether Mainio is an online community or not, was considered. The maintainers’ opinions about this question differed. For example, one maintainer stated that Mainio is an online community and the members feel the sense of community because they are either the OP Bank Group’s customers or people who are interested in the same themes that are covered in Mainio.

Code. The maintainers stated that as a business-to-business forum aimed for mobile software developers members feel some sense of similarity with each other. Since Code is universal, members may discuss with another member from around the world and get different points of views. The only requirement is that they have to speak the same language. Yet the members did not stress similarity in their answers. However in a place like Code, similarity or compatibility is crucial to be able to give a professional help to each other.

5.3.2 Attraction factors in member-to-maintainer relationships

Attraction factors in member-to-maintainer relationships exist between members and maintainers. Table 24 brings out the member-to-maintainer relationships in the attraction model.

Table 24. *Member-to-maintainer relationships in the attraction model*

RELATIONSHIP	TYPE OF ATTRACTION	ATTRACTION FACTOR
Member-to-member	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with members
	<i>Social related</i>	Discussions
	<i>Social related</i>	Commercial activities
	<i>Social related</i>	Dating
	<i>Social related</i>	The diversity of people
	<i>Social related</i>	Friendships
	<i>Social related</i>	Playing
	<i>Social related</i>	Roles
	<i>Social related</i>	Similarity
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with maintainers
Member-to-service	<i>Self-related</i>	Maintainers' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Members' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Awareness
	<i>Self-related</i>	Service variety
Member-to-brand	<i>Self-related</i>	Usability
	<i>Self-related</i>	Reputation

Only one factor was found in this relationship, namely *Knowledge exchange with the maintainers*, which is presented next.

Knowledge exchange with maintainers

In addition to Knowledge exchange with other members, maintainers may also involve discussions for example as a role of the moderator or to give advice. Similarly to the knowledge exchange with members factor, this factor was labelled *knowledge exchange with maintainers*. The type of attraction is both self- and social related and members may either actively communicate with the maintainer or read the members' and maintainers' communication from the discussion forum.

As considered earlier, Ridings and Gefen (2004) named exchange information as an attraction factor. Also Wasko and Faraj (2000) mention the importance of getting and giving advice in general. The present study goes a step further and also specifies the participants between whom knowledge exchange or learning occurs.

Sooda. In Sooda, members look for backup and answers to their questions in different life areas. In addition to asking these questions from other members, questions can be asked from the maintainer in some discussion forums. For example, in a service called *cyber mom* members may ask advice for their different problems. The answers are enriched with an amount of humour. However, during the study, the opportunity to pose questions was closed and cyber mom concentrated only on giving advice by offering different types of articles.

Mainio. In Mainio, members can ask experts in financial things or in constructing houses. According to the maintainers' plans, it is possible that the amount of these services will be increased in the near future. At the moment, according to the maintainer, members have not yet found these sections very well.

Code. The maintainer participates in discussions and develops Code based on the feedback. Thus, the maintainer admitted that there are only scarce resources channelled for this, and therefore the answering happens mostly based on the personnel's own interests.

Among the Code's members, clearly the attraction factor mentioned most often was advice from the maintainer. In fact, there was a need for more participation from the maintainer's side. The part of the data was collected by utilising a user study, which partly explains the importance of this factor. The members felt that they are not getting enough advice and backup from the maintainer, but they are "left outside alone..."

As Code offers a professional service for their members, it has allocated more resources in answering questions there. However, this does not seem to be enough according to the members' opinions, but the maintainers should also participate actively in discussions.

My #1 request would be for Code to participate more actively in this forum, so that questions actually get answers, rather than have your developers guess for them. (Member)

You've got to agree with everyone that company X has got to show a little more interest and answer the questions of those needing help. (Member)

5.3.3 Attraction factors in member-to-service relationships

Due to the characteristics of an online community, besides the attraction factors between people, also the attraction factors related to services and the whole community has to be considered. Table 25 points out the member-to-service related attraction factors.

Table 25. *Member-to-service relationships in the attraction model*

RELATIONSHIP	TYPE OF ATTRACTION	ATTRACTION FACTOR
Member-to-member	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with members
	<i>Social related</i>	Discussions
	<i>Social related</i>	Commercial activities
	<i>Social related</i>	Dating
	<i>Social related</i>	The diversity of people
	<i>Social related</i>	Friendships
	<i>Social related</i>	Playing
	<i>Social related</i>	Roles
	<i>Social related</i>	Similarity
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with maintainers
Member-to-service	<i>Self-related</i>	Maintainers' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Members' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Awareness
	<i>Self-related</i>	Service variety
	<i>Self-related</i>	Usability
Member-to-brand	<i>Self-related</i>	Reputation

Member-to-service attraction factors differ from the first ones as they are between the content, not the people. They also differ as these factors also can emerge in web services, not only in online communities. These factors are discussed next.

Maintainers' content

The earlier literature has not recognised *maintainers' content* as an attraction factor of online communities. The reason is that the researchers have not included content as an attraction factor of online communities, but considered it as a part of a web service. However, the present study suggests that because both the maintainers and members indicated the maintainers' content as an attraction factor, it should be added to the model of attraction. Maintainers' content represents a self-related attraction factor.

Nicehouse. The maintainers pointed out that people seek for information and advice for their daily routines in Nicehouse such as cooking and cleaning. One of the ideas of Nicehouse is particularly to make people's daily life easier. Although there are also articles where information is provided, their role is mainly to support and create an impression that the content is regularly updated.

Sooda. In Sooda, the maintainers expressed that there are articles concerning themes that teenagers are interested in. However, the main emphasis is clearly on

the members' discussions. In fact, the members did not mention the content as an attraction factor, which confirms the maintainers' answers that the role of the content is not central in Sooda.

Mainio. Mainio differs from its competitors, as it offers much information in three specific areas which are housing, cars and financial matters. The content of Mainio is updated regularly and the links for the newest issues are gathered to the weekly newsletter sent by email. In Mainio, the interesting content attracted the members who expressed that the content often changes and always concerns current topics.

From Mainio I get information for the backup of current purchases. Mainio is a real time information forum. I read for example comparisons between cars and home devices here. I use Mainio pretty much and I explore what it offers about various things. (Member)

I got familiar with Mainio about two years ago as I searched for an instalment calculator...I noticed then that there were current news and tips, and they are diligently updated...The best thing in Mainio is that it offers articles very widely about everyday things. (Member)

Code. According to the maintainer, Code offers the newest information about the developments of this area for professionals. Therefore, the current content of the newest developments and news in the field are important. The members also indicated that documents offered on the web sites are important for them.

Members' content

Next, the factor named as *members' content* refers to the members' possibility to see content created by other members and is based on self-related attraction as well. Members' content may be almost anything. In fact, only the maintainers' imagination limits the possibilities they offer for the members to create content. Some examples of these services are members' home sites, virtual pets, and a service where members can send their poems.

Nicehouse. Although Nicehouse offers quite traditional services, there are some more innovative ones as well. For example, one of the services allows members to send their poems and read others' poems, which was mentioned as an attraction factor.

Sooda. One example of the content created by members in Sooda is a novel that is written by different writers. The members expressed that they visit Sooda to see what kind of content others have created.

And it is also nice to see what others have created here.. which I often marvel at. (Member)

Code. The limitations of the services offered restrict members to create content that they would appreciate. However, it seems that members would be attracted for example by the bug reports given by other members.

Awareness

A precondition for attraction is that a member finds the online community. Therefore, *awareness* can be seen as a precondition for attraction. In their study, Harris et al (2003) called the precondition for attraction as familiarity. Due to the chosen context, awareness can be considered as a possibility to find an online community's website. According to Barabasi (2002), an online community has to have a certain amount of links that it can be found or it should be marketed on the Internet or in another media.

Even though awareness can also be seen as a precondition for attraction, in this context it also has other meanings than the possibility to find and use the service. In general, one of the characteristics of online communities is that members can visit them from all over the world, 24 hours per day. Of course, to be able to visit online communities, members need to have access to the Internet. Even though the amount of Internet connections has increased significantly, all households do not have the access yet.

In addition, using the services of online communities places some requirements for members' technology as well. Furthermore, some online communities may have given the access only for some specific group of people.

Nicehouse. The maintainer advertises Nicehouse in some other communities that Nicefactory owns, but not in a large scale. Nicehouse's calendar sold in bookstores is also a way to increase the awareness of Nicehouse.

However, one of the characteristic features of online communities is that they can be visited any time and everywhere. One of the members said that one of Nicehouse's attraction factors is that "you can visit even in the middle of the night".

Sooda. Similar to Nicehouse, also Sooda is advertised occasionally with banners, but mainly the maintainer trusts in the word-of-mouth method. Also the calendar sold in bookstores, which can be updated on Sooda's websites, probably increases the members' awareness of Sooda.

Mainio. Since Mainio is the OP Bank Group's service, it is advertised on the banks' websites and its marketing material. Also a weekly newsletter sent by email to subscribers is designed to increase Mainio's awareness. Current themes are gathered in the newsletter as links. This helps and encourages subscribers to visit Mainio and find the themes they are currently interested in.

You can visit it whenever you want to, many kind of topics that are chosen according to the season, also offers information. (Member)

Code. Code differs from other studied cases as its language is English. Therefore, Code brings together developers from all over the world. Since Code also exists in the physical world and is offering different activities and services, this increases people's awareness of its existence.

Service variety

The service variety factor refers to different services that an online community offers. Services enabling members to act individually, for example to solve crossword puzzle, are included in this factor. Offering different types of services may be useful from the members' perspective as they may learn by using new kind of services.

In their study Wasko and Faraj (2000) stressed the importance of appropriate technologies to support an online community. For instance, they mentioned service that keeps track of the structure of interaction, archive discussions in a searchable format and display of the identities of group members.

Nicehouse. *The ask mother – answer mother* service is one of the innovative interactive services offered. Examples of other interactive services are a flea market and a service where members can send their poems. However, the maintainers stressed that the main focus in Nicehouse is to concentrate on discussions, not innovative services. Thus, the commercial aspect has not been forgotten. An example of this is a calendar for women that was launched for the first time in 2004. This calendar can be personalised and updated on Nicehouse's websites and it is sold in bookstores. The calendar is a good illustration of a product, which utilises the online community and the brand created on the Internet to increase its value.

Sooda. Sooda is a dynamic and innovative service that offers many kind of possibilities to create content and interact with others. Referring to the maintainers, Sooda's members are motivated to create and publish content so that others can also see it.

In Sooda, because it is made for teenagers, it is more dynamic, there is more movement, more colours, more curious applications; counting love percentages or different columns, teenagers like to test different things and they like and enjoy these tricks, so there have been put much more these kind of things than in Nicehouse, so it is the idea in the background. (Member)

Sooda has also extended its brand from an online community to calendars and clothes. The Sooda calendar is advertised in the Sooda community. As in Nicehouse, the Sooda calendar brings together two things: the physical calendar and the updates for it in the Sooda community. For example, members can create a virtual pet in the Sooda community and then print it on the paper and put it into the calendar. The Sooda calendar can be personalised this way, which can be seen as an attraction factor of the community as well.

According to the members, the service variety is one reason why they came to Sooda in the first place. In general, it seems that they like to use interactive services in Sooda.

I visit Sooda generally to answer the question about opinions and checking what others have replied. I visit Sooda's club to participate in the quiz and sometimes to write or to send presents. In the top story there are always funny stories (but not all of them!). In addition, I visit it almost every time. (Member)

Mainio. Mainio's maintainers' stressed that the whole concept including services is carefully designed to increase the attractiveness of Mainio. Yet, during the study, they decided to close Mainio's discussion forum, because it was not as successful in the amount of discussions as they had expected, and also because it needed a lot of resources.

Mainio got compliments from the members for its variety of services. Especially crossword puzzles, competitions, calculators and e-cards were mentioned.

I visit Mainio about once a week, mostly because of new competitions in which I participate almost every time. (Member)

One of Mainio's member suggested that tests, jokes and *the ask something site* would be a nice addition to the service variety. However, since Mainio does not offer any interactivity between members, it is seen more as an Internet journal or *collection of articles* as one of the members stated.

Code. The maintainers mentioned that tools, documents, discussion boards and also a commercial sale channel are attraction factors. According to the maintainers, they provide a complete solution on mobile value added industry. Code has discussion forums and various services to offer tools and information for developers, including chargeable pro service. Code offers many types of other services outside the online community as well. They include services for testing and developing mobile services as well as happenings where developers can meet operators. Therefore, developers are also offered new business opportunities through Code.

However, considering universality and new business opportunities, it should be noticed that since Code acts outside the online community as well, these factors may affect the attractiveness of Code outside the Internet more than in Code's online community.

Yet, the members asked for more possibilities to create content and see content created by other members. For example, they asked for the possibility to send bug reports about the problems caused by the errors in the code. The idea included that these bug reports would be available for the other members. According to one of the members, another online community in the same field offers this type of service, and he has found it very useful. Also a proper list of the frequently asked questions (faq) was suggested.

You might want to consolidate a FAQ list to answer those most asked questions with the proper answers. It will be good for beginners and reduce the traffic of the thread on the forum. (Member)

Furthermore, in the user study some of the members suggested that there should be some type of reward system for active participants. He also said that other similar forums offer this kind of system. Then, another member stated that the most active posters were actually rewarded by brand new phones in the other online community. Yet, during the study Code launched a rewarding programme for active discussers, but it is too early to assess its success yet.

Usability

At some level, a factor called *usability* is regarded as a precondition of attraction. However, since usability is an essential part of web services that can not be ignored, it should be considered as an attraction factor as well.

According to Dafoulas, Kalaitzakis and Macaulay (2004) usability can be divided into ten categories: (1) accessibility, (2) clarity of communication, (3) navigation, (4) consistency, (5) visual presentation, (6) content, (7) privacy/security policies, (8) services, (9) comfort and (10) stickiness. The category about accessibility includes questions regarding page loading time; graphics download time and accessibility of information. Clarity of communication is concerned with the purpose of the site, the language used, status messages etc. Navigation comprises of site organisation and link clarification. Consistency focuses on screen layout, the use of a standard procedure etc. Visual presentation includes text readability, the use of colours and the use of animation. The content category concentrates on the depth of information and whether the information is up to date. The category about privacy and security policies consists of clarity of the privacy policy, security methods provided, the choice of receiving future contact etc. The services category includes online search facility, help on product selection, delivery charges and contact information. Comfort concerns how safe the member feels within the website, how *friendly* and *welcoming* the website is. Finally, the last category focuses on the overall stickiness of the website, asking the evaluators whether they could become regular users of the website etc.

Also other researchers have recognised usability as important in online communities (e.g. Klang and Olsson 1999; Ridings and Gefen 2004). In this study both a question posed for members and the interviews showed that usability affects the attraction of online communities. Because dividing usability into more specific factors according to Dafoulas et al. (2004), is not the main focus, the usability is considered as a one factor in the present study

Nicehouse. The maintainers stated that the usability is one of Nicehouse's attraction factors.

Nicehouse is built to be peaceful, clear, easy-to-use, so it is meant for middle-aged women, who are not experienced computer users, so when they come to the service, it is instantly cosy, and peaceful, and not like the place with many banners or colours of flashing all the time. (Maintainer)

From the members the easiness of the usability got acknowledgement. The sites were mentioned being fast, the user interface of the discussion forums good and the idea of the house metaphor as brilliant.

Sooda. Originally, the idea was that the sites are not logically linked; conversely members get lost and accidentally end up to different sites. Yet, this caused problems as members did not find the sites they wanted to visit, and as a result the user interface was organised in a traditional way. However, the members did not mention usability in their answers.

Mainio. As mentioned earlier, also the usability is designed to back up the whole concept. As a supplement to increasing awareness, the newsletter enhances the usability because members can quickly find current articles. Furthermore, different tricks and tools are used to enhance the usability. For example, the themes have different colours and the content is organised under them. Currently, all the articles were given keywords to enable members to find them with the search-service. The usability of Mainio also got acknowledgements from the members. They find it easy to find relevant and current information.

I find stories about interesting topics here such as furnishing, living, recipes, bank affairs. It is easy to follow links and by using the search the desired article is quickly found. (Member)

I get a newsletter including a very clear list about the current topics of Mainio to my email. It is quick to check from the list if there are some things that I am interested in (and I do not necessarily have to open whole the web service, because usually discerning the structure of the web service takes a lot of time, this does not consider Mainio more than other web services). (Member)

In addition, one member commented that Mainio's articles are also easy to print on paper.

Code. The maintainers or the members generally did not mention the usability in their answers. Yet, one of the members wished that it could be better, because "Occasionally the server seems to get stuck for a while."

5.3.4 Attraction factors in member-to-brand relationships

In contrast to other relationships that were originated from the some specific part of the community, a member-to-brand relationship refers to the factors that derive from the whole community or the maintaining company. Table 26 highlights the member-to-brand relationship in the attraction model.

Table 26. *Member-to-brand relationships in the attraction model*

RELATIONSHIP	TYPE OF ATTRACTION	ATTRACTION FACTOR
Member-to-member	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with members
	<i>Social related</i>	Discussions
	<i>Social related</i>	Commercial activities
	<i>Social related</i>	Dating
	<i>Social related</i>	The diversity of people
	<i>Social related</i>	Friendships
	<i>Social related</i>	Playing
	<i>Social related</i>	Roles
	<i>Social related</i>	Similarity
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with maintainers
Member-to-service	<i>Self-related</i>	Maintainers' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Members' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Awareness
	<i>Self-related</i>	Service variety
	<i>Self-related</i>	Usability
Member-to-brand	<i>Self-related</i>	Reputation

The relationship may exist between a member and a brand, and therefore it is related to parasocial relationships (Gummesson 2002a). The relationship is called reputation and it is presented next.

Reputation

Although the word reputation may refer to members' reputation, in this study the reputation refers to the online community's reputation and the members' reputation is included under the Roles attraction factor.

The reputation attraction factor is problematic since it is difficult to make a difference between an online community's and a company's reputations. Moreover, the company's, its products' as well as the online community's reputation may affect on the attractiveness in many ways. For example, it may help members to forgive some mistakes or errors.

Harris et al. (2003) mentions other participant's reputation as an attraction factor. Image and reputation are often seen as close concepts, even synonyms. However, they have different meanings. Image is often seen as more figurative

and visual, whereas reputation is more like an entity of evaluative stories (Karvonen 2000, p. 64). According to Bromley (1993, p. 6) reputation includes the evaluation, while image is a more neutral term.

Corporate image can also be seen as a part of the company's reputation, and therefore reputation may be considered as a stronger concept and to also include relationships inside organisations, culture and real operations. Therefore, reputation reflects organisations' real activities, not something that is purposefully communicated outside. Reputation is also considered as a communal concept that is spread through stories from one to another and seen as a sum of the stories told about the organisation (e.g. Karvonen 2000; Smythe Dorward and Reback 1992, pp. 3-9)

In this study, image is seen as a part of the reputation and therefore, reputation was chosen as an attraction factor. Reputation in the context of this study includes the reputation of an online community and its maintainer company.

Nicehouse. Nicehouse is named as the first Finnish online community aimed for women. Thus, the maintainers stated that such an image has no stronger influence on the general attractiveness since the amount of such online communities has increased. Instead, Nicehouse's calendar was built to increase the awareness and the brand of Nicehouse.

Sooda. Sooda has succeeded in creating a coherent graphic with colours and characters that together create an own world. Furthermore, Sooda has won a multimedia award and got publicity in media which also may increase its attractiveness. Therefore, according to the maintainers, its image and brand create attraction as well. Sooda's calendar also has a strong brand, and because it can be updated on Sooda's web sites it increases the possibility that the brand attracts members.

Although the members did not mention reputation in their answers, it can be assumed that they play at least some role in creating attraction. This is deduced on the basis of the presupposition that teenagers often are affected by others' opinions.

Mainio. The image of Mainio is naturally influenced by the maintainer, the OP Bank Group. However, the idea of Mainio is to respect everyone's relationship with his/her bank. Therefore, the OP Bank Group is brought discreetly as a part of Mainio's content. Even though Mainio has created its own brand, members know who the maintainer is and according to the maintainers, the image of the bank increases the trust in Mainio. Members may as well benefit from the bank's offerings. In fact, according to the latest development plans Mainio is moving closer to the bank aiming to create additional value for the customers. In the future Mainio's name will be probably changed as well and the new name will more closely illustrate the relation with the bank.

According to members' answers Mainio seems to have a rather good reputation. Among the members Mainio has also gained their trust by offering

high quality articles. Furthermore, according to some of the members, one of their reasons to visit Mainio is to get offerings and news from their own bank.

Mainio always offers ‘surprises’, current and interesting stories and tips. News, benefits and even offerings from the own bank. (Member)

Mainio a service of the OP Bank Group and I trust in this bank. (Member)

In contrast, all the members do not like to get the bank’s offerings, but felt that they are victims of propaganda as they get those offerings. According to the answers, members also prefer not to have too many advertisements on Mainio’s websites.

Code. According to the maintainers, the company’s good reputation and the strong brand are online community’s attraction factors. A company can be considered as a technology leader that offers valuable and current information.

Sometimes, I have heard that someone has a master’s voice and when it says something, it is listened to...so it is a professional and skilful player, and it is worth listening to what it says. (Maintainer)

5.4 Comparing the attraction factors

5.4.1 Comparisons of the maintainers’ and members’ views of the attraction factors

Nicehouse. Basically, in Nicehouse the attraction factors mentioned by the maintainers and the members were rather similar. The similarities and differences are illustrated in Table 27. Although Nicehouse offers a flea market, it seems to be rather unimportant in creating attraction among members. The maintainers also mentioned dating as an attraction factor. Thus, they admitted that it is not in a central role, which was confirmed by the members. Since Nicehouse does not offer services for playing, this factor was not mentioned at all. The absence of the knowledge exchange with maintainers factor can be explained by the fact that maintainer does not involve in discussions. Furthermore, the maintainers did not mention members’ content as an attraction factor although members mentioned it. Yet, this can probably be explained by the fact that because Nicehouse offers basic services, possibilities to create other content are quite restricted. Although Nicehouse is the first online community for women, the image does not seem to influence the attraction in the members’ eyes.

Table 27. Comparing the attraction factors between Nicehouse’s maintainers and members

ATTRACTION RELATIONSHIP	ATTRACTION FACTOR	MAINTAINERS’ VIEW	MEMBERS’ VIEW
Member-to-member	<i>Knowledge exchange with members</i>	Others’ advice and experiences	Others’ advice and experiences
	<i>Discussions</i>	Relevant in-depth discussions	Relevant in-depth discussions
	<i>Commercial activities</i>	Members can buy and sell in the flea market	
	<i>Dating</i>	Seeking for dating company	
	<i>The diversity of people</i>	Heterogenous group	Meeting people from different backgrounds and opinions
	<i>Friendships</i>	Making friendships	Making friendships
	<i>Playing</i>		
	<i>Roles</i>	Anonymity and roles	Anonymity
	<i>Similarity</i>	Women, people interested in the same issues, small communities formed	A sense of community, other members in the same situation
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Knowledge exchange with maintainers</i>		
Member-to-service	<i>Maintainers’ content</i>	Articles, interesting themes, related to family issues	Interesting themes
	<i>Members’ content</i>		Poems
	<i>Awareness</i>	Banners	Easy to come to
	<i>Service variety</i>	Calendar	Poems
	<i>Usability</i>	Easy to use, traditional	Easy to use, good idea
Member-to-brand	<i>Reputation</i>	The first online community for women	

To conclude, maintainers and members stress the member-to-member relationships on the basis of the results. The attraction factors also confirm that Nicehouse is a traditional place for women to have in-depth discussion about family issues.

Sooda. In Sooda’s case the maintainer expressed that similarity between others attracts members. The members mentioned the same thing, yet they also stated that it is nice to talk with other kind of people and they enjoyed having good

discussions. Having discussions was also mentioned by the maintainers. Yet, according to the maintainers' opinion, Sooda's members do not usually have in-depth discussions. Differences and similarities between the maintainers' and the members' answers are presented in Table 28.

Table 28. Comparing the attraction factors between Sooda's maintainers and members

ATTRACTION RELATIONSHIP	ATTRACTION FACTOR	MAINTAINERS' VIEW	MEMBERS' VIEW
Member-to-member	<i>Knowledge exchange with members</i>	Backup and advice	Asking for advice, expressing opinions freely
	<i>Discussions</i>	Yes, but not in-depth	Interesting discussions
	<i>Commercial activities</i>		
	<i>Dating</i>	Looking for dating company and email pals	
	<i>The diversity of people</i>		Meeting different kind of people
	<i>Friendships</i>	New friends and email pals	New people and friends
	<i>Playing</i>	Virtual pets, Sooda club	Virtual pets, Sooda club
	<i>Roles</i>	Anonymity and roles	Anonymity
	<i>Similarity</i>	Mainly girls around the same age, <i>Sooda people</i>	The same kind of people
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Knowledge exchange with maintainers</i>	Backup and advice	
Member-to-service	<i>Maintainers' content</i>	Articles on things that teenagers are interested in	
	<i>Members' content</i>	Reading others' texts	Looking at what others have done
	<i>Awareness</i>	Banners	
	<i>Service variety</i>	Innovative services, calendar	A wide variety of innovative services
	<i>Usability</i>	Logical user interface	
Member-to-brand	<i>Reputation</i>	Publicity in media, strong brand	

Even though Sooda's members did not mention that they are interested in a dating possibility, these forums seem to be rather popular based on the amount of the messages in the dating discussion forums. However, this dilemma may be

explained by the low response rate that may have left the users of those forums outside. Another reason may be that members may be reluctant to admit that they are attracted because of the possibility of dating.

Then, the members did not mention maintainers' content as Sooda's attraction factor. This can be explained by the fact that Sooda only offers a few articles. More surprisingly, while there are services where the maintainer answers the questions of members; the members did not mention knowledge exchange with maintainers as an attraction factor.

Furthermore, both sides recognised the importance of a large service variety. This was evident as Sooda offers many innovative services. Therefore, the Service variety seemed to be Sooda's most important attraction factor. Even though the maintainer has lately changed the user interface into more logical and easier to use, the usability was not recognised as an attraction factor by members.

Finally, awareness and reputation were not mentioned as attraction factors by the members while the maintainers mentioned some of them but did not consider them very important either. To conclude, in Sooda's case it seems that the members appreciate the innovativeness and dynamics of the place, which has been the maintainers' idea in building Sooda. Also the calendar sites, where the Sooda calendar can be updated, are popular in Sooda.

Mainio. Since there is no possibility for interaction between members, relationships are not formed between the members. However, the attraction factor called knowledge exchange with members was mentioned by the maintainer. According to the maintainers, members get information by reading questions to the experts posed by other members. However, members did not mention these factors, so it seems that at the moment they do not consider this possibility as an attraction factor. Also, because of the possibility to ask for advice, the maintainers' mentioned knowledge exchange as an attraction factor, which was not mentioned among members, however.

In addition, similarity was mentioned by the maintainer because members are either the customers of the OP Bank Group or potential customers sharing the interest to bank issues and related themes. Yet, members do not recognise these attraction factors, basically because the genuine interaction between them is lacking. Therefore, the sense of community seems to lack, because according to members' answers Mainio is more of a collection of articles rather than an online community. The maintainers' and the members' answers are compared in Table 29.

In Mainio, maintainers' content, awareness, service variety and usability were appreciated. In Mainio's case the themes seem to be well chosen as the members also mentioned them. Also Mainio's reputation as well as the commercial offerings was mentioned from both sides. The maintainers' and members' answers in Mainio's case were the most similar among the studied cases.

Table 29. Comparing the attraction factors between Mainio's maintainers and members

ATTRACTION RELATIONSHIP	ATTRACTION FACTOR	MAINTAINERS' VIEW	MEMBERS' VIEW
Member-to-member	<i>Knowledge exchange with members</i>	Question and answer -service	
	<i>Discussions</i>		
	<i>Commercial activities</i>		
	<i>Dating</i>		
	<i>The diversity of people</i>		
	<i>Friendships</i>		
	<i>Playing</i>		
	<i>Roles</i>		
	<i>Similarity</i>	OP Bank Group's customers, potential customers, people interested in the same themes	
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Knowledge exchange with maintainers</i>	The possibility to ask experts	
Member-to-service	<i>Maintainers' content</i>	Current and interesting information, bank's offerings	Interesting articles, diverse content, tips, bank's offerings
	<i>Members' content</i>		
	<i>Awareness</i>	Links in the newsletter, banners	Links in the newsletter
	<i>Service variety</i>	Newsletter, interactive services, successful concept design	Newsletter, competitions, e-cards, crossword puzzles, calculators
	<i>Usability</i>	Good usability	Relevant information is easy to find and print
Member-to-brand	<i>Reputation</i>	Strong brand, image of the bank	Reliable and high quality articles

To conclude, Mainio's attraction factors concentrated on member-to-service and member-to-brand relationships. Although Mainio has some communal features, because of the lack of interactive services, Mainio does not fulfil the

criteria set for online communities. Therefore, Mainio could be labelled as a web service instead of calling it an online community.

Mainio has potential members who are interested in the same issues, and therefore, it could become an online community by enabling member-to-member interaction. However, it seems that the maintainers are not letting the control away from them, which would restrict the formation of an online community. At the moment, the maintainers prefer to offer a high-quality electronic journal or web service with a little interaction for the members.

Code. In Code, knowledge exchange with members and maintainers, maintainers' content and similarity were mentioned by both sides of the respondents. In contrast, only maintainers mentioned service variety, awareness and reputation as attraction factors. Furthermore, no-one mentioned members' content or usability as an attraction factor at the moment.

In Code's case the most remarkable thing was the members' well-defined need for new services to be able to share knowledge better. For example, they need a service where they could read and send bug reports. Also seeing other members' status and being able to gain such were wished by members. Furthermore, the maintainer's more active participation in discussions was needed. Therefore, service variety and members' content could be considered as attraction factors, which are currently not utilised. Table 30 presents the maintainers' and the members' attraction factors. The members' development ideas from the user study are in brackets.

Table 30. Comparing the attraction factors between Code’s maintainers and members.

ATTRACTION RELATIONSHIP	ATTRACTION FACTOR	MAINTAINERS’ VIEW	MEMBERS’ VIEW
Member-to-member	<i>Knowledge exchange with members</i>	Advice and information	Advice and information, sharing knowledge
	<i>Discussions</i>		
	<i>Commercial activities</i>		
	<i>Dating</i>		
	<i>The diversity of people</i>		
	<i>Friendships</i>		
	<i>Playing</i>		
	<i>Roles</i>	Profiles	Seeing the others’ profile and the possibility to gain a status
<i>Similarity</i>	Mobile software developers	Others in the same situation	
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Knowledge exchange with maintainers</i>	Answers to members’ questions	Getting advice
Member-to-service	<i>Maintainers’ content</i>	Information	Information about the newest developments
	<i>Members’ content</i>		(Need for information about the bugs, for example)
	<i>Awareness</i>	Advertisements, universality	
	<i>Service variety</i>	Other services, business opportunities	(Need for the possibility to see own messages, FAQ, <i>Bug parade</i>)
	<i>Usability</i>		(Server gets stuck)
Member-to-brand	<i>Reputation</i>	Company is a technology leader	

All in all, quite many factors were not mentioned in Code's case. This can probably be explained with the background of this community, because Code is a community for professionals who use the information from the community in their work, not in their leisure time as the other cases.

In conclusion, it seems that there is some kind of conflict between the members and the maintainers, because the members feel that they get too little information from the maintainers. The maintainers actually do not have resources for that, because the other, chargeable service is meant for a place, where they actively answer members' questions.

5.4.2 Comparisons of the attraction factors in case company online communities

Multiple case online communities enable comparisons between the cases, which are discussed next by following the order of the attraction factors in the attraction model. To summarise the comparisons, the maintainers' views and the members' views in the different cases are gathered in Table 31 and Table 32. The mark 'X' is used to signify that the factor was mentioned.

Table 31. *Maintainers' views on the attraction factors in the case online communities*

ATTRACTION RELATIONSHIP	ATTRACTI ON FACTOR	NICE-HOUSE	SOODA	MAINIO	CODE
Member-to-member	<i>Knowledge exchange with members</i>	X	X	X	X
	<i>Discussions</i>	X	X		
	<i>Commercial activities</i>	X			
	<i>Dating</i>	X	X		
	<i>The diversity of people</i>	X			
	<i>Friendships</i>	X	X		
	<i>Playing</i>		X		
	<i>Roles</i>	X	X		X
	<i>Similarity</i>	X	X	X	X
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Knowledge exchange with maintainers</i>		X	X	X
	<i>Maintainers' content</i>	X	X	X	X
	<i>Members' content</i>		X		
Member-to-service	<i>Awareness</i>	X	X	X	X
	<i>Service variety</i>	X	X	X	X
	<i>Usability</i>	X	X	X	
Member-to-brand	<i>Reputation</i>	X	X	X	X

Knowledge exchange with members was mentioned as an attraction factor in all case communities. This factor seemed to be an important attraction factor especially in Nicehouse's discussion forums which were related to some specific theme, for example cars or dogs. In Sooda, the members asked advice and opinions from others for different personal problems. In Code, the members asked for professional advice in problems related to software development. In Mainio, only the maintainer mentioned this factor referring to the services where members can ask questions for example about financial things from professionals and others can read the answers.

The discussions attraction factor seemed to be the most central attraction factor in Nicehouse. According to the members, they are attracted by the in-depth conversations with bright people. In Sooda, while the members are attracted by discussions, the maintainer argued that teenagers do not usually have very in-depth discussions. In Code, this factor did not come up, probably because Code seems to be used only for professional tasks and the attraction is concentrated on knowledge exchange.

Then, only Nicehouse offered *commercial activities*. Although this factor is very important in some company online communities, it was not essential in the chosen cases.

Dating was mentioned by the maintainers of Nicehouse and Sooda. However, the members did not mention this factor. Still, in Sooda's case, the reason may also be that the respondents were not willing to admit this kind of reason. This argument is rationalised by exploring Sooda's websites where looking for pen pal sites seem to be quite popular. Of course, as already mentioned, another reason for the lack of this factor may be the limited number of the respondents.

Meeting *the diversity of people* was important according to Sooda's and Nicehouse's members. Also the maintainers stated that Nicehouse consists of heterogenous group of members. Since Code is a professional online community, this kind of curiosity did not emerge, yet the main thing was to find information.

Making new *friendships* and meeting friends was most important in Nicehouse and Sooda. The members are searching for a companion for conversations and creating new friendships in the online community because they are either lonely or socially active persons. In Sooda, the maintainer mentioned that some of the members consider themselves as Sooda people, and they also express devotion to each other. At the moment, this factor was ignored in Code, although the maintainer mentioned that this may change in future.

Another factor that seemed to be rather unimportant in the cases was *playing* which was mentioned in Sooda only. In fact, only Sooda enabled this activity. In general, playing may be a very strong attraction factor. This is evidenced by numerous communities that are concentrated on playing web games.

Then, an attraction factor labelled *Roles* was mentioned by Nicehouse's, Sooda's and Code's maintainers. The members stressed anonymity more than admitted that they enjoy having different roles than in normal life. For example, Sooda's members enjoyed meeting different types of people online. Online communities allow members to act anonymously, which is not normally possible and Nicehouse' and Sooda's members felt this possibility relieving. They felt that anonymity makes communicating easier and they are able to discuss without commitment. In Sooda, one of the respondents indicated that he/she even changes his/her nickname every time. In Code, the members have to register, however the nicknames preserve anonymity. Since Code is a professional online community, role playing is not common in such communities. Yet, Code's members wished to see others' profiles and member status. The possibility to gain a high status could encourage members to contribute more in online communities like Code.

Similarity was found important in creating a sense of community and was especially highlighted in the pregnancy forum in Nicehouse where the members share the same kind of life situations. However, the maintainer of Nicehouse mentioned that even though members are mainly women, they are not very homogenous in general and they represent many different backgrounds. In Sooda's case the maintainer expressed that Sooda's members are more homogenous and feel that they are Sooda people. They also express by their behaviour the signs of community as they get angry if someone breaks the rules and they like to monitor messages. However, Sooda's members stressed the importance of meeting different kind of people as an attraction factor but also meeting the people they already know. In Mainio, only the maintainer mentioned similarity as an attraction factor. Conversely, according to the members, Mainio lacks the sense of community. In fact, all the maintainers did not even see Mainio as an online community at the moment, but rather as a web service. However, they addressed the interest to develop it to a more communal direction. In Code, similarity was also recognised. This was quite evident as Code's members represent mobile software developers.

Even though explored discussion forums were mainly aimed for members' discussion, also the *knowledge exchange with maintainers* factor was especially important in Code where the members need advice for their professional problems. The problem was that the members felt that they did not get enough advice from the maintainers at the moment. In Sooda and Nicehouse the maintainer mentioned this factor, but admitted that the role of this factor is not essential. Namely, in these forums the maintainer is not actively involved in discussions. Even though Mainio offers some services where members can ask questions from professionals, for example in financial matters, these are apparently not in a central role. It seems that for some reason, the members have not found these services.

Furthermore, the cases show that *maintainers' content*, for example articles, supports online communities by giving relevant information about the theme that online community concerns. Among the cases maintainers' content was stressed most in Mainio. This was not a surprise as Mainio focuses in producing a wide variety of current articles, which both the maintainer and the member respondents mentioned as an attraction factor. In Code, information on the current developments and all the relevant information were considered important as well. Also in Nicehouse and Sooda, there are some articles published by the maintainer but the main focus is clearly on other factors. In fact, this factor was not mentioned by members, and therefore it seems to play a minor role.

Then, *members' content* was mentioned as an attraction factor in Sooda and in Nicehouse by the members. Alternatively, the variety of services enabling to create content in Sooda is much wider than Nicehouse's variety that is much more traditional and conventional. In Code, although the members felt that different services enabling them to see content created by others would be very practical in sharing the information, they are currently not being offered such services.

Awareness came up at some level in all cases. In Nicehouse and Sooda, the maintainers have used advertising banners to increase awareness. In Mainio, banners are used, and the weekly newsletter is designed to increase the awareness. Furthermore, Mainio's maintainer, the OP Bank Group, also increases the people's awareness about Mainio by its own communication. Code is advertised on the maintainer's websites and in conferences as well, but also the global aspect was stressed. In Code, members can get advice from members from other parts of the world.

Then, *service variety* was mentioned in all cases. The results addressed that members like to try and use different services that offer them new experiences as well as new ways to communicate. In addition, members may also learn by using new types of services. One good example is Sooda's and Nicehouse's joint service that enables adults and teenagers to discuss. Especially teenagers seem to be eager to create many kind of content. Sooda's members enjoy using innovative services in creating content. In Code's case many comments were related to the services they would like to have. For example, they wanted to get a service that offers them information about the newest software bugs as well as allows them to report the bugs they have noticed. Also in other cases, some suggestions for new services occurred. In Sooda, members were eager to try innovative services, and therefore Sooda also acts as a testing field for its maintainers.

Usability was mentioned in Nicehouse, Sooda and Mainio. Especially, the house metaphor in Nicehouse was commended. Also in Mainio, the members indicated that relevant information is easy to find and to print, if needed. However, only the maintainer mentioned usability as an attraction factor in Sooda. One explanation may be that members actually consider the innovative nature of the service more important than the usability. In fact, according to the maintainer, at first Sooda did not have any logical structure and the current structure was constructed only a while ago. In Code, the usability was criticised. This may be explained by the neutrality of the user interface of Code.

Reputation was mentioned by maintainers in all the cases, but members mentioned it as an attraction factor only in Mainio. Mainio belongs to a strong bank brand, which may explain the role of reputation as an attraction factor. A bit surprising was that Code's members did not mention reputation as an attraction factor.

Table 32. *Members' views on the attraction factors in the case online communities*

ATTRACTION RELATIONSHIP	ATTRACTION FACTOR	NICE-HOUSE	SOODA	MAINIO	CODE
Member-to-member	<i>Knowledge exchange with members</i>	X	X		X
	<i>Discussions</i>	X	X		
	<i>Commercial activities</i>				
	<i>Dating</i>				
	<i>The diversity of people</i>	X	X		
	<i>Friendships</i>	X	X		
	<i>Playing</i>		X		
	<i>Roles</i>	X	X		X
	<i>Similarity</i>	X	X		X
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Knowledge exchange with maintainers</i>				X
	<i>Maintainers' content</i>	X		X	X
	<i>Members' content</i>	X	X		
Member-to-service	<i>Awareness</i>	X		X	
	<i>Service variety</i>	X	X	X	
	<i>Usability</i>	X		X	
Member-to-brand	<i>Reputation</i>			X	

To conclude, the study found out that in Sooda and Nicehouse the member-to-member relationship is stressed. Conversely, Mainio's members do not recognise the member-to-member or member-to maintainer relationships at all. In Code, knowledge exchange with members and maintainers are central attraction factors.

5.5 Attraction offering models

5.5.1 The attraction type based offering

As a result of this study two types of company online communities' attraction offering model are constructed and the cases are used to exemplify them. These attraction offering models can be utilised in companies aiming to build online communities. In Figure 13 attraction offerings are compared by two variables that are the content offering and the type of attraction. The content offering may offer either cognitive- or affective-linked benefits. The type of attraction is divided into self-related and social related attraction on the basis of the attraction model illustrated earlier.

		The type of attraction	
		Self- related	Social related
The content offering	Cognitive-linked benefits	Individual learning	Knowledge sharing and networking
	Affective-linked benefits	Individual entertainment	Social entertainment

Figure 13. The attraction offering of company online communities based on the type of attraction and the content offering

The four sectors are named to depict the main attraction offering of four kind of theoretical company online communities. In reality, company online communities do not purely represent these four kinds of communities. Hence, the aim of the figures is to enable analysis and comparisons between different types of company online communities' attraction offerings as well as to offer a starting point for discussion rather than giving an ultimate description of existing attraction offerings of company online communities.

The sector on the top left corner represents an online community that attracts members to learn individually. Members may learn by reading the content of the online community and discussions, but they do not share knowledge in

discussions. These kind of members are more concentrated on individual benefit than creating knowledge together. The problem in these kinds of online communities is that they might be silent, in other words, the members are not motivated to discuss. Therefore they may more resemble a web service than a real online community.

The top right corner, *knowledge sharing and networking*, refers to the type of community where members come to share knowledge and discuss with others and also to create friendships. In this type of company online community maintainers do not need to involve into discussions so much, since members exchange knowledge by themselves. A good example of such forum is a Finnish forum called Kunnian kevät (<http://www.kunniankevat.com>). The forum is aimed for people who are studying for entrance examinations to universities. In the forum they meet similar people and share knowledge (more about this community see Puska 2005).

The left bottom corner is labelled as *individual entertainment*. This kind of online community offers a self-related type of attraction since it does not require interaction with others. Services for content creation, for example writing blogs that has become very popular last years, may offer this kind of attraction online communities.

Commenting blogs, on the other hand, can be seen as *social entertainment*, which is placed on the right bottom corner. Social entertainment is offered in online communities that are concentrated on web games. One of the most popular genre is Massively-Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG), such as Ultima Online (<http://www.uo.com/>) in which a large number of players interact with one another in a virtual world. In those forums, members come there to play with each other. While playing, players also often chat with other players.

In general, the social related type of attraction seems to fulfil the criteria set for company online communities better than the self-related type of attraction. Therefore, if attraction in an online community is concentrated only on the self-related type of attraction, it can be questioned if it truly is an online community or a web service.

To further exemplify the attraction offering, Figure 14 positions the cases on the basis of their attraction offerings. In addition, the arrows show the direction where the community is moving according to the study. Since Mainio's members are not being offered any possibilities to interact, its attraction offering is related to self-related type of attraction. Mainio's maintainer expressed that the content offering has already changed and will be changed into more entertaining in the future.

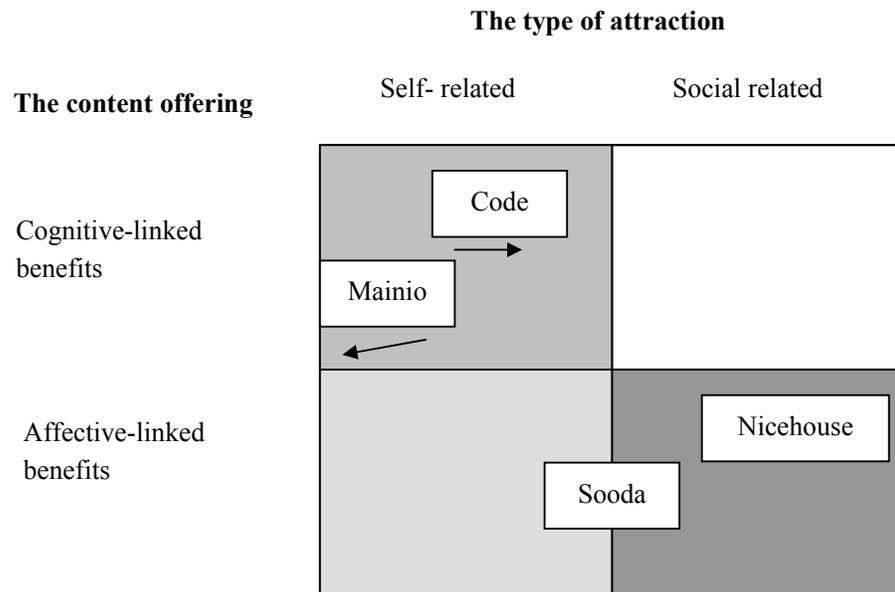


Figure 14. The attraction offering of the case online communities based on the type of attraction and the content offering

Code is also positioned in this corner, but however, the aim of the maintainer is clearly to move to the right towards knowledge sharing and networking. At the moment in Code, all type of learning is important, thus individual learning seems to be more stressed than social learning.

Since in Sooda maintainers' content creation is so important, it is positioned in the middle between individual and social related attraction. Nicehouse's attraction offering represents almost a pure social entertainment online community as members come there to feel the sense of community and share experiences in interesting discussions. Therefore, Nicehouse is situated in the right corner of the figure. Based on the study, both Sooda's and Nicehouse's attraction offerings seem to remain quite the same in the future.

5.5.2 *The attraction origin based offerings*

Another attraction offering model presented in this study is based on the maintainer-originated or member-originated attraction. In such model attraction factors related to service or brand are excluded. Figure 15 illustrates this kind of division. The axis maintainer originated - member originated refers to the origin of attraction factors. The maintainer can influence member-to-maintainer, member-to-service and member-to-brand relationships with its own actions, and therefore these factors are labelled as maintainer-originated. For the member-originated factors, the maintainer has smaller possibilities to affect.

The origin of attraction factors

The content offering	Maintainer-originated	Visitor-originated
Cognitive-linked benefits	Knowledge exchange with maintainers	Knowledge exchange with members
Affective-linked benefits	Entertainment from maintainers	Entertainment with members

Figure 15. The attraction offering of company online communities based on the origin of attraction factors and the content offering

The sector on the top left represents a company-oriented online community that offers cognitive-linked attraction factors based on the content, services and advice from the maintainer. The maintainer's role in these types of online communities is stressed as a source of knowledge. The sector is named as *knowledge exchange with maintainers*. In such online communities, the maintainers need to be actively involved and for this reason, these kind of online communities need plenty of resources from the company.

In contrast, *knowledge exchange with members* represents a company online community where the members' roles are central and active. Therefore, this kind of online community is member-oriented offering utilitarian attraction factors. Compared to the *knowledge exchange with maintainers* attraction offering the *knowledge exchange with members* saves the company resources as members give advice to each other, and therefore it is attractive to companies. However, most of the online communities are in the middle of these models. One example of such online communities is a Finnish online community called as Saunalahti Palsta (<http://palsta.saunalahti.fi/>). Its owner and maintainer, Saunalahti, offers Internet and telecommunications services in Finland for consumer customers. In Saunalahti Palsta customers are offered discussion forums where they can discuss, ask questions and comment on Saunalahti's services. Other customers as well as the company involves in the discussions as a moderator. The idea is to create a databank that can be utilised by all customers.

Then, the left bottom corner offers maintainer-originated attraction and is called *entertainment from maintainers*. The difference between the upper corners is that the content offering is more entertaining, in other words the community offers affective-linked attraction factors, which are mainly realised in entertaining content or services produced by the maintainer. Therefore, this kind of attraction offering is almost similar to *individual entertainment* presented in Figure 13. However, the difference between those two types of models is that in *the entertainment from maintainers* sector maintainers may interact with members. In online communities where moderators actively involve in discussions, for example in Suomi24.fi, this kind of attraction factors can be offered. Overall, in Figure 15 both sectors on the left represent such online communities, which may represent more web services if the interaction between members is lacking.

The right bottom corner, named as *entertainment with members* offers affective-linked attraction factors. In such online communities, members interact and create the content. A good example of this is Habbo Hotel, where the attraction offering is clearly concentrated on affective-linked attraction with other members. Thus, the maintainer-originated content and services are of course needed to support the community. *The entertainment with members* attraction offering differs from *the social entertainment* attraction offering (Figure 13) as the former attraction is totally visitor-originated but in the latter also maintainers may involve in social entertainment.

In Figure 16 the cases are placed into the theoretical model presented in Figure 15. Code is an online community for professionals and therefore it is positioned on the top. Code's members are attracted on both, maintainer- and member-originated attraction as the advice from the maintainer and other members are important. However, the maintainer aims to the member-originated direction where members would help each other and the maintainer's role would diminish. The objective for moving towards the member-originated attraction is to save resources by encouraging the members to learn from each other.

Then, Mainio's attraction factors consist of almost only maintainer-originated factors. Because Mainio offers both cognitive- and affective-linked attraction it is positioned almost in the middle of the vertical axel. Since Mainio closed its discussion forums its direction has been towards maintainer-originated content. If the content is totally maintainer-originated the existence of an online community can be questioned because one of the basic concepts behind online communities is a user-generated content.

The origin of attraction factors

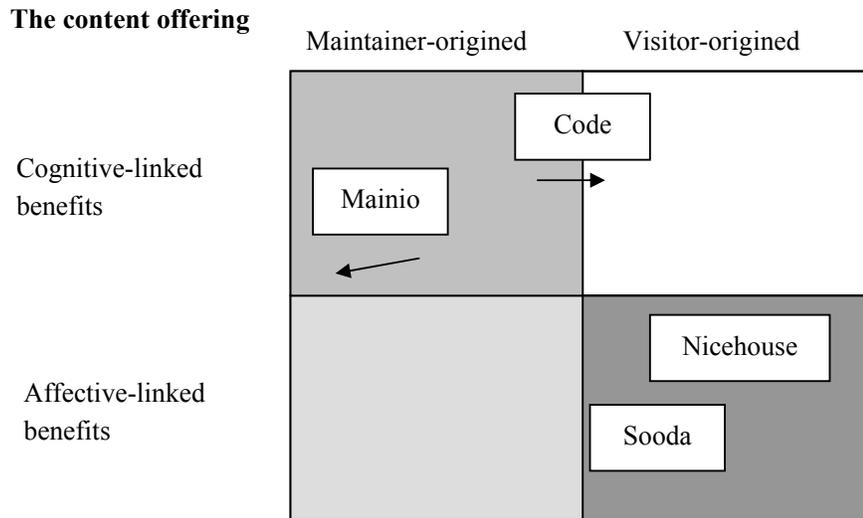


Figure 16. The attraction offering of the case online communities based on the origin of attraction factors and the content offering

Nicehouse offers both type of content, but more emphasises affective-linked content. Sooda is even more entertaining. Sooda's attraction factors are mainly member-related but also maintainer-related factors are included as the innovative services are considered important. In Nicehouse, the significance of maintainer-related factors is considerably low. The attraction factors are mainly concentrated on member-to-member factors, for example discussions are one of the members' main reasons to visit Nicehouse. From the company point of view, more visitors generate the content, fewer resources are needed. Similarly, as the amount of visitor-originated attraction factors increase, the control of the maintainer decreases. This is the question that has been the issue in many companies considering to build own online communities.

5.6 Discussing the findings

The attraction model brought out some factors that have not occurred in the earlier studies concerning members' reasons to visit online communities. Firstly, the model presents *the maintainers' role as an advisor as well as a content creator and moderator*. Although a member plays a central role in an online community, the maintainer has a significant role as well. This role seems to be

stressed in such online communities, where members suppose that maintainers answer their questions. Also in other kind of online communities, where member-to-member interaction plays a bigger role than member-to-maintainer interaction, the maintainer has an essential role in enhancing discussion by offering interesting themes and content around the themes.

The attraction model included a factor labelled *discussion* that has not been emphasised in earlier literature. Even though earlier studies mentioned discussion and dialogue, they stressed the information exchange side of it. In contrast, the present study suggests that having discussions can be considered as a factor of its own. Based on the results, members seem to enjoy having interesting discussions with others, and therefore, discussion can be regarded as an attraction factor. In fact, also maintainers have important roles as moderators in this attraction factor controlling the quality of the discussions.

Furthermore, a factor called *roles* was chosen as an attraction factor in the attraction model. The empiric evidence clearly showed that having different roles or acting anonymously is an attraction factor. The study found out that a possibility to act anonymously gave members a feeling of freedom to interact with other without any commitments. Also, it is also characteristic for online environment that it enables people to communicate without seeing the others' physical presence, for example nationality or gender. Furthermore, possible restrictions of people can not be noticed, which can be important for such people. In fact, this point was stressed many times in the pilot study. Based on the study, having some kind of member status is also an important aspect to encourage participation and increase trust. This point is probably stressed in specific online communities, for instance aimed for professionals. Also a member status or member rating may be important in such online communities, where trust is an essential element, such as in online actions.

In some cases *role playing* and *playing games* may be very close to each other or even intertwined. If we for example think about a famous online community, Habbo Hotel, where members communicate in the virtual world by virtual characters, we can notice that its attraction factor is role playing. In this case, playing roles has become a game. However, the concept of anonymity and roles in online communities is not new as for example Preece (2000, 2001) mentioned anonymity and roles as important elements of online communities.

Furthermore, it is suggested that some factors can be divided into smaller *subfactors*. For example, *active and passive roles* of the members should be taken into account in some factors. A member with a passive role has been called *a lurker* in online community literature (e.g. Katz 1998; Nonnecke and Preece 2000a; Nonnecke and Preece 2000b; Nonnecke et al. 2004a)

On the basis of the results, because communications and relationships between people play an important role in online communities, it was argued that member-to-service may have less influence than the member-to-member and member-to-maintainer or member-to-brand factors. However, the study did not measure the importance of different attraction factors, but rather concentrated on depicting them.

Because of the *dyadic approach*, it was possible to compare the maintainers' and members' views of the attraction factors. One of the findings was that in the cases where member-to-member attraction factors (Nicehouse and Sooda) were important, the maintainers' and the members' views on the attraction factors varied more than in content-oriented (Mainio) or professional (Code) cases. The reason may be that it is more difficult for maintainers to find out attraction factors between members than between themselves, the service or the brand, in which relationships they have more control.

The study also found out that *active listening* of the members seems to be lacking in all the cases (Mäntymäki and Mittleilä 2004). In Code, the lack was the most evident, as members' requests were not answered. It is suggested that the precondition for knowing the attraction factors is active listening. Since online communities are a dynamic phenomenon, members' preferences change, and therefore, it is important to actively follow discussions and feedback. Together with active listening, attraction offering models may work as planning tools for companies building and maintaining own online communities.

Two types of attraction offering models were constructed and exemplified. The first one was based on the attraction type and the second one based on the attraction offerings. Different kind of company online communities may be situated in these models, and based on this information the desired direction can be planned.

All in all, based on the empiria it is suggested that especially in affective-linked benefit offering communities social related and member-originated attraction seem to be important. Again, in online communities that are concentrated on offering cognitive-linked benefit, maintainer-originated attraction and self-related attraction was more emphasised.

6 CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH PATHS

The resulting contributions are believed to enrich the existing theoretical understanding of the attraction and its realisation in the company online community context as well as increasing knowledge about how company online communities may be used in enhancing relationship marketing. In addition, this study aims to methodologically contribute by increasing the knowledge of online research methods.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. First, the conclusions are drawn. Then, the theoretical and practical implications are presented. After that the quality of the study is assessed. Finally, the paths for further studies are discussed.

6.1 The summary of the study

The purpose of the study was to identify and analyse attraction of different company online communities from the relationship marketing perspective.

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following questions were answered:

- 1 How can company online communities be classified?
- 2 What kind of relationships can be identified in company online communities?
- 3 What kind of company online communities' attraction factors can be identified?

Since there was some incoherency in the research area concerning company online communities, the first research question explored how company online communities can be classified. In order to answer the research question a multidisciplinary literature review was needed. Also the findings of the pilot study were considered when constructing the classification of company online communities. Then, to be able to understand attraction, it was considered important to identify relationships in online communities, which was the second research question. Finally, the third research question identified the attraction factors of company online communities.

First, the research reviewed earlier studies on company online communities and attraction. As a conclusion, a research gap was identified. The researcher

decided to explore the phenomenon without a strict theoretical framework but rather reflecting the results with earlier studies. As a synthesis from the empiria of this study as well as earlier studies, a following definition is presented. *A company online community is maintained by a company sharing a common interest and interacting via information and communications technologies* (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003). In this context, *a common interest* refers to all kind of interests, for example a hobby or similar life situation. Although the maintainers may participate in the activities in company online communities, their interests usually differ from the members' interests. The maintainers of these communities seek direct or indirect profit for the company in either the short or long term. (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003)

To answer the first research question, company online communities were classified on the basis of the earlier literature and the results of the pilot study. The five elements in classification was called business logic of the company online community, people, value of the company online community for members, value of the company online community for the company, culture and interactive technology.

Furthermore, in this study attraction was seen as an online community's ability to draw members. Moreover, since this study explores the attraction basis of how members themselves perceive it, this study examines members' perceived attraction. Although the starting points of the study were discussed, the strict preliminary framework was not drawn in order to avoid too strong presuppositions in this exploratory study.

The methodological choices were made to support the explorative nature of the study. Also an online community context affected the methodological choices. In other words, the methods were selected in order to utilise online research methods. The logic of the study, the research strategy and the research path are depicted in the methodological chapter to give a transparent view on the research process. Validity, reliability and generalisability of the present study should be assessed by the terms and methods suitable for qualitative studies. These criteria as well as the assessment of the quality are included in chapter 7.5. In addition, methodology is assessed separately in the methodology chapter.

The empirical data was gathered in four case company online communities. To gain a wide perspective, both maintainers' as well as members' views were explored in the study. In the first phase of the study, the maintainers of the case online communities were interviewed. In the second phase, the members were studied with multiple methods. However, before conducting the study for members, a pilot study was done to test the method. In order to increase the reliability of the study, a second round of data collection was conducted for the maintainers as well as for the members. The maintainers were also asked to comment on the preliminary model of attraction.

In this report, the case online communities were depicted in terms of the background, objectives and management. Furthermore, the cases were compared. This was considered important in order to offer better possibilities to understand the cases and consequently the results of the study.

On the basis of the results, the model of the relationship between a member and an online community was built. The study suggests that members may have various kind and levels of relationships with other members, maintainers, services and brands. These relationships are not exclusionary but they can exist at the same time. The model of attraction was built on the basis of the attraction factors in these relationships. Altogether 16 attraction factors were identified between members and an online community. In addition to attraction relationships and factors, attraction was divided into two types: self-related of social related based on the literature.

To obtain a deeper insight into this phenomenon, the differences and similarities in the maintainers' and members' views on the attraction factors were compared. When comparing maintainers' and members' views on attraction factors no big differences were found. Yet, in the case online community for professionals, there were some differences in views as the members asked for more activity from maintainers in answering their questions as well as new services. However, as the data in that case was collected from the members by using different methods than in other cases, this point affects on the results. Furthermore, the sense of community was not recognised among the members, although the maintainers mentioned this as an attraction factor.

Furthermore, on the basis of the results, two kinds of company online communities' attraction offerings were found and modelled using the cases as exemplars. These models were built to conceptualise the different kinds of attraction offerings. Another objective was to offer practical implications by using the cases as well as existing online communities as exemplars. All in all, the study revealed that especially in affective-linked benefit offering communities social related and member-originated attraction seem to be important. In more cognitive-linked benefit offering communities maintainer-originated attraction as well as self-related attraction was more emphasised.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

The research contributes theoretically, as it combines the theories of relationship marketing (e.g. Gummesson 2002a; Halinen 1997; Harris et al. 2003) and online communities (e.g. Hagel and Armstrong 1997; Preece 2001; Rheingold 2000; Schubert and Ginsburg 2000). Theories considering online communities derive from psychology, social psychology, sociology, computer science as well as marketing, whereupon the study takes a multidisciplinary approach to the phenomenon. Moreover, studies from different perspectives that concern reasons to visit online communities have been utilised (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002; Dholakia et al. 2004; Gruen et al. 2005; Hagel and Armstrong 1997; McKenna and Bargh 1999; McKenna and Green 2002; Ridings and Gefen 2004; Wasko and Faraj 2000). The present study has four specific possibilities to contribute theoretically.

Firstly, there was a research gap considering theories of online communities. Online communities in general, as well as commercial online communities with direct revenue purposes have been studied, but despite their generality, especially the area of company online communities from the relationship marketing perspective has been more or less neglected. Therefore, the study contributes to bringing *company online communities as a part of the relationship marketing paradigm* and presenting the concepts of attraction and relationship in the online community context. In addition, this study strengthens the online community research by bringing a coherent definition for company online communities as well as extended understanding of them.

Secondly, the study modelled the relationship between a member and a company online community. The study found out that relationships between members and company online communities have different levels, from relations to relationships. The relationships may exist between members, the member and the maintainer, the member and the service and the member and the brand.

In the present study, relationships between participants were named as member-to-member and member-to-maintainer relationships, but in general they can be named customer-to-business, business-to-business, customer-to-customer, and employee-to-employee relationships, depending on the participants of the studied online community.

The relationship model enlarges theories of relationship marketing, attraction as well as online communities. The idea is to represent a generic model of relationships in online communities, and therefore, to contribute widely in an online community research. With this model the study also suggests that additional value for customers may also be created with enabling interaction and relationship creation with the maintainers, the brand and the service in online communities in addition to c-to-c interaction (Gruen et al. 2005)

Thirdly, *the attraction model* of company online communities was built in this study. The attraction model can be used for further studies considering the attraction factors in the company online community context and also as a basis for studying other types of online communities. The attraction model enables comparisons between different kind of company online communities, and it can also be used as a runway for qualitative and explanatory research.

In addition, *two models of attraction offerings* both presenting four kinds of theoretical company online communities were built by using the attraction model and utilising the case online communities as well as other existing online communities as exemplars. These models can be further utilised in analysing, comparing and discussing attraction offerings in different types of company online communities.

Although the empiria was collected in company online communities and the theoretical perspective is relationship marketing, also the multidisciplinary nature of the phenomenon was utilised in the abductive research approach. Hence, the models created in the present study may also with some limitations be generalised to consider different types of online communities. It is suggested that the relationship model is a generic model of relationships in online communities. However, because of the chosen cases, the attraction model may stress the role of

maintainers and their relationship marketing purposes, which may be seen in the absence of some commercial-related attraction factors, for example integrated web stores. Furthermore, this study may also lack some factors that would have emerged in online communities maintained by non-profit organisations. To conclude, this study is meant to represent an opening in studies considering the use of company online communities in enhancing companies' relationship marketing.

6.3 Practical implications

Along with the popularity of online communities their role as a part of consumers' everyday life has increased. Company online communities have already become places in which people can look for information, share experiences and give and get opinions about companies' products and services. Word-of-mouth has got a new scope while geographical and timely limitations have been extracted and consumers are able to communicate and discuss about companies and their products around the world and around the clock. This development also increases customer power.

However, online communities not only set challenges for companies but they also open new possibilities. Firstly, firms may utilise other online communities as a *valuable channel of customer information* or secondly, *they may build their own online communities for relationship marketing purposes or to support an existing e-marketplace*.

This study brings out possibilities how firms may utilise online communities in their relationship marketing. *Enhancing knowledge-exchange through c-to-c interaction is an additional source for creating value for companies* that is separate from the value created in the marketer-customer exchange. This source of additional value can have an impact on customer loyalty (Gruen et al. 2005). As a supplement to the additional value through c-to-c interaction, the present study stresses the possibilities to create value through relationships between customer-to-maintainer and customer-to-brand as well as offering various services.

One of the characteristics of online communities is the members' important role. Actually online communities can not be built, rather active members form them. The fact is that without active members, online communities will not form, which is also one reason for why companies may be reluctant to try building them. Furthermore, controversially to the traditional product development, online communities can not be built beforehand and launched as they are ready, but they must be built in public, like in a real life laboratory. In addition to the challenges of forming an own online community, another challenge is the difficulty to control it and lead it to the chosen direction. A failure in these processes may even harm the company's reputation.

The present study helps companies to build attractive online communities by starting with considering the reasons why members create and maintain relations

and relationships with company online communities. In addition, the study extensively deals with the building and management processes of company online communities. All in all, the greatest value of the study for the firms is to be able to identify attraction factors, and on the basis of this information, plan the models of attraction offerings for online communities. The study introduces the model of *the active management* to implement the way how firms may follow the current attraction factors of their online community in a dynamic environment. Finally, the study broadly views the opportunities how to utilise online communities.

The study argues that four relationships, member-to-member, member-to-maintainer, member-to-service and member-to-brand, should be taken into account when planning and building as well as maintaining company online communities. These relationships can be further divided into 16 attraction factors. In the building process, companies should set the objectives about what kind of online community they are aiming at. While presenting two kinds of attraction offerings; the first one based on the attraction type and the second one based on the attraction offerings, this study offers companies a tool for planning different types of attraction offerings for their own online communities. By utilising other existing online communities as well as the cases of this study also give examples of what kind of online communities there may be and what kind of actions have been taken in those online communities.

Hence, after setting the objectives, the second step in forming an online community is to formulate a strategy to reach the objectives. In practice, this means the planning and implementation processes of the websites, services and overall management.

Companies' possibilities to influence attraction factors in member-to-member and member-to-brand relationships are more limited than influencing member-to-maintainer and member-to-service relationships, in which they can directly influence with their own actions. However, encouraging the interaction between members by *offering interesting topics and themes, effective and innovative services for interaction, involving and committing active moderators and encouraging a positive word-of-mouth*, companies can influence the attractiveness of these relationships. Though, positive word-of-mouth is more effective, also advertising can help building the image.

In member-to-member relationship *rewarding active participants* is a good way to encourage members to communicate and contribute. Members may be encouraged by giving them a status of an expert or another title after he or she has written some particular number of answers, for example. By using profiles, also other members can see the title and make some conclusions about the value of this person's answers.

The study suggests that the roles of different relationships vary between different types of online communities. For example, in professional and beneficial communities, the maintainer's role is central as members wish to obtain answers to their problems. In such online communities problems may occur if members expect that the maintainer involves into discussion and then they disappoint if the maintainer remains passive. Furthermore, articles and other

content by the maintainer are considered important especially in company online communities aimed for professionals or beneficial purposes.

Although the member-to-service relationship is evidently not the most important attraction factor, in some company online communities it plays a central role. For example, in professional communities, the importance of offering tools for optimising and enhancing knowledge sharing is crucial.

Furthermore, one of the characteristics of online communities is that members may play different roles and manifest themselves anonymously. *Anonymity* and *roles* were seen as important factors in discussion forums. Online communities as well as company online communities may utilise these possibilities and offer members new experiences with the help of technology and innovative services. In such company online communities members' experiences can be related to playing and roles can develop to *role playing*. On the other hand, the members' answers indicate that adding registration or increasing commercial offerings, companies should be careful that they would not drive members away.

In some company online communities the maintainers have chosen an invisible role. However, the study underlines the importance of the presence of a maintainer. Even if the main objective is to provide a community aimed for member-to-member interaction, the presence of the maintainer is important, at least to give an illusion that someone is listening to the members' wishes and is ready to act. The maintainer's presence is also needed to give members the feeling that their opinions are highly valued and taken into account. One way of making this impression is to encourage members to give feedback, have well-planned processes to handle the feedback, and regularly monitor discussions as well as log data.

The study points out that an active management referring to a process of *building, maintaining and utilising company online communities* is a valuable source of knowing the attraction factors. However, on the basis of this study, it seems that the active management is not emphasised enough. The study suggests that since active management enables to learn about members and interact with them, it is a key process in utilising company online communities in companies' relationship marketing.

To conclude, since online communities improve the dialogue with customers and between them, they can strengthen the company's relationships with customers. Therefore, online communities can for example improve trust and commitment with the company, which can further have an effect on customer buying behaviour. In addition to the customers' own opinions, word-of-mouth in online communities has a remarkable impact on customers' decisions. Altogether, adding other possible benefits to the before mentioned points, namely learning, getting insights, creating innovations, increasing efficiency and getting extra revenues, having an own online community should be considered when making strategical decisions in companies.

6.4 Evaluating the quality of the study

In this chapter, firstly the methodology of the study is assessed. Then, the quality of the study is assessed in general.

6.4.1 Assessing the methodology

Assessing the methodology of the study

The inductive data collecting methods enabled to analyse the data without too strong presuppositions. However, the interviews were based on the interview guide to be sure that theoretically interesting topics were covered. During the interviews some new interesting themes arose that were followed. As a secondary material other sources (websites, presentation material) were used to confirm some facts.

In order to get rich qualitative data for the attraction model, it was decided to use open questions. Since the cases were online communities having their own discussion forums, it was reasonable to use their discussion forums in data collection. However, Mainio closed its discussion forum during the study, and therefore, the data was collected with the questionnaire in Mainio.

Because of the lack of knowledge of the usability of the chosen method, before conducting an actual data collection, a pilot study was conducted in eight discussion forums of different online communities. Since the pilot study with only one question seemed to be successful, it was reasonable to continue with the same kind of method.

With these methods the saturation point for the purposes of this study, in other words the point where new answers did not bring any new data, was reached. Therefore, to reach the purpose of the study, it was not necessary to use other methods, for example interviews.

In the used data collection method, the idea was that respondents were not given any complete choices but they were encouraged to respond spontaneously. In Nicehouse and Sooda, the questions were posed again after a year and a half from the first data collection round. Then, in the next phase of the study, as the knowledge had increased, the questions were formed a bit differently. In addition, the case communities' websites were used as secondary data. The sites were visited and observed regularly. In Nicehouse, the researcher actually participated in different discussions as a private person by using a nickname during the study.

In Code's case, the first method for data collecting was not successful and the amount of the answers remained too small. Therefore, an old discussion thread that considered members' wishes for developments was utilised. This may affect on the reliability of this study considering the answers of this case. However, since this study includes multiple cases and is explorative aiming to find

attraction factors, not to measure them, it can be assumed that this does not affect the reliability of the results in general. The positive side of the used data was that it can be considered as naturally occurring data from the discussion forums since the researcher was not involved in the data collection process.

Furthermore, due to the uncertainty of online community members' will to response, the amount of the demographic data was minimised. Since the researcher was a stranger in these communities, asking demographics may have been interpreted as an invasion of privacy. In general, the decision about using only one question was done on the basis of the assumption that members might prefer one question to many questions as well as they may give longer answers if they are posed only a single question.

In the analysis, the idea was to give data a possibility to *speak*. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that even if the qualitative approach is stressed in all parts of the methodology, the impact of the researchers' preunderstanding and background can not be eliminated. However, the impact can be diminished by recognising and accepting this fact. For instance, in categorising the results, there is a question about the level of abstraction. In fact, there is not one solution, but is only a question of taste as to which one to use (Roos 1999).

However, there are some critical points that should be discussed about the chosen cases and methodology. Because the cases were selected from various backgrounds in order to draw a wide understanding of the phenomenon, the amount of the data presenting one kind of an online community remained quite low. At the same time, the response rate in some cases was considerably low, which increases this problem. Therefore, some problems occurred in drawing conclusions. Selecting more identifiable cases would have affirmed the results of one kind of online communities, but also prevented making comparisons between cases and drawing a general framework about the attraction factors of company online communities. After all, with the resources at hand, this study generated a framework that may and should be developed in further studies.

Although the cases represented a variety of company online communities, generalisation has some limitations due to the limited number of cases. For example, company online communities aimed for playing games were not studied. In addition, Nicehouse and Sooda were called web brand communities by the maintainers, but none of the cases represents such company online communities that are formed around a strong and well-established brand of the company's product (e.g. Andersen 2005; McAlexander et al. 2002; McWilliam 2000; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Therefore, attraction factors related to the brand relationships may have got too little attention.

Another object of critique in this study was the data collecting methods. The open question in forums, however, inevitably gave answers about the things that first came in the respondents' minds. Therefore, some attraction factors that might play a minor role may have been neglected. In addition, due to the chosen methods, members are presumably not in the online community for the first time, which fact may affect the attraction factors they perceive. Moreover, the members' relationships were not scrutinised at a deeper level, for example by exploring how long they have been members, how often they visit etc.

Assessing the use of online research methods

This study was partly made by using online research methods in an online environment, and therefore it is important to briefly consider online research methods and the characteristics and challenges of this environment.

As a supplement to new research fields, online communities enable new kind of research methods for academic and practical researchers. The internet and online communities provide various data collecting methods including questionnaires, interviews, observational techniques and using experimental methodology (Hewson et al. 2003). It seems that computer-mediated research needs specific and carefully designed instruments that not only accommodate but exploit the features of the electronic environment to attract respondents. Researchers cannot merely import paper-and-pencil methodologies to online studies, but must adapt them to the electronic environment and create new methods to expand our knowledge of computer-mediated communication. (e.g. Witmer et al. 1999, p. 158) Therefore, this study utilises multiple online research methodologies in exploring company online communities. One of the methods used was gathering data in the discussion forums of the case online communities.

When conducting online research, there are some factors to be taken into account. Technology changes constantly and rapidly, which sets some requirements for the users, too. A decade ago, most Internet users were, of necessity, skilled computer programmers, or at least, they had a relatively deep understanding of network applications. Nowadays, many people have access to the Internet and the skills that are needed. However, in avoiding misunderstandings and making it easy to answer there is a need for a clear and simple design of studies. People are not willing to use too much of their valuable time to learn how a questionnaire should be filled in, for example. According to Witmer et al. (1999, p. 158) online survey research requires incentives for participation, introductory messages separate from the instruments, and safeguards against alteration of the questionnaires. Clearly, computer-mediated research needs specific and carefully designed instruments that not only accommodate but exploit the features of the electronic environment to attract respondents.

Furthermore, an average Internet user is often overwhelmed by a variety and vast amount of information. For this reason people have difficulties processing and selecting the relevant information that increases the demand for clear, attractive design as well.

People also like *surfing* on the Internet. In contrast to the traditional linear search along shelves of books in a library, the Internet user follows a nonlinear search in which most pages emphasise eye-catching designs and attention-grabbing movement rather than a sequential and logical presentation of information. (Witmer et al. 1999, p. 158)

Finally, in most online methods, the respondent's anonymity and lack of physical presence increase the challenges for the interpretation of results. For

instance, most online methods lack the possibility to see respondents' body language or hear their tones of voice.

As stated earlier, as a supplement to traditional methods, online environment enables and in some cases even demands the use of new qualitative methods. Conducting research in online community environments as this study does, points to some factors that need to be taken into account, which are briefly discussed next.

According to Sudweeks and Simoff (1999, p. 43) communication in online communities is computer-mediated and people there communicate in some cases constantly with people they do not know. Even though, in fact, communicating with strangers on a regular basis is not new. There are many examples of *pen pal relationships* that have lasted for many years.

Then, in some cases if there are long delays between communication exchanges, the sense of virtual presence in online communities is not strong. On the other hand, the message exchange process on the Internet can be almost instantaneous. In such cases, a written correspondence is like a conversation. Formalities, introductions, signatures, and many other features of written communication are eliminated (Ong 1982). In such a communication environment, indirect social cues are transmitted, and the virtual presence takes on qualities of a real presence. In fact, quite often, the mental distance between regular participants in discussion groups is less than with colleagues working in the same office. (Sudweeks and Simoff 1999, p. 43)

In a particular case of using discussion forums for data collecting, the method is quite similar to group discussions, especially when everybody can see the others' answers. In such a case, respondents may act anonymously and without face-to-face contact but, the others' answers may affect an individual's answers.

An open-ended question approach was chosen in order to ensure the capture of unbiased information from online community members with all the semantic richness that typically comes with unconstrained answers to this type of question. The open-ended question was also chosen because of the lack of similar studies before. However, Wasko and Faraj (2000) had explored reasons why people participate in Usenet newsgroups, but their study only concerns groups aimed for programming languages. Additionally, during this study, Ridings and Gefen's (2004) article considering the reasons to visit online communities and using the same data gathering method was published, but then the data collecting was already conducted and their results could not be utilised in that phase. Moreover, their focus differed from the one of the present study as well.

Therefore, to consider this study at hand, the advantages of conducting the case research partly in online environment compared to offline environment, were adaptability, easiness as well as cost and time efficiency as was suggested by Sudweeks and Simoff (1999, p. 43). The methods used enabled that responses were available immediately and it was easy to start the analysis already in the ongoing phase of the data collection. Also the need for additional data was noticed in the early phase.

It was suggested earlier that the interpretation of online research is more challenging because of the lack of the physical presence. However, due to the nature of this study, background information and information about the body language and tones of voice were not important. As to the additional plusses of the study, it was easy to reach the target group, which otherwise would probably have been difficult to contact. Cost and time efficiency materialised in savings of time and money when posting the question and transferring the data to the analysis software.

On the negative side of the used method, posing questions in discussion forums evoked a fairly low response rate. This was surprising, because Nicehouse, Sooda and Code are popular online communities and the question was technically easy to answer. Also the anonymity was guaranteed. However, an open question may be more challenging for respondents than a traditional survey questionnaire with ready options, which may result in the low amount of answers in some cases.

Furthermore, another challenge was to get answers that contained rich data. The fact may be influenced by the same reasons as in the quantity of answers. The length of the answers varied from ten to 200 words. Yet, the use of one open question seemed to be suitable as it also generated long and in-depth answers. Another challenge was that the pilot study found out that some people had prejudices towards the study and the researcher, which is a natural reaction on the web. However, this can be avoided by a proper introduction and giving contact information.

If the use of traditional methods and new methods are compared in an online context, some additional advantages can be identified. Firstly, in this study the manipulation of the researcher was at the minimum level. Then, asking a question in discussion forums included some elements of group discussion. This was clearly seen in some discussions where the respondents adopted the same terms that earlier respondents had used.

However, one of the drawbacks of this method was that the attempt at generating a group effect and discussion in a forum was not very successful in all cases. The reason for this may be that the respondents were not motivated to discuss this kind of question in a group. Therefore, it is suggested that other techniques, for example opening an own discussion forum for a focus group, may be more useful in generating discussions between members. Another challenge that the study brought out was that in discussion forums for professionals, it can be hard to motivate the respondents to answer

Based on the results of this study it seems that posing questions in discussion forums resembles a mass interview. Many answers may be obtained, but the possibilities of posing personalised questions are rather limited. Yet, the respondents may be asked to send their contact information in order to pose additional questions individually by email, for example. In conclusion, to be able to develop mass interview and group discussion methods in an online environment, more information is needed. However, building a web questionnaire and writing a request for participation may produce a bigger amount as well as better quality answers as Mittilä and Antikainen's (2006)

study suggest. However, it seems that members were not eager to discuss with others about the study questions and they preferred that others do not see their answers. To conclude, the fact is that the role of new methods in online research grows at the same time as possibilities for using them increase, and therefore, the development of online research methods is important.

6.4.2 *Assessing the qualitative research*

A researcher is a multicultural subject, whom earlier history and research traditions have inevitably affected. This study also admits the fact that there is no value-free research, but ethics and politics are involved in every study at some level. However, a researcher has to believe that he/she can with objectivity, clarity and precision, report on his/her own observations of the social world including the experiences of others. A researcher has to believe in a real subject, or a real individual, who is present in the world and is able to report on his/her experiences. (Denzin and Lincoln 2003)

Especially in qualitative studies such as the present, the transparency of the research process holds an important position for reflecting the researcher's backgrounds', motivations' and own actions' influence on the study and give the reader the possibility to make own judgments of the results. Therefore, this study includes a detailed depiction of the data collection and analysis of the chosen cases as well as the whole research process. In addition, the researcher's background and motivations are described in the text. Then, it should be taken into account that the researcher represents the viewpoint of marketing, which reflects through this work in chosen perspectives as well as in understanding and interpretation of meanings.

In the following, the quality of the study is discussed in the context of qualitative research. In qualitative and quantitative research central terms used in evaluating the quality of the study are *reliability* and *validity*. Reliability is defined as the extent to which a research procedure returns the same results whenever it is carried out. Validity, in turn, is used to depict the extent, in which a research gives correct results. However, reliability and validity are based on the assumptions that originate from positivistic philosophy and approaches. One of these assumptions is related to an unchanging universe. Conversely, qualitative study is based on the assumption that the world changes constantly and thus we cannot assume any stable properties in the social world (Silverman 1993, p. 146). Consequently, the relevance of the concepts of validity and reliability in assessing the quality of the study can be questioned.

Hence, more relevant questions in qualitative research are to consider how we can be sure that the findings would be replicated if the study was conducted with the same participants and in the same context. Another relevant question concerns the question of how we can be sure that the findings are reflective of the subjects and the inquiry itself, rather than the product of biases and prejudices on the part of the researcher (Marshall and Rossman 1999).

In the qualitative research there is a considerable debate over what constitutes a good interpretation. The criteria differ between the different scientific paradigms. The positivist paradigm argues that there is nothing specific in the qualitative research and thus it can be evaluated as quantitative research by using four criteria that are internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln 1998, p. 276; Hammersley 1992, p. 57; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Silverman 2000) Yet, the postpositivistic paradigm among other paradigms argues that a unique set of criteria in assessing qualitative research is needed (Guba and Lincoln 1998, p. 276). As these criteria are originally developed for the needs of quantitative research, Yin (2003) suggests that quality in the quantitative research can be assessed by using four tests: internal validity, external validity, reliability and construct validity. Even though only one of Yin's terms is different from the positivist terms, the means for achieving them are considerable different.

In contrast to Yin's (2003) terms, Lincoln and Guba (1985) used four criteria in assessing the quality of the study. These are *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *conformability*. However, these criteria have similar interpretations to Yin's (2003) terms. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggested a fifth criterion for assessing quality that is called *integrity*. This five-pointed criterion is used in the subsequent discussion of the quality of the study.

Credibility (internal validity) refers to the extent to which the results are acceptable representations of the data. The means for achieving credibility in this study are transparency of the research process, triangulation of data and methods, gathering longitudinal data, and presenting findings continuously during the study in academic networks as well as to the case companies.

Transferability (external validity) is the extent to which findings of the study in one context are also applicable in other contexts. In this study multiple methods, purposive sampling and careful documentation of procedures were made to ensure transferability. Also plenty of quotations were included into the reports to give the reader the possibility to assess the validity of interpretations and estimate the quality of conclusions. However, it is admitted that because of the characteristics of the study environment, cases that were aimed for relationship marketing purposes and maintained by online communities as well as the limited amount of the cases, there are some limitations in applying some of the results in other kinds of online communities.

Dependability (reliability) or the extent to which interpretation was constructed in a way that it avoids instability other than the inherent instability of a social phenomenon. In other words, dependability refers to the extent to which findings would be repeated if the study was replicated with similar subjects and context. In the present study, dependability was aimed to be achieved by giving a detailed description of how the study was carried out, including the interview guides and inquiries posed for the members in the report. In addition, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Nvivo including several rounds of coding. Since the pilot study revealed similar factors with the results of the case online communities, this increases the reliability of the study as well. Furthermore, to increase reliability, the model of attraction as well as the

final version of the manuscript were shown to the company representatives and they were asked for comments. These procedures were made to ensure the reliability of the framework according their opinions. All the people gave their acceptance for the framework. Also interactive study and good relationships with the maintainers gave good possibilities to flexible data collection.

Conformability refers to the extent to which interpretations are the results of the participants and the phenomenon as opposed to the bias caused by the researcher. The conformability of the present study rests on the credibility of the empirical data and the reporting. During the process the findings were presented to the maintainers of the case online communities several times to ensure that the interpretation was adequate.

Integrity refers to the extent to which the interpretation was unimpaired by lies, evasions, misinformation or misrepresentations by informants. Some measures to avoid problems with integrity were taken in this study. The aims of the study were told to all informants and the anonymity was reassured. All the informants were encouraged to ask any questions concerning the research. They were also asked for a permission to record the interciews. As Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggested, the atmosphere of trust was created with a regular contact with the case companies.

Again, Gummesson (2000) presented several criteria to evaluate the quality of the study. Firstly, he suggested that following the research process should be easy and the researcher should draw his or her own conclusions. Secondly, he emphasised the presentation of the paradigm and preunderstanding. Thirdly, he stressed credibility that is common for the traditional criteria presented before. Then, he also mentioned the researcher's adequate access as an important factor. About this he refers to using suitable methods and reporting how successful they were and reporting about possible problems and limitations. Further, he also stresses an assessment on the generalisability and validity as well as contribution of the study. After that Gummesson (2000) emphasised that research is a dynamic process and therefore creativity, openness and flexibility are important. Finally, according to him the researcher's personal qualities affect the quality as well. Due to the extent and diversity of Gummesson's criteria, this study also follows his guidelines as a checklist to assess the quality. The means used to achieve Gummesson's (2000) quality criteria in the present study are presented in Table 33.

Table 33. *Assessment of the quality of the present study based on Gummesson's (2000) checklist*

Quality criteria and the central means for achieving	
1	Following the research process and drawing own conclusions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparent research process including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Limits of the research project ○ Accurate depiction about methodology and research strategy
2	Presenting the paradigm and preunderstanding
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting central theories and concepts, including a multidisciplinary approach • Presenting the researcher's prior experience and other pertinent information
3	Credibility
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aspiration for correct data, including correct rendering of statements and views of informants by making careful and logical notes • Recording interviews, analysis with the help of the NVivo software • Including explanations how analysis and information are supported by data • Presenting all relevant data and information used in the case study • Showing the manuscript before publishing it to the informants • Selecting the methods after forming the research problem, purpose and the research questions
4	Researcher's adequate access
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used methods and techniques ensured adequate access to the processes during the study • Reporting the difficulties in deploying desired access methods and how access limitations have impaired the research
5	An assessment on the generalisability and validity
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussing what areas the results apply to and how closely the research represents the phenomenon the researcher aimed to study • Using plenty of quotations in the report • Comparisons between results and earlier theories and concepts
6	Contribution
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aimed for theoretical, methodological contribution and managerial implications • Dealing with relevant problems • Optimising the trade-off between methods, techniques, and results
7	Dynamic process
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity and openness to new information and interpretations has been necessary because of the used online methods and some difficulties to get an adequate amount of data • Familiarity with literature from many disciplines (sociology, computer science and marketing), using triangulation in literature methods and data • The different phases of this study were intertwined, which also enabled to switch between deep involvement and distance. For example the questions posed in discussion forums included breaks between the cases
8	Researcher's personal qualities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong motivation and involvement in the present study, which has employed the researcher full-time • Flexibility, openness and a genuine interest towards the phenomenon

6.5 Further research paths

This study represented an opening for further studies concerning company online communities in enhancing relationship marketing. Because of the novelty value of this study area, the study opens many avenues for further studies.

Firstly, the attraction model created in the present study could be used as a basis *to measure the importance and relationships between the attraction factors* in different kind of online communities and as a tool to develop the model further. Also the models of attraction offerings in company online communities should be explored more deeply, and, for instance, *analysing the benefits and weaknesses of each sector in the models*.

Then, studying further relationships and relations between members and online communities would be interesting as well. *Exploring different kind of relationships in company online communities* further and comparing attraction between these groups would bring interesting insights. Furthermore, studying *the process how members' relationships in and with the online community evolve during time* would be interesting. This kind of research would need longitudinal data from the selected members.

Furthermore, rather than only concentrating on attraction, exploring two other elements in the three-bond model (Halinen 1994b), *trust and commitment*, and their relations and roles in creating and maintaining relationships with online communities, would be an interesting path for future research. It would be also interesting to take one step further and to study *how customer relationships in company online communities affect customers' relationships with companies*; do they increase customers' attraction, trust, commitment and loyalty, for example. Again, it would be interesting to know how they affect buying behaviour.

Then, one fruitful path would be to explore an opposite phenomenon to attraction, *non-attraction*, in other words to consider why members end their relationship with an online community. The initial step for this direction was already taken in this study as the second data collection round for the members included a question considering non-attraction factors. The results seem to bring interesting knowledge of non-attraction, which also helps to create a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. After that, the second step in exploring non-attraction has been taken with conducting an empirical study and writing a conference paper about the results (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2006).

Moreover, the customer dialogue perspective would be interesting as well. In other words, it would be interesting to study *how customers as well as companies can learn and interact through online communities*. Many-to-many communications, like discussion forums, have features from both mass and relationship marketing. They intensify two-way interaction between the customer and the maintainer and also interaction among customers. The study found out as well that conversations between customers under the communities' brands can be seen as a part of the dialogue process even if the maintainer does not involve in discussions.

Word-of-mouth and viral marketing have grown on a whole new level after the success of online communities. Customers are asking and telling their experiences in discussion forums that might be dedicated for a specific product. Taking a company's perspective and exploring *how companies may systematically use online communities in creating positive word-of-mouth and doing viral marketing* would be an interesting and a rather unexplored area. Furthermore, the study found out that the utilisation of discussions is still in its infancy and many companies do not have accurate processes for dealing with this information. Furthermore, *following discussions in online communities is as well an interesting and unstudied area.*

In addition, there are also many possible research paths concerning company online communities in general. To mention some of them, the formation of company online communities as well as the management of online communities would be interesting research areas. The literature and business cases show that it is a demanding process and probably not even possible for all kind of companies.

Finally, this study utilised online research methods, which can be considered useful especially in gathering a qualitative data. As mentioned before, further research with these methods would be important in order to develop them. Since online communities offer an ideal environment for *ethnographic studies*, using ethnography or netnography in studying members in company online communities would be interesting as well.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. The first interview guide for maintainers

- Could you tell me about your job and responsibilities?

Building process

- When was Z² built?
- Please, tell me more about the building process? The duration, phases, problems, how long it took to be built etc.
- Why was it built?
 - Has it been the objective from the beginning to create an active online community?
 - What is the reason why you wanted to particularly create an online community?
 - Since when have the interactive elements existed?
- What are its customer segments, why?

Management and services

- What kind of possibilities do the members have to create content, for example their profile, home sites etc.?
- Do you organise online events, for example seminars, virtual meetings etc. Or do you organise events in real life? Or do the members organise them?
 - If yes, what kind of events?
 - If no, have you planned to organise them?
- What kind of possibilities do members have for interaction?
 - Discussion forums, chat etc.

² 'Z' refers to the current online community that the interview concerned.

- How actively do members participate in discussions?
- How much do you involve in discussions?
- Do you offer a newsletter?
- Do you have a reward system?
- How have services developed during the years?
- What kind of things have you learned about the management of online communities?

An online community and the sense of community

- How would you define an online community?
- Is there such a group who share a common interest?
 - Has it existed from the beginning?
- How have you influenced the formation of Z?
- Could you depict relationships between members in the online community Z?
- Could you depict your relationship with Z's members?
- How do you call participants: visitors, members, customers, or with another name?
 - How do you allure members?
 - How many of them visits regularly?
 - How do you make members committed?

Online communities as a part of the company's strategy

- Could you depict Z's role as a part of the company's strategy? (e.g. in gaining profit, getting new customers or retaining old customers, increasing efficiency and creating new innovations)
- Business logic of the online community: How do you finance Z?
 - Does it generate profit? How?
 - Are there multimedia enlargements? If yes, what kind of?
 - Have you planned multimedia enlargements?
 - What kind of objectives have been set for Z?
 - In the long run? (strategic objectives)

- In the short period? (operative objectives)?
- How well have you reached the objectives?
 - In which things have you been successful and in which not so successful?
- Has Z somehow changed the way the company operates? If yes, how?

Online community marketing

- Could you depict Z's role as a part of your marketing strategy?
- Do you consider Z as a
 - tool for competition,
 - marketing channel,
 - tool for customer service,
 - channel to learn or
 - other?
- How do you utilise Z?
 - Do you follow discussions? If yes, how? How do you use the information?
 - Do you collect member data? If yes, how do you use them?
 - Do you use personalised advertisements?
 - What kind of vision do you have about the utilisation of information from Z in the future?
- Does Z have a market place? If yes, what is its role and how does it operate?
- How do you market Z and what channels do you use?
- How has Z affected on the company's image?

Online community vs. competitors

- What are the weaknesses of Z in general?
- Which online communities are your competitors?
 - What are their good and negative attributes?

Online community attraction factors

- How is a successful online community formed? What are the critical factors?
 - How much does a maintainer / members affect?

- What attracts members? Why does the online community exist and what kind of value does it provide?
 - What kind of things are stressed:
 - a place to meet people and discuss with similar people
 - a place to form relationships
 - a place for commercial purposes
 - a place to get information
 - a place for entertainment
 - other, what?
 - Do these things differ between new and old members?
- How do you find the members' possibility to act anonymously, does it affect the attractiveness of the online community?
 - Do you think that some of your members have different roles in the online community than in real life?

The future

- How has Z changed during its existence?
- How do develop Z?
 - How much does the members' feedback influence?
 - Do you conduct some kind of surveys concerning the communities? How does this information affect Z?
- How do you see Z in the future, for example in 3 years?
- How do you see online communities' role in general? Have you planned to build new online communities?

Appendix 2. The second interview guide and a questionnaire for maintainers³

The interview guide

- What kind of changes have happened in the company during the last one and half years? (services, customers, objectives, role of online communities)
- What kind of changes have happened in the online community during the last one and half year? (services, members, objectives, monitoring and utilising customer data)
- What draws members into the online community?
- How have these factors been taken into account?
- How do you see the online community's future?

The questionnaire

How important do you consider the following factors in order to attract members to Z (the name of the online community)? (Scale 1-5, 1= not significant, 5=very important)

- ___ Obtain and give advice, information and tell own experiences
- ___ Create own content and see content created by others
- ___ Have discussions, share experiences and opinions
- ___ Creating relationships
- ___ Be able to act anonymously or have a different role than in real life
- ___ Share similar backgrounds or feel accustomed each other
- ___ Dating
- ___ Obtain professional or non-professional advice and information
- ___ Maintainers' other content (for example articles)
- ___ Be able to find and visit the community

³ The guide differed between case communities and between the roles of interviewees

- ___ Different services of the community
- ___ Technical features in the community
- ___ The image of the community
- ___ The themes of the community (for example discussion themes)
- ___ Other, what _____?

Appendix 3. Questions posed in Nicehouse's and Sooda's discussion forums

The first data collection round

The following message was sent to Nicehouse's and Sooda's discussion forums in the first data collection round.

Nicehouse – Children's room – Pregnancy
May 8, 2004

Title: Why do you visit Nicehouse?

Message:

Hello,

I am conducting a study at the University of Tampere about online communities.

I would like to ask

Why do you visit Nicehouse?

Please, reply to this message or mail your answer to maria.mantymaki@uta.fi. If you have some questions, I will be happy to answer them.

Thank you! All answers are very valuable.

Br, Maria Mäntymäki

The second data collection round

The following message was sent to Nicehouse's and Sooda's discussion forums in the second data collection round.

Nicehouse – Children's room – Pregnancy
Jan 11, 2004

Title: Participate in dissertation study

Message:

Hello,

I am conducting a study at the University of Tampere about the attraction factors of online communities. I would like to arouse conversation about the following topics:

1. What draws you here?
2. Do you visit other online communities, if yes, why?
3. Have you ended visiting some online communities, if yes, why?

It would be nice if you could tell your age and gender for background information.

Thank you a lot! All answers are very valuable.

Kind regards,
Maria Mäntymäki
Department of Management Studies
University of Tampere
maria.mantymaki@uta.fi

Appendix 4. The Web questionnaire in Mainio

Dear respondent,

this survey is a part of my dissertation study at the University of Tampere. The aim of the study is to explore the reasons for why people visit online communities.

There is only one open question, and therefore, I would appreciate long answers. Thank you, your answers is very valuable! Naturally, all the data is handled confidentially and anonymously. If you have any questions about the survey or the study, please contact me by sending email to maria.mantymaki@uta.fi

Best regards,
Maria Mäntymäki

--

Why do you visit Mainio?
(open question)

Background information

I am

- Male
- Female

Year of birth (drop-down menu)

Education (conducted or student) (drop-down menu)

Position (drop-down menu)

Thank you!

Email address * _____

Phone number* _____

*) Please fill in your contact information, if you can be contacted for further questions

Appendix 5. The email questionnaire and questions posed in Code

The email questionnaire

Dear member of Code,

I am a doctoral student doing my dissertation about online communities. I got your contact details from Code. It would be very helpful if you could kindly answer my questions. Naturally, all the data is handled confidentially and anonymously.

There are a only couple of questions, and therefore, I would appreciate long answers in the open questions. If you have some questions about the survey, you can find my contact information below.

Best regards,
Maria Mäntymäki

Researcher, M.Sc. (Econ.)
Department of Management Studies
33014 UNIVERSITY OF TAMPERE
FINLAND
Mobile: +358 (0)50 336 4272
Office: +358 (3)215 4101
Fax: +358 (3)215 7214

The most important question is:

1. Why do you visit Code?

Other questions:

2. How long have you been a member of Code?

3. Why did you join Code?

4. How often do you visit Code's online community?

5. What do you do in Code's online community?

6. Have you bound new relationships in Code's online community?
If yes, please tell what kind of relationships?

Background information

7. Sex

a. man

b. woman

8. Year of birth

9. Education

10. Position

11. Nationality

Thank You!

--

Questions posed in Code's discussion forums

The first collection round

The following message was sent to Code's discussion forums in the first data collection round.

Developer Discussion Boards > > Browsing > WAP (General)

October 12, 2004

Title: Dissertation study: Why do you visit Forums' online community?

Dear member of Forum,

I am a doctoral student doing my dissertation about attraction factors of online communities. I would like to ask you

“Why do you visit Forum's online community?”

Please, reply to this message or mail your answer to maria.mantymaki@uta.fi.

Naturally, all the data is handled confidentially and anonymously.

Thank You! All answers are very valuable.

Best regards,

Maria Mäntymäki

Researcher, M.Sc. (Econ.)

Department of Management Studies

University of Tampere

Finland

The second collection round

The following message was sent to Code's discussion forums in the second data collection round.

Developer Discussion Boards > > Mobile Java > General >
January, 19, 2004

Title: Participate in dissertation study

Dear member of Forum,

I am a doctoral student doing my dissertation about attraction factors of online communities. I would like to ask you three questions:

1. What draws you here?
2. Do you visit other online communities, if yes, why?
3. Have you ended visiting some online communities, if yes, why?

It would be nice if you could tell your age and gender for background information. Please, reply to this message or mail your answer to maria.mantymaki@uta.fi. Naturally, all the data is handled confidentially and anonymously.

Thank You! All answers are very valuable.

Best regards,
Maria Mäntymäki
Researcher, M.Sc. (Econ.)
Department of Management Studies
University of Tampere
Finland